

2. Davidson and the Role of Error¹

1. Davidson's externalisms

The questions that we are supposed to approach in this seminar are: "...in what ways ... if at all, can the non-conceptual aspects of experience be said to form a basis for knowledge? What are the non-conceptual aspects of experience, and in what way are these aspects relevant to conceptual knowledge?"

Davidson doesn't say much about experience in his writings, and he says even less about non-conceptual experience. This obviously doesn't mean that he denies that we ever experience something. Neither would he deny that some of our experiences are non-conceptual, as he would certainly agree that we have sensations, like pains and itches, there are phenomena like daydreaming etc. But he would deny that the non-conceptual as such are relevant to conceptual knowledge. He will resist ways of talking about "experience" that makes it sound or function as though it is an object, or as something that lies between the world and us. Davidson's theory of knowledge is an externalist theory, which in this case means that our thoughts have intersubjectively available events and objects as their causes, and therefore he is indeed concerned with the world and our interaction with the world. But, I will hold that it is not possible to address the mentioned questions *directly*, if it is to be done from a truly Davidsonian perspective.

From a Davidsonian standpoint, our *experience* cannot play a causal role in relation to our propositional attitudes. He would say that objects and events, or the whole causal chain is what causes our attitudes. Even so, he takes perceptions to be the basis of our knowledge about the world.² This might sound like an outright self-contradiction, but it is really more a question of vocabulary. The *contents* of our beliefs about the world are according to Davidson directly caused by perceived objects and events in the world. But, our beliefs come to be what they are partly *also* because of where they are located in relation to other

¹ I would like to thank Donald Davidson for very helpful comments on an early draft of this paper. I am also thankful for comments and advice from Arnt Myrstad on later drafts.

² As do the tradition of empiricists from Locke to Quine, from which Davidson likes to dissociate himself because of their reliance on epistemic intermediaries.

beliefs in the network of beliefs. According to Davidson, beliefs are thus causally and logically related to each other, and they have the objects, properties, situations and events of the world as their causes.

For Davidson, the theory of knowledge about the world takes the form of a theory of interpretation. The interpretational situation that Davidson considers basic is a situation of “triangulation”. He holds that knowledge about the world (or belief, intentionality, normativity, conceptualization, understanding; notions that in this connection are intersubstitutable for Davidson) cannot arise as a phenomenon, unless there is more than one creature present. Hence, as a condition for beliefs about the world, there has to be the world and at least two creatures.³ The world that he is talking about is “...a world of objects, properties and events that the creatures can discriminate in perception.”⁴ The two individuals in the triangle switches between the roles of interpreter and interpretee, and what they have in common is the world, or rather; the objects, events and situations occurring in it. The point of introducing more than one creature, is, according to Davidson, *adding* “...something basic to the situation with one creature, for with the possibility that their actions may diverge we have introduced the gap needed to make sense of the notion of error.”⁵ Hence, with two persons present, there is an opening for error to occur. This connection between the second person and the notion of error will be our focus of the next part of this article.

But before we go ahead to the role of error, let’s first try to exemplify the triangular situation by thinking my friend Janet and me into a specific situation of triangulation. Let’s say that I play the interpreter-role, while Janet is playing the role as the one to be interpreted. Now, we said that perceived objects and events are the basis for our beliefs about the world, and that our beliefs can be identified partly on the background of where they are located in relation to other beliefs in a network of beliefs. This would mean that a certain response in the form of a belief to (a perception of) a certain event that my friend and I have in common, will be identified by me as the belief it is, partly on the basis of its

³ I will hereafter say ‘person’ or ‘individual’ instead of ‘creature’, even if that really is to imply a little too much for the stage of my explanation being.

⁴ In Donald Davidson: “Externalisms”, unpublished manuscript, p. 4.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 2.

location in my friend's network of beliefs. For instance, if I am walking in the middle of a road with my friend, and she suddenly says: "car!" I will then interpret her exclamation on the background of other beliefs that I know inhibits her, e.g. the belief that cars are vehicles with four wheels and an engine, that makes them capable of running on a road, and the belief that such a vehicle with a certain velocity probably will bring damage to anything it bumps into, and the belief that a human body will be harmed by meeting a car with a certain velocity, etc., etc., and I will of course take into account the actual car that we both perceive. On the basis of all of these assumptions, I interpret her as telling me that a car is approaching us, and we will probably both hurry ourselves onto the side of the road. In this way, I interpret her as trying to warn me about the car. In a situation like this, there is a possibility of a misunderstanding between us, maybe I'm not realizing that what my friend said was meant to be a warning, or I might think that she said something else because of all the noise around us, or I might not realize that the vehicle coming toward us is what she would call a 'car', as I would have called it a 'truck' etc., etc. Ascription of a belief to the other person is thus being done both on the basis of the perceived event; the vehicle that comes driving down the road, which causes her belief, *and* that particular belief's location in her network of beliefs. In the basic triangle there are causal connections between the world and the two persons respective, and there are causal connections between the persons. We perceive the relevant aspects of the world, and we perceive each other's reactions to the world. Davidson holds that "these two sets of connections are themselves correlated", for each person associates for instance cars with car-reactions of the other person, "...except of course in the relatively rare case of error."⁶

As we can see, Davidson would insist that whatever justification we could have for attributing propositional attitudes – and other mental content – to others, must be public and intersubjectively available in the outset. But this point seems to be based on recognition of methodological restrictions rather than ontological or metaphysical commitments. This might make a difference in the present context. What we can consider in radical interpretation is what we all can observe, but *this doesn't mean that what we can hear or see is all there is*, in Davidson's opinion.

⁶ Ibid, p. 4.

But how do we know whether even a simple utterance, such as the utterance of ‘car’ in that situation really is a correct way of using the language? Maybe it would be wrong to classify the vehicle as a car, and so the right thing to say would be ‘truck’? Someone might, even more radically, insist that saying ‘bar’ is the only correct solution, or even ‘bruck’.⁷ And, on what basis could we say that they were wrong? According to Davidson, we have to go into the situations where we learned the language in question (here; English) for the first time, or rather; when we heard the sound of someone uttering the sounds necessary for pronouncing ‘car’ (or ‘truck’ or whatever), for the first time applying it to a specific object in the world. The most common way of teaching somebody to apply a specific sound to specific objects for the first time, is by pointing out the specific objects which the sound are meant to refer to. Ostensive learning is therefore of utmost importance in language acquisition, according to Davidson.⁸ Further, he would hold that when we take this normal ostensive process of learning a language into account, we have an answer to the question of how we can know whether we have misapplied the concept of ‘car’ or not in specific cases. My belief that this particular object is a car has, first of all, the correctness guaranteed by the process of which I learned to apply that word in the first cases. Furthermore, its correctness is verified by the confirmations (and rejections) that others have given to my usage of the word, and by my observations of how other adult language users have applied that particular word. Through our interpretations of the other speakers, and other speakers’ interpretations of us, we have the possibility of being corrected by others, and we have the possibility that our beliefs are being refined by our interaction with others. Thus, the publicly available objects and events cause our beliefs in the first place, and the correction of wrong beliefs is going on all the time. The corrections comes by way of further perceptual experiences, by the fact that our beliefs are being confronted with other and contradictory beliefs that we have ourselves, and by contradictory beliefs that others have. This makes it generally not very likely that most of our beliefs about the world are wrong.

⁷ Anyone familiar with Kripke’s *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* will recognize this as the voice of Kripke’s meaning skepticist. (Saul Kripke: *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1982.)

⁸ He holds that Kripke partly misses this point in his book, because of Kripke’s use of only mathematical examples. (p. 2 in Davidson: “Externalisms”, unpublished manuscript.) Mathematical functions like addition isn’t typically what you learn when you first learn a language.

But why do we pick out the same things to be objects and events that other creatures do in the first place? How come that a car would count as an object in our (and most other peoples') language? According to Davidson we are disposed – *genetically* – to discriminate, but we also *learn* to discriminate more fine grained by and by.⁹ Without our learned discriminative powers we're just not in a position to be thinkers and believers. But we always have to think about it all as *starting from* common discrimination that we are genetically inclined to, combined with the learned discrimination or categorization that has its starting point where an experienced language user ostensibly teaches us how to hook words on to the world. In the beginning, it is likely that the teacher will have to switch between ascribing propositional attitudes on a behavioral basis and overinterpreting the child, putting too much into it.¹⁰ This will go back and forth, and in the end, when the learner has developed a full-fledged language, there will no longer be a need for overinterpreting.

For Davidson, perception is propositional and it is an open question whether non-propositional seeing is possible for an adult language-user. (x sees *that* y, versus x sees y) He would not acknowledge a separate level of concepts, as he says that: "...there is in fact no distinction between having a concept and having thoughts with propositional content, since one cannot have the concept of mama unless one can believe someone is (or is not) mama..." Further, he says that he will "...stress the connection between concepts and thoughts only to make the point that concept-formation is not a way station between mere dispositions, no matter how complex or learned, and judgment."¹¹ This means in effect that children's (and, of course, other people's) one-word sentences should be seen as propositions, rather than as concepts, if these first understandable utterances are to be seen as more than mere reactions.

What is then necessary for distinguishing between, on the one hand, a pure disposition to react to stimuli in a certain way, and on the other hand the ability to conceptualize and

⁹ Bob Brandom is instructively calling "being genetically disposed to discriminate in" "reliable differential responsive dispositions". (p. 900, footnote in his "Knowledge and the Social Articulation of the space of Reasons" in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. LV, No. 4, 1995)

¹⁰ Comment made by Davidson in seminar, Berkeley spring 2000.

¹¹ In Donald Davidson: "Seeing through language" (1997) pp. 15-27 in *Philosophy: the journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1997, p. 25.

think (what Wittgenstein is talking about as “following a rule”)? Two creatures can respond in a certain way to certain stimuli and we can then say that there is a certain focus of their responses; there is a common cause to be found. This common cause will be an indication of the content of the thought that’s present.¹² So one creature will see relevant similarity between its own response and the other creature’s response, and so this second person’s perspective that is present in the triangulation seems to be the *source* of objectivity. Davidson says that this is acknowledging that “...the only legitimate source of objectivity is intersubjectivity.”¹³

Is there really anything more to add here? Have we now said what *is* to be said about Davidson and “non-conceptual aspects of experience and their relevance to conceptual knowledge”? Surely not, but by this first approach I have tried to give a general picture and a quick overview of his position regarding the relevance of non-conceptual experience to conceptual knowledge. What I have said implies that *the non-conceptual* is hardly relevant to conceptual knowledge at all in a Davidsonian theory of knowledge. *Experience*, understood as something that lies in-between the world and our beliefs, is simply non-existent in his theory. It is rather that the objects and events in the world *cause* our beliefs (and other attitudes) directly, and objects and events thereby also take part in the *content-formation* of our beliefs. Thus, the world, in the form of objects, properties, situations and events “impinges” *directly* on our belief-systems. According to Davidson, there is nothing such as the world as “given in our experience”.

2. Making Sense of Error

I will now go on to concentrate on the notion of error and the role that error or mistake, and a subject’s acknowledgment of the possibility of error and mistake, plays in Davidson’s theory of knowledge. I will try to show that this is deeply connected to his rejection of skepticism about the world. Awareness of the possibility of error is necessary as a criterion for ascription of propositional attitudes to others, and according to Davidson, it is also a

¹² In Donald Davidson: “Externalisms”, unpublished manuscript, p. 9.

¹³ *Ibid.*

sufficient condition. I will briefly discuss whether disagreement or the possibility of alternative interpretations is another criterion for such ascription to take into account.

The concept of error is connected to the concept of truth, and to the fact that truth and belief are distinct. Truth is the way in which things are, while belief is the way in which we take things to be, and if there were no difference, there were no error in our sense. Hence, we could say that error can only emerge where there are norms or where there are rules for correctness. Mistake is then a sign of a normative, holistic system that inhibits a person. When a mistake is possible, and the person knows that it is possible, *we* know that a person might be a language user. The concept of truth is therefore central to our use of language, and for our thinking in general, according to Davidson. But this will only be so at a certain “level” of language use; it will not be so for a creature that only copies what it has “learned” by others. Thus, for truth to be important, the person will have to have reached a stage where he or she realizes that he or she could be wrong about something. The person must be aware of the possibility of a mistake for the concept of truth to have an application. Furthermore, Davidson holds that “...where error has no point, there is not a concept of thought.” It seems as though thought and truth have the same conditions in some respects; they both require the possibility of error. The same holds for beliefs (or the concept of belief); there is no use in characterizing something as a belief unless one in principle could be wrong.

When a two-year-old child says “light” (or rather; something that his parents or guardians would interpret as such), pointing to the lamp, he doesn’t really understand what he is saying unless he understands that this sound can be successfully applied to only a certain limited selection of objects in the room. Hence, if he has no idea that this sound does not go as well with his brother and the milk bottle as with the lamp, he does not understand the sentence he is uttering.

This seems to me to be a reasonable account of how we as adult language users usually would understand such a situation. What we actually would do if he uttered “light” when pointing at his brother, would be to correct him, saying maybe “No, this is *Eric*”, pointing at his brother, and then: “*This* is light”, pointing at the lamp or the candle or whatever.

Now, it might take some time to get it, that an error is possible, but when the child does get it, he might indicate this by saying for instance: “light” in a questioning voice, looking very carefully at his parents’ or guardians’ faces for reactions. At this point, we may begin to apply a concept of belief to him, saying that he *believes* that the lamp, or whatever he might be pointing at, *is* “light”. For us, as full-fledged users of language, it is also very clear that it would make sense to tell whether it is true or false that what is pointed at is “light”, but this could also be possible for us at an even earlier stage. But as far as *my* intuitions are concerned, I would neither say that a two-year old, nor that a younger child yet understands the concept of truth and falsity, or what *we* think of as truth and falsity. If a child says “light” when pointing to his brother, I think that we would rather say that the child had not yet quite learned how to apply the concepts and expressions of the language. We would say *this*, rather than holding that he was saying something that was false, or not true. When the child is in a position to play with words confidently, or “deceive” others with his words; that is, when it is obvious that the child is in charge of the word-to-world connections and tries them out in a way so as to, for instance, deliberately provide a misapplication, then we can start questioning whether he knows the difference between truth and falsity. Later on, he would be able to provide reasonable disagreements with his parents or guardians, and he would be able to argue about which descriptions of a common environment are the better ones.

An important point here is that it is not possible to make sense of error in the beginning of language-acquisition or before the individuals in question have internalized a norm. When there is only dispositions to react to something perceived that is present, we wouldn’t even call deviations by the name of ‘error’. (By disposition I mean something like a stable tendency to respond in a certain way to certain stimuli, something that has no normative force.) Error can in this context only make sense once one has mastered the language, and error is therefore a sign of intentionality. But how can we identify a mistake as a mistake? How can we really distinguish between having a concept and having a disposition?

This is the same as asking: How do *you* know that *they* know that they can be wrong? Expression of uncertainty or if they ask you? But do they really think, or do they have propositional content, unless they are able to produce a disagreement? I am not sure that

awareness of mistake is the sole prerequisite for us to acknowledge others as thinkers/language-users/believers etc.; we might also require that they could produce interpretations that can compete with our interpretations of the world. In other words, we might require that they are able to disagree with us. At least, it is obvious that the situation of triangulation requires this kind of symmetrical relationship between the persons present. Without “propositional communication”, we wouldn’t be able to share our beliefs about the world with the other(s). Or, as Davidson puts it himself: “...without the exchange of propositional contents, there is no way they can take advantage of their ability to triangulate their shared world.” This means that, even if the creatures cannot give their own interpretations (which by definition is something recognized as fallible), there could still be a basis for ascription of thoughts to them, according to him, but they wouldn’t be able to share their thoughts with us. So, Davidson holds that error is sufficient for ascription of thought, but it is unclear to me how this view of his combines with his description of the basic situation of triangulation.

Either way, according to Davidson, we still lack an account of how error can get into the picture, or what he calls “an analysis of the concept of error”. He holds that if we had an analysis of the concept of error, we would have an analysis of the concept of objectivity or of thought itself, but the very fact that we haven’t managed to give such an analysis, is a reflection of the fact that “...intentional phenomena cannot be reduced to something simpler or different.”¹⁴ Thus, it seems that Davidson is pessimistic when it comes to the possibilities of explaining intentionality.

I would agree that the triangulation-metaphor seems to lack a reference to the systematic or systematizing effect that are added by holistic considerations. There is the world and the other person, but where is the normative system? The pressure from within, so to speak? The pressure from within our own belief system and system of concepts? Does the other person represent that? The other person instantiates society, but is he also representing the normative holistic from within the system of beliefs? Or is it maybe the I-person – the interpreter that represents the normative system? The pressure from holistic considerations, or what we would consider normativity, is there in a way, as something immanent in our

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 11.

interpretation of the other person, in the pressure from what we have already interpreted to be his other beliefs. In this way, it seems as though normativity itself *emerges* in the triangular situation. But Davidson is explicit in stating that triangulation is only one step towards explaining the difference between reaction and thought. He does not think that triangulation is a way of explaining thought, but rather that triangulation provides illuminating necessary conditions for thought.¹⁵ The metaphor of triangulation is therefore, according to him, laying out the necessary basics for thought and language to be present, but it doesn't give an explanation of thought or for the difference between reaction and thought. The triangle where the three participants are the other person, the world and I, cannot explain *normativity* either. Holistic considerations are not brought in, and intentionality is not explained. On the other hand, it seems to me that it is impossible to explain the triangular situation without *presupposing* intention. Neither is error, and awareness of error, possible without presupposing intention. This may point to an extended role for the metaphor of triangulation.

3. McDowell's criticism of Davidson in *Mind and World*

If my presentation of Davidson's theory of knowledge is reasonable, it seems as though McDowell is systematically misrepresenting Davidson's views on the relation between thought and the world in his *Mind and World*. McDowell says that "Davidson's picture depicts our empirical thinking as engaged in with no rational constraint, but only causal influence, from outside."¹⁶ That this comes out as a misrepresentation of Davidson's view is due to the fact that McDowell omits the theory of interpretation, which deals with precisely "rational constraints". These rational constraints on empirical thinking could be said to come from "the inside" in a way, since they come from the other beliefs in the system. But, and this is essential: the constraints apply especially and exactly to our "outside", to the world that we are dealing with. And maybe the most important point to stress here is that the rational constraints on our empirical thinking are always there as constraints coming from "the others". Thus, in triangulation the other person is interpreting my utterances on the background of what is going on in our common and publicly available "environment". This means that his or her interpretation of me, my utterances and my

¹⁵ This does not imply that the conditions are eternal, even if he looks upon them as necessary. These conditions are conditions that are necessary *now*, that is, given our present biological constitution.

belief-system are contributing to the process of determining the contents of my beliefs. I am able to occupy the same role, the role of the interpreter towards the other person, thereby taking part in the process of determining the contents of his or her belief. This means that our empirical thinking is engaged with rational constraints, the constraints that the first ostensive learning process supplied, and then later the constraints from “society”.

McDowell could seem to be right in some ways here; Davidson’s coherentism may seem to threaten “...to disconnect thought from reality.”¹⁷ But then it has to be shown that his insistence of the world’s causal role towards our beliefs are impossible, or without effects or implications. If so, the only contact between thought and world is through truth, or through interpretation of others, and his theory would indeed be “one legged” in a sense. The reason for saying that it is *not* is that the basis of interpretation of others (in radical interpretation at least) is the utterances that they produce as reactions to a publicly available world. The causal impact of the world is already put into “the space of reasons”, in Davidson’s system, but this is done through the eyes of the interpreter. This rational relation between word and world is one that he has acknowledged for at least the past 30 years. He holds that our interpretation of the empirical beliefs of others is constrained by what *we* hold to be rationally sound beliefs. So, it seems that Davidson in no way is denying that our interaction with the world is epistemologically significant, quite on the contrary. So, McDowell’s characteristic of Davidson, that “...Davidson’s picture is that we cannot get outside our beliefs.” is somewhat strange. In a way, we could say that we have never been anything but “outside” our beliefs because our beliefs have their source in what we perceive, and our thinking is intrinsically social.

If we grant McDowell the benefit of doubt as to whether he misrepresents Davidson or not, it is important to notice that Davidson’s theory of interpretation has been developed and changed over the years. It has developed from its source in the situation of the Quinean field linguist doing radical translation, to radical interpretation, and over into the situation of triangulation. I would say that this has been a development from a more static behaviorist model of stimuli and response, towards a dialectic process of mutual

¹⁶ John McDowell: *Mind and World*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1994, p. 14.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 24.

interpretation between “speaker-interpreters” in the model of triangulation. This means that McDowell’s comments may have been a bit more reasonable in 1994 than they are now.

McDowell says: “We find ourselves always already engaging with the world in conceptual activity within such a dynamic system. Any understanding of this condition that it makes sense to hope for must be from within the system. It cannot be a matter of picturing the system’s adjustments to the world from sideways on: that is, with the system circumscribed within a boundary, and the world outside it. That is exactly the shape our picture must not take.”¹⁸

I think that McDowell touches an important point here. But I also believe that this point can be accommodated by the notion of triangulation. In the situation of triangulation, the world is a fully participating, always and already present part. But it is also true that the world is only making impacts on us (and our “concepts”) causally, not rationally. If we hold that concepts are bound up with the world *rationally*, our notion of a “world” would be a world of mere appearance, or in other words, a mere phenomenal world, and not a world that could actively cause anything (such as beliefs) in us. This could open up for the possibility of a system of beliefs completely out of touch with the world. If we wish to explain how objectivity of empirical thought is possible, the solution that Davidson has pointed out seems to be a better one: That we “catch” the causally active objects and events into a rational system of beliefs by interpreting others. Thus, we connect world and thought by ascribing beliefs to others, and others interpret us by ascribing propositional attitudes to us, and all of this is done based on publicly available objects and events. These interpretations take the form of hypotheses (guesses about what the other sayings mean), which in turn are being corrected or confirmed and refined as we communicate with one another, and as time passes. This makes what McDowell calls “a sideways-on understanding of our thinking” unnecessary.¹⁹ We mutually come to have an understanding of the beliefs that we have, and we have most of them in common.

The perhaps most pressing problem with McDowell’s solution is that he relies on a representational picture of the world-to-word relationship. His solution seems to require

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 34.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 35.

that for a belief to be about the world, we have to be able to pick out the part of the world that justifies this particular belief. This would, in turn, require a manageable correspondence between parts of the language and parts of the world. Having witnessed many attempts at such theories for the past hundred years of analytic philosophy, it is hard to see how it could be achieved in a satisfactory manner.

4. Concluding remarks

What are the strengths and weaknesses of Davidson's theory as we have seen it unfold? As I see it, the main achievement of the Davidsonian theory lies in the non-representational, yet objectivity-oriented epistemology. His theory of knowledge gives an account of what we already know; namely, that our beliefs about the world are objective. Specifically, our beliefs are objective in the sense of intersubjectivity. He avoids skepticism by rejecting epistemic intermediaries, and also by taking the objects of a belief to be the causes of that belief.²⁰ As regards the non-representational features of his theory, he holds that there are no such things as representations of reality in our heads. He says that "...we ought to question the popular assumption that sentences, or their spoken tokens, or sentence-like entities or configurations in our brains, can properly be called 'representations', since there is nothing for them to represent."²¹ Here, he is contesting correspondence theories of truth, specifically, the ontology of facts that would have to follow such a theory. The following excerpt is a good summary: "Language does not mirror or represent reality, any more than our senses present us with no more than appearances".²² This is where I would say Davidson might be parting from Rorty's *less* objectivity-oriented, but *non*-representational approach and from McDowell's objectivity-oriented, but representational approach.

²⁰ At page 317 in his "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge", he puts it this way: "What stands in the way of global skepticism of the senses is, in my view, the fact that we must, in the plainest and methodologically most basic cases, take the objects of a belief to be the causes of that belief" in Donald Davidson: "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge" (1983) pp 307-319 in E. LePore (ed): *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, Blackwell, Oxford 1986.

²¹ Donald Davidson's manuscript "Epistemology and Truth" (1988), p. 12. (The article has later been published in Donald Davidson: *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2001, pp 177-191, and the quote is on p. 184.)

²² Donald Davidson: "Seeing through language" (1997) pp. 15-27 in *Philosophy: the Journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1997, p. 18.

The main weakness of Davidson's theory regarding the problems addressed by this workshop may be that his claim that perception plays a casual role in the word-to-world relationship is not very specific. What does the statement really mean, and what does it amount to? He would probably say that it means that whatever we perceive is the cause of our empirical beliefs. We perceive the world and we perceive the reactions of the others to the world. This, combined with our considerations for the system of beliefs as a whole, forms our beliefs. But it doesn't seem that we can go much further into the question of what it amounts to, to say that objects and events cause our beliefs. Davidson doesn't appear concerned with explaining *how* our empirical knowledge can be *empirical*, or *how* our beliefs *can* have «content». Such questions can probably not be answered by his theory if something more than a story about language-acquisition and perception is asked for.²³

Another problem that might be raised is that his theory is not very phenomenologically sensitive. Only propositional differences are taken into account. He says: "Language is the organ of propositional perception. Seeing sights and hearing sounds does not require thought with propositional content; perceiving how things are does, and this ability develops along with language."²⁴ Hence, Davidson is *not* letting the non-conceptual play any role when it comes to conceptual or propositional knowledge, and he agrees with McDowell by holding that "...reasons have to be geared conceptually to what they are reasons for. The relation of epistemic support requires that both relata have propositional content, and entities like sensation and sense-data have no propositional content."²⁵ In effect, this means that we cannot possess knowledge, properly speaking, of the non-conceptual. At least, this is the conclusion that Davidson seems to draw from the insight that only something propositional can be a reason for something propositional. As most of us will probably have noticed, McDowell draws another conclusion from the same insight, namely that the world itself is propositional. According to McDowell, the only way of

²³ Given that we acknowledge his criticism of the distinction between conceptual scheme and content, the reason why he cannot or would not even try to answer such questions, should stand out as obvious. (In Davidson "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" (1974) pp 183-198 in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1984.) Another alternative would be to account for the ideal conditions under which specific beliefs are caused, and he isn't exactly doing that, but the most ordinary situations, with the most ordinary objects that are middle-sized, *do* play a particular role.

²⁴ Donald Davidson: "Seeing through language" (1997) pp. 15-27 in *Philosophy: the journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1997, p. 22

²⁵ *Ibid.*

securing the objectivity of our knowledge of the outer world is to consider the *justifications* for holding our beliefs as *propositional*. As I have argued, Davidson is in no need of this sort of contra-intuitive commitment. Given the way that we have all learned to connect the perceived world to the word in the first place, and given the way that a specific perceptual belief fits with the rest of our beliefs, we have the possible and required foundation and justification for the objectivity of our beliefs. In the question of objective knowledge McDowell has failed to appreciate the importance of the linguistic community.

Finally, we could ask: “What is the function of Davidson’s move to allow us to conceptualize the world through other speakers; that he lets the world’s importunity on us go through another person?” The whole point of this is to stress the fact that thought and language is both social phenomena. Following Davidson, there is no language without a community, and he goes further in this direction than many others by saying that thought does not exist without a community. Literally, society is a condition of both thought and language. This makes for an anti-individualist epistemology, and this is where Davidson anchors his rejection of skepticism about the world and skepticism about other minds. It also enables Davidson to tell the skeptic to “get lost”, and it seems to me that McDowell is unable to do anything of the sort, due to his individualistically oriented epistemology. Bob Brandom’s comments on McDowell shows that he, in line with Davidson, is serious about this Wittgensteinian legacy. Brandom phrases this in post-Sellarsian language: “...I have indicated how knowledge can be construed as standing in the space of reasons.”²⁶ Further: “To individualize the space of reason is to interiorize it. To ignore the social articulation of standing in the space of reasons is to leave out what makes it possible to understand such standings as answerable for their correctness to how things actually are.”²⁷ Thus, normativity and the objectivity of our norms are connected to the world itself in triangulation.

Davidson’s two externalisms are his perceptual *and* his social externalism, and according to himself, the interconnected triangle “...fills the gap in social and perceptual

²⁶ In Robert B. Brandom: “Knowledge and the Social Articulation of the space of Reasons” in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. LV, No. 4, 1995, p. 907.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

externalism...”²⁸ According to Davidson, triangulation does not necessarily explain objectivity of thought, but he grants that some necessary and interesting conditions for objectivity of thought are laid down. The possibility of error is our indication of the existence of such objectivity.

²⁸ In Donald Davidson: “Externalisms”, unpublished manuscript, p. 5.