

## ABSTRACT:

*Jeff Malpas: Philosophy, Topography, Triangulation*

Davidsonian triangulation is often treated as if it were an idiosyncratic element in Davidson's thought, and yet the idea actually connects up with a much larger philosophical tradition. This essay explores some of these broader connections, conceptual as well as historical, aiming to locate triangulation within a broader landscape than is usually the case. The aim is thus to 'triangulate' triangulation, and to provide a brief sketch of the territory within which Davidson can be located – a territory that I have elsewhere characterised in terms of the idea of 'philosophical topography'. Undertaking such a task is valuable not only because of the light it may shed on the Davidsonian position as such, but also because of the way in which it opens up a different mode of philosophical proceeding than is common with the analytic tradition that dominates so much of contemporary Anglo-American thought.

# Philosophy, Topography, Triangulation

Jeff Malpas

Triangulation ... [... n, of action from \**triangulare* to TRIANGULATE. So F. *triangulation* (1835 in *Dict. Acad.*)] The action or process of triangulating. 1. The tracing and measurement of a series or network of triangles in order to survey and map out a territory or region – *Oxford Dictionary of the English Language*.

## *I. Introduction: Triangulation and a Philosophical Landscape*

Although the term may not appear prior to 'Rational Animals' in 1987,<sup>1</sup> a form of triangulation is clearly present in Davidson's work from very early on. It can already be discerned in Davidson's development of the idea of radical interpretation: the assignment of content to attitudes and utterances is dependent on the holistic interconnections of attitudes, of attitudes with utterances, and of both with action; this interconnection must encompass speakers taken together as well as singly; and it must also depend on the interconnection between attitudes, utterances, actions and the real-world objects to which they relate (both causally and intentionally). Moreover, triangulation can be viewed as adumbrated in the Quinean description of the three-way encounter between field linguist, native speaker, and environmental stimulus that is at the heart of radical translation (all the more

so given Davidson's conversational quip that it was Quine who, at the time of the writing of *Word and Object*, convinced him of the truth of externalism<sup>2</sup>).

Within contemporary analytic thought, the reception of the Davidsonian account of triangulation has been, in general, fairly unsympathetic. By this, I do not only mean that Davidson's account of triangulation has been viewed as implausible or unconvincing, but also that it has usually been read in ways that make very little effort to come to a genuine understanding of that account – it typically fails to heed the Collingwoodian advice (which amounts to nothing more than a basic principle of hermeneutic adequacy) that when one reads an author the first aim should not be to arrive at a judgment of the absolute truth or falsity of the author's claims, but rather to come to the position at which one could see how those claims could be true.<sup>3</sup>

The fact that the analytic consensus on Davidsonian triangulation has been negative may itself be thought somewhat surprising given the way in which triangulation itself connects with a much wider body of thought within both contemporary philosophy and its history (although that may say more about the readers of Davidson's work than about the work itself). One might well argue that what Davidsonian triangulation does is to present, within a specifically analytic idiom, ideas that have a much more widespread currency within pragmatist, idealist, phenomenological, and hermeneutic ways of thinking. What I aim to do here is to explore some of these broader

connections, conceptual as well as historical, and to locate triangulation within a broader landscape than is usually the case. The aim is thus to 'triangulate' triangulation, and to provide a brief sketch, through this triangulative process, of the territory or region within which Davidson can be located – a territory or region that, in my own work, is encompassed within the idea of 'philosophical topography' or 'topology'.<sup>4</sup> Undertaking such a task is valuable not only because of the light it may shed on the Davidsonian position as such, but also because of the way in which it opens up a different mode of philosophical proceeding than is common with the analytic tradition that dominates so much of contemporary Anglo-American thought.

## *II. Triangulation, Topography, and Some Geometry*

In its original form, the practice of triangulation is essentially underpinned by the principles of Euclidean geometry together with some basic trigonometry: from one angle plus the lengths of two sides of a three-sided figure one can always determine the length of the third side. When applied in topographic surveying and mapping (an application pioneered by the Dutch mathematician Willebrord Snell in the 17<sup>th</sup> century), triangulation enables the determination of relative location – given two locations that each stand at a known distance to a third location, and given also the angle that subtends the two lines connecting each location to the third, one can then determine the distance between the first and second locations – and through repeated

triangulations one can map out a series of locations that make up an entire region or territory.

The need for triangulation to operate through repetition (triangulation is not something that can be completed all at once) indicates that topographic triangulation has an essentially temporal dimension – in this respect, triangulation may even be said to provide a demonstration of the necessary co-implication of space with time – although it is perhaps better to say that it is essentially *dynamic* or *processual*. The locations upon which triangulation operates in its topographic employment may be identical with the locations of particular entities or geographical features (natural formations or human constructions), and yet the locations themselves will be determined as locations only relative to the other locations with which they are connected within the triangulative structure – the determination of location in triangulation is thus essentially *relational*, and this is a feature of such locations and not only of our knowledge of them. Finally, since it is indeed Euclidean geometry that underpins the process of triangulation, so triangulation can only operate across a single plane – across a single *surface*. The relations that are determinative of locations and that are worked out dynamically or processually are also, therefore, relations that themselves belong to a single surface – there is nothing to the relationality in question that exists either beneath that surface or, indeed, above it. Process, *relationality*, and *surface* are three ideas that lie at the heart of triangulation, not

only as it operates in geographical mapping, or topographical surveying, but also in its philosophical employment, of which Davidson provides an especially significant, but not the only, exemplar.

### *III. Triangulation, Knowledge, and Content*

In its philosophical employment, triangulation is not intended to deliver, nor does it depend upon, calculations of angle or distance as these apply in a strictly geometric context. In his original presentation of the idea in 'Rational Animals', Davidson describes triangulation as he deploys it as follows:

If I were bolted to the earth, I would have no way of determining the distance from me of many objects. I would only know that they were on some line drawn from me towards them. I might interact successfully with objects, but I could have no way of giving content to the question where they were. Not being bolted down, I am free to triangulate. Our sense of objectivity is the consequence of another sort of triangulation, one that requires two creatures. Each interacts with an object, but what gives each the concept of the way things are objectively is the base line formed between the creatures by language. The fact that they share a concept of truth alone makes sense of the claim that they have beliefs, that they are able to assign objects a place in the public world.<sup>5</sup>

If triangulation establishes the distance between two points that each stand in relation to a third point, then, in Davidson's exposition here, the relation between the first two points and the third is equivalent to the relation

between each of two speakers and a third object, and the relation between the two speakers – the ‘base-line’ that is objectivity – is what is worked out within the triangle. As Davidson employs it, however, triangulation does not serve only to establish the relation between speakers. Indeed, in the passage just quoted, Davidson first introduces the notion of triangulation as a means by which the locations of objects can be determined relative to an observer.

While he does not always clearly distinguish between the different aspects of triangulation at work here (and sometimes writes as if there were quite different forms of triangulation at issue), Davidson actually seems to use triangulation to encompass a single complex structure within which content is determined, and within which subjectivity, intersubjectivity, and objectivity are mutually determined and defined.

In ‘Three Varieties of Knowledge’, the essay that he himself presents as providing an overall summary of his position, Davidson articulates a triangulative structure that unites the three forms of knowledge at issue here – knowledge of self, knowledge of others, knowledge of world – and in uniting them also makes them possible (‘the three sorts of knowledge form a tripod: if any leg were lost, no part would stand’<sup>6</sup>). Although the triangle at issue here exhibits, one might say, certain structural relations between concepts, it can nevertheless also be seen as a sort of generalised, and perhaps more statically rendered version, of the same structure that is evident, in

dynamic form, in the triangulation that unites a speaker with another speaker and a common object.

This is particularly clear in 'Three Varieties of Knowledge'. The central theme of the essay is indeed the relation between subjective, intersubjective, and objective, which is presented as forming a triangular structure, but at the same time Davidson describes triangulation, in particular, in a way that echoes his initial explication in 'Rational Animals'. Triangulation is thus understood in terms of the determination of location, but location is itself the analogue (the very close analogue<sup>7</sup>) for content:

It takes two points of view to give a location to the cause of a thought, and thus to define its content. We may think of it as a form of triangulation: each of two people is reacting differentially to sensory stimuli streaming in from a common direction. Projecting the incoming lines outward, the common cause is at their intersection. If two people now note each other reactions (in the case of language, verbal reactions), each can correlate these observed reactions with his or her stimuli from the world. A common cause has been determined. The triangle which gives content to thought and speech is complete. But it takes two to triangulate.<sup>8</sup>

The Davidsonian account of triangulation – mirrored in the triangular relation between the three forms of knowledge – is structurally analogous to triangulation as it operates in geometry: in particular, it employs knowledge of the relation between two objects as they each stand in relation to a third in

order to determine the relation between the first two objects.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps more significant, however, is the fact that Davidsonian triangulation also exhibits features that are characteristic of triangulation as it operates in topographical surveying or mapping: it is essentially oriented to process, relationality, and surface.

The processual or dynamic character of Davidsonian triangulation is a feature of triangulation in two ways. First, in a way that directly parallels the structure of topographic triangulation, Davidsonian triangulation is not a process completed all at once, but is instead a process on ongoing interaction between speakers, and between speakers and the world. Second, the interactive character of triangulation in the determination of content is itself underpinned by the interactive character of the engagement between speakers and between speakers and the world that resides in their everyday activity – it is thus through their behaviour that speakers are drawn into relations with others and with the world, and it is on the basis of this behavioural interaction that the triangulative relation that makes for the possibility of content arises.

The role of action here is crucial: the ‘common causes’ that Davidson looks to as standing at the intersection of lines taken from each speaker to the world, and determined as common, not because of some mysterious lines of intentionality or perception, but through the causal interaction between speakers, and between speakers and objects, and this causal interaction is one that is perceptual and also behavioural. It is because speakers act in similar

ways towards the same objects that those objects present themselves to the speakers in similar ways – typically in ways that interfere or overlap with one another through the interfering or overlapping modes of behaviour of speakers.<sup>10</sup>

The interaction that underpins triangulation, and in which triangulation consists, is not merely an interaction between entities that are already determined in respect of the content that might be attributed to them. Triangulation is indeed the process by which content is constituted, and so, inasmuch as speakers are understood to have certain attitudes or to engage in certain actions (intentionally described) and inasmuch as objects are presented as having a certain meaningful character, then such attitudes, actions and meanings are formed only within the *relational* structure that is established by triangulation. Put in a slightly different way, one might say that it is only through the relational interaction between speakers, and between speakers and the world, that speakers come to be speakers (and so to have attitudes), that behaviour becomes action, that objects become meaningful.

The way in which Davidsonian triangulation exhibits a processual or dynamic character, is thus itself directly connected to its commitment to a fundamental relationality. The Davidsonian claim regarding the role of triangulation is, in this respect, not merely an *epistemological*, but an *ontological* thesis – it concerns the grounds for the possibility of content, or, to put the

matter more directly, it concerns the very *being* of content. The failure to appreciate the ontological nature of triangulation is one key reason why triangulation has been so poorly received by most of the analytic readers of Davidson's work: triangulation has been assumed to be a process that *operates upon* content (no matter whether content is understood in terms of the meaning of sentences, the contents of belief, or the intentionality of action) rather than being that which *establishes* content.

Davidson's position exemplifies what I take to be a form of 'relational ontology' with respect to content: the ground for the possibility of content is given through the interaction between creatures possessed of certain cognitive and behavioural capacities (more specifically, creatures possessed of the capacity for language, and hence creatures who can take on the roles of speakers and agents), and between those creatures and the world. In referring to this as a relational ontology, I do not mean, however, that the existence of anything other than relations is refused or denied. The relational ontology at issue is one that applies to content, but it depends upon an underlying causal ontology – an ontology, if we are to remain within the Davidsonian framework, of *events* (and perhaps also of things, inasmuch as any ontology of events can perhaps be redescribed, with some adjustments, in terms of an ontology of *things*).

The relationality of content that emerges within the account of triangulation reflects the character of triangulation as it operates with respect

to locations or landmarks within some territory according to which locations are determined as locations through the way in which they stand in relation to other locations, and so as part of a locational network rather than as independent elements. Locations thus have to be understood holistically in much the same way that Davidson claims beliefs, and meanings, also have to be understood holistically: to have one belief, there must be many beliefs; for there to be one meaningful sentence, there must be many meaningful sentences; for there to be one speaker, there must be other speakers and a world.<sup>11</sup>

The structure of triangulation makes very clear the way in which the holism that appears here is itself tied to externalism: holism does not concern merely the inter-relatedness of content as it is given within some 'internalised' structure of content (with respect to a particular body of beliefs or utterances narrowly conceived), but encompasses the 'externality' of other speakers and the world. On the basis of such holistic-externalist relationalism, not only can we not understand content as residing in autonomous, 'internalised', states or structures, but we cannot understand the mental in such a fashion either. Minds emerge not on the basis of autonomous states, brains, or bodies as they stand apart from the world, but instead supervene on larger systems that encompass such states, brains, bodies and environments in much larger holistic interaction. It is this that is the real basis for the idea of anomalous monism – which can now be seen as essentially an expression of the

commitment to triangulation, conjoined with certain other claims concerning the nature of law and cause, within the philosophy of mind.

If the relationality of content can be seen to be underpinned by the processual or dynamic character of triangulation, then relationality can itself be seen to underpin the character of triangulation as giving priority to *surface*. In the Davidsonian content, the idea of surface appears most clearly in terms of a rejection of certain forms of *foundationalism*. The generally anti-foundationalist tendency of Davidson's thought is clearly evident in Richard Rorty's deployment and development of Davidsonian ideas (with which Davidson himself was largely in sympathy<sup>12</sup>), but we can see how such anti-foundationalism is be a key element in Davidson's own thinking by consideration of the structure of triangulation alone.

The fact that triangulation requires that we look to the reciprocal relations between elements that together make up the structure of triangulation rather than to any single element (whether a single element within the structure that has priority over the others or an element that underlies the structure as a whole and to which the others can be reduced) that is determinative of the entire structure means that triangulation makes for a unity composed of the very same elements that appear within it – triangulation does not allow of any reduction or dissolution into anything simpler or more basic. Although it is only within the structure of triangulation that content, and so also action, mind, and meaning, come to appearance,

triangulation itself depends on the interconnection of content as worked out in the interconnection between speakers, between speakers and the world, between attitudes, and between attitudes and behaviour. Triangulation operates, in other words, through that which it also constitutes – hence the emphasis on what I have presented as the primacy of surface.

The anti-foundationalism that is at issue here appears in many different ways in Davidson's work. It is what underlies his onetime characterisation of his position as involving a 'coherence' theory of truth and knowledge, and, more generally, underpins both his rejection of scepticism and relativism as well as his refusal to allow that knowledge can be grounded in any set of infallible procedures or indubitable 'truths'. It is evident in his view of linguistic understanding as based, not in any system of rules or conventions, but in the ongoing communicative interaction between speakers (as Marcia Cavell puts it "Meaning depends on successful communication rather than the other way around"<sup>13</sup>). It leads to a rejection of the idea that there can be any single, privileged vocabulary that is uniquely adequate to the world so that truth is always plural (if there is one truth then there are many truths) – an idea itself crucial to the possibility of interpretation across difference<sup>14</sup> – and that also leads to Davidson's adoption of an ontologically monistic, but descriptively pluralist approach to the relation between the mental and the physical (the position known as 'anomalous monism' to which I referred briefly above).

Although the material on which Davidsonian triangulation operates is different from that which is the subject matter for the geometer or topographical survey, still the same structure obtains, and process, relationality, and surface appear as key features of triangulation as it functions philosophically no less than in its geographical employment. What triangulation gives rise to in the philosophical sphere, however, is a position that may well appear quite divergent from more conventional accounts inasmuch as it does not allow what philosophy often seems to demand, namely, some privileged level of analysis on the basis of which all else can be extrapolated, explained or deduced. There is no such level here – there is only the complex interweaving that combines elements, and is formed in such combination, at the same time as it also determines them (a determination that is never complete, and so always allows for other determinations<sup>15</sup>).

Moreover, not only does triangulation mitigate against reductive or foundationalist approaches, but because it does indeed position notions such as belief, action, meaning and mind within a larger interdependent framework of concepts, so it also requires that one rethink the key concepts at issue here ; belief, truth, action, world cannot mean the same within the structure established by Davidsonian triangulation, and the holistic-externalist relationalism with which it is associated, as these terms may mean elsewhere, and to read Davidson on the assumption that those terms do mean the same is to misread him. The rethinking required here (to which Davidson

typically does not himself draw attention – the ‘subversion’ in which he engages remains implicit) is usually not restricted just to the concepts themselves, but ramifies across a range of philosophical categories and modes of approach. The idea of triangulation does not entail just a different conception of content, but a different conception of what philosophy itself might be about and how it might go about it. It is this different conception that seems to me to be captured within the idea of philosophical ‘topography’ or ‘topology’. Such a topography or topology can be seen as an elaboration of Davidsonian triangulation, but it also draws on topological and cartographic conceptions of philosophy that can be found in thinkers such as Kant and also Heidegger.<sup>16</sup>

#### *IV. Triangulation and Some (Other) Philosophers*

With some exceptions, much of the discussion of Davidsonian triangulation within the analytic literature tends to ignore or to overlook the features of process, relationality and surface that are so central to the Davidsonian position – as a result they also tend to read Davidson as holding to a much more conventional position than is actually the case, and to import into their readings exactly the assumptions that the idea of triangulation contests. Moreover, the analytic treatment also tends to approach triangulation from within a fairly narrow philosophical frame – as if the idea were peculiar to Davidson alone. The tendency to treat it as idiosyncratic in this way

undoubtedly contributes both to the difficulty many analytic readers have in understanding the Davidsonian position, and their generally negative judgment as to its philosophical cogency and significance.

That latter tendency surely reflects the somewhat parochial character of much analytic thought – not only is there a residual suspicion of many forms of engagement with the history of philosophy, coupled with a tendency to prioritise philosophical thinking as it occurs in English, but there is also a more general and widespread inability to undertake any genuine philosophical engagement with ideas that go beyond certain conventional or familiar tropes and approaches.<sup>17</sup> Thus analytic philosophy, for all its that it often presents itself in liberal and cosmopolitan terms, too often tends, at least so far as its own philosophical practice is concerned, to be relatively narrow-minded and intolerant – it insists on assimilating everything to its own familiar frames, shunning what resists such assimilation.<sup>18</sup> Seen from a perspective that is broader than the analytic, however, Davidsonian triangulation, and the externalist-holist relationalism that it expresses, can be seen to be continuous with a larger tendency within European thought (one that carried into earlier traditions of British and American philosophy) that emphasises much the same ‘triangulative’ structure – although often expressed in different ways – as constitutive of ‘mind’ (broadly understood), content, or self as these stand in relation to world.

In terms of contemporary thought, the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer provides an important and obvious point of comparison here.<sup>19</sup> Like Davidson, Gadamer adopts a dynamic and dialogic approach to the character of understanding in general – something captured in Gadamer’s emphasis on language as ‘conversation’ (*Gespräch*) – and similarly eschews any idea that understanding can be based in some determinate ‘method’ or rule.<sup>20</sup> One of the key moves in Gadamer’s development of hermeneutic theory was to emphasize the nature of hermeneutic engagement as always oriented towards some thing – a particular subject-matter or *Sache* – whether understood in terms of a question that is at issue or a ‘text’ that is to be understood. Every act of interpretive engagement involves a dialogue between conversational partners – even though sometimes one partner may be present only through the text – that is directed towards what Gadamer calls a ‘fusion of horizons’ (*Horizontverschmelzung*). Reading Gadamer through the same triangulative lens employed by Davidson, one can say that the structure of hermeneutic engagement is one in which the fusion of horizons that is understanding, and which always takes place *in language* (leading Gadamer to talk of understanding, in a way that misleads Davidson in his own reading of Gadamer,<sup>21</sup> as a matter of arriving at a *common language*), corresponds to the establishing of the base-line joining one speaker to another that Davidson sees as a key part of the triangulative process. That base-line is established through the way each speaker articulates their own relation (a relation that must be

both causal *and* intentional<sup>22</sup>) to the interpretative object – the *Sache* in Gadamer's terms, the 'common cause' in Davidson's.<sup>23</sup>

The comparison with Gadamer is itself suggestive of a further comparison that can be drawn between Davidsonian triangulation and aspects of the thinking of Gadamer's one-time teacher, Martin Heidegger. Although Heidegger does not focus specifically on the structure of interpretation or understanding in the way that Davidson or Gadamer do, and also uses a different language from either of these later thinkers, he nevertheless presents an account in which one can discern a very similar picture of 'content' or 'meaning' as formed only through the interaction of thinking beings with one another and with respect to the entities that they encounter in their active engagement within the world.<sup>24</sup> There is thus, one might say, already a triangulative structure that can be seen in, for instance, the analysis given in *Being and Time* that emphasises the character of Dasein as 'being in the world' in a way that is determined both in relation to the being of equipment and in relation to the being of others. Equally significant, moreover, is the fact that Heidegger also strives, if not always successfully, to move towards an account that exhibits similar features of process, relationality, and surface to those that are evident in Davidsonian triangulation. Indeed, it is partly for this reason, that Heidegger's thinking can be properly understood as constituting a form of 'topology' – as, in his words, a 'topology of being'.<sup>25</sup>

The work of Gadamer and Heidegger provides useful landmarks in relation to which the Davidsonian account of triangulation can be positioned. Yet as landmarks they are also positioned in a slightly different part of the landscape from that with which Davidson was most familiar. If one were to look for the philosophical landmarks closest to Davidson with specific regard to the question of triangulation – the landmarks by which he oriented and located himself on this matter – then the thinker whose work is most prominent (in addition, perhaps, to Quine and Wittgenstein) is undoubtedly G.H. Mead. It is Mead's social account of the mind that provides the immediate antecedent to the Davidsonian position – one that Davidson himself acknowledged (in conversation and discussion, if not in print). Although Mead does not himself use the term 'triangulation', he nevertheless sets out an account that exhibits the same triangulative structure evident in Davidson.

In *Mind, Self and Society*, Mead writes of the relation between selves and the world in a way that prefigures Davidson's account in essays such as 'Three Varieties of Knowledge':

When a self does appear it always involves an experience of another; there could not be an experience of a self simply by itself. The plant or the lower animal reacts to its environment, but there is no experience of a self. When a self does appear in experience it appears over against the other, and we have been delineating the condition under which this other does

appear in the experience of the human animal, namely in the presence of that sort of stimulation in the co-operative activity which arouses in the individual himself the same response it arouses in the other. When the response of the other becomes as essential part in the experience or conduct of the individual; when taking the attitude of the other becomes an essential part in his behaviour – then the individual appears in his own experience as a self; and until this happens he does not appear as a self.<sup>26</sup>

Self appears, according to Mead, only in relation to the other, while the relation between the two depends on a mutuality of involvement in relation to some common 'object'. What Davidson saw to be missing from Mead's account, however, was *argument*, and it is partly the argumentative development of the account that Davidson provides. But Davidson does more than just take up an existing set of views: while Mead may be an important precursor to Davidson, what Davidson does is to embed certain key ideas that also appear in Mead within an explicitly philosophical, rather than sociological, analysis, and so in a way that addresses key philosophical problems concerning mind and meaning, self and other, truth and world.

Although writing from within the American pragmatist tradition, and so connecting with the ideas of James and Dewey, Mead's account also draws on a background of ideas that derive both from a developing naturalistic tendency indebted to Darwinian thought (whose effects are also clearly evident in much contemporary analytic thought including that of Davidson<sup>27</sup>) as well as from elements of the German idealist tradition as mediated through

Mead's teacher, Josiah Royce. Indeed, it is this latter tradition, rooted in the work of Kant and Hegel, that provides a common historical underpinning to the thinking of Heidegger and Gadamer (although it is a tradition with which they take issue), and, even if indirectly, that of Davidson.<sup>28</sup> It is in this tradition that one finds, for instance, a similar emphasis on the self as worked out always in relation to others, as well as to the world, and so also a commitment to a mode of analysis that looks not to reduce or to simplify, but to understand elements as mutually related within a single, unitary, yet complex, structure.

The type of analysis at issue here appears as a key idea in the transcendental-critical project that is undertaken by Kant in the first *Critique*. Not only does Kant himself employ an explicitly topographical characterisation of his method and approach,<sup>29</sup> but he also looks to understand the structure of knowledge and experience in a way that emphasises the holistic and relational character of the structure by which they are made possible.<sup>30</sup> In this respect, it seems to me entirely appropriate that Davidson sometimes characterised his position as 'transcendental', since the Kantian idea of the transcendental is itself inseparable from Kant's own geographic-cartographic conception of his project. The transcendental inquiry is best understood as one that aims to map out the territory that is knowledge or experience in a way that exhibits the unity and limits of that territory, and that does so on the basis only of what is given within it.<sup>31</sup> The structure of the

inquiry is thus analogous to the structure of triangulation, and it exhibits much the same key features – process, relationality, surface – as are evident in the Davidsonian account.

It may be thought that what is often missing from Kant is an emphasis on the intersubjective and the social (although this does enter into Kant's inquiries in the Third *Critique*), but such an emphasis is certainly present in Hegel in an explicit, if variously understood, fashion within his account of the logic of recognition: "Self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged".<sup>32</sup> The self comes to be as a self, according to Hegel, through the way in which it relates to other selves – a relatedness that takes one very particular form in the dialectical relation between master and servant as famously analysed by Hegel in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, the self also finds its objectification in and through externality of language: "We only know about our thoughts, only have determinate, actual thoughts, when we give them the shape of objectivity, of being distinguished from our interiority, and so give them the form of externality, and indeed of such an externality as carries the stamp of the highest internality".<sup>34</sup> While the interpretation of Hegel on these matters is contested (particularly the theory of recognition as developed in the work of Alexandre Kojève), there can be no doubt that Hegel's conception of the inter-related character of self, other and world, has not only exerted a powerful effect on the history of modern

philosophical thought,<sup>35</sup> but that it is also an account which, in certain key aspects, can be seen to be mirrored in Davidsonian triangulation.

There is not the space here fully to explore the way in which Davidson's thought may be mapped onto aspects of Kantian and Hegelian philosophy (although it should perhaps be noted that the way both McDowell and Brandom have attempted to position themselves in relation to Kantian and Hegelian thinking may serve to underline the significance of the connection at issue here), but the key point for my discussion concerns not the details of such a possible mapping, so much as the direction that it suggests for better understanding the character of Davidsonian triangulation. Indeed, it is worth noting that on the one occasion when Davidson does explicitly position triangulation in relation to another thinker, it is not a representative of the analytic tradition whom he cites,<sup>36</sup> but rather someone whose work was deeply immersed in a more historical, and implicitly hermeneutic approach, namely, R. G. Collingwood. Thus, in 'Three Varieties of Knowledge', Davidson quotes from Collingwood's *The Principles of Art*:

The child's discovery of itself as a person is also its discovery of itself as a member of a world of persons ... The discovery of myself as a person is the discovery that I can speak; and am thus a *persona* or speaker; in speaking I am both speaker and hearer; and since the discovery of myself as a person is also the discovery of other persons around me, it is the discovery of speakers and hearers other than myself.<sup>37</sup>

Here Collingwood's thinking seems clearly to echo that of Hegel, but it also locates the idea of the interdependence of self and other in a context that explicitly connects this with the capacity for speech – a point that makes it particularly resonant with the Davidsonian account..

The positioning of Davidsonian triangulation within this larger philosophical landscape is not intended as any sort of confirmation of the Davidsonian account – as if philosophical argument were a matter of establishing some form of philosophical consensus. The point is rather to show that, far from being an idiosyncratic approach, the Davidsonian development and deployment of the idea of triangulation stands within, and may well be taken to derive from, a well-established body of previous thought, and that locating Davidson's thinking in this way may actually be important in understanding the nature of, and so also the possible grounds for, that that thinking. Of course, the larger tradition of thought with respect to which triangulation is here positioned is a body of thought toward which analytic philosophy has often taken a hostile and uncomprehending stance. Perhaps it is the latter that really underlies the antagonism so often shown towards the Davidsonian position, or at least, towards the thinking of the later Davidson as that centres around the idea of triangulation. Even if unintentionally, Davidson's later thinking, particularly as expressed in triangulation, may appear to draw the analytic enterprise too much towards the supposed shoals of a European shore.<sup>38</sup>

### *V. Conclusion: Triangulation and Philosophical Topography*

The idea of triangulation comes originally, as I noted above, from geometry and geography. In geographical terms, it refers us, as the OED has it, to the ‘tracing and measurement of a series or network of triangles in order to survey and map out a territory or region’. When the territory or region at issue is, instead of a piece of land, a domain of concepts, or a certain region of existence, then triangulation implies a way of understanding that philosophical domain or region in terms that emphasise: the dynamic or processual character of such understanding, and therefore the inability of any ‘complete’ account; the character of that understanding as given in and through the relational articulation of the domain or region, and so the mutuality and interdependence of the elements that make it up; and the focus of understanding on a grasp of the domain or region as given in and through its surface, and so the impossibility of any reductive or simplificatory account.

In these respects, triangulation captures the essence of what I have called philosophical topography or topology – a mode of philosophical analysis that looks to understand its subject matter in a way analogous to the way a surveyor aims to understand a territory or region: through engaging with and moving across the landscape at issue, mapping out the relations between landmarks, and so uncovering the structure of the region by an exploration of its surface. Such a process never results in a single map that

stands as definitive of the region to be explored, but opens up the path for further exploration, different mappings. Davidsonian triangulation provides both an exemplification of such a form of philosophical topography, while it also lays bear some of its essential features.

Understanding Davidson's thought in this way is to see Davidson as belonging rather less to the mainstream of conventional analytic thought, and, instead, like Richard Rorty, as more part of a very different, much more eclectic, and also more radical tradition. I would suggest that it is partly the attempt to interpret Davidson in a way that does indeed try to assimilate him back into the conventional analytic mainstream that so often results in readings that render key Davidsonian ideas, including that of triangulation, as implausible or obscure. Such an outcome, as I noted at the outset of my discussion here, is itself suggestive of the hermeneutic inadequacy of such readings, as well as of a philosophical narrowness that Davidson himself did not share – a narrowness which, it should be added, he did not himself see as intrinsic to analytic thought. In his foreword to a volume of essays engaging analytic with Chinese thought, Davidson commented on the way in which “the analytic method in philosophy...when practiced with an open mind ... engenders dialogue” and thereby creates “mutual understanding, fresh insights, sympathy with past thinkers, and, occasionally, genuinely new ideas”.<sup>39</sup> One only wishes that Davidson's own thinking were more often approached in just such a spirit.

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<sup>1</sup> Originally appearing in *Dialectica* 36 (1982), 317-327; reprinted in *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), pp.95-106.

<sup>2</sup> A quip made, in my hearing at least, at a conference in Aix-en-Provence in 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, with a new introduction by Stephen Toulmin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), p.27 (Collingwood is here referring to a principle underpinning his own teaching practice, but see also his discussion in Chapters V, pp.29-43, and Chapter VII, 53-76). It should be noted that, in spite of the apparent difference in the role given to truth here, Collingwood's advice is quite consistent with the Davidsonian principle of charity, and can be viewed as a variation on it. Like Davidson, Collingwood emphasises the need to assume the rationality of one's interlocutor's utterances, and so to arrive at an interpretation that makes the best overall sense of those utterances (on this account, an inability to make sense of one interlocutor's utterances, which includes an inability to see how those utterances could be held to be true, must itself count against the viability of the interpretation being employed).

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

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<sup>5</sup> 'Rational Animals', *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* (Oxford: Clarendon press, 2001), p.105.

<sup>6</sup> 'Three Varieties of Knowledge', *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, p.220.

<sup>7</sup> I say 'very close' because the determination of content is so much tied to the determination of cause; causes are always causes 'under a description'; and the identification of cause that enables the determination of content involves the identification of the appropriate description along a continuum of descriptions that can be understood as extending from the speaker to the object. Content and cause are thus tied together, but so too are they tied to a form of notional 'location' along a line from speaker to object.

<sup>8</sup> 'Three Varieties of Knowledge', p.212-213.

<sup>9</sup> In the geometrical case, one might think of the 'objects' at issue as the apexes of the triangle – related by the distances between them – or as the lengths of the sides.

<sup>10</sup> See my discussion of this matter in 'What is Common to All: Davidson on Agreement and Understanding', in Malpas (ed). *Dialogues with Davidson: Acting, Interpreting, and Understanding* (Cambridge, MIT Press, forthcoming, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> How many speakers? Triangulation, taken literally, suggests that there must be at least one other speaker, but since speakers always belong to a

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community of speakers, so it seems safe to say that for there to be one speaker there must be many.

- <sup>12</sup> Although Rorty gave a much more pragmatist twist to Davidson's position than Davidson himself would have accepted – something that is clearest when it comes to the question of truth. See Rorty's response to my reading of Davidson on this point in *Philosophy and Social Hope* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000), pp.41-42, n.22.
- <sup>13</sup> Cavell, 'Introduction', *Truth, Language, and History*, p.xv.
- <sup>14</sup> See my discussion in 'What is Common to All: Davidson on Agreement and Understanding'.
- <sup>15</sup> It is thus compatible with indeterminacy understood as the ever-present possibility of other determinations.
- <sup>16</sup> See Jeff Malpas and Karsten Thiel, 'Kant's Geography of Reason', in Stuart Elden et al (eds), *Kant's Geography* (New York: SUNY Press, in press, 2010); Jeff Malpas and Günter Zöller, 'Reading Kant Topographically: From Critical Philosophy to Empirical Geography', in Graham Bird et al (eds.), *New Essays in Kant Studies* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, in press, 2011); and also Jeff Malpas, *Heidegger's Topology: Being, Place, World* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006).

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<sup>17</sup> A tendency that Collingwood noted, again in his *Autobiography* (p., as also a feature of the ‘realism’ that characterised English philosophy in the early part of the twentieth century.

<sup>18</sup> In its defence it might be said that it is only intolerant of what it takes to be philosophically dangerous or mistaken. One has to be careful here, however, since this is exactly the sort of defence that is always used to defend intolerance and prejudice. Judgment, whether negative or positive, has to be based on some form of understanding, and yet understanding is just what analytic philosophy, in its encounter with other modes philosophising, often seems to resist and to refuse.

<sup>19</sup> For a closer comparison of Davidson and Gadamer, see my ‘Gadamer and Davidson on the Ground of Understanding’, in Jeff Malpas, Ulrich Arnsward and Jens Kertscher (eds), *Gadamer’s Century: Essays in Honor of Hans-Georg Gadamer* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), pp.195-216, as well as ‘What is Common to All: Davidson on Agreement and Understanding’; see also David Hoy, ‘Post-Cartesian Interpretation: Hans-Georg Gadamer and Donald Davidson’, in Edwin Lewis Hahn (ed.), *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer, The Library of Living Philosophers XXIV* (Chicago: Open Court, 1997), pp. 111–128; and Robert Dostal, ‘In Gadamer’s Neighbourhood’, in Malpas (ed.), *Dialogues with Davidson*. It is worth noting that Dostal takes the Davidsonian position to be essentially epistemological rather than

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ontological (and explicitly opposing my own reading of the matter as set out in 'Gadamer and Davidson on the Ground of Understanding'). Such a claim seems to me to be indefensible on at least two grounds: first, on the grounds that Davidson clearly and explicitly commits himself to a set of ontological claims – claims about, for instance, the nature of mind, meaning, belief and knowledge; and second, on the grounds that if we take seriously the transcendental character of Davidson's project, as Dostal seems himself to do, then we surely must treat Davidson's account as ontological, and not merely epistemological, since the transcendental concern with grounds is not a concern merely with evidence, but with that which makes possible – the transcendental is indeed a mode of ontological inquiry, although one that also transforms the conception of what ontology might be. This is a particularly important point given my own topographical conception of the transcendental, of the ontological, and of the philosophical (on this matter, see especially the essays in the first part of *Heidegger and the Thinking of Place* as well as the opening and closing discussions in *Place and Experience*).

<sup>20</sup> On Gadamer, see my '*Sprache ist Gespräch: On Gadamer, Language and Philosophy*', in Andrzej Wiercinski (ed.), *Between Description and Interpretation: The Hermeneutic Turn in Phenomenology* (Toronto: The Hermeneutic Press, 2005), pp.408-17, and also 'The Beginning of

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Understanding: Event, Place, Truth', in Jeff Malpas and Santiago Zabala (eds), *Consequences of Hermeneutics* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2010), pp.00-00.

<sup>21</sup> See Davidson, 'Gadamer and Plato's Philebus', in *Truth, Language, and History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), p.275.

<sup>22</sup> The fact that Gadamer does not thematise the causal relatedness here does not mean that it is irrelevant (although one might view it as trivial or truistic); Davidson, on the other hand, is explicitly concerned with the way in which intentional or rational engagement is necessarily underpinned by the causal. The latter, however, need not be incompatible with the former.

<sup>23</sup> Notice that since Davidson takes reasons to be causes, the difference between his and Gadamer's language here is less than one might first think. See my 'On Not Giving Up the World – Davidson and the Grounds of Belief', *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 16 (2008), pp.201-215, in which some of the complexities of Davidson's position are further explored.

<sup>24</sup> See my 'Topology, Triangulation, and Truth', in *Heidegger and the Thinking of Place* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, in press, 2011).

<sup>25</sup> On the topological reading of Heidegger alluded to here, see *Heidegger's Topology* and also *Heidegger and the Thinking of Place*.

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<sup>26</sup> Mead, Mind, Self and Society (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934), p.195.

<sup>27</sup> It is not uncommon to find the commitment to naturalism construed in ways that make it automatically incompatible with, and opposed to, hermeneutic or phenomenological approaches. Such a construal is surely mistaken if only because the meaning of naturalism is itself contested and cannot straightforwardly be taken for granted. In the case of a thinker like Davidson, naturalism does not and cannot be taken as equivalent to any form of reductive physicalism or materialism nor as entailing the rejection of the language of rationality or the intentionality.(as Davidson's commitment to anomalous monism should make clear).

<sup>28</sup> One may speculate that, in Davidson's case, this is a tradition filtered through his early involvement with Whitehead – not that it is Whitehead's own reading of this tradition that is operative here, but rather that through the involvement with Whitehead, Davidson assimilated a body of ideas that, even if not explicitly acknowledged, remained effective in his thinking. Thus Davidson once commented, on reading one of my own discussions of his work in relation to Kant, that he had not realised just how much Kant there was in his thinking, but that it probably was not surprising given how much he had read Kant as an undergraduate.

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<sup>29</sup> See Jeff Malpas and Karsten Thiel, 'Kant's Geography of Reason', in Stuart Elden and Eduardo Mendieta (eds), *Reading Kant's Geography* (New York: SUNY Press, in press, 2011), and also Jeff Malpas and Günter Zöller, 'Reading Kant Topographically: From Critical Philosophy to Empirical Geography', in Roxana Baiasu, Adrian Moore and Graham Bird (eds.), *Contemporary Kantian Metaphysics Today* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, in press, 2011).

<sup>30</sup> See my 'The Constitution of the Mind: Kant and Davidson on the Unity of Consciousness', *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, (1999), pp.1-30.

<sup>31</sup> This is a conception of the transcendental that I have explored in a number of essays – in addition to the essays cited in the previous note, see also 'Ground, Unity, and Limit', in *Heidegger and the Thinking of Place*, and 'The Transcendental Circle', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 75 (1997), pp.1-20. The understanding of the transcendental in direct relation to the topographical or topological is an important element in my reading of Kant, as well as Heidegger and Davidson, as well as being central to the idea of 'philosophical topography'.

<sup>32</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §178.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 00000

<sup>34</sup> Hegel, *Encyclopedia III*, §462, Addition.

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- <sup>35</sup> Although the Hegelian understanding of self as constituted within a 'recognitive' structure has had an impact in many different areas and among a range of thinkers, it has been particularly influential in recent philosophy among theorists of the Frankfurt School including Jürgen Habermas, Karl-Otto Apel, and especially Axel Honneth (see, for instance, Honneth's *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, London: Polity Press, 1996 – Honneth's work also draws on directly on Mead).
- <sup>36</sup> Although Davidson does discuss triangulation in relation to analytic contemporaries such as Kripke and Putnam, it is not because he finds an analogue to triangulation in their work, but rather because of the overlapping nature of the problems at issue.
- <sup>37</sup> Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938), p.248; quoted by Davidson in 'Three Varieties of Knowledge', p.219. It seems likely that Davidson's reference to Collingwood here is at least partly a reflection of his close friendship with Alan Donagan – a Collingwood scholar and the author of *The Later Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).
- <sup>38</sup> Since it is Davidson's later thinking that seems to move more clearly in this direction, it is no surprise that analytic readers have tended to want to separate off the later thinking from the earlier – and to retrieve a version of

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Davidson's thinking that is more narrowly focussed on the meaning-theoretic concerns evident in Davidson's early essays. In fact, I see no reason for strongly separating Davidson's later work from his earlier. There can be no doubt that there are shifts in his thinking, and important changes of mind, but just as the idea of triangulation is itself adumbrated even in Davidson's early essays, so Davidson's thought as a whole is marked more by its continuity than its discontinuity – moreover, it is a continuity that is best seen, so I would argue, from the late thought back to the early.

<sup>39</sup> Donald Davidson, 'Foreword', in Bo Mou (ed.), *Two Roads to Wisdom: Chinese and Analytic Philosophical Traditions* (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 2001), p.v – a fuller version of the comment appears as the epigram to Jeff Malpas (ed.), *Dialogues with Davidson: Acting, Interpreting, Understanding* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2011).