

DAVIDSON'S TRANSCENDENTAL EXTERNALISM

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Jason Bridges
University of Chicago

Abstract. One of the chief aims of Donald Davidson's later work was to show that participation in a certain causal nexus involving two creatures and a shared environment—Davidson calls this nexus “triangulation”—is a metaphysically necessary condition for the acquisition of thought. This doctrine, I suggest, is aptly regarded as a form of what I call *transcendental externalism*. I extract two arguments for the transcendental-externalist doctrine from Davidson's writings, and argue that neither succeeds. A central interpretive claim is that the arguments are primarily funded by a particular conception of the nature of non-human animal life. This conception turns out to be insupportable. The failure of Davidson's arguments presses the question of whether we could ever hope to arrive at far-reaching claims about the conditions for thought if we deny, as does Davidson, the legitimacy of the naturalistic project in the philosophy of mind.

Donald Davidson's work in the years following the publication of his celebrated collections, *Essays on Actions and Events* and *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, was largely devoted to two projects, one epistemological and one metaphysical. The epistemological project was to articulate and defend an account of human knowledge that opposes “empiricism” (“the view that the subjective is the foundation of objective empirical knowledge”)¹ and in so doing undermines traditional arguments for skepticism that, by Davidson's lights, assume empiricism. The metaphysical project was to show that participation in a certain complex interaction involving another creature and a shared environment—Davidson calls this interaction “triangulation”—is a

¹ “The Myth of the Subjective”, p. 46.

metaphysically necessary condition for the acquisition of thought. Davidson's epistemological project has been the subject of sustained critical commentary, much of it sophisticated and illuminating,² but the metaphysical project, despite being the primary focus of his writings from the late-'80's onward, has received extremely little discussion.³ Given Davidson's preeminent status in analytic philosophy, this state of affairs is both surprising and unfortunate. The present paper aims to help remedy this neglect.

It seems appropriate to apply the label "externalism" to a view, like Davidson's, that holds that causal relationships to things outside the body are metaphysically necessary conditions for thought. But such a view differs importantly from the well-known theses in the philosophy of mind and language that originally prompted that terminology. Those theses are attempts to elucidate specific types of mental content by giving criteria for individuating contents of those types. They are motivated by considerations specific to the types of content in question, for example, by suitably tailored twin-earth thought experiments, or by appeal to features of the use of linguistic expressions apt for expressing those contents. Just to have a name, we might call these doctrines varieties of *semantic* externalism. By contrast, we can think of the kind of externalism embodied by Davidson's view, in which causal relationships to things in the external world are said to be necessary for the possibility of thought, as *transcendental*. In one way, transcendental externalism is a stronger form of doctrine. The semantic externalist theses don't have the implication that any creature who can think at all must stand in causal relations to, say, water or people who talk about arthritis; these conditions bear on a given thinker only insofar as

² The most well-known discussion of Davidson's views on empiricism is in John McDowell's *Mind and World*, especially chapter 1 and the first afterward. McDowell's treatment of Davidson has in turn spurred much commentary.

³ The only discussions of the arguments that will concern me here of which I am aware (at the time of writing) are: Child, *Causality, Interpretation and the Mind*, chapter 1; Verheggen, "Davidson's Second Person"; Talmage, "Meaning and Triangulation", and Pagin, "Semantic Triangulation".

they entertain the particular kinds of thought in question. But in another way, transcendental externalism involves less substantive commitments, for a transcendental externalist view needn't be, as Davidson's isn't, committed to any particular story about the contents of any particular thoughts. Such a view will not be defended by a detailed examination of specific kinds of content, but by much more abstract considerations pertaining to the nature of thought as such.

Davidson's claim is that participation in what he calls "triangulation" is a necessary condition for having thoughts; I will thus call it the *triangulation thesis*. Triangulation is a causal nexus involving two creatures and a third item in the shared physical environment: two creatures "triangulate" on a given object or event when both creatures react to that object or event and then react in turn to each other's reaction.⁴ The scenario, if not the term, is familiar from Davidson's earlier work on radical interpretation. This convergence might raise the hope that the triangulation thesis can be understood as a consequence, or at least a natural development, of Davidson's earlier work on radical interpretation. Davidson certainly gives the impression that he takes this to be so. But he does not explain the connection explicitly, and as we will see, it is not easy to make out.

As I noted, Davidson argues for the triangulation thesis in a number of different essays. But everything he says is a variation on two main lines of argument, which I will call *the argument from object-directedness* and the *argument from error*. The arguments arise respectively from Davidson's attempts to answer the following two questions:

One question is this: where, in the infinite causal chains that lead to the sense organs, should we locate the elements that give content to our observation sentences and accompanying perceptual beliefs?...The second question is this: what, in the process of acquiring a first language and propositional thought, gives us the idea of error

⁴ As we shall shortly see, Davidson will have reason to characterize triangulation without using the quasi-intentional concept of *reacting to*.

(and so of truth)?⁵

I begin with a brief discussion of the argument from error, but the bulk of my attention will be directed to the argument from object-directedness. As will emerge, it plays a more fundamental role in Davidson's thinking and, I believe, raises deeper and more substantive issues.

It is perhaps worth emphasizing that my interest is in the arguments that Davidson actually gives in his papers (in particular the papers from the time period mentioned above), not with arguments that might strike one as "Davidsonian" but that Davidson does not himself articulate. To this end, I will quote salient passages from these papers as fully as is practicable.

1. The argument from error

The argument from error is prompted by Davidson's view that a creature lacking the idea of epistemic error—lacking an appreciation that how things seem to one can differ from how things are—cannot be credited with thoughts at all. Such a creature would have no conception of an objective world, of a reality constituted independently of the creature's own perspective upon it, and so could not entertain claims with an objective purport. But then it could not entertain claims with a subjective purport either—claims about how things seem to it—for such a capacity is impossible in the absence of a capacity to entertain objective contents. So, at any rate, Davidson maintains. These views are not universally accepted, but for purposes of assessing Davidson's argument, we may grant them. They allow Davidson to pursue necessary conditions on the possibility of thought by asking what must be in place for a person to become aware of the possibility of error. According to Davidson, at least part of the answer to the latter question is

⁵ "Quine's Externalism", p. 85.

that we could not come into that awareness without participating in instances of triangulation.

Why so? Davidson's basic thought is that an opening for an appreciation of error is created when a sharing of reactions between two triangulating creatures breaks down. When creatures cease to react in similar ways to shared stimuli, these deviations "show us the possibility of error and the distinction between belief and truth."⁶ A representative formulation of this idea is the following:

The interactions of the triangle do not in themselves generate this appreciation [of the concept of error], as we see from the example of simple animals, but the triangle does make room for the concept of error (and hence of truth) in situations in which the correlation of reactions that have been repeatedly shared can be seen by the sharers to break down; one creature reacts in a way previously associated by both creatures with a certain sort of situation, but the other does not. This may simply alert the non-reactor to an unnoticed danger or opportunity, but if the anticipated danger or opportunity fails to materialize, a place exists for the notion of a mistake. We, looking on, will judge that the first creature erred. The creatures themselves are also in a position to come to the same conclusion. If they do, they have grasped the concept of objective truth.⁷

There are at least two puzzling features to this passage. First, triangulation is said to facilitate acquisition of the concept of error because, if a sharing of reactions is "seen by the sharers to break down", "the creatures are in a position to come to the conclusion" that one of them has made a mistake. It is hard not to read this remark as saying that the role played by a breakdown in a shared reaction is that the creatures can *infer* from it the existence of the possibility of error. That is how Davidson seems to be understood, for example, by William Child. Child unpacks the argument as follows:

If I had the resources only of my own point of view, of how things seem to me, what could give me the idea of a contrast between what I believed and the truth?
'Nothing,' is Davidson's response. In that situation, I could never be confronted with a contrast between how things seem to me and how they are... But now consider how things are if I am interacting with another creature, which has its own point of view

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ "Seeing Through Language", pp. 26-7.

on the world. There is now the possibility of divergence and disagreement. If S indicates that p is true, when, in my opinion, p is false, I cannot make do with an indiscriminated conception of how things are, which makes no distinction between how things seem to me, how they seem to S , and how they really are.⁸

As Child appears to present it, the subject catches on to the contrast between truth and belief by noticing that someone else has a belief at odds with one of her own (“ S indicates that p is true, when, in my opinion, p is false”), and then grasping the implication that how a person believes things to be can diverge from how they really are. There is an obvious difficulty with glossing Davidson’s remarks in this way. The whole point of his inquiry into the conditions necessary for acquiring the concept of error lies in his view that possession of the concept is necessary for thought. Child’s retelling is straightforwardly in conflict with this view. It represents the subject as having beliefs (“opinions”) and drawing inferences prior to her grasping the concept of error. As a matter of interpretive charity, we should be reluctant to saddle Davidson with the baldly contradictory position that, on the one hand, possession of the concept of error is a necessary condition on thought and belief, and on the other hand, we arrive at that concept by being presented with a situation in which our beliefs disagree with someone else’s.⁹

What remains in Davidson’s story if we purge it of this connotation? The central suggestion is apparently that repeated triangulation over time creates a “place” for the “notion of a mistake”. It does so by providing a context in which one creature can observe an aberrant reaction on the part of itself or another. Two conspecifics in frequent contact regularly both perform behavior B in situation S , and thereby receive reward R . Now one creature performs B

⁸ *Causality, Interpretation and the Mind*, pp. 18-19.

⁹ Of course, we do not want to take the opposite tack, and cast Davidson as holding that acquisition of the concept of error precedes acquisition of a capacity for thought and belief. In claiming that possession of the concept of error is necessary for thought, Davidson needn’t be taken as saying that there are two temporally discrete processes—acquisition of the concept of error and acquisition of the capacity for thought and belief—and that the former must be over and done with before the latter can begin. There is a single process—acquisition of the capacity for thought and belief—and Davidson’s claim is rather that this process must encompass, among other things, arriving at an appreciation that beliefs can be false.

in a non-S situation and the other does not. R is not forthcoming. “We, looking on, will judge that the first creature made a mistake”, and the creatures themselves are “in a position” to do so too. It doesn't seem obligatory to see Davidson as claiming that the creatures are “in a position” to judge that there has been an error in the sense that they already have the capacity to make such judgments. We may take his point to simply be that, whether or not the creatures yet have the cognitive tools to recognize the mistake as a mistake, in the situation he describes there is at least a mistake for them to recognize. They are better positioned to appreciate the possibility of error than is a creature that has never been presented with any.

But this leads directly to the second puzzling feature of the passage. If the significant feature of the scenario Davidson describes is just that it involves a deviant reaction, a reaction that departs from a regularity, the presence of the second creature is superfluous. The irregularity in the first creature's dealings with the environment, considered in isolation from what may be transpiring with the second creature, does the trick. Suppose an isolated creature regularly produces behavior B in and only in situation S and thereby receives reward R. Now the creature performs B in a non-S situation and R does not ensue. It seems just as likely that “we, looking on” will find a mistake here as in the original scenario. Why isn't the creature just as much “in a position” to draw that conclusion, in the thin sense now at stake, as before?

The triangulation thesis is a claim about what is *necessary* to acquire the capacity for thought. An argument for this thesis must work to show that participation in instances of triangulation is the *only* route by which one could acquire that capacity. One way we might try to articulate the problem with Davidson's story is that while the story shows that triangulation is *one* route to acquiring the idea of error, it does not show it is the only route, and so does not lend

any support to the claim of necessity.¹⁰ But in fact, this understates the problem, which is that Davidson's story doesn't show how triangulation might bear on acquisition of the idea of error at all. The social aspect of Davidson's story is functionless. To requote Davidson's description of the scenario: "one creature reacts in a way previously associated by both creatures with a certain sort of situation, but the other does not...if the anticipated danger or opportunity fails to materialize, a place exists for the notion of a mistake." The question is why it is relevant that both creatures "previously associated" the reaction with a certain sort of situation. Surely there being a place for the notion of a mistake for the first creature depends on *its* previous conditioning, on *its* having an "association" or expectation that is now thwarted. Suppose the second creature is conditioned differently, so that the danger or opportunity now failing to materialize does not violate any expectations it has. How could this make a difference to the first creature? Why isn't it in precisely the same position as before to appreciate that it has made a mistake? The basis for that appreciation, again, would be the thwarting of *its* expectation. Nothing Davidson says in the quoted passage shows why this simple thought is not the correct view of what creates a "place" for the notion of a mistake in the situation he describes; there is thus no explanation of the role played by the second creature in bringing the possibility of error to the attention of the first creature.

Nor is this a matter of selective quotation. So far as I can see, all of Davidson's discussions of how triangulation is supposed to make available an awareness of the possibility of error contain the same considerable lacuna.¹¹ At least, that is so insofar as the argument from error is distinguished from the argument from object-directedness. In one or two places Davidson does

¹⁰ This is Child's objection to his mentalistic version of the argument: see *Causality, Interpretation and the Mind*, p. 19.

¹¹ See for example the discussions at "The Emergence of Thought", p. 129 and "Externalisms", p. 5.

not clearly distinguish the two questions quoted at the end of the introduction above; in those places, the line of thought we have just discussed is superseded by a variant of the line of thought we are going to discuss next.¹² This is one consideration that leads me to regard the latter as more fundamental to Davidson's thinking than the former; another consideration is the flimsiness, as we have just seen, of the former.

2. The argument from object-directedness

2.1 Suppose you ring a bell, and a dog salivates. Or you point to a table, and a child says, "Table".¹³ Observing these interactions, we will be inclined to say that the dog was responding to the bell's ringing and the child to the table (or if we are looking for an event, to our ostension of the table). In saying this, we are saying, of course, that the ringing of the bell caused the salivation, and that the ostension of the table caused the child's utterance. But that appears not to be all we're saying. The dog's salivation, to focus on the first case, is the terminus of a vastly long causal sequence; the sequence begins much farther back with (say) the Big Bang, and proceeds through a great many intervening events that include the bell's ringing but also, further in, sound waves traveling from the bell to the dog, vibrations of the dog's ear drum, a series of events in the dog's inner ear, impulses traveling down the cochlear nerve and then processing in the dog's brain. We would resist saying that the salivation was a response on the part of the dog to any of these other events, however. In salivating, the dog is not responding *to* some event in its brain, still less to something that happened last week or ten billion years ago, even if all of these events are causally upstream of its response. The salivation, or so we ordinarily suppose, is

¹² See, for example, the last few pages of "The Social Aspect of Language".

¹³ These examples are discussed at pp. 117-121 of "The Second Person".

related to the ringing of the bell in a way that it is not related to these other causes.

Just to have a label, let us say that we conceive the salivation as an *object-directed response* whose *object* is the event of the bell's ringing. We are already in a position to note two features of this relationship. 1) It is far more discriminating than the causal relationship: usually, we take a given bit of behavior to be a response to only one of its causes. 2) In many if not all cases, we take the object of a creature's response to be, as Davidson likes to put it, a "distal" rather than a "proximal" cause of the behavior—that is to say, something further out than an impingement on the surface of the creature's body. Typically, we take the response to be directed to a middle-sized event or object in the creature's local environment.¹⁴

To conceive a bit of behavior as an object-directed response to a cause C is evidently to suppose that C, as opposed to events farther out or further in, has some distinctive bearing on what that creature is doing, on what it is up to. One obvious basis for regarding C as having such a bearing would be if C is the object of a thought or propositional attitude on the part of the creature, and if the behavior at issue involves the creature's acting upon that thought or attitude.

We shall return to the question of what is involved in viewing a creature as responding to a cause in section 2.6. For the moment, however, what we need to register is that Davidson assumes that any creature that can think at all must be a producer of object-directed responses. I propose to grant this assumption. It follows that a necessary condition on object-directed responsiveness is also a necessary condition on thought. Davidson thinks he can show that

¹⁴ Neither of these features require us to deny that sentences of the form, "x's f-ing was a response to e," are extensional. I believe that in this regard they are exactly on par with sentences of the form, "x's f-ing was caused by e": in both cases we have extensionality, and in both cases there will nonetheless be pragmatic considerations, usually having to do with questions of explanation, governing which of the possible co-designating expressions we choose to employ in a given case. The difference pointed out in the text lies not in the extensionality of the respective contexts but in the extensions of the respective relationships: there will be many e such that e (however described) caused x's f-ing but x's f-ing was not a response to e (however described). Davidson himself says nothing on this matter, and it will not bear on our evaluation of his argument.

participation in instances of triangulation is necessary for having the capacity to produce object-directed responses. That is the argument we will now examine.

2.2 Davidson couches his fullest exposition of this argument in terms of the aforementioned examples of the dog and child.¹⁵ He begins by acknowledging that we take the dog to be responding to the ringing of the bell and the child to the table, rather than to, say, more proximate stimuli like sensory excitations. But, he asks, why do we do so? What motivates or grounds our perception that the child and dog are responding to these particular items among the countless involved in the relevant causal sequences? On reflection, our choice can seem arbitrary:

[A]s psychologists have noticed, there is a problem about the stimulus. In the case of the dog, why say the stimulus is the ringing of the bell? Why couldn't it be the vibration of the air close to the ears of the dog—or even the stimulation of its nerve endings? Certainly if the air were made to vibrate, in the same way the bell makes it vibrate, it would make no difference to the behavior of the dog. And if the right nerve endings were activated in the right way, there would still be no difference.

Given the availability of more proximate causes, why do we insist on locating the “stimulus” farther out on the causal sequence? Davidson's answer is as follows:

What explains the fact that it seems so natural to say the dog is responding to the bell, the child to tables? It seems natural to us because it *is* natural—to us. Just as the dog and the child respond in similar ways to certain stimuli, so do we. It is we who find it natural to group together the various salivations of the dog; and the events in the world that we effortlessly notice and group together that are causally linked to the dog's behavior are ringings of the bell.

Reverting to the example of the child, Davidson promptly draws the following conclusion from these reflections:

Involved in our picture there are now not two but three similarity patterns. The child finds tables similar; we find tables similar; and we find the child's responses in the

¹⁵ This discussion, and the three block quotes to follow, are from *ibid.*, pp. 118-119.

presence of tables similar. It now makes sense for us to call the responses of the child responses to tables...It is a form of triangulation: one line goes from the child in the direction of the table, one line goes from us in the direction of the table, and the third line goes between us and the child. Where the lines from the child to table and us to table converge "the" stimulus is located... [T]he kind of triangulation I have described, while not *sufficient* to establish that a creature has a concept of a particular object or kind of object, is *necessary* if there is to be any answer at all to the question what its concepts are concepts of.

My primary objection to the argument contained in these passages is that its premises—and we will have to do some work to figure out what the premises are supposed to be—do not pass muster. Nonetheless, it will help in fixing ideas to first consider some questions that arise about the conclusion of the argument.

2.3 The last sentence of the final block quote, considered by itself, might look like an epistemological remark: we cannot arrive at "any answer" to the question of what a creature is responding to (hence of what its concepts are of) unless we first triangulate with the creature in the manner described. That much seems undeniable; obviously, we won't have any view of what the dog is responding to in advance of actually observing the behavior and matching it up with something in the environment. But Davidson is making a stronger claim. He is claiming that triangulation is necessary if there is to be a *right* answer to the question he raises. Absent our responses to the dog's responses, there's simply no fact of the matter about what the dog is responding to. He is careful to warn off a reading that has him stopping short at the epistemological point: "The problem is not, I should stress, one of verifying what objects or events a creature is responding to; the problem is that without a second creature responding to the first, there can be no answer to the question."¹⁶

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 119. Here's a passage from a different article to reinforce the point:

For until the triangle is completed connecting two creatures and each creature with common features of

But if the claim is that our triangulating with a creature is actually what determines the object of its response, this seems to have a peculiar epistemological implication. It seems to render our judgments about the objects of other creatures' responses into self-fulfilling prophecies. By judging that the dog is responding to the bell, we thereby make it so. It would appear to follow that it's impossible for us to be wrong about what a creature responding to. And this raises the question whether Davidson's story leaves room for judgments properly so-called at all: according to a familiar view of objectivity (one Davidson himself endorses), application of doxastic notions like judgment presupposes the possibility of error.

Davidson thinks that this worry is defused by adopting a more nuanced view of the role of triangulation than his argument might at first blush seem to imply. What the reflections on the dog and the child show, according to Davidson, is not that the objects of a creature's responses are fixed one-by-one by separate instances of triangulation, but that a creature who makes object-directed responses must have a history of engaging in triangulation with other creatures. In other words, the externalist necessary condition that Davidson thinks he has uncovered applies at the level of general capacity rather than particular exemplification; it is a matter of what must be in place for a creature to have the capacity for object-directed responsiveness, not of what must happen on each and every occasion that this capacity is exercised. That is part of the reason why, as I noted at the beginning, Davidson's account should not be understood as providing criteria for determining the content of any particular thought or utterance. Freed of this implication, the view leaves open, as any plausible view surely must, that creatures can produce

the world, there can be no answer to the question whether a creature, in discriminating between stimuli, is discriminating between stimuli at the sensory surfaces or somewhere further out, or further in. Without this sharing of reactions to common stimuli, thought and speech would have no particular content—that is, no content at all. It takes two points of view to give a location to the cause of a thought, and thus to define its content. We may think of it as a form of triangulation.... (“Three Varieties of Knowledge”, pp. 212-213).

object-directed responses when no one is around to observe them. And it leaves open that we may sometimes be in error about what another creature is responding to.

Another initial perplexity about the quoted passages is the fact that in the scenarios Davidson describes, we, the observers of the dog and child, already have the capacity for thought. Davidson describes us as finding it natural to *say* that the dog is responding to the bell and the child to the table; I recast his claim as one about what we find it natural to *judge*, and it is clear the point can be put either way. But if Davidson's thesis were that a precondition for object-directed responsiveness is another creature's making a judgment about what one is responding to, and if, as Davidson thinks, object-directed responsiveness is a precondition for thought, an obvious regress would ensue. For it would follow that the second creature can be in a position to make a judgment about one's responses only in virtue of a third creature's having previously made such judgments about its responses. The implication iterates. The problem is not that we are left with no explanation of how thought arose in the first place—it's not clear why Davidson should be obligated to provide that—but that the account implies that thought couldn't have arisen at all.

Davidson anticipates this worry as well. He suggests that we can distill from the story of our interactions with the dog and child a causal nexus that is describable in non-intentional, non-semantic terms, and hence fit to obtain in cases where both creatures do not yet have thought. It is this nexus that really matters for fixing the object of a dog's or child's response; the fact that we are already thinkers and speakers turns out to be an inessential feature of the story.

Reflecting on the case of the child learning a language, Davidson writes, "If we ignore the difference between passing on an established meaning and the creation of a new one, the difference between teacher and innovator fades, and with it what distinguishes teacher and

learner. Paring down the scenario even further, we can imagine a sort of proto-ostension before there is the general grasp of language that allows us to get more out of ostension than goes into it.”¹⁷ What is left in this stripped-down scenario is simply that an event in the shared environment of two creatures causes them both to react, and then both creatures are further caused to react by the reaction of the other. This is a situation, as Davidson points out, that “occurs with great frequency among animals that neither think nor talk.”¹⁸ And it this causal triangle, not the more sophisticated and unequal dynamic of a teacher and learner, that Davidson wants to present as a necessary condition for object-directed responsiveness.

However, this move raises a number of questions. For one thing, the conclusion may now seem to lose contact with the train of thought that was supposed to motivate it. That train of thought certainly appears to concern the basis for our judgments about other creatures’ responses—an impression our examination of it will shortly reinforce—and it’s thus unobvious how it is supposed to fund a conclusion that is not itself stated in terms of those judgments. For another thing, the bare causal relations with which Davidson’s move leaves us are far less equipped to home in on particular events, hence to fix the object of a response, than the judgments with which we began. We can see how the requirement that the object of a response be a shared cause of two creature’s behavior would rule out causes much further *in* than bells or tables. Impingements on sensory receptors, for example, aren’t shared; the dog has his eardrums and we have ours. But the requirement does not seem able to rule out any of the infinite number of causes that are further *out* than the bell or table. It’s true, as was just mentioned, that Davidson doesn’t purport to offer a complete account of what determines the object of given responses. But we may well worry that the shared-cause requirement is so indiscriminating that

¹⁷ “Seeing Through Language”, p. 26.

¹⁸ Ibid.

it can seem motivated only if we elide, as Davidson sometimes seems to do, the difference between it and the requirement stated in terms of judgment.¹⁹

Davidson does say something more about what must be added to the basic causal triangle in order to yield thought, but what he says does not address the current puzzlement, and introduces one of its own. In order for thought to arise, says Davidson, “the interactions must be made available to the interacting creatures.”²⁰ Or as he puts it elsewhere, “If the two people now note each other’s reactions (in the case of language, verbal reactions), each can correlate these observed reactions with his or her stimuli from the world. A common cause has been determined. The triangle which gives content to thought and speech is complete.”²¹ To “note a reaction” is to recognize that that reaction has taken place, which entails believing that the reaction has taken place. Only a creature that can have propositional attitudes can note anything. It would then appear that on Davidson’s account the process by which one acquires thought requires that one already be able to think.

This objection, which is reminiscent of our first puzzle about the argument from error, may seem a cheap shot. After all, Davidson disclaims an ambition to explain precisely how someone first acquires thought. Indeed, he doubts that this is possible: “perhaps there is no answer that does not lead in a circle, for a non-circular answer would tell us how to account for intensionality

¹⁹ Would it help to claim on Davidson’s behalf that the object of a response is in the typical case the *most proximate* shared cause? (This suggestion is made by Peter Pagin: see “Semantic Triangulation”, p. 202.) There are two problems with this. First, the stipulation seems arbitrary: what in our ordinary understanding of how people and animals engage with their environment supports it? (More on the importance of our ordinary understanding later.) Second, there is no guarantee that the ringing of the bell is the most proximate shared cause of our and the dog’s behavior. If we and the dog are standing close together, couldn’t the sound travel to our ears, at least up to a certain point, via the same vibrations of the air? Is there some non-arbitrary way of individuating events of the air vibrating that would yield a negative answer to this question?

²⁰ “The Second Person”, p. 120.

²¹ “Three Varieties of Knowledge”, p. 213.

in non-intensional terms.”²² Moreover, “the abilities to speak, perceive and think develop together, gradually.”²³ So he sees himself as describing in very broad terms a process that is both gradual and resistant to a step-by-step elucidation. This all fair enough, but it’s hard to see how it helps. Time and again, Davidson suggests that the transition into thought is effected by a creature’s cottoning on to the fact that it and another creature are jointly triangulating on particular events in the world. There is a real question how such a cottoning-on could in any sense be part of the *explanation* of the acquisition of the capacity for thought, given that it presupposes that capacity. According to Davidson, thought arrives when the triangulating creatures “take cognitive advantage of the three-way relation.”²⁴ The question is why this circle, being vanishingly small, isn’t vicious.

That concludes my brief survey of complications pertaining to the argument’s conclusion. All of these matters could be pursued further than I have taken them here. But as I have said, my primary objection is that the premises of the argument are untenable. If that is so, questions about the interpretation of its conclusion are academic.

2.4 Let us turn, then, to the premises. I suggest that we can extract the following line of thought from the series of passages quoted in section 2.2. Stated in terms of the example of the dog, the first claim is that there is nothing in the situation of the salivating dog, considered in itself, in virtue of which the ringing of the bell rather than some other event in the causal sequence should count as the “stimulus”, as what the dog’s salivation is a response *to*. This is followed by a second claim: that the explanation for our linking the dog’s behavior to that

²² “Seeing Through Language”, p. 25.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

²⁴ “The Second Person”, p. 120.

particular cause lies not in our sensitivity to any such independent feature of the situation (for there is none), but just in its being “natural” to us to fix upon that kind of event. However, the proper conclusion to draw from these two claims, says Davidson, is not that there is no fact about what the dog or child is responding to. There *is* something that differentiates the ringing of the bell and the table from causes farther out and further in—namely, these are the causes we fix upon. Our reactions introduce another element into the “picture”, one which serves to single out certain items on the causal sequences. The proper conclusion to draw is then that object-directed responsiveness can be a real feature of behavior, but that the conditions that constitute it are not in view so long as we “consider a creature by itself”: “If we consider a single creature by itself, its responses, no matter how complex, cannot show that it is reacting to, or thinking about events a certain distance away rather than, say, on its skin.”²⁵ For the conditions that fix the object of a response implicate our own (or at least someone else’s) reactions to the creature whose behavior is in question.

It would be helpful to have a more general statement of this argument, one that isn’t couched in terms of the specific examples Davidson discusses. We can restate the two claims I ascribed to Davidson as follows:

1. There is nothing in the scene of a creature inhabiting its environment, considered independently of our own judgments on the matter, that determines the creature’s behavior on a given occasion as a response *to* one of the events on the causal sequence producing it rather than another.
2. We, observing the creature’s behavior, judge it to be responding to the cause that we do—typically, an event involving a local, middle-sized object—simply because that’s the kind of event we find it natural to fix upon.

On the basis of 1 and 2, Davidson concludes:

3. If the creature’s behavior is to count as a response to one of its causes rather than

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

another, this fact must be partly constituted by another creature's judgments about (or at least reactions to) that behavior.

The parenthetical bit in the statement of the conclusion reflects an interpretive puzzle that I have already mentioned and will not further pursue.

It may not be obvious that claims 1 and 2 are the right thing to take away from the somewhat impressionistic passages under consideration. So let us marshal some further textual evidence. First is a passage in which Davidson discusses Alex, the psychologist Irene Pepperberg's famous 'talking' parrot.²⁶ Notoriously grand claims have been made on behalf of Alex's mental capacities, on the basis of such evidence as his being disposed to utter, "Color," when presented with a bunch of like-colored, differently shaped objects and asked "What's the same?" Unsurprisingly, Davidson demurs at ascribing concepts and thoughts to Alex. But he also wants to examine our assumption that Alex is so much as responding to the presence of the objects:

What is it that tells us that the stimulus (cause) of Alex's 'answer' to the question 'What's the same?' isn't the activation of certain rods and cones in his eyes, or the firing of certain optic nerves, or the photons bouncing off surfaces we see as the same color?" All of these causes, and endless more, are common to the cases where Alex emitted the sound, 'Color'. We have no grounds for choosing one of these causes over the others.²⁷

"We have no grounds for choosing..." is surely not expressing a merely epistemological point; the claim is not that there is some limitation in our particular perspective obstructing our view of the facts about which cause Alex is responding to. The claim is rather that there simply are no such independent facts to which our choice, our judgment, is answerable. This is claim 1.

Or consider the following passage:

In the end, we must ask this notion of what comes naturally to do serious work. For how do we decide whether [an] infant is responding to [a] noise, or rather to the vibrations of its eardrum, or to the signals from the inner ear to the brain? It hardly

²⁶ See Pepperberg, *The Alex Studies: Cognitive and Communicative Abilities of Grey Parrots*.

²⁷ "Interpretation: Hard in Theory, Easy in Practice", p. 34.

matters when we are in a position to specify an appropriate stimulus at any of various points along the causal chain from noise source to brain. But if we think of responses to the mother, most of us have no idea what class of neural stimuli touch off the relevantly similar responses; the best we can do is to say it is the class of stimuli (sense-data, appearances, etc.) caused by the mother. That is why, when we have taught the child to say 'Mama' when stimulated by the mother, we conclude that the child means that its mother is present (rather than that it is receiving a certain neural input).²⁸

Of course, with respect to a creature that can think and talk, it would be indefensible to maintain that "it hardly matters" where we locate the stimulus. If I say, "There goes Mama," you will not have understood me if you suppose I am talking about vibrations of my eardrum. But anyone who can think and talk already has a long history of triangulation, and Davidson will claim that it is that history that serves to fix the object-directedness of a given utterance. Davidson's focus in this passage is restricted to small children and non-human animals, to those just beginning initiation into thought and to those that (as Davidson sees it) will forever remain uninitiated. And his claim is clearly that in these cases, our decision about which cause to identify as the object of a response is accountable to nothing. That is claim 1. But, says Davidson, it doesn't follow we will choose at random. Our decision is guided not by the facts but by "what comes naturally" to us—in particular, by our being so constituted that the mother is the only cause that, given our dispositions and capacities, we are readily "in a position to specify". That is claim 2.

It is illuminating to see the line of thought here ascribed to Davidson as an instance of a deflationary strategy familiar from other areas of metaphysics. Prior to scrutinizing the matter in the way Davidson wishes us to, we will likely be inclined to suppose that our judgments about what a non-linguistic creature is responding to answer for their truth or falsity to features of the behavior that are in place in advance of our so judging—to "objective" features of the behavior,

²⁸ Davidson's self-written entry in Guttenplan (ed), *A Companion to the Philosophy of Mind*, p. 234.

in one familiar sense of that term. And if we suppose this, we will likely further suppose that the explanation for our making the particular judgments that we do lies in our sensitivity to those features. But according to Davidson, reflection shows that our judgments about what a creature is responding to, insofar as they purport to discriminate in favor of certain causes of behavior and against others, are not plausibly understood in these terms. For there is really nothing about the behavior, considered in and of itself, that licenses viewing it as specially linked to certain of its causes. What explains our favoritism toward these causes is not something that we discover in the behavior, but something we bring to it, namely, our “natural” dispositions to attend to certain kinds of events and ignore others. This is a deflationary or debunking move of just the sort employed in arguments for subjectivism about, say, moral value. In both cases, a construal of our judgments we might initially find tempting—that our judgments track an independent reality—is allegedly revealed to be a mistake. And the parallel goes farther. As with certain forms of subjectivism, we are supposed to be able to recover the idea that our judgments are truth-evaluable—indeed, largely true—by taking our judgments, and perhaps other attitudes and reactions, to partially constitute the very states of affairs they concern.

2.5 What is Davidson’s justification for claims 1 and 2? One initial point here is that they do not seem intended as wholly independent premises; they seem to be a kind of package. Is one claim, then, supposed to entail the other? If so, which one, and what is its own justification?

It might seem that claim 2 is intended as prior in the order of justification. This is the claim, recall, that we regard a particular cause as the object of a creature’s response simply because it comes naturally to us to attend to causes of that sort and to ignore or overlook the others. The passages under consideration can give the impression that Davidson views this as his

fundamental point, with the first claim seen to follow from it: once we realize that we fix on distal causes simply because it comes naturally to us to do so, we're supposed to realize that there's no reason to think that our doing so correlates with some independent fact of the matter. Moreover, given that the second claim concerns the question of how one creature arrives at an understanding of the behavior of another, it seems the place to look if we want to understand Davidson's argument for the triangulation thesis as a development of his earlier views on interpretation.

In fact, I think this proposal gets things backwards. We must regard Davidson as viewing the second claim as a corollary of the first, and not the other way around. Otherwise he has no intelligible basis for the second claim.

Davidson is certainly right that it comes naturally to us notice certain kinds of objects and events and to ignore others, to find certain features of things salient and not others, to pick up on certain similarities among objects and not others. It comes naturally to us, for example, to notice that two tables are similar in respect of their both being tables, but not (to use an example of Kripke) to notice that a table and a-chair-found-at-the-base-of-the-Eiffel-Tower are similar in respect of their sharing the property of being a-table-or-(a-chair-found-at-the-base-of-the-Eiffel-Tower).²⁹ Part of the point of saying that dispositions like these come "naturally" to us is to register that they generally operate below the level of judgment and reflection: most of us do not possess the former disposition because we at some point explicitly judged that we have reason to attend to the property of table-ness. And part of the point of calling the dispositions "natural" is to register that they have a strong innate basis. Any recognitional capacities and attentional dispositions that we acquire through training evolve out of dispositions which were already

²⁹ *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, p. 19.

programmed in at birth. It could not be otherwise. As Davidson puts it, "Before there can be learning, there must be unlearned modes of generalization."³⁰

For this reason, it is surely undeniable that our judgments about the objects of other creatures' responses depend upon our possession of such "natural" dispositions. The judgments depend upon these facts in the following sense: had we been born with a sufficiently different set of such dispositions, we wouldn't now be in a position to take the dog's salivation to be a response to the ringing of the bell, or to take the child to be responding to the table.

The problem is that our judgments about what other creatures are responding to are not unique in this regard. To the extent that the mundane considerations just retailed can be said to show that our "natural" dispositions play a role in shaping our judgments about what other creatures respond to, these considerations show that natural dispositions play a role in shaping *all* of our judgments. Our natural dispositions condition everything we think and say, at least in the minimal sense just given: were our dispositions sufficiently different, we wouldn't say or think those things. This is the circumstance Wittgenstein makes vivid with his story of the child who cannot so much as learn to count because what "comes natural to him" is not what comes natural to us.³¹ In fact, this is Davidson's point as well: unlearned modes of generalization are the foothold for *all* learning. There is nothing here to provide the basis for a distinctive thesis about our judgments about the object-directed responses of others.

Of course, Davidson claims more than that our judgments about the objects of others' responses are conditioned by "what comes naturally to us," something which could equally be said of all our judgments. He thinks that, as philosophers seeking an explanation of our judgments about the objects of others' responses, "we must ask this notion of what comes

³⁰ "Seeing Through Language", p. 26.

³¹ *Philosophical Investigations*, §185ff.

naturally to do serious work” (this is from the quotation in 2.4 about the infant and the mother). This serious work, as we have seen, is to provide the *whole* explanation for these judgments. It is not just that we base these judgments on reasons that we would not be in a position to appreciate were it not for our natural dispositions and capacities. The point is that we do not base these judgments on reasons, “grounds”, at all, and so we need an appeal to our natural dispositions to fill the explanatory gap left by the absence of grounds. But this justification for the second claim depends upon the first claim. The explanatory gap is created precisely by the first claim’s denial that our judgments about what an animal is responding to are guided by our appreciation of some independent fact of the matter.

Absent the first claim, there seems no way of getting from the unremarkable fact that our natural dispositions condition our judgments about the objects of responses to the claim that our having these dispositions provides the whole explanation for these judgments—that we make these judgments *simply* because of what comes naturally to us. The unremarkable fact cannot show this on its own, not unless it shows that our natural dispositions provide the whole explanation of *all* of our judgments.

I conclude that claim 1 is fundamental; claim 2 is motivated only as a corollary to it.

2.6 Davidson does not offer anything we would want to call an argument for claim 1. To the extent that he makes a case for the claim, it is to be found in the passages quoted earlier and in comparable passages scattered throughout his later essays. Once we subtract from these passages any misleading hint that claim 2 is doing justificatory work, what remains is only this: Davidson apparently assumes that the truth of claim 1 will be evident as soon as we take an honest look at the matter. He takes it that when we reflect clearheadedly on the examples he puts

before us—of the dog, the parrot, the baby and so on—we will be brought to realize that we simply have no justification, no “grounds”, for taking the cited behavior to be a response to one item on the triggering causal sequence rather than another. The truth, once you really think about it, is that it “hardly matters” whether we take such animals to be responding to one cause rather than another.³²

But the view of non-linguistic animals that Davidson encourages upon us is not an unavoidable deliverance of clearheaded reflection. In fact, it is insupportable. The presumption that an animal's responses are directed to things *out there*—in the world of middle-sized objects and events—is essential to our ordinary understanding of animal life. The role it plays in this understanding gives us all the “grounds” for the presumption that should be required.

The very generality and abstractness of the presumption may obscure its role, so let us begin with something more concrete. Consider the capacity many animals have to flee from threats. When an animal is caused to flee, say by the appearance of a predator, there will of course be proximal stimuli mediating that causal connection. But the animal does not flee *from* the proximal stimuli. It flees from the predator. In so doing, it is responding *to* the predator. What this simple example illustrates is that the idea of a distal-object-directed response is built into our ordinary concepts for thinking about animal behavior. A proximal stimulus is simply not the kind of thing from which an animal flees. To refrain from conceiving an animal as responding to distal events and objects is to refrain from conceiving it as ever fleeing from anything. Or, by the same token, as playing with, watching over, hiding from, searching for, returning to, threatening, fighting with, attacking, defending territory from, following, stalking, herding,

³² The question of what case Davidson offers for claim 1 is the question of what he actually says in support of this claim. The question must be distinguished from another: what views or assumptions are the real source—perhaps unstated, perhaps unknown to Davidson himself—of his attraction to claim 1? The latter question is a meaningful and important one, but I cannot properly address it here.

gathering, burying, stealing, grooming, greeting, warning, etc. All of these activities are forms of responsiveness directed to middle-sized material objects, and events involving such objects, in the animal's environment.

But the point is not simply that our ordinary ways of conceptualizing animal behavior, such as the concept of *fleeing from*, link the behavior to distal causes. That might sound like something Davidson could allow; his position would then be that we have no "grounds" for employing such a concept rather than some hypothetical alternative that would link the same behavior to a more proximal or distal cause. What gives the lie to this attitude is that our conceiving an animal as, say, fleeing from a predator, is not an isolated quirk on our part, disconnected from anything else we know or believe. It is an integral part of a larger conception that we constantly bring to bear in our observations and reflections on the behavior of parrots, dogs, nine-month-old babies and other non-rational animals. The ways of conceiving animal behavior at stake here have their home in this larger conception of animal life.

The conception involves a number of interrelated components. There is first of all an idea of perceptual awareness; we think of an animal as in perceptual touch with at least some of what is going on around it. Second, we view an animal as a self-mover—as having the power to go from place to place of its own accord and to intervene bodily in its environment. And third, we take an animal to be driven to satisfy basic biological needs. These components fit together in our thinking in a characteristic pattern: we see an animal's behavior as a function of its drives and its perceptual sensitivity to surrounding circumstances. Further elements are incorporated on a case-by-case basis. Typically, we see an animal's range of behavior as constrained by a limited (but to some degree plastic) repertoire of strategies for satisfying its drives. And we will sometimes ascribe further states and capacities that connect to the three basic components. For

example, we may credit the dog in Davidson's example with an expectation of food, one engendered by a process of conditioning whose explanation will make reference to the dog's drives and perceptual capacities. Or we may see an animal as capable of certain affective responses, such as fear or excitement, which in turn will influence its behavior.

This is to describe a very general conceptual framework for thinking about animal life, one whose details will be filled in quite differently for different species. But it does not take much scrutiny of our everyday thought in terms of this framework, or of the various sciences that attempt to improve upon and systematize that thought (ethology, ecology, comparative psychology, animal cognition), to realize that our ascriptions on this front are holistic in a way analogous to the holism Davidson famously brought to our attention in the interpretation of speakers. The question of what an animal is capable of perceiving, for example, cannot be answered simply by investigating what kinds of discriminations its sensory apparatus can make. It requires thinking about the role perception plays in putting the animal in touch with features of its environment relevant to pursuit of the satisfaction of its drives. The same point goes for each of the other elements of the framework.

In particular, the same point goes for our conceptions of the animal's behavior. The holism is at work, to return to our example, when we walk near a squirrel and take its subsequent behavior of running up a nearby tree to be a response to our approach, namely a response of *fleeing from* our approach. Flight is a strategy of threat avoidance. Light frequencies, impingements on the retina, neural activity further in, etc.—none of these are potential threats to a squirrel. They are not, for example, going to eat it. Predators of squirrels are middle-sized moving objects like us. So squirrels are driven to flee from such objects. The more systematic observations of scientists yield subtler patterns. Urban squirrels, habituated to a human presence

that proves largely benign, allow humans to get closer to them than do squirrels in the wild. The closer a squirrel is to a refuge (such as a tree), the closer it will allow a creature to get to it before it flees.³³ There is evidence that some animals vary their behavior in the presence of a potential predator depending on what can be seen from the potential predator's perspective (as determined by, among other things, its direction of gaze).³⁴ And so on. These are patterns at the level of an animal's transactions with local, middle-sized objects, and they are patterns described and made intelligible in terms of our conception.

The point, then, is that we *do* have grounds, indeed extremely compelling grounds, for linking animal behavior to distal causes. The grounds are constituted by our holistically supported conception of the life of whatever species of animal is in question. We have the same grounds for viewing animals as perceptually sensitive to local material objects and events. And we have the same grounds for viewing animals as driven to avoid predators, seek mates and so forth. Each of these supports the others, and together they add up to a conception of an animal's life as taking place at the level of its engagement with its local middle-sized surroundings, and not with, say, excitations of its sensory receptors.

I do not mean to suggest that our ordinary conception of animal life, as I am calling it, is a hermetically sealed area of our thought, immune to outside influences. Of course sciences such as evolutionary biology and cognitive science affect our view of the character of an animal's drives and perceptual and behavioral capacities. Acknowledging this influence is no problem from the present perspective; we go astray only if we suppose that the deliverances of these

³³ Dill. and Houtman, "The influence of distance to refuge on flight initiation distance in the gray squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*)".

³⁴ For a recent account of evidence apparently supporting this hypothesis, see Watve et. al, "Bee-eaters (*Merops orientalis*) respond to what a predator can see." It is much debated whether results in this vein show that animals have a "theory of mind": see Heyes, "Theory of Mind in Nonhuman Primates" and the accompanying commentary. Nothing I claim in the text requires a positive answer to that question.

sciences threaten the very status of the ordinary conception of life, perhaps by providing a competing and more scientifically respectable alternative. This mistake is more tempting in the case of cognitive science, so let me say a word about that case.

It is true that cognitive science, at least in its classical information-processing form, treats proximal stimuli as the input into an organismic system. This is so when the organism in question is a human being no less than when it is a non-thinking, non-speaking animal. But cognitive scientific theorizing about the human mind is not in conflict with the commonsense view that human perceptual experience, thought and action is directed toward distal events and objects. Cognitive scientific theories are “subpersonal”, i.e., theories of a human being’s internal machinery, in particular of the neurophysiological systems that enable mental life. The fact that these systems can be regarded as processing, hence responding to, proximal stimuli does not imply that the human’s own responses are directed toward such stimuli. On the contrary, the theories in question *assume* that human perception, thought, speech and action are all in the basic cases directed to the world outside the body; explaining what makes these phenomena possible, so understood, is precisely what these theories aim to do. (Consider, for example, Marr’s oft-cited view that the task of the visual system is to compute from the initial retinal stimuli a 3D representation of the visible environment, including such things as the shapes and locations of material objects.) There is absolutely no reason to think the situation is any different when our object of study is a non-human animal. To the extent that it pays to treat what goes on inside an animal as the processing of information contained in proximal sensory input, it will be in the service of understanding the mechanisms that make possible the states, capacities and behaviors ascribed to the animal under the ordinary conception.³⁵

³⁵ It is worth noting in this context the recent shift in some cognitive-scientific quarters toward a more

A different reason for having doubts about the status of the ordinary conception of non-human animal life might be a suspicion that the conception is guilty of anthropomorphism. It does seem the case, historically, that a number of philosophers and scientists have had this suspicion. But it is misplaced. We do not have to choose between Davidson's bare vision of an animal driven to and fro by undifferentiated causal sequences passing through its body, and the sentimental pet owner's view of an animal as a full-fledged thinker and agent who just happens to be unusually taciturn. The conception of animal life we've been discussing can be understood as charting a middle course. There are, broadly speaking, two different ways of so understanding it. The first approach is to view the states and capacities ascribed to animals under this conception as analogous to, but fundamentally distinct from, those that we ascribe to adult human beings (and to other full-fledged thinkers and agents, such as they may be). The second approach is to see the contrast between the states and capacities assigned to (non-human) animals and those assigned to human beings as one not of kind but, as it were, of quantity.

This distinction between approaches has substance only relative to some specific determination of what it is to have states and capacities that are of the 'same kind' as those possessed by a human being. A plausible answer is that the distinguishing mark of a full-fledged thinker and agent is its possession of rationality—that is, of a capacity to recognize, assess, and be moved by reasons. On the first approach then, we deny that animals are rational, but hold that what goes into their lives is analogous to what goes into human lives in other ways. An example of this approach is John McDowell's account, indebted to Gadamer, of the "proto-subjectivity"

"embodied" conception of the systems that enable mental life, that is to say, a conception in which these systems are seen as realized not in a nervous system in isolation but only in a *mise-en-scène* involving a creature's whole body and the environment with which it interacts. This shift may suggest a developing awareness that a wholly proximal construal of stimuli is inappropriate even at the subpersonal level. For a discussion of "embodiment" and its challenge to a conception like Marr's, see Clark, "Embodiment and the Philosophy of Mind".

that animals enjoy.³⁶ On the second approach, we grant animals a rational faculty, and take the difference between a human and an animal to lie rather in the more limited field over which the latter's faculty operates. Thus Susan Hurley argues that non-human animals are capable of appreciating and acting for reasons, but only reasons of a highly "context-bound" sort.³⁷ Turning on its head an image that figures prominently in McDowell, Hurley suggests that an animal's "point of view may provide islands of practical rationality rather than a continuous space of reasons."³⁸ Either of these approaches provides what we need to meet the worry about anthropomorphism: a distancing of the ordinary conception of animal life from the idea of a full-fledged subjectivity. Hence we do not need to adjudicate between them here.³⁹

I don't know if Davidson himself is prompted to his denial of "grounds" for the ordinary conception of animal life by either of the two worries just considered; regardless, we have seen that they are ill-judged. A third possible worry we can be confident is not Davidson's own. We might hear the call for grounds for our judgments about the objects of an animal's responses as a call for a *foundation* for those judgments—that is, for something that provides an unqualified justification for those judgments and whose own justification is not dependent on its place in a network of beliefs to which those judgments belong. If the view adopted here about the holistic character of the ordinary conception of animal life is correct, nothing of the sort is available in this case. Davidson has done more than anyone to show that we should not expect foundations

³⁶ *Mind and World*, chapter six, with references to Gadamer. The point of McDowell's conception is to steer between the "Cartesian idea that brutes are automata" and the unrealistic view that animals "possess the spontaneity of understanding", which would involve their being "subjects who are in charge of their thinking, standing ready to reassess what is a reason for what, and to change their responsive propensities accordingly" (p. 114). McDowell encapsulates the resultant conception with the Gadamerian formulation that the difference between subjectivity and proto-subjectivity is the difference between a life lived in the world and a life lived in a succession of environments.

³⁷ "Animal Action in the Space of Reasons".

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 231.

³⁹ I will also pass over the related question of whether any non-human animals should be credited with beliefs and other propositional attitudes. I have not found it necessary to address this question in making the points pertinent to our current topic.

in this sense for our ascriptions of psychological states to human beings; it would be bizarre if he insisted upon in it the case of the analogous ascriptions to non-human animals.

I conclude it is false that it “hardly matters” where we locate the stimulus of the behavior of a non-human animal (or pre-linguistic child). Locating the stimulus at the distal cause is essential to a conception of animal life that is deep-rooted enough to inform all of our observations of animals, and robust enough to provide the material for an array of biological sciences. These sciences inform, and do not compete with, subpersonal theories of an animal’s infrastructure. Moreover, crediting animals with the capacity to produce responses directed to distal objects needn’t involve anthropomorphism. The point is not that non-human animals are human; it is that they are animals, and that we should not forget all that this entails.

Davidson’s question was how minded creatures can come into their capacity to have responses directed toward objects in the world. He argued that the transition requires participation in the kind of social interaction he describes. But in fact, there is no transition to be made, and so no need for bringing in social interaction. Davidson’s question cuts too deep. There may well be features of thought for which we can account only by considering the thinker’s relationships to others, but the very fact that we thinkers can respond *to* things in the external world is not one of them. This fact is secured by our animal nature.

3. Conclusion

We have considered two arguments from Davidson for his transcendental externalism. Both are unsuccessful. The argument from object-directedness fails to take the measure of our ordinary conception of non-human animal life—of its role in our scientific and non-scientific thinking, and correlatively of the justificatory context it provides for our judgments about animal

behavior. And the argument from error fails to provide any credible account of how triangulation might enable an appreciation of error, still less of how it might be necessary for that appreciation. In neither case was any connection to Davidson's earlier work on interpretation forthcoming.

I suggested at the outset that Davidson's preeminence makes the critical neglect of this aspect of his work unfortunate. This is certainly true, but the interest of the arguments we have considered here is not merely *ad hominem*. For one thing, both arguments give explicit expression to attitudes that command a wide, if generally unexamined, appeal. The idea that there is something inherently intersubjective about the concepts of error and objectivity is a lesson we are supposed to have learned at the feet of Wittgenstein; the failure of Davidson's simple argument to this effect encourages us to look more closely at this assumption. And the Cartesian conviction that there is no alternative between being a full-fledged thinker and an automaton continues to retain a grip on some philosophical imaginations. Thinking through this alleged dichotomy in the context of Davidson's argument from object-directedness has led to an appreciation of a kind of intentionality, or at least proto-intentionality, already built into our ordinary concepts of non-human animal behavior. The idea that there is such a thing as animal intentionality, and that it is a purely biological phenomenon, has much potential interest for thinking about human beings: among other things, it raises the question of whether other 'communitarian' accounts of human intentionality might not be guilty of the same error as Davidson's—the error of cutting too deep. And the idea that the biological concepts apt for capturing animal intentionality are autonomous with respect to both cognitive science and evolutionary biology has implications for the naturalistic project in the philosophy of mind: it presses the question of why it should behoove a naturalist to try to reduce *human* intentionality to

cognitive-scientific or evolutionary-biological terms.

Finally, the failure of Davidson's arguments raises anew the old question of whether we can ever hope to arrive at successful transcendental arguments in philosophy, arguments that establish substantive necessary conditions on the possibility of thought. More specifically, the question is what results of this character we can expect if we deny, as Davidson does, that philosophy is in the business of providing reductive explanations of the phenomena of our lives. Reductionists of whatever stripe are accustomed to arrive at surprising and far-reaching claims about the conditions for various phenomena: in holding that a given phenomenon reduces to such-and-such configuration of circumstances, they thereby portray those circumstances as necessary for that phenomenon. Semantic naturalists, for example, who aim to explain mental content in 'naturalistic' terms, almost always end up with views of a transcendental-externalist character. The externalism comes on the scene as soon as we begin casting about for naturalistic properties of mental states and occurrences that might seem to have a chance of constituting their possession of content. As the prominent semantic naturalist Fred Dretske remarks, "I know of no plausible psychosemantics, no plausible theory of what makes one thing *about* another, that isn't externalist in character."⁴⁰ Davidson, early and late, disavowed what Dretske here calls "psychosemantics" as an appropriate or feasible project for philosophy. Nonetheless, he thinks he can demonstrate that a certain social-cum-environmental causal nexus is a condition on the very possibility of thought. That his arguments do not come close to showing this at least opens the question whether, setting aside reductionism, any such demonstration could be a realistic prospect.⁴¹

⁴⁰ "Phenomenal Externalism or If Meanings Ain't in the Head, Where are Qualia?" p. 143.

⁴¹ I'd like to thank David Finkelstein, Hannah Ginsborg and Barry Stroud for helpful comments on early versions of this paper.

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