

Davidson's Wittgensteinian Metaphilosophy

Ali Hossein Khani

In this short paper, I am going to discuss an often neglected aspect of Davidson's philosophy, his metaphilosophy. Metaphilosophy is traditionally defined as the philosophy of philosophy. This definition, however, is not illuminating. I think metaphilosophy aims at a disclosure of the nature of philosophical questions, what they are and how to approach them.

Perhaps, the most important metaphilosophical move in the history of analytic philosophy has been made by the founders of this tradition, such as Frege and Russell, following them, the early Wittgenstein and the philosophers of the Vienna Circle. They believed that many of the philosophical problems we are perplexed by have their roots in our failure to precisely analyze the function of, and the complexities lying behind, our ordinary linguistic practices. Although some of them reached some radical view, e.g., a denial of meaningfulness of any metaphysical claim, the core idea of their approach to philosophical problems was well received and kept alive among the analytic philosophical diaspora. The next metaphilosophical move was made by the later Wittgenstein himself. He famously declared "don't think, but look!" (1953, §66): looking at, rather than theorizing and philosophizing about, our ordinary linguistic practices would disclose that we have been more deeply engaged in bad philosophy than we thought, a way of thinking which has led to contradictions, self-refutations, paradoxes, and insane skeptical conclusions. He constantly warns us of "a temptation to misunderstand the logic of our expressions" (1953, §345), that we need to shed "light on our problem by clearing misunderstandings away" (1953, §90), and that "philosophers constantly see the method of science before their eyes, and are irresistibly tempted to ask and to answer questions in the way science does. This tendency is the real source of metaphysics and leads philosophers into complete darkness" (1958, 18).

In different places, I have pushed the idea that Davidson and Wittgenstein have been closer

to each other than we expected them to be.¹ Let me briefly explain why. The whole philosophy of Davidson is formed around the central notion of interpretation. The influence of Wittgenstein on Davidson's philosophy manifests itself especially in his later works, when his concern is not anymore to investigate how an adequate formal theory of meaning can be constructed; rather how communication and understanding can successfully take place and, at some point, how language and thought can emerge at all. In this period of his philosophy, dealing with Wittgenstein's remarks on private language and his considerations on rule-following appears as a chief concern of Davidson's.² He tries hard to show that his later view can perfectly accommodate Wittgenstein's basic insights on meaning and understanding.

The core idea of Davidson's philosophy is that no study of meaning and mental content can succeed, unless it proceeds via adopting a third-person standpoint, i.e., via looking at the matter from the point of view of another speaker, an interpreter, who attempts to understand (or interpret) the linguistic behavior of another speaker. This is deeply rooted in Wittgenstein's general view of linguistic practices, but a view which is interpreted by Davidson in his own way. This view is Wittgensteinian in two senses, one of which is often missed by the commentators on Davidson. According to the first, Davidson has always been fully loyal to the centrality of the seems right/is right distinction in any adequate view of meaning which was especially highlighted by Wittgenstein: by yourself, you cannot tell whether something is the case or it just seems to you that it is so. Davidson captures this point in his discussion of the concept of error and blends it with his externalist view of content: if we agree that the things causing a person to respond in a certain way contribute to the determination of the content of those responses, then, for a solitary person isolated from birth, it would be impossible to determine what the actual cause of her responses is. If she makes a mistake, she cannot find out that she does because the only ground on the basis of which she can decide whether she has been right or wrong is her own opinion alone.

Davidson, in his discussion of the notion of triangulation, argues that unless there is another person who responds to the world in a similar way, as well as to the subject's responses, there is no opportunity for a genuine conception of error, truth, believe, disagreement, and correctness to emerge. Once the similarity between the responses of the two is broken, there is then an opportunity for them to realize that the response which seems similar to one does not seem similar to the other. For Davidson, however, in order to settle such disagreements they need to speak, to interpret and to be interpreted by each other.³ It is only in this situation

¹See Hossein Khani (2020a), (2020b) (2019), (2018) and (2017).

²Though I have argued that, for Davidson at least, his more theoretical and supposedly explanatory projects, such as that of constructing a formal theory of meaning and his use of the notion of triangulation, are not to be taken to be in conflict with the Wittgensteinian quietist view. See Hossein Khani (2020a).

³See, e.g., Davidson (1992), (1994), (1999), and (2001).

that the concept of error and truth can emerge. Without having this central concept, no other concept can be acquired: in order to possess the concept of a cat, the subject must know what it is to make a mistake in counting only certain things as falling under the concept of a cat. Wittgenstein's remarks on private language sustain, in a Davidsonian way, such a view: when there are others observing a person's linguistic behavior, her use of words, they would be able to decide whether it agrees or disagrees with theirs. This implies that any notion of correctness and incorrectness in use can appear only if there are outward performances accessible to others to be publically used as evidence for making such assessments. This, of course, does not suggest that error can be *explained* in this way: for Wittgenstein, no explanation of such phenomena is forthcoming which does not involve us in bad philosophy. Rather, *correctness in use* would have a chance to emerge only if there are others who are (blindly indeed) inclined to respond to the world in a specific way.⁴

The second, and more important, sense in which Davidson is Wittgensteinian concerns the crucial difference Davidson thinks there is between mere dispositions to respond in certain ways to specific things and *judging* that one way of responding is correct. This latter distinction separates the sort of (interpersonal) view which Davidson holds from the sort of (communitarian and conventionalist) view, different versions of which have been supported by Dennett, Dummett, Kripke, Lewis, and many others. Such a crucial difference can be put as follows: some may interpret Wittgenstein as claiming that without the existence of a speech community, no opportunity for a legitimate attribution of meaning to a person can exist. Meanings are genuinely attributable to a subject simply if her responses can be said to accord with the responses of the members of that community: agreement in behavior legitimizes attributions of meaning and mental content to the subject. For instance, Dennett's intentional stance view implies that any system whose behavior can be usefully predicted, by allowing for an interpretation of that behavior as an intentional action, can be counted as an intentional system, i.e., as a true believer, a rational agent.⁵ Kripke's Wittgenstein also maintains that what allows us to attribute meaning to a person's responses is whether those responses agree with the responses of others in a speech community.⁶

Davidson's view differs from these in a very important respect, which owes a great deal to his different reading of Wittgenstein, according to which it is not important if the subject's

⁴To emphasize, I surely am not suggesting that Wittgenstein has argued for or against any sort of externalist or internalist conception of meaning and mental content. And, I am definitely not suggesting that Wittgenstein equates correctness in use with doing what others do and thus advocates any sort of behaviorism as we know it. All such remarks from Wittgenstein on which I relied should be seen from a quietist point of view. I have unpacked this issue in detail in Hossein Khani (2020a).

⁵See, e.g., Dennett (1979), (1987), and (2009).

⁶See, Kripke (1982, Chapter 3).

behavior is or is not in agreement with others'; what matters is that through such interactions the subject can command the Wittgensteinian seems right/is right distinction. Once this distinction is mastered, the subject can gradually fix her concepts. Having done that, she is then *free* to use her words in whatever way she may, provided that her utterances are interpretable. This view is deeply Wittgensteinian because, for Davidson, Wittgenstein's point has not been that in order for our responses to be meaningful, we should all use our words in a similar way, i.e., that the subject is conditioned or taught to be disposed to respond, for instance, by "tree" to certain things. A parrot can be trained to do that. What really matters is that the subject *herself* acquires and applies the concept of truth: the subject must be able to *judge* that something falls under the concept of a tree.⁷ Making a judgement about something requires having the concept of that thing. Davidson believes in the holism of the mental: propositional attitudes emerge as a whole interdependent set.⁸ If so, in order for a subject to be able to judge that something is a tree, she must have a rich set of interrelated concepts about many particular and general things. Once she possesses such a set, it would not matter whether she responds to the world as others do. She can use them in whatever way she likes if the available evidence and clues can lead the interpreter to successfully interpret those utterances. Davidson also appreciates the essentiality of the Wittgensteinian notion of (non-linguistic) institutions: meaning-attributions involve much non-linguistic information, luck, wisdom, etc.⁹

Davidson agrees that the emergence of thoughts and meanings requires a social setting, a wealth of interactions with others. But it does not mean that the subject is then confined to use her language in accord with a rigid set of rules which a community of speakers advises on how the words ought to be used. Davidson thus offers his own reading of Wittgenstein. He follows Wittgenstein by devoting his later works to warning us of the danger of doing bad philosophy: he strongly refuses to be labelled as a realist, anti-realist, irrealist, communitarianist, Platonist, idealist, relativist, and the like.¹⁰ He thinks of all these views as misrepresenting our ordinary linguistic practices. No comprehensive account can do justice to all the complexities lying behind the processes through which we come to understand each other. At best, we can only offer a description of them. Such a Wittgensteinian attitude to philosophical problems is what forms Davidson's metaphilosophy.¹¹

⁷See, e.g., Davidson (1999).

⁸See, e.g., Davidson (1982).

⁹See Davidson (1986, 446).

¹⁰See, e.g., Davidson (1997).

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