

# *Linguistic Practice and Its Discontents: Quine and Davidson on the Source of Sense*

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Quine emphasized indeterminacy in order to wean us away from the myth of meanings. Having been weaned, we can now turn to the legitimate question of what is invariant, the 'facts of the matter'.

—Donald Davidson<sup>1</sup>

## *I. The Virtues of Indirection*

What is thought?

We can approach the question head-on by inquiring directly into the nature of thoughts and our ability to entertain them. Obviously, this tack does not lack for takers (most notably, Gottlob Frege). In the twentieth century, however, a more indirect approach developed, and here I shall pursue its study. We begin with the observation that "thought" (or "content" or "meaning"—I shall use these terms more or less interchangeably) is one rather straightforward, if unhelpful, answer to the question "What is preserved in translation from one language into another?" The indirect approach then displaces the original topic by trying to answer the question about translation without making any reference to thought. When pursuing the indirect approach to topic X, we find a question Y for which X is an appropriate answer, and then we try to answer Y without adverting to X. We can hope that doing so will illuminate the nature of X.

The schematic answer to the indirect question about translation that has had most sustained appeal is simply this: linguistic use. Clearly, something must be preserved in the course of translation. A translation is not merely a mapping from one language into another; otherwise, the issue of correctness simply would not arise. Rather, if a mapping is to count as a correct translation, it must be faithful to some range of facts. But to which? To truths about thought or meaning? Yes of course, but our indirect approach bars such

<sup>1</sup> In Lewis Edwin Hahn (ed.), *The Philosophy of Donald Davidson* (Open Court, 1999), p. 124.

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answers. According to an important tradition, it is better to say that what translation needs to preserve are the ways in which the translated expressions get used in their respective linguistic communities.

One reason for the attraction of this response is that it promises to elucidate some alleged truths about thought which are often taken to be central to its nature. In what follows, I shall focus on three in particular that have exercised a powerful hold over reflections on the nature of propositional content. The first of these theses, *intersubjectivity*, is simply that content is shareable in the sense that any thought that can be entertained or expressed by one speaker can be by another. The second, *publicity*, holds that all facts pertinent to the determination of meaning are observable. And finally, there is *empiricism*, the conviction that a speaker's experience plays a central role in fixing the content of his or her language.

I shall have more to say about these claims later, but for now the point is simply that a focus on linguistic practice, as that which determines correctness of thought-preserving translation, holds out the prospect of making sense of them. Use of language, after all, seems shareable, in the sense of being identifiable across speakers. It also appears to be something knowable and learnable on the basis of observation. And finally, it seems that linguistic practice can be understood in terms of how a speaker employs language in response to his or her experiences. Thus, although the details remain to be filled in, it appears that a study of thought that proceeds via an examination of the linguistic use that is preserved by translation might after all lead to an improved understanding of the basis of these features of content.<sup>2</sup> For

<sup>2</sup> It might be objected that I have matters the wrong way round here—that the motivations for these claims are to be found in the fact that they follow from what in reality is the primary insight, that there is nothing to meaning beyond that which can be gleaned from linguistic practice. I have not put the matter this

this reason alone, the indirect approach might seem a useful one in the study of propositional content.

Certainly, the study of linguistic practice has had a rich and complex history in the analytic tradition. If one follows its most significant turns, one finds oneself revisiting some of the deeper disputes within the tradition, which themselves often reconstellate recurring conflicts in the history of philosophy. There can be few better ways to start such an oblique inquiry into the nature of thought than by considering how W. V. Quine wrestled with these issues over many decades; for no one in the course of the twentieth century brought greater effort and imagination to bear in the elaboration of such an approach.

Quine long strove to find an analysis of language use that would in fact accommodate these three claims. I shall argue below that he ultimately failed to elaborate an account that could do the work he wanted done. I shall also explore whether some variations on his ideas, inspired by the work of Donald Davidson and John McDowell, might turn the trick for him. We shall see that, though these alternatives are often interesting descendants of Quine's project, they all fall short in different ways of what he originally wanted to achieve.

## II. Quine's Stimulus

Quine argues that if we reflect carefully on the use of language, we will realize that it is not sufficiently rich as to guarantee anything like uniqueness of translation. Because he takes facts about meaning to be exhausted by the use to which language is put—as opposed to guiding that use from

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way because one of my goals here is to show how some thinkers have reshaped their conception of linguistic practice in the attempt to preserve these claims. But I agree that this is a two-way street, that one's conception of the linguistic practice preserved in translation might likewise influence one's views about meaning.

behind the scenes—Quine holds that facts about meaning are not nearly as determinate as many have thought, and consequently that a traditional philosophical conception of meaning must be abandoned.

There has been a great deal of attention paid to this negative claim, the indeterminacy of translation. Here I shall focus instead on Quine's positive contention, that there are substantial checks on translation. For it is no more of a mistake to assume that use renders translation determinate than it is to think that it fails to constrain translation at all. In fact, the doctrine of indeterminacy entails that there are substantial constraints on translation. For it does not claim that no translation is correct, but rather that many are. And any talk of correctness—even if multiple—entails the existence of constraints.

For Quine, then, there must be aspects of the use of language to which translation strives to be faithful, and he expended much energy over many years in articulating what these might be. Most schematically, they consist in regularities that hold between, on the one hand, circumstances of the speaker and, on the other, linguistic activity of that speaker. These regularities are the only facts to which translation must do justice. A translation is correct insofar as it is a mapping from one language to another that succeeds in preserving these regularities. Of course, so far we have a merely formal description of the linkages that constrain translation, and it needs to be supplemented by specifications of what the relevant circumstances of use are and of what the relevant activity consists in. Furthermore, this supplementation should yield a conception of linguistic practice that satisfies the demands of intersubjectivity, of publicity, and of empiricism.

Quine was pulled in different directions on this issue. One strong, although ultimately not dominant, strain in his

thinking is that the relevant regularities hold between proximal stimulatory conditions and the assenting/dissenting behavior of speakers upon querying. The sentences of a speaker for which these regularities are tightest Quine calls *observation sentences*; they are sentences with respect to which the speaker's assenting/dissenting behavior is very closely linked to his present stimulation. Quine defines the *stimulus meaning* of an observation sentence as, roughly, the collection of stimulations that would prompt immediate assent to it. Stimulus meanings, on this conception, provide the evidential base—indeed, the fact-determining base—for translation:

The predicament of the indeterminacy of translation has little bearing on observation sentences. The equating of an observation sentence of our language to an observation sentence of another language is mostly a matter of empirical generalization; it is a matter of identity between the range of stimulations that would prompt assent to the one sentence and the range of stimulations that would prompt assent to the other.<sup>3</sup>

These stimulatory conditions are eventually to be described in terms of a speaker's "global neural intake on a given occasion"; more fully spelled out, in terms of "the temporally ordered set of all firings of his exteroceptors on that occasion."<sup>4</sup>

Clearly, this was an attempt on Quine's part to articulate a de-mentalized version of the view that the meaning of an expression for a speaker is fixed by the latter's dispositions to use it in various experiential circumstances. This is a form of empiricism, as I characterized it above, and there I was only following Quine himself: "the old empiricist Pierce," he says, held "that the very meaning of a statement consists in

<sup>3</sup> "Epistemology Naturalized," in *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (Columbia University Press, 1969), 69-90, p. 89.

<sup>4</sup> "Reactions," in Paolo Leonardi and Marco Santambrogio (eds.), *On Quine: New Essays* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 347-61, p. 349.

the difference its truth would make to possible experience,” and he suggests that “we recognize with Pierce that the meaning of a sentence turns purely on what would count as evidence for its truth.”<sup>5</sup> The construal of empiricism takes one back, perhaps, to Pierce but also to the group within the Vienna Circle led by Moritz Schlick, which urged that the contents of *Protokollsätze*—Viennese observation sentences—are determined by the sensory experiences that would justify them. In declaring the linguistic regularities that constrain translation to be those that link neural stimulation of the speaker to his or her assenting behavior, Quine sought to describe a scientifically respectable conception of linguistic use that honors this empiricism.

This conception did not carry the day, however. Eventually, it was firmly repudiated because what it singles out as the relevant regularities fails to satisfy either of the other two desiderata. In the first place, this conception flouts publicity because neural intakes are not observable in any plausible sense. Dagfinn Føllesdal, among others, urges this point upon Quine:

In my daily life, where I learn and use language, I cannot observe the sensory stimuli of others. And I have never observed my own. How can I then compare the stimuli of others with those of my own, as Quine requires? The stimuli are encumbered by the same problem as Frege’s “Sinne,” they are not publicly accessible.<sup>6</sup>

According to Føllesdal, neurological information of the kind Quine once highlighted is simply not available to a translator or to anyone in the business of language acquisition. As a consequence, publicity requires that such information not figure in the facts that fix the content of language. And pub-

licity must be respected. The idea that meanings do not guide our observable use of language from behind the scenes but instead are constituted by that use is the most central and powerful facet of Quine’s approach to language.<sup>7</sup> It is an idea from which he never wavers: “There is nothing in linguistic meaning,” he always insists, “beyond what is to be gleaned from overt behavior in observable circumstances.”<sup>8</sup> The problem here is that neural stimuli simply fail to count as “observable circumstances.” And Quine himself eventually concluded that such stimuli “ought not to matter” for semantics.<sup>9</sup>

This conception also fails to secure intersubjectivity, as it leads to the conclusion that no translation is correct, something Quine strongly rejects. This failure results from the privacy of the proximal: there is no reason to believe that any two speakers’ bodies display the same or even similar neurological landscapes. Consequently, no regularity linking stimulation of nerve endings with use of language is likely to be common to two speakers. The conclusion that something has gone wrong is not dependent on armchair physiology. It is already made patent by the fact that this conception simply rules out the possibility of communication with creatures whose anatomies are very different from ours: for something is fundamentally flawed in a doctrine about content that entails the impossibility of communication with non-human beings. As Quine himself worries, “What will we do when we get to Mars?”<sup>10</sup> There is some irony here in the fact that neural idiosyncrasy sinks this par-

<sup>7</sup> Davidson describes the impact his appreciation of Quine’s approach had on him: “When I finally began to get the central idea, I was immensely impressed; it changed my life.” (“Intellectual Autobiography,” in Hahn (ed.), *The Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, 3-70, p. 41.)

<sup>8</sup> *Pursuit of Truth*, revised edition (Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 38.

<sup>9</sup> *Pursuit of Truth*, p. 40.

<sup>10</sup> “Propositional Objects,” in *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*, 139-160, p. 158.

<sup>5</sup> “Epistemology Naturalized,” pp. 78, 80-1.

<sup>6</sup> “Triangulation,” in Hahn (ed.), *The Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, 719-28, p. 720.

ticular conception, given that one motivation for it might have been the desire to describe the objective constraints on translation without referring to the mental with all its alleged privacy.

If the regularities involving the use of language that are pertinent to translation do not make reference to a speaker's neurology, then to which circumstances of use do they refer? Quine must of course reject the proposal that the circumstances of use are sub-epidermal, neurophysiological states of the speaker: clearly, there is even less plausibility to the suggestion that these are observable or are shared across individuals. Moving in the other direction, Quine once suggested that stimulation "is best identified, for present purposes, with the pattern of chromatic irradiation of the eye."<sup>11</sup> But he quickly abandoned this suggestion in favor of an identification of stimulation with the irradiated nerve endings, perhaps because the pattern of chromatic irradiation, if measured at the surface of a speaker's organ of sight, would obviously be peculiar to each individual, what with the uniqueness of eyeball contour and the like.

The proposal that ultimately dominates within Quine's thought is that we should take the circumstances of use to consist simply in the present distal environment of the speaker. By thus moving out beyond the speaker's body and into the world, we have clearly arrived at a communal stimulus. In opting for an "object-oriented line" on intersubjective semantics by "treating translation purely in terms of the external objects of reference," Quine's considered view converges with that of Davidson.<sup>12</sup> Indeed Davidson has long argued that Quine had been mistaken earlier in not fully committing himself to the "object-oriented line":

<sup>11</sup> *Word and Object* (MIT Press, 1960), p. 31.

<sup>12</sup> "Progress on Two Fronts," *The Journal of Philosophy* 93 (1996): 159-163, p. 160.

Where I found I differed from Quine was in how to account for the content of those sentences most closely connected with perception. I balked at the idea that the locus of shared meaning (so far as the meaning of observation sentences was concerned) depended on the proximal stimulus, what Quine called the "stimulus meaning"; I thought it should be the distal stimulus, the object or event or situation in the world speaker and hearer naturally shared.<sup>13</sup>

By the end of his life, however, Quine was clear and consistent: as far as the determinants of meaning are concerned, proximal stimulation goes by the board. As Tallulah Bankhead said, "There is less in this than meets the eye."

Stepping back, this situation is an age-old one, albeit decked in modern garb. The logic of the situation is summed up in (C):

- (C) If experience is unique unto each individual and also plays a central role in determining the content of language, then the intersubjectivity of meaning cannot be maintained.

Certain empiricists have seized the nettle by affirming that indeed meanings cannot be shared amongst speakers. Locke and some other historical figures may have held this view, and any teacher of undergraduates will know that this conclusion has enduring appeal. Of course, this is anathema to the analytic tradition, which Frege began by insisting that the consequent of (C) be rejected.<sup>14</sup> Because Quine also af-

<sup>13</sup> "Intellectual Autobiography," p. 41.

<sup>14</sup> Frege clearly affirms the intersubjectivity of sense: senses are shareable. Michael Dummett claims that Frege also holds something like publicity. I have argued, though, that the textual evidence is cloudier than Dummett suggests; for some discussion, see my "Has Dummett Oversalted His Frege?: Remarks on the Conveyability of Thought," in Richard G. Heck, Jr. (ed.), *Language, Thought, and Logic: Essays in Honour of Michael Dummett* (Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 35-69.

firms the first conjunct of (C)'s antecedent, he denies that experience is centrally implicated in the content of our claims and affirms instead the "object-oriented line."<sup>15</sup>

Neural intakes, though no longer involved in a description of intersubjective content, nevertheless continue to be important in Quine's final view. For one thing, reference will be made to them in spelling out which sentences are amenable to determinate translation: only the observation sentences, those whose use is very closely tied to neural intake, will be determinately translatable. Neural intake also continues to be an important notion in the study of the indi-

<sup>15</sup> For the record, I think that Quine (especially once gripped by the "object-oriented line") would have disagreed with this summary of his views. He would have insisted, as against Davidson's and Føllesdal's suggestions, that all his talk of the regularities involving proximal neural stimulation was never part of his account of the facts that constrain translation, which was always distal in nature. The point of focusing on the regularities involving proximal stimulation was rather to clarify the preconditions of communication, to help explain why translation, as pursued distally, actually succeeds; his interest in neural stimulation "concerned not what the translator does or should do, but why it works." ("Where Do We Disagree?," in Hahn (ed.), *The Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, 73-79, p. 74.)

Quine eventually concluded that a neurological explanation is neither plausible nor necessary. (See, for example, his "Progress on Two Fronts.") It is not plausible because its assumption of an inter-personal homology of neural receptors is not plausible. And it is not necessary because natural selection suffices to explain both why individuals are born reacting differentially to their neural intakes and why there is a consonance in the differential responses of speakers to their respective neural intakes (that is, why, if distal stimuli cause in one speaker neural intakes that she treats similarly, then those stimuli will cause in another comparably situated speaker neural intakes that he too treats as similar). Thus natural selection, Quine believed in the end, explains why the environment prompts uses of language on my part that are in synchrony with your prompted uses of language, even though the environmental happenings lead to neurological events in your body that are not assimilable to those it causes in mine. As Davidson sums it up: "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." ("Reply to Føllesdal," in Hahn (ed.), *The Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, 729-32, p. 732.)

But, to repeat, Quine would have insisted that this late shift concerned not his understanding of the facts that constrain translation but rather his explanation of why translation so pursued can succeed.

vidual. The full story of how a scientific theory blossoms in a speaker will ultimately make reference to his neural intakes, for Quine expects attention to such neural buzzing to prove crucial in developing a naturalistic account of how the intricately structured complex of dispositions we call "science" comes to develop in an individual.

Quine's shift away from a proximal account of content fixation entails that stimulus meanings have no role to play in fixing the meanings of observation sentences. This is worth emphasizing. The content of an observation sentence, that which pertains to its functioning as an intersubjective checkpoint of scientific theorizing, is fixed by whatever translation preserves. Quine's final word on the matter is that what translation preserves makes no reference at all to stimulus meanings. Hence, stimulus meanings are irrelevant to determining the content of observation sentences. The proximal is personal, and so it is not germane to this task. What matters, rather, are the regularities that hold between distal stimuli and use of language. I have taken empiricism to involve the claim that a central determinant of a sentence's content for a speaker—assuming it has some on its own—makes reference to the speaker's experience; I can consequently put the present observation by saying that Quine's considered view is incompatible with the empiricism he once endorsed.

There is still in Quine's final view an attenuated sense in which it is true that stimulus meanings are relevant to the content of observation sentences. For that a speaker is disposed to use a sentence in a particular way in particular distal circumstances surely has something to do with the sentence's having the stimulus meaning it does for that speaker: the distal circumstances cause a certain neural intake which, *given the sentence's stimulus meaning*, causes the speaker's verbal response. What this shows is that in a full causal account of the speaker's use of language, reference

will be made to the stimulation of his or her nerve endings. Quine's final empiricism is merely of this bare variety. And one can certainly hold for such a withered empiricism while eschewing its more robust cousin: it is possible that a detailed story of what causes the regularities that fix the content of a speaker's observation sentence will make reference to its stimulus meaning, even though a characterization of those regularities does not. As far as semantics is concerned, Quine's empiricism has a "pallid"<sup>16</sup> cast and ultimately lacks the vigor of even that "old empiricist Pierce."

We just saw that Quine ultimately deems the privacy of empiricism intolerable. Does empiricism as understood above have other consequences that might also have prompted Quine to abandon it? Some have been concerned by the *Problem of the Cartesian Curtain*: if the facts that fix the contents of observation sentences are characterized in terms of experience, however understood, how can one use such sentences to talk about an objective, external world? Statements whose contents are fixed by reference to a speaker's experience may well appear to be a curtain between the speaker and the world which once drawn can never be penetrated. Thus one might fear that such an empiricism would make the physical world—the world of atoms and microbes, but also of rabbits and trees—forever indescribable.

Would Quine have been moved by this? On his view, observation sentences are about the physical world; they are reports on how matters stand with rather local bits of matter. The existence of rabbits and trees is his starting point, as is our ability to talk about them. To question the existence of the external world or our ability to refer to it is just to saw

<sup>16</sup> The term is Davidson's and not intended by him to be derogatory; in fact, he urges that we should not hanker after a rosier empiricism. ("Meaning, Truth and Evidence," in Robert B. Barrett and Roger F. Gibson (eds.), *Perspectives on Quine* (Blackwell, 1990), 68-79, p. 68.)

off the branch on which one sits: for the provisional conclusion that the content of observation sentences is fixed by regular links between experience and use is one that arises within a rational inquiry that is presently committed to the existence of such a world and to our capacity to discourse upon it. If we learn that the facts that fix language's content mention experience, then we ought rather to conclude that such mention is just what makes reference to the physical world possible.<sup>17</sup> For Quine, the Cartesian Curtain never threatened to come between speakers and the external world.

Since empiricism holds that the content of observation sentences is determined by regularities involving sensory experience, the view naturally suggests that observation sentences are justifiable by sensory experience. But what does duty for experiences in Quine's conception are neural intakes, which are by their nature non-propositional. Since everything non-propositional is evidentially inert, experience on Quine's view cannot enter into the required evidential relations. We might call this the *Problem of the Surd Sensum*. Precisely this problem was raised against Schlick and the so-called "right wing" of the Vienna Circle by those in its "left wing," notably Otto Neurath; for "the left," talk of experience justifying statements was nonsense and so empiricism, as here understood, had to be abandoned.

Quine did not appear moved by this concern either. Perhaps in the spirit of the last response, one might reply to

<sup>17</sup> See, for instance, Quine's "Posits and Reality," in his *The Ways of Paradox and Other Essays* (revised and enlarged edition, Harvard, 1971), 246-54, especially the section "Restitution". The argument there concerns evidence, but Quine's response carries over to the issue of reference as well. I have dubbed this Quine's "linguacentrism"; for some discussion, see my "On Washing the Fur Without Wetting It: Quine, Carnap, and Analyticity," *Mind*, 109 (2000): 1-24. The line on justification is essentially Schlick's; see his "Positivism and Realism," Henk L. Mulder and Barbara F. B. van de Velde-Schlick (eds.), Peter Heath (transl.), *Moritz Schlick: Philosophical Papers, Volume II (1925-1936)* (Reidel, 1979), 259-284.

Neurath that if we discover that the connection between our observation sentences, which we assume are by and large justified, and the world is via neural intake, then that just is what a justificatory link looks like. And indeed one does sometimes find Quine treating neural intake as evidence for observation statements: “Roughly specifiable sequences of nerve hits,” he once said, “can confirm us in statements about having had breakfast, or there being a brick house on Elm Street.”<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, towards the end of his life, when he had abandoned empiricism, as here understood, he wrote as if he had always acknowledged the correctness of this concern (e.g., see the quotation at the end of the following paragraph).

What we can be quite sure of is that Quine, in reaction to the threats to intersubjectivity and to publicity that he saw lurking in empiricism, eventually abandoned it and settled for an ersatz variant. On Quine’s most mature view, what fixes the content of observation sentences has nothing to do with experience: stimulus meanings are no part of the range of facts that determine how such statements can be translated. Consequently, one need not resort to Schlickian maneuvers to ward off the challenges of phenomenalism. Furthermore, since what fixes the meanings of observation sentences has now been divorced from experience, there is no pressure to force neural stimulation into any kind of evidential relation with such sentences. Thus in the end we find Quine insisting that “We are not aware of our neural intake, nor do we deduce anything from it. What we *have* learned to

<sup>18</sup> “Posits and Reality,” p. 253. Somewhat later, he wrote: “Grant that a knowledge of the appropriate stimulatory conditions of a sentence does not settle how to construe the sentence in terms of existence of objects. Still, it does tend to settle what is to count as empirical evidence for or against the truth of the sentence” (“Speaking of Objects,” in *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*, 1-25, p. 11). And later still: “The proper role of experience or surface irritation is as a basis not for truth but for warranted belief” (“On the Very Idea of a Third Dogma,” in *Theories and Things* (Harvard, 1981), 38-42, p. 39).

do is to assert or assent to some observation sentences in *reaction* to certain ranges of neural intake.”<sup>19</sup> The *sensum* remains surd, but since it is no longer pressed into justificational service, all is well.

To sum up, Quine originally sought an account of linguistic use, of the touchstone for the correctness of translation, that would accommodate features of meaning that he deemed central: its intersubjectivity, its publicity, and its constitutive link to sensory experience. Eventually, he despaired of rendering either of the first two compatible with the third. He responded by altering his conception of linguistic use in such a way as to abandon empiricism in favor of an anemic alternative according to which experience, or its counterpart in a scientifically respectable theory of the world, plays no substantive role in an analysis of what determines the content of the claims of natural science.

### III. Dissent about Assent

We saw that Quine’s primary motivation for shunning empiricism was despair at avoiding subjectivity and privacy if what fixes the contents of observation sentences should involve reference to speakers’ experiences, however soberly understood. On Quine’s final, distal account of translation, by contrast, the regularities that are to be respected by a correct translation make reference only to a speaker’s use of language in worldly circumstances. This appears to restore the desired intersubjectivity and publicity—but does it really? To answer this, one must examine how Quine conceives of the other half of these regularities: use of language.

“Query and assent, query and dissent—here is the solvent that reduces understanding to verbal disposition,” Quine insists. “It is,” he continues, “primarily by querying sentences for assent and dissent that we tap the reservoirs of

<sup>19</sup> “In Praise of Observation Sentences,” *The Journal of Philosophy*, 90 (1993): 107-16, p. 111.



verbal disposition.”<sup>20</sup> So the relevant uses of language are assents and dissents. Furthermore, we must understand that a certain kind of *behavior* is at issue here: “[...] let us adopt,” Quine suggests, “the term *surface assent* for the utterance or gesture itself. My behavioural approach does indeed permit me, then, only to appeal to surface assent; assent as I talk of it must be understood as surface assent.”<sup>21</sup>

But how can such behaviors be compared across speakers? Among speakers of the same language, it is not obvious that one person’s behavioral response can be likened to another’s. The point is even clearer when we consider translation between speakers of different languages: uttering “Yes” and uttering “Oui” are quite different behavioral displays. More generally still, it seems in principle possible that I could communicate with a creature whose morphology, and so behavior, is very different from mine. Do we really want to rule out the possibility of such communication *a priori*?

Quine has a conception of behavior that makes matters even worse. Thus he writes that:

a reassuring symmetry emerges between stimulus and response. Parallel to stimulus as neural intake, identifiable with the totality of activated receptors, the response may be taken as motor output, identifiable with the totality of activated fibers in the motor muscles, including those of speech.<sup>22</sup>

In this connection the symmetry is not reassuring, for it raises the very difficulty that arose in trying to find a physiological level at which stimulation could be common between two speakers. If we assume that the regularities that translation must preserve involve the behavior of

speakers so understood then translation will be impossible, since such regularities will not likely carry over from speaker to speaker. Again, it should not be a consequence of a theory of content that one cannot communicate with a being whose motor-related anatomy is very different from one’s own. (Remember the Martians.)

Additionally, the “reassuring symmetry” confounds Quine’s desire for publicity. For “activated fibers in the motor muscles” are no more observable than triggerings of our surface neural receptors.

A defender of Quine might suggest that I have here mischaracterized the regularities that are to ground translation. For a given speaker they link, on the one hand, events or objects in the environment<sup>23</sup> and, on the other, assent *so described*. That is, the linguistic use of the speaker is not to be specified in terms of bodily movements or motor muscle contractions, but rather simply as assent. The regularities to which translation must do justice hold not between circumstances in the world and activity of the body or of its muscle fibers, but rather between these circumstances and acts of assent. *Such regularities are* shareable across speakers: Anthony will assent to “Red?” in just those circumstances in which Antoine will assent to “Rouge?” The translation-relevant regularities come into view only upon ascent to the level of assent.

But what is the level of assent? What is it, for example, that makes Antoine’s utterances of “Oui” instances of assent? Quine writes as if there is a fact of the matter regarding the behavior that constitutes a speaker’s act of assenting—as indeed he must if he is to maintain that the issue of

<sup>20</sup> “Mind and Verbal Dispositions,” in Samuel Guttenplan (ed.), *Mind and Language: Wolfson College Lectures 1974* (Oxford, 1975), 83-95, p. 88.

<sup>21</sup> “Mind and Verbal Dispositions,” p. 91.

<sup>22</sup> “In Praise of Observation Sentences,” pp. 115-6.

<sup>23</sup> This points to another question for Quine that I am passing over. It is odd to speak of there being a regularity between *objects* and linguistic use. On the other hand, Quine’s view makes no room for facts involving *events*, which are *entia non grata* in his ontology. What, one might well wonder, is the *relatum* on the world side of the regularity?

correctness arises for the translation of observation sentences.<sup>24</sup> But which fact is that? Clearly, Quine would not want to say that behavior counts as assent so long as it expresses the speaker's intention to agree, or anything along such lines. For this would be to place the private cart before the public horse.

Quine offers a behavioral heuristic to help the linguist recognize the native's sign for assent: whenever the native volunteers *S*, query him with *S?*, the interrogative counterpart of *S*; his response stands a good chance of being his assent. But Quine makes it clear that he takes this to be a mere aid in identifying assent; it is a criterion that has nothing to do with what *makes* a display of behavior a sign for assent.

We thus still await a general characterization of what assent in a language consists in. Taking a line from Quine himself, we might naughtily add that even if one could specify what makes some behavior assent in language  $L_0$ , one would have thereby analyzed "assent-for- $L_0$ " but not the idiom "*B* is assent for *L*" with variable "*B*" and "*L*." The problem is not as easily solved as might at first appear, yet Quine never addressed it. It may be that at one time he thought a behavioral analysis of assent would be forthcoming. But it is difficult to see what it might be and even more challenging to imagine how it would make room for the desired intersubjectivity of content.

Might one simply say, for instance, that assent is just whatever type of behavior is mapped into "Yes" by a translation manual that permits smooth communication? What makes it the case that a vocalization of "Oui" is Antoine's assenting behavior is that the translation manual that permits

easy communication with Antoine is one in which that type of utterance is translated as "Yes." This proposal will, of course, be of no help to the field linguist who is trying to determine when a foreign speaker is assenting. But this is irrelevant: useful procedures for discovering the facts are one thing, the nature of the facts so discovered something else.

Still, Quine ought to be wary of the proposal. For on his view translation of assent and dissent, of observation sentences, and of some logical connectives is determinate, unlike translation of the more theoretical reaches of language. According to the present proposal, however, the correctness of our identification of assent in a speaker's language depends on whether there is a translation manual which permits fluent exchange and in which that identification figures. This makes some behavior type's being assent dependent on the translatability of the entire language, including stretches of the language whose translation is taken by Quine to be far less determinate than that of assent. But if the correctness of the translation for assent depends on the acceptability of the entire translation manual, in what sense is its translation on a firmer footing than that of any other part of the language? On the present proposal, the entire translation manual is to be evaluated in terms of its contribution to successful communication; no component of the manual is correct independently of the whole translation's being correct. Because the entire manual confronts the tribunal of mutual negotiation as a corporate body, there are no determinate facts about the translation of assent—and so of the observation sentences—that are independent of how to translate the entire language.

This undermines the ability of observation sentences to carry out their appointed tasks. In order for science to lay claim to objectivity, or at least intersubjectivity, it must be that holders of different theories can find common ground at the level of observation sentences, whose shareable content

<sup>24</sup> That said, Quine occasionally claims that indeterminacy affects the translation of assent and dissent. For some discussion, see my "Quine and Observation," in Alex Orenstein and Petr Kotatko (eds.), *Knowledge, Language and Logic: Questions for Quine* (Kluwer, 2000), 21-45, section 3. (The present paper provides a sharpening and elaboration of some thoughts in "Quine and Observation.")

must consequently be independent of the theoretical superstructure within which they are embedded. Another role for observation sentences is as the entry points into language, which likewise suggests that their content can be learned—and so can be fixed—independently of a mastery of the entire language. These goals would be unattainable if the content of an observation sentence, the correctness of its translation, depended on the translation of a language as a whole. To play the role of inter-theoretic checkpoints for the natural scientist and that of entry points into language for the learning child, observation sentences need intersubjective contents that can be attached to one's expressions regardless of which theory one holds or even of whether one has a language. And such content is precisely what is ruled out by the above conception of assent.<sup>25</sup>

The truth is that Quine never supplies an adequate analysis of assent. As a consequence, he ultimately fails to clarify what substance there is to the claim that translator and translated assent, in the same circumstances, to two

<sup>25</sup> If facts about assent are determined only once a translation manual judged to be adequate is in hand, then we must have an independent analysis of adequacy of translation, one that makes no reference to fidelity to a range of linguistic practice that is specified in terms of assent. Quine sometimes writes as if we do: what is “utterly factual,” he occasionally proposes, is just fluency of negotiation. (See, for instance, *Pursuit of Truth*, p. 43.) This is what fixes what counts as assent, and so also what the observation sentences are and how they should be translated. On this view, the observation sentences are no longer distinguished with respect to determinacy of translation: “their distinctive factuality [as regards translation] is blurred now by the disavowal of shared stimulus meaning.” (*Pursuit of Truth*, p. 43.)

This proposal preserves the idea that translation is beholden to linguistic exchange—save the communication, save the surface negotiation, and you have saved all—but as I just suggested, it no longer at all localizes in some collection of shared uses of language what translation needs to be faithful to, and so it fails to provide a notion of observation sentence that can do what Quine wants done. It is noteworthy that a few years after writing the above in *Pursuit of Truth* (in 1990), we find Quine urging as usual that observation sentences “are free of the indeterminacies that beset translation of theoretical sentences.” (“In Praise of Observation Sentences,” p. 111.)

given sentences in their respective languages. And without this, Quine has no account of how use of language—and hence linguistic content—is identifiable across speakers.

Thus Quine eventually arrives at a view which not only forsakes a central precept of empiricism (see section II), but which also abandons the publicity and intersubjectivity of meaning. Quine's final position thus fails to accommodate the characteristics of content that he originally wished to ground in facets of the linguistic use that determines meaning.

#### IV. Davidson's Response

There is, however, a seemingly modest proposal suggested and defended by Davidson. The adjustment is to take a speaker's *holding true* a sentence at a particular time to be the use of language that figures in the linguistic regularities that constrain interpretation of another. Thus the regularities that translation must honor obtain rather between, on the one hand, circumstances in the world and, on the other, a speaker's attitude with regard to the truth of a given sentence. This immediately eases the subjectivity that bedevils Quine's view, for the relation of holding true that, say, Anthony bears to the sentence “It's hot” at time *t* can be precisely the same relation that Antoine bears to the sentence “Il fait chaud” at *t*, their idiosyncratic bodily and muscular designs notwithstanding. Such is the virtue of prescinding from anatomical matters, a virtue that all the mental attitudes possess. It is yet another ironical twist that intersubjectivity can be regained by mentalizing Quine's surface assent.

Davidson suggests that Quine ought not be bothered by this amendment; indeed, that he is merely elaborating Quine's view: “I suggest, following Quine, that we may without circularity or unwarranted assumptions accept cer-

tain very general attitudes towards sentences as the basic evidence for a theory of radical interpretation."<sup>26</sup> True, he grants, "where [Quine] likes assent and dissent because they suggest a behaviouristic test, I despair of behaviourism and accept frankly intensional attitudes toward sentences, such as holding true."<sup>27</sup> But on Davidson's view this difference is one of mere detail.<sup>28</sup> By contrast, I find that it marks a significant departure from some of the goals that animate Quine's work.

This can be appreciated if we return to thought's publicity, a feature of thought which Quine always emphasizes and which is of a piece with his understanding of the constraints on translation in terms of observable linguistic practice. Facts about the thoughts of another or about the content of another's claims are of course not divivable from the armchair: we cannot come to understand another speaker simply through reflection. Observation is needed. But observation suffices: these facts are exhaustively revealed by observing another, for we can grasp them completely on the basis of such observations. We could of course invent notions of "thought" or "meaning" according to which the contents of another's beliefs or speech are not thoroughly accessible through observation; but these notions are not correlative to that of interpersonal communication, which is what interests us here.

<sup>26</sup> "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford, 1984), 183-198, p. 195.

<sup>27</sup> "The Inscrutability of Reference," in his *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, 227-241, pp. 230-1. Perhaps "intensional" here is a slip or a printer's error for while holding-true is an intentional attitude between a speaker and a sentence, it is intended not to be intensional: "a relation, such as holding true, between a speaker and an utterance is an extensional relation which can be known to hold without knowing what the sentence means." ("Three Varieties of Knowledge," in A. Phillips Griffiths (ed.), *A. J. Ayer Memorial Essays* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 153-66, p. 158.)

<sup>28</sup> On this matter, according to Davidson, he and Quine "probably differ on some details." ("The Inscrutability of Reference," in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, p. 230.)

So, can one observe that another holds true a sentence? Davidson's answer is unequivocal: "we cannot directly see that someone holds a sentence true."<sup>29</sup> For holding a sentence true "is not a *use* of language."<sup>30</sup> But since evidence for a theory of truth consists in facts about when a speaker holds a sentence true—that is, in T-sentence-verifying regularities that link distal events and holdings-true—Davidson must conclude that such evidence is not directly observable.

Davidson goes on to argue that the attitude is nevertheless detectable on the basis of what we can observe, and I shall turn to this claim in a moment. But it is worth pausing to note that, by his own lights, Davidson's account of the facts that fix content—those against which a theory of truth is measured—fails to satisfy the publicity constraint when strictly interpreted. For Davidson, what makes a theory of truth empirically substantive are the consequences it entails about regularities that link holdings-true and distal events. It is at the level of such regularities that a theory of truth makes contact with reality. But this level, according to Davidson, is not observable, and so publicity in the strictest sense fails to be respected.

One can take the sting out of this conclusion by taking the sting out of publicity. Perhaps publicity demands something less than that the truths pertinent to the translation or interpretation of another be observable; perhaps publicity calls only for such truths to be inferable from what can uncontroversially be observed. Quine's demand for strict publicity was philosophical Viagra, and it is doubtful whether any weakened version would prove as stimulating. For instance, this proposed weakening could be welcomed even by the friend of traditional meanings, who always

<sup>29</sup> "Reply to Deborah Hansen Soles," in *The Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, 330-2, p. 331.

<sup>30</sup> "Epistemology and Truth," reprinted in Davidson's *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* (Oxford, 2002), 177-91, p. 190.

claimed that we can reason to facts about these unobservables on the basis of what can be observed. But it would be lamented by those who believe both that skepticism with respect to linguistic meaning must be assiduously resisted and also that it can take root in any gap, however small, between the observable responses of a speaker in observable circumstances and the facts that settle the content of the speaker's language. Davidson's conception opens precisely such a gap.<sup>31</sup>

How does Davidson believe this gap can be bridged? He often suggests that, while we cannot directly observe the attitude of holding true, we can infer its presence from information about a stratum of behavior that is unproblematically observable. Thus he says of the general attitude of holding true that it is "relatively directly observable" through being inferable from speech behavior.<sup>32</sup> Which speech behavior? "[W]hat we can observe are assents and dissents," Davidson writes, and from such observations we can infer that a speaker holds a sentence true.<sup>33</sup>

What can be observed, of course, is speech behavior in relation to the environment, and from this certain attitudes toward sentences can be fairly directly inferred. [...] For Quine, the key observables are acts of *assent* and *dissent*, as caused by events within the ambit of the speaker. From such acts it is possible to infer that the speaker is caused by certain kinds of events to hold a sentence true. [Footnote: The step from observed as-

<sup>31</sup> There is more irony here in the fact that a central consideration that Davidson advances against Quine's earlier proximal account is that the gap between the world and stimulations allows for skepticism. (See "Meaning, Truth and Evidence," pp. 74ff.)

<sup>32</sup> "The Structure and Content of Truth," *The Journal of Philosophy* 87 (1990): 279-328, p. 318. Elsewhere, he writes that there "are obvious relations between holding a sentence true and linguistic (and other) behavior. [...] Our speech acts reveal our underlying attitudes towards our sentences; but often indirectly." ("Epistemology and Truth," p. 190.)

<sup>33</sup> "Reply to Deborah Hansen Soles," p. 331.

sents to the inferred attitude of holding true is not, I think, explicit in Quine.]<sup>34</sup>

I have already argued that the move to holdings true is not only not explicit in Quine but at odds with a strict construal of his publicity constraint. I shall return to this question again toward the end of this section, but before doing so a few points are in order regarding Davidson's proposed inference.

First, despite the nod to Quine, Davidson could not here be referring, by "acts of assent and dissent," to physiologically or muscularly described bodily movements. The idea that information about holdings-true might be inferred from such observable assentings would bring us full circle, for we originally looked to the attitude of holding true as a replacement for Quine's ultimately obscure conception of assent. The upshot of our earlier discussion (see section III) is that we lack a conception of surface assent that will do the work Quine wanted done. We cannot now pretend that we have such a conception in order to motivate the idea that Davidson's amendment to Quine leaves us with an evidential base that is inferentially connected to the observable.

Second, even if one could articulate such a bare conception of assent, it would undercut Davidson's claim about inferability.<sup>35</sup> For how can an intentional attitude be inferred from, or attributed on the basis of, a display of surface assent? The answer, presumably, is that we can infer something about what the agent holds true from the displayed assent together with the constellation of attributed attitudes in whose content such assent figures. For this to be possible, however, the display must be one with respect to which an

<sup>34</sup> "The Structure and Content of Truth," p. 318.

<sup>35</sup> There is of course the additional problem that, as mentioned above, bare behavior understood as muscle-fiber activity is not observable either. I focus here on a different objection because, as we shall see, it applies even if one takes behavior to consist in observable bodily movements.

agent might readily have beliefs. Jennifer Hornsby expresses the thought well and draws the appropriate conclusion:

One thing that we know is that  $\varphi$ -ing is a proper explanandum of the common-sense psychological scheme only if agents have some beliefs in the ascription of which  $\varphi$ -ing could be mentioned. So functionalists are not in fact entitled to use whatever bodily movement terms they like; their resources can include only such terms as could be used in giving the contents of agents' mental states. It seems, then, that they must refrain from using any very detailed bodily movement terms.<sup>36</sup>

Thus even if we possessed what in fact we lack, namely a bare characterization of surface assent (say, in terms of muscle-fiber activity), it is unlikely that such a concept will figure in the contents of a speaker's beliefs. For instance, in the normal course of affairs I might well have beliefs about what results from my bidding at an auction, but not about the consequences of contraction of my right hand's *extensor digitorum*; that is why something could be inferred about my cognitive state from the information that I had bid, but not from the information that my *extensor* had contracted. In sum, since it is not likely that a speaker would have beliefs whose contents involve notions of very detailed bodily or muscular movements, inferences from activity so described to attitudes of the speaker are blocked. Hence, the assentings that on Davidson's view furnish the evidence for attributions of holdings-true cannot be described in any very detailed or measurable manner.

Finally, reflection on Hornsby's observation yields a prior and even more basic point: that an attribution of holding-true cannot be made merely on the basis of a display of

<sup>36</sup> "Physicalist Thinking and Conceptions of Behaviour," in Philip Pettit and John McDowell (eds.) *Subject, Thought, and Context* (Oxford, 1986), 95-115, pp. 103-104.

surface assent, even if such assent is described in terms of bodily movements that might readily figure in the beliefs of a speaker. For nothing about a speaker's attitudes follows from the bare fact that the speaker did something, unless we also attribute to the speaker a collection of attitudes that involve such a doing. Hence surface assent, taken to be bodily movement at whatever level of muscular detail, cannot by itself provide the evidential base for attributions of holdings-true to a speaker. If we insist that the assent is surface assent, then other beliefs will need to be attributed in order to draw the desired inferences. And now the original problem about the evidence for holdings-true simply reappears with regard to these other attitudes. Thus, if assentings are to suffice in principle to license inferences to holdings-true, assent cannot be understood as surface assent in anything like the way Quine intends this notion.

And in fact, this does not seem to be Davidson's view, in spite of his description of assents as "speech behavior"; for he conceives of it rather as "the non-individuative attitude of *prompted assent*." A non-individuative attitude is one which, though "psychological in nature, [does] not bestow individual propositional contents on the attitudes."<sup>37</sup> Information about assent so construed can indeed function as sole premise in an inference to a conclusion about what a speaker holds true. If a speaker, when queried with a sentence, regularly expresses agreement, we can infer that she takes that sentence to be true; for, other things being equal, this conclusion helps explain her repeated agreement.

Once the need for this psychological conception of assent is acknowledged, our original question about the evidential base for an attribution of holding-true shifts to one about the evidence for attributing the attitude of prompted assent.

<sup>37</sup> "Three Varieties of Knowledge," p. 158. But even here, one can find Davidson insisting that "behavioural grounds are all we have for determining what speakers mean" (p. 162).

And again, there is no question of attributing this attitude on the basis of an inference just from the speaker's behavior, whether this is construed bodily or muscularly or neurally.

We have, in fact, already seen Davidson's answer to this new question. For he holds that the attitude of prompted assent, from which we can infer to the attitude of holding true, is *observable*: "what we can observe," he asserts, "are assents and dissents." This remark—together with Davidson's use of such expressions as "speech behavior" and his gestures toward Quine—initially encouraged the thought that his assent is something like surface assent. But we saw that this cannot be if assent is to play its required evidential role. Thus, if evidence for a theory of truth must be observable and if such a theory meets reality, so to speak, at the level of regularities between holdings-true and distal events, and if the attitude of holding true is not itself observable but instead requires inference from information about prompted assent, then the attitude of assent must itself be observable. Often, an observer can just *see* that another instantiates the attitude of assent.

This is something Davidson could in principle embrace. For he holds that to perceive that *p* is to have a belief that *p* that is caused in an appropriate way by environmental features and the operation of one's sensory organs. (We shall return to this view later in detail.) And in principle there is no reason why a belief that someone has assented could not be so caused.<sup>38</sup>

I argued just above that whether or not the gap between

<sup>38</sup> Davidson holds that "[a]ssent is a subtle attitude (though we often detect it with ease) compared to giving an order because it is much less directly connected with action." ("Reply to Deborah Hansen Soles," p. 331.) In line with the above interpretation, I understand this to mean that one can often, though not always, observe that another is assenting. If, however, one reads this passage as suggesting that conclusions about assent are themselves inferred from information about actions, then much of the above discussion carries over to the nature of these actions.

what can be observed and the empirical content of a theory of truth can be bridged, there does remain a publicity-threatening gap. The gap extends between the facts that a theory of truth seeks to capture (*viz.*, certain regularities between holdings-true and distal events) and what can be observed (*viz.*, the attitude of prompted assent). I would now add that, even if one feels comfortable with a more relaxed publicity requirement, Davidson's conception of what lies on either side of this gap is in tension with an underlying motivation for a certain conception of publicity.

For Quine, a person can arrive at a complete understanding of another through observation of that speaker. On Quine's view, it is crucial that analysis of content do justice to this thesis when "a person" is taken to refer both to one with language *and to one without*. Pre-linguistic infants acquire language, and they do so on the basis of observation; they develop speech with intersubjective content through observing those around them. There can be no aspect of this content that is not manifestable in the public use of language, for "all inculcation of meanings of words must rest ultimately on sensory evidence."<sup>39</sup> We can secure this by holding, as Quine does, that the facts that fix content just are facts about observable linguistic use; one's words have the content they do because, and only because, one employs them as one does. "It is the very facts about meaning, not the entities meant," Quine insists, "that must be construed in terms of behavior."<sup>40</sup> On the basis of their observations, then, infants are able to learn to engage in such use themselves.

It can now appear unavoidable that the facts that fix content can be described without the use of propositional attitudes or their kin. Why? Because if, as seems more than

<sup>39</sup> "Epistemology Naturalized," p. 75.

<sup>40</sup> "Ontological Relativity," in *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*, 26-68, p. 27.

plausible, a grasp of the propositional attitudes is made possible by the development of a first language, then one cannot explain that development by attributing such a grasp to the learning infant. So if the development of contentful speech is to be understood in terms of the infant's gradual participation in a linguistic practice, then this practice must be such that it could be entered into by someone who lacks a command over the propositional attitudes. And this might seem to require that this practice can be described without reference to these attitudes.

The suggestion is explicit and important in Michael Dummett's reflections on the proper form of a theory of meaning. "What we want to arrive at," Dummett maintains,

is a model of that in which our understanding of our language consists, a model which will be adequate to explain the entire practice of speaking the language. Certainly that model must itself be described in terms which do not presuppose a tacit understanding of terms, such as "assertion," "justification," "true," etc., which relate to the practice of which the model aims to provide an account, or it will, to that extent, fail to be explanatory.<sup>41</sup>

A theory of meaning "must not avail itself of notions, taken as already understood, whose application depends on there being such a thing as language."<sup>42</sup> To do so would frustrate the desire to arrive at an understanding of how first language learning is possible:

This account of a speaker's possession of a concept expressible in the language must make intelligible his acquisition of that concept by coming to speak the lan-

<sup>41</sup> "What does the Appeal to Use Do for the Theory of Meaning?," in *The Seas of Language* (Oxford, 1993), 106-116, p. 115.

<sup>42</sup> "Reply to McDowell," in Barry Taylor (ed.), *Michael Dummett: Contributions to Philosophy* (Nijhoff, 1987), 253-68, p. 259.

guage: it must therefore describe a practice the mastery of which does not demand prior possession of the concept.<sup>43</sup>

These observations are reminiscent of Ludwig Wittgenstein's complaint that "Augustine describes the learning of human language as if the child came into a strange country and did not understand the language of the country; that is, as if it already had a language, only not this one."<sup>44</sup> Dummett's remarks do not express a felt, and foiled, need for some kind of strict reduction. Rather, they convey a wish to understand how a creature without a language could come to engage in the practice that gives language its content, and a conviction that this is possible only if that practice can be described in a non-semantic and non-intentional manner. Sometimes Davidson, too, seems to share these thoughts: for he wants to understand "how the intentional supervenes on the observable and non-intentional," which involves exploring how one can "take certain observable aspects of verbal behavior as evidence for a theory of truth."<sup>45</sup>

Quine's characterization of the facts that constrain translation satisfies this wish. For on the basis of what it observes, a pre-linguistic child could—indeed does—come to respond behaviorally to a given range of distal stimuli. If there are questions here, they are questions about the nature of operant conditioning in general that are no more mysterious than ones about how pigeons learn to peck keys in response to colored lights.

The wish is not satisfied, however, by Davidson's suggestion regarding the facts that fix content, or even by the

<sup>43</sup> "Reply to McDowell," p. 267.

<sup>44</sup> G. E. M. Anscombe (trans.), *Philosophical Investigations* (third edition, Blackwell, 1953), Part I, §32.

<sup>45</sup> "Radical Interpretation Interpreted," in James E. Tomberlin (ed.), *Philosophical Perspectives 8: Logic and Language, 1994* (Ridgeview, 1994), 121-8, p. 127.



evidence on the basis of which we might know these facts: for both are to be described using intentional idioms, that of holding a sentence true and that of prompted assent, respectively. Thus the direction in which Davidson's amendment to Quine's proposal moves is away from the latter's insistence (and that of Dummett and others) that one must be able to characterize what it is to have a language, what it is for one's words to have intersubjective content, in terms of abilities, dispositions, regularities, or practices that are describable without any reference to thought, reason, belief, or other notions cognate to that of language itself. For Quine, of course, this is the wrong direction to be heading, for it appears to leave the phenomenon of first-language acquisition something of a mystery. From this perspective, the modesty of Davidson's proposal is of the Swiftian variety.

Dummett sometimes puts his objection to Davidson by observing that it "is essential to Davidson's project that one brings to the theory [of truth for a language] a prior understanding of the concept of truth: only so can one derive, from a specification of the truth-conditions of sentences, a grasp of what they mean."<sup>46</sup> He considers this a criticism because it follows that we cannot, even speculatively, view the child's eventual linguistic achievement as the bare grasp of such a theory. Davidson agrees with this observation. He acknowledges that a Tarskian theory of truth does not provide a full account of truth.<sup>47</sup> His response to the worry is to specify what such a theory omits. "What is missing," he says, "is the connection with the users of language."<sup>48</sup> He continues:

<sup>46</sup> *Origins of Analytical Philosophy* (Duckworth, 1993), p. 18.

<sup>47</sup> "Dummett and others," he says, "have attempted in various ways to make the slow-witted among us appreciate the failure of Tarski's truth predicates to capture completely the concept of truth. The central difficulty, as we have seen, is due simply to the fact that Tarski's definitions give us no idea how to apply the concept to a new case, whether the new case is a new language or a word newly added to a language." ("The Structure and Content of Truth," p. 287.)

<sup>48</sup> "The Structure and Content of Truth," p. 300.

If we knew in general what makes a theory of truth correctly apply to a speaker or group of speakers, we could plausibly be said to understand the concept of truth; and if we could say exactly what makes such a theory true, we could give an explicit account—perhaps a definition—of truth. The ultimate evidence, as opposed to a criterion, for the correctness of a theory of truth must lie in available facts about how speakers use the language.<sup>49</sup>

This response cannot satisfy Dummett, however, for we have seen that for Davidson the facts that determine such a theory's correctness must remain inaccessible to one without a language; we cannot, even speculatively, view the child as constructing a theory that accommodates this "ultimate evidence." Davidson in effect grants this: "When I say available," he continues, "I mean publicly available—available not only in principle, but available in practice to anyone *who is capable of understanding the speaker or speakers of the language*."<sup>50</sup>

One might have expected that Davidson, so close to Quine, would have shown more interest in the roots of language acquisition. He reports that "it took Quine's account of radical translation to make me see that learning a language is not a matter of attaching the right meanings to words, but a process in which words are endowed with a use."<sup>51</sup> And sometimes he even suggests that first- and second-language learning "depend on similar mechanisms and

<sup>49</sup> "The Structure and Content of Truth," p. 301.

<sup>50</sup> "The Structure and Content of Truth," p. 301 (emphasis added). (The passage also appears almost verbatim in his "Epistemology and Truth," p. 182.) Davidson does not comment here on whether he thinks this will, or ought to, relieve Dummett's dissatisfaction. Elsewhere, though, he refers to Dummett's pressing him in Oxford in 1973-74 "to specify in a non-circular way what behavior would count as showing that an agent commanded the relevant concepts." And he suggests, without elaboration, that "we no longer are as far apart as we were then, or so it seems to me." ("Intellectual Autobiography," pp. 53-4.)

<sup>51</sup> "Comments on Karlovy Vary Papers," in Petr Kotatko, Peter Pagin, and Gabriel Segal (eds.), *Interpreting Davidson* (CSLI Publications, 2001), 285-307, p. 287. He adds that this insight "changed my thinking forever." See also note 7 above.

similar cues.”<sup>52</sup> But in fact Davidson has shown little interest in developing a conception of use visible to, or displayable by, those without language; that is, a conception of use that makes it intelligible how the pre-linguistic child can leverage itself into language. Indeed Davidson can sound pessimistic about our prospects for a thorough understanding of language acquisition: “to explain in detail how the process [of first-language acquisition] works,” he says, amounts “to reducing the intensional to the extensional,” which “is not, in my opinion, possible.”<sup>53</sup>

Rather, Davidson emphasizes that his project holds out the prospect of making *second-language* learning (or interpretation) more intelligible. For, he says, regularities between events in the environment and speakers’ holding sentences true (or, more directly, their prompted assents) are indeed capable of being recognized by those who are already in possession of a language but who do not yet under-

<sup>52</sup> “The Irreducibility of the Concept of the Self,” reprinted in Davidson’s *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, 85-91, p. 88 (emphasis added).

<sup>53</sup> “Comments on Karlovy Vary Papers,” p. 293. Elsewhere, he writes that “there is a perhaps insuperable problem in giving a full description of the emergence of thought. I am thankful that I am not in the field of developmental psychology.” (From “The Emergence of Thought,” reprinted in *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, 123-34, p. 128.)

Obviously, it can sound outrageous to claim that Davidson shows little concern with language acquisition: his first published paper in the philosophy of language focuses on that very subject. My point is that Davidson’s conception of the “facts of the matter” as regards interpretation makes unavailable a certain picture (e.g., that favored by Quine) of how the child learns those facts. (Someone like Quine might even be skeptical about this conception for reasons akin to those advanced by Davidson, in that very paper, against certain linguistic analyses: there he argues that any analysis is incorrect which entails that the basic vocabulary of some language is infinite, for such a language is unlearnable by finite beings.)

What Davidson has said early and late is that the first steps of language acquisition are not to be viewed as “learning part of the language,” but rather as “a matter of partly learning” the whole language. (“Theories of Meaning and Learnable Languages,” in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, 3-15, p. 7. See also, for instance, his “Reply to Jim Hopkins” [in *The Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, 286-7, p. 287], where, incidentally, Davidson mentions approvingly Wittgenstein’s rejection of Augustine’s picture; and his “Reply to Simon J. Evnine” [in *The Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, 305-10, p. 305].)

stand either the language of those being interpreted or any of their propositional attitudes. The entire intersubjective content of the complex attribution of belief, desire, and meaning to another can be seen to rest on regularities that are open to view to speakers of another language. Quine no doubt would applaud this goal. But he expects more: an account of the regularities that determine content that reveals them to be accessible both to speakers and to those learning to speak.<sup>54</sup> This desire informs his conception of publicity and the requirement it imposes on an account of the facts that fix meaning.

To sum up, Quine wants an analysis of the linguistic practice constraining translation to be one that actually permits translation; that is, it must be possible to identify uses of language across speakers. We have seen that this forces one away from a bare characterization of such uses and towards a description of them that employs mental attitudes and intentional notions. Such a move in turn compromises our ability to satisfy fully a demand that such linguistic use be public, because infants without language are not capable of seeing, or engaging in, such use. There is a tension, then, between Quine’s attempt to secure intersubjectivity and his desire to give a unified account—unified through being applicable both to those with language and to those without—of how the language and thoughts of another could in principle be learned. We can read Davidson as silently backing away from Quine’s requirement of publicity. This might at first appear incorrect, for Davidson continues to conceive of the ultimate data—regularities between distal events and prompted assentings—as observable. But we saw that he does distance himself from Quine’s publicity in

<sup>54</sup> Quine repeatedly places the pre-linguistic infant in a learning situation comparable to that of the radical translator. Each seeks, in effect, to discover the regularities of use associated with the speech of those around him; and then, in the case of the infant, to employ newly learned expressions in the same way; in the case of the translator, to determine which of his own already learned expressions he employs in that way.

two respects: first, by introducing a gap between the ultimate, observable data and the non-observable consequences of a theory of truth; and second, by describing that data in semantic or intentional terms. These data are indeed observable, but only to those who already possess a language, who have a mastery of a vast stable of concepts that is coeval with language itself.

### V. Experience Redux

We have recently been worrying the “response” relatum of the regularities that fix content. But in the light of what we have seen, it will be useful to return to their other half, to their “stimulus” component.

We can begin with an old concern. If causal regularities are all that can be pointed to in determining the content of one’s words, then it seems unclear how language could have any determinate content at all: for alongside the highlighted causal regularities between doings in the world, on the one hand, and our holdings-true on the other, there will be regularities linking these attitudes to packets of photons winging their way toward us, to stimulation of nerve endings, to firing along the optic nerve, perhaps even to particular neural business in the brain. What then would make my words be about Cooper House rather than about some complex of light particles? If causal regularity is all there is to fixing content, then come one cause, come all.<sup>55</sup>

Davidson insists that this familiar worry takes insufficient notice of the importance of communication in fixing content. One cannot explain, he urges, how a speaker’s lan-

<sup>55</sup> And perhaps there is also the opposite concern: that there are too few lawlike regularities of the appropriate kind. For Davidson insists that there are no psycho-physical laws, no lawlike relationships between physical events (i.e., events characterized using the vocabulary of physics broadly construed) and mental ones. Yet we see that for him the ultimate facts determining the correctness of a theory of truth for a language consist of counterfactual-supporting generalizations that link events in the environment of a speaker and his subsequent holdings-true, generalizations that seem to be precisely of the proscribed kind. (I first encountered this concern in conversation with A. W. Moore.)

guage can have content independently of explaining how it has content *for an interpreter*, that is, of explaining how an interpreter could in principle assign it content. The way an interpreter could do this, he says, is by noting the causal regularities that attend the speaker’s use of language. Which of the multifarious attendant causal regularities? The ones that are salient for the interpreter, the regularities that link what is going on in the environment in the view of the interpreter to holdings-true on the part of the speaker.

Davidson adds that once it is understood how a speaker’s words come to have content, one sees why they are on the whole justified. I shall take up this crucial point in a moment. First, though, I would like to pause to bring into sharper focus Davidson’s conception of the relevant environmental features. Precisely *which* aspects of the external world are germane to the facts that fix the meaning of a speaker’s language? Davidson is subtly conflicted on this point, and on occasion he elaborates his view in a way that is in tension with publicity, even publicity weakly construed.<sup>56</sup> This occurs whenever he says that one’s claims imbibe their content from the circumstances in which they were first acquired: “in the simplest and most basic cases,” he writes, “words and sentences derive their meaning from the objects and circumstances in whose presence they were learned.”<sup>57</sup> For “the contents of our thoughts and sayings are partly determined by the history of causal interactions with the envi-

<sup>56</sup> Davidson also sometimes couches his view in a way that seems to conflict with the thesis of the inscrutability of reference, which he also holds. For instance, he writes that “because of the environment in which I learned the word ‘porcupine’, my word ‘porcupine’ refers to porcupines and not to echidnas.” (“The Myth of the Subjective,” in *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, 39-52, p. 49.) Somehow this must be interpreted so as not to clash with his view that, regardless of one’s learning environment, there is no fact about which objects one’s predicate ‘porcupine’ is true of; that is, his view that there is a perfectly correct way of interpreting him in which his word ‘porcupine’ is true of echidnas.

<sup>57</sup> “The Myth of the Subjective,” p. 44.

ronment.”<sup>58</sup> The problem is that in general such historical facts are not available to an observer. Hence if successful interpretation must await the determination of such past facts regarding a speaker’s learning environment, then interpretation would for the most part be blocked. If calibration of all present and forthcoming linguistic behavior has been secured, it is a violation of publicity to suggest that understanding might yet have eluded one on the grounds that one might be in error regarding the actual conditions in which the speaker’s words were learned. For Quine, once the surface is captured, all is; one does not, in addition, need to arrive at a correct account of the surface’s history. And Davidson agrees: “What the learner or linguist or interpreter hears invests those utterances with whatever meaning they can have for him. Nothing else matters until further intercourse corrects or reinforces expectations.”<sup>59</sup> Publicity, even weakly understood, insists that all the relevant meaning-determining facts be available for present or future observation by the interpreter; and that is precisely what past facts about the speaker’s learning history are not. Davidson’s historical externalism fails to satisfy a publicity requirement that would pass Quinean muster.

Davidson draws a distinction between the view he wishes to advance and the causal theory of reference as propounded by Saul Kripke and Hilary Putnam. He says his view “has little in common” with theirs because they “look to causal relations between names and objects of which speakers may well be ignorant.”<sup>60</sup> But according to the historical externalism that he often advances, while the speaker was at one time not “ignorant” of the cause of his belief, he

<sup>58</sup> “Epistemology Externalized,” reprinted in *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, 193-204, p. 200.

<sup>59</sup> “Reply to W. V. Quine,” in *The Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, 80-5, p. 80.

<sup>60</sup> “A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge,” reprinted in *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, 137-53, p. 151.

may be subsequently: “If our past—the causal processes that gave our words and thoughts the content they have—had been different, those contents would have been different, *even if our present state happens to be what it would have been had that past been different.*”<sup>61</sup> For instance, because Millie’s present state is what it would have been had she learned ‘ostrich’ in the presence of emus (in fact she learned the word in the presence of ostriches), she is ignorant of the fact that her claim “There is an ostrich in that pen” is false (in fact, there is an emu in that pen); and there might be nothing in Millie’s present or future use of language that would reveal to an interpreter what she had causally interacted with when learning the term ‘ostrich’. A speaker’s present and future linguistic behavior might fail to reveal the causal genesis of his understanding, and this is just why Davidson’s historical formulations of externalism are in tension with a Quinean demand for publicity.

A consequence of the Kripke and Putnam variety of externalism from which Davidson explicitly recoils is that it makes general error on the part of the speaker a real possibility: on their view, he says, “the chance of systematic error is thus increased.”<sup>62</sup> But this seems precisely to be the case for historical externalism as well. For if the content of a speaker’s words is determined by the environment in which he learned them and if, as seems obvious, a speaker can be mistaken about whether his present environment is really the same as his learning environment, then a speaker’s claims about his present surroundings could be on the whole incorrect.<sup>63</sup> Historical externalism is a form of externalism

<sup>61</sup> “Reply to Barry Stroud,” in *The Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, 162-5, p. 165 (emphasis added).

<sup>62</sup> “A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge,” p. 151.

<sup>63</sup> For this reason, I disagree with Davidson when he says, after describing historical externalism, “I am not sure whether [Barry] Stroud accepts this form of externalism, but my case against scepticism depends on it.” It seems rather that the case against scepticism is made more difficult by historical externalism, as Davidson himself comes close to acknowledging in his rejection of Kripke and Putnam. (“Reply to Barry Stroud,” p. 165.)

that makes room for a skepticism that Davidson believes his position keeps at bay.

Davidson can believe this because in fact he often defends a position that is distinct from historical externalism. For usually, Davidson stresses that “[t]he relevant stimuli are the objects or events we naturally find similar [...] which are correlated with responses of the child we find similar.”<sup>64</sup> “If anything is systematically causing certain experiences (or verbal responses),” he insists, “that is what the thoughts and utterances are about.”<sup>65</sup> In contrast to Kripke and Putnam, Davidson says, he “does the reverse by connecting the cause of a belief with its object,” where this cause is just that feature of the environment that the interpreter presently finds salient and correlated to the speaker’s responses.<sup>66</sup>

Arguably, this form of externalism is not in tension with publicity. Nor must it leave the door open to the possibility of gross error on the part of a speaker: because, Davidson says, the content of a speaker’s utterances is ultimately identified by reference to what an interpreter believes to be the external circumstances that caused those utterances, the speaker will of course end up being, from the point of view of the interpreter, on the whole right about what is going on in their immediate vicinity. Statements which are such that the speaker’s assent to them is regularly caused by events in the surrounding environment are, Davidson concludes, for the most part true.<sup>67</sup>

Davidson often infers that skepticism is untenable: he

<sup>64</sup> “The Second Person,” reprinted in his *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, 107-21, p. 119.

<sup>65</sup> “Epistemology Externalized,” p. 201.

<sup>66</sup> “A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge,” p. 151. Such formulations are common in Davidson’s work. One last example: “a speaker’s utterances reliably touched off by evident features of the observable world are true and about those features.” (“The Irreducibility of the Concept of the Self,” p. 89.)

<sup>67</sup> Of course, this form of externalism must confront the opposite problem, that of explaining how error is possible.

concludes that a speaker must on the whole have knowledge about his immediate perceptual environment. But there is a hiatus here. For even if we accept the contention that there is a class of statements which distal events regularly cause a speaker to hold true and which, given the way the meanings of these statements are allegedly determined, the speaker usually correctly holds true, there remains the question as to whether he is justified in doing so. The speaker might be *right* in believing most of what he does, but is he *rational* to do so? According to the “pallid” empiricism that Davidson promotes, there is nothing about our experiential interactions with the world that justifies our theories: the only role experience is allotted is a purely causal one. And as every beginner in philosophy is told, there is all the difference in the world between citing what has caused someone to have a particular true belief, and saying what his justification is for that belief. As a conception of empiricism, Davidson’s view calls to mind Samuel Butler’s observation about bees buzzing around wallpaper flowers: “so many of the associated ideas could be present, and yet the main idea be wanting hopelessly, and for ever.”

This complaint about justification is similar to the one Schlick presses against Neurath. For Schlick, once one abandons the view that the meaning of an observation statement is determined by reference to experiences that would provide rational warrant for it, what could justification of such a statement involve? There would be nothing for it but to acknowledge that the justification of an observation statement consists in its coherence with other presently held statements. If we settle for an etiolated empiricism, Schlick in effect urges, we will be forced into a coherence theory of warrant and will be unable to say whence comes the ultimate justification for our theories of the world.<sup>68</sup>

We saw (in section II) that Quine eventually joins David-

<sup>68</sup> “On the Foundation of Knowledge,” in *Moritz Schlick: Philosophical Papers, Volume II (1925-1936)*, 370-387; see p. 374.

son in settling for such a thin empiricism. Quine does not appear disturbed by such worries. They arise, he might have thought, from an illusory but enduringly tempting perspective, namely that of someone who seeks to provide science with an epistemological foundation, who seeks to ratify its bearing on the external world. But there is no such perspective, Quine always insists: it is an illusion to imagine that there is a place outside scientific inquiry from which one might rationally assess that inquiry. Rather, we work within science, accepting it as the basis for justified claims about an external world—always provisionally of course, as everything is in principle revisable. From within this framework of inquiry, we discover, says Quine, that science itself is developed in reaction to causal exchanges with the world. This cannot lead us to question the justification of the entire framework, for there is no place outside it from which to entertain such doubts. As with Oakland, so with the Archimedean point: there is no there there. Perhaps Quine might even go on to insist that, since we *are* in general justified in our beliefs about the world, whatever link there turns out to be between those beliefs and the world is just what evidence consists in.<sup>69</sup>

But does this response allay Schlick's concern? Let us take for granted that thin empiricism must find whatever justification it has within science itself and not from without. And let us also accept that, as a consequence, we could not conclude from this view that the status of science is problematical: we cannot climb a tree only to discover upon

<sup>69</sup> Thus making use of a Schlickean maneuver (see note 17) in a reply to a Schlickean criticism. Regardless of whether Quine would have taken this line, others have; for instance, it is what Jerry Fodor urges upon John McDowell as "the easy way out." "Maybe," Fodor suggests, "sometimes exculpation is justification and is all the justification that there is to be had." ("Review of John McDowell's *Mind and World*," reprinted as Chapter 1 of Fodor's *In Critical Condition: Polemical Essays on Cognitive Science and the Philosophy of Mind* (MIT Press, 1998), p. 6.)

reaching the top that after all there was no tree to climb. Nevertheless, to chase the metaphor, if ever we were to come across such a strange tree (*viz.*, one the climbing of which would provide a vantage point from which one could see that there was no tree to begin with), we would be wrong to think we could climb it: the assumption that we could leads to an incoherence, and so must be rejected. Schlick ought similarly to insist, against the above Quinean argument, that we could never within our theory of the world be justified in advancing a view that, if taken seriously, would entail the absurd conclusion that no statement within that theory is warranted. Appearances to the contrary are just that, and we can only hope future inquiry will reveal where we went astray. The overall correctness of our beliefs about the world—over which, we are assuming with Quine, there does not hover a justifying first philosophy—must of course be taken for granted in the course of any inquiry. But precisely for this reason, we cannot be content with a vegetarian empiricism, which would ultimately challenge the warrant of all our beliefs. To spurn a position that entails that all our beliefs are so much sound and fury is not to sign on to the project of providing these beliefs with some kind of meta-justification.

And Davidson himself has not sought to evade the question of justification. Occasionally, he says that a speaker's justification for the truth of most of his claims about his environment consists in knowing the reason that Davidson himself offers for their truth. "The agent," he writes, "has only to reflect on what a belief is to appreciate that most of his basic beliefs are true."<sup>70</sup> "Each individual knows this," he says, "since he knows the nature of speech and belief."<sup>71</sup> Surely, though, this justification is not available to most

<sup>70</sup> "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge," p. 153.

<sup>71</sup> "Empirical Content," reprinted in *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, 159-75, p. 174.

speakers, who remain blessedly ignorant of such philosophical reflections. The account provides whoever accepts it with a justification for taking many of a speaker's beliefs to be true; but unless the speaker numbers himself among these, *he* still lacks a justification for their truth. And in fact, Davidson eventually acknowledges that such an account "would seem to credit only those whose philosophical thinking is correct with knowledge."<sup>72</sup> But what does he put in its place?

Speaking of perceptual beliefs, Davidson says that

since our only reasons for holding them true are the support they get from further perceptual beliefs and general coherence with how we think things are, the underlying source of justification is not itself a reason. We do not *infer* our perceptual beliefs from something else more foundational.<sup>73</sup>

This feels unsatisfactory. And it is no doubt the very feeling that Schlick had when contemplating Neurath's proposal. That a belief coheres with a collection of other beliefs is a hallmark of justification *so long as* the beliefs in that collection are by and large correct. Without this general correctness, coherence might amount to no more than the blind leading the blind. Davidson would agree, but he would also insist that such general correctness holds. For recall that he argues that "beliefs are by nature generally true."<sup>74</sup> This veridicality of belief, one might urge, insures that speakers are justified in believing a statement that coheres with their other beliefs. It is indeed true that an appreciation of this veridicality, being deeply philosophical in nature, is one that most speakers lack. But, Davidson might continue, this la-

cuna does not impugn their justification; rather, the correct inference is simply that most speakers do not know that they are justified.<sup>75</sup>

This still fails to satisfy, however, for the justification it attributes to speakers is sufficiently partial as to appear no justification at all. Suppose, for instance, that someone believes *If p, then q*; suppose also that *p* is true, although she fails to believe this. Is she justified in believing that *q* is true? No: there are facts that justify a belief that *q*, but because this agent is not in possession of them all, she herself is not justified in believing *q*. Similarly, if indeed belief is veridical and also *S* coheres with one's other beliefs, then there is a justification for one to believe *S*. But if one appreciates only the fact of coherence and not that of veridicality, then one is not fully in possession of that justification.

A natural suggestion, one that harks back to a position that we saw tempted Quine early on, is to say that what justifies the basic claims of the speaker are just the experiences that lead him to make those claims. With this in mind, let us return to Davidson's account of radical interpretation; in particular, to his position that an interpreter identifies the content of a speaker's words by reference to salient (to the interpreter) distal stimuli that regularly accompany the speaker's holdings-true. Typically, that is not quite what would happen. An interpreter might appreciate that every time a rabbit scurries by, the speaker holds "Gavagai" true, and yet hesitate to take that utterance to mean "There goes a rabbit." This might occur if the interpreter also appreciated that the rabbit is in fact obscured from the view of the speaker by tall grass; perhaps, to embroider further, the interpreter comes to see that what is visible to, and (for reasons that need not detain us) salient for, the speaker is actually the rabbit fly that, unbeknownst to the speaker, hovers

<sup>72</sup> "Reply to Thomas Nagel," in *The Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, 207-9, p. 208.

<sup>73</sup> "Reply to Thomas Nagel," p. 208.

<sup>74</sup> "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge," p. 153.

<sup>75</sup> I have benefited here, and elsewhere in this essay, from conversations with Nishi Shah.

faithfully above its host. The rabbit's scurrying past is a link in the causal chain leading to the speaker's utterance (the rabbit's movement causes the fly's) and it is salient for the interpreter, but the interpreter will hesitate to make it part of the content of the speaker's utterance. The interpreter's judgment about what are the relevant content-fixing regularities is based less on what is salient for him than on what he judges to be salient for the speaker.

As Quine notes, "Even a primitive mother, in encouraging or discouraging a child's use of a word on a given occasion, will consider whether the relevant object is visible from where the child sits."<sup>76</sup> And not just whether it is perceivable from there, but also whether the child perceives it. Indeed, it is natural to focus on what the experience of the individual is.<sup>77</sup> For that is the event that is most closely correlated with his holdings-true. If the speaker holds *S* true whenever a rabbit scurries by, that is because the speaker holds *S* true whenever he has the kind of experience induced in him by the rabbit's scurrying by. The rabbit might hop past and the speaker not hold *S* true (say, if he has not seen the rabbit), and the rabbit might not have hopped past and yet the speaker holds *S* true (say, if a fake has induced in him the experience of a rabbit's hopping past). A speaker's holding a sentence true is more tightly linked to what the speaker perceives to be the case than to what actually is the case (or to what the interpreter takes to be the case); and this

<sup>76</sup> "Propositional Objects," p. 158.

<sup>77</sup> Of course, this ought not occasion a return to couching the regularity in terms of response to something closer to epidermal home, like neural intake—as it once did for Quine, who here responded by insisting that "[i]t is the stimulation at the bodily surface that counts, and not just the objective existence of objects of reference off in the distance, nor yet the events deep inside the body." (Not the former, because of his then loyalty to empiricism. And not the latter, for "even a highly civilized mother is content, when checking the child's testimony against the child's data, not to penetrate the child's surface.") ("Propositional Objects," p. 158.)

is something every interpreter knows.<sup>78</sup>

This suggests a reconsideration of the idea that regularities involving the experience of speakers are relevant to the assignment of content to their utterances. How might this relevance be traced? Assume that an interpreter correctly notes that whenever the speaker perceives that a cloud obscures the sun, the speaker holds true sentence *S*. It would then be legitimate for the interpreter to infer that the speaker means by *S* that a cloud obscures the sun.<sup>79</sup> Why? Quite simply because the perception that a cloud obscures the sun usually justifies the claim that a cloud obscures the sun. In general, one's perceiving that a cloud obscures the sun immediately justifies one's believing that a cloud obscures the sun. If we find that on the heels of possessing such justification a speaker is prepared to assent to *S* then it is reasonable to interpret *S* to mean that a cloud obscures the sun. Indeed, unless we have some alternative story, we muddy the rationality of the agent should we *not* so understand *S*.

This proposal, that the facts about language use that are relevant to content are patterns involving perception and holdings-true, has the virtue of rationalizing the speaker's observed holding-true of the sentence in question. This is not so on Davidson's proposal, for it is not rational to believe that a cloud obscures the sun whenever a cloud obscures the sun. Nor is it irrational: rationality is simply not to the point. Reason weaves together beliefs and other mental states, not beliefs and actual states of affairs beyond one's ken. Only on the present picture does the attribution of a belief to the speaker or of content to his words reveal his ra-

<sup>78</sup> Davidson writes that "The content the learner will pick up, with luck, is that an utterance of 'Gavagai' means that a rabbit is in sight." ("Reply to W.V. Quine," p. 84. See also his "Reply to Barry Stroud," p. 164.)

<sup>79</sup> Or that *S*'s content is that a cloud obscures the sun, or that its truth conditions are that a cloud obscures the sun; again, I shall not scruple here to distinguish amongst these formulations.



tionality; the attribution is of a piece with viewing the speaker as a thinking being.

The proposal also has the virtue of making room for a thick empiricism, one that gives experience a role in determining the content and justification of our beliefs, while holding the specter of subjectivity at bay. For the conception of experience here is an intersubjective one: perceiving that a cloud obscures the sun is something that any number of people can do. Earlier (see section III), I claimed that Davidson's shift from Quine's surface assent to the attitude of holding-true was a move away from privacy, since one of the attributes of the attitudes is precisely intersubjectivity. The present suggestion completes that move by rendering multiply accessible the other relatum in the linkages that are assumed to constrain translation. The suggestion gives way to Quine's original full-bodied empiricistic leanings by implicating experience in the business of content fixation and justification, but it does so by recourse to a propositional conception of experience and thereby avoids the subjectivity of his earlier view.

But does it do so at the cost of flouting the demand for publicity? For one might worry that the meaning-making regularities, as now understood, are no longer observable. If the concern is that a speaker's perceptions are not observable to one who does not yet possess a language, then it must be granted—but with the reminder that Davidson has himself already abandoned such a strong form of publicity. The concern, however, might rather be that the perception of a speaker is not observable even to another speaker.<sup>80</sup> But the thought that it sometimes is merits attention, more attention

<sup>80</sup> We have not broached this thought: that observability of the meaning-making regularities requires not only that the relata be observable but also that the fact that they are related be so as well. I cannot pursue this here, except to note that the thought bears an interesting resemblance to an idea advanced by Bertrand Russell in his "The Limits of Empiricism," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, New Series, 1935-6, pp. 131-150.

than will be given it here. For it is plausible that at times one can, for instance, observe that another is perceiving that a cloud obscures the sun. Our earlier remarks (in section IV) about the attitude of holding a sentence true apply here as well: one could not infer that someone perceives that something or other is the case by inferring this from supposedly "truly observable" information about the individual's physiognomy or bodily movements. Rather, often one just observes that the other perceives that such and such.<sup>81</sup>

We can locate the present idea by harking back to the situating conditional (C), repeated here:

- (C) If experience is unique unto each individual and also plays a central role in determining the content of language, then the intersubjectivity of meaning cannot be maintained.

With Davidson and Quine, the current proposal rejects (C)'s consequent. But, now parting company with Davidson and the later Quine, it accepts the antecedent's second conjunct (as did the early Quine), and so rejects its first conjunct (a path the early Quine could not follow because of his commitment to a particular form of publicity that forced him away from a conceptualized notion of experience). If thick empiricism is to accommodate the intersubjectivity of meaning, then it must make room for a conception of experience that is not idiosyncratic. And such a conception quickly brings the propositional attitudes to mind.

In this way, Schlickean worries about justification can be allayed by returning to a thick empiricism present—to be

<sup>81</sup> Quine in his own way makes the observability of another's perception central to the feat of language learning: "Martha's business," he says, "is to encourage Tom in uttering the sentence, or in assenting to it, when she *sees that he is noticing appropriate phenomena*, and to discourage him otherwise." (*Pursuit of Truth*, p. 61 [emphasis added].)

sure in a very different form—in some of Quine’s writings. This current in his thought weakened as a result of two forces: his increasing concern to secure the intersubjectivity of language; and his insistence that language be public in the sense that whatever grounds its content be fully observable both to those who have learned to speak and to those who are learning. These two forces squeezed experience out of the picture, for the conceptions of experience that could satisfy the one desire stymied the other. However, if the publicity requirement is relaxed somewhat, a direction in which Davidson has already moved, then the goal of safeguarding intersubjectivity need no longer be in tension with a more robust empiricism.

### *VI. Empiricism Reduced*

Davidson would not be happy with this position; again, not because it leads to a weakening, relative to Quine’s standards, of publicity; rather, because it trades in a conception of experience that Davidson believes to be deeply mistaken. For he argues that we shall be entangled in problems if we take experience to have any epistemological significance along the lines explored above. In examining his position on this issue, it will be very useful to consider his dispute with John McDowell, who has likewise worried about how, on Davidson’s view, our beliefs come to be justified.<sup>82</sup>

Davidson insists that a belief can be justified only by another belief. Nothing that fails to be propositionally articulated can enter into rational relations with a belief. Hence if an item can provide justification, then it is really just a belief. This seems to be in conflict with McDowell’s insistence that

<sup>82</sup> McDowell would insist that the more fundamental question is really how, on Davidson’s conception, beliefs come to have any content at all—which is really just to ask whether Davidson’s view has room for anything recognizable as belief. Employing the terms used earlier, McDowell worries that Davidson cannot even secure the right, let alone the rational.

perceptions can indeed provide justification for beliefs.

But what does this disagreement amount to in light of the fact that for McDowell perceptions are themselves propositionally (or conceptually, as he puts it) articulated in a way that does permit them to provide rational support for beliefs? It might seem that this is merely a disagreement about how to apply the term “perception”: McDowell is prepared to apply it to items viewed as conceptual in nature, whereas Davidson is not. It is not yet clear where the substantive disagreement is, for they agree that only propositional items can provide rational support for a belief.

Yet perceptions for McDowell, even though propositionally articulated, are not to be assimilated to beliefs. He holds that we have control over our beliefs in a way in which we fail to have over what we perceive. What we perceive is, as it were, foisted upon us, whereas we reflectively choose what to believe in the light of evidence.

But, again, this disagreement seems insubstantial. For does it not really amount to the fact that Davidson is willing to apply the term “belief” in cases where McDowell is not, *viz.* to states over which, at least in the first instance, we have no control? For Davidson, some beliefs—what he calls “perceptual beliefs”—are causally forced on us by distal stimuli. Again, it is not yet clear where the real disagreement lies, for they concur that the items available for rational support are imposed upon us by the world.

In sum, Davidson and McDowell agree that only an item with conceptual content can enter into justificatory relations with a belief and also that experience forces precisely such items upon us. McDowell insists, however, that the reasons provided by perception are not Davidson’s perceptual beliefs. What are they then?

Davidson dismisses appeal to perceptions as epistemic intermediaries. One can helpfully view his objection along

the lines of David Hume's argument against social contract theories, that is, against the claim that in justifying one's duty to obey the state one must appeal to one's duty to keep one's word. Hume argues that the latter duty must itself be based on something, and whatever that is will suffice to explain directly our duties of allegiance to the state. Hence, he says, appeals to social contracts involve an unnecessary shuffle: "Nor can you give any answer [to the question regarding the basis of our promise-keeping duties], but what would, immediately, without any circuit, have accounted for" what originally needed explaining.<sup>83</sup> Likewise, one might construe Davidson's argument as follows: either we have an account of how perceptions are endowed with justificatory authority or we do not; in the latter case, no advance is made by bringing them into the picture, for this merely replaces one mystery by another; and in the former, we see that the appeal to perceptions has been a pointless detour, for the very account we give of how they acquire their epistemic authority could have been given directly for the beliefs that they were called in to justify.<sup>84</sup> Thus a recourse to perceptions here is either unhelpful or unnecessary. Perceptual beliefs, according to Davidson, receive their justification like all other beliefs: through coherence with beliefs already accepted. They are distinguished only by their causal etiology: our sensory apparatus played a role in our being caused to have them.

McDowell seeks to escape this argument by denying that perceptions have epistemic authority which then gets passed on to beliefs. Such a position, he thinks, is indeed subject to

<sup>83</sup> "Of the Original Contract," in *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*, Eugene F. Miller (ed.) (revised edition, Liberty Classics, 1987), 465-87, p. 481. The lovely label "unnecessary shuffle" is Wittgenstein's (*Philosophical Investigations*, Part I, §213). John Rawls uses it to describe Hume's argument in his *Theory of Justice* (Harvard, 1971), p. 32.

<sup>84</sup> See, for instance, Davidson's "Comments on Karlovy Vary Papers," pp. 288-90.

the unnecessary shuffle argument. His own view is rather that experience is the means through which our beliefs come to be justified by how matters actually stand in the world. Through experience, we take in *that such and such holds*. This conceptually articulated state of affairs is placed within our conceptual ken through the act of perception, and the state of affairs itself is thereby made available to us to justify beliefs. This is why McDowell says that "Experience enables the lay-out of reality itself to exert a rational influence on what a subject thinks."<sup>85</sup> On this view, then, the above application of the Humean objection breaks down: perceptions do not acquire their justificatory authority in the way in which beliefs do—but not because they acquire it in some other way, but rather because they do not acquire such authority at all. Rather, they serve as channels through which items with justificatory authority, facts, are made epistemically available to the subject, where these items are ones about which it makes no sense to ask how *they* acquired their epistemic heft.

These are large issues. My aim here is to isolate crucial disagreements and to trace how they arise out of, and relate to, the long and complex struggle to articulate a conception of linguistic practice that is shaped by, and in turn shapes, general conceptions of meaning, experience, and thought. A preliminary analysis and assessment of the disagreement between Davidson and McDowell will, I hope, be helpful and germane.

There are several challenges that Davidson's conception faces. The first concerns whether it does justice to the way we talk about experience and belief; in the material mode, to the phenomenology of experience and its relation to belief. When looking at a familiar optical illusion, one might wish to say: "One line looks longer than the other, but I know that

<sup>85</sup> *Mind and World* (Harvard, 1996), pp. 25-6; see also p. 34.

it isn't." That is, one reports how matters appear to one as well as one's belief that these appearances are deceptive. Yet how can Davidson accommodate this talk? For him, the perceptual state is just another doxastic state. The report in question seems therefore to verge on the self-contradictory. As he says, "for me, there is no distinction between things appearing to me to be a certain way and my taking them to be that way."<sup>86</sup> But if this is truly the case, then one wonders how someone can consistently claim that while the world appears one way to her she takes it to be another. The flip side of this observation is that for Davidson it would be wrong to claim that one's reason for taking the world to be a certain way is that it so appears to one.

If one misses this feature of Davidson's position, one will fail to appreciate its revisionary nature. Barry Stroud, for example, asks "And how could Davidson, or anyone, deny that seeing that it is raining can give one good reason to believe that it is raining? Looking and seeing what is going on is the best way to get a reasonable belief about the weather."<sup>87</sup> Davidson will agree that looking is a good way of getting a reasonable belief about the weather—but that is only because looking generally causes a belief about the weather that comes to cohere with one's other beliefs. For Davidson, it is in its coherence with other beliefs that the reasonableness of the belief resides, not in its causal generation through the operation of our senses. Contrary to Stroud's suggestion, Davidson does deny that the seeing in itself, one's perception, gives one a reason for believing anything about the weather. Stroud's misunderstanding brings out just how revisionary of our ordinary ways of speaking Davidson's position is.<sup>88</sup>

<sup>86</sup> "Comments on Karlovy Vary Papers," p. 289.

<sup>87</sup> "Sense-Experience and the Grounding of Thought," in Nicholas H. Smith (ed.), *Reading McDowell* (Routledge, 2002), 79-91, p. 82.

<sup>88</sup> Apparently articulating what he takes to be Davidson's position, Stroud writes that "it is possible for one's having a certain attitude toward a proposition

A second difficulty is that Davidson's conception fails to respect *prima facie* distinctions. For instance, it seems that Davidson cannot distinguish epistemologically the phenomenon of "blindsight" from more usual cases of perception-based belief formation. A blind individual with blindsight has no visual experience of, say, the location of projected dots but nevertheless finds herself with inclinations about the matter which are often correct—to her surprise, upon first being told. Her visual system is causally implicated—if she closes her eyes, she will attach no subjective probability to any claim about the location of the dots—but she has no visual experience at all. Insofar as she is justified in her beliefs about the locations of the dots, this is because those beliefs are part of an integrated corpus of beliefs she possesses, including for instance beliefs about the reliability of her inclinations about dot locations. This is effectively the position we are all in according to Davidson: a belief is induced in us as a result of causal activity involving our sensory organs, and it is justified so long as it meshes appropriately with other beliefs we hold. For him, there is no epistemological contrast between the sighted individual's belief about the location of the dots and the blindsighted person's belief; both individuals have perceptual beliefs—assignments of subjective probability caused in part by the operation of their sensory organs—that are justified on the basis of those beliefs' integration with other beliefs. For Davidson, that the one claims to see where the dots are while the other does not is of no epistemological relevance.

The final challenge is just the one that initially prompted our variation on Davidson's variation on Quine: that of se-

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(e.g., seeing that *p*) to justify or give one reason to hold a different attitude toward that same proposition (e.g., believing that *p*)" (p. 83). This seems quite wrong as an account of Davidson, who in fact complains that he cannot see what that rationalizing "certain attitude" might be if not belief.

curing not only the right but the rational. The thought was that unless experience is given an epistemological role to play there is no accounting for the justification that one takes one's beliefs to possess. Davidson does of course have a conception of perceptual belief that plays an epistemological role—but that role is not distinguished from the one played by any other belief, and so it cannot serve to advance the project of understanding what reason in general someone has to put any epistemic credit in any of his beliefs. Experience plays no special epistemological role for Davidson, and it plays no special role in describing the regularities that constitute the linguistic practice that makes up the facts of the matter regarding meaning. On Davidson's view, distal events cause an individual to assign a degree of subjective probability to a proposition. These events do not justify the assignment; they merely cause it to come into being. That the individual finds himself assigning that probability is of no more epistemic significance for that individual than the fact that distal events lead to an increase in his blood pressure. At this point, the belief enters the doxastic economy of warrant revision. The belief is justified for that individual, according to Davidson, to the extent that it forms part of a mutually supporting web of rational relations with other beliefs. But once it is appreciated that from the individual's point of view there is no rational basis for the subjective probabilities that are brought into coherence through the operation of the mechanism of doxastic adjustment, that these simply reflect bare psychological facts about him, then it is hard to take even one who has achieved doxastic harmony to have justification for his beliefs.

McDowell holds that experiences are, as he puts it employing language from Wilfrid Sellars, standings in the space of reasons: they provide rational support for beliefs.

We have seen that he is in agreement with Davidson that insofar as they do provide such support experiences must be propositionally articulated; that is, their content must be rationally relatable to beliefs. Thus experiences cannot be sensory tingles, for tingles do not make plausible or cast doubt on anything. Experiential states must be as finely conceptually articulated as are the beliefs for which they provide justification. Not a tingle, therefore, but the perception that *p*.

We must not, McDowell urges, view such states as mere appearances to an agent that *p* is the case; for these, he argues, cannot provide the epistemic underwriting that he believes we have when all goes well. No argument that starts from the information that it appears to someone that *p* could possibly constitute a conclusive reason for holding that *p*, for any such argument would be compatible with *p*'s not obtaining. But to know that *p* is precisely to occupy a position in the space of reasons that is incompatible with *p*'s falsity. Consequently, the epistemic standing that amounts to knowledge cannot be based on the fact that it appears to one that *p*.

But how else then to view someone's perceiving that *p* if not as its appearing to him that *p* holds? McDowell suggests that in those circumstances in which the agent's experience reveals how it is in the world, he is simply seeing that *p* is the case. Seeing that *p* holds is a "success state": one could not be seeing that *p* holds without its being the case that *p* does hold. An argument that takes as a premise that someone sees that *p* can conclusively establish that *p* holds. When I see that *p*, I have a conclusive reason for believing that *p* is the case; when I see that *p*, I occupy a position in the space of reasons that can serve to underwrite knowledge.<sup>89</sup> Experience has the power to place us in such a position, McDowell holds, because through it the justificatory force of the world

<sup>89</sup> See, for instance, §§3 and 5 of McDowell's "Knowledge by Hearsay" in *Meaning, Knowledge, and Reality* (Harvard, 1998), 414-43.

itself is placed at my epistemic disposal and so enters into rational connections with my propositional attitudes. “By being taken in in experience, how things anyway are becomes available to exert the required rational control, originating outside one’s thinking, on one’s exercises of spontaneity.” Such exercises “can be rationally constrained by facts, when the facts make themselves manifest in experience.” “The world,” McDowell says, “is ultimate in the order of justification.”<sup>90</sup>

It is natural at this point to want to cry Foul, to feel that attributing McDowell’s state of seeing that  $p$  to an agent is just to say that it appears to her that  $p$  is the case and then to add *sotto voce* that in fact  $p$  really does obtain. No wonder the inference from someone’s seeing that  $p$  to its being the case that  $p$  is conclusive!

But this would be precisely to misunderstand McDowell’s conception of experience. To claim that someone sees that  $p$  is not shorthand for the compound claim that someone is in a certain mental state and that the world stands just so; rather, it is to make a claim about the particular epistemic standing of an individual. To be sure, someone’s being in that experiential state depends on its being the case that  $p$  obtains, but the state is nevertheless one that in itself is a standing in the individual’s space of reasons, that is, one that comprises reasons for belief that are within the ken of the individual.

How might we understand McDowell’s claim that beliefs can be “rationally constrained by facts” themselves? As insisted above (section V), reason knits together items within the ken of an individual, and how matters stand in the world seems precisely not to fall within one’s cognitive orbit. We might distinguish two components of McDowell’s position on perception (similar remarks apply to his views on mem-

ory and testimony). First, there is the insistence that whether an individual sees that  $p$  depends on how the world is; if  $p$  does not hold, then one simply cannot be in the state of seeing that  $p$ . And second, there is the thought that the obtaining of the worldly conditions on which the state of seeing depends is epistemically available to the agent, a standing in that agent’s “space of reasons”; seeing opens us up epistemically to how the world is. With which position would Davidson take issue?

Clearly, he agrees with the first claim, at least as it applies to many of a speaker’s states; this is just a feature of his externalism. For example, in order for one to be properly described as carsick, the responsible imbalance in one’s body must be caused by travel in a car; if the identical imbalance were brought about by travel on a boat it would not be a case of carsickness.<sup>91</sup> The second claim is, however, absurd in this connection. That I am carsick supplies me with no evidence regarding the etiology of my discomfort, for I might be in that sorry state without knowing it (in that I might not know whether my nausea has been induced by car travel, the rocky sea, drugs, etc.). Of course, if it is given that someone is carsick then we have a conclusive argument to the conclusion that he has recently been traveling by car. The point is rather that someone can be in that state without its being given to him that that is the state he is in.

Is the situation any different for mental states on Davidson’s view? That one’s perceptual belief has the content “The dog is lying before the fire” depends on its being the case that the dog is lying before the fire; should the dog be patently not so lying then an interpreter would be reluctant to attribute that belief to the speaker. But does Davidson also believe, in the usual cases where the perceptual belief is correct, that the dog’s so lying—that fact—is epistemically

<sup>90</sup> *Mind and World*, pp. 25-26, 143-44, 146.

<sup>91</sup> Thanks to Sue Vice.

available to the agent? Its being available, according to McDowell, is what underwrites the individual's potential knowledge; its epistemic availability is why he has a conclusive reason for believing that the dog is lying before the fire. This is where Davidson would part company with McDowell. All Davidson finds it intelligible to say is that the individual attaches some subjective probability to the claim that the dog is lying before the fire. But this is an epistemic position that falls short of allowing for the kinds of conclusive arguments that, when the world is in the giving vein, McDowell believes are available to us.<sup>92</sup>

McDowell's position is not just that the reasons available to an individual are, under appropriate circumstances, determined by the world. Rather, it is that the reasons *are* the (perceived) world itself. As he puts it, "that the world does someone the necessary favour, on a given occasion, of being the way it appears to be is not extra to the person's standing in the space of reasons."<sup>93</sup> Reasons provided by an individual's experience are conceived to be internal to the space of reasons of that individual: they are *his* reasons. Furthermore, what experience provides is nothing short of an observed state of affairs itself. Thus it is that perception places the world itself within my ken. This is precisely what Davidson finds unintelligible. For him, the only kind of item within the space of reasons is a propositional attitude, a particular cognitive stance taken toward a thought.

<sup>92</sup> Perhaps, if the individual held the philosophical view that links content with distal cause, he could argue from his believing that the dog is lying before the fire to the conclusion that the dog is lying before the fire. But would this be a conclusive argument? Anyway, we have seen that Davidson grants that this is not a view that most people find themselves holding. Also, the conclusion here is theoretically mediated in a way that some (e.g., McDowell) believe perceptual knowledge not to be. And finally, it seems peculiar to distinguish, from the first-person point of view, between the claim that one believes that *p* and the claim that *p* holds.

<sup>93</sup> "Knowledge and the Internal," in *Meaning, Knowledge, and Reality*, 395-413, p. 406.

It might help to clarify McDowell's position, and also to appreciate how difficult it is to grasp, to consider a particular misinterpretation of it. I hope this will also set the stage for the articulation of a concern about the picture on offer. The mistake is to think that on McDowell's view someone might be seeing that *p* and yet not be justified in believing that *p*. If the above analysis is correct this must be an error; for I have said that, according to McDowell, to be in the state of seeing that *p* is to possess conclusive justification for the claim that *p*. Thus Crispin Wright at one point argues that "Even McDowellian experience, then, is not an *unconditional* justifier."<sup>94</sup> And Hilary Putnam writes that on McDowell's view "[experience] normally justifies the proposition that states its content."<sup>95</sup> But these are incorrect or misleading formulations, for McDowell's experience does not "normally" or conditionally provide justification for propositions; rather, it always and unconditionally does so. McDowell acknowledges that someone might lose his justification for believing that *p* through epistemic irresponsibility, say by continuing to claim that *p* in the light of how things appear to him even in the face of evidence that his senses are deceiving him.<sup>96</sup> But this is not a case of someone's seeing that *p* and yet not being justified in believing that *p*; rather, for McDowell, such an individual would not properly be said to see that *p*. On his conception, if it is true that one sees that *p*, then one has a reason for holding that *p*—and (this is where Wright goes wrong) one continues to have this reason if one fails to conclude that *p* or even if one concludes that *not-p* holds. For McDowell, seeing that *p* presents one with an "invitation"<sup>97</sup> to know that *p*—and that invitation will

<sup>94</sup> Crispin Wright, "Postscript to 'Human Nature?'," in *Reading McDowell*, 160-73, pp. 169-70.

<sup>95</sup> Hilary Putnam, "McDowell's World and McDowell's Mind," in *Reading McDowell*, 174-90, p. 176.

<sup>96</sup> See "Knowledge by Hearsay," pp. 429-30.

<sup>97</sup> "Response to Stroud," *Reading McDowell*, 277-9, p. 278.

remain open whether one fails to accept it for lack of attention, or even whether one declines it due to competing epistemic engagements. And of course, to be so invited is not being conceived here as something external to the mind of the agent; rather, it is an item within the agent's stock of reasons.

One reason why one might see that  $p$  and yet fail to affirm that  $p$  is that one might not realize that one is seeing that  $p$ . One might, for instance, believe that one is hallucinating and so believe that it only appears to one that  $p$ , when in fact one is seeing that  $p$ . Though seeings and mere appearances are different states, there is no phenomenological difference between the two; this just follows from the fact that our senses can fool us. And that there is no phenomenologically based argument that will establish that I am now seeing that  $p$  rather than that it now merely appears to me that way is suggested by the history of failed attempts to offer a direct response to the argument from illusion.

What this means is that on McDowell's conception someone could have a reason for belief, namely that provided by his veridical experience, which was not only unknown to him but which could not be made known to him through any kind of self-reflection on his part. The agent could be justified in having a certain belief, indeed conclusively justified, but neither realize this nor be capable of getting himself into a position in which he would realize this by carefully reflecting on what is or has been consciously available to him. I would like to expand on this before turning to an appreciation of its significance.

It might be thought that McDowell is hostile to the argument from illusion and hence that appeal to it above is suspect. Let us say that both genuine seeings and deceptive appearances can present the same *look*. We can then formulate the upshot of the argument from illusion as the conditional claim:

- (AI) If one's reasons for belief are restricted to looks, then one will never attain an epistemic standing that guarantees that the world is just so.

McDowell thoroughly agrees with (AI). His dispute is instead with the uses to which it is sometimes put. Thus, historically (AI) has been made the booster rocket for skepticism or, alternatively, for a particular mixed analysis of knowledge. More specifically, if one accepts (AI)'s antecedent and also holds that knowledge is a truth-guaranteeing standing whose possession is completely determined by how matters lie within one's cognitive landscape, then (AI) entails that one will never attain knowledge of the world. Alternatively, one might accept (AI)'s antecedent but insist that one does have truth-guaranteeing knowledge of the world, and so conclude from (AI) that possession of knowledge turns not only on features of one's cognitive landscape but also on how matters stand in the world; McDowell calls this conclusion the "hybrid position"<sup>98</sup> on the nature of knowledge. McDowell rejects both the hybrid analysis, by affirming skepticism's internalist conception of knowledge; and skepticism, by agreeing with the hybrid conception that we do have knowledge of the external world. The only way he can do this—that is, adhere to the (AI) while affirming that we do have knowledge on a truth-guaranteeing internalist conception of knowledge—is to reject (AI)'s antecedent. Both skepticism and the hybrid conception go wrong, McDowell believes, in assuming that one's reasons for belief are restricted to how matters look to one. For him, one's reasons also include the perceived facts themselves, the worldly states of affairs that experience places within one's cognitive grasp.

<sup>98</sup> "Knowledge and the Internal," p. 400.



Consider now the question of one's epistemic access to these perceptually provided reasons. The upshot of (AI), McDowell must agree, still holds with respect to them. If the basic ingredients of one's epistemic deliberation are supplied by what one is conscious of, then (given McDowell's conception of knowledge as a standing that is both internal to the knower and truth-guaranteeing) knowledge of such reasons will not be attainable. One could not, with respect to one's own reasons, know that one had them however much one carefully reflected on the basis of what is consciously available to one. McDowell must affirm that one's perceptually provided reasons for belief are not amenable to being known by one in this way any more than the world is. And this is hardly surprising since, for McDowell, one's perceptually provided reasons *are* part of the world.

If McDowell is to allow for knowledge of one's own reasons, he must likewise conclude that the basis of one's epistemic standing with respect to them is not confined to looks. One has evidence regarding one's perceptually provided reasons that is not confined to consciously given items. And likewise, *this* evidence is not knowable simply on the basis of how matters look to one. But if we were worried about McDowell's picture of one's epistemic access to one's perceptually provided reasons for belief about the world, it would not help to appeal to an evidential basis for this access about which the very same worries could form.

Should we be so worried? In order to appreciate the situation better, consider a detective who is in the dark about a perpetrator's identity; imagine first that there is a crucial piece of information that would reveal all, but that he is not in possession of it. We might say in such a case that there is a reason for him to believe the perpetrator to be Madame X even though he is not aware of it. But of course what we would mean is that there is information which he does not have but which, were he to have it, would justify him in be-

lieving the perpetrator to be Madame X. In fact we would insist that if, on the basis of his present state, he were to conclude that the culprit is Madame X, he would be unjustified; for though there is a reason to believe this, he does not possess it. This is quite different from the situation in which someone sees that *p*, according to McDowell, because the reason for belief that experiential state makes available to the agent is being understood as a reason the agent already has; it is a reason the agent now possesses to believe that *p*.

Imagine then a detective who does have in his cognitive possession the information that will solve the mystery, but who just has not yet appreciated its significance. In this case, we might say that he does now have justification for a claim about the perpetrator's identity but has simply not yet realized this. Why are we willing to say this here? The crucial consideration is that the detective is in principle in a position to "put two and two together"; that is, by carefully reflecting on what is or has been consciously available to him, he could arrive at a justified conclusion about the culprit's identity. Now it might be that the detective is incapable, for whatever reason, of engaging in such reflection. But we do think that if he were to engage in it, he would be inclined to believe that the perpetrator is Madame X through an appreciation of the epistemic force of the relevant datum.<sup>99</sup> To say that someone has a reason for believing that *p* is connected to saying that if that person were to reflect carefully he would appreciate the force of the relevant consideration and be correspondingly moved to believe that *p*. A reason someone has is something that could in principle be appealed to in a rationalizing explanation of some of his beliefs.

Can we assimilate perception, as McDowell sees it, to the situation of the detective in the previous paragraph? Can we, that is, say that were an individual who sees that *p* to reflect carefully, he would come to appreciate the conclusive

<sup>99</sup> Of course, he might still not come to believe this, for there might be competing considerations in play.

reason experience provides and be correspondingly moved to believe that *p*? It seems not. Recall the case we recently mentioned, that of someone who sees that *p* but who believes that in fact he is hallucinating: no amount of reflection could reveal to him whether the appearance that *p* is a mere appearance or in fact a glimpse of how things are. To think otherwise would be to think that one could, by reflecting carefully enough on what is consciously available, work out whether one is now hallucinating. But as we have already noted, McDowell holds no hope for a refutation of the argument from illusion.

A case more analogous to this last is thus rather one in which our detective has a reason to believe that the culprit is Madame X, indeed a conclusive reason, but is incapable, careful reflection notwithstanding, of determining this and hence of being moved to believe on the basis of such a determination.<sup>100</sup> But is this case fully intelligible? Is the alleged reason really one that the detective possesses? In what sense is it a reason for belief that *he* has? One might justly wonder whether talk here of *his* having a reason for belief has floated too freely from what *he* would be moved to judge upon careful reflection. The attribution seems to be idle, one that plays no role in a rationalizing explanation of belief formation on the detective's part.

By the same token, is there something troubling about

<sup>100</sup> In offering this analogy, I am not improperly assimilating the justification perception provides for belief to that which inference does. I am simply saying that, in order for something to be a reason for belief that *p* for someone, careful reflection on his part (which he might not in fact be able to undertake) would move him to believe that *p*. There is no claim that he would be so moved as a result of appreciating an argument. The reference to "careful reflection" is there to mark out a sense in which the item in question is a *reason* (as opposed, say, to a misleading consideration); the focus on whether one would be "moved to believe" is intended to make sense of the item's being a reason *to believe* (as opposed, say, to a reason to act); and the attention to how that specific individual would respond is intended to make sense of its being a reason to believe *that he has* (as opposed to one someone else does).

taking perception to provide the perceiver with a reason for belief, when that reason is conceived to be one which might remain unknown to him however careful his introspection-based reflection and so one which might never be appealed to in the course of understanding him? McDowell wants to acknowledge the intuition that

one's epistemic standing on some question cannot intelligibly be constituted, even in part, by matters blankly external to how it is with one subjectively. For how could such matters be other than beyond one's ken? And how could matters beyond one's ken make any difference to one's epistemic standing?<sup>101</sup>

But McDowell does not believe that his conception of experience violates this intuition, for according to him perception is exactly a process that makes a justifying fact subjectively available to the perceiver: "[T]he obtaining of the fact [made manifest to someone through experience] is precisely not blankly external to his subjectivity."<sup>102</sup> But to be reassured that such internalist intuitions are accommodated because perception places justifying states of affairs within one's subjectivity is rather cold comfort if it is added that a justification of this kind might be subjectively available to one though undiscoverable through reflective self-scrutiny.

The concern here stems not from the thought that epistemological considerations must be phenomenologically transparent: I have acknowledged that an individual might be wrong about the reasons he possesses and might even be incapable of undertaking the reflection that would reveal to him what they are. Nor is it animated by the idea that one should be able to take the epistemic measure of one's evidence for a claim about the world before settling on that

<sup>101</sup> "Criteria, Defeasibility, and Knowledge," reprinted in *Mind, Knowledge, and Reality*, 369-94, p. 390.

<sup>102</sup> "Criteria, Defeasibility, and Knowledge," p. 391.

claim.<sup>103</sup> Rather, the fear is that the concept of a subjectively available reason has been stretched too thin in being given an application in circumstances in which the reason could play no role in rationalizing the subject's judgments. It is one thing to say that armchair reflection will not yield knowledge about whether the world is as it appears to be; it is quite another to hold that it is equally futile in uncovering reasons for belief that are in one's possession.

To speak of someone's having a reason in these kinds of circumstances is not far from saying that such and such fact about angular momentum is one of the bicyclist's reasons for shifting his weight as he does. And this sounds odd: in some sense it might be *a* reason for him to do so, but not *his* reason. As McDowell says:

A competent cyclist's adjustments of posture and so forth are not merely triggered by cues to alterations in road camber and the like, but are *justified* in the light of those alterations. So there is an intelligible sense in which what the cues are cues to constitute reasons for the adjustments. But in the normal case a cyclist does not respond to such things *as* the reasons they nevertheless intelligibly are.<sup>104</sup>

The reasons are not the subject's own, McDowell seems to

<sup>103</sup> McDowell suggests that this idea can drive one to view the evidence provided by sensory experience as restricted to what is common to genuine seings and deceptive appearances. He thinks this would be calamitous (forcing a choice, as we saw above, between skepticism and a hybrid conception of knowledge) and works to loosen the motivating idea's grip in his "Criteria, Defeasibility, and Knowledge." Whatever its merits, this idea is distinct from my concern about grounding the subjective possession of experience-given reasons. Imagine, *per impossibile*, that rationalism is correct and that one can, merely by reflecting, work out both how matters stand in the world and how they stand in one's space of reasons. This would surely alleviate my concern about grounding, but it would leave open the question whether one's appreciation of evidence is prior to one's judgment about the world.

<sup>104</sup> "Reply to Gibson, Byrne, and Brandom," in Enrique Villanueva (ed.), *Perception: Philosophical Issues 7* (1996): 283-300, p. 296.

suggest, because the subject does not accept the justification, does not use it in deciding what to do, and would not cite it in defense of his actions.<sup>105</sup> Yet McDowell's conception of a perceptually provided reason is precisely that of a reason that could be similarly cut off from how a reflective person might respond.

Consideration of McDowell's view helps in an appreciation of Davidson's and the problems it faces. It might also seem to be a candidate for the kind of return to empiricism considered at the end of the last section; indeed, McDowell styles his outlook "minimal empiricism."<sup>106</sup> We saw that Davidson's own "pallid" empiricism is so attenuated as hardly to warrant the name, for it bars experiences (considered as mental states distinct from belief) from doing any kind of justificational work: such duty is rather to be borne by coherence with other beliefs. But as I hope the foregoing will have made clear, McDowell's view likewise bars experiences themselves from entering into epistemic relations with beliefs. Experiences, for McDowell, have no justificational authority to pass on to beliefs. McDowell's is indeed a reduced empiricism. For it must be appreciated that he is ultimately in deep agreement with Davidson regarding the force of the unnecessary shuffle argument; it is just that he does not believe the argument is appropriately applied to his own position. What does the justificatory work, according to him, is the world itself—the perceived world to be sure, but still the world itself. In barring experiences themselves from entering into rational relations, McDowell is as far from

<sup>105</sup> He asks: "How could we ensure that a story like [Christopher] Peacocke's displayed experience not just as part of the reason why, but as yielding reasons for which a subject forms her beliefs? One way would be to have it that the subject accepts the story, and uses it in deciding what to believe, or at least would be disposed to cite it if challenged." (*Mind and World*, p. 164.)

<sup>106</sup> "Introduction," *Mind and World*, xi-xxiv, p. xi *et passim*. For instance, this reading of McDowell is implicit in the quotations from Wright and Putnam above, both of which suggest that on McDowell's view experience is a justifier.

a thick empiricism as is Davidson. Thus McDowell writes:

My point about perceptual experiences is that they must *provide* rational credentials, not that they must have them. Perceptual experiences do not purport to report facts. In enjoying experiences one seems to, and in some cases does, take in facts; this makes the facts available to serve as rational credentials for judgments or beliefs based on the experiences. [Robert] Brandom reads me as attributing to experiences the sort of rational connection to facts that is appropriate for observational claims or judgments. Naturally enough, invoking experiences then looks like a pointless duplication, a gratuitous insertion of an intermediary between observational claims or judgments and the facts observed. But in my picture experience does not introduce an indirectness in the rational responsiveness of observational thinking to facts. Rather, experience is simply the way in which observational thinking is directly rationally responsive to facts.<sup>107</sup>

Perception, says McDowell, serves to place within the ken of the subject the ultimate justifiers, facts. Use of our perceptual organs, says Davidson, is needed to cause the only justifiers, beliefs, to enter the agent's ambit. According to both, perceptions themselves (though perhaps differently conceived) fail to enter into rational relations.

We have seen that each of these alternatives to a heartier empiricist view about the ultimate source of justification faces challenges—furthermore, these are roughly correlative. On the one view, we understand how the alleged justifiers, beliefs, could be within an individual's ken, but we lack a sense of how they could bestow warrant on their own. On the other view, we see (let us grant) how the alleged justifiers, now facts, get their rationalizing force, but we lack a firm hold on what it means for them to be within the cogni-

tive reach of an individual.

The present discussion of Davidson and McDowell arose while exploring some facets of an indirect characterization of content, in this case one that proceeds by articulating the linguistic practice to be preserved in the course of translating from one tongue into another. This practice can be conceived as a complex of regularities, of linkages between stimulus and response. Empiricists, like the early Quine, insist that the stimulus be specified in terms of the rationalizing experience of the subject. Davidson argues, and Quine ultimately agrees, that it be described instead in terms of features of the subject's environment. We saw that such linkages are less firm than, and really derivative upon, regularities linking response (e.g., holdings-true) to experience; and of course they also raise Schlick's problem, that of making beliefs rational in addition to right. If empiricism is to be reconsidered and the intersubjectivity of meaning is to be maintained, then experience needs to be brought back into the picture as something that does justificatory work and is also shareable or meaningfully comparable across speakers. We suggested that if experience were understood along the lines of the propositional attitudes, then perhaps both its capacity to justify and its shareability would no longer seem so mysterious (with respect to the latter, in the same way that the shareability of the response component of linguistic practice is rendered less problematic by Davidson's move away from Quine's surface assent and toward the attitude of holding-true). But what we have just lately observed is that not every position that conceptualizes experience is prepared to grant it justifying powers: according to McDowell, while one does see that *p*, it is not the seeing that accomplishes the justification but rather the fact that is seen, the *that p* itself. To follow through in the empiricist spirit, the propositionally characterized experiential state itself must be the source of justification, perhaps along the lines sketched at the end of the previous section.

<sup>107</sup> "Reply to Commentators," in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 58 (1998): 403-31, p. 406.

Samuel Johnson complained that in “Highland conversation ... the inquirer is kept in continual suspense, and by a kind of intellectual retrogradation, knows less as he hears more.” I hope that my reader will not sympathize. The above reflections are deliberately presented in a spirit of *reculer pour mieux sauter*. They seek to illuminate an alluring approach to thought and meaning that proceeds by asking after the ultimate evidence that constrains the understanding of another person (section I). Here, I have evaluated the fate of this approach by initially focusing on Quine’s positive claims about meaning, for his is the most dogged and influential attempt to work out the details of such a view. The schematic answer that translation or interpretation of another should be preserving of linguistic practice is given substance by Quine through the triple demands of intersubjectivity, empiricism, and publicity. I tried to show (section II) why these three desiderata, as Quine understands them, are in tension with one another and how, as a consequence, he is forced to reshape his conception of the regularities that determine meaning. Nevertheless, I argued (section III), his resulting and final view still suffers from the same problems he discerns in the earlier, discarded one. I portrayed (section IV) Davidson as taking a step toward repairing this, though one that necessitates relaxing some of Quine’s original desiderata. Even so, I claimed (section V), Davidson stops halfway with a position that raises some pressing questions, in particular ones about its ability to make room for the justification we take our beliefs by and large to possess. In this connection, I presented a neo-Quinean conception that completes Davidson’s propositionalizing of “what is invariant, the ‘facts of the matter’,” the facts about linguistic practice that are the source of sense. It is Quinean in its attempt to

articulate these meaning-determining facts while satisfying a thick empiricism, intersubjectivity, and publicity. And it is “neo” because it consorts with propositional attitudes and, relatedly, because it relaxes Quine’s publicity requirement. To bring out more fully its nature, I examined (section VI) McDowell’s view of experience. I concluded that the latter could not truly be assimilated to the kind of empiricist conception presented, which also arguably avoids some of the challenges besetting McDowell’s view. That said, clouds remain over the neo-Quinean picture of the “facts of the matter.” For the view must render impotent the forces that move Quine and others to demand full publicity. It also needs to make it plausible that a restricted publicity constraint can after all be satisfied: that it is often observable by one speaker that another is perceiving that *p*. And of course, such a view must also confront the unnecessary shuffle argument. These needs are pressing for one who would pursue this particular indirect inquiry into sense and thought. Although they will not be addressed here, I hope that the above will have gone some way toward an understanding of their genesis, of their place within a larger constellation of ideas, and perhaps even of ways forward.<sup>108</sup>

Dedicated to the beloved memory of Charles K. Silberstein.  
*“So out went the candle, and we were left darkling.”*

<sup>108</sup> In addition to those mentioned above, I would like to thank Jill Cirasella. I am also grateful to Amherst College for its support.