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DAVIDSON'S

HERMENEUTICS: LANGUAGE, PLACE, WORLD

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HERMENEUTICS: LANGUAGE, PLACE, WORLD

LA HERMENÉUTICA DE DAVIDSON: LENGUAJE, LUGAR, MUNDO

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Donald Davidson's philosophy from a hermeneutic perspective, exploring its points of convergence with the thought of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Martin Heidegger. Taking Davidson's, A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs as its starting point, the study examines his controversial claim that there is no such thing as a language, interpreting it not as an isolated thesis concerning linguistic competence but as an expression of a broader conception of meaning, understanding, and our relationship with the world. Adopting a qualitative, hermeneutic, and argumentative approach to philosophical inquiry, the study examines Davidson's writings on language, interpretation, conceptual schemes, objectivity, and triangulation in relation to central aspects of Gadamer's and Heidegger's philosophies. The analysis reveals a fundamental continuity between Davidson's rejection of languages conceived as fixed systems of rules, his critique of conceptual schemes, and his account of triangulation. The latter integrates subjective, intersubjective, and objective dimensions within a relational, dynamic, and situated structure that cannot be reduced to a purely epistemological function. The study argues that understanding emerges through the interaction among individuals, others, and the world, and that the situated nature of thought constitutes a condition of possibility for knowledge rather than a limitation to be overcome. From this perspective, the philosophical affinities among Davidson, Gadamer, and Heidegger invite a reconsideration of the traditional boundaries between analytic philosophy and hermeneutics. The study concludes that philosophical inquiry itself can be understood as a form of triangulation through which different perspectives interact and mutually enrich one another.

Keywords:

Hermeneutics, language, triangulation, understanding, analytic philosophy.

RESUMEN

El artículo examina la filosofía de Donald Davidson desde una perspectiva hermenéutica y explora sus puntos de convergencia con el pensamiento de Hans-Georg Gadamer y Martin Heidegger. Tomando como punto de partida la obra A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs de Davidson, el estudio analiza su controvertida afirmación de que no existe algo como un lenguaje, interpretándola no como una tesis aislada sobre la competencia lingüística, sino como expresión de una concepción más amplia del significado, la comprensión y nuestra relación con el mundo. Mediante un enfoque filosófico de carácter cualitativo, hermenéutico y argumentativo, se examinan los escritos de Davidson sobre el lenguaje, la interpretación, los esquemas conceptuales, la objetividad y la triangulación, en relación con aspectos centrales de las filosofías de Gadamer y Heidegger. El análisis revela una continuidad fundamental entre el rechazo davidsoniano de los lenguajes concebidos como sistemas fijos de reglas, su crítica de los esquemas conceptuales y su concepción de la triangulación. Esta última integra las dimensiones subjetiva, intersubjetiva y objetiva dentro de una estructura relacional, dinámica y situada que no puede reducirse a una función exclusivamente epistemológica. El estudio sostiene que la comprensión surge de la interacción entre los sujetos, los otros y el mundo, y que el carácter situado del pensamiento constituye una condición de posibilidad del conocimiento, antes que una limitación que deba superarse. Desde esta perspectiva, las afinidades filosóficas entre Davidson, Gadamer y Heidegger invitan a reconsiderar las fronteras tradicionales entre la filosofía analítica y la hermenéutica. El estudio concluye que la propia actividad filosófica puede comprenderse como una forma de triangulación mediante la cual diferentes perspectivas interactúan y se enriquecen recíprocamente.

Palabras clave:

Hermenéutica, lenguaje, triangulación, comprensión, filosofía analítica.

INTRODUCTION

For many years now, I have been arguing, both to Davidson himself when he was alive and to others, that there is a closeness of ideas between Davidson and Hans-Georg Gadamer—and thus also Heidegger—that justifies thinking of Davidson as a "hermeneutic" thinker, though just what this means is something I will return to later. That philosophical closeness was not, however, something that either Gadamer or Davidson was particularly adept at articulating, despite their cordial personal relationship. The two seem to have had a sense of proximity while at the same time often appearing to misread one another's work. What I want to do here is take up this issue of Davidson's "hermeneutics" in relation to "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs" and suggest that Davidson's claim that there is no such thing as a language has to be read as itself a claim that can be seen as capturing a certain hermeneutic orientation.

Before going any further, I should acknowledge that there is a literature, though not an extensive one, that has developed around the relation between Davidson and hermeneutic thinking, primarily in relation to Gadamer. The discussion has a relatively long history, extending back at least to Ramberg's ***Donald Davidson's Philosophy of Language: An Introduction*** (1989) and my own ***Donald Davidson and the Mirror of Meaning*** (Malpas, 2026). Subsequent discussion has tended to cluster around a relatively small number of edited collections, including ***The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*** (Hahn, 1997), ***Dialogues with Davidson: Acting, Interpreting, Understanding*** (Malpas, 2011), and ***The Gadamerian Mind*** (George & Van der Heiden, 2021), as well as more sustained individual treatments such as Puolakka's ***Relativism and Intentionalism in Interpretation: Davidson, Hermeneutics, and Pragmatism*** (2011) and Keane's (2021) examination of Gadamer, Rorty, and Davidson.

I have contributed to that literature, of course, although not for some years. While I thought, for a time, that there might be an expansion of attempts to explore possible connections in this regard, the literature seems to have contracted rather than expanded. There seems to be little interest in such connections from the analytic side, where the focus on Davidson's work also seems to have narrowed. From the hermeneutic perspective, when Davidson is discussed, it is more often with the aim of demonstrating the extent to which his position supposedly diverges from that of Gadamer, frequently accompanied by arguments concerning the supposed inadequacies of Davidson's position. I do not engage critically and directly with that literature here, and that may well be seen as a shortcoming on my part, but my aim in this essay is the largely positive one of trying to sketch out the reasons why I think that there remain important convergences between Davidson and Gadamer despite their differences. In part, I also want to reaffirm a sense of the broader rapprochement between analytic thought, as expressed in Davidson's work, and hermeneutics that once appeared, if all too briefly, to be possible. That may make this discussion seem too deeply rooted in the past, and there is some truth to that. But it seems to me a past worth revisiting and one that deserves not to be entirely forgotten.

From the very start, I want to be clear about what I understand by the term "hermeneutics," especially when it is used in connection with Gadamer. This is particularly important because Gadamerian hermeneutics differs significantly from the forms of hermeneutics associated with figures such as Schleiermacher and Dilthey. It also differs from broader conceptions of hermeneutics common in fields such as literary studies, where the term may encompass figures such as Kleist, Nietzsche, and Derrida, even though Nietzsche and Derrida also appear within discussions of philosophical hermeneutics, albeit less centrally. Moreover, the conception of the hermeneutical that I take to be central to Gadamer's thinking seems to me to be poorly understood by many thinkers within the English-language tradition. If anything, it is a pre-Gadamerian conception of hermeneutics, and with it of language and understanding, that tends to dominate many English-language appropriations of hermeneutics even when Gadamer's name is explicitly invoked, and here I have especially in mind the work of Charles Taylor.

Placing himself in a critical relation to much of the preceding hermeneutical tradition, Gadamer attempts to rethink hermeneutics in a way that follows from Heidegger's own radical appropriation of hermeneutics within ontology. Central to Gadamer's approach is his rejection of one of the main ideas of what he terms "romantic" or "subjective" hermeneutics, namely, the idea that understanding is primarily determined by the self-understanding of the subject. Within the history of hermeneutics, especially nineteenth-century hermeneutics, this meant that understanding a text, artefact, or utterance was essentially a matter of somehow recapturing the original experience, thought, or intention with which that text, artefact, or utterance was associated and that was expressed by it.

In contrast, understanding, on the Gadamerian account, is not a matter of gaining access to some inner subjective realm, but rather of participating in a conversational engagement—***Gespräch***—that encompasses speaker, interpreter, and subject matter. Similarly, the being of language, for Gadamer, is itself understood as given in conversation or dialogue, and thus as belonging to the engagement between speakers in relation to something of concern to them rather than as some internalised calculus. Thus, language, Gadamer tells us, is conversation—***Sprache ist Gespräch***. This shift away from a subjectivist construal of understanding and language is grounded in Heidegger's thinking, even though it is Gadamer who makes explicit its significance for hermeneutics. Here, the rejection of subjectivism is itself closely tied to the

insistence on the dynamic and indeterminate character of understanding—an idea captured by Gadamer in the very idea of conversation or dialogue itself, and also in the notion of play, ***Spiel***. The latter is a notion that Gadamer immediately hears as being at work in the Wittgensteinian notion of the language game, ***Sprachspiel***, although with an emphasis different from that usually associated with the notion in English-speaking philosophical circles.

It is worth noting that Gadamer's refusal of any subjectivist grounding of understanding applies no less to the understanding of philosophies and philosophers than it does to any other area of inquiry. In reading the work of another thinker, we are not trying somehow to reconstruct their thinking as they themselves thought it—whatever that might mean—but rather to engage with the work before us in a way that allows a common subject matter to emerge. We contribute as much to that engagement as does the thinker whose work it is, and, in some cases, we may find that we have to override some of a thinker's own self-interpretations when these prove inadequate to the character of their thought.

Heidegger's "violent" readings of thinkers such as Kant might be thought to constitute an extreme version of this phenomenon, but what is at work in Heidegger is something that ought to be familiar to anyone who has genuinely tried to think through the work of another. One is constantly faced with an essential indeterminacy as to whether the thinking that results from one's own "thoughtful engagement" with another—***denkendes Gespräch***, to use Heidegger's phrase—does indeed belong to the thinker with whom one is concerned or to oneself. The truth is that it belongs wholly to neither.

This becomes all the more evident when one reflects on the indeterminacy that affects even the attempt to engage with one's own thinking about another thinker. Here, too, there is an ineliminable indeterminacy, one that is reflected in Davidson's work in his very particular and restricted use of the idea of first-person authority. It is an indeterminacy that derives, whether in one's understanding of oneself or of another, from the essentially dynamic and dialogical character of understanding and interpretation, as well as from the impossibility of appealing to anything that might stand outside such interpretive indeterminacy.

Moreover, this is no mere epistemological claim. It is not simply that we lack access to the subjective intentions of a thinker that underpin their thought, since those subjective intentions themselves arise only within the interpretive context that also gives rise to their indeterminacy.

Accordingly, the objective of this article is to examine the hermeneutic dimensions of Davidson's philosophy by exploring its convergences with Gadamer and Heidegger, particularly in relation to language, understanding, interpretation, and the dialogical character of meaning, and thereby to show how Davidson's rejection of language as a determinate system can be understood as expressing a fundamentally hermeneutic orientation.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative, philosophical, and hermeneutic approach based on the critical interpretation and conceptual analysis of selected works by Donald Davidson, with particular attention to ***A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs*** and its relation to other central texts concerning language, interpretation, objectivity, and triangulation. Rather than treating Davidson's arguments as isolated contributions to analytic philosophy, the analysis examines their continuity within the broader development of his thought and considers their possible convergence with the hermeneutic traditions associated especially with Hans-Georg Gadamer and Martin Heidegger.

The primary materials consist of Davidson's philosophical writings on language, meaning, interpretation, conceptual schemes, triangulation, subjectivity, intersubjectivity, and objectivity. Particular emphasis is placed on the relationship between his rejection of language as a determinate system of shared rules or conventions and his broader account of understanding as arising through the interaction among speakers, interpreters, and the world. The analysis also draws on relevant writings by Gadamer and Heidegger, together with selected secondary literature concerning Davidson's philosophy and its relationship to hermeneutics. This textual corpus is approached comparatively, not for the purpose of establishing direct doctrinal equivalence among the philosophers considered, but to identify conceptual affinities, divergences, and structural correspondences between their accounts of language and understanding. This orientation is consistent with the article's examination of Davidsonian triangulation as involving the subjective, intersubjective, and objective dimensions of understanding.

The analytical procedure was organized around several interconnected conceptual problems: the critique of subjectivist accounts of understanding; the rejection of language as a fixed or independently constituted structure; the dynamic and relational character of interpretation; the role of triangulation in the constitution of meaning and objectivity; and the situated or placed character of understanding. Davidson's arguments were first reconstructed within their own philosophical context and then interpreted in relation to corresponding themes in Gadamerian and Heideggerian hermeneutics. Special attention was given to conceptual continuity between Davidson's earlier and later writings, since the argument developed here understands his later formulations not as a complete departure from his earlier philosophy but as a development and clarification of themes already present within it.

The method is therefore interpretive and argumentative rather than empirical. No experimental procedures, statistical analyses, or human participants were involved.

The validity of the analysis rests on textual coherence, conceptual reconstruction, comparative interpretation, and the capacity of the proposed reading to account for connections among Davidson's treatments of language, triangulation, objectivity, and situated understanding. The hermeneutic comparison is used as an analytical strategy through which Davidson's philosophy can be situated within a broader philosophical landscape without reducing the differences between analytic and hermeneutic traditions. In this sense, the method itself reflects the article's central claim that philosophical understanding emerges relationally and contextually through the positioning of ideas in relation to other ideas, thinkers, and interpretive situations. This methodological orientation corresponds closely to the manuscript's concluding characterization of its own procedure as a form of philosophical triangulation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

So how, you might ask, is this relevant to the focus I announced at the start of this discussion, namely, Davidson's "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs"? For at least two reasons, both of which should already be evident from the comments just made. First, because what I want to suggest is that Davidson's position, as set out in that essay, converges with Gadamer's own rethought approach to hermeneutics—an approach that can itself be read as containing a rejection of what might be seen as a subjectivist understanding of language, a rejection also present in Heidegger. Second, because the question of how to read "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs" (Davidson, 1986) inevitably gives rise to questions concerning the nature of the interpretive engagement at issue.

This is all the more so when one is involved not only in a reading of Davidson that brings him into proximity with thinkers such as Gadamer, but also in a consideration of the continuity and connectedness of Davidson's own thought. How do we read Davidson's thinking as a whole, and how do we read his later thinking in particular? The interpretive question that arises here is especially important in Davidson's case, since not only does he employ a style of writing that is highly polished and often quite dense, but his work can arguably be read as frequently operating against the grain of much mainstream analytic thought. It ought not to be read, then, in a way that simply takes for granted the terms or concepts it employs, or its key premises and conclusions.

My own engagement with Davidson began in the 1980s and intensified during the 1990s, when I was fortunate enough to be able to spend concentrated time in Berkeley working with Davidson—he kindly allowed me to share his office during my stay—as well as, oddly enough, Hubert Dreyfus, whose connection to Davidson was otherwise slight and sometimes rather awkward. In this regard, my involvement with Davidson came ***after*** the period of the essays that established his fame, that is, after the essays that appear in the first two volumes of his collected philosophical essays, *Essays on Actions and Events* (Davidson, 1980) and *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Davidson, 1984b).

One might say that this colours my reading of Davidson, although Davidson himself, when I put this sort of question to him, replied that this was not a bad thing, since too many of his readers, even those close to him, simply had not read or attended to his later work. As he grew older, not surprisingly, it was his later writing that he saw as all the more important. Moreover, it is worth noting that his thinking at this time was becoming increasingly broad in its compass, at the same time as he was in conversation with a very wide range of thinkers. There was some direct contact with Gadamer, but he was also close to Dieter Henrich and had engaged with Manfred Frank. He was also being drawn into other discussions and fields, including, perhaps most notably, a brief engagement with the artist Robert Morris. None of this should be surprising given Davidson's own earlier background—his student days at Harvard with Whitehead and Werner Jaeger, for example, as well as his brief stint as a radio scriptwriter—and his longstanding interest in music and literature.

Leaving aside Davidson's own comments on the understanding, or misunderstanding, of his work, it seems to me that it is indeed in the later essays, among which "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs" (Davidson, 1986) has a central place, that the most important of Davidson's ideas are to be found in their most developed form. However, those ideas still have their foundation and origin in the earlier essays. In my own case, although my personal connection with Davidson developed in the 1990s, my philosophical engagement with his work was originally based not on the later essays but almost entirely on the essays from the period before 1984, especially those collected in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Davidson, 1984b).

Similarly, the sense of proximity that Gadamer himself seems to have felt with Davidson's work, and that undoubtedly played into his nomination of Davidson for the 1988 Hegel Prize, surely also arose out of Davidson's work prior to the 1990s rather than depending on the later essays. When they first appeared, those later essays seemed to me, as they still seem now, to be a natural development and explication of ideas with which I was already familiar from Davidson's earlier writings. I think that was also true of other readers such as Sam Wheeler and Bjørn Ramberg, both of whom, I think, had much the same experience as I did, and especially Richard Rorty, whose engagement with Davidson was similarly based, first of all, on essays such as "Radical Interpretation" (Davidson, 1973b).

If Rorty and I could both find a connection between Davidson and those "ratbags"—the term regularly used by my old teacher Jack Smart to refer to idealists, phenomenologists, and other representatives of "Continental" thought—such as Heidegger and Gadamer, it was not

initially because of what Davidson later said in essays such as "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs" (Davidson, 1986) or "Three Varieties of Knowledge" (Davidson, 1991), but rather because of what was present in his writing almost from the very beginning. Yet, in this respect, and in spite of the seeming reversal in his thinking that "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs" is taken to exemplify, and that Davidson himself partly acknowledges, the argument against the idea that there is such a thing as a language is already presaged in the earlier work and is therefore not peculiar to the later work alone.

On The Very Idea of a Language

Davidson's argument for the claim that there is no such thing as a language is most directly bound up with his rejection of a particular view of the basis of linguistic understanding, one that takes such understanding to be grounded in some sort of determinate, shared, and prior agreement. This agreement may be expressed in terms of knowledge of a set of rules or conventions, but it may also take the looser form of shared practices or attitudes. "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs" (Davidson, 1986) thus stands alongside "Communication and Convention" (Davidson, 1984a), with which it shares the same basic line of argument, even though the latter essay holds back from making any claims concerning the ontological status of languages.

In fact, the arguments of both essays reflect a general mode of argument that plays out across many of Davidson's writings and that can be seen as rejecting standard conceptions not only of language, but also of meaning and content more generally, of belief and the other attitudes, and even of truth. In "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" (Davidson, 1973a), the same view of understanding as dependent on some determinate, shared, and prior agreement is embodied in the idea of a conceptual scheme, and the conclusion is similar to that reached in "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs": there is no such thing as a conceptual scheme, at least not as it is usually understood.

In these essays, as in many others, the arguments Davidson advances typically fall into two parts. First, there is a set of negative arguments designed to show the incoherence of the conceptions at issue, whether, for instance, of language or understanding. These negative arguments often depend on showing how the claim at issue itself relies on some presupposition with which it is inconsistent. In the case of the arguments in "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs" (Davidson, 1986) and "Communication and Convention" (Davidson, 1984a), they can be seen as variations on a point often made against certain forms of social-contractarian accounts of the origins of civil society. Such accounts seek to found civil society on some form of fundamental agreement, some sort of social contract, and yet it is civil society, and all that accompanies it, that provides the framework within which agreement, and especially any form of contract, is realised.

Similarly, the idea that language is to be founded on some prior theory assumes, if it makes any sense at all, exactly the sort of capacities that it also purports to explain. Interestingly, something like this was already implicit in Davidson's early and groundbreaking idea that the development of a theory of truth must itself depend on mastery of the truth predicate as it operates in our native language: every theory of truth must already presuppose that very concept.

Second, Davidson advances his own positive account of the nature and basis of understanding. Like some accounts of the basis of civil society, this account looks neither to any strange pre-social form of sociality or civility nor to any pre-linguistic, pre-epistemic, or pre-conceptual foundation. Instead, it sees understanding as arising out of an interplay of elements that includes agents, their actions, and the environmental context in which they are situated. Thus, Davidson (1999) writes, "our thoughts neither create the world nor simply picture it; they are tied to their external sources from the beginning; those sources being the community and the environment we know we jointly occupy" (p. 732).

It is in relation to the latter that the idea of triangulation, essentially taking over from the earlier idea of charity, plays a crucial role. Triangulation captures precisely this idea of a dynamic interplay among elements that enables their articulation and integration. Understanding, linguistic as well as general, is thus itself understood as a complex capacity that depends upon a range of other skills and abilities, as well as on the agent's responsive locatedness within an environment. In many respects, this is an argument that has its first incarnation in Davidson's own version of the Quinean rejection of the so-called "museum myth" of meaning, and the claim that there is no such thing as a language can be seen to follow directly from this. Meaning is not some internalised mental entity but rather arises only through the externalised interaction between speakers and between speakers and the world.

It is commonplace to find thinkers—Charles Taylor is a notable example here—arguing for language as infusing all of our engagement with the world, as the medium for that engagement. Davidson does not deny the pervasive character of language in relation to understanding, although the idea of a "medium" needs to be approached with some care, but he also emphasises that linguistic capacity is not discrete and is instead entangled with and dependent upon many other capacities. That is not to say that certain forms of linguistic behaviour cannot be separated off and even disabled in a way that seems independent of some others, as some clinical experiments show. It does mean, however, that we cannot reduce the capacity for linguistic understanding in general to some specific set of capacities that are independent of others, nor, indeed, can we

make sense of language independently of the world with which it is entangled.

In this latter respect, the Davidsonian argument in "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs" (Davidson, 1986) not only has precursors in some of Davidson's early writings on questions of meaning and truth, but also, unsurprisingly given the interconnected character of so much of Davidson's thinking, in his arguments concerning language and rationality in essays such as "Thought and Talk" (Davidson, 1975). Language is not simply one capacity added to others, nor can it be treated as a capacity that admits of varying degrees, of which the most basic is the simple communication of information or command. Instead, language is that which gives structure and pattern to the complexity of behaviour in a way that enables behaviour, and the attitudes with which it is thereby connected, to be distinguished from those things and events towards which behaviour and attitudes are directed. It is this that allows for the sense of objectivity and subjectivity, of truth and error, and so enables behaviour to take on the complex patterning associated with rationality and thought.

In this regard, language is not an addition that sits on top of other modes of worldly engagement, nor is it a subjective imposition upon the world; it is not to be construed instrumentally. Instead, it is that which allows the differentiation of the world to be made articulate and accessible. Language thus belongs, as Heidegger and Gadamer both emphasise, to the "between." In Davidsonian terms, this means that language is indeed the "baseline" on which triangulation rests and that enables both the relatedness among subjects and the relation between those subjects and the objects with which they are actively engaged. Hermeneutics itself belongs to this very "between": to the space between speaker and hearer, between reader and text, between interpreter and interpreted, and among the subjective, intersubjective, and objective.

Beyond Epistemology Alone

Triangulation is a key idea in Davidson's thinking, and it has deservedly received significant attention in recent years, partly stimulated by the work of Verheggen and by discussions of the second person (Myers & Verheggen, 2016; Verheggen, 1997). Yet that discussion has also tended to remain firmly within the analytic literature, and triangulation seems to me a notion that remains underappreciated both in its broader significance and in its potential relevance within a hermeneutic context. Davidson first uses the notion in an essay from 1987, where he invokes triangulation as a means of explicating objectivity and, with it, of providing an account of the determination of the contents of thought.

Davidson illustrates the point by comparing objectivity to the geometrical process of triangulation. Were he fixed to a single position, he argues, he would be unable to determine the location of objects beyond their position along a line extending from himself. The possibility of triangulation changes this because a second point makes location determinable. Davidson (2001) then transfers this structure to linguistic and conceptual life: two creatures interact with a common object, while language forms the baseline between them. It is through this triangular relation that the distinction between belief and objective reality becomes possible.

Elsewhere, Davidson (2001) explicates the same structure in terms of a three-way relation among what he calls the subjective, the intersubjective, and the objective—what might more broadly be characterised as self, other, and thing. The relation among these is one of mutual dependence. The three elements form a "tripod" such that "if any leg were lost, no part would stand" (p. 220).

Triangulation as it appears in Davidson involves what I have termed a topological structure, even though it is not named as such. It is a topology that exhibits several important general features. First, triangulation has the character of an always unfinished ***process***, in exactly the same way that radical interpretation, as it operates through charity, is such a process. Not only does triangulation have an essentially temporal or dynamic character—it depends on repeated sightings over time—but any triangulation always allows for further triangulations, and so no mapping, as I noted above, is ever final or complete. The dynamic but also always incomplete character of triangulation is a consequence of the fact that triangulation is itself "local," meaning that it always operates through an engagement with specific locations, and only through such engagement is there any access to a larger structure.

Second, triangulation is fundamentally based in ***relation***. This does not mean that what is triangulated—locations or, indeed, attitudes, meanings, actions, and things—can simply be decomposed into the relations among them, as if the relations were all there really are. Rather, nothing is given except in localised relation. When it comes to beliefs, this idea is reflected in the Davidsonian insistence that for there to be one belief or attitude is for there to be many beliefs or attitudes; and we may add, for there to be many actions, events, and things.

Third, triangulation always operates across a single plane or surface, so that we can say that there is nothing underneath that supports triangulation or that triangulation somehow reveals. As in Kant, for whom the possibility of knowledge resides in its complex structural unity rather than in anything external to it—this being the real basis for the idea of the transcendental—for Davidson there is nothing outside the triangulative structure of meaning, understanding, and the rest that provides a foundation external to that structure.

It is commonplace to read Davidson (2001) on triangulation as making a primarily epistemological or even methodological claim, a tendency supported by Davidson's own

inclination to frame his approach in terms of questions of knowledge. On such a reading, Davidsonian triangulation is treated as if it were merely a process by which one gains access to meaning or content. But it cannot be merely this. Triangulation operates because of the prior entanglement of its elements within a single topographical or topological field, and only because of this. It therefore cannot be construed as giving access to anything other than that which it also constitutes—here the Kantian echoes of Davidson's approach are once again evident—and so one cannot separate the elements ontologically and expect the same epistemological structure to remain.

In Davidson's case, the tendency of many commentators to read the structure of triangulation as purely epistemological not only weakens the claim at issue but also renders it largely inexplicable and all too readily defeasible. This is one reason why Davidson's account has so often fared poorly among analytic readers whose predilection, at least when it comes to questions of meaning and content, is indeed for epistemology over ontology. I have discussed the broader character of Davidson's thinking on these matters, including its implications for epistemology, elsewhere (Malpas, 2026).

Yet if we do indeed read Davidson as offering an implicitly ontological account—one in which knowledge of subjectivity, intersubjectivity, and objectivity is inseparable from the mode of being of these three—then it must also be emphasised that the sort of ontology that appears here is not one that privileges any one element over the others. Davidson's thinking, no less than Heidegger's or Gadamer's, resists the tendency to look to any form of foundationalist metaphysics, just as it resists any foundationalist epistemology, at least of the sort that is usually sought (Malpas, 2026). If we seek to understand the ontology at issue in subjectivity, for instance, it can only be an ontology that derives from the way subjectivity is embedded within the larger relational field that also encompasses the intersubjective and the objective. Moreover, although Davidson insists that the realm of content—of meanings and attitudes, and most generally of the "mental"—supervenes on the realm of the physical, he nevertheless denies that the one can be reduced to, or replaced in any simple fashion by, the other.

Here, the "monism" at work in the idea of triangulation, consisting in the commitment to a single yet complex relational or topological field, is itself reflected in Davidson's idea of a similarly complex unity encompassing the mental and the physical—his "anomalous monism." This generally leads Davidson (1985) to refuse any simple characterisation of his position as "materialist" or "physicalist." As he puts it, "I have resisted calling my position either materialist or physicalist," while nevertheless acknowledging its monistic character (pp. 244–245). This is not to say that Davidson denies that the mind is material, but rather that he does not think it is ***only*** material.

Davidson's tendency to emphasise his underlying ontology as an ontology of ***events*** should likewise not be construed as implying any simple ***reduction*** to events, as if there were ***nothing but*** events, since even the language of events calls upon concepts other than the concept of event alone. There are thus no pure vocabularies that stand apart from other vocabularies, no final or privileged languages in which the world can be completely described. Even the project of ontology—and of epistemology too, for that matter—turns out to have the character of a relational or topological exploration and to exhibit the same features.

Davidson often complained about the failure of those who read him to grasp how different his position was from more standard approaches, the tendency often being to read Davidson in a way that draws him closer to conventional modes of thinking. He once complained at a conference in Aix-en-Provence that "no one seems to have recognised just how radical my position is." This is, I think, partly why he was sometimes led to put things in a more provocative fashion, as with the claim that "there is no such thing as a language." In fact, there is an important sense in which Davidson not only denies the existence of language, as usually understood, but also challenges conventional understandings of meaning, attitudes, truth, and even the social.

Indeed, in the essay Davidson wrote to clarify the position set out in "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," namely, "The Social Aspect of Language," Davidson positions his critique of the usual understanding of language in a way that also takes issue directly with certain understandings of sociality and normativity. There he argues for a view of the social as established not through shared linguistic or other previously given structures, but rather through the commonality established in action. Social normativity, on this account, is a process of mutual adjustment to one another that arises through the engagement between speakers rather than through conformity to any pre-existing rule or principle. Once again, then, the argument against language is not to be viewed as an isolated element in the Davidsonian scheme, but rather as reflecting a larger set of arguments about the nature and possibility of the mode of being of "rational animals" like ourselves—the mode of being that belongs to "objective thought."

It may be thought that the idea of triangulation, and the structure that goes with it, is specific to Davidson, but in many ways it develops an idea and structure already evident in Kant and Hegel. In Kant, the structure, or something close to it, is suggested both by Kant's own "topological" mode of thinking—something at the heart of his transcendental-critical mode of philosophy—and by the interconnection between subjectivity and objectivity as they operate in the ***Transcendental Deduction*** and the ***Refutation of Idealism***. I have explored these Kantian,

transcendental, and topological connections in detail elsewhere (Malpas, 2002; Malpas & Thiel, 2011; Malpas & Zöller, 2011).

Davidson himself comments that what seemed to him to be missing in Kant was a sense of the role of the social—of the intersubjective—but one might suggest that this is precisely what is at the centre of the Third Critique, even if it remains at best only implicit in the First. The structure of recognition (***Annerkennung***), as well as the idea of the dialectic itself, especially as developed within recent "anti-metaphysical" readings of Hegel, which have sometimes explicitly invoked hermeneutic notions, also provides important points of reference and precursors for the idea of triangulation and the topological structure it embodies.

Indeed, in Davidson's case, there is a direct line back to Hegel that runs through G. H. Mead, whom Davidson himself acknowledged as an influence on his thinking about triangulation and who explicitly articulates a triangulative structure almost identical to Davidson's own. That connection runs through Mead's relation to C. I. Lewis, who was also influential on Davidson, and through that key figure in the mediation between Hegelian and American thinking, Josiah Royce.

The Kantian and Hegelian strands at issue here emerge in important ways in the hermeneutics of Gadamer and Heidegger, especially with regard to the triangulative-topological structure at issue here. In Heidegger (2010), this appears, for instance, in the three fundamental modes of interrelation that he identifies in the key lectures of 1919–1920, expressed in terms of "our ***surrounding world*** … our ***with-world*** … [and] our ***self-world***" (pp. 33–34). The very structure set out in ***Being and Time*** identifies Dasein, being-in-the-world, as constituted through a mode of being with things, being-alongside; with others, being-with; and with oneself. These three modes stand in an essential interrelation.

In Gadamer, the triangulative-topological structure at issue is understood directly in relation to the structure of understanding as given in the interrelation of interlocutors as they are jointly engaged with the same subject matter (***dieselbe Sache***). The hermeneutic structure of understanding can therefore be seen as sharing the relational configuration that Davidson articulates through triangulation: neither self, other, nor world stands independently, since each becomes intelligible only through its relation to the others.

Triangulation and the Interpretive Situation

Yet notwithstanding the larger background of Davidson's thinking in relation to Kant and Hegel, and their successors, many of the key elements in Davidsonian triangulation can be traced more immediately to Davidson's engagement with Quine in the early 1960s and to the discussions that gave rise to ***Word and Object***. Significantly, even this engagement is not separate from the larger background just sketched, since Davidson himself liked to point out how much Quine owed, though unacknowledged by Quine himself, to C. I. Lewis. It is in the context of ***Word and Object*** (Quine, 1960) that we find the elaboration of the situation of the radical translator—or, as Davidson will call it, the radical interpreter—and it is also there that the basic structure of what Davidson comes to call "triangulation" appears in clearly recognisable form: speaker, interpreter, and object. Much of Davidson's work, especially the later work, is oriented towards understanding how these components fit together as part of the unified structure that makes meaning, understanding, and content possible.

The translational or interpretive situation portrayed in ***Word and Object*** (Quine, 1960), though in some respects exotic, is also, in other respects, extremely familiar: it is the situation of two people trying to communicate about something that appears before them. Whatever way Quine himself interprets or reinterprets this scene—and Quine quickly moves towards a more technical construal of what is at issue—in Davidson's work the scene remains one presented in largely familiar terms. Davidson's starting point for his inquiry into the "conditions of thought" is thus not individual thinkers separated from the world or from one another, but thinkers already engaged with one another and already situated within the world.

It is this starting point that constitutes the real "naturalism" of Davidson's position. It is not a naturalism that requires commitment to any particular description or theorisation of the world and of what is in it, but rather a naturalism that consists in taking as prior what is already "given"—in a sense other than that famously criticised by Sellars—namely, our being already embedded in a world and already engaged with others within it. Davidson's attacks on the idea of a language or a conceptual scheme, on "internalist" conceptions of meaning or belief, and on the correspondence account of truth can all be read as attempts to return us to this basic sort of naturalism as the proper starting point, and as a continuing constraint, on our philosophising.

It might be supposed that to take such a starting point for the sort of philosophical reflection in which Davidson is engaged is already to assume too much and to presuppose a certain sort of answer to the questions being posed. Yet it is difficult to see what other starting point one could adopt that would not, in fact, be even more partial and would not presuppose even more than this. The naturalism that I am proposing here as embedded in Davidson's thinking is thus a naturalism that seems to me to underpin any philosophical inquiry at all. The difference is that most other inquiries move too quickly to ignore this starting point or to put it to one side.

It is the importance of this starting point in Davidson's thinking that surely underpins what he once acknowledged,

in conversation, as the grounding of his thought in simple "common sense." Not only is his thinking an attempt to clarify certain commonsensical assumptions, but it is also derived from reflection on our ordinary situatedness—on our being already placed in the world and in relation to others. To draw on a line from Marcia Cavell, Davidson's thinking begins "in the only place it can, here, in the midst of things," and I would only add that it also never abandons that place.

The convergence that I have argued exists between Davidson and Hans-Georg Gadamer—and Heidegger—and that justifies thinking of Davidson as indeed a "hermeneutic" thinker can be found in Davidson's rejection of "subjectivist" construals of understanding and his espousal of a dynamic conception that treats understanding as arising out of the complex interaction among speakers or agents and the world. This is to say that the convergence can be found in the triangulative-topological approach that emerges in its fullest form in his later thinking, even while it is presaged in the earlier work. It is this, I would argue, that finds one expression in the claim that "there is no such thing as a language."

Yet the hermeneutic character of Davidson's thinking is also evident in its "naturalistic," or perhaps better "factical," starting point. Such a starting point is characteristic of the thinking of Heidegger and Gadamer, even if differently expressed, just as it is of Davidson. The "naturalism" at issue here is, of course, rather different from "naturalism" as the term is often used. As I use it here, I mean exactly the commitment expressed in Cavell's comment about the starting point of thinking in the midst of the world as ordinarily given to us, as well as the related idea in Heidegger and Gadamer that thinking begins first with our given factical situation—with the situation in which we always already find ourselves involved with a world of things, events, and other people. The additional claim is not only that we begin here, but that our thinking must remain answerable to this initial starting point and that the terms in which it presents the world cannot easily, and indeed should not, be abandoned.

There is, however, another idea at issue here—an idea that lies at the very core of twentieth-century hermeneutic thinking and that seems to me no less an element in the Davidsonian approach. If all our thinking, knowledge, and experience begin with their necessary situatedness, then this situatedness—this "being placed"—has to be understood not as that which prevents knowledge or understanding, or as a barrier to their realisation, but rather as precisely that which enables them.

There is a long tradition in philosophy that takes the opposite view and therefore regards the fact that human beings are always placed or situated—and so are always, in some sense, in a state of dependence—as a primary obstacle to genuine knowledge and understanding. Philosophy has often aimed at finding a way to overcome such situatedness, to achieve what Nagel (1986) famously describes as a "view from nowhere." Heidegger (1999), by contrast, explicitly rejects the possibility of such "freedom from standpoints," insisting on the factical situatedness from which understanding proceeds.

One of the characteristic insights of hermeneutic thinking has been that not only is such a view from nowhere impossible to achieve, but that it is in any case unnecessary and involves a misconstrual of the nature of understanding and knowledge. The only view, then, is a view ***from somewhere***, and it is in virtue of our being somewhere—our ***being-in-place***—that we can have a view at all. Moreover, it is through having a view, and only thus, that we are opened up to the possibility of other views. To be able to know or understand the world is first of all to be in the world. The further elaboration of that knowledge or understanding does not involve relinquishing that situatedness, but rather grasping the necessary interconnection between that situatedness, and the situation it involves, and other modes of situatedness.

The dependence of understanding on situatedness has been variously expressed within the hermeneutic tradition, although not always through an explicit focus on situatedness or place as such. It is worth noting in this regard that the term ***topos*** figures within many forms of traditional rhetorical and hermeneutical practice to designate the "place" of a discussion or approach, often in terms of the subject or "topic" towards which that discussion or approach is directed and within which it moves. In Aristotle's ***Topics*** and ***Rhetoric***, ***topos*** can also designate a general argumentative type or form.

The famous hermeneutic circle, whether understood in terms of the structure of part-whole dependence or the fore-structure of understanding, or indeed as it may be seen to be instantiated in the Davidsonian account of the relation between prior and passing theories, can itself be construed as situational and orientational in character. What the circle suggests is that understanding is always a movement that depends on first having a place from which to move, so that understanding itself depends on our first standing somewhere.

Similarly, one might say that what is at issue here is the essentially productive role played by limit in making possible any access to that which might go beyond limit. The openness of the world is thus enabled through the finitude of our being in the world. In Davidson, although this is not expressed in what may seem to be the more existential language of Heidegger and Gadamer, it is nevertheless just as present and can be seen as expressed in the idea that understanding depends on our negotiation of the concrete relations we have with others, with ourselves, and with the things and events around us—on our capacity, which cannot be reduced to anything more fundamental, for a certain sort of complex situational responsiveness. Language does not underpin that responsiveness by providing some

sort of template that determines behaviour or decodes the responses of others, but rather by being itself the medium and enabler of that responsiveness.

Let me finish on one last point. One might ask why it matters to connect Davidson with thinkers such as Gadamer and Heidegger, and why it matters to bring Davidson into this sort of hermeneutic frame. Part of the answer is itself given in the idea of triangulation as it might be applied to thinking—to philosophy—itself. What I have been doing here is triangulating Davidson in relation to a larger philosophical landscape and, in so doing, also triangulating the elements of that landscape in relation to Davidson. All thinking, whether it recognises itself as such or not, and no matter the different ways in which it proceeds, involves just this sort of triangulation.

In doing this, we seek to enlarge and enrich our knowledge and understanding, and so better to understand our own ideas and our own situation. Our situatedness becomes a problem only when we refuse the multiple relations that our very situatedness opens up to us. Hermeneutic thinking, whether expressed in Davidsonian or Gadamerian terms, urges us always to be attentive to those relations and so to be attentive to the others, and the other viewpoints, that are thereby made accessible to us.

We may not always succeed in this. Both Gadamer and Davidson provide examples of the ways in which the project of understanding fails as much as it succeeds, and such failure is itself a product of the very situatedness that also makes understanding possible. But that is not a reason for refusing the attempt; indeed, refusal is, in one sense, not even an option.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis developed in this study supports the claim that Donald Davidson's philosophy can be productively understood from a hermeneutic perspective, particularly when his conception of language, interpretation, and triangulation is considered in relation to the thought of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Martin Heidegger. This approach does not seek to erase the differences between the analytic and hermeneutic traditions, but rather to show that significant philosophical convergences exist that allow some of Davidson's central arguments to be reconsidered.

The claim that there is no such thing as a language, developed most provocatively in ***A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs***, should not be understood merely as the rejection of a particular theory of linguistic competence. The argument forms part of a broader critique of the idea that meaning and understanding can be grounded in predetermined structures, shared systems of rules, or conceptual schemes independently of concrete situations of interaction. From this perspective, language appears as inseparably connected to the relations between speakers and to the world in which they are situated. This continuity between the critique of language, the rejection of conceptual schemes, and the structure of triangulation constitutes one of the central outcomes of the interpretation proposed here.

Triangulation consequently acquires a significance that exceeds an exclusively epistemological interpretation. The relation among the subjective, the intersubjective, and the objective shows that meaning, thought, knowledge, and understanding emerge within a relational field in which none of these elements can be established entirely independently of the others. Triangulation is also dynamic, local, and necessarily incomplete: it always begins from particular positions and remains open to further relations and perspectives.

This structure makes it possible to understand more clearly the proximity between Davidson and the hermeneutics of Gadamer and Heidegger. In all three cases, understanding does not begin with an isolated subject who subsequently attempts to gain access to an external world, but from a situation in which subjects, others, and world are already related. The situated character of thought is therefore not a limitation that must be overcome in order to attain objectivity. On the contrary, being situated is precisely what makes understanding, interpretation, and access to other perspectives possible. There is no view from nowhere: every understanding begins somewhere and can be enlarged through its relation to other places, subjects, and modes of understanding.

Finally, placing Davidson in dialogue with Gadamer and Heidegger demonstrates the philosophical value of moving across the traditional division between analytic philosophy and hermeneutics. The comparison undertaken in this study itself operates as a form of triangulation: Davidson allows certain aspects of hermeneutics to be reconsidered, while the hermeneutic tradition makes visible dimensions of Davidson's thought that may remain obscured when it is interpreted exclusively within analytic categories. Philosophical understanding thus emerges as a necessarily relational, situated, and open activity in which establishing connections between different perspectives can enrich our understanding both of what is interpreted and of the position from which interpretation itself proceeds. This reflects the manuscript's final proposal that philosophical thinking itself can be understood as an activity of triangulation.

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