REFERENCE

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ON THE WAY TO LANGUAGE

. . . for, as regards reason or sense, since it is the only thing that makes us men and distinguishes us from the beasts, I am inclined to believe that it exists whole and complete in each of us.

—Descartes, *Discourse on Method*

I

It seems indisputable that children learn words like "mother" and "hungry" (and so acquire the concepts *mother* and *hunger*) before words like "justice" and "digestion."[1] When it comes to the use of language and reason, children can do some, but not all, of the things adults can do. Progress comes with age.

These simple and meager data might suggest the following hypothesis about language and its acquisition. The ability to speak a language is a complex capacity, in the sense that it is made up of various component capacities. The structure and components of language—sentences, the logical relations between them, and the words of which the sentences are composed—are mirrored in the various sub-capacities that together constitute mastery of them. So, for example, the ability to speak a language would be partially constituted by the abilities to use its sentences, and those abilities, in turn, would involve the abilities to use various words. The process by which we come to acquire the complex ability matches the way in which the various sub-capacities make up the complex ability. We begin by learning simple words and logical relations and by gradually adding more difficult and complex elements we finally attain a grasp of the whole.

Such is, as Davidson caricatures it, the "building-block theory of language learning, echoing, chapter by dusty chapter, empiricist epistemology."[2] In fact,

as I described it, the theory is not especially empiricist. For even on an innatist view, the activation of some innate capacities could be held to depend partially on the activation of others. So the idea of being able to exercise a complex capacity through becoming able to exercise its various sub-capacities remains intact. Empiricism and innatism might disagree over whether the order in which the various abilities are accessed must match the evidential and analytical relations between the concepts and propositions those abilities reflect. But they can agree that we come to possess a complex capacity through the gradual accession (be it through learning or through activation of innate mechanisms) of various component capacities.

As attractive and uncontroversial as this highly general picture of language and its acquisition may seem, it appears to be inconsistent with Davidson's holism. It is a consequence of the view just sketched that at some point during its acquisition of language, a creature will possess some, but not all, of the capacities that constitute the ability to speak that language. According to Davidson's holism, however, the identity of sentences and words is at least partially constituted by their manifold relations to other sentences and words. If you change what surrounds a given item in the network, you change the identity of that item itself. Thus, Davidson writes:

> Because of the holistic character of the semantic aspect of language, it is wrong to suppose that a sentence (or word) belonging to a natural language would have the same meaning if its linguistic environment were radically impoverished. By the same token, there is no reason to suppose any element of pre-speech behavior, or of animal communication, has the same meaning as the utterance of a word or sentence in a developed language.[3]

On the view expressed here, we have no reason to think that the child's utterance of "mama" has the same meaning as does our (adult) utterance of the same word, or indeed, of any word. This in itself will seem implausible to many. But Davidson's troubles may be even more extreme. He goes on to say, shortly after the passage just quoted, that "until a language, or language-like structure, is found to have expressive powers very similar to the most highly developed languages, we are apparently at a loss to make clear sense of what its sentences, or utterances, mean, or are about."[4] Putting the matter in terms of our inability to make sense of, for instance, the 'language' of the young child, however, is deceptively concessive. For we know from other works that Davidson thinks that if we are at a loss to understand some behavior, that behavior cannot be linguistic behavior at all: "translatability into a familiar tongue [is] a criterion of languagehood."[5] Since translatability requires the shared acceptance of various norms, referred to collectively by Davidson as the Principle of Charity, and since the impoverished environment of the infant's utterance of "mama" does not allow the application of these norms,

the infant's noises are not translatable, and hence not part of a language at all.

So, Davidson's apparent problem is not just that the infant's 'words' do not mean the *same* as their homonyms in the adult language, but that they are actually meaningless. This conflicts both with (some of) our intuitions, and with the natural picture of the acquisition of language described at the beginning of this essay.

This problem is similar to the problem Davidson faces over the issue of animal thought and communication (as the long quotation above suggests), but there is one important difference. With animals, Davidson takes a hard line, denying them any thought or language. Many people object to this hard line as being counter-intuitive. But if Davidson takes the same hard line in the case of children, he not only faces the problem of counter-intuitiveness; he also fails to lay to rest the initial problem. For the untranslatable child grows into the translatable adult, and somewhere in the course of this change, we would either have to allow that the child had some, but not all, of the conceptual and linguistic resources of the adult, thus apparently giving up on holism after all; or we would have to say that the child makes the jump from not having a language to having one all in one go—a most implausible contention.[6]

Davidson himself, in recent work, can be caught saying things that seem to go against his earlier thorough-going holism and its consequences. For instance, he records that "my mother kept a record . . . of the language I spoke when I was two years old. It certainly was not the language spoken by others in the family. . . . But she claimed, rightly, that she understood me and I her."[7] Although Davidson's point here is that communication does not require sameness of language (a point on which he has long insisted), in making it he admits that as a two-year-old he spoke a language and was interpretable (and himself an interpreter), though I presume that the linguistic environment of his utterances was radically impoverished compared to that of his mother's. If this little vignette is to be taken as described, some revision of holism is required.[8]

In the sections that follow, I shall consider two approaches to resolving the problem of how Davidson should describe the acquisition of language, both of which can be gleaned from his writings. The first, discussed in section II, does not question holism as such. The second, dealt with in section III, derives from constraints placed on holism and so is associated with some potentially far-reaching modifications of Davidson's views.

II

In his early paper "Theories of Meaning and Learnable Languages," Davidson already recognized that the holism he was working towards would not allow

the simple building-block picture of language acquisition: "in so far as we take the 'organic' [i.e. holistic] character of language seriously, we cannot accurately describe the first steps towards its conquest as learning part of the language; rather it is a matter of partly learning."[9] We do not have to suppose that the conquest of language happens instantaneously in order to avoid the view, unacceptable to holism, that we learn it piece by piece. We may spend time learning, gradually better and better, the whole thing. "[T]here is no reason a child cannot master a complex system without it ever being accurate to say he has mastered part of it first."[10]

Thus stated, the suggestion is, as Davidson recognizes, insufficient, for it offers no positive way of characterizing the utterances of the pre-linguistic child.[11] Holism prevents us from saying that the child's utterance of "mama" has the same meaning as the adult's utterance of that word. It may even prevent us from saying that the child means anything, since meaning something requires that one is interpretable in accordance with the Principle of Charity. Yet we do not want to say that the child's utterance is totally meaningless. If it does not *mean* something, it does something else very like meaning. In other words, we want some form of proto-semantics for the child.

The image suggested by the idea of partly learning without learning a part is of a picture coming into sharper and sharper focus, becoming, as we might say, more and more determinate. So it is no surprise that Davidson has looked to the notion of indeterminacy of meaning to supply the kind of proto-semantics needed if this solution is to work. He writes:

> let us say small children and animals have beliefs and the rudiments of speech up to some system of transformations of ways of assigning propositions to their utterances or intentions. The fewer acceptable transformations, the more thought.[12]

Davidson's suggestion seems to be something like this. In interpreting children, we can allow ourselves greater freedom in redescribing their utterances as meaning something or other. Distinctions that can be made in the language of the interpreter become irrelevant for the purposes of assigning meanings to the utterances of young children. This is because the linguistic (and presumably behavioral) environment provided by children is not sufficiently complex to give those distinctions any empirical significance.

The following might provide a concrete example of what Davidson means. Quine, in discussing possible translations of the imaginary one-word sentence "Gavagai," suggests—along with "Rabbit"—"undetached rabbit parts," "Rabbiteth," and so on.[13] Gareth Evans has denied that some of Quine's alternatives are sustainable, given certain linguistic behavior that includes the use of compound sentences. For creatures, such as adult humans, with linguistic behavior of a certain degree of complexity, Quine has overstated the

range of acceptable transformations.[14] But where the creature being interpreted has the linguistic behavior of an infant, and does not produce compound sentences in such a way as to rule out these alternatives, there may be genuine indeterminacy of a greater degree than that which affects the interpretation of adults. It may, for instance, be indeterminate whether the child is referring to its mother, as an object, or noting the current instantiation of a pleasurable property. That Davidson has *something* like this in mind is suggested by his following the statement of his suggestion with the claim that "it is only when the machinery of quantification is present that questions of ontology have a clear application."[15]

In effect, Davidson's suggestion amounts to a relativization of the concepts of meaning, belief, and so on, to a particular degree of indeterminacy. Just as there can be varying degrees of indeterminacy, so there can be varying degrees of meaning, belief, and all the other intentional concepts. There is 'meaning' relative to a promiscuous "system of transformations of ways of assigning propositions" (this is how the child means something), and 'meaning' relative to more restrictive systems of transformations. In all of these cases, "we will continue to talk as if [the objects of our interpretation] have propositional attitudes [and therefore mean and believe things *simpliciter*]. We can do so with a good conscience if we keep track as best we can of the *level of significance* of such talk."[16]

It seems to me that this solution runs Davidson into difficulties in some related areas. In order to explain why, I must digress to give an account of Thomas Nagel's criticism of Davidson in *The View from Nowhere*. (This will also be important when we come to section III.) Nagel contrasts two views which he calls "realism" and "idealism." He defines "realism" as the view that "our grasp on the world is limited not only in respect of what we can know but also in respect of what we can conceive. In a very strong sense, the world extends beyond the reach of our minds." By contrast, "idealism" is the view that "what there is is what we can think about or conceive of."[17]

Nagel, rightly as it seems to me, describes Davidson as an idealist. This follows from the claim that translatability is a criterion of languagehood, together with the assumption that whatever there is can be conceived of by some rational creature or other.[18] Dropping this further assumption would yield a weaker form of idealism (which would still be in marked contrast to Nagel's realism), namely, that we can conceive of anything of which any other rational creature can conceive. Nothing hinges on the distinction between these two versions of idealism in what follows.

In arguing against idealism, Nagel exploits the possibility that translatability may sometimes be asymmetrical—that is, that one language may be translatable into another but not vice versa. This is a possibility that Davidson declined to discuss in "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" (and has

not discussed anywhere else).[19] Let us say that, where there is a pair of languages subject to an asymmetrical translatability relation, the language into which translation is possible is inclusive and the other language is non-inclusive. In such a case, speakers of the inclusive language would be able to think and talk about everything that the speakers of the non-inclusive language could. But speakers of the non-inclusive language would not have cognitive access to everything about which speakers of the inclusive language could think and speak. The possibility of languages related in this way would show that the idealist claim that what there is and what we can think about are co-extensive could be at best accidentally true.

Furthermore, if it could be shown that we adult humans might be speakers of a language that was non-inclusive in relation to some other language, then the idealist claim would be false; there would actually be things that we could not think and talk about. That is, we would be shown to be cognitively cut off from part of our world.[20]

What remains for Nagel, in his defense of realism, is to establish that there might be some language with respect to which our adult language is non-inclusive. One way to do this, hinted at but not explicitly developed by Nagel, would be to invoke the case of children. The language of children is non-inclusive with respect to adult language. That is, adults can successfully translate children, yet there are many aspects of adult language that children cannot understand. Now children become adults by some process of development. Would it not be arbitrary to insist that this process could not go any further than to produce normal adult conceptual abilities? In theory, could not the process continue, leading to creatures who stood to typical adults as those adults stand to typical children? If so, our adult language would be non-inclusive with respect to the language of these super-adults.

Davidson might attempt to respond to this challenge by making a distinction between two different types of untranslatability. Suppose that, at present, my language does not include the term "quark" though it does include a number of other terms from physics. In conversation with a physicist, she explains to me what a quark is, and thus enlarges my language and conceptual repertoire. Assuming there are no other significant differences between our idiolects, before the conversation my language was non-inclusive with respect to the physicist's. Yet the fact that, with the means at our common disposal, she was able to introduce the term "quark" to me suggests that the initial untranslatability of her language into mine was of a benign sort. Such untranslatability does not pose a threat to Davidsonian idealism since it is (more or less) easily overcome by enlarging the resources of the non-inclusive language, or the conceptual abilities of the speaker of that language. This is to be distinguished from malign untranslatability, which cannot be remedied by any amount of education.

This distinction is necessary, for one thing, to allow for the idea of scientific progress. Aristotle could certainly not translate quantum theory straight into ancient Greek. But there is nothing mysterious here: he would simply have to learn quantum theory and introduce new terms into his language to express the concepts he had learnt. Of course, the greater the historical distance, the longer the learning process. Perhaps Aristotle would have to learn Newtonian physics before he got on to quantum theory and so on. And I suppose it is possible that progress could reach so far that a single human lifetime would not, as a matter of fact, be long enough to learn everything one would have to learn to update oneself. Nonetheless, in principle, all such difficulties can be overcome. Or, to put it another way, the existence of such difficulties depends on factors extraneous to our mental and linguistic abilities as such.

Now, since children do, usually, learn what adults know, and in so doing become fully able to understand adult language, it might be argued that the untranslatability they experience as children of some parts of adult language must be of the benign sort. In the same way, the beings whose intellectual capacities were formed by the further progress of whatever development makes children into adults (from a cognitive point of view) must only be benignly untranslatable by adults. If this were so, the example would not pose a serious threat to Davidson's idealism.

Yet I think that Nagel would hold, with reason, that the case of children is not one of benign untranslatability. True, children do learn adult language, and in that sense overcome the original impediment to translation, but it is surely only by undergoing a development in their cognitive capacities that they are able to do this. They require, that is, some kind of constitutional transformation.[21] Freeze their capacities at the point at which they are still unable to translate adult language, and no amount of instruction will be effective. We thus have a distinction, parallel to that between benign and malign untranslatability, of learning given a certain cognitive hardware or constitutional capacity (the sort that Aristotle would have to do to learn about quantum mechanics) and learning that requires the improvement or development of cognitive hardware (the sort that children have to do to learn about quantum mechanics).

That Nagel wants to present a problem for Davidson by pointing to cases in which untranslatability can only be overcome by the development of mental constitution is evident. He seeks to establish that we might be speakers of a non-inclusive language with respect to some other beings by describing a possible population of people who are blind from birth and have a permanent mental age of nine. These are people who "*constitutionally* lack the capacity to conceive of some of the things that others [i.e. sighted adults] know about."[22] Insofar as they have a mental age of nine they cannot understand

such things as the general theory of relativity or Gödel's theorem; insofar as they are blind from birth they are unable to 'understand'—Nagel's word —colors. Just as people in these groups cannot conceive of everything of which we can conceive, so, Nagel argues, it seems arbitrary to deny that there could be others to whom we stood as congenitally blind nine-year-olds stand to us.[23]

In response to this challenge, Davidson might try to keep his idealism unchanged and show that both the untranslatability of color concepts by the congenitally blind, and that of the concepts involved in Gödel's theorem by those with a mental age of nine, are actually cases of benign untranslatability. I think this is not a promising strategy. A better response would be to retrench the idealism, by retrenching the holism that leads to it, not giving up the central core, but allowing it to accommodate such cases as these. I shall discuss this in the next section, since I think Davidson has, in fact, suggested some of the necessary modifications to his original position in a way that relates directly to the original problem of the acquisition of language and reason.

I return now to the point at which this digression into Nagel started. We were, it will be remembered, faced with Davidson's suggestion that we interpret children by assigning sentences of our language to describe their proto-speech acts, but that interpretation is subject to a greater degree of indeterminacy than is the interpretation of adults. There is thus a spectrum of concepts of belief and meaning, each relative to some degree of indeterminacy. Now, the danger in this suggestion is that if we allow different degrees of indeterminacy, we must either argue that the interpretation of adult humans is subject to the least degree of indeterminacy, or allow that there might be others who stand to us as we do to children. The second possibility seems to be tantamount to a concession that Nagel's realism is after all correct. Just as we can distinguish between positing the presence of the mother as an object and noting the instantiation of some property, while the infant who cries "mama" cannot, so there may be similar distinctions of which we are totally oblivious which are nonetheless part and parcel of some more intelligent creatures' conceptual repertoire. Their language would be only partially translatable by us, just as ours is only partially translatable by children.

If Davidson is to resist this option, he must embrace the idea that we adult humans exhibit the limit of determinacy. While there may be creatures, such as children, who are subject to more indeterminacy than we are, there could be none subject to less. It seems difficult to see how this might be argued for. In fact, Davidson's whole attitude to the existence and nature of indeterminacy is rather perplexing, and this makes it even more difficult to evaluate the proposal under discussion and to see how to argue for the claim that we are at the limit of determinacy.

Davidson's favorite analogy for indeterminacy, one which occurs in the context of his suggestion that interpretations of children are subject to more systems of transformations of ways of assigning propositions, is the 'indeterminacy' involved in being able to measure temperature in Fahrenheit or centigrade. Yet if this is all indeterminacy means, it is trivial, for even a believer in total determinacy could allow the possibility of, say, describing in either French or English what a subject means, and it is this, surely, that is analogous to the temperature example.[24] In addition, Quine characterizes indeterminacy as allowing different incompatible translations of a speaker,[25] but nothing we could correctly say in 'centigrade' about the temperature of an object could be *incompatible* with anything we could correctly say about it in 'Fahrenheit'.

For these reasons, I am inclined to think that Davidson is much less a believer in indeterminacy than he represents himself as being.[26] And if this is so, it seems to call into question his suggestion that children are subject to more of it than we are. He might suggest that, rather than a quantitative difference, there is a qualitative gap between children and adults. We are not subject to indeterminacy, they are. But in that case, we are back with the old problem of how the transition is effected. Alternatively, perhaps Davidson could show that although adults are subject to serious indeterminacy (not of the centigrade-Fahrenheit sort), there is some reason why no creature could be more determinate than we are. We need more clarification from Davidson on indeterminacy before we can decide.

III

The attempt mooted in the previous section to describe creatures on the way to language did not challenge the basic premise of holism. Some recent developments in Davidson's philosophy, however, do seem to me to provide some retrenchment of his original holism, and hence to provide some answer to the question of how to describe the acquisition of language and reason. In order to approach this issue, though, we must take a few steps back.

In the classic, early version of his holism (as expressed, for example, in "Radical Interpretation," "Psychology as Philosophy," "Belief and the Basis of Meaning," "Thought and Talk," etc.), Davidson emphasized how the identity of concepts and beliefs was determined by their relations to other concepts and beliefs. Thus, he questioned:

> how clear are we that the ancients . . . believed that the earth was flat? *This* earth? Well, this earth of ours is part of the solar system, a system partly identified by the fact that it is a gaggle of large, cool, solid bodies circling around a very large, hot

star. If someone believes *none* of this about the earth, is it certain that it is the earth that he is thinking about?[27]

Although Davidson immediately adds that a definite answer is not called for, the thrust of his papers from around that time was that such holistic connections served to identify propositional content. The passage just quoted was criticized in a way that prefigured the development of Davidson's position.[28] For Davidson began to put more and more weight, in the middle 1980s, on causation as a factor in the determination of content. For instance, if the sentence "the earth is flat," held true by the ancients, were causally connected, in the right way, to the earth, we might be certain that the ancients were referring to this earth, even if they believed none, or very few, of the other beliefs Davidson suggests would be necessary to make their sentence be about this earth.

These two factors, causal origin and logical relations to other beliefs, when transmuted into constraints on interpretation, constitute the two main subdivisions of the Principle of Charity. Davidson has recently referred to them as the Principles of Coherence and Correspondence: "The Principle of Coherence prompts the interpreter to discover a degree of logical consistency in the thought of the speaker; the Principle of Correspondence prompts the interpreter to take the speaker to be responding to the same features of the world that he (the interpreter) would be responding to under similar circumstances."[29]

It is clear why Davidson should have turned to causation. The reason does not lie so much in the anti-skeptical arguments it made possible, as in the thought that, however complicated are the logical relations between beliefs, they could never generate, by themselves, intentional content. At some point, we must look for a relation between a belief and the world, if the belief is to be about that world. Davidson wanted to show that "coherence yields correspondence."[30] But mere coherence can never yield correspondence. Relations among beliefs can never help one of those beliefs to reach outside the circle of beliefs and be about something else. If there is to be any intentional content, we must appeal, at some point, to factors other than holistic relations among beliefs.

There is, however, a problem in combining the Principles of Coherence and Correspondence, for the Principle of Coherence is holistic (it governs the relations among all beliefs) while the Principle of Correspondence is not (it governs the relations between individual beliefs and the world).[31] Take those ancients again. As we have just seen, the causal origins of their beliefs might lead us to attribute certain contents to them, even at the cost of making them come out mistaken or inconsistent. Conversely, the drive for consistency might

lead us to ignore the causal origins of certain beliefs in determining what they were about. It may be that where these two principles come into conflict, interpretation must take the form of balancing their various requirements. Alternatively, we might try to show that the principles do not potentially conflict because they have distinct spheres of application. This is a line that Davidson seems to have pursued in some of his recent work.[32]

Davidson often writes now in terms of a two-strata picture of language. The picture, moreover, is intimately tied to the situation of learning a first language. On this picture, the infant first learns a number of words by having its babbling reinforced and encouraged in various ways by a teacher. What guides the teacher in these confirmations is his or her perception of similarities in the environment plus the perception of similarities in the infant's responses to the environment. Davidson likens the teacher and infant to two points of a triangle, the third point being the intersection of the causal chains reaching from the environment to their perceptual systems. He uses this image to argue against the possibility of a private language, on the grounds that any objective reference requires first, a communal determination, a point where people's causal links with the environment intersect, and secondly, communication between the people, in order for them to know that they are corners of such a triangle. Without the triangulation, nothing would serve to establish that one point as opposed to another on the causal chain that led from the world to the speech-act was the object of reference. Without the knowledge that one was part of such a triangle, one could not have the concept of an independent object of reference.

The cogency of this anti-private-language argument is not our concern.[33] What is important for our present purposes is that at this first stage of language-learning, the only interpretative principle at work is the Principle of Correspondence. Single bits of verbal behavior are associated with what the teacher takes as their salient causes. Holistically-applicable rationality constraints—the Principle of Coherence—play no part. Thus, the first stratum of language and the process of its acquisition are molecular, not holistic. Davidson holds that it is with this first stratum "that the ties between language and the world are established and that central constraints on meaning are fixed."[34] In Davidson's writing, the phrase "constraints on meaning" is most likely to conjure up the notion of rationality constraints, the need in interpreting others to find them consistent and coherent. But it is clear that in this case, the constraints are those based on our mutual perceptions of our causal contact with the world. Rationality constraints are not at issue here.

Only when language has been securely anchored to the world in this way can we go on to extend it, introducing discourse about the past, the future, the unobservable, the abstract, and so on. Here is where interpretation must be

guided by considerations of overall rationality. Here is the proper sphere of operations of the Principle of Coherence.

Any arguments Davidson has for the necessary inter-translatability of languages which are founded on the necessity of principles of rationality will need to be re-evaluated in the light of this new theory. For the first stage of language does not require shared norms, but rather a shared world. If a creature came from an environment sufficiently different from ours, or if its perceptual access to the world were too different from ours, we now would have no reason to suppose that any linguistic activity must be translatable or interpretable by us. For this early part of language, translatability should not be a criterion of languagehood.

It is in this light that Davidson should respond to Nagel's claim that congenitally blind people could not translate our color talk, or, as Nagel puts it, could not 'understand' colors. Whether Nagel is right to insist that the blind could not form concepts of colors is much debated. But let us suppose he is right about this and see what the consequences are for Davidson's position. Not sharing with us the perception of the world through visual experiences, a society of such people might be totally at a loss to interpret that part of our language with which we refer to colors. This would not be a benign sort of untranslatability for them. Nothing we could teach them would give them the same concepts of colors that we have. Lacking the right sense organs, no amount of learning would help. Yet there is absolutely no reason why they should not recognize that the sighted are nonetheless using language when they talk about colors. Similarly, there is no reason why we should not be prepared to admit that other creatures whose means of perceiving the world are just too different from ours, might use language in ways that are untranslatable by us to refer to perceptual features of their environment.

The important point about color concepts is that they can be isolated from the rest of the fabric of concepts without unraveling the whole cloth. The broad network of holistically interrelated concepts does not embrace them; they are precisely such that they can be lopped off from the system of concepts while leaving the remainder unaffected.[35] Likewise, the other concepts learned at the first stage of language acquisition seem to have attribution conditions which do not link their possession constitutively to the possession of other concepts. The first stratum of language, the stratum at which language is anchored to the world, is molecular, not holistic.[36]

I think that this response would give Nagel his due in the color-concept case, while allowing Davidson to preserve the heart of his holism and the associated idealism. Our recognition that there may be creatures which have ways of experiencing the world of which we could never conceive does not have the same isolating bleakness that goes with the thought that much of reality itself could be inaccessible to us. As a matter of fact, though, I don't

think this is Davidson's response. In one place he writes: "Too much difference in what can be perceived will put limits on the possibility of communication *and thought*."[37] It is clear that too great a difference in perceptual abilities should render communication difficult or impossible, but why should Davidson think that it also puts limits on what can be thought? What argument does he have, parallel to the argument that certain rational norms are built in to the very notion of thought, to show that too great a difference from us with respect to perceptual capacities is inconsistent with thought? It seems to me that Davidson has gone further here than he is entitled to go.

Given enough of a shared world for this basic stratum to be commensurable, shared both in terms of its objective features and our ways of apprehending them, the rest of language, if Davidson's holism is correct, must be translatable. Any failures of translatability at this stage must be of the benign sort, easily cured by a crash course in alien theory.

As for the problem with which we started, the difficulty in describing the acquisition of language and reason, we could now say that there is no bar to describing the beginnings as the serial acquisition (or activation, if we want to be innatist) of the various skills associated with such basic concepts as mama, red, person, etc. Here the child proceeds bit by bit, piling one capacity on another. When it comes to the second stage, however, holism will require that the child does indeed master everything in one go. Not, of course, in the sense that it gets to know every concept or word at one time. Rather, it reaches a point suddenly at which everything becomes learnable. From here on, asymmetrical failures of translatability can be easily rectified with a bit (or in some cases, a lot) of explanation.

The challenge to idealism, based on the fact that adults are malignly untranslatable by children, but that children develop into adults, is thus diffused. For the way in which children develop into adults is not through an indefinitely extendible process that could, in theory, continue on to result in some super-adults who would be malignly untranslatable to us. It rather involves the crossing of a threshold which, once overstepped, reveals on its further side the whole world waiting to be grasped and understood.

The only trouble with this picture of language acquisition is that it may sound a little too much like the old dualism of observation versus theory for Davidson to be comfortable with. It may be that it does not fall foul of the various objections to dualism. After all, there is no reason to think that it relies on "a concept of the mind with its private states and objects."[38] And it is this conception of mind that is supposed to make the various dualisms untenable. Furthermore, Davidson does not unequivocally call for their rejection. He says that these dualisms "are being questioned in new ways or are being radically reworked. There is a good chance they will be abandoned, *at least in their present form*."[39] Is Davidson offering us a reworked form of the old dualism

of theory and observation? Whatever the answer to this question, I believe that the picture I have sketched is strongly suggested both by what Davidson writes and by the exigencies of his philosophy.[40]

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NOTES

1. Davidson holds that the ability to speak a language and the possession of reason necessarily imply each other, and I accept this here without argument. So the following pairs should be read as more or less inter-substitutable: (interpreted) sentence/proposition; (interpreted) word/concept; ability to speak a language/rationality.

2. "Theories of Meaning and Learnable Languages" in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 4.

3. "Introduction" in S. Harnad, H. Steklis and J. Lancaster, eds., *Origins and Evolution of Language and Speech*, vol. 280 of *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* (New York: New York Academy of Sciences, 1976), p. 18.

4. Ibid., p. 19.

5. "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" in *Inquiries,* p. 186.

6. This problem has been briefly urged by Patrick Suppes ("Davidson's Views on Psychology as a Science" in B. Vermazen and M. Hintikka, eds., *Essays on Davidson: Actions and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), p. 189; and, in a different context, by Michael Dummett in "What is a Theory of Meaning?" in S. Guttenplan, ed., *Mind and Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

7. "The Second Person" in P. French, T. E. Uehling, H. Wettstein, eds., *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 17 (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992): 266.

8. Davidson seems to realize that his holism opens up various new problems, which are the counterparts of old epistemological problems that his view does away with, and that some retrenchment of holism will be required to deal with the new problems. For instance, he notes that "error is hard to identify and explain if the holism that goes with a nonfoundational approach is not somehow checked" ("The Myth of the Subjective," in M. Krausz, ed., *Relativism: Interpretation and Confrontation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), pp. 166–67.

9. *Inquiries*, p. 7.

10. "Reply to Suppes" in *Essays on Davidson: Actions and Events*, p. 252.

11. "The trouble with this answer is that it leaves us not knowing how to describe the early stages, just as the general thesis that animals don't have beliefs leaves us without our usual useful way of explaining and describing their behaviour" (ibid.).

12. Ibid.

13. W. V. Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1960), ch. 2.

14. Gareth Evans, "Identity and Predication," *Journal of Philosophy* 72 (1975): 343–63.

15. Davidson, "Reply to Suppes," p. 252.

16. Ibid., (italics mine).

17. *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 90.

18. It might be wondered what reason Davidson has for holding this further assumption; *that* he holds it is clear. In his argument against skepticism he introduces the notion of an omniscient creature. See, for instance, "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge" in E. LePore, ed., *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986). As long as such a creature is in some sense possible, this premise of Davidson's idealism seems acceptable. For some discussion of this device see my *Donald Davidson* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), pp. 141–42, 164–68.

19. "In what follows I consider . . . complete, and partial, failures of translatability . . . (I shall neglect possible asymmetries.)" ("On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," p. 185.)

20. This thought—the denial of which forms, I think, a large part of the unconscious fuel for Davidson's work—is actually eagerly embraced and argued for by a number of philosophers. See, in addition to the work of Nagel, Noam Chomsky, *Reflections on Language* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975); Jerry Fodor, *The Modularity of Mind* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1983); Colin McGinn, *The Problem of Consciousness* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991).

21. I put the point so as to be neutral on questions of ontology. The constitution that must be transformed might be that of the neural hardware in the brain, or it might be that of some immaterial substance.

22. *The View from Nowhere*, p. 95; (italics mine).

23. In this context, one should also consult his paper "What is it like to be a Bat?" in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

24. This seems to be consistent with Davidson's own interpretation of the analogy: "It should not bother us that the Frenchman and I use different utterances to characterize the same state of Paul's mind: this is like measuring weight in carats or ounces" ("What is Present to the Mind?" in Enrique Villanueva, ed., *Consciousness* [Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview Publishing Company, 1991], p. 210). Yet following on from this passage, Davidson uses the same analogy to apply to differences in the way a *single* speaker might characterize someone's beliefs. Does Davidson think that the difference between the Frenchman and me when he uses French and I use English to describe someone's beliefs is of the same sort as the difference between interpreting someone as believing there is a rabbit there, and believing that there are undetached rabbit parts there? Or is his use of the analogy imprecise?

25. *Word and Object*, p. 27.

26. Ian Hacking argues that indeterminacy is actually incompatible with Davidson's semantics. See his *Why Does Language Matter to Philosophy?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 150–56.

27. "Thought and Talk" in *Inquiries*, p. 168.

28. By Colin McGinn in "Charity, Interpretation, and Belief," *Journal of Philosophy* 74 (1977): 521–35.

29. "Three Varieties of Knowledge" in A. Phillips Griffiths, ed., *A. J. Ayer: Memorial Essays. Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 30 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 158.

30. "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge," p. 307.

31. Essentially the same tension surfaced in the conflict between the coherence and correspondence theories of truth in such papers as "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge" (see my *Donald Davidson*, pp. 134–43). Although Davidson has now renounced any claim to either theory of truth (see "The Structure and Content of Truth" in *Journal of Philosophy* 87 (1990): 279–328, the reappearance of the two words "coherence" and "correspondence" in the descriptions of the principles, after their banishment from descriptions of theories of truth, is evidence that Davidson's 'dissolution' of the problem of truth may not be completely satisfactory.

32. For example, "Three Varieties of Knowledge," "The Second Person" and "Epistemology Externalized" in *Dialectica* 45 (1991).

33. For a good discussion of this argument see William Child, *Causality, Interpretation and the Mind* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), pp. 19–23.

34. "Epistemology Externalized," p. 198. See also "The Myth of the Subjective" where he says: "Of course very many words and sentences are not learned [by conditioning in the presence of the things they are about], but it is those that are that anchor language to the world" (p. 164).

35. Cf. Davidson, "Introduction," p. 18.

36. It is possible, however, that there are local eddies of holism in these molecular waters. Perhaps one cannot learn a single color concept at a time, but must latch onto a whole color spectrum. But even if this is so, the holism that binds together the group of color concepts is merely local, and does not extend beyond these concepts, constitutively tying them to other concepts.

37. "Turing's Test," in K. A. Mohyeldin Said, W. H. Newton-Smith, R. Viale, K. V. Wilkes, eds., *Modeling the Mind* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 8 (italics mine). Actually, Davidson follows this with the claim that "the ability to perceive things does not depend on the details of the sense organs (the blind can perceive the same things the sighted perceive)." This rather suggests that Davidson would like to undercut Nagel's case by denying, what I have allowed for the sake of argument, that the congenitally blind could not understand colors.

38. "The Myth of the Subjective," p. 163. Of course, my suggestion of how Davidson might deal with Nagel's color-concept case might rely on such a conception of mind (and I suspect that that is one of the reasons Davidson would not go along with it). But that should not affect the general idea that the example was meant to illustrate.

39. Ibid., (italics mine).

40. I would like to thank Tyler Burge and Michael Jacovides for reading several drafts of this paper and commenting on them extensively.

REPLY TO SIMON J. EVNINE

The untranslatable child grows into the translatable adult, says Simon Evnine, and he thinks this is a problem for me. For either the child must, at some intermediate point, have some, but not all, of "the conceptual and linguistic resources of the adult", in which case my claims about the holism of the mental are seriously wrong, or the child "makes the jump at one go", which is absurd. He is right that I think there is a serious problem in knowing how to describe the states of mind of a child who is partly into language and the kind of thought that goes with it, and that there is a problem how to understand the utterances of such a child. Evnine knows I have claimed we can get around this particular difficulty by distinguishing between saying the child learns the language part by part (which would offend my holistic leanings) and saying the child, at various stages, has partly learned the whole. Evnine's own suggestions for ways of describing language acquisition seem in accord with this idea. He thinks, along with many who study the matter, that the ability to speak a language is made up of various "component capacities" and "sub-capacities", and these capacities are sequentially activated. I have no reason to deny it. In itself, this tells us nothing about how to translate the sounds the child utters, or how to describe its thought processes. Since Evnine says very little more concerning how to think about the problem that puzzles me, let me turn to what he considers my strongly counterintuitive position.

We all attribute all sorts of sharply individuated propositional attitudes to animals and infants, and fond parents go to lengths to make sage sense of their children's cooing. If we all do it, how can we be misusing the concepts we are applying? I suppose we recognize some limits: we don't really imagine that a parrot means anything by the sounds it makes, even though it utters those sounds in situations in which it would be appropriate for a language speaker to mean them. Still, it is hard to explain a great many things even quite simple animals do without assigning thoughts and intentions to them. Something much like thinking is going on, and we often have no alternative explanation available of what they do.