

*In Contemporary Philosophy in Focus: Donald Davidson*, ed. by Kirk Ludwig (Cambridge University Press, 2003)

## **Davidson's Epistemology**

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Davidson's epistemology, like Kant's, features a transcendental argument as its centerpiece. Both philosophers reject any priority, whether epistemological or conceptual, of the subjective over the objective, attempting thus to solve the problem of the external world. For Davidson, three varieties of knowledge are coordinate—knowledge of the self, of other minds, and of the external world. None has priority. Despite the epistemologically coordinate status of the mind and the world, however, the content of the mind can be shown to entail how it is out in the world. More exactly, Davidson argues, we could not possibly have the beliefs we have, with their contents, unless the world around us was pretty much the way we take it to be, at least in its general outline. We are thus offered a way to argue, to all appearances a priori, from how it is in our minds to how it is in the world. The argument is a priori at least in being free of premises or assumptions about contingent particularities concerning the world around us or our relation to it. From premises about the contents of our propositional attitudes, the argument wends its way to a conclusion about the general lines of how the world around us is structured and populated.

Before presenting his own account, Davidson rejects received views of meaning and knowledge. What follows will combine themes from his critique of alternatives with his more positive account and how it deals with the skeptic.

### **A. Davidson's Epistemic Argument Against Empiricist Theories of Meaning**

Empiricist accounts of meaning, including Quine's and Dummett's, lead to skepticism, warns Davidson, who sees an advantage of his own account in its better

**response to the skeptic. Why do the earlier accounts lead to skepticism? Why does his own account do better?**

**According to Davidson (Davidson 1986a, p. 313),**

**. . . Quine and Dummett agree on a basic principle, which is that whatever there is to meaning must be traced back somehow to experience, the given, or patterns of sensory stimulation, something intermediate between belief and the usual objects our beliefs are about. Once we take this step, we open the door to skepticism for we must then allow that a very great many—perhaps most—of the sentences we hold to be true may in fact be false.... Take Quine’s proposal that whatever there is to the meaning (information value) of an observation sentence is determined by the patterns of sensory stimulation that would cause a speaker to assent to or dissent from the sentence.... Quine’s proposal, like other forms of verificationism, makes for skepticism. For clearly a person’s sensory stimulations could be just as they are and yet the world outside very different. (Remember the brain in the vat.)**

**Just how is this supposed to substantiate the charge that rival theories of meaning lead to a radical skepticism about objective external reality? According to Davidson, those theories lead us astray by opening a logical gap between our subjectivity and objective externalia: that is to say, between intrinsic descriptions of the contents of our minds and contingent facts about the world around us. For we are then necessarily unable to close this logical gap (not, presumably, without vicious circularity).<sup>1</sup> These are central themes sounded repeatedly in Davidson’s writings on epistemology. Consider, for example, this passage.**

**There is at least a presumption that we are right about the contents of our own minds; so in the cases where we are right, we have knowledge. But such knowledge is logically independent of our beliefs about a world outside, and**

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<sup>1</sup> Compare Nagel’s discussion of Davidson’s epistemology, “Davidson’s New Cogito,” [The Philosophy of Donald Davidson](#) (Open Court, 1999), p. 203; we shall return to this passage below.

so cannot supply a foundation for science and common sense beliefs. This is how skeptics, like Hume, reason, and I think they are right: knowledge of the contents of our own minds cannot be the basis for the rest of our knowledge. If this is correct, then our beliefs about the world must, if they are to count as knowledge, stand alone. Yet it has seemed obvious to many philosophers that if each of our beliefs about the world, taken alone, may be false, there is no reason all such beliefs might not be false. (Davidson 1991b, p. 193.)

Here we have two main points: first, that if external reality is logically independent of the contents of our minds, then the contents of our minds can give no foundation for our beliefs about that external reality. And there is also a second point. Even if no particular contingent empirical belief is guaranteed to be right, we may still be able to show how we cannot be generally wrong about the world around us. Despite universal fallibility in individual empirical beliefs, we might still be able to secure a guarantee that lots of our beliefs must be right, that we are inevitably, massively right about the world around us.

The gap that yawns between our subjectivity and the external world, according to earlier views, is repeatedly blamed by Davidson as a source of radical skepticism. In his view this sort of skepticism bedevils not only supernaturalist, classical foundationalists, such as Descartes, but also contemporary externalist, coherentist, naturalists: Quine himself, for example. What exactly is the argument for so surprising a pairing and so unexpected a charge? Given the interest and importance of this issue, we are fortunate to have it explained by Davidson himself with his customary pith, in an account worth quoting and considering in full:

According to Quine's "naturalized epistemology" we should ask no more from the philosophy of knowledge than an account of how, given the evidence we have to go on, we are able to form a satisfactory theory of the world. The account draws on the best theory we have: our present science. The evidence on which the meanings of our sentences, and all our

knowledge, ultimately depend is provided a person with his only cues to “what goes on around him.” Quine is not, of course, a reductionist: “we cannot strip away the conceptual trappings sentence by sentence.” Nevertheless, there is according to Quine a definite distinction to be made between the invariant content and the variant conceptual trappings, between report and invention, substance and style, cues and conceptualization.

What matters, then, is not whether we can describe the data in a neutral, theory-free idiom; what matters is that there should be an ultimate source of evidence whose character can be wholly specified without reference to what it is evidence for. Thus patterns of stimulation, like sense-data, can be identified and described without reference to “what goes on around us.” If our knowledge of the world derives entirely from evidence of this kind, then not only may our senses sometimes deceive us; it is possible that we are systematically and generally deceived.

It is easy to remember what prompts this view: it is thought necessary to insulate the ultimate sources of evidence from the outside world in order to guarantee the authority of the evidence for the subject. Since we cannot be certain what the world outside the mind is like, the subjective can keep its virtue—its chastity, its certainty for us—only by being protected from contamination by the world. The familiar trouble is, of course, that the disconnection creates a gap no reasoning or construction can plausibly bridge. Once the Cartesian starting point has been chosen, there is no saying what the evidence is evidence for, or so it seems. Idealism, reductionist forms of empiricism, and skepticism loom...

Instead of saying it is the scheme-content dichotomy that has dominated and defined the problems of modern philosophy, then, one could as well say it is how the dualism of the objective and the subjective has been conceived. For these dualisms have a common origin: a concept of the mind with its private states and objects...

(Davidson 1989b, pp. 161–3.)

According to Davidson's reasoning, certain philosophical positions, Quine's for example, lead to skepticism by allowing a certain crucial possibility. In his study of Davidson's epistemological views, Thomas Nagel endorses this reasoning, and joins in taking the crucial "skeptical possibility" to be this: that the external world could differ radically despite presenting subjectively indistinguishable appearances; that a logical chasm divides our subjective appearances from the world beyond. By leaving that possibility open one smooths the way for the skeptic. Nagel reminds us of the many ways in which the skeptic has been opposed without success. One might try to refute him by reducing external reality to subjective experience, for example, which is the way of phenomenologists, verificationists, pragmatists, transcendental idealists, and internal realists. Reductionists deny that it is really possible for one's experience to remain indistinguishable even while external reality diverges as broadly as the skeptic imagines. And such reductionism is one traditional way in which philosophers have tried to oppose the skeptic. An alternative way does not rely on any ontological reduction of the world to the mind. But it attempts to argue its way from the internal to the external nevertheless, in the way of Descartes or in some other way.

According to Nagel, Davidson has a third way with the skeptic, one that attempts to relate the external to the subjective neither by deduction nor by reduction. Some might be misled to see it as an attempted reduction, not of the external to the subjective, but in the opposite direction. However, in fact Davidson is no reductionist at all, not even in the way of the behaviorist. Despite renouncing any such reductionism, Davidson's way still does manage to yield an a priori argument that we cannot be as radically mistaken about the external as the skeptic would have us believe. If the attempt succeeds, therefore, it does, amazingly enough, refute the skeptic, and does so from the armchair. Such an a priori argument is said to be crucially required, since we cannot fall back on retail empirical beliefs in arguing against a radical skeptic. To appeal thus to

empirical beliefs would just beg the question, since the skeptic puts in doubt all such beliefs in one fell swoop.

The a priori argument is needed because the empirical reasons for particular beliefs are not by themselves sufficient. It makes sense to think about each of a great many of my beliefs, taken one at a time, that it might be false, in spite of the evidence. Some reason must be given to show that these individual possibilities can't be combined into the possibility that most of them are false. That reason can't be just the sum of the particular reasons for each of them, since these are just further beliefs in the set, and the whole question is whether most of them might be false. If they were, their apparent support of one another would be systematically misleading. So we cannot demonstrate empirically that this is not the case, as is proposed by naturalized epistemology; it must be *proved* to be impossible if skepticism is to be ruled out. We need an a priori argument, and Davidson has given us one. It is an argument which does *not* rely on the reduction of truth to coherence. (Thomas Nagel, "Davidson's New Cogito," The Philosophy of Donald Davidson (Open Court, 1999), p. 203.)

Davidson's response is to agree, indeed effusively so, and even to reject the one gesture by which Nagel tries to distance him from any such purported a priori refutation of the skeptic.<sup>1</sup> Nagel had ventured that Davidson would resist viewing his reasoning as designed to run *from* thought *to* objective reality. In response Davidson counters by avowing his intention to argue in precisely that way. Davidson concludes his response with a caveat of his own, but not one that would give Nagel pause, nor much gladden the skeptic.

Nagel is understandably astonished that a priori reasoning should show that our general picture of the world around us "covering vast tracts of history, natural science, and ordinary lore," is largely true. Of course, as he notes,

there is an empirical premise, the *cogito*. There is not an a priori proof that there is a world more or less as I think of it. Nor is the empirical premise a small one. The conclusion that I know that the world, both in general and in many particular ways, is as I think it is, depends on the fact that I have just the beliefs I do. (“Reply to Nagel,” *op. cit.*, p. 209.)

Whether this removes the “a priori” character of the reasoning is a matter of definitional opinion. In what follows let us take reasoning to be “a priori” so long as it relies neither on any substantive commitments concerning the external world, nor on external observation as a mode of justified belief acquisition. Reasoning is thus not reduced from a priori status simply because it rests on contingent commitments concerning the contents of the reasoner’s own mind. It is in this sense of ‘a priori’ that Nagel had tried to distance Davidson from a priori reasoning designed to counter the skeptic. And it is taken in *this* sense that Davidson rejects that gesture.

Regardless of how we choose to speak, the substance of Davidson’s claim will remain amazing anyhow. Who would have thought that, just on the basis of otherwise a priori reflection, reasoning from our knowledge of what we believe, of how it is within our own minds, we should be able to arrive at substantive conclusions about the objective and independent external world around us? This is indeed the sort of reasoning that Cartesians once aspired to, or is an impressively close approximation thereto.

Nagel is not fully persuaded to join Davidson in arguing thus against the skeptic, but he does think that Davidson has come up with a deep paradox. The only ways out he can see are, first, a Platonism that is anathema to contemporary naturalism, and, second, a radical “... form of skepticism about whether one was really capable of significant thought.” (p. 205)

## B. What *Is* Davidson’s Argument?

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<sup>1</sup> See his “Reply to Thomas Nagel,” pp. 207-9.

How does Davidson propose to refute the skeptic and solve the problem of the external world? His reasoning has two main sources. One is his account of radical interpretation, the other his externalism. Though closely related, the two are separable on close inspection. Let us first take up radical interpretation.

What is involved in attributing propositional attitudes to someone else? How can we manage it if we do not presuppose a common language giving us easy access to the mind behind the words? In such radical interpretation there is no substitute for considering the other's variable assents and dissents upon correspondingly varying occasions of speech. We must then assess meaning in the light of external promptings by the saliently variable features of those occasions. Attributable meaning comes thus in a package together with causation by externalia.

This connects with two other important themes in Davidson's account of meaning and knowledge: charity and triangulation. Since we can attribute such observational beliefs and knowledge only if we interpret through what we see to prompt the believer's assent, the very nature of radical interpretation commits us to interpret the other as largely right in his beliefs. Moreover, the meanings that an interpreter attributes to a speaker's utterances are then bound to reside in the commonly shared nodes of the causal trees that prompt the respective attitudes of speaker and interpreter. Meaning, attributed meaning, is thus bound to derive from such triangulation. From this Davidson draws an important lesson:

It should now be clear what ensures that our view of the world is, in its plainest features, largely correct. The reason is that the stimuli that cause our most basic verbal responses also determine what those verbal responses mean, and the content of the beliefs that accompany them. The nature of correct interpretation guarantees both that a large number of our simplest beliefs are true, and that the nature of those beliefs is known to others. Of course many beliefs are given content by their relations to further beliefs, or are caused by misleading sensations; any particular belief or set of beliefs about the world around us may be false. What cannot be the case is that our



general picture of the world and our place in it is mistaken, for it is this picture which informs the rest of our beliefs, whether they be true or false, and makes them intelligible. (Davidson 1991d, p. 160.)

“[B]eliefs are by nature generally true.” So Davidson sums up his point. (Davidson, 1991a, p. 319.) On this matter, his statements and arguments leave open two possible interpretations, however, or so Barry Stroud has argued plausibly.<sup>1</sup> There is a stronger reading and a weaker reading, as follows:

<i>Stronger reading:</i>	No believer’s set of beliefs could be massively false.
<i>Weaker reading:</i>	No interpreter could correctly interpret a speaker in such a way that the speaker’s beliefs come out massively false in the interpreter’s opinion.

Stroud then documents his claim that the stronger reading is endorsed by Davidson, as when the latter argues that it “cannot be the rule” that a speaker be interpreted on the basis of “shared but erroneous beliefs,” and concludes that “massive error about the world is simply unintelligible.”

That is of course reminiscent of the much discussed Omniscient Interpreter argument; but I will pass over this with little further comment, since Davidson has now effectively disavowed it in print.<sup>2</sup> Recently he has written, for example, as follows: “I also agree ... that the argument that summons up an Omniscient Interpreter does not advance my case. As with Swampman, I regret these sorties into science fiction .... If the case can be made with an omniscient interpreter, it can be made without, and better.” (“Reply to A.C. Genova,” p. 192)

Stroud argues that the stronger reading does not follow from the weaker reading, since “... the conditions of interpretation as Davidson describes them do not alone guarantee that what interpreters take the causes of utterances to be is

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<sup>1</sup> “Radical Interpretation and Philosophical Scepticism,” in Lewis Hahn, ed., The Philosophy of Donald Davidson (Open Court, 1999)

<sup>2</sup> There is an instructive critical literature on this, including Richard Foley and Richard Fumerton, “Davidson’s Theism?” Philosophical Studies 48 (1985).

what they in fact are ... [and] if it is not a necessary condition of interpretation that the actual causes of utterances are what interpreters and speakers take their causes to be, as I think it is not, the guaranteed truth of attributed belief is not supported by the conditions of radical interpretation as described so far.” (p. 154)

Stroud’s argument highlights (a) that the stronger reading does not follow from the weaker, (b) that Davidson should renounce the stronger, and (c) that the weaker will suffice for a good response to the skeptic. Stroud does not think the stronger reading “... is needed to block the threat of philosophical skepticism in the highly promising way he [Davidson] has in mind; the weaker reading alone, and the conditions of interpretation as described so far, suffice.” (p. 154)

According to Stroud, we must grant the abstract possibility that we be mostly or even wholly wrong in our contingent beliefs about external reality. To reject that possibility is to threaten the objectivity of our beliefs about such reality. What Davidson’s account of radical interpretation yields, then, according to Stroud, is not the impossibility that our beliefs be largely false, but rather only that “... belief–attribution is in its nature largely truth–ascribing.”

Stroud’s discussion seems to me illuminatingly right in distinguishing the two readings and in arguing for the independence of the stronger from the weaker. Evidently, one must go beyond the conditions of radical interpretation if one is to derive anything like the stronger reading. Nevertheless, I am not persuaded on two main points. I do not believe that simply the weaker reading, and the fact that belief–attribution must be truth–ascribing suffices for much of a response to the skeptic. And, on the other side, I am not persuaded that the stronger reading is either false or unacceptable, even if it does not follow from the weaker. Section C below will take up Davidson’s externalist argument for the stronger reading. What remains of this section will discuss Stroud’s claim that the weaker reading on its own is enough to block the skeptic, and on his argument for that claim.

Here is that argument:

An inquirer’s relation to the apparently innocent possibility from which a skeptical threat is thought eventually to arise is therefore parallel to a speaker’s relation to the possibility expressed in the paradoxical sentence ‘I

believe that it is raining, and it is not raining'. That is not something one could consistently believe or assert.... If the apparently innocent possibility from which the epistemological reasoning would begin is not a possibility anyone could consistently believe to be actual, it can be eliminated from serious consideration right at the beginning. There would be no need to insist on the stronger view ... There can be no general threat [of the sort pressed by the skeptic] because our considering the specific attributed beliefs we [ask about] ... guarantees that we find those beliefs to be for the most part true. Our having them and their being all or mostly false is not a possibility we could consistently believe to be actual, so it is not a possibility we could be pressed to explain how we know is not actual. That is not to say that we therefore *know* that all or most of the things we believe are true. That would be the negation of skepticism, and it does not follow from this anti-sceptical strategy. The goal is only to block a familiar route to skepticism, not to show that skepticism is false. A certain possibility is to be removed from consideration as the source of a potentially unanswerable threat. (pp. 136–7)

Several points remain doubtful or unclear in this reasoning. From the fact that  $\langle \text{Not-}p \text{ but I believe } p \rangle$  is Moore-paradoxical, and cannot coherently be believed or asserted, it does not follow that the corresponding proposition of the following form must also share that fate:  $\langle \text{It is possible that both: not-}p \text{ and I believe } p; \text{ that is to say, it might have been that the following two things were so at the same time: that not-}p \text{ while I believed that } p \text{ anyhow} \rangle$ .

Even if this propositional form were in fact incoherent, moreover, so that each of the propositions of that form about each of my beliefs would be incoherent, it still would not follow that  $\langle \text{It is possible that my beliefs are massively false} \rangle$  is also incoherent. Here's an analogy. In a certain time span  $T$ , I may list five positive integers: 2, 5, 7, 3, 8. Each of the positive integers I list is such that it could not possibly have been greater than 10. However, that still leaves open the following possibility: that, in time span  $T$ , I might have listed some positive integer

larger than 10. Similarly, even if I cannot coherently think or say that although I believe that *p*, still it is *not* so that *p*, and even if, *only for the sake of argument*, it is granted that I cannot coherently think or say the following: <although I believe that *p*, it is, compatibly with that, possible that not-*p*>, nevertheless it does not follow from any of that, nor is it true, that I cannot coherently think or say *this*: <I might be massively wrong in my beliefs>.

Accordingly, I do not see that simply from the Davidsonian account of radical interpretation, and, specifically, from the weaker reading of Davidson's key thesis, anything has been shown to follow that would block the skeptic's route to supposing, as he tends to do, that we might be massively wrong in our contingent beliefs about the external world. Nor has it even been shown to follow that we are somehow incoherent in supposing, with regard to any actual belief we host about external reality, that we *might* have hosted that belief despite its falsity (unawares of course).

Accordingly, I conclude that we must go beyond the weaker reading to the stronger if we hope to block the skeptic's progress. However, I agree with Stroud that the weaker reading is distinct from the stronger and does not entail it. If so, we need to go beyond considerations involving radical interpretation if we are to reach the conclusions that we need against the skeptic. What are the chances that we can reach any such conclusions a priori? Do we *need* to reach *a priori* any such conclusion that can possibly be of use against the determined skeptic?

### C. Skepticism About Davidson's Account of Skepticism

Suppose *arguendo* that we concede the need for an a priori argument if we are to oppose the skeptic with any hope of success, as Nagel supposes, about which in response Davidson seems to concur. And suppose further that Davidson has indeed given us the sort of argument we need. I wish to argue that we are nevertheless not much better off against the skeptic, and indeed that such a concession would admit the skeptic's Trojan horse.

Consider an unfortunate victim of futuristic technology whose brain is wirelessly controlled by demonic controllers. Suppose this to have come about only hours ago, perhaps overnight while the victim slept soundly. This is the sort of possibility that Davidson's reasoning does not manage to preclude. So now we face the following outcome. True, we cannot reason that we might be generally wrong just because we might be wrong in any specific instance. But nor can we reason that we are safe from being wrong in any specific instance just because we cannot be generally wrong. So even if Davidson's reasoning enables us to close the gap between what is accessible to us a priori and our general correctness about the character of external reality, this still leaves in place gaps aplenty between what is accessible to us a priori and the various specific substantive beliefs that we hold about the world and our place in it at any given time. None of these gaps would seem bridgeable just with an argument like Davidson's.

It might be argued that appearances are here deceptive, as they so often are in this dark swamp. After all, Davidson's argument does yield the conclusion that our substantive beliefs about externalia are and must be massively correct. May we not therefore conclude that any particular such belief must then have presumptive justification? Such justification might be defeated, of course, by particular untoward circumstances. Absent such defeat, however, it is certainly not nothing. And so we seem to have made progress against the skeptic after all.

This argument has a certain "blanketing" property that should give us pause. It would render all substantive beliefs presumptively justified, the astrologer's along with the astronomer's. And now the action would shift to what accounts for the difference, what accounts for the defeat of the astrologer's justification and the nondefeat of the astronomer's justification. Anyone who believes something out of the blue, and has no very good argument against his reliability on the subject matter involved, any trusting soul innocent of much relevant theory, would seem ipso facto to inherit undefeated epistemic justification.

What is more, there is a further problem that Davidson himself has come explicitly to recognize: namely, that if we are thinking of justification as provided by his proposed complex reasoning, then only those enlightened few who grasp

and adopt that reasoning would have their knowledge protected against the skeptic. The masses of nonphilosophers, indeed the masses of nonDavidsonians, no matter how brilliant and otherwise well informed, would remain benighted. In spite of this, Davidson retains hope that his account will still do some epistemic good. So we will need to consider how any such reasoning might accomplish its good work.

#### **D. Davidson's Argument and the Skeptic's Trojan Horse**

If we frame our debate with the skeptic as do Davidson and Nagel, therefore, the skeptic wins regardless of whatever success Davidson's transcendental argument may enjoy. The success of the transcendental argument turns on complex and still disputed issues in the philosophy of language and mind. Even if that should all turn out favorably, however, once we think of skepticism as suggested by the writings of Davidson and Nagel, there is no way ultimately to overcome skepticism. We are unwise if in effect we thus allow the skeptic to set the agenda and frame the issue. We should be wary of setting up the dialectic with the skeptic along the following lines, in the fashion often attributed to Descartes:

- a. If we are to know realm W it must be via realm M.
- b. The way to know a realm X via a realm Y is by knowing Y and reasoning validly from one's knowledge of Y to conclusions about X.
- c. Only deductive reasoning is really valid.
- d. There is a logical gap between M and W that no deductive reasoning could possibly bridge.

(Here M is the realm of one's mind at the given time, and W is the realm of one's surrounding objective world.)

However, one does not defeat the skeptic simply by rejecting c, while also adding inductive reasoning to our set of valid forms of reasoning. For it is no more clear

how to cross the gap between M and W through valid *inductive* reasoning. Once we grant a division such as that of M and W above, and concede that any knowledge of W would have to be via knowledge of M, it will be hard to withstand the attack of the skeptic.

On one straightforward reading, Davidson's way of framing skepticism puts the realm of one's beliefs B in place of the realm of one's mind M in the argument above. Accordingly he does inherit the problem of crossing a divide from the subjective to the objective. How then does Davidson propose that we reason our way from B to W?

The argument is presented in various forms in several places. For example, it appears as follows in Davidson 1989b.

The action has centered on the concept of subjectivity, what is "in the mind." Let us start with what it is we know or grasp when we know the meaning of a word or sentence. It is a commonplace of the empirical tradition that we learn our first words (which at the start serve the function of sentences—words like 'apple', 'man', 'dog', 'water'—through a conditioning of sounds or verbal behavior to appropriate bits of matter in the public domain). The conditioning works best with objects that interest the learner and are hard to miss by either teacher or pupil. This is not just a story about how we learn to use words: it must also be an essential part of an adequate account of what words refer to and what they mean.

Needless to say, the whole story cannot be this simple. On the other hand, it is hard to believe that this sort of direct interaction between language users and public events and objects is not a basic part of the whole story, the part that, directly or indirectly, largely determine how words are related to things.... The grasp of meanings is determined only by the terminal elements in the conditioning process and is tested only by the end product: use of words geared to appropriate objects and situations. This is perhaps best seen by noticing that two speakers who "mean the same thing" by an expression need have no more in common than their

dispositions to appropriate verbal behavior; the neural networks may be very different. The matter may be put the other way around: two speakers may be alike in all relevant physical respects, and yet they may mean quite different things by the same words because of differences in the external situations in which the words were learned...; in the simplest and most basic cases words and sentences derive their meaning from the objects and circumstances in which they were learned. A sentence which one has been conditioned by the learning process to be caused to hold true by the presence of fires will be true when there is a fire present; a word one has been conditioned to be caused to hold applicable by the presence of snakes will refer to snakes. Of course very many words and sentence are not learned this way; but it is those that are that anchor language to the world....

The fallout from these considerations for the theory of knowledge is (or ought to be) nothing less than revolutionary. If words and thoughts are, in the most basic cases, necessarily about the sorts of objects and events that cause them, there is no room for Cartesian doubts about the independent existence of such objects and events. Doubts there can be, of course. But there need be nothing we are indubitably right about for it to be certain that we are mostly right about the nature of the world. Sometimes skepticism seems to rest on a simple fallacy, the fallacy of reasoning from the fact that there is nothing we might not be wrong about to the conclusion that we might be wrong about everything. The second possibility is ruled out if we accept that our simplest sentences are given their meanings by the situations that generally cause us to hold them true or false, since to hold a sentence we understand to be true or false is to have a belief. Continuing along this line, we see that general skepticism about the deliverances of the senses cannot even be formulated, since the senses and their deliverances play no central *theoretical* role in the account of belief, meaning, and knowledge if the contents of the mind depend on the causal relations, whatever they may be, between the attitudes and the world. This



is not to deny the importance of the actual causal role of the senses in knowledge and the acquisition of language, of course. (pp. 163–5)

In the simplest cases, we are told, words and sentences derive their meanings from the objects and circumstances in which they were learned. Just how does this happen? What sort of “derivation” is here in play? In leading up to and defending his “derivation” thesis, Davidson makes some revealing claims (which are quoted as follows, with my emphases in bold):

... [Two] speakers who “mean the same thing” by an expression need have no more in common than their dispositions to appropriate verbal behavior; the neural networks may be very different. (p. 164)

A sentence which one has been conditioned by the learning process to be caused to hold true by the presence of fires will be true when there is a fire present; a word one has been conditioned to be caused to hold applicable by the presence of snakes will refer to snakes. (p. 164)

If words and thoughts are, in the most basic cases, necessarily about the sorts of objects and events that cause them, there is no room for Cartesian doubts about the independent existence of such objects and events. (pp. 164–5)

In considering these and the many other passages where Davidson makes the same basic points, we need to distinguish between (a) dispositions to appropriate verbal behavior, and (b) the process or processes that may cause such dispositions in a certain speaker/believer. The disposition that one hosts in being such that “one is caused to hold a certain sentence true by the presence of fires,” may have been put in place by repeated experience of fires. If so, that is just a contingent matter of fact, however, which might possibly have been otherwise. The actual disposition involves the fact that one *would* be caused to say or think “Fire!” in the presence of

a fire (an evident enough fire). This most likely was indeed put in place through some experience by the speaker/thinker with actual fires. Even if that is so, it would seem only a contingent matter of fact, and the disposition might even have been there innately. But now we have a problem for Davidson's transcendental argument. For there is now no evident impossibility in one's understanding the concepts of our commonsense objective reality, where this understanding resides, at least partly, in one's complex dispositions to verbal and other relevant behavior, although one has *not* acquired such dispositions through causal intercourse with exemplars of the concepts possessed.

So it seems at best unestablished that *both* (a) one could possibly have the beliefs that one has only through having in one's possession the concepts constitutive of the contents of those beliefs, and also (b) the only way one could have such concepts is through causal intercourse with their exemplars. Further defense would seem required in favor of assumption (b), for there is a plausible argument against it, one indeed that seems suggested already by Davidson's actual words. It can be argued plausibly, after all, that the relevant requirement for possession of a concept, say, a recognitional concept, is only one's hosting a disposition that makes for differential sensitivity to the presence or absence of exemplars. And such a disposition *need not* have been acquired through causal interaction with actual exemplars.

There are indications that Davidson has come to regard his argument as less plausibly a priori than one might have thought, perhaps even less so than he himself originally may have thought. Consider this recent passage:

Is my argument for the "massive" (essential) truth of our perceptual beliefs transcendental? If you accept the steps that lead to my version of externalism, ... then you cannot, I think, be a skeptic about the existence of an external world much like the one we all believe we share, nor about the existence of other people with minds like ours. But the considerations in favor of semantic realism seem to depend in part not on purely a priori

considerations but rather on a view of the way people are. (“Reply to A.C. Genova,” p. 194.)

Indeed, in recent passages Davidson candidly reveals his vacillation about epistemology and skepticism, especially in his more recent thought. The following are particularly revealing:

I have vacillated over the years on how to describe my attitude toward scepticism. Do I think that if I am right about the nature of thought scepticism is false, or that scepticism simply cannot get off the ground? Passages Stroud quotes suggest the former. At the same time, I have been happy to go along with Rorty in telling the sceptic to get lost. The two poses can be reconciled by pointing out that though I think scepticism as Stroud formulates it is false, I did not set out to show this. Reflecting on the nature of thought and interpretation led me to a position which, if correct, entails that we have a basically sound view of the world around us. If so, there is no point attempting, *in addition*, to show the sceptic wrong. (“Reply to Barry Stroud,” p. 163.)

Nagel quotes “A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge” as saying, “The agent has only to reflect on what a belief is to appreciate that most of his basic beliefs are true.” I was concerned to show that each of us not only has a basis for his picture of the world in his perceptual beliefs, but that he also, on reflection, would see that there was a reason (my arguments) for thinking this. I was trying to fend off the criticism (which perhaps surfaces in Stroud’s contribution to this volume) that I might have shown that we do have a large supply of true beliefs, but not have shown that these constitute knowledge. I now think this attempt at fending off criticism was a mistake, if for no other reason than that it would seem to credit only those whose philosophical thinking is correct with knowledge. The right thing to say is rather this: we are *justified* in taking our perceptual beliefs to be true, even

**when they are not and so when they are true, they constitute knowledge (this is what I meant by saying our perceptual beliefs are “veridical”). But 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. (“Reply to Thomas Nagel,” p. 208.)<sup>1</sup>**

**In these passages we are given to understand that there is a source of justification other than the adducing of a reason for one’s belief, or the basing of one’s belief on a reason. Reason-based justification is not the sort of justification that Davidson calls to our attention in his many reflections about the bearing of his content externalism on issues of skepticism and epistemology. He has now seen this clearly, and acknowledges it openly. The source of justification that he focuses on is not a *reason*, inasmuch as it is a source of justification that epistemically favors even those who have no *belief* in any Davidsonian theory about how our beliefs and sayings acquire content.<sup>2</sup> Nor need one have any reason at all for beliefs that are nonetheless somehow justified. Again, nothing in the causality of perceptual beliefs**

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<sup>1</sup> Compare Davidson’s “Reply to McDowell”:

My view is that particular empirical beliefs are supported by other beliefs, some of them perceptual and some not. Perceptual beliefs are caused by features of the environment, but nothing in their causality (except in special, derivative cases) provides a reason for such belief. Nevertheless, many basic perceptual beliefs are true, and the explanation of this fact shows why we are justified in believing them. We know many things where our only reasons for believing them are further beliefs. (pp. 105-6)

“A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge” had taken a rather different view of the matter:

What is needed to answer the skeptic is to show that someone with a (more or less) coherent set of beliefs has a reason to suppose his beliefs are not mistaken in the main. What we have shown is that it is absurd to look for a justifying ground for the totality of beliefs, something outside this totality which we can use to test or compare with our beliefs. The answer to our problem must then be to find a *reason* for supposing most of our beliefs are true that is not a form of *evidence*. (p. 314)

I have not been concerned with the canons of evidential support (if such there be), but to show that all that counts as evidence or justification for a belief must come from the same totality of belief to which it belongs. (p. 319)

<sup>2</sup> Compare this: “Perceptual beliefs are caused by features of the environment, but nothing in their causality (except in special, derivative cases) provides a reason for such beliefs. Nevertheless, many basic perceptual

provides a reason for them, while still “... many perceptual beliefs are true, and the explanation of this fact shows why we are justified in believing them.” Those innocent of a Davidsonian account of the nature of mental content and meaning, would lack any rationale deriving from any such Davidsonian theory of content, in favor of their empirical beliefs about their enviroing world. But, if Davidson’s account is true, they would still have a source of justification involving the nature of such content. And it is the existence and nature of such justification that Davidson now sees himself as having clarified through his writings on externalism, knowledge, justification, and skepticism.

The Davidsonian justification at issue is *not*, therefore, of either of the sorts that Nagel distinguishes. It is not a justification that derives from a reduction of the external to the subjective (or, for that matter, the other way around), nor from a deduction of the external from the subjective. Nor is it a justification that comes with possession of an argument, an *a priori* argument, through which one gains support for its conclusion. Davidson has concluded that it is hopeless to suppose that this is how people generally avoid the clutches of the skeptic. For people generally adduce no such Davidsonian argument in support of their retail beliefs. So, even if a few philosophers, persuaded by Davidson, do adduce such a complex argument concerning the nature of mental and linguistic content, and even if they do *thereby* gain some measure of justification for their empirical beliefs, that will not explain the justification that ordinary folk have for *their* empirical beliefs, and so it will not explain how it is that *these folk* are safe from the objections of the skeptic.

What then *is* the source of the distinctive Davidsonian empirical justification that a subject’s perceptual beliefs get from something other than the support of other empirical beliefs hosted by that subject. Apparently it is simply the *truth* of the Davidsonian account of how our sayings and attitudes must derive their content, and how this guarantees that one’s picture of the enviroing world *must* be massively correct, especially in its perceptual components.

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beliefs are true, and the explanation of this fact shows why we are justified in believing them. (“Reply to John McDowell,” pp. 105-6.)

Two fascinating questions ensue. First of all, isn't Davidson now drawing on reliabilist intuitions? It would seem to be the high level of reliability of our empirical beliefs, given his account of meaning and content, that now serves as the core of the special source of justification invoked to explain the high epistemic status of our empirical, and especially of our perceptual beliefs.<sup>1</sup>

The second interesting question concerns the status of Davidson's theory and his "answer" to the skeptic. If the source of justification should now be viewed as distinct from any reasoning, from any invoking of a justifying argument, then it is no longer clear why it must be *a priori*. (Not that it was all that clear in any case.) It becomes positively opaque why the *a prioricity* of Davidson's epistemologically effective reasoning should be an issue. Now it would seem to matter only that the reasoning establish the theory, for it is just the *truth* of the theory that has turned out to be epistemologically effective. What seems to matter is essentially that as things in fact stand in our contingent circumstances, content is set externalistically through causal linkages with our external environment. For it is through this fact that the reliability of our beliefs is assured. And it is from their assured reliability that their presumptive justification derives. Of course, if in no possible world could content derive in any other way, then the reliability of our beliefs would be assured with alethic necessity. But it is far from clear that Davidson's account, or any such content-externalist account, is true with alethic necessity.

Note, finally, that through this new approach we have a way to understand epistemology naturalized that avoids the objection, voiced for example by Nagel, that such naturalization of epistemology would involve a vicious circularity. This is also reminiscent of the longstanding controversy as to whether Descartes's supernaturalization is similarly vicious in its circularity. Consider how interesting in this connection is Davidson's new reason-avoiding approach, on which justification derives somehow from a source other than the subject's actual reasoning. As we have seen, the new approach strongly suggests a reliabilism for which justification can derive from the reliability of the sorts of beliefs at issue (perceptual beliefs

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<sup>1</sup> That at a deep level Davidson is a reliabilist is suggested already in my "'Circular' Coherence and 'Absurd' Foundations," in *Truth and Interpretation*, ed. Ernest LePore (Blackwell, 1986); see especially pp. 395-7.

most importantly, though Davidson also generalizes beyond these eventually). And Descartes's epistemological reasoning can be viewed similarly as proposing a way of understanding our forming of beliefs (in the lap of an epistemically benevolent God) as bound to be reliable. (Of course, for special reasons, Descartes *did* aim for alethic necessity, and for *a priori* reasoning, but the present comparison is independent of that.) For if Descartes's epistemological theorizing is meant to identify a way in which our beliefs get to be justified which is precisely *not* through any reasonings from which we derive them as conclusions, then Descartes too can avoid vicious circularity by responding to the skeptic that our beliefs have a source of justification that need not involve the use of reasoning. In Descartes's case the effective fact would involve assent attendant on sufficiently clear and distinct perception, while favored by God's epistemic benevolence. In Davidson's case the effective fact would involve rather that we would not form beliefs having the contents of our empirical beliefs did we not interact appropriately with surroundings characterized generally as are our surroundings in this world.

The main remaining question concerns the epistemic status of our empirical beliefs once we have reasoned along with Davidson, while leaning presumably on adequate empirical support. Do our empirical beliefs gain any epistemic status through such reasoning? It might be thought that obviously they do not. How could they do so without vicious circularity? How could such theoretical beliefs as to the nature of content add to the status of one's empirical beliefs generally, if it is granted that the theoretical beliefs must in turn gain their own status through reliance on empirical, perceptual beliefs?

Here again the comparison with Descartes is instructive. Descartes did obviously think that by the end of the Meditations he had improved himself epistemically. But it is hard to see how he could possibly have avoided the vicious circularity of which he has so often been accused. Since Descartes, early in the Meditations, puts so much in doubt, including even his simplest arithmetical and geometrical beliefs, it is hard to see how he could possibly dig himself out of so deep a skeptical hole without at some point falling foul of vicious circularity. Descartes does have a way out, however, one in fact open both to the advocates of

common sense such as Moore, and to those who advocate an epistemology naturalized, either Quine's, or, now, perhaps, Davidson's.<sup>1</sup> The response is indeed a kind of "coherence theory of knowledge" after all. For it is by adding interestingly to the coherence of one's picture of the world and one's place in it that one is able to gain a *further* measure of distinctive, epistemically valuable justification for one's own empirical beliefs, a measure of justification that goes beyond the mere reliability of those beliefs derivative from how we must acquire contents and form beliefs. The additional measure of justification goes beyond any delivered by sheer reliability, and does so by bringing to consciousness a well founded account of how our nature and emplacement do yield such reliability. Whether this is done in the way of Descartes, or in that of Moore, or of Quine, or, now, of Davidson, the result would be, structurally, the same: a more satisfyingly coherent account of our nature and place in the scheme of things.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> More details are offered in two recent papers of mine: "How to Resolve the Pyrrhonian Problematic: A Lesson from Descartes," *Philosophical Studies* LXXXV (1997) 229-49; and "Reflective Knowledge in the Best Circles," *Journal of Philosophy* XCIV (1997): 410-30.

<sup>2</sup> For further discussion of Davidson's epistemological views, see the papers by Peter Klein and Colin McGinn in *Truth and Interpretation*, ed. Ernest LePore (Blackwell, 1986), and the papers by A.C. Genova, John McDowell, and Tyler Burge in *The Philosophy of Donald Davidson* ed. Lewis Hahn (Open Court, 1999).