INTERPRETATIONS AND CAUSES

New Perspectives on Donald Davidson's Philosophy

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RAFFAELLA DE ROSA

IS THERE A PROBLEM ABOUT DAVIDSON’S EXTERNALISM VIS-A-VIS HIS HOLISM?*

It’s not news to be told that Davidson is a holist. However, it may come as a surprise to some philosophers, especially those unfamiliar with Davidson’s recent anti-skepticism writings, that he combines holism with (some sort of) externalism. There are good prima facie reasons for thinking that holism and externalism are incompatible. I will argue as such in what follows, after which I will also argue that Davidson’s own brand of externalism differs in relevant ways from what has been generally called “externalism.” Once the distinctive sort of externalism Davidson endorses is identified, we will see how his holism and “externalism” can coexist. If successful, in addition to showing that Davidson’s position is consistent I hope to illuminate how his rejection of the Subject-Object dualism, his notion of “triangulation,” and his “realism” can all fit together.

I. HOLISM

Holism comes in various shapes and sizes. A confirmation holist, like Quine (and apparently Duhem), thinks that single hypotheses are never confirmed in isolation, rather whole theories are confirmed.1 Philosophers as diverse as Derrida, Putnam, Dennett, Eco and Davidson maintain that holistic constraints must be respected in devising interpretations of another. Neither of these holisms — confirmation or hermeneutical — by itself seems to imply anything metaphysical about the nature of meaning. One might be a confirmation or a hermeneutical holist without holding that the content of any sentence, thought, or hypothesis (i.e., representational states with content) is determined (or constituted) by the content of any other sentence, thought, or hypothesis respectively.

Meaning holism is itself a family of theses. Some meaning holists hold that no representational state can have a meaning (metaphysical “can”) unless many or indefinitely many or all other representational states have meaning. Passages can be
found in Davidson’s writings supporting each of these theses. I believe, though I cannot argue this here, that it is only the strongest thesis—the “all”—about meaning holism that Davidson endorses. Suffice it to say that each of the other theses sufficiently compromises meaning holism so as to prevent Davidson from securing some of his most famous philosophical theses, in particular, his anomalous monism and his anti-relativism.

So, for the purposes of this discussion, I will ascribe to Davidson the strong meaning holism thesis that the meaning (or content) of every single sentence (or belief) is metaphysically determined by the meaning (or content) of every other sentence (or belief) in a language (or system of thought). (If I can make my case that Davidson’s externalism is compatible with what I am calling strong meaning holism, obviously, I will have secured its compatibility with its weaker cousins.) Admittedly, these claims need clarification and amplification.

2. EXTERNALISM

Like holism, externalism is not an unitary thesis. The root idea behind externalism is that the meaning of a representation type is determined by some relationship between tokenings of that type and extralinguistic entities. There is rather large disagreement about the nature of the relationship, about the nature of the extralinguistic entities, and about the types of representations to which externalism applies. Some authors restrict the thesis to natural kind terms; others, like Burge and Davidson, are more generous, extending the thesis beyond these terms. Burge, like Putnam, holds that the thesis is a thesis about content determination for subential expressions. For Davidson, however, it is important that his externalism is about sentence types and not about terms (Davidson 1991a, 1988b, 1986b).

According to Davidson, the meaning of certain sentences, roughly what Quine calls “occasion sentences”, i.e., essentially sentences with indexical elements, is determined by actual causal relationships between events and tokens of these occasion sentences:

... in the simplest cases the events and objects that cause a belief also determine the content of that belief. (Davidson 1988, p. 195; my emphasis).

or

... causality plays an indispensable role in determining the content of what we say and believe. (Davidson 1983, p. 317; my emphasis).

These passages suggest that Davidson’s externalism would allow for a privileged metaphysical standpoint for the radical interpreter: since sentences with indexical elements would gain their content independently of the rest of the theory that the interpreter devises to understand the speaker, the interpreter can make of them a starting point for assigning content to the rest of the attitudinal system of the speaker. The problem is that as I interpret Davidson’s strong holism it involves the dismissal of such starting points, and so there seems to be a contradiction between his profession of both holism and externalism.

3. THE NATURE OF THE INCONSISTENCY BETWEEN HOLISM AND EXTERNALISM

Consider these three representative quotations from Davidson:

- If sentences depend for their meaning on their structure, and we understand the meaning of each item in the structure only as an abstraction from the totality of sentences in which it features, then we can give the meaning of any sentence (or word) only by giving the meaning of every sentence (and word) in the language. (Davidson 1967, p. 22; my emphasis).

- A belief is identified by its location in a pattern of beliefs; it is the pattern that determines the content of the belief, what the belief is about. (Davidson 1975, p. 168; my emphasis).

- The contents of our earliest learned and most basic sentences ("Mama", "Red") must be determined by what it is in the world that causes us to hold them true. It is here... that the ties between language and the world are established and that central constraints on meaning are fixed; and given the close connection between thought and language, analogous remarks go for the contents of the attitudes. (Davidson 1991a, p. 198-9; my emphasis).

The first two quotations typify Davidson’s meaning holism (though I recognize that each could also be interpreted as espousing a weaker holistic thesis about interpretation). According to this thesis, the pattern of sentences and beliefs embedded in a language determines the meaning and content of each sentence and belief of that language. The third quotation exemplifies Davidson’s externalism: it says that in the case of occasion sentences, their meaning and the content of the beliefs they express are determined by some sort of causal relation between tokens of these sentences/beliefs and extra-representational events in the world. In short, the third quotation reintroduces what the other two excluded. Externalism would readmit two theses that holism ruled out, namely:

(a) atomism, that is, the view according to which a belief or a sentence in a language can have the meaning or the content it has independently of any pattern of beliefs and sentences in which it is embedded; and

(b) (a radically non-epistemic) realism, that is, the view according to which there is a world totally independent of our beliefs such that it could reveal all our beliefs about the world false.1

Eyebrows might begin to rise here because, although it is obvious that holism entails the denial of atomism, why does holism entail any sort of “anti-realism”? If realism is true, then the world exists independently of how we conceptualize it, so
that it is possible for two people to disagree about its nature. On the one hand, there are people and their own beliefs about the world; and, on the other hand, there is the actual world. The latter functions as the final arbiter for the correctness of people's beliefs. However, if holism is true, it is not obviously possible for two people to disagree about anything. Because in order for there to be disagreement there must be some sentence p that one speaker accepts and the other denies. But, if there is such a sentence, then, of course there will be many inferences that one endorses and the other rejects. This divergence suffices, if strong holism is true, to establish that p differs in content, i.e., in intentionality, for these two speakers. If the content of a belief is determined by the chain of inferences related to it, and two speakers have two different chains of inferences to justify their divergent beliefs, neither can be said to be wrong. The notion of correctness would collapse on what we can reasonably hold as correct.

It is well known that Davidson refuses to label himself either "a realist" or "an idealist". No matter what he admits his holism commits him to, it certainly can't be a realism of form of (b) above. Perhaps Davidson's holism doesn't lead to idealism (as he himself claims), but certainly it is not obvious that (and how) his holism can be compatible with realism.*

Is there anything we can do to avoid attributing inconsistency to Davidson? We could make holism and externalism compatible by (1) weakening his holism, or (2) weakening his externalism, or (3) weakening both.

Solution (1) might work if Davidson's general philosophy were compatible with some sort of Dummettian moralism, that is, if we could admit of occasion sentences which would obtain their meaning simply by confrontation with specific events in the world—viz., independently of whatever other sentences there are in the language. Occasion sentences would be the place where language and the external non-linguistic world get in touch, independently of the pattern of sentences in which those simple sentences are embedded. This solution weakens holism, while maintaining externalism and involving both (a) and (b). (As I noted above, I believe that the holism Davidson endorses is the strongest one. If it weren't, I don't see how he could still defend his anti-relativism and his rejection of the analytic-synthetic distinction.)

Solution (3) suggests that we provide looser versions of both holism and externalism that somehow work together. The idea of a weaker externalism is prompted by several passages in Davidson's writings. He often says that in the most basic cases the content of a belief is partly determined by the events that cause that belief. The modifier "partly" makes a difference, because it would make the regular causes of a belief only one determinant of its content among others. Another important requirement Davidson imposes on correct content attribution is the rationality of the speaker. According to Davidson, we must interpret a speaker's basic sentences in a way that make them consistent with whatever interpretation we give to the rest of the sentences of her language—on pain of failing to identify the speaker as a rational agent (and, hence, as a speaker) altogether. This proposed interpretation of Davidson's externalism implies a looser version of his holism as well: insofar as it admits of sentences the meaning of which is partly determined by confrontations with an outside world and partly by their place in the pattern of sentences of the language. This solution avoids atomism, but still admits of (b), i.e., of realism. As we shall see presently, I am not completely unsympathetic with solution (3) because, in the end I shall myself propose a weaker version of Davidson's externalism. However, what I find wrong with solution (3) is the combination of a weaker form of externalism with a weaker form of holism.

Weakening holism readmits the possibility of there being something objective outside our language and belief system (the world, facts, sensory stimulations and so on) that determines the meaning (and the content) of at least some of our sentences (and beliefs)—and this is a possibility that Davidson's philosophy prohibits.

Solution (2) is what I shall defend, in particular, an interpretation of Davidson's externalism compatible with his strong holism. So, my aim is to show that Davidson's brand of externalism comprehends neither atomism nor realism (in the form of (b) above).

4. A COMPARISON OF DAVIDSON'S AND PUTNAM'S EXTERNALISM AS A FIRST EVIDENCE THAT DAVIDSON CANNOT BE AN EXTERNALIST IN ANY STANDARD SENSE **

Since Descartes, mental states have been considered something completely internal and subjective, something exclusively private. In another jargon, we say that the propositional objects of the mind have been considered to be both what gives contents to our thoughts and what the mind can know with unconditional certainty. If the content of a thought (and the meaning of a sentence) is determined by the object the mind is entertaining, and if this object—as inherently private—is the only thing the mind can be absolutely certain of, then skepticism about knowledge of the external world and of other minds seems to follow.

Externalism—viz., the view that the causal history of our beliefs provides a constitutive feature of their contents—challenges the above picture and can be traced back to, among others, Putnam 1975. On an externalist account of content, content properties are not completely internal and intrinsic but rather extrinsic and relational. The contents of one's propositional attitudes are partly determined by reference to objects (or properties or events) outside the mind. Causal relations to the world are constitutive of the contents of our minds. It is generally admitted, however, that externalism results in a new form of skepticism, viz., skepticism about the knowledge of our own minds (Davidson 1986c, p. 445). Skepticism is not defeated, but simply converted from skepticism about knowledge of the external world into skepticism about knowledge of our own minds. As Davidson puts it, according to externalism, the meanings of our sentences are "directed onto the
world, but we do not know what we believe" (Davidson 1986c, p. 446). In other words, it is compatible with externalism that one’s beliefs may be true although one may not know what they are. Consequently, externalism is seen as threatening the “first person authority” on which, on a Cartesian picture of the mind, all the rest of our knowledge depends. Putnam’s externalism, at least in Davidson’s eyes, exemplifies this difficulty.

Putnam’s famous Twin-Earth experiments (are intended to) show that an inhabitant of the Earth and an inhabitant of Twin-Earth can refer correctly to something of which each may be ignorant. Although when each utters the word “water” each refers correctly to different things (the inhabitant of the Earth refers to H₂O, the inhabitant of the Twin-Earth refers to XYZ), they might not know it. In fact, they share many beliefs about what they call “water,” namely, that it is liquid, transparent, the stuff we use to quench our thirst, and to sail on, and so on. So, strictly speaking, since the meaning of a word is partly determined by causal relations to the external world, a speaker might not know what she means by uttering “Water is wet.” Putnam’s conclusion that a speaker may not know what she thinks, according to Davidson 1986c (p. 451), depends on two assumptions (A1)-(A2), as follows:

(A1) If we identify thoughts (meanings) by reference to something outside the head, then they are not wholly in the head; and

(A2) if we consider fully known by the subject (in the way required by first person authority) only what is wholly in the head (i.e., narrow psychological states18), then,

(C) we cannot fully know what we think.

In other words, since the only states that have the property of being known in a special way by the subject who is in them are narrow psychological states, psychological states widely individuated (i.e., individuated by reference to external objects) cannot be fully known to the subject. A thought individuated in terms of a relation to something outside the mind, isn’t completely in the mind; and what isn’t completely in the mind can’t be known by it in the way first person authority demands, that is, in a fully and absolutely certain way.

However, according to Davidson, the reasoning exemplified by (A1)-(C) depends on “a faulty picture of the mind, a picture which those who have been attacking the subjective character of... psychological states [i.e., the supporters of externalism] share with those they attack” (Davidson 1986c, p. 453; my emphasis). According to a venerable philosophical tradition, the mind is a theater in which the conscious self watches a passing show (consisting of – given the disgrace into which sense data are fallen as possible candidates – “propositions, tokens of propositions, representations, or fragments of mental sense”) so that “whatever we know about the world depends on what we can glean from these inner mental objects”) which are directly before the mind (Davidson 1986c, p. 453-4). The dogma consists, according to Davidson, in conceiving of thinking as having some object before the mind’s eye – viz., in claiming that for someone to have an attitude is for someone to be in psychic touch with some object (Davidson 1988a, p. 9). Mutatis mutandis, as Davidson puts it in “The Myth of the Subjective”, what both the externalist and her opponent share is a dualism of the subjective and the objective resulting from the “concept of the mind with its private states and objects” (Davidson 1986b, p. 163) (alias, “the myth of the subjective”).

According to Davidson, (implicit) endorsement of this picture of the mind (underlying (A1)-(A2)) drives the externalist from the discovery of the essential intentionality of the mental (i.e., of the fact that external factors enter into the individuation of mental states) to the conclusion that belief’s contents are determined by external factors cannot be fully known. As Davidson puts it:

It is easy to see how the discovery that external facts enter into the individuation of states of mind distorts the picture I have been describing. For if it to be in a state of mind is for the mind to be in some relation like grasping to an object, then whatever helps determine what object it is must equally be grasped if the mind is to know what state it is in. This is particularly evident if an external object is an “ingredient” in the object before the mind. (Davidson 1986c, p. 454).

In conclusion, according to Davidson, standard externalism still relies on the myth of the subjective: although the externalist believes that the content of propositional attitudes is determined by factors outside the mind, the resulting skepticism about knowledge of our own minds reveals that she still thinks in terms of a Subject-Object dualism.19 It should be clear how Putnam’s externalism implies both atomism and a (radically non-epistemic) realism. It implies atomism since the meaning of each word is determined by a causal relation between tokens of that word and something in the outside world and, hence, at least some sentences (for example, “This is water”) can have the meaning they have independently of the rest of the sentences in the language,10 it implies (a radically non-epistemic) realism, since the kind of skepticism that externalism brings in is intelligible only on the assumption of a world that, independently of our minds, determines the content of our beliefs – viz., on the assumption that the “objective” is characterized as the dualistic counterpart of the “subjective”. In short, a radically non-epistemic realism explains the skepticism that externalism brings in.11

Since Davidson accepts the basic tenet of externalism — that is, the idea that the contents of our beliefs is fixed in part by reference to the circumstances in the world that caused those beliefs — but, at the same time, abandons its (alleged) assumptions — that is, the dualism between the objective and the subjective resulting from the concept of the mind as having its private objects —, the question that needs to be addressed is, What kind of externalism does Davidson profess?
5. DAVIDSON'S EXTERNALISM

Before establishing how Davidson's dismissal of the dualism between the subjective and the objective (or, mutatis mutandis, between scheme and content) affects his own "externalism", it is worth pointing out that it is the requirement of the learnability and interpretability of language that ultimately motivates his externalism. Namely, Davidson's view that the nature of meaning must be investigated from the perspective of a radical interpreter ultimately motivates Davidson's externalism. Davidson's dismissal of the myth of the subjective fits into this picture. Abandoning the idea that thinking is having private objects before the mind which function as "epistemic intermediaries between our beliefs and their objects in the world" is essentially related to Davidson's assumption that "meaning, and by its connection with meaning, belief also, are open to public determination" (Davidson 1983, pp. 312, 315). Davidson's reasoning seems to be as follows: if meaning and thought are social and public in nature (as the requirement of learnability and interpretability dictates), rather than essentially private and subjective (as the Cartesian picture of the mind dictates) - then externalism must be true; and, if externalism, known of the myth of the subjective, is true there are a priori reasons "in favor of the overall truthfulness of anyone's beliefs, including our own" (Davidson 1983, p. 314) - viz., there are a priori reasons against any kind of skepticism. In short, according to Davidson, an externalism about the myth of the subjective (and, hence, no longer vulnerable to any kind of skepticism) is an externalism that acknowledges that the nature of meaning and belief is essentially public and that the "identification of the objects of thought rests on a social basis" (Davidson 1991a, p. 201).

With this said, it is easy to see why externalism is true from a third person point of view. Externalism is true - viz., it is true that in the case of beliefs expressed by occasion sentences the objects that cause a belief also determine the content of that belief - because, once we adopt the point of view of a radical interpreter, it becomes constitutive of at least some beliefs that their content is given by what regularly causes that belief (Davidson 1986b, pp. 195-6). In other words, once we adopt the point of view of a radical interpreter, thoughts, in the most basic cases, are "necessarily about the sort of objects that cause them" (Davidson 1986b, p. 164-5). However, the real issue is whether externalism is also true from a first person (or solipsistic) point of view. The issue is whether one can consider the content of one's own beliefs as determined by some object located in the common space (as opposed to some phenomenal object) that regularly causes them. According to Davidson, externalism can be proven true from a first person point of view as follows: If we give up the idea that thinking is having an object before the mind's eye (and, hence, give up the idea of a subject who confronts her representations with what they represent) and acknowledge instead that thinking is a social activity from the beginning (viz., that the identification of the objects of thought requires a form of "triangulation" among oneself, a third person and the source of the stimulus), then the problem of how one can identify external objects as determining the content of one's own beliefs would not get off the ground.

In order to illustrate the notion of "triangulation" and, hence, the idea that the identification of the objects of thought rests on a social basis, Davidson asks us to consider a primitive learning situation (see, for example, Davidson 1988b, 1991a). In such situation, we observe that a child utters "Table" whenever a table is present or every time the teacher shows her a table. A problem arises about the location of the stimulus: is the child reacting to a pattern of stimulation of his nerve endings or directly to tables? Davidson's answer is that the child refers to an object in the intersubjective space in virtue of what he calls "triangulation". The apexes of the triangle are oneself, a third person similar to oneself and an object or event in the world. The convergence of the lines between me and the object, on the one side, and between a third person and the object, on the other side, renders that object real and not merely phenomenal. The agreement between a third person and myself on something we find similar, renders that thing objective, that is, something unique and perdurable. This is where, according to Davidson 1988b (pp. 196-7), social factors play a role, that is, in identifying the objects of thought. After illustrating the phenomenon of triangulation, Davidson remarks:

... the kind of triangulation I have described... is necessary if there is to be any answer at all to the question what is [a creature's] concepts are concepts of. If we consider a single creature by itself, its responses, no matter how complex, cannot show that it is reacting to, or thinking about, events a certain distance away rather than, say, on its skin. The solipsist's world can be any size; which is to say, it has no size. It is not a world.

The content of our basic beliefs is then determined by our interacting (and communicating) with others in a shared public world. The phenomenon of triangulation explains why the identification of the objects of thought rests on a social basis and is the trademark of Davidson's dismissal of the myth of the subjective. As Davidson puts it:

... I would introduce the social factor in a way that connects it directly with perceptual externalism, thus locating the role of society within the causal nexus that includes the interplay between persons and the rest of nature. (Davidson 1991a, p. 200; my emphasis).

Two related remarks about Davidson's account of externalism as presented so far are in order. First, the fact that the content of (at least, some of) our beliefs is determined by reference to some external object that regularly causes those beliefs depends on two factors: on the one hand, the interaction with the environment in which we learn our first sentences; and, on the other hand, the interaction with the others with whom we share a natural world. A question arises: is the natural world we have in common with others the reason for our agreement with others, or is it our "original" agreement with others what makes possible our sharing a natural world? Sharing a natural and public world with others seems to be what makes it possible
for us to know what a third person thinks; however, as Davidson's "triangulation" suggests, our interaction with others is what makes possible our reference to a publicly shared world. So, is the suggestion that intersubjectivity is the transcendental condition for the objectivity of thought, or is it only, so to speak, a consequence of our sharing an objective world?26 Davidson's view seems to be that the two conditions are mutually dependent, since we are never told which one comes conceptually first.

Secondly, Davidson's view that the phenomenon of "triangulation" and our original "community of minds" [explain, at least partly] the intrinsic veridicality of belief27 (or, mutatis mutandis, the view that the content of our basic beliefs is causally -- rather than epistemically -- connected to the world) should alert us that the fact that causality plays a crucial role in determining the content of what we say and believe does not rule out endorsing a radically non-epistemic (or metaphysical) realism.

So, if Putnam's externalism still relies on the Subject-Object dualism and Davidson rejects such dualism (and the faulty picture of the mind it implies), how should we interpret Davidson's externalism in a way that is compatible with a "radically revised view of the relation of the mind and the world"? (Davidson 1986b, p. 163). I suggest that we should look at Davidson's externalism within the framework of the requirements of learnability and interpretability he imposes on language. Within this framework, externalism is the result of the application of the principle of charity in our interpretation of others and comes down to something (as metaphysically innocuous as) the following claim: in the cases of sentences like "This is a table," the circumstances in which words are being learned or interpreted confer meaning on them; or, mutatis mutandis, to the claim that, in the most basic cases, the meaning of sentences is related to the usual causes of our use of such sentences. As Davidson puts it:

... as long as we adhere to the basic intuition that in the simplest cases words and thoughts refer to what causes them, it is clear that it cannot happen that most of our plausible beliefs about what exists in the world are false. The reason is that we do not first form concepts and then discover what they apply to; rather, in the basic cases the application determines the content of the belief. (Davidson 1991a, p. 195; my emphasis)

If we look at Davidson's externalism from this perspective, the incompatibility between strong meaning (and content) holism and his externalism dissolves. If we interpret Davidson's externalism as the claim that the meaning of sentences with indexicals (and the content to the beliefs expressed by them) is determined by both what circumstances in the external world regularly cause the utterance of such sentences (on pain of ignoring the rather trivial fact that the world we live in constrains what we think and say); and the relation in which such sentences stand with respect to the rest of the sentences in the language; then holism and externalism are prima facie compatible. In particular, under this reading, externalism need not be taken to be the claim that causal relation with the world are constitutive of content independently of the total assignment of content in a belief system -- viz., it does not have to be taken as an account of content alternative to content holism. Rather, causal relations are "constitutive" of content properties within, so to speak, the total assignments of content in a belief system. To mimic Davidson's own phrasing of a different issue, given a totally coherent assignment of content in a system of belief we can be externalists in all departments.

It may be objected at this point that there is no clear difference between the solution (3) I discussed above and my recommendation since, in the end, I acknowledge that external relations are "constitutive" of meaning (although partly and within the framework of the total assignment of meaning in a language). The difference between my suggestion and solution (3) above, though subtle, is essential. Solution (3), insofar as it admits of a confrontation with the external world as a partial constituent of meaning still relies on a dualistic view of the relation of the mind and the world and, hence, implies metaphysical realism (i.e., the view according to which the world could in principle reveal all our beliefs false). My solution instead accommodates Davidson's view that external causes are partial constituents of meaning with his rejection of the Subject-Object dualism -- viz., it accommodates Davidson's externalism with his view that the identification of the objects of thought rests on a social basis or, to put it differently, that the role of society is to be located within the causal nexus between the mind and the world (which I take to be the measure of his aversion to radically non-epistemic versions of realism). So, on the version of Davidson's externalism I am recommending, externalism is simply the claim that since our language and our system of beliefs are part of the natural world in which we live and which we share with others, we necessarily learn what some sentences mean in application to external events in the world. According to this picture, language and reality are no longer in a relation of confrontation. Language doesn't filter or fit or face reality, but learning a language is part of our learning how to live in the world. This is what I take to be the inevitable burden of Davidson's anti-realism.28 In short, I suggest that once we place Davidson's externalism within the framework of his account of how we learn our language in the context of the world in which we live and in virtue of communicating with our similars, the problem of the incompatibility between Davidson's holism and externalism dissolve since external and holistic constraints intertwine in our content attributions from the beginning.

6. CONCLUSION

If the reading of Davidson's externalism (as presented in sections 4 and 5) is correct, then Davidson's externalism is compatible with holism (contra prima facie reasons to the contrary) because Davidson's externalism does not imply either atomism or (a radically non-epistemic) realism.29 One might object against my interpretation of Davidson's externalism that it is so weak and peculiar that it is
doubtful whether we can still consider Davidson an externalist. The force of this reply depends on how broadly or narrowly we are prepared to define "externalism" but, as far as I can tell, Davidson is an externalist at least in the negative sense that he is not an internalist about content.

NOTES

1 I would like to thank William Child, Mary Frances Egan, Jerry Fodor, Ernest Lepore, and Brian Loar for comments on, and discussion of, various ancestors of this paper.

2 In so far as Fodor and Lepore argue that Davidson's externalism and holism are incompatible, my paper replies to them. See Fodor and Lepore 1992, ch. 3.5.

3 See Dubem 1962, and Quine 1951.

4 Several passages in Davidson's writings exemplify the first and second characterization of holism (I group them together because they make use of the same different degree). In any event, at least, two representative examples: "Someone who can interpret an utterance of the English sentence "Thel gun is loaded" must have many beliefs, and these beliefs must be much like the beliefs someone must have if he understands that the gun is loaded. The interpreter must, we may suppose, believe that a gun is a weapon, and that it is more or less an enduring physical object. There is probably no definite list of things that must be believed by someone who understands the sentence "The gun is loaded", but it is necessary that there be endless interconnected beliefs" (Davidson 1975, p. 158); and "There is no assigning belief to a person one by one on the basis of his verbal behavior, his choices, or other local signs no matter how plain and evident, for we make sense of particular beliefs only as they combine with other beliefs, with preferences, with intuitions, hopes, fears, expectations, and the rest. It is not merely, as with the measurement of length, that each case tests a theory and depends upon it, but that the content of a propositional attitude derives from its place in the pattern" (Davidson 1970, pp. 121). From the fact that the content of some or several beliefs is derived from its place in a certain pattern it does not follow that the content of every belief is determined in such a way. Such loose holism can still admit of special beliefs whose content is determined independently of that pattern. I take to be examples of Davidson's strong meaning holism all the passages in which he explicitly says that the content of every sentence is determined by the place it occupies in the pattern of sentences of that language. See the quotation from Davidson 1967 below and all the passages in which he links his holism to his anti-foundationalism and anti-realistism.

5 The "intuit" is the burden of Davidson's anti-empiricism and anti-scepticism. On this see Fodor and Lepore 1992, pp. 155-61.

6 Evidence that Davidson distinguishes his "realism" from this sort of realism can be found in several passages; see, for example, Davidson 1983, where he argues for a form of realism consistent with a correspondence theory of knowledge, or, mutatis mutandis, for a correspondence theory of truth that is consistent with a correspondence theory of truth: "My form of realism seems to be neither Hilary Putnam's internal realism nor his metaphysical realism. It is not internal realism because internal realism makes truth relative to a scheme, and this is an idea that I do not think is intelligible... But my realism is certainly not Putnam's metaphysical realism, for it is characterized by being "radically non-epistemic", which implies that all our best researched and established thoughts and theories may be false". This characterization of realism is also present in later writings by Davidson. In Davidson 1987 Davidson writes that he should have called his view on truth neither a correspondence (as he did in Davidson 1999) nor a correspondence theory (as he did in Davidson 1983). Instead, he claims that his stance on coherence was only a negative point in order to distance himself from any realist (or radically non-epistemic) conception of truth and that, therefore, shouldn't be taken as a positive thesis maintaining that reality and truth are "constructs of thought". In distancing himself from realism and idealism, he starts his own brand of "realism" as follows: "Truth emerges not as wholly detached from belief (as a correspondence theory would make it) nor as dependent on human methods and powers of discovery (as epistemic theories of truth would make it). What saves truth from being "radically non-epistemic" (in Putnam's words) is not that truth is epistemic but that belief, through its ties with meaning, is

intrinsically veridical." In Davidson 1999, he, in characterizing the realistic conception of truth as opposed to the epistemic one, writes: "Apparently opposed to these views is the intuitive idea that truth is entirely independent of our beliefs as it is sometimes put, our beliefs might be just as true as they are and yet reality - and the truth about reality - be very different. According to this intuition, truth is "radically non-epistemic" (so Putnam characterizes "transcendental realism"), or "evidence-transcendent" (to use Dummett's phrase for realism) (p. 294).

7 In a sense, as we shall see presently, Davidson's aversion to (6), i.e., to a radically non-epistemic realism (and the picture of the mind it involves) requires giving his externalism a different reading altogether: if externalism involves that kind of non-epistemic realism (and a certain picture of the mind), then the denial of the latter must involve a different reading of the former. Particularly interesting, if we want to understand what is left of realism in Davidson's still realistic attitude towards truth, is a passage from Davidson 1990, where Davidson, in commending on his own profession of a brand of realism in Davidson 1983, writes: "The terms "realism" and "correspondence" were ill-chosen because they suggest the positive endorsement of a position, or an assumption that there is a clear positive thesis to be adopted, whereas all I was excited to maintain, and all that my position actually entailed with respect to realism and truth, was the negative view that epistemic views are false... I simply made the mistake of assuming realism and epistemic theories were the only possible positions... I was concerned to reject the doctrine that either reality or truth depends directly on our epistemic powers. There is a point in such a rejection. But it is futile either to reject or to accept the slogan that the real and the true are 'independent of our beliefs' " (my emphasis, pp. 304-5). I take that Davidson's persistent 'realism' is to be seen, as we shall see presently, as resulting from Davidson's rejection of what traditional realism and idealism still share, i.e., what Davidson calls the "myth of the subjective".

8 For the sort of molecularism Dummett is endorsing and a comparison with Davidson's holism, see Dummett 1975 and Dummett 1978. The term "molecularism" is from Fodor and Lepore 1992.


10 In the sense in which, according to the so called "epistemological turn" due to Descartes, the subject becomes a focus of foundation of the rest of knowledge. The subject guarantees the objectivity of knowledge, because internal certainty becomes the sole criterion for truth.

11 For Putnam's definition of "narrow psychological state" see Putnam 1975, pp. 226-7.

12 That is, in terms of a representational conception of knowledge, according to which knowledge is a progression from the private recesses of the mind (the subjective) to the objective. See Davidson 1986b, pp. 163-9.

13 Putnam considers himself a meaning holist, but I don't see any significant connection between his profession of holism and Davidson's meaning and belief holism (see Putnam 1990, pp. 278-80). In that paper, for example, Putnam's own profession of meaning holism and defense (up to a point) of Quine's meaning holism is mainly a thesis against any kind of naive or sophisticated mentalism (as Putnam calls Fodor's mentalism); that is, it is mainly a thesis against postulating meanings as entities. It seems to be another way of saying that meanings aren't in the head, i.e., a re-phrasing of his "original" (at least, from the influential paper "The Meaning of "Meaning", Putnam 1975) anti-mentalism. In fact, Putnam doesn't follow Quine, still less Davidson, in their, respectively, doctrines of almost total and total indeterminacy of reference.

14 As an example of Davidson's opposition to the way in which, according to Putnam, the meaning of natural kind terms is determined consider this quotation from Davidson 1991a: "While I agree... that the usual causal of my use of a word determines what it means, I do not see why semantic of microstructure is necessarily the relevant similarity that determines the reference of my word "water"" (p. 156).

15 Needless to say, with regard to Putnam's realism, I have put Davidson 1975a primarily in mind. Since the late Seventies, Putnam has rejected his former realism and endorsed some form of anti-realism. For Putnam's most recent position on this issue, see Putnam 1994.

16 See Davidson 1986b, pp. 163-171; Davidson 1986a, pp. 454: "The solution in the case of mental states..., simpler, it is to get rid of the metaphor of objects before the mind"; and Davidson 1986a, pp. 6, 9, 17-4.

17 See Davidson 1986b, pp. 166, and his "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" (Davidson 1974).
Davidson is explicit about this. In Davidson 1986b, he writes: "Putnam's argument [in defense of externalism] depends on rather elaborate thought experiments.... But as far as I can see, the case can best be made by appealing directly to obvious facts about language learning and to facts about how we interpret words and languages with which we are unfamiliar" (p. 164). See also Davidson 1991a, p. 195; Davidson 1986c, p. 440; and Davidson 1983, p. 314.

That is, from the perspective of someone who does not know in advance either the meaning of the speaker's sentences or her propositional attitudes. For the relevant essays on radical interpretation, see Davidson 1984.

3. Needless to say, the assumptions of the intrinsic learnability and interpretability of language and, hence, of the public nature of meaning and thought are far from being untenable.

3. For Davidson's view that externalism provides an answer to the skeptic's see, for example, Davidson 1983. See also, Davidson 1987, where he writes that in Davidson 1983 he had put forward an approach to meaning and knowledge such that (if correct) it prevents skepticism from even getting off the ground.

4. See, for example, Davidson 1988b, p. 194.

5. The idea that there can't be thoughts in one mind unless there are other "thoughtful creatures with which the first mind shared a natural world" (Davidson 1988b, p. 193) is a leitmotif of Davidson's philosophy. See, for example, Davidson 1975, 1982.


7. Davidson 1991a, p. 200, my emphasis. The endorsement of such a statement is what distinguishes Davidson's externalism from Burge's "social externalism". Davidson disagrees with Burge that the linguistic habit of people around us determine what we say and think. For Davidson's arguments against Burge's social externalism see also Davidson 1986c.

8. This is the same sort of problem Kant had in defining the transcendental status of the categories in *Critique of Pure Reason*. Asking for the objectivity of the categories when they are the transcendental condition for the constitution of the object of our experience seems to be question begging. But this move has a clear sense in both Kant and Davidson. In fact, I take Kant's appeal to the given to secure the objectivity of the categories and Davidson's appeal to a natural world to explain our agreement on what we believe about the world to go in the same direction--against idealism.

9. Reference to the thesis of the intrinsic veridicality of belief can be found in Davidson 1983, Davidson 1987 and Davidson 1993. Such thesis is closely connected with Davidson's externalism and anti-skepticism. However, although it is conceived as a way out of the debate between realism and idealism, Davidson never dwells on it long enough to make it clear.

10. For this view on language see Davidson, "Introduction" to Davidson 1984, p. xvii; Davidson 1974, pp. 183-198; and Davidson 1986a, pp. 433-446. I take Davidson's rejection of language as something that can face or structure reality (in Davidson 1984), and his later statement that there is no such thing as a language (in Davidson 1986b) to be complementary and to amount to a revised picture of the relation between language (and mind) and world.

11. See Section 3 above.

REFERENCES


