

Donald Davidson

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One of the most important philosophers of the latter half of the twentieth century, Donald Davidson explored a wide range of fundamental topics in metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and the philosophies of action, mind, and language. His impact on contemporary philosophy is second only to that of his teacher W. V. O. Quine, who, along with Alfred Tarski, exerted the greatest influence on him. Given the range of his contributions, his work emerges as surprisingly systematic, an expression and working out of a number of central guiding ideas. Among his most important contributions are

1. his defense of the common sense view that reasons, those beliefs and desires we cite in explaining our actions, are also causes of them [11],
2. his groundbreaking work in the theory of meaning, and his proposal, based on Tarski's work on recursive truth definitions for formal languages, for how to formulate a compositional semantic theory for a natural language [29, 46, 47, 50, 51],
3. his development of the project of radical interpretation as a vehicle for investigating questions about meaning and the psychological attitudes involved in understanding action [7, 15, 42, 44, 48],

4. his defense of an event ontology and of the conception of events as dated particulars [23, 24, 30],
5. his analysis of logical form of action sentences and in particular the introduction of an implicit quantifier over events as a way of showing how to handle systematically the logic of adverbial modifiers [18, 32],
6. his analysis of the logical form of singular causal statements, which treats events as causes, as opposed to properties or states of affairs [16],
7. his paratactic analysis of indirect discourse, quotation, and mood setters [36, 38, 41],
8. his proposed solution to the mind–body problem, anomalous monism, which derives a token-token identity theory of mental with physical events from the denial that there are any strict psychophysical laws [14, 27, 33, 34, 40],
9. his arguments against relativism of truth to conceptual schemes and of the possibility of radically different conceptual schemes from our own [39],
10. his anti-Cartesian epistemology, which gives the third person point of view conceptual primacy, and proposes a view of our epistemic position which makes knowledge of the external world, our own minds, and the minds of others, interdependent and coordinate [12, 17, 19–22, 25, 26, 31, 35, 37, 45, 49, 52],
11. his analysis of weakness of the will, and irrationality more generally, as a dislocation of the lines of causal influence and all-in justification which is possible only against a background of largely rational thought and action [3–5, 9, 28, 51].

The lines of influence from these are many and varied, and cross over disciplinary boundaries. Arguably his greatest influence has been in the area of semantics, where he both developed and argued against ideas proposed by previous thinkers, including Aristotle, Descartes, Frege, Hume, and Tarski. His proposal to use a truth theory as the vehicle for a compositional semantic theory has had an enormous impact on the philosophy of language and the pursuit of an understanding of logical form. He has both influenced and been influenced by other scholars working on a truth-conditional approach to meaning, or with a more general interest in the relationship between truth and language, including Dummett, Lewis, Montague, and Putnam. An account of any approach to the semantics of natural languages is now likely to begin by stating whether it is based on adopting or rejecting a truth-conditional approach inspired by Davidson's work. In addition, Davidson's proposals for the logical form of particular constructions in natural language have been very influential, and in linguistics his suggestion about the logic of adverbial modifiers has been widely adopted and fruitfully developed. In the philosophy of action, his defense of the claim that reasons are causes of actions has been so successful that it has now become the new orthodoxy. In the philosophy of mind, Jaegwon Kim has written recently that "no other philosopher has been more influential than Davidson in shaping the basic contour of the field as it exists today" [55, p. 113]. His anomalous monism, as much as his argument for the crucial premise that there are no strict psycho-physical laws, has been one of

the major sources of the now dominant orthodoxy on the mind–body problem of nonreductive physicalism. Davidson’s basic third person methodological stance on language and the psychological attitudes has also contributed significantly to that sea change, whether for good or ill, in attitudes toward traditional problems of epistemology and the relation of the mind to the world. Now it is widely held that the mind’s contents are seen as determined by its embedding in its actual environment. The public point of view is given epistemic primacy. The very existence of an epistemic domain over which we have “first person authority” is seen as dependent on the public point of view.

Donald Davidson was born March 6, 1917, in Springfield, Massachusetts. His father, Clarence Herbert Davidson, was a civil engineer and his mother, Grace Cordelia Anthony, was the daughter of a fairly prosperous industrialist. His father’s work caused the family to travel frequently and this meant that Davidson received little formal education until he was around 9 or 10 years old, when his family moved to Staten Island and he enrolled, after a short stint at a public school, in fourth grade in the Staten Island Academy. He gained a B. A. at Harvard in 1939 and a Ph.D., also at Harvard, in 1949. Before completing his Ph.D., he interrupted his studies to serve with the U.S. Navy in the Mediterranean from 1942 until 1945. While carrying out his undergraduate work in English, Comparative Literature, and Classics, he attended classes taught by Alfred North Whitehead and this influence inspired him to study philosophy as a graduate student. His graduate thesis explored Plato’s *Philebus*. But he went on to become one of the most important analytical philosophers of the twentieth century. He lived an adventurous non-academic life, taking part in a wide range of activities, including surfing, mountain climbing, skiing, piloting two-engine aircraft, script writing, piano playing, and drama.

Though Davidson entered Harvard to study classical philosophy, Quine was an early and important influence on him. He had regarded the study of philosophy as akin to the study of literature and the history of ideas. Davidson took a seminar from Quine on logical positivism in his first year. “What mattered to me,” Davidson reported, “was not so much Quine’s conclusions (I assumed he was right) as the realization that it was possible to be serious about getting things right in philosophy” [10, p. 23]. At the time when Davidson began his graduate studies, American philosophy was heavily influenced by empiricism, and in particular by logical positivism. Davidson studied both of these carefully before rejecting them in his mature work.

Davidson’s most important work covers a wide range of topics in analytical philosophy. But they can be thought of as dividing into two broad areas: work on reasons, causes, events and actions; and work on the philosophy of language, including work on the semantics of natural languages. Work in these areas forms the basis for the conclusions that Davidson reaches in the philosophy of mind, metaphysics, and epistemology. Davidson saw rationality and language as closely linked, and it is possible to see his work as part of one overall project of understanding what it is to be a rational, language-using being.

Davidson started his teaching career at Queens College in the City University of New York in 1947, moving to Stanford University’s new philosophy depart-

ment in 1951, where he taught until 1967, when he began a series of moves which brought him through Princeton University, Rockefeller University, the University of Chicago, and finally to the University of California at Berkeley in 1981. The 1950s were a formative period for Davidson. He taught everything from ancient philosophy to ethics. He published relatively little, but many of his most influential ideas were developed. At Stanford, Davidson was introduced to formal and experimental decision theory through collaboration with Patrick Suppes and J. J. C. McKinsey. He discovered a technique of identifying subjective utilities and probabilities without presupposing either, only to find that it had been anticipated by Frank Ramsey (1926). This led to experimental testing of decision theory with Suppes and Sidney Siegel, the results of which were published in *Decision Making: An Experimental Approach* [53]. The work in decision theory had an important influence on Davidson's mature philosophy. He took two lessons from it: first, that in "putting formal conditions on simple concepts and their relations to one another, a powerful structure could be defined"; second, that the formal theory itself "says nothing about the world," but rather its content is given in its interpretation, in the case of an empirical theory, by the data to which it is applied [10, p. 32]. This provides the methodological background of Davidson's work on radical interpretation and the theory of meaning.

His work on experimental decision theory, and the influence of ideas on action theory that his student Dan Bennett brought back from a year in Oxford, led to his interest in the philosophy of action. He read Anscombe's *Intention* [1]—which he described as "the most important treatment of action since Aristotle"—and Stuart Hampshire's *Thought and Action* [54], which led him back to Wittgenstein and other work by his followers in action theory.

There were two signal influences on his thinking in the philosophy of language. One was Alfred Tarski's work on the semantic conception of truth. Tarski had taken up a teaching position at the University of California, Berkeley in 1942, having been in effect stranded in the United States when Germany invaded Poland while he was at an international Unity of Science meeting at Harvard University. Davidson gave a version of a paper intended for the Library of Living Philosophers volume on Carnap at Berkeley. Tarski was in the audience. Tarski gave Davidson a copy of his informal paper "The Semantic Conception of Truth," which led Davidson to Tarski's technical development in *Wahrheitsbegriff* [67]. After assimilating it, Davidson wrote, "it seemed to me that Tarski's truth definitions could be viewed as providing an answer to the question that plagued me: an analysis of the logical form of a sentence was satisfactory only if it could be incorporated into a truth definition" [10, p. 35]. It was a short step then to seeing in Tarski's truth definitions a solution to the problem of the form of a compositional meaning theory for natural language. The other major influence on Davidson in this period, which he combined with that of Tarski, was Quine. In the 1958–1959 academic year, Quine came to the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford with the manuscript of *Word and Object* [63], in which the project of radical translation is developed as a philosophical basis for understanding linguistic behavior. Quine invited Davidson to go through the manuscript with him that aca-

demical year. Davidson has said about this, “When I finally began to get the central idea, I was immensely impressed; it changed my life” [10, p. 41].

In the 1960s, Davidson published a series of seminal papers that changed the philosophical landscape. In 1963, Davidson published the essay “Actions, Reasons and Causes,” which continues to have a huge impact on the philosophy of mind and action. Davidson argued against the then standard view, inspired partly by the work of Wittgenstein on action, and partly by Hume’s views on causation, that a reason for an act could not be a cause of it. Hume had suggested that it is not possible for one thing to cause another if there is a logical connection between them, or if they were not distinct existences. It was suggested that there were logical connections between the concepts of action and of reasons for actions, for the concept of an action is the concept of an event for which an agent had his reasons, and that therefore reasons could not be causes of actions.

Davidson pointed out that it was doubtful that one could infer from the description of an event as an action what its reasons were, for we can do the same thing (e.g., wave) for different reasons, and equally doubtful that a description of reasons for an action entailed what action would result, for we may have reasons for action on which we never act. But even putting this aside, Davidson pointed out that the existence of a logical connection between the *descriptions* of two events does not rule out a causal relationship between the *events* themselves. There are clear logical connections between “the cause of *B*” and “*B*”, but that does not preclude the truth of “the cause of *B* caused *B*”.

Action explanations, “rationalizations”, in Davidson terminology, consist, he argued, of providing a primary reason for an action (under a description), which includes a pro attitude toward actions with a certain property, and a belief that the action (under the description) has that property. For example, someone’s waving may be explained by citing her pro attitude toward actions with the property of being a signaling of a friend (her desire to signal a friend), and her belief that this action, being a waving, is a signaling of her friend. Action explanation thus provides the materials for a practical syllogism that shows what is to be said for an action, or what minimally justifies it from the agent’s point of view. Signaling a friend is good; this waving is a signaling; this waving (insofar as it is a signaling) is good. Why think anything more is required to account for the explanatory force of action explanations? We often have more than one set of reasons for doing something, but act on only one of them. In this case, the action is explained by only one of a pair of reasons that justify it. Absent any other explanation of the extra force of the “because” of reasons explanation (in, e.g., “he did it because he wanted to impress her and thought that sending her flowers would do so”), Davidson argued we should think of it, in line with common sense, as causal: the reasons we act on are the reasons that not only justify (minimally) the action from our point of view but also cause it.

What are an agent’s actions? Davidson defended an influential view [13]. Primitive actions are those we do but not by doing anything else. Primitive actions, Davidson argued, were identical to bodily movements, or, more broadly, bodily changes (this formulation together, with his commitment to a token-token iden-

tity of mental with physical events, brings mental acts within the fold). Those things we speak of ourselves as doing by doing other things are just our primitive actions redescribed in terms of their typically causal results. The queen killed the king by poisoning him. She poisoned him by emptying the vial in his ear. She emptied the vial in his ear by turning her hand. Therefore, she killed him by turning her hand. According to Davidson, we have here not four actions, a killing, a poisoning, an emptying, and a turning, but one action, described in various ways: emptying the vial is causing the vial to be emptied, poisoning the king is causing him to be poisoned, killing the king is causing him to die (without mediation of another agency). And causing *F* is doing something that has *F*'s occurrence as an effect. In this case, it is one and the same thing that causes the emptying, the poisoning, and the dying, namely, the turning of the hand. According to Davidson: "We never do more than move our bodies: the rest is up to nature" [13, p. 59].

Davidson followed Anscombe in holding that actions are intentional or unintentional under a description. One may turn on the light intentionally, and by doing so unintentionally alert a burglar; it is one and the same act, but intentional under "turn on the light" and unintentional under "alert a burglar". To say one *F*-ed intentionally is to indicate that one did it with the intention of *F*-ing. Initially Davidson did not treat intentions as a species of psychological state independent of belief and desire, but later modified his view, identifying intentions with all out, or unconditional, judgments in favor of an action.

Out of this arises his account of weakness of the will [28]: one acts weakly when one judges all things considered, that is, in the light of all the considerations one has available, that a certain course of action is best, but then does something else intentionally. If what one wants most is revealed by what one does intentionally, and what one judges the better goes in accordance with what one most wants, then weakness of will appears paradoxical. Davidson resolves the puzzle by distinguishing between the all things considered judgment, which he treats as conditioned by the reasons for it in the same way that a probability judgment is conditioned by the evidence for it, and the all out, or unconditional judgment, identified with an intention. The principle that one judges better what one wants more invokes the notion of an all out judgment, in contrast to the all things considered judgment. Still, weakness of the will reveals a deep fact about human agency, which is that lines of causal force need not be in perfect alignment with lines of rational force from either the agent's or observer's point of view.

Despite the possibility of irrational action, Davidson held that rationality was at the core of our conception of agency [43]. Clearly, even in regarding an action as an expression of weakness of will, we must identify it first as an action, and this requires us to see it as motivated by a belief and desire pair that justify it from the agent's point of view. To regard it as irrational we must further see the agent as having a range of other attitudes, and as being able to reason correctly in their light that a certain course of action is best. Only then are we able to see a particular action of his as flouting what is best for him. Even to identify a belief or desire, we must see it as embedded in a system of beliefs and desires with related contents which enter into patterns of interaction expressed in behavior that make sense of the content we assign to them. Irrationality is not lack of rationality, but

it is possible only against a background of largely rational thought and action. It is not the absence of reason, but “a perturbation of reason.” This general picture of the nature of agency and thought, as a rational field of attitudes and behavior, plays a large role, as we will note, in Davidson’s theory of radical interpretation, and also in his argument for anomalous monism.

Davidson’s ideas in the philosophy of language were developing in tandem with his work in the philosophy of action. One of the first important ideas Davidson proposed in his work on the philosophy of language, in “Theories of Meaning and Learnable Languages” (1965), was an adequacy criterion for theories of linguistic meaning. He insisted that an adequate meaning theory for a natural language must be “compositional”, that is, that the meaning of all sentences in the language must be exhibited by the theory as generated from that of their parts (of which there are a finite number). This requirement derives from the fact that human beings have finite capacities for understanding yet are in a position to understand an infinite number of non-synonymous sentences in languages they speak. This notion of compositionality was present in the work of earlier philosophers, notably Gottlob Frege and Rudolph Carnap, but Davidson’s work and his systematic application of the criterion to problems in semantics helped to make it a standard assumption in subsequent theories of linguistic meaning.

A constructive or compositional theory of a language gives an account of the meanings of complex expressions on the basis of the meanings of their parts. What form should such a theory take? Theories from that of Frege on identified the meanings of expressions with entities of a special sort—senses on Frege’s view, universals and particulars on Russell’s. Conceived in these terms, the task of a compositional meaning theory is to say how the entities associated with complex expressions are “built up from” or “composed out of” those associated with their parts. One of Davidson’s most important contributions to the theory of meaning consists in the rejection of this approach as barren and its replacement by a radically different conception of how the end of a compositional meaning theory is to be achieved, a proposal, despite its influence, still not entirely well understood or properly assimilated by contemporary philosophy.

If we consider how an account in terms of meanings, construed seriously as entities, rather than a *façon de parler*, would go, the difficulty quickly becomes apparent. If we tell someone what the meaning of a complex is by telling him what the meanings of its parts are by naming them and providing some way of identifying their referents, we have not yet succeeded in enabling him thereby to understand the expression; and no amount of additional general information about their “mode of combination” would be any help. No one comes to understand “Le coeur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît pas” by being told that “Le” stands for Bob, which is the meaning of “Le” in French, that “coeur” stands for Carol, which is the meaning of “coeur” in French, etc. It does not help to be told that some of these meanings are “functions” and others arguments supplied to them, which yield as values of certain types of meanings. To enable understanding, we must be artful in our choice of names, and how we present them. We must in effect present a sentence understood by our interlocutor that is synonymous with the sentence in question (the object language sentence) in a way that conveys that it is so, and

which also conveys which contained object language terms correspond to which terms in the understood sentence. Meanings, it turns out, help us do this only because they allow us to apply the recursive machinery of quantification theory to sentence positions that ostensibly are not positions for referring terms. (See [57, 58, 60].)

Davidson's great insight was to see in Tarski's work on truth definitions for formal languages the answer to the puzzle of how to avoid what would be pointless quantification over entities associated with every expression, even if it could be made to work. The proposal was first put forward in "Truth and Meaning" (1967). Tarski shows how to construct an axiomatic truth definition for a formal language that enables one to generate a sentence of the form (T) for every sentence of the language,

$$(T) \text{ } s \text{ is T iff } p$$

where "is T" is the truth predicate for the object language, and the truth definition is constructed in a metalanguage distinct from the object language. Tarski imposed on an adequate truth definition the requirement that it be formally consistent and that it have as theorems all sentences of the form (T) in which " p " is replaced by a metalanguage sentence that translates s (Tarski's "Convention T").

Davidson observed that if we had an axiomatic Tarski-style truth theory (henceforth "truth theory") for some language presented in a language we understood, and we had a mechanical way of isolating the right theorems, those in which " p " is replaced by a sentence that translates s (call these the canonical theorems), the theory would put us in a position to understand each of the object language sentences. This is all, in the end, that a theory that quantified over meanings could do for us. For example, for a truth theory for German in English that meets Convention T, the canonical T-theorem for "schnee ist weiss" (ignoring tense) would be

"schnee ist weiss" is true in German if, and only if snow is white

Knowing that this is a canonical theorem, we are in a position to understand an utterance in German of "schnee ist weiss".

Suppose that, in addition, we start with axioms for object language terms that employ metalanguage terms that translate them in giving their truth or satisfaction conditions, or referents in the case of referring terms. For example, consider informally these six axioms, representing the forms of axioms for names, predicates, quantifiers, and connectives, and the definition of truth in terms of satisfaction (the inverse of the "true of" relation).

A1. " g " refers to Gottlob Frege.

A2. For any f , f satisfies " Wx " iff $f("x")$ is wise.

A3. For any ϕ , for any f , f satisfies " \sim " $\parallel \phi$ iff it is not the case that f satisfies ϕ .

- A4. For any ϕ, Ψ , for any f, f satisfies “(‘ $\parallel \phi \parallel$ ’ ‘ $\&$ ’ ‘ $\parallel \Psi \parallel$ ’)” iff f satisfies ϕ and f satisfies Ψ .
- A5. For any ϕ , for any f, f satisfies “(x)” $\parallel \phi$ iff every f that differs from f at most in what it assigns to “x” is such that f satisfies ϕ .
- A6. For any ϕ, ϕ is true iff for any f, f satisfies ϕ .

We stipulate that “Gottlob Frege” translates “g”, that “x is wise” translates “Wx”, that “it is not the case that” translates “ \sim ”, that “and” translates “ $\&$ ”, and that “for every x” translates “(x)”. “f” ranges over functions from object language variables to objects, and “ ϕ ” and “ Ψ ” are metalanguage variables that range over object language sentences. Then it is easy to see that, intuitively, “minimal” proofs of T-theorems would give us the canonical theorems in a way that provides us with an understanding of how the complex expressions were understood on the basis of understanding their parts and modes of combination. The base axioms A1–2 show us the “meanings” of the primitive expressions; the recursive axioms for connectives A4–5 show us the contributions of “ \sim ” and “ $\&$ ” to the “meanings” of sentences; the recursive axiom for “(x)” shows us how it contributes to the “meanings” of sentences. The “minimal” proof of a T-theorem shows us how each contributes in its proper order to the truth of a complex sentence. We will call a truth theory for a language that meets the condition here adumbrated an interpretive truth theory.

The truth theory itself, on this conception, would not be a meaning theory. It says nothing about the meanings of any expressions of the language, and it does not state that it meets the conditions that enable us to use it to understand object language sentences and gain insight into their semantic structure. But certain knowledge about an adequate truth theory, what it stated, that it stated it, that its axioms met the condition stated above, and knowledge of an appropriate proof procedure, would provide all the knowledge that a compositional meaning theory is intended to. It would do this without invoking any more ontology than would be required for a truth theory.

It will be seen that in this there is no attempt to reduce the concept of meaning to that of truth. There is no attempt to eliminate the concept of meaning in favor of some other putatively clearer concept (that of truth) in terms of which language is to be understood. There is no attempt in this to supplant the meaning of a sentence with its truth conditions, construed as some kind of entity. To construe Davidson’s project in any of these ways is to miss the point.

Davidson takes the concepts of truth, meaning and the propositional attitudes to be equally basic and interdependent [8]. We should not seek to analyze any of them in terms of the others, but rather seek illumination of them by tracing out the connections between them and how they are applied in understanding others’ speech. Davidson has argued specifically against analyzing the concept of truth in terms of correspondence to fact. Sentences do not represent or refer to facts, states of affairs, or anything else. The connection between language and the world comes through referring terms and predicates, through the notions satisfaction and reference.

This truth-conditional approach has not been universally understood, or adopted, but it has been extremely influential and is a useful starting point in defining any approach to the study of meaning. So far, a detailed account along these lines has not been fully developed. There are worries that arise about the program at a number of points. Natural languages are not formal languages, so how can we hope to provide a formal truth theory for them? Natural languages contain their own truth predicates, so how could a consistent truth theory be given for any of them? Natural languages contain many terms whose contribution to truth conditions of utterances is determined only relative to the context of utterance. How can a truth theory handle this aspect of the languages we speak? There are, in addition, many constructions in natural languages that look to provide a challenge to being incorporated into a first-order truth theory for them. These difficulties and responses to them cannot be surveyed here. There is good reason, however, to think that the general problems can be met, and that there is considerable hope that natural language constructions that present problems can be accommodated. (See [57].)

Davidson has made a number of contributions within the program to problem areas in natural language semantics, to the problems of indexicals, quotation, indirect speech acts, imperatives, and interrogatives. Others have made alternative proposals in the program and proposals in areas Davidson has not treated. These areas are still the subject of considerable interest and debate. Of particular note is a strategy Davidson has applied to quotation, indirect discourse, and non-declarative sentences, each of which presents different sorts of challenges to a compositional semantics which makes central use of a truth theory [36, 38, 41].

The problem in the case of indirect discourse is that a sentence such as “Galileo said that the earth moves” contains an embedded sentence but the truth-value of the whole sentence is not a function of the truth of the embedded sentence. The complement clause creates a non-extensional context. Expressions cannot be replaced in it generally on the basis of sameness of truth-value, extension, or reference without change of truth-value. Frege maintained that the context was extensional by dint of holding that the expressions in the complement do not have their usual senses, but rather indirect senses that refer to their customary senses. Davidson rejects this approach as a violation of “semantic innocence”, the common sense view that the words in complement clauses are understood in just the way they are in other contexts. But then how is a truth theory to be applied to such sentences? We must, it seems, find structure in “Galileo said that the earth moves”, to account for our ability to understand an unlimited number of novel sentences of that form. We cannot simply treat “said that the earth moves” as a fused predicate, for then there would be an infinity of semantic primitives in the language, and it would be unlearnable. Yet it seems the truth of the whole cannot be understood as determined by the extensional properties of its components, which is all the truth theory can work with. Davidson makes a brilliant suggestion in this context, namely, that semantically the sentence may be treated as equivalent to two:

Galileo said that. The earth moves.

In the first, “that” is a demonstrative, and refers in use to an utterance of the second, which is not asserted, though it is used with the meaning it has in English in the context. “said” is interpreted as requiring that Galileo have said something that had the same content as the demonstrated utterance of “The earth moves”. This has been called the “paratactic analysis” because it treats indirect discourse as a matter of two clauses placed together without coordination or subordination. Clearly, once we analyze indirect discourse as involving two independent sentences, the difficulties for the application of a truth theory disappear, for the first sentence is analyzed as a simple relational sentence, and the second receives whatever stand alone analysis it would receive in the theory.

The paratactic analysis of indirect discourse, while controversial, has also been influential. Davidson applies a similar technique in the treatment of quotation and non-declarative sentences. In the case of quotation, in order to capture the idea that quotation works in some sense by “picturing” the expression that is being referred to, Davidson treats the quotation marks as a singular term, and the material which appears between them not as part of the sentence semantically, but as a token picked out by a demonstrative in a description of the expression in question. Thus,

“Dhaulagiri” names a mountain adjacent to Anapurna

is understood as semantically equivalent to

Dhaulagiri. The expression of which this is a token names a mountain adjacent to Anapurna.

In an utterance of this, the demonstrative “this” is taken to refer to the utterance of “Dhaulagiri”. The same idea is applied to imperatives and interrogatives, which Davidson treats as semantically decomposable into a mood setter and a declarative sentence (the declarative mood does not receive the same analysis). The mood setter involves a reference to the “indicative core” to the effect that it is a speech act of the appropriate kind. Thus, for example, “Put on your hat” is, on the proposal, to be understood semantically as equivalent to

My next utterance is imperatival in force. You will put on your hat.

This proposal, like the previous ones, is controversial. It needs, for example, supplementation when we come to questions that have an open sentence as their indicative core, such as “Who won the game?” And plausibly there are other ways to accommodate these constructions in a semantic theory of the general sort that Davidson proposes [59].

One of the most influential of Davidson’s proposals is his account of the logical form of action sentences [32]. This represents an important point of intersection between his work on the theory of meaning, the philosophy of action, and metaphysics, and, in the case of the latter, especially in the crucial idea, which both underpins and is supported by several strands of Davidson’s work, that an event

is a concrete dated particular entity [24]. This view is exploited in his account of actions (which he treats as events), of causation (a relation between events), in his account of the mind–body relation (which denies type-type identity of mental with physical events but asserts their token-token identity), and in his work on meaning, for the interpreter’s evidence consists in observations of events and his object is ultimately to be in a position to assign meanings to utterance acts. Events, such as the eruption of Krakatoa, the death of Caesar, or the signing of the Magna Carta, are concrete particulars, which occur at particular times or over particular time intervals. They are not types, for example, properties, or ordered triples of properties, objects, and times, nor facts or states of affairs. They are the relata of the causal relation. “The short circuit caused the fire” is a singular causal statement whose truth conditions require that the event denoted by “the short circuit” was a cause of the event denoted by “the fire”. Davidson conceives of events as changes. In early work, he suggested that they could be individuated in terms of their causes and effects [30]. He later rejected that account because of Quine’s criticism that it presupposed prior individuation of the causes and effects which are events also, and adopted the view that events, though ontologically distinct from objects, or space-time regions, can be individuated by the space-time regions they occupy [2]. This requires Davidson to explain away an intuition he had relied on earlier to reject this view, that the rotating of a sphere and its warming up over the same time interval are distinct events.

Davidson’s account of the semantics of adverbial modifiers in action sentences (and more generally) both exploits and provides support for his view of events as concrete particulars. The problem presented by adverbial modification is how to understand compositionally the contributions of adverbial phrases, for there is no limit to the number of adverbial modifiers one may add to a sentence such as “John hit Bill”. This is the same problem as that of revealing the logical form of a sentence with adverbial modification. The logical form of a sentence is revealed by the derivation of its truth conditions in an interpretive truth theory for the language. One of the central constraints on such an account is that it explain the entailment relations that the relevant sentences enter into in virtue of their forms. Davidson’s proposal was suggested by his view that actions are events, and that events are dated particulars. Action verbs then are event verbs. There is no explicit reference to an event in a sentence such as “John hit Bill”, but many adverbs that modify “hit” look to be related to predicates that are plausibly predicates of events, such as “at six”, or “in the bedroom” or “violently”. We may also form a definite description of an event using the gerund, “John’s hitting of Bill was violent, and occurred at six in the bedroom”. Davidson’s proposal at once makes sense of these observations and explains the entailment relations that action sentences enter into in virtue of form. The proposal is that action sentences contain in logical form an existential quantifier that ranges over events, and that the function of adverbial phrases is to contribute a predicate of an event whose argument place is bound by the quantifier introduced by the main verb. Thus, take as an example the sentence (1), which is analyzed as in (2), where “*e*” is an event variable, that is, takes on as values only events.

- (1) John hit Bill violently in the bedroom at six.
- (2) $(\exists e)(\text{hitting}(e, \text{John}, \text{Bill}) \ \& \ \text{violent}(e) \ \& \ \text{in}(e, \text{the bedroom}) \ \& \ \text{at}(e, \text{six}))$

This makes transparent how to integrate adverbial phrases into an interpretive truth theory, and it makes clear how the entailment relations that (1) enters into are explained as a matter of logical form. It is transparent on this account how “John hit Bill violently in the bedroom”, “John hit Bill violently”, “John hit Bill at six”, “John hit Bill”, and so on, follow from (1), namely, by conjunction elimination. This initial account has been considerably elaborated and integrated with the theory of thematic roles in linguistics, and has been especially helpful in extension to treatment of plurals (e.g., [65, 66]). Davidson noted that the treatment parallels a suggestion of Frege’s on how to treat tense, and the two approaches can in fact be usefully combined [56]. Davidson’s conception of events lies in the background of the account, but the account’s success in making sense of a wide range of semantic phenomena in turn provides support for the metaphysics that it rests on.

A compositional semantic theory for a natural language is an empirical theory. It is a theory about a language spoken by a community of speakers. While we have discussed the role of the truth theory in a compositional meaning theory independently of this point, from the first Davidson conceived of himself as offering an account of the formal structure of a theory that would be confirmed by observation of actual speakers. This marks the connection of the proposal to use a truth theory in a meaning theory with the larger concerns in his philosophy of language. Davidson brought to bear two influences on him at this point. The first was his work with experimental testing of decision theory, and the two morals we noted above that he drew from it: (1) putting formal conditions on simple concepts and their relations to one another enables one to define a powerful structure (2) whose content is given in its empirical application. The second influence was Quine’s conception of the basic stance from which to investigate language, that of the radical translator. Quine’s *Word and Object* begins with the sentence “Language is a social art”. From this starting point, Quine argued that the proper methodological stance for investigating language is the third person stance, which affords us only evidence of another’s meanings and thoughts in the form of their overt behavior. Quine’s radical translator aims to arrive at a translation manual for another’s language justified solely by observations of the other’s behavior described in ways that do not presuppose anything about his thoughts or meanings. Davidson adopted this basic methodological stance on language and thought. There are, however, a number of differences between Davidson’s project and Quine’s. Davidson’s radical field linguist, in contrast to Quine’s, aims to confirm a compositional meaning theory, not a translation manual. Also in contrast to Quine’s radical translator, Davidson’s field linguist relies on responses to distal objects in interpretation, rather than, as for Quine’s radical translator, responses to patterns of sensory stimulation. This reflects a further difference in aim. Quine’s purpose was to replace our ordinary, and in his view hopelessly unclear, notion of meaning with a scientifically respectable reconstruction, based on the notion of stimulus synonymy. In contrast, Davidson aims to understand our ordinary notion.

Davidson calls his project radical interpretation, since the aim is to produce an interpretation in the compositional meaning theory of each object language sentence, rather than a translation manual. For Davidson, this takes the form of confirming a suitable truth theory for the subject's language on the basis of purely behavioral evidence [42].

We have then the formal theory on the one hand, that is, the truth theory (and also a theory of an agent, formal decision theory or an elaboration of it), and the conditions for its empirical application, specified by the constraints on the radical interpreter, on the other, which gives the concepts of the theory their content. This represents, Davidson says, "an alternative to the generally futile attempt to define or analyze important concepts," for "[e]ven if we cannot hope to define concepts like truth, virtue, probability, belief, action, or intention in terms of more basic concepts, there is legitimate philosophical work to be done in relating these concepts to one another in as clear a way as we can" [10, p. 32]. In "Radical Interpretation," Davidson describes the method as follows:

In philosophy we are used to definitions, analyses, reductions. Typically these are intended to carry us from concepts better understood, or clear, or more basic epistemologically or ontologically, to others we want to understand. The method I have suggested fits none of these categories. I have proposed a looser relation between concepts to be illuminated and the relatively more basic. At the center stands a formal theory, a theory of truth, which imposes a complex structure on sentences containing the primitive notions of truth and satisfaction. These notions are given application by the form of the theory and the nature of the evidence. The result is a partially interpreted theory. [42, p. 137]

An abstract description of how the project of radical interpretation would proceed, then, is intended to provide simultaneous illumination of all of the concepts that we bring to bear in a theory of another's speaking of a language, rather than a traditional analysis of them piecemeal. Importantly, on Davidson's view, nothing that could not be gleaned on the basis of the radical interpreter's evidence could be a part of meaning, and assumptions that are identified as necessary for the success of radical interpretation are treated as constitutive of their subject matter [7, p. 314].

How does the radical interpreter proceed? To simplify the task, Davidson assumes that the radical interpreter can identify on the basis of his evidence the hold-true attitudes of his subject or subjects. These are simply the beliefs that the subject has about what sentences of his language are true. (In further elaborations of the project, Davidson has suggested the radical interpreter would appeal not just to hold-true attitudes, but to other attitudes toward the truth of sentences such as desiring true, preferring one sentence true to another, intending true, believing to a certain degree true, and so on.) Davidson assumes that near enough for each of the subject's beliefs he will hold true a sentence that expresses its content on the basis of knowing what he believes, and what his sentences mean. If we could identify either what the subject believes, or what his sentences mean, we could

solve for the other. For example, if we know that he holds true “Schnee ist weiss” and that this means that snow is white, we could infer he believes that snow is white. If we know that he believes that snow is white and holds true “Schnee ist weiss” on this basis, then we can infer that it means that snow is white.

To break into this circle, Davidson argues that the radical interpreter must assume that most of a speaker’s beliefs directed toward his environment are about the conditions that prompt them. Then in identifying the conditions that prompt the speaker’s environmentally directed hold-true attitudes, which are based on his beliefs, we can identify their contents. More specifically, in holding that a speaker’s beliefs about his environment are mostly correct, the interpreter is in a position to use information about correlations between hold-true attitudes and conditions in the speaker’s environment to frame hypotheses about interpretive truth conditions for the speaker’s sentences. For if the interpreter identifies the conditions prompting a speaker’s beliefs which the beliefs are about, then the speaker identifies the conditions which the sentences the speaker holds true are about. Then the interpreter can infer from “*S* holds true *s* iff *p*” in conditions appropriate for reliable observation that it is probable that “*s* is true iff *p*” is a theorem of a correct interpretive truth theory for the speaker’s language, and that the speaker has a belief that *p*. Then the interpreter projects axioms that generate the tentatively identified target theorems to confirm an interpretive truth theory for the language.

This principle just sketched is one half of what Davidson has called the principle of charity (following Quine’s lead [63, p. 59]). In later work, Davidson has divided the principle of charity into the principle of correspondence, the assumption just noted, and the principle of coherence [49]. The principle of coherence holds that the interpreter should interpret the speaker so as to make him largely decision theoretically and epistemically rational. This requirement Davidson sees as falling out of our conception of a speaker as an agent who thinks and acts, for thought and agency makes sense at all, on Davidson’s view, only as part of a largely rational system of thought and behavior. This is an application of Davidson work in the philosophy of action to the theory of meaning.

The two parts of the principle of charity are in tension. Sometimes we find someone more rational if we can attribute to him a mistaken belief. If someone trains an elephant gun on the refrigerator door before opening it, we may make better rational sense of his behavior, given our commitments about his beliefs about what guns are for, by attributing to him a mistaken belief about the contents of the refrigerator. Interpretation, then, is a holistic enterprise in the sense that we seek a best fit between our evidence as a whole and our constraints, recognizing that there will be trade-offs between finding the subject a believer of truths and a fully rational agent. One source, at least, of what Davidson has called the indeterminacy of interpretation, lies in the possibility of there being different trade-offs which in the end account equally well for all the evidence and a priori constraints imposed by the structure of the concepts we bring to bear in interpreting another. Since the constraints and the empirical evidence, on Davidson’s view, exhaust the content of the theory, to say that there is indeterminacy of interpretation is to say that there are distinct theories of interpretation which do an equally good job of accounting for the facts about meaning and thought the the-

ories aim to tell us about. The theories are distinct in the sense that in the metalanguage in which they are stated, for instance, the axioms in the interpretative truth theory for the same object language expressions in the two theories provide different satisfaction conditions (at least different and, from the point of view of the metalanguage, non-synonymous expressions are used to give the satisfaction conditions). Davidson has argued that this is no more alarming than the fact that we can use different numerical scales in measuring temperature (but see [57, vol. 1, ch. 15; 64]).

Reflection on the project of radical interpretation, the nexus of Davidson's philosophy, is the source of a number of Davidson's most striking claims about the nature of language, thought, and meaning and their relation to the world. Adopting the stance of the interpreter of another as methodologically basic means that we think of the concepts that he deploys as understood in the first instance in relation to their application in the context of interpersonal communication. What the interpreter must assume about his subject for success in interpretation then is constitutive of his subject matter, for on the assumption that the concepts of meaning and of the attitudes have application at all, they must, on this view, have application from the standpoint of the interpreter, that is, it must be possible to cite evidence available from the interpreter's point of view that suffices for their correct application. This profoundly anti-Cartesian methodological stance has important epistemological and metaphysical consequences.

Davidson has argued in a number of places for the impossibility of massive error in our empirical beliefs [12, 17, 20–22, 35, 49]. This is a direct consequence of taking the radical interpreter's stance as methodologically basic, and the claim that the interpreter must accept the principle of charity in order to be in a position to interpret another speaker. For the principle of charity *inter alia* holds that the speaker is largely right about his environment. Thus, massive error in our empirical beliefs is not possible. We can make mistakes to be sure, even systematic mistakes, but the possibility of making mistakes presupposes a much larger background of correct belief as a precondition for identifying them from the point of view of another, and, therefore, for the existence of those of our beliefs which are mistaken. If the argument is correct, it provides a transcendental guarantee of the correctness, by and large, of our empirical picture of the world, in the sense that being mostly right about our environment is a necessary condition (or precondition) of having any attitudes, and so being capable of any thought, at all. This does not show that our empirical beliefs are justified, for truth is not sufficient for justification. However, a guarantee that our beliefs are mostly true and coherent enough to enable us to be interpreted on the basis of public evidence plausibly puts us in a position to employ them with confidence in sorting out those that we ought to lend more credence to from those that we should relinquish or call into question. While the detail work of epistemology remains to be done, if Davidson is right, the possibility of its success in telling us how to proceed is secured.

This same point is supposed to establish that thoughts—propositional attitudes—are relationally individuated. For the interpreter must interpret a speaker's words, and assign contents to his attitudes, on the basis of correlations he observes between a speaker's hold-true attitudes and what is going on in the speaker's envi-

ronment. If the speaker's meanings and attitudes must be available to the interpreter in virtue of their nature, then what they are about is constituted in part by the actual relations that they bear to things in their environment, for those are what the interpreter must rely on. This doesn't clearly establish the full extent of Davidson's commitment to the relational individuation of thought content, for he adds an historical component, motivated by a thought experiment, which does not appear to fall out of just reflection on radical interpretation. The thought experiment involves reflection on a physical duplicate of a person being created (for example) by chance by lightning striking a log in a swamp. The resulting organism, dubbed "Swampman" [31], Davidson argues, does not have any beliefs, or desires, or intentions, or other propositional attitudes, at least initially. (But see [62].)

In the same stroke in which the stance of the radical interpreter is supposed to reveal the correctness by and large of our empirical beliefs, it is supposed to provide a guarantee that we can know both the minds of others and our own minds [49]. That access to the minds of others is possible falls out of acceptance of the radical interpreter's stance as methodologically basic, for it tells us that all there is to be learned about minds is recoverable from the third person point of view, and the argument for this rests on the claim that it is only by holding this that we can respect the fact that language is by its nature a medium of interpersonal communication. But less obvious is that it is also necessary for the interpreter's success that he assume that the speaker is mostly right about, and, indeed, knows what the contents of his own attitudes are. While Davidson offers a relatively complicated argument for this [26, 31], it is easy to see that the interpreter, in inferring from a correlation between a speaker's hold-true attitudes and conditions in his environment, to the interpretive truth conditions for the sentence held true, must assume that, by and large at least, the hold-true attitudes are the result of the speaker's knowing the meanings of his sentences and knowing the contents of his beliefs. For that is the justification for taking the correlation of hold-true attitudes with conditions in the environment to show something simultaneously about the meaning of the sentence and the content of the belief on which it is based.

As the emphasis on the importance of the position of the interpreter of another's speech on understanding language and thought would suggest, Davidson holds a strong position on the relation between language and thought, namely, that one cannot have propositional attitudes unless one has a language [43, 48]. It is clear why this is an important thesis for Davidson. For if we deny it, then we must deny also that the position of the interpreter of another speaker is fundamental to understanding thought as such, and this may be thought to call into question the claims about the nature of the propositional attitudes which rest on reflection on the procedure of the radical interpreter. Davidson has offered a number of different sorts of considerations in favor of this view. One is that in the absence of patterns in behavior that support attribution of speech to another, we do not find sufficient complexity to distinguish between what we think of as distinct thoughts that we might be inclined to attribute. For example, there may be various ways of describing what a dog believes which is barking up the wrong tree after chasing a squirrel. Yet it might be thought that this shows only that our con-

cepts are too sophisticated to use in keeping track of the dog's thoughts, and we have no others, rather than that the dog has no thoughts. A different line of argument relies on the assumptions that to have a belief, one must have the concept of belief, for having belief requires understanding what it would be to be mistaken, and to have the concept of belief one must then have the concepts of truth and falsity; and further, to have the concepts of truth and falsity, one must possess a language. Possession of a language is held to be essential for possessing the concepts of truth and falsity on the grounds that (1) the concepts are essential for interpretation in order to, in effect, resolve the tension between the two halves of the principle of charity, attributing falsehood when necessary in order to make our interlocutors out to be more rational, and (2) that it is only in the context of interpreting the speech of another that there is a role for the application of the concepts of truth and falsity. It is not easy to find in Davidson's work an argument for (2), however, and it does not appear to be self-evident.

Another thesis of Davidson's which has been influential and which can be seen as required by the emphasis he places on the role of the radical interpreter in understanding language and thought is the claim that there can be no radically different conceptual schemes [39]. Davidson identifies possession of radically different conceptual schemes with possession of non-intertranslatable languages, and then asks whether it makes good sense to suppose that there could be such languages. Davidson argues that neither of the central metaphors of conceptual pluralism that are supposed to make sense of the possibility of radically different conceptual schemes succeeds in doing so. These are the metaphors that express what job conceptual schemes are supposed to do. Different conceptual schemes *organize* the world differently or *fit or predict* it differently. The trouble with the first is that it presupposes a common subject matter that is organized in different ways, and so presupposes a basis of translation. The trouble with the second is supposed to be that ultimately the notion of fitting or predicting comes down to, or relies on, that of truth, and we do not, Davidson argues, understand the notion of truth independently of that of translation. The argument for this latter claim goes by way of the claim that Tarski's "Convention T embodies our best intuition as to how the concept of truth is used" [39, p. 195]. Convention T (see above) requires an adequate truth definition to prove a theorem for each object language sentence which gives its "truth conditions" using a metalanguage sentence that translates it. Given this, Davidson says, "there does not seem to be much hope for a test that a conceptual scheme is radically different from ours if that test depends on the assumption that we can divorce the notion of truth from that of translation" [39, p. 195]. This argument, however, relies on more than just the observation about the centrality of the intuition embodied in Convention T. It requires us also to assume that (1) we cannot identify utterances as true (or false) without having an interpretive truth theory for the language, and that (2) to make sense of a language not translatable into our own we must be able to describe how we could empirically confirm that someone possessed it. These might be thought to be supported by Davidson's position on the fundamental role of radical interpretation in understanding speech and thought. However, it is not clear that the strong publicness of language which Davidson rests this position on requires that someone

possessing a language be interpretable by any possible speaker as opposed to speakers of his language [57, ch. 18; 61].

Another important thesis connected with seeing language through the lens of the radical interpreter is Davidson's startling claim that "there is no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed" [6, p. 446]. At first glance this claim can appear to be in conflict with Davidson's basic program in the theory of meaning of providing a compositional meaning theory for a language by constructing a truth theory for it, for it seems to rob the theory of its subject matter. But to conclude this would be to miss the importance of the qualifier, for Davidson's target is a particular conception of language that treats it as conventional and as something shared prior knowledge of which is necessary for communication. Davidson's main point is to argue that prior shared knowledge of conventional meaning is not necessary for communication. This falls directly out of taking the stance of the radical interpreter as methodologically basic. All the radical interpreter needs to do is to have a "passing theory" of the speaker that is a best fit with the speaker's intentions with respect to how his words are to be understood as reflected in his dispositions at the time at which he speaks. In principle, this is all that is needed for successful communication. In practice, shared knowledge of conventions for the use of words of course plays an important role, and perhaps must for cognitively limited agents like actual speakers. But the position Davidson targets urges a stronger role for convention.

Finally, we turn to Davidson's solution to the mind-body problem. Davidson's approach to the mind-body problem focuses on the relation between mental and physical events and he developed a new perspective on the problem in his thesis of "anomalous monism" [34]. This thesis holds that everything in the world is physical, in particular that mental events are physical events (monism) but also that (anomalously) one cannot be reduced to the other, because there cannot in principle be strict psychophysical laws. The argument for the token-token identity theory, a form of materialism, relies on the thesis that there can be no strict psychological laws, which is based in turn on the claim that there can be no strict psychophysical laws. The assumptions of the main argument, as Davidson lays them out initially in "Mental Events," are these: (i) The Principle of Causal Interaction: ". . . at least some mental events interact causally with physical events"; (ii) The Principle of the Nomological Character of Causality: "where there is causality, there must be law: events related as cause and effect fall under strict deterministic laws"; (iii) The Anomalism of the Mental: "there are no strict deterministic laws on the basis of which mental events can be predicted and explained" [34, p. 208]. Later in "Mental Events" Davidson relaxes the requirement on strict laws that they be deterministic, requiring instead that they be laws that are part of a "comprehensive closed system guaranteed to yield a standardized description" of events "couched in a vocabulary amenable to law" [34, pp. 223–224]. Davidson notes that the argument will work only for mental events that causally interact with physical events, and there are certain other assumptions in the background as well. The assumptions needed for the argument for the general claim that every mental event is a physical event are as follows:

1. Every mental event interacts with some purely physical event.
2. There are no strict psychophysical laws.
3. Events related as cause and effect fall under a strict law.
4. The physical constitutes a comprehensive causally closed domain, that is, every physical event e_1 has a physical cause e_2 such that a strict physical law subsumes them.
5. All strict laws are physical, psychological, or psychophysical.
6. An event is a physical event if it has a description that makes it suitable for subsumption by a strict physical law.

(1) and (3) tell us that a strict law connects every mental event with some physical event. (2) tells us that it does not involve a mixed vocabulary of mental and physical terms. (4) tells us that there is a strict physical law that covers the physical event in question. (5) tells us that the only strict laws that could cover a mental and physical event are physical, psychological, or psychophysical. (2) rules out its being psychophysical. (1) rules out its being psychological. Therefore, every mental event is subsumed by a strict physical law. (6) tells us that this is sufficient for the mental event to be a physical event. Davidson did not endorse (1) in full generality, but regarded it as plausible.

The novelty of the argument was the way it combined an anti-reductionist thesis, that there are no strict psychophysical laws—for this rules out strict lawlike correlations between mental and physical event types or state types—with assumptions about causality to yield the claim that every mental event is in fact identical to some physical event. When this argument was first propounded in 1970, it was widely assumed that any materialist account of the mind would minimally have to endorse strict correlations between mental and physical event types, and the plausibility of this was taken to be necessary for the argument for materialism. Davidson's argument showed that this was not so, and that token-token identity theories did not presuppose type-type identity theories, by producing an argument against type-type identity theories whose conclusion he used to argue for a token-token identity theory. While Davidson's argument is still controversial, it has had a profound effect on thinking in the philosophy of mind in the last thirty years of so.

The commitment to there being no strict psychophysical laws has been thought to be in conflict, not surprisingly, with Davidson's signature view in the philosophy of action that action explanations are causal explanations. There is certainly some tension here, for causal explanations, as opposed to causation itself, seem to rest on laws connecting the kinds expressed by the descriptions used in the explanation. But the tension is alleviated to some extent by noting that the thesis Davidson endorses rules out only strict psychophysical laws, not rough psychophysical laws, and it is by no means clear that the latter is not enough to satisfy the demands of an ordinary causal explanation of an event, and to satisfy our common sense conception of the mental as causally relevant to the movements of our bodies.

The most controversial premise in the argument is the claim that there are no strict psychophysical laws. Davidson's argument for this is notoriously difficult. According to Davidson, "[l]awlike statements are general statements that support

counterfactual and subjunctive claims, and are supported by their instances” [34, p. 217]. Against this background conception of laws, the central idea of the argument rests on the claim that psychological concepts and physical concepts form families of interrelated concepts governed by constitutive principles, which in “Mental Events” Davidson suggests we might think of as “synthetic a priori”. An example in the case of the physical is the principle of the transitivity of length of rigid objects. This principle is partly constitutive of what a rigid object is. If measurement of three objects, *a*, *b*, and *c*, by use of a measuring tape, at a time or across times, yields the “result” that *a* is longer than *b*, *b* is longer than *c*, but *a* is not longer than *c*, then we would conclude a priori either that they were not all rigid objects, or that some mistake had been made in the measurements (perhaps in assumptions about the measuring tape—e.g., that it is a rigid object—or in assumptions about the accuracy of the observations made by the measurer). In this way the principle of the transitivity of length governs the application of the concepts of length, rigid object, and observation. Similarly, in the case of concepts of psychological attitudes, there are constitutive principles (but different ones) which govern their application, namely, those which emerge as structuring the project of radical interpretation, including both the requirement that we attribute attitudes in largely rational patterns that make sense of the speaker as an agent and the requirement that we find a speaker largely right about his environment. In deciding whether to attribute a particular attitude to a speaker, we must consider at the same time what other attitudes we attribute to him, for identifying them as attitudes of the kind in question requires that we be ready to apply other allied concepts at the same time. Similarly, when applying physical concepts we must be prepared to apply other allied concepts at the same time. In each case, though, we look to different constitutive principles. Davidson urges that in thinking through the implications of this we will see that this will undermine our confidence that, as we continue to develop in tandem our physical and psychological theory of an agent, any correlation that we find between its physical and psychological properties is a strictly reliable guide to what we will find in the future. That is, the different commitments of the physical and the psychological vocabulary make it epistemically unreasonable to think that, even if we have found past strict generalizations, they will extend to the future. Therefore, in the terms introduced above, no generalizations could in principle be supported by their instances to the degree that would support acceptance of a strict law. Against the epistemic conception of law that Davidson is working with, this entails that there can be no strict laws connecting the mental and the physical. We see in this argument combined Davidson’s metaphysics of events as datable particulars which stand in the causal relation and his conception, already intertwined with this, of speakers as constitutively interpretable rational agents mostly right about their environments.

Out of these various interwoven projects there emerges a systematic vision of man as a rational linguistic animal who takes his place essentially among his peers in the natural world, who is constituted by but irreducible to it, whose knowledge of his own mind, of the minds of others, and of the world around him is as essential a feature of his kind as is the power of thought and speech itself.

Four signature features of Davidson’s philosophy account for its influence. The first is its attention to the most fundamental questions of philosophy. The

second is its systematic nature, despite its appearance in short, compact, elegant, but often difficult and cryptic essays. The third is the fruitfulness of its proposals and ideas, even for those who do not agree with them, and even where those sympathetic to them find it hard to follow the line of argument that is supposed to establish them. The fourth, which is connected with the others, is how it draws connections between what look initially to be unconnected areas of philosophical inquiry, and derives insight from them. Davidson's ideas are now a permanent part of the fabric of contemporary philosophy. His unexpected death, on August 30, 2003, marked the passage of one of the great philosophers of the twentieth century.

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