14. What is Common to All: Davidson on Agreement and Understanding

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"To those who are awake, there is one ordered world [κοσμοσ] common to all." – Heraklitus, *Fr.89*

1.

The essentially social nature of language, and not only of language, but also of thought, is one of the most basic ideas in the philosophy of Donald Davidson. It is an idea that Davidson articulated in various ways, most notably in the idea of triangulation, and which he also acknowledged as already present in the work of other thinkers, especially G. H. Mead (in whose work he also found a version of triangulation itself),[1] as well as in the later Wittgenstein.[2] It has not always appeared clear to all readers of Davidson's work, however, just how this claim regarding the social nature of language and thought should be understood.

One of the reasons for this is that Davidson also rejected what is probably the most widely accepted account of the nature of the sociality that might be thought to be at issue here, namely, the idea that sociality is based in *convention*—in a set of pre-existing, shared rules.[3] In "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," Davidson even goes so far as to suggest that "there is no such thing as a language"—at least not if by "language" one means a clearly defined, shared system of syntactic and semantic rules that exists prior to any particular linguistic encounter.[4] In "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme"—surely one of the most important, but also most abused and misread essays of twentieth-century philosophy—Davidson had already presented an argument to a similar, if not identical, conclusion, through his undermining of the idea that there could be radical discontinuities in understanding of the sort proposed by various forms of radical relativism. As Davidson comments in his conclusion to that essay:

> It would be wrong to summarize by saying we have shown how communication is possible between people who have different schemes, a way that works without need of what there cannot be, namely a neutral ground, or a common coordinate system. For we have found no intelligible basis on which it can be said that schemes are different. It would be equally wrong to announce the glorious news that all mankind—all speakers of language, at least—share a

> common scheme and ontology. For if we cannot intelligibly say that schemes are different, neither can we intelligibly say that they are wrong.[5]

In rejecting the idea of a common conceptual scheme as the basis for communication or understanding, Davidson also rejects the particular idea of subjectivity with which that idea is associated: the idea of an inner mental realm that is set apart from the world, "a concept of the mind with its private states and objects."[6] There is no "inner" world that stands completely apart from the public world in which we speak and act, and there is no completely "external" world that already stands apart from us and to which we gain access through our ability to apply a set of private concepts, meanings or rules.

One simple way of putting the underlying point that is at issue here is to say that what Davidson argues against in a number of his later essays is the idea that *understanding*, whether of others or of the world, cannot depend on the existence of any form of pre-existing, determinate, "internalised" *agreement*. When it comes to language, this idea is expressed in the idea that linguistic understanding depends on speakers sharing a set of linguistic rules or conventions (the issue addressed in "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs"), and when it is epistemology that is at issue, it is expressed in the idea that there must be some overall correspondence between our concepts or beliefs and the world (something explored in "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge"), or that also obtains between our beliefs and concepts and those of others

(one of the concerns of "On the Very idea of a Conceptual Scheme"). All of these versions of the idea are explicitly rejected by Davidson.

It is not uncommon, however, to find Davidson being read in ways that commit him to the view that, contrary to his arguments elsewhere, understanding does indeed depend on determinate, internalized, pre-existing agreement as that is given specific form in a common "human nature." In their discussion of Davidsonian philosophy of language as applied to the philosophy of social science, for instance, Graham Macdonald and Philip Pettit claim that charity, along with the principle of "humanity" which they present as continuous with it, "rests on a belief in the unity of human nature: a belief that people in different cultures are essentially similar" and according to which "any differences there are across cultures, or at least any differences central to the attitudes and actions of people, should be explicable by reference to different circumstances."[7] The same idea is picked up, though in a slightly different way, by Anita Avramides. Focusing on Davidson's own emphasis, most famously in "Thought and Talk," on the having of the concept of belief as conditional for the having of thoughts,[8] Avramides argues that the Davidsonian position leads inevitably to the conclusion that "we have the concept of belief that we have because we are creatures who 'act in the world, and act on each other, and act in accordance with a common human nature.'"[9]

It is certainly the case that Davidson has repeatedly emphasised the dependence of the possibility of interpretation on a background of overall agreement. Thus he writes in a well-known passage from "Belief and the Basis of Meaning" that:

> Widespread agreement is the background against which disputes and mistakes can be interpreted. Making sense of the utterances and behaviour of others, even their most aberrant behaviour, require us to find a great deal of reason and truth in them.…If the vast amount of agreement on plain matters that is assumed in communication escapes notice, it's because the shared truths are too many or too dull to bear mentioning.[10]

The issue at stake here is not whether agreement is necessary for understanding, but rather the particular sort of agreement that is so required. In his "Introduction" to *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Davidson makes this point explicit:

> The aim of interpretation is not agreement but understanding. My point has always been that understanding can be secured only by interpreting in a way that makes for the right sort of agreement. The "right sort," however, is no easier to specify than to say what constitutes a good reason for holding a particular belief.[11]

What is at issue in much of Davidson's discussion of these matters is actually the clarification of the nature of agreement as it plays a role in understanding. What Davidson rejects in essays like "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs" or "On the very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" is a way of thinking about agreement that sees it as based in what is an essentially subjective, even if shared, structure that is prior to any encounter, and that is also capable of determinate characterization. This way of thinking recurs again and again across many different domains and in many different forms, and is so commonplace that it is seldom questioned or even made explicit. In contrast, Davidson argues for a form of agreement that is not and cannot be specified in terms of any shared set of propositions, rules, concepts, behavioural dispositions, practices or "forms of life."[12] While I shall have more to say about this in the discussion below, the short answer to the question as to the sort of agreement that makes for understanding, and that also underpins the social nature of language and thought, is that it is an agreement cinsisting in our dynamic, active engagement with a set of worldly events and entities.[13]

2.

While it is commonplace to find many readers of Davidson treating the principle of charity as simply imposing an already determined set of beliefs onto those we interpret—so every one of our interlocutors believes just as we do (thus leading to the

objection that charity embodies an ethnocentric approach to interpretation that erases difference)—charity as it appears in Davidson's work always refers to a dynamic process rather than a static formula.[14] The charitable advice that we should assume overall agreement in beliefs (which on the Davidsonian account means the same as assuming the overall truth of beliefs), thus provides an initial specification of beliefs that is intended to enable the interpretive process rather than complete it. Attributions of beliefs are played off against determinations of meaning, within a larger framework that also encompasses other attitudes and behaviour, so as to enable us to make sense of our interlocutors in a way that is itself always subject to further articulation and revision. In this respect, we may say, using the language of "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," that the overall interpretive "theories" that result from the process of radical interpretation are always *passing* theories, never prior.[15]

The dynamism that characterizes the operation of charity as it is presented in Davidson's early essays on radical interpretation carries over into Davidson's later accounts of triangulation. Indeed, one might argue that the very use of the term "triangulation," which in its original sense involves the determination of location through the taking of lines of sight from each of two fixed, but distinct points and on to the object that lies at their intersection, already indicates a dynamic, active process that depends upon difference as the means to arrive at commonality. Moreover, the lines of connection between speaker and interpreter, and between each of these and the object

that lies between them, are not constituted merely through the speaker or interpreter's passive reception of subjectively present sensory information or through the activation of a set of internalized responses. Instead, the connection of speaker to interpreter, of interpreter to speaker, and of both to the object, arises through the actions of the speaker and interpreter in relation to the entities and events around them, as well as through their being causally affected by those same entities and events. Speaker and interpreter are implicated with one another, and with the world, through their mutual entanglement in the same complex structure of causation and action.

While Davidson's own emphasis in his accounts of triangulation tends to be on the way in which the objects of belief are to be identified, in the first instance at least, with the common causes of belief, one might also say that the objects of belief are also what appear as the focus of action. Indeed, this is why the proper objects of belief are not to be identified with the proximal causes of belief—with the privately felt stimulation of our sensory surfaces that give rise to events in our nervous systems—but rather with their distal causes—with the publicly accessible entities and events that are the causes of such stimulation. The objects about which we have beliefs are also the objects with respect to which our actions are variously oriented and directed. Through looking at the way in which action, perhaps grasped initially as mere behavior, is organized in relation to the entities and events that make up an agent's environment we can identify the objects towards which the agent acts and so begin also to identify the objects of the

agent's beliefs.[16] What we may not be able to do initially is to identify the correct descriptions under which the agent's beliefs are held of those objects or under which those objects are the objects towards which action is directed. However, so long as we do not rely only on single observations, and instead triangulate between observations while also attending to the intersections between our own actions and the actions of those we seek to understand, then not only will we be able to arrive at an identification of the common causes of belief, but also be able to refine the descriptions of those causes as they are relevant to the beliefs and actions at issue.

The process here is almost exactly the same as the process that Davidson himself describes under the heading of "radical interpretation." It is a process that is predicated on the assumption that what determines the descriptions that are relevant to an agent's self-understanding is also what determines the understanding of the agent by another. This is not an assumption that Davidson has always made explicit,[17] but it does underlie much of Davidson's approach. The point that is at issue here, a point that Davidson employs relates specifically in relation to interpretation, connects with what initially appear to be a somewhat different point made by Strawson. In *Individuals*, Strawson famously argues that the notion of objectivity requires the re-identification of particulars, and that this requires a notion of an objective space in which particulars can be located and that is largely independent of the one making the identification and re-identification.[18] The identification of some entity as an object of belief also requires a

capacity for re-identification of that entity as the same object about which beliefs are held, and such identification and re-identification must be possible both for any single individual who has beliefs, and for any individual who attempts to attribute beliefs to others. The possibility of belief, and of any contentful state, thus requires an objective, but intersubjectively accessible world to which our own subjective attitudes can be related, in which the objects of our attitudes can be located, and within which our own actions can be situated. This is why intentional objects are always public objects (the point also applies as much to abstract objects, although analogously, as to the concrete).[19]

The space within which the determination of the objects, and so also the contents, of belief arises is thus not the internal space of subjectivity, but rather the externalized, public space wherein the agent acts, and wherein the encounter with others also takes place. In discussing the idea of triangulation, and comparing the Davidsonian emphasis on the distal with Quine's early emphasis on the proximal, Dagfinn Føllesdall writes:

> Why, then, did Quine turn to stimuli? He saw, I think, clearer than it had ever been seen before, how intricate the notion of an object is. We cannot determine through observation which objects other people perceive; what others perceive is dependent upon how they conceive of the world and structure it, and that is just what we are trying to find out. When we study communication and

> understanding, we should not uncritically assume that the other shares our conception of the world and our ontology.[20]

Yet while we may not be able to determine which objects other people perceive through observation alone (or, more precisely perhaps, we cannot determine the *descriptions* under which objects are perceived), we can determine the objects they perceive through recognizing the objects around which their actions are organized, not only as this is evident in regard to those actions taken on their own, but also as they overlap or interfere with our own actions, and our actions with theirs, and so are organized in relation to the *same* objects (even if given under different descriptions). In this respect, although we may not share the same descriptive vocabulary (the same "ontology") as our interlocutors, that does not mean that we do not stand in relation to the same objects, nor that we cannot use our own descriptive vocabulary in the process of coming to understand what may well be a different descriptive vocabulary on the part of our interlocutors.[21]

In his own discussion, Føllesdal acknowledges the importance of social considerations in coming to understand another. Yet he takes this to be a matter of attending to the intersubjective propositional structures within which perception is embedded.[22] The lesson that follows from study of the structure of triangulation is that the social is not first given in terms of shared linguistic structures, but rather through

the commonality established in action. Normativity, on this account, is a process of mutual adjustment to one another that arises in the engagement between speakers, rather than a matter of conformity to any pre-existing rule or principle. This means, however, that normativity arises through our orientation towards, and active engagement with, the world in which both we and our interlocutors find ourselves. Not only normativity, but also meaning and thought, arise in this fashion. Thus Davidson writes that "Our thoughts neither create the world nor simply picture it; they are tied to their external sources from the beginning; those sources being the community and the environment we know we jointly occupy."[23]

3.

The way Davidson views the relation between agreement and understanding, and especially his underlying rejection of understanding as based in any form of pre-existing, determinate, internalised agreement, turns out to be closer to that of certain key figures within twentieth century continental philosophy than of many of his analytic colleagues.[24] One of the key shifts in hermeneutic theory, for instance, especially as developed by Hans-Georg Gadamer, and as adumbrated in the work of Heidegger, is that understanding cannot be based in any attempt to re-think or re-experience that which is to be understood. This is, indeed, one of the central arguments of Gadamer's *magnum opus*, *Truth and Method*. In that work Gadamer sets a Hegelian

conception of the nature and possibility of understanding against that of Schlieiermacher. Directed at the interpretation of texts, Schlieiermacher argued that understanding the meaning of a text was a matter of re-thinking the thoughts of its authors (it is this idea that to a large extent was taken up and developed within nineteenth century hermeneutics through the idea of *Verstehen*—and idea that is still present within areas of sociological thinking through the influence of Weber). Hegel, on the other hand, took understanding to be inevitably oriented to the present situation of the one who aims to understand—in historiography, for instance, this means that understanding always comes after the events it seeks to understand, and consequently it cannot be based in any re-capturing of the past, but instead derives from our present situation.[25]

As Gadamer presents matters, following Hegel, and drawing on ideas to be found in Heidegger and Husserl, understanding is always based in our current situatedness which allows us to encounter things from a particular perspective and with a particular set of interests—this is why Gadamer and Heidegger both insist on the essential historicality of understanding and the role of tradition.[26] Yet inasmuch as understanding always involves an awareness of the existence of such alternative views, so it is always directed, in spite of its partiality, to the "object" or "matter" (*Sache*) at issue. In this respect, historical situatedness and tradition function, not as a base of determinate and prior agreement from which understanding proceeds, but rather as

opening up a commonality that consists simply in a commonality of engagement between different interlocutors with respect to the same objects of concern.[27] In the work of Hannah Arendt, itself directly influenced by the phenomenological-hermeneutic thinking also found in Gadamer, this idea reappears as a key element in the constitution of the realm of common engagement that Arendt calls the "public realm," and that she also characterises as the realm "of the real." In what could be taken almost as a summary of the Davidsonian position itself, Arendt writes that: "Under the conditions of a common world, reality is not guaranteed primarily by the 'common nature' of all men who constitute it, but rather by the fact that, differences of position and the resulting variety of perspectives notwithstanding, everybody is always concerned with the same object."[28] In this way, our "perspectives" on the world turn out to be, not a barrier to our access to the world or to others, but the very means by which such access is effected.[29]

There is nevertheless a tendency to read Gadamer (as well as Heidegger and Arendt), in a way we have also seen arises in the reading of Davidson, as holding to the view that understanding does indeed depend on some form of agreement that must obtain prior to any particular encounter, and that takes the form of some determinate, often internalized, content or structure. Indeed, Davidson himself misreads Gadamer in just such a fashion taking issue with what he takes to be the Gadamerian claim that "agreement concerning an object demands that a common language first be worked out",

and arguing instead that "it is only in the presence of shared objects that understanding can come about."[30] The apparent disagreement is particularly significant in this context, since it focuses on just the question that is here at issue, and it is notable that Davidson makes exactly the argument that accords with his own commitment to the idea that it is our common engagement in the world that founds understanding and the determination of agreement: "Coming to an agreement about an object," he writes, "and coming to understand each other's speech are not independent moments but part of the interpersonal process of triangulating the world."[31] While Davidson is correct in the general claim he makes here, he is mistaken in assuming that Gadamer's own conception of language stands opposed to such a claim. Although differently expressed, the Gadamerian position is indeed committed to much the same dynamic, dialogic conception as that which Davidson identifies as at the heart of communication and understanding. As Gadamer so evocatively puts it, language is itself "conversation" (*Gespräch*)—a conversation that is always oriented towards its object, towards some subject matter, and in which the very being of language is constantly articulated and rearticulated.[32]

One of the points to which the Gadamerian approach may be taken to draw particularly to our attention, however, and that Davidson may be thought to neglect, is the way in which the ongoing process that is understanding, which is also a process of constant determination of agreement, can also solidify into distinctive and apparently determinate forms—into what we often refer to in our ordinary usage, for instance, as

"languages." Thus a group of speakers engaged in constant linguistic interaction may recognize themselves as speaking the "same" language precisely in virtue of the ongoing interaction in which they are engaged—in virtue, as it were, of their capacity for ready and regular convergence in linguistic behaviour. This convergence is itself facilitated by, even though it is not founded in, the recognition, on the part of members of the community, of certain regularities that are evident in their behaviour (regularities that may be misconstrued as enabling their interaction, rather than developing in that interaction). A process of self-identification may then occur around the idea of a language, perhaps a set of practices, and also a history, that are taken to be common to that community.

Recognition of such community and commonality may well serve to reinforce the capacity for mutual understanding and engagement, even though it does not found it, but what is perhaps more significant in the present context is precisely the way in which such recognized commonality, based always in modes of mutual action and interaction, functions to underpin notions of *identity* and *self-identity*. The commonality at issue here is not only expressed in terms of the idea of language, but also in the idea of community as such, and in the idea of the world as itself constituted always in terms of a certain mode of appearing of things. Thus different communities, which understand themselves as communities, and so in terms of a certain identity that belongs to them, will also view the world as ordered in a certain fashion, and the things

that appear within the world as appearing in a certain way, and in a certain light. In summary, what we take to be important about the world, what aspects of things are taken to be significant, is itself a result of the constant formation of agreement that occurs in and through the complex and ongoing interaction that is the process of understanding, and that involves, in the terms Davidson employs, the subjective, the intersubjective and the objective.[33]

In Gadamer, the importance of this level of commonality is evident in the emphasis given to language (an emphasis that appears to mislead Davidson) and on the role of tradition. It is an emphasis that can be seen to have its origins in Heidegger's focus on what he refers to as "the happening of truth," particularly as that is developed in the essay that Gadamer cites as playing a key role in the formation of his own thinking, "The Origin of the Work of Art."[34] In the latter work, Heidegger looks to the way in which the self-identity of a community, and the appearing of the world within which the community orients itself, occurs through the ordering of things around certain common practices or things—in Heidegger's essay it is the ordering of things around the Greek temple. It is noteworthy that for Heidegger especially, the commonality that is at issue here is always articulated, not through any internalized structure, but rather through modes of action and interaction that are oriented and organized in relation to the things around us. The commonality that is given in a certain form of the world, and a certain mode of self-identity that belongs to a community, is

itself shaped and determined through the broader commonality that is our mutual action and interaction as it occurs within the world as such—the world as it transcends any particular identity or mode of description within which it may be framed.[35] While the matter is not one that can adequately be pursued as part of the present inquiry, what starts to become evident here is the complex connection, as developed in a number of Heidegger's core works, between the concepts of truth and of world, and notions of community, commonality and action.[36] Moreover, although Davidson approaches these issues in a very different way, it should already be clear, as I have also argued at greater length elsewhere,[37] that something like a similar, if not identical, set of connections also appear in Davidson's work. While on the one hand Davidson presents a view of truth that is metaphysical modest, if not quite deflationary, on the other hand he also embeds truth within a network of other concepts in a way that makes truth a central concept in the possibility of language, meaning and understanding—truth turns out to be a concept inseparable from the world as that common realm of action and encounter.

What emerges here, then, are two forms of agreement or commonality that each play different roles in relation to the possibility of understanding and the formation of self-identity. There is the commonality that resides in the possibility of common engagement, and that obtains independently of any agreement as it might exist in the form of a shared language, or shared attitudes, dispositions or practices; and there is

also the commonality that depends upon such common engagement, but that is articulated in those modes of determinate agreement that take the form of a shared language, or shared attitudes, dispositions or practices, and through which our notions of identity and self-identity are articulated. These two modes of commonality—two different modes of "agreement"—also interact with one another. Our engagement with the world always occurs in the light of the particular formations of commonality that determine our identity, and so constitutes our particular situatedness in the world (our particular relation to the entities and events around us), and yet is not restricted to those formations alone. Indeed, not only is our engagement in the world such that we can come to recognize perspectives different from our own precisely through our sense of self-identity coupled with the ability to identify others through our common engagement with the same objects, but we may also be led to re-interpret, perhaps to enlarge, our own sense of commonality through just such engagement.

Put topographically (which is to say, within the context of Davidsonian triangulation), we might say that whereas our involvement with a landscape, and our ability to engage with others within that landscape, always requires that we are located somewhere within it, the fact that we are so located does not prevent us from recognizing other possible locations nor does it prevent us from re-locating ourselves, so long as we can determine the relation between locations, so long as we can establish a "mapping" from one to another. The location in which we currently find ourselves is

that by means of which we are enabled to enter into the landscape in which we are located, but our engagement is not restricted to that location alone. In similar fashion, the determinate agreement that is formed in the process of sustained interaction with others, and that is the result of our understanding of them, while it may form the basis for our sense of identity with those others, while also providing the framework within which our understanding of the world is articulated, is not itself what makes possible understanding in the first instance nor is it that which underpins the ongoing process of understanding in any fundamental sense.[38] The commonality that is given in the self-identity of a community, and in a particular formation of the world, is a commonality that depends upon our active involvement with the "same" entities and events, upon our being immersed in a single, if infinitely complex, web of worldly interconnection. The latter form of commonality turns out to be a commonality that, while it remains always indeterminate, constituted as it is through activity rather than content, is actually that which enables both the determination of agreement and of difference.

4.

Davidson's insistence on the idea that the agreement that grounds understanding must be an agreement based in our common engagement in the world, and not in shared propositions, rules, concepts, behavioural dispositions, practices or whatever, is something repeated across many different essays and contexts. Nevertheless, in some of

his later essays, Davidson has also made certain remarks that appear to run counter to this insistence. There is, of course, no reason to suppose that Davidson should be immune to inconsistency on this or any other matter, and nor is it crucial to the objectives of the present inquiry that Davidson's position remain the same across all his works—whatever reading we give to any contrary remarks in Davidson's later writings, it should be clear that the over-riding argument that is sustained throughout a large number of Davidson's essays, as well as being a central theme in many of them, is that understanding does not depend upon any pre-existing, determinate, internalized agreement. Still, it is worth looking more closely at the comments in question here, since how those comments should be read turns out to be a little more complicated than may at first sight appear to be the case. Moreover, the issues that emerge in relation to such a closer examination turn out themselves to be particularly instructive in the consideration of the issues at stake.

In "The Second Person," Davidson provides an illustration of the structure of triangulation by reference to a simple learning situation—the example he uses is taken directly from Kripke's discussion of Wittgenstein on rule–following and concerns a situation in which a child learns to use the word "table."[39] Davidson argues that it is our ability to identify similarities between our responses and those of the child that enables us to identify the table as the common cause of both our and the child's responses, and

so as being that towards which those responses are directed. As Davidson explains matters:

> The child finds tables similar; we find tables similar; and we find the child's responses in the presence of tables similar. It now makes sense for us to call the responses of the child responses to tables. Given these three patterns of response we can assign a location to the stimuli that elicit the child's responses. The relevant stimuli are the objects or events we naturally find similar (tables) which are correlated with responses of the child we find similar. It is a form of triangulation: one line goes from the child in the direction of the table, one line goes from us in the direction of the table, and the third line goes between us and the child. Where the lines from child to table converge "the" stimulus is located. Given our view of the child and world, we can pick out "the" cause of the child's response. It is the common cause of our response and the child's response … if someone is the speaker of a language, there must be another sentient being whose innate similarity responses are sufficiently like his own to provide an answer to the question, what is the stimulus to which the speaker is responding?[40]

Given the considerations that we have explored in the preceding pages, this passage, or more particularly, the last sentence in this passage, is somewhat puzzling. Davidson seems to claim that the basis for being able to recognise someone as speaking a language, and so also for being able to assign specific meanings to that person's utterances, is that they have the same "innate similarity responses." This is surely very close to the idea that what underpins understanding is some form of prior and internalised agreement—inasmuch as it would seem to be "innate," some form of "common nature." Davidson makes similar remarks about the importance of shared "similarity responses" elsewhere. Thus, in replying to an essay by Kirk Ludwig, Davidson writes that: "Thought and language are features and functions of rationality.… But interpretation requires more similarity than this: we could only understand another creature that was tuned to some of the main features of the world we are tuned to,"[41] and in replying to Dagfinn Føllesdal, Davidson tells us that "Quine came to think that it was because evolution had shaped our discriminative abilities to be much alike (rather than the details of our personal neural wirings) that linguistic communication was possible, and I am sure he was right."[42]

These sorts of comments, which appear only in some of Davidson's later essays and replies, and always in connection with discussions of triangulation, might well seem, on the face of it, to provide confirmation of a Davidsonian version of the claim that understanding requires prior, internalized agreement. Yet read in such a way, these

comments also seem clearly to be at odds with those long-standing elements in the Davidsonian position that have been the focus for my discussion here. Indeed, if understanding were a matter of shared "similarity responses," then we could surely imagine cases in which responses were not shared, and so could make sense of precisely what Davidson denies, namely, the idea of speakers whose language we could not understand—and just such an argument is sometimes advanced by those who see it as providing an obvious counter to the Davidsonian position.[43] So what is going on here? Does Davidson encounter a set of considerations that lead him to change his mind about the sort of agreement that makes for understanding and that need to be taken account of here? Or does consideration of the role of shared similarity responses and common discriminatory capacities indicate something else about the issues at stake and the manner in which they might be approached?

The example of triangulation that Davidson considers in "The Second Person" concerns our understanding of a child who may well be in the process of acquiring a first language. If we consider the role of shared similarity responses in such cases, then it should be clear that they play a quite decisive role. Without a set of shared, innate responses it is hard to see how language would ever be able to develop in the first place. Certainly no individual could ever acquire a first language, and so the very possibility of language and communication must rest, in a certain sense, in some shared cognitive and behavioral heritage. What holds for first language acquisition, however,

need not hold for the ongoing operation of understanding or for the acquisition of a second language. In particular, understanding in these cases does not depend on our having an already fixed body of discriminatory capacities that are both innate and shared.

Certainly it is the case that in order to understand another, whether or not the situation is one of first-language acquisition, one must be able to match up one's own responses with those of one's interlocutor in ways that pick out the same object. We can do this in only if there is a high degree of convergence in the way we and our interlocutor are, as Davidson puts it, "tuned into" the world, and so the possibility of understanding can indeed be said to depend upon agreement in the form of such shared 'tuning'. Yet there is no necessity to conclude, from the mere fact that ongoing communication and understanding requires the ability for shared discrimination, that the capacity for discrimination is therefore based in, and restricted by, some biologically determined "nature." Undoubtedly, if we cannot correlate our behavior with the features of the world in a way that correlates with the behavior of some other creature, then that other creature will not be able to be understood by us. For the most part, of course, evolutionary history means that we will share, with many other creatures around us, and certainly with creatures of our own species, similar capacities that enable us to identify and track similar features of the world. But we need not rely only on our evolutionary heritage in this regard. We can augment and extend our capacities

to identify and track, and we can modify what we are tuned toward. Moreover, it is precisely our encounter with creatures that have different discriminative capacities that can lead us to augment our capacities in this way[44]—in much the same way that a difficult interpretative encounter may lead us to revise, and perhaps expand, our ideas about the world; in much the same way that the linguistic encounter with another may lead us to revise our 'prior' theories of interpretation to arrive at a "passing" theory suitable to that encounter.

The fact that we do not currently share certain specific capacities, or indeed certain specific dispositions to respond, with another creature does not, then, rule out our interpretation or understanding of that creature, but it does mean there is an additional challenge to be overcome. Indeed, we first need to satisfy ourselves of the likelihood that there is some feature of the world in relation to which a creature is responding, but to which we do not normally react in the same way, and then we need to be able to find a way of correlating our responses with that same feature. Moreover, that this is something we are capable of doing is exemplified by the wide range of cases in which we have been able to come to understand the behavior of creatures in spite of the fact that aspects of their behavior involve responses to quite different features of the world those to which we respond—bees, for instance, respond to features of the world, specifically the polarization of light, of which we normally have no awareness, while dogs and cats have olfactory and auditory sensitivities that go far beyond the human.

What this shows is that what is crucial for understanding is not so much the particular responsive dispositions we have to start with, but the fact that we have some such capacities.

In this respect it is not the exact character of our access to the world that determines our capacity to understand, but, once again, the fact that we have some such access – and the nature of that access is that it is indeed access *to the world*, and not restricted to some part or aspect of it. What does unite our responses – those of bees, cats and dogs, and even human beings, is the fact that such responsiveness is shaped, through evolution in the case of the species and through learning on the case of the individual, *by environmental circumstance* – it is shaped, in the broadest sense, *by the world*. Perhaps this is actually what lies behind Davidson's thinking here. Thus in "Epistemology Externalized", he writes that "It may be that not even plants could survive in our world if they did not to some extent react in ways we find similar to events and objects that we find similar".[45] In that case, what is crucial is not so much the mere fact of a similarity of response, but of a responsiveness that is similarly shaped – a similarity that is grounded in the world.

Read against this sort of background, it is not at all clear that Davidson's remarks on the importance of shared similarity responses for the possibility of communication unequivocally represent a revision of his more general views on the nature of the agreement that is necessary for understanding as expressed elsewhere. Moreover, a

closer examination of the role played by shared similarity responses or shared discriminatory abilities in first language acquisition compared to the process of ongoing communication and understanding, suggests that there are important differences here that need to be taken into account, and that while they legitimate some respects in which such responses and abilities are necessary to the possibility of language and communication, there is another sense in which they do not. All too often, the failure to distinguish between the various cases at issue here leads to confusion as to the exact role and nature of agreement in making possible understanding. Perhaps Davidson can be accused of failing to prevent such confusion even if he does not fall prey to it himself.

5.

Davidson's work has always been demanding on the reader, and so it should be no surprise in discovering some complications in Davidson's thinking about the role and nature of the agreement that makes for understanding. Yet the conception of understanding as a dynamic process that is essentially based in the interconnected engagement of speaker and interlocutor within the same worldly environment, and with respect to the same events and entities, is one that runs through much of Davidson's writing from his early essays on radical interpretation to his later writings on triangulation. While there is a sense of agreement that does indeed found the possibility of understanding—the agreement that consists in our common engagement

in the world—the determination of agreement is something that occurs in the process of coming to understand rather than being that on which it is based. Similarly, the formation of a determinate form of commonality of the sort that is expressed in the idea of a shared language, shared practices, or shared ideals and beliefs, while it may feed into and reinforce the capacity for arriving at a shared understanding, is not itself that which enables such understanding. Even our shared biological heritage, while essential to language *acquisition*, is not obviously essential to *understanding* as such.

Davidson's emphasis on the way understanding arises out of our active involvement in the world can be viewed as a reversal of the usual direction of explanation: typically philosophers have aimed to explain our engagement with others or with the world on the basis of our subjectivity, but Davidson's strategy has been to treat subjectivity as explicable only, if at all, on the basis of our engagement—subjectivity itself is thereby understood as part of a larger structure that also encompasses intersubjectivity and objectivity, and is nothing apart from this structure.[46] This is why both relativism and scepticism cannot, on the Davidsonian account, find an initial footing—both positions assume that content can be given to a notion of an internalised structure or content, subjectivity, that is understood as potentially disengaged from others and from the world. Yet if this means that relativism and scepticism cannot properly achieve any proper formulation, then neither can traditional

epistemology, and neither can traditional accounts of the basis of knowledge or of understanding.

Davidson cannot, in this respect, be read simply as operating within the usual technical framework that governs so much contemporary analytic thinking (thereby giving some license to my own attempts to move the discussion in the direction of the hermeneutic and phenomenological). His approach is both simple, in that it aims to keep to a certain everyday conception of the world and our relation to it and to eschew certain standard "philosophical" presuppositions, but it is also radical, in that it implicitly presents a completely re-envisioned conception of the core issues concerning self, meaning, knowledge and world—a vision that may be viewed as expressing a thoroughgoing "externalism" (although of an idiosyncratic form). It is precisely because of its simplicity and radicality that Davidson's work has most often been under-estimated and misunderstood by readers from both analytic and continental perspectives alike.[47]

The idea that understanding can only proceed on the basis of some pre-existing, determinate, internalized agreement, and that sociality and normativity must themselves be understood as based in agreement of this sort, is one of the most commonplace of philosophical assumptions, as well as being one of the most debilitating. Part of the radicality of Davidson's position is its rejection of this idea, and part of its simplicity is the turn back towards our own active engagement in the world

as primary. It is thus that, at the conclusion to the "On the very idea of a Conceptual Scheme," Davidson can talk, in his famous phrase, of re-establishing "unmediated touch with the familiar objects whose antics make our sentences true and false."[48] It is through being in touch with those objects that we also come to be in touch with ourselves and with others. What is common to all is, then, is simply the shared connectedness that comes from our shared involvement in the world. As Heidegger writes, emphasising the way in which even language depends on this prior connectedness and involvement:

> Words emerge from that *essential agreement* of human beings with one another, *in accordance with which they are open in their being with one another for the beings around them*, which they can then individually agree about – and this also means fail to agree about. Only on the grounds of this originary, essential agreement is discourse possible in its essential function.[49]

The agreement that enables understanding is precisely the agreement that consists in this *openness towards* the world, an agreement that can never be uniquely determined, since it is that on the basis of which any determination is possible.

1 Davidson regarded G. H. Mead's *Mind, Self and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934), as particularly relevant, although lacking in argument.

2 See especially Donald Davidson, "The Social Aspect of Language," in *Truth, Language, and History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), pp. 109-26; Davidson once responded to a seminar question as to how much Wittgenstein was an influence on his thinking by saying that "I try to read the *Investigations* once every couple of years to remind me of what is important."

3 See Donald Davidson, "Communication and Convention," in *Inquiries into truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, rev. edn., 2001), pp.265-280; "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," in *Truth, Language, and History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), pp. 89-108; and "The Social Aspect of Language.

4 Davidson, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs", p.107.

5 Donald Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," in Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, p. 198.

6 Donald Davidson, "The Myth of the Subjective,"in *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), p. 43.

7 Graham Macdonald and Philip Pettit, *Semantics and Social Science* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), pp. 31-2. See also my *Donald Davidson*

and the Mirror of Meaning (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp.154-156.

8 See Donald Davidson, "Thought and Talk," in *Inquiries into Actions and Events*, pp. 155-70.

9 Anita Avramides, "Davidson and the new sceptical problem," in *Donald Davidson: Truth, Meaning and Knowledge*, ed. Ursula M Żegleń (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 153; Avramides refers, in the embedded quotation, to P. F. Strawson, *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics* (London: Methuen, 1974), p. 112.

10 Donald Davidson, "Belief and the Basis of Meaning," in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, p. 153.

11 Donald Davidson, "Introduction," in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation,* p. xix.

12 The latter idea deriving of course from Wittgenstein, and often taken to be given particularly striking expression in Wittgenstein's famous remark "If a lion could talk, we could not understand him" (*Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, Oxford: Blackwell, rev. edn. 2001, p. 223), the reason being, so it is usually assumed, that understanding is only possible on the basis of similar forms of life (or from within the *same* form of life), and the radical difference between human and leonine 'forms of life' would therefore also preclude any understanding between them. Saul Kripke

quotes this very remark, seemingly with approval, in his essay on the rule-following problem, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language,* Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982), p. 96.

13 The engagement at issue here is not, it should be noted, some form of purely 'pragmatic' engagement of the sort at issue, for instance, in Hubert Dreyfus's notion of 'absorbed coping' nor should it be taken to involve any prioritization of the 'non-conceptual' over the 'conceptual'. It is an engagement that takes many different forms including both the linguistic and non-linguistic, the 'practical' and the 'theoretical' – the key point is that it is an engagement that already implicates things and world.

14 As Bjørn Ramberg writes, "the radical-interpretation model must be understood as a model of a *process*, not as a model of a static state of linguistic competence," *Donald Davidson's Philosophy of Language: An Introduction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 78.

15 See Davidson, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," p. 101.

16 It is important to recognize here that one can determine something as an object of belief or as the focus of action even though one may be unable to determine the correct description under which beliefs are held of the object or action directed toward it. This could be viewed as the correlate of the original Davidsonian claim that we can identify the attitude of holding

true on the part of a speaker independently of being able to attribute meanings to her utterances.

17 Although see Davidson, ‘Reply to Burge’, *Journal of Philosophy* 85 (1988), p.664.

18 See Strawson, *Individuals*, pp.31-38.

19 See my discussion in *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), chapter 6.

20 Dagfinn Føllesdal, “Triangulation,” in *The Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, Library of Living Philosophers vol. XXVII, ed. Lewis Edwin Hahn (Chicago: Open Court, 1999), p. 721.

21 One can see here the way in which Føllesdal’s account seems essentially to consist in a restatement of the original problem set by Quine under the heading of radical translation, but without regard to Davidson’s own reformulation of that problem within the framework of radical interpretation. In this respect, see Davidson’s comments in “Belief and the Basis of Meaning,” *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, pp.141-154, and his claim that the indeterminacy that arises under the Quinean approach is diminished under his, at least in so far as concerns the identification of the objects of action and of belief.

22 Ibid., pp. 725-6.

23 Donald Davidson, "Reply to Dagfinn Føllesdal," in Hahn (ed.), *The Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, p. 732.

24 This is so notwithstanding the failed engagement between Davidson and Gadamer that takes place in the volume of the Library of Living Philosophers devoted to Gadamer's thought—see Davidson, "Gadamer and Plato's *Philebus*," and Gadamer, "Reply to Donald Davidson," in *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, Library of Living Philosophers vol. XXIV, ed. Lewis Edwin Hahn (Chicago: Open Court, 1997), pp. 421-36; reprinted in Davidson, *Truth, Language and History*, pp. 261-76 (all references are to the *Library of Living Philosophers* edition). What is notable about that exchange—both Davidson's contribution and Gadamer's reply—is how little the two understand of one another's positions. It seems to me foolish to take this as having any real significance for the viability of their respective philosophical projects (Gadamer's problematic dialogues with other thinkers are similarly of little help in the assessment of Gadamer's own philosophical position). The failure of understanding does not derive from any inadequacy on the part of their own interpretive theories, but from contingent features of the personal and professional situation of the two thinkers—from aspects of personality, the circumstances of the engagement, and their philosophical background.

25 See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, rev. trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2nd revised edition, 1992), esp. pp. 164-9 in which Gadamer contrasts the “restorative” conception of hermeneutics espoused by Schleiermacher with the “integrative” conception to be found in Hegel.

26 See my comments on this issue in ‘Sprache ist Gespräch: On Gadamer, Language and Philosophy’, Andrzej Wiercinski (ed.), *Between Description and Interpretation: The Hermeneutic Turn in Phenomenology* (Toronto: The Hermeneutic Press, 2005), pp.408-17

27 This is a summary of the arguments set out in *Truth and Method*, esp. Part II, Sec. II, pp. 265-380.

28 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1958), pp. 57-8; see also Arendt’s important discussion of the connection between speech and action in *The Human Condition*, Chapter V (and especially her comments on what she calls “the space of appearance,” pp. 199ff). In *The Thracian Maid and the Professional Thinker: Arendt and Heidegger* (New York: SUNY, 1997), pp. 92-3, Jacques Taminiuax points to the centrality of the idea of the common world in Arendt’s thinking, as well as its origin in Aristotle’s comment in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1176b36ff, that “what appears to all, this we call being.”

29 Which is, of course, why Gadamer can say of our prejudices (understood in the positive sense in which that term is deployed in *Truth and Method*), that they are "biases of our openness to the world," Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics,* ed. and trans. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), p.115. There is a tendency to read Gadamer, in particular, in a way we have also seen arises in the reading of Davidson, as holding to the view that understanding does indeed depend on some form of agreement that must obtain prior to any particular encounter, and that takes the form of some determinate, often internalized, content or structure. Indeed, Davidson himself misreads Gadamer in just such a fashion taking issue with what he takes to be the Gadamerian claim that "agreement concerning an object demands that a common language first be worked out", and arguing instead that "it is only in the presence of shared objects that understanding can come about." (Davidson, 'Gadamer and Plato's Philebus,' p. 432.).

30 Davidson, "Gadamer and Plato's *Philebus*," p. 432. It should be noted that Davidson acknowledges that his disagreement with Gadamer on this point may simply show that he has not fully understood the Gadamerian position, see "Gadamer and Plato's *Philebus*," p. 431.

31 Ibid.

32 See my discussion in "Gadamer, Davidson and the Ground of Understanding," in *Gadamer's Century*, ed. Jeff Malpas, Ulrich Arnswald and Jens Kertscher (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), pp. 209-210; and also "*Sprache ist Gespräch*: On Gadamer, Language and Philosophy".

33 See also my discussion in *Place and Experience*, Chapters 3-6.

34 Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," *Off the Beaten Track* (a translation of *Holzwege*), trans. Kenneth Baynes and Julian Young (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 1-56. See Gadamer's comments on the importance of this essay to his thinking in "Reflections on my Philosophical Journey," in Hahn (ed.), *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, p. 47.

35 On the importance, within Heidegger's thought, of this idea of the thing, or as I have put it here, the world, as transcending any particular appearance, see my *Heidegger's Topology: Being, Place, World* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006), p.249.

36 See *Heidegger's Topology,* passim.

37 See my *Donald Davidson and the Mirror of Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), but also 'Locating Interpretation: The Topography of Understanding in Heidegger and Davidson', *Philosophical Topics* 27 (1999), pp.129-148.

38 This is a point that is often overlooked in many of those discussions that draw on Gadamerian and Heideggerian approaches. Hubert Dreyfus, for instance, sometimes presents the determinate commonality that appears here in a way that makes it look as if it were that which enables understanding, rather than as arising on the basis of such understanding. See, for instance, Dreyfus' discussion in "Nihilism, art, technology and politics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, ed. Charles Guignon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 290-301.

39 See Saul A. Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 105.

40 Davidson, "The Second Person," *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), pp. 119, 120.

41 Donald Davidson, "Reply to Kirk Ludwig," in Urszula M. Żegleń, *Donald Davidson. Truth, meaning and knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 47; see also Davidson's similar comments in his "Reply to Barry Stroud," in Hahn (ed.), *The Philosophy of Donald Davidson,* p. 165 and, perhaps even more strongly, in his "Reply to Dagfinn Føllesdal," in Hahn (ed.), *The Philosophy of Donald Davidson,* pp. 731-2.

42 Thus Davidson writes that "Quine came to think that it was because evolution had shaped our discriminative abilities to be much alike (rather than the details of our personal neural wirings) that linguistic

communication was possible, and I am sure he was right", "Reply to Dagfinn Føllesdal," in Hahn (ed.), *The Philosophy of Donald Davidson,* p. 732. But see also my comment above, n. 19.

43 See, for instance, Nicholas Rescher, "Conceptual Schemes," in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 5; *Studies in Epistemology*, ed. P. A. French, T. Uehling Jr, and H. K. Wettstein (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980), p. 323.

44 See my discussion of this issue in Davidson's work (as developed even prior to the appearance of Davidson's explicit deployment of triangulation) in "The Intertranslatability of Natural Languages," *Synthese* 78 (1989): 233-64.

45 "Epistemology Externalized", *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, p.202.

46 See Donald Davidson, "Three Varieties of Knowledge," in *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, pp. 205-20, as well as "The Myth of the Subjective."

47 Leading Davidson to comment, as he did, for instance, at the end of a panel discussion on externalism in Aix-en-Provence in 1999, that it seemed to him that no-one had really appreciated just how radical or idiosyncratic was his own externalism.

48 Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," p. 198.

49 Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), p.309.