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VOLUME INTRODUCTION
Donald Davidson: Looking Back, Looking Forward
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The papers collected in this issue were solicited to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of Donald Davidson's birth. Four of them discuss the implications of Davidson's views—in particular, his later views on triangulation—for questions that are still very much at the centre of current debates. These are, first, the question whether Saul Kripke's doubts about meaning and rule-following can be answered without making concessions to the sceptic or to the quietist; second, the question whether a way can be found to answer Davidson's own doubts about the continuity of non-propositional thought and language; third, the question whether normative properties can be at once causal and prescriptive; fourth, the question whether folk psychological explanations can be at once illuminating and autonomous. The fifth paper reexamines Davidson's take on the principle of compositionality, which always was at the centre of his theorizing about language.

Special Issue:
Donald Davidson: Looking Back, Looking Forward
Edited by Claudine Verheggen

VOLUME INTRODUCTION
Donald Davidson:
Looking Back, Looking Forward

Claudine Verheggen

1.

The papers collected in this issue were initially solicited to commemorate the centenary of Donald Davidson's birth. That date has come and gone, but his work remains, and it continues to prompt new, highly original and interesting thoughts, which make productive and illuminating connections with contemporary philosophical debates.

   The issue brings together five papers, four of which turn around and build upon an idea that preoccupied Davidson in the last fifteen years of his life, that of triangulation, the idea of a creature[1] interacting simultaneously with another and the world they share. Triangulation, Davidson maintained, is needed for anyone to have a language and thoughts. The idea of triangulation was first introduced in 1982, in "Rational Animals", and by the late eighties there was hardly a paper in which Davidson did not exploit it and further draw its consequences for many areas of philosophy. Yet, this is a part of Davidson's work that to this day has not received the attention it deserves. The present issue should help to remedy this. It demonstrates that closer attention to Davidson's views on triangulation proves useful in shedding light on current philosophical disputes and in helping us to make progress toward their resolution. I also hope it will encourage us to reconsider Davidson's writings on radical interpretation, the interpretation from scratch of an alien speaker, in light of those

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   [1]Following Davidson, I use "creature" when it may be an open question whether what the word refers to is, or could be, an agent or speaker.

on triangulation. Most commentators have taken there to be a break between Davidson's earlier and later writings, concerning, in particular, the kind of semantic externalism advocated in each period, and the question whether possession of a language and thoughts requires actual interpretation by others rather than mere interpretability. I myself believe that the writings are continuous, taking seriously Davidson's frequent suggestion that radical interpretation is an instance of triangulation. In what follows, I give a sketch of the triangulation argument as I understand it. I then indicate how it builds on Davidson's writings on radical interpretation. I end by outlining the papers in this issue.

2.

The triangulation argument starts with the premise that what necessarily determines, at least in part, the contents of one's basic thoughts and utterances, such as "There goes a rabbit", is what, in one's environment, typically has caused similar thoughts and utterances (Davidson 1991, 201). This is the view, shared, in this general form, by many philosophers, which Davidson calls perceptual externalism. The crucial question, which Davidson stresses other externalists fail to answer, is, what are those typical causes? Davidson argues that the causes of a creature's utterances (I shall focus on utterances, but for Davidson what is true of utterances is also true of propositional thoughts) may in fact be doubly ambiguous, with respect to "distance" and with respect to "width" or "aspect" (Davidson 1999, 129–30). Thus, on the face of it, the causes of a creature's utterances could be, to begin with, "anything from the stimulation of [her] nerve endings to the original big bang" (Davidson 2001a, 4). Furthermore, the causes of a creature's utterances could be any chunk or aspect of the world causing the creature to respond in certain ways. Thus the cause of someone's uttering "Gavagai" could be a rabbit passing by, its fur, its speed, its loveliness, etc. Davidson argues, in effect, that without the speaker herself contributing to the

disambiguation of the causes, there is no way these could be disambiguated. The world itself cannot impose kinds or categories that are inescapably captured in the sounds produced in reaction to it, thereby endowing them with whatever meaning they have. And of course, if the causes of someone's utterances cannot be disambiguated—if the distinction between what is a similar cause and what seems to be a similar cause cannot be drawn—it follows, given perceptual externalism, that those utterances cannot mean anything; indeed, the distinction between correct and incorrect applications of expressions cannot be drawn.

Now, Davidson next argues, a solitary creature's contribution could not be such that the causes of her utterances are disambiguated. This creature could never be in a position to distinguish between what is a similar cause and what seems to her to be a similar cause, and hence could not draw an objective distinction between correct and incorrect responses, which is required for her expressions to be meaningful. On Davidson's account, only triangulating creatures could succeed in drawing the relevant distinctions. Davidson then introduces the idea of primitive triangulation, a kind of triangulation available even to non-linguistic creatures, which allows us to describe interlocutors as responding to common items of their environment they currently perceive. This type of triangulation, however, though for Davidson necessary for utterances to have determinate meanings, is not yet sufficient. Creatures participating in primitive triangulation do not yet have any concept of what it is they are reacting to. The problem may be seen in analogy to that faced by the solitary creature. Even if (contra Davidson) the solitaire is thought of as reacting in the same way to distal items in the world around her on different occasions, as noted above, she still needs to answer the question which particular aspects of the distal causes she is responding to. Similarly, creatures participating in primitive triangulation have to determine which causes are similar to which, and thus which responses count as correct. But this is something they can have done only, according to Davidson, if they have engaged in many *in situ* disputes about what is causing them to react in certain ways, and if they have settled at least some of these disputes. In the process, they are led to recognize that there is an objective distinction between what seems to be the case and what is the case, and this is what helps them to fix the causes that, in part, determine the meanings of their utterances. Thus, triangulating creatures can have fixed the causes of their utterances, and so be speaking meaningfully, only if they have engaged in linguistic triangulation.

According to Davidson, therefore, a full account of meaning cannot be reductive. Though simultaneous interactions with other people and the world they share are necessary for meaning determination and thus for possession of language and thoughts, there is no way to explicate, as Davidson often puts it, a person's first entry into language. Thus we cannot explain the transition between meaninglessness (thoughtlessness) and meaningfulness (thoughtfulness). The meanings of a speaker's utterances cannot be specified without using any semantic terms. The causal connections that partly determine these meanings have to be regarded as providing specific meanings in order to do the job. Thus we cannot specify the meanings of a speaker's utterances without saying, in effect, that that is what the speaker means by them. Neither, therefore, can the full explanation of what makes it possible for words to have meaning be reductive. A speaker means what she does by her words, and thus means anything at all, because she has used at least some of them in triangulating situations.

This is not the place to assess the triangulation argument.[2] The question I wish to address briefly is how the argument builds on the considerations of radical interpretation.

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[2]I have done so in Myers and Verheggen (2016, chap. 1).

3.

Davidson's original intent, when embarking on the radical interpretation thought-experiment, was to answer the question "what it is for words to mean what they do?" by reflecting on how to construct a theory of interpretation for a speaker, a theory that would yield the meaning of any utterance the speaker may produce. The idea was that reflecting on the construction of the theory would deliver everything that is "philosophically instructive" about meaning. Thus, to put it in a nutshell, reflecting on the construction of the semantic theory would deliver meta-semantic goods; indeed, reflecting on the epistemology of meaning, on how meanings can be attributed, would supply its metaphysics, telling us how meanings are constituted. Davidson's goal was to do this in a non-question-begging way, without assuming knowledge of the speaker's language and propositional attitudes (though on the assumption that meaning is essentially public), hence the inquiry into radical interpretation.

Armed with knowledge of her own language and concepts and how these are related to the world around her, and with the assumption that similar relations apply to the speaker, the interpreter, on the basis of connections she observed between the speaker's utterances and items of their shared environment, would eventually come up with a theory from which she could derive the truth-conditions of any sentence the speaker may utter. Davidson's goal was to build a theory in such a way that these truth-conditions would be meaning-giving. We need not bother here with the details of the construction (see Davidson 1973). The main point of connection with the triangulation argument, to put it briefly and bluntly, is this: if the interpreter is to solve the aspect problem, she will have to triangulate with the speaker, and she will have to do so linguistically. At the very least, it is hard to see how she could narrow down and isolate the causes of the speaker's utterances if she remained a perfectly passive observer. Granted, the predicament of the interpreter

may not be as drastic as that of the solitary person, as Davidson imagines her. After all, for the interpreter, there is no distance problem to be solved; she is *per force* taking the causes of the speaker's utterances to be distal items that currently cause her to react in certain ways. But there is definitely an aspect problem to be solved. And, if it is thought that the radical interpreter solves it by projecting her own meanings onto the utterances of the speaker, there is then the question what makes her think that she got them right. Moreover, there is the question, newly suggested by Davidson, how the interpreter solved the aspect problem for herself to begin with. The triangulation argument is supposed to demonstrate that she could not have solved it by herself.

The main point I want to make here is that, if the above remarks are on the right track, there is no real break between the writings on radical interpretation and those on triangulation. It is obvious that, if radical interpretation could not proceed without triangulation, then interpretability is not sufficient for possession of a language and thoughts, and the account of meaning to be derived from reflecting on radical interpretation cannot be reductive. But even if, to my mind *per impossibile*, the interpreter could somehow understand the speaker without interacting with her, then reflecting on triangulation makes it clear that the account of meaning derived from reflecting merely on radical interpretation is simply incomplete. In particular, such an account would not have paid sufficient attention to the point of view of the speaker herself, as the triangulating situations precisely demand. Now it may be that Davidson changed his mind on the question whether someone's possession of a language and thoughts requires actual interpretation by another rather than mere interpretability, but, if he did, he never said so.[3] On the contrary, he wrote, for instance, that "[l]earning a

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[3]He could have said so, for instance, when he introduced the Swampman thought-experiment where clearly the creature he imagines is interpretable,

first and learning a second language [in the absence of an interpreter or bilingual dictionary] . . . depend on similar mechanisms and similar cues" (Davidson 1998, 88). So why not take his views as continuous when what he says in his later writings is compatible with what he said earlier and can be seen to build upon it? Needless to say, the idea of compositionality Davidson emphasizes in his early work, which Peter Pagin focuses on in this issue, remains central to the answer to the question what it is for words to mean what they do. Indeed, Davidson never relinquished the claim that Tarski-style theories of truth, from which the truth-conditions of a speaker's utterances could be derived, "are adequate to powerful parts of natural languages" (1993, 83). But he came to realize that specifying these truth-conditions in such a way that they are meaning-giving is even more difficult than he initially thought.

Seeing Davidson's writings as continuous, we can then regard the triangulation argument as providing further support for the kind of semantic externalism Davidson was advocating: social in an interpersonal rather than in a communitarian sense. This is to say that, though someone must have triangulated linguistically with others in order to have a language and thoughts, she does not have to mean by her words what others mean by them.[4] Davidson made it clear very early on that his was a social view of meaning, since he always thought that the concept of belief or objectivity is needed to have a language and thoughts, and that interpersonal communication is needed to have that concept. What the triangulation argument, as I understand it, makes perspicuous is the connection between meaning-determination and possession of the concept of objectivity. If successful, it shows that these can only obtain in tandem. Finally, in so far as any conceivable determinant of meaning, either internal or external

but Davidson denies that Swampman has any language (Davidson 1987, 19).

[4]Whereas according to the communitarian view, broadly understood, one's having a language essentially depends on meaning by one's words what members of some community mean by them.

to the speaker, is ambiguous as long as it is not taken in a certain way, the triangulation argument establishes Davidson's early assumption that meaning is essentially public, since only publicly accessible items could be triangulated upon.

The above is but a sketch of what I take the triangulation argument to have accomplished. In the final section I briefly describe the papers of this issue, outlining how some of them take off from the idea of triangulation to advance our understanding of human thought, language, and action.

4.

Olivia Sultanescu and Claudine Verheggen argue that the triangulation argument can be used to provide an answer to the sceptic introduced by Saul Kripke almost four decades ago in *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Languages*. They see Kripke's sceptical problem as similar to the problem Davidson maintains that the perceptual externalist is confronted with. Just as Kripke is asking what it is about someone's mental and behavioural history that makes the utterances she produces meaningful, so Davidson is asking what it is about a someone's causal interactions with her environment that does this. Whereas Kripke argues that there are no facts of any kind, not even irreducible meaning facts, about an individual that constitute her meaning what she does by her expressions, and then proceeds to give an alternative explanation of what is involved in ascribing meaning to individuals, Davidson argues that an individual's causal interactions with her environment, when properly understood, can be seen to contribute to the constitution of the individual's meaning states, where these, though irreducible, are to be conceived of in a way different from Kripke's. Sultanescu and Verheggen identify two conditions that must be met by any acceptable account of meaning, namely, that it show how we can distinguish between correct and incorrect applications of expressions and how we can use them in an intelligent, rather than merely robotic, manner.

They argue that Davidson, unlike Kripke, succeeds in meeting these two conditions.

In the second article, Dorit Bar-On examines the relationship between language and thought. She argues against what she takes to be two extreme views on the topic, namely, Paul Grice's, according to which propositional thought is prior to language, and Davidson's, according to which there cannot be thought of, as she calls it, a genuine variety, without language. Neither view, she argues, can explain the natural origins of objective thought and meaningful language. She then develops an intermediate position, according to which thoughts of a genuine, though not propositional, kind are prior to propositional thoughts and language. These "brute" thoughts can be conveyed through a kind of non-linguistic "expressive" communication exhibited even by pre-linguistic children and languageless animals. Thus brute thoughts, which are "neither purely reactive nor fully reflective", can be expressed through "intermediate" triangulation, a kind of triangulation which is neither primitive nor linguistic. The kind of thoughts present in intermediate triangulation can thus be seen as foreshadowing the objective propositional thoughts present in linguistic triangulation. In effect, then, Bar-On extends a central idea of Davidson's to try to come to terms with the doubts concerning the continuity scepticism—the claim that "our mature thought and linguistic communication could have no intelligible natural history"—he himself was adamant could not be overcome.

Robert Myers takes up related issues in metaethics and philosophy of action. In a late paper ([Davidson 1995](#)), Davidson makes it clear that he means the triangulation argument to apply to normative thought and language, and that he understands this to imply that values and normative reasons must be "attitude-causing" properties of situations upon which people can triangulate. Unlike most naturalists, however, Davidson denies that the causal nature of these properties undermines their prescrip-

tive authority in any way. He thinks that even John McDowell's attempt to model normative properties on secondary qualities goes too far in that direction. This leaves us with two pressing questions: how is the prescriptive authority of normative properties to be understood, and how are we to understand the relation of these properties to basic physical properties? Davidson's answer to the first question, Myers argues, lies in his holism of the mental; normative properties are strongly prescriptive for pro-attitudes because pro-attitudes aim, as a system, to get normative matters right. Myers argues that Davidson's answer to the second question lies in his anomalous monism; although normative properties are not reducible to basic physical properties, they are nonetheless grounded in basic physical properties in the way all causal properties must be. Myers concludes that the resulting view, while in need of further development, points towards an attractive alternative both to revisionary naturalism and to non-naturalism.

Anomalous monism is also a focus of Karsten Stueber's contribution. Critics have long objected that this position, far from securing the explanatory autonomy of the mental, in fact renders it epiphenomenal. Stueber argues that Davidson would be on firmer ground here if he were to adopt an "interventionist" account of causation, according to which causal explanations imply the existence, not necessarily of strict laws at the level of basic physical properties, but only of "invariant generalizations" applicable within specific domains of application. As Stueber demonstrates, this could have the additional advantage of supplying a solution to the problem of deviant causal chains. Stueber goes on to argue that, in the case of mental explanations, the relevant domain of application is epistemically delineated by our capacity for reenactive empathy. As he notes, while Davidson does not much discuss the psychological capacities involved in interpretation and triangulation, one would suppose that the capacity for reenactive empathy must be chief among them. Thus

further development of the triangulation argument can be expected to dovetail nicely with these proposed amendments to Davidson's anomalous monism.

The collection ends with a paper by Peter Pagin. This paper is of special value to us, as it revisits an exchange Pagin and Davidson had at a conference in 1995.[5] The topic is one that was always at the core of Davidson's theorizing about meaning, namely, that a theory of meaning for a language must respect the principle of compositionality, according to which, as Pagin puts it, "the meaning of a complex expression is a function of the meanings of its parts and its mode of composition." Pagin argues that Davidson was right, surprising as it may sound, in maintaining that he never took the principle itself to be in need of justification. Rather, what Davidson was arguing for is the claim that "semantic *theories* must be compositional, in the sense of *showing* how the meanings of sentences depend on the meanings of their parts." This was meant to accommodate the fact that natural languages are learnable and that new sentences in a language can be produced and understood on the basis of mastery of a finite number of features of the language.

Acknowledgements

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[5]See Żegleń (1999) for a collection of papers from the conference, together with replies by Davidson.

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