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Method and Metaphysics: Pragmatist Doubts¹

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1. Introduction

Donald Davidson fits quite neatly into the resurgence of metaphysics that has been evident in Anglophone philosophy for a generation or so. At the same time, however, Davidson has been an important source—indeed, a main source—of inspiration in the development of the increasingly and self-consciously *ametaphysical* variety of pragmatism, associated with Richard Rorty, that has come to the fore during that same time. This makes Davidson a particularly interesting philosopher to engage with if one wants to understand the nature of the pragmatist critique of metaphysics—if there is one. I begin by expanding on the first claim, that Davidson is easily absorbed by metaphysics. Next, I marshal pragmatist reservations toward metaphysics and toward the metaphysical Davidson. In the third section, I ask whether it is not possible, after all, to recover a pragmatizing reading even of this Davidson. Finally, I allow myself to wonder about the force and point of the pragmatist stance against metaphysics. Even if metaphysics remains elusive, however, there is the hope that some light will have been shed on the resources that Davidson offers pragmatists trying to affect the philosophical conversation, and also on what the metaphilosophical divergences are between a naturalistic pragmatism and contemporary analytic metaphysics.

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2. Metaphysical Davidson

The challenge that Davidson poses for pragmatists who wish to co-opt his work is clearly in evidence in a paper from 1977, "The Method of Truth in Metaphysics". It opens as follows:

In sharing a language, in whatever sense this is required for communication, we share a picture of the world that must, in its large features, be true. It follows that in making manifest the large features of our language, we make manifest the large features of reality. One way of pursuing metaphysics is therefore to study the general structure of our language. Davidson, 1984a, 199

Davidson, it seems, unequivocally affirms the idea that there is a way of viewing the world such that all language-users share it, that this common picture can be characterized in terms of its general features, and that these features are ipso facto general features of the world. Metaphysics, then, is what we do when we try to say what these features are. Paying attention to language, tracing its "general structure," we may come to know something about how the world must be. This is the characteristic modality of metaphysics; it uncovers necessary truths.

In Davidson's hands, the concept of truth is methodologically central to metaphysics for a plain reason: "What a theory of truth does for a natural language," Davidson explains, "is reveal structure" (Davidson, 1984a, 205). Metaphysics, then, is recast as the explication of the ontological commitments we must undertake as we develop a recursive theory capable of specifying the truth conditions of any of the infinitely many assertive sentences of a language. Insofar as "such a theory makes its own unavoidable demands" on ontology, we are able to say something very general about how the world must be structured (Davidson, 1984a, 205). The application of the method, which Davidson offers in the final part of the paper, is a matter of considering what is needed to construct "a comprehensive theory of truth." Davidson concludes that unless we wish to deny that a very large number of our most ordinary sentences can be true, we must take it that there are objects and events.

The tight connection between ontology and logical form that Davidson's method exploits depends on his initial claim, that successful communicators share a largely true picture of the world. It is in the context of this claim that Davidson's method of truth yields constraints on what the world must be like. Moreover, this claim and the argument for it are connected to a number of philosophical theses for which Davidson is fa-

mous, claims concerning the nature of minds, of knowledge, and of the interrelations between knowing subjects and the world they occupy. These theses certainly are not derived by the method just described; rather, they make up the underpinnings of it. Yet they appear to be, and are typically treated as, metaphysical theses. Considering this metaphysical underpinning a little more closely will take us into familiar Davidsonian ground.

What is needed to understand the utterances of a speaker and figure out what is on her mind must be available to observation. The stance of the interpreter is methodologically basic. What the interpreter has to go on is what a speaker says and the circumstances of her saying it. The details of the method of radical interpretation need not concern us here. The key idea is that interpretation requires that the interpreter is able to form an idea of what a speaker acting in the world is up to. This implies two things. First, what the interpreter believes about the world must give some indication of what the speaker believes about it—this is obvious when it comes to the perceptual registration of salient facts in the communication situation, but actually pertains much more generally. Second, both the inferential connections between beliefs that the interpreter is disposed to endorse, as well as the action-guiding preferences that the interpreter possesses, must give some indication of what the speaker is likely to say or do given her beliefs. Failing these requirements, that is to say, if the interpreter cannot recognize a basic rationality in the speaker, there is no connection to be made, neither between utterances and action, nor between utterances and the world, and the interpreter will literally have no clue as to what the speaker might be saying.

In "The Method of Truth in Metaphysics," Davidson is clear that these considerations initially seem to give us only agreement between interpreters. "And certainly agreement," he observes, "no matter how widespread, does not guarantee truth" (Davidson, 1984a, 200). The real point is that "objective error can occur only in a setting of largely true belief. Agreement does not make for truth, but much of what is agreed must be true if some of what is agreed is false" (Davidson, 1984a, 200).

Here we confront the core thought in Davidson's philosophy: the intimate, inalienable nature of the connection between truth and meaning. The connection is emphasized wherever Davidson argues that we can describe what it is to understand a language in terms of the structure provided by a theory of truth for the language. The very same connection shows up, also, when Davidson argues against the skeptical idea that our beliefs about the world may be generally and systematically false;

wherever there is any degree of real semantic understanding (such as is presupposed in any agreement), Davidson claims, there is also common knowledge of the world. This symmetry has perhaps not always been evident in debates around these claims. Still, if one doubts the Davidsonian idea that successful communication—mutual understanding of the meaning of what speakers say to one another—entails that we are largely operating knowledgeably in the world, one ought to find at least *prima facie* troublesome the idea that meaning is closely tied to truth conditions. One way to respond, if one remains attracted to a truth-conditional account of meaning, is to allow that we may be massively ignorant of what we really mean when we speak. Alternatively, though still in the same general neighborhood as far as one's conception of semantics goes, one may hold that meaning is tied to verification conditions, to what it is that we count, based on evidence available to creatures like us, as justifying an assertion, so that while we well understand one another's utterances and agree about many of them, we may remain systematically ignorant of the world. Both of these strategies make much of the intuition that there is a gap between what we have reason to believe and how things really are. Indeed, a large number of philosophers have argued that Davidson, in his antiskeptical line of thought, makes far too little of exactly this gap. The objective, mind-independent nature of truth is obscured, or the human capacity to know is inflated—the corrosive power of systematic doubt is not fully appreciated.

One line of thought where this alleged tension in Davidson is often diagnosed is the argument against the idea that we can make out a philosophically interesting notion of conceptual schemes (Davidson, 1984b). Davidson identifies conceptual schemes with "sets of intertranslatable languages," and the question now becomes, "Can we then say that two people have different conceptual schemes if they speak languages that fail of intertranslatability?" (Davidson, 1984b, 185). This is the very idea that Davidson rejects. Given that interpretation is possible only if we assume shared norms of rationality and substantial overlap in belief, we will not be able to interpret a speaker without also recognizing a core of familiar concepts in her thoughts. This is not just a matter of intersubjective agreement; the connection between truth and meaning ensures not only that we share a significant body of concepts, but also that we largely apply them correctly to the world.

Scott Soames, in his much-discussed history of twentieth-century analytical philosophy, summarizes his response to Davidson's claims as follows:

First, the fact that we can interpret the speech of another group does not guarantee as much agreement between them and us as Davidson seems to assume. So long as it is possible for us to explain why the other speakers hold beliefs different from ours, we can make sense of a great deal of disagreement. Second, we can make sense of big differences between ourselves and speakers of another culture that don't involve disagreements—e.g., differences regarding which objects are basic, and most worthy of attention. These two points suggest that, contrary to Davidson, even those whose utterances we can interpret and translate may have views different enough from ours to warrant the attribution of a different conceptual scheme. Finally, we found no reason to believe that there couldn't be speakers whose conceptual schemes were so different from ours that we couldn't translate their speech.

Soames, 2003, 330

These are telling remarks. First, does Davidson underestimate the amount of disagreement there can be between us and another group? The objection suggests that the constraints Davidson articulates on radical interpretation produce a clear quantitative sense of agreement, and that such lessons from the idealized radical interpretation situation can be projected onto relations between "us" and some other group. These are questionable assumptions, but might seem natural to make on an *epistemic* reading of Davidson, that is, a reading that construes him as engaged in the project of evaluating and legitimating our beliefs. Second, may discrepancies between cultures be so great that, while they do not necessarily confound interpretation, we should take them as indicating different conceptual schemes? How we respond to this will depend on the kind of explanatory work we hope the idea of a conceptual scheme will do for us, as we will see in the third section. For now, though, a relevant question is this: Why are "differences regarding which objects are basic, and most worthy of attention" not disagreements? Perhaps these differences do not count as disagreements because they concern evaluations, how we respond to and cope with the world, not how we picture it. It is difficult to know, but certainly such a distinction may come more easily to us if we think it an important task of epistemology to sort our subjective *response* to the world as we conceive of it from our registered *picture* of it. And finally, why could there not be conceptual schemes—sets of intertranslatable languages—that we are unable to translate? Soames's reasoning continues as follows:

Since we know that whatever attitude we are warranted in taking toward a proposition, we are similarly warranted in taking toward

the claim that it is true, we will be prepared to accept and assert a new proposition just in case we are prepared to accept and assert that it is true. [...] We regard a sentence as true if it expresses a true proposition. What now becomes of the idea that there could be a language containing true sentences that are not translatable into English? This is just the idea that there could be a language that expresses true propositions that are not expressed by any sentence of English. This is no more incoherent than the claim that there are true propositions one has not yet encountered, Soames, 2003, 329–330

What, asks Soames, is so special about English? Why should we think that all the truths there are may be expressed in the particular language that we happen to speak? There is something immediately persuasive about this reaction. It seems preposterous to suggest that some particular language should be the one in which we are able to express a god's-eye view of things, to formulate sentences expressing all the true propositions there are. Surely, as Soames argues, just like we now know truths that could not have been expressed by past speakers, so it seems future communities may come to know things that we are unable to express, things that they can express in their language, but that simply cannot be translated into the English that we know. Faced with an argument that precludes this eventuality, the prudent thing to do is to be suspicious of the argument.

Two issues bear on the merits of this third point against Davidson. How are languages to be individuated in the context of Davidson's discussion? What is the relation between knowledge of some particular language and the nature of communicative success considered in Davidson's third-person perspective? We will return to these questions in the third section. At this point, let us simply note the idea against which Soames reacts, namely, that there is some language mastered by a group of speakers in which all the truths there are can be expressed, and that we belong to that group. This idea is part of the context of epistemology. It is a claim pertaining to the legitimacy of our picture of reality, specifically, the legitimacy of the tools we rely on to construct it. Soames rejects it. Making his three points, Soames insists that neither our concepts nor our beliefs are as closely tailored to those of our fellow creatures or to the nature of reality as Davidson claims. Soames, in effect, is asserting a more robust gap between how things appear to us to be and how they really are than Davidson seems willing to acknowledge.

Here is where we stand. Metaphysically speaking, Davidson advertises a way to get from mere belief, appearances, to truth, to reality: Taking ourselves to be rational, communicating agents we must also take ourselves to have knowledge—of ourselves, of others, and of the world we share. Certainly, we make errors regarding all three, but errors, no matter how deep or pervasive, are parasitical on a foundation of justified, true belief; take away that basis and errors simply dissolve into pointless noise and movement.² This view is the context in which efforts to tease out the logical form of expressions, the forms that implement a truth theory for a language, will also be a systematic approach to metaphysical knowledge, knowledge of the large structures of the world.

The response, however, has frequently been skeptical. For those who share a basic premise of modern epistemology, that the relation between appearance and reality is subject to general consideration, it seems that the skeptical challenge to knowledge is underestimated—Davidson is simply ducking it. Yes, you can tie meaning to belief and to observable behavior, or you can tie it to truth. Do both at the same time, however, and you are a verificationist. Yet this very context in which verificationism appears as a dodge, a failure of nerve or of philosophical seriousness, is one way to characterize the target of the pragmatist critique of metaphysics. This critique, I will suggest, provides a basis for a different view of the lessons to be extracted from Davidson. First, though, it is necessary to home in more closely on the pragmatist conception of the target.

3. Pragmatist doubts

Metaphysics probably cannot be given a useful, coherent definition, but that fact certainly need not impugn the practice of metaphysics. This, I think, is common ground between pragmatists and most practicing metaphysicians. Those working in the philosophical tradition that traces its main roots to ancient Greece have in the course of 2 500 years developed a repertoire of questions and styles of handling them that include metaphysical questions, questions we typically recognize as such even if we cannot give an adequate general description of the kind, and even if for some questions and some inquiries it is unclear or controversial whether they should be counted as metaphysics. That it recognizes this common ground is distinctive of the skepticism toward metaphysics that is char-

² These claims run through much of Davidson's work, but are most fully elaborated in (Davidson, 2001a) and (Davidson, 2001b).

acteristic of pragmatism. It means that pragmatists will not frame this skepticism in a manner that presupposes a definitional handle on metaphysical questions. So pragmatists do not want to say that all metaphysical statements are necessarily false, or that they must be meaningless, or that metaphysical questions as such point to matters beyond the reach of human cognitive capacities. That all depends, the pragmatist will want to say—some metaphysical statements are false, some perhaps meaningless (without clear point, statements we don't know what to do with), and some metaphysical questions may in fact be forever unanswerable by creatures like us. But we will not want say that these facts, when they obtain, are somehow explained by the metaphysical character of the statement or question. Paradoxically, the pragmatist's complaint against metaphysics will not be that it is metaphysical.

The paradox is only apparent, however. The appearance depends on taking two kinds of critical response as exhaustive of the options. There are, first of all, the familiar attempts, exemplified paradigmatically in recent history by the logical positivists' struggle to articulate a criterion of verification, to criticize metaphysics that end up being co-opted by metaphysics; saying what metaphysics is, even to reject it, is to do metaphysics. Then there is the call, made by the late Heidegger and ever more imaginatively heeded by Derrida, to leave metaphysics alone. This second strategy is reminiscent also of Wittgenstein; if you can't say what it is without doing it, better shut up about it, and do something different. Both these broad strategies are what we may call *puritanical*—they attempt to free our thought from a kind of activity to which it is prone, but of which no good or truth can ever come. They are putative philosophical *cures*.

The pragmatist critique of metaphysics carves out space between these two unsatisfactory strategies. It is antiessentialist about metaphysics. It takes it that whether or not a statement is metaphysical depends entirely on the purposes for which it is deployed, and that these purposes can be understood as contingent historical artifacts of human culture. Rorty is its main exponent, and his strategy has been twofold: more or less direct attacks on key ideas in a broad but specific philosophical paradigm, and deliberations about what sort of contribution to life that philosophy should be making. Let us briefly consider each in turn.

Rorty's direct engagement with metaphysics is most systematically carried out in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, as an attack on the mirror-imagery informing the Cartesian conception of mind, purified by Kant, and setting the agenda for epistemology-based philosophy (Rorty, 1979).

Modern epistemology, in Rorty's diagnosis, is inescapably *representationalist*. Its task is to determine what the general characteristics are of mental or linguistic representations that succeed in rendering the world as it really is. In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty gives a genealogical interpretation of the conception of the mind that gives rise to this task, culminating in a set of arguments against it that he draws principally from Sellars, Quine, and Davidson. Without the myth of the given, and without a principled distinction between questions of meaning and questions of fact, the way is cleared for giving up what he later came to call the "world-picture" picture, the visual metaphors of our epistemic situation (Rorty, 2007, 150). To the extent that Rorty's account of the rise and unfolding of the vocabulary of modern epistemology is convincing, his readers will come to doubt that philosophy must continue to contend with a general gap between the world as it appears to us would-be knowers and the way it really is.

The appearance–reality gap provides a connection between the kind of philosophical argument offered in the main parts of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* and what we may call the external strategy pursued in much more detail in Rorty's later writings.³ This strategy is not designed to undermine the epistemological project of the modern age by arguments that engage the project on its own terms. Rather, the point here is to read the significance of the project through a different lens; as a phenomenon of what Rorty calls cultural politics, what is the significance of representationalism? What, in cultural and political terms, is the effect of an epistemological conception that takes the essence of knowledge to be a matter of aligning appearance with reality? This is a theme that Rorty has pursued from a great many angles, not always with consistency. One persistent idea, though, is the link that Rorty finds between thinking in terms of the "picture-world" view and the hypostatization or externalization of moral, political, and epistemic authority. On this recognizably Nietzschean line of thought, we diminish ourselves—our ability both to shape and to embrace our fate—by maintaining a demand for legitimization in terms of something beyond human interest.

It is a noteworthy characteristic of Rortyan pragmatism that this second, external strategy is what motivates the first, more internally directed argumentative approach to representationalism; the common end is to affect the vocabulary of philosophy in such a way that questions of cul-

³ See, in particular, (Rorty, 1989), but also (Rorty, 2007).

tural politics, questions regarding the social significance of philosophical vocabularies, will no longer be perceived as extraneous matters.

Representationalism is Rorty's name for a conception of the mandate of philosophy that obstructs this change. To call it metaphysics is to indicate exactly this feature. As a polemical, argumentative target for pragmatism, then, metaphysics is the idea of philosophy as separable from questions of cultural politics.

Davidson, as we have seen, may be read into the project of providing philosophical legitimization for our picture of reality—in large parts and in its most general structure. But as we have also seen, on quite natural assumptions of this "picture-world" view, the legitimization Davidson offers is questionable. Reading Davidson along Kantian lines, one may well find his arguments about the inescapability of shared norms of rationality convincing, but the scope of the conclusion is restricted to how the world will appear to us. We human subjects cannot identify as communicators creatures with whom we do not share a basic epistemic outlook. We cannot identify creatures as thinkers without identifying them as deploying a basic core of familiar concepts. But to think that this constrains what is possible begs the question against someone who takes the objectivity of reality to consist in its independence of mind.

To the extent that he casts his central thoughts as underpinnings for a method in metaphysics, Davidson certainly may encourage such a reading. So one antimetaphysical response might be to set out to rescue the arguments from this packaging, deploying some version of the "new wine in old bottles" metaphor to set up a distinction that would free Davidson's thought of the self-imposed, nonobligatory metaphysical casing. This would be the *purification* response, and it would likely fail, for much the same reasons that what I earlier called puritanical critiques of metaphysics always fail: These critiques do not come to grips with the idea that metaphysics, as a tradition, a practice, is not something to be defined or eliminated, but something to be *transformed*—transformed, according to the pragmatist, by being treated as a species of cultural politics.

4. Pragmatist Davidson

How, then, might pragmatists incorporate the thoughts distilled in Davidson's attack on the very idea of a conceptual scheme? As a first pass, let us return to Rorty. In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, he com-

ments as follows on Davidson's move "in the direction of a purified and de-epistemologized conception of the philosophy of language":

One outcome of so recasting the subject is to discard what Davidson calls "the third dogma" of empiricism, namely, "the dualism of scheme and content, of organizing system and something waiting to be organized"—a dualism which I have argued [...] is central to epistemology generally as well as to empiricism in particular

Rorty, 1979, 259 ⁴

For Rorty, the real gain is Davidson's critique of the metaphors of conceptual relativism—of a scheme organizing or fitting some uninterpreted deliverance from the objective side of the subject-object gap that is the heart of representationalist epistemology. The pragmatist's point here is not at all to delineate the extent of possible divergence of views. There probably is no interesting such delineation. It seems easy enough to imagine communicating organisms or systems whose makeup (say, life span) is so different from ours that communication between them and us would be impossible—perhaps we could flesh out a thought experiment such that As and Bs, happily chatting in their separate camps, would be unable even to recognize each other as communicating creatures. Would this show that Davidson is wrong? To the pragmatist, nothing Davidson says limits the extent to which the potential for communicative success remains an empirical question. The point, rather, is that we will never explain *failures* of communication and divergences of views by appealing to the notion of a conceptual scheme. Soames may well be right that on some occasions we might want to attribute different conceptual schemes to people or to cultures. What we would mean by that, however, is that their habits of acting, thinking, and speaking are different—rooted, perhaps, in vast differences in their natural or cultural environment—and that those habits are so rigid that there seems to be no way to work past them toward mutual understanding. But it wouldn't then be as if we had discovered that there are conceptual schemes after all. In such cases, we are not relying on the idea of conceptual schemes to explain anything; we are simply applying that term as shorthand for obstacles and differences that may well be quite pervasive and systematic, but whose roots and explanations are to be found in practice, in behavior, in the environment, and in interests. Indeed, it is the *explanatory uselessness* of the idea of a conceptual scheme that is the immediate pragmatist lesson of Davidson's attack on the idea.

⁴ The quote from Davidson is from "On the very idea of a conceptual scheme".

This lesson, moreover, steers us in the direction of a deeper point. To see explanatory value, where communication fails, in the idea of a conceptual scheme, one has to think of it as applying not primarily to would-be communicators and their practical situations, but to a relation between differing systems of thought or speech in which such noncommunicants are trapped. Crudely put: Communication fails because their representations are structured differently. Davidson deals explicitly with this idea in "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme." But there is an associated notion that may well survive the attack, in part because Davidson does not face up to it until later. This is the idea that the communicative capacities of speakers can be characterized in terms of knowledge of a shared language. That idea is explicitly challenged in "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs" (Davidson, 2005). In this paper, Davidson sets out to preserve the distinction between literal meaning and speaker's meaning in the face of difficulties posed by innovative, humorous, erroneous, idiosyncratic—in a word, nonstandard—use of language. A critical tool is the distinction he draws between *passing theories* and *prior theories*:

For the hearer, the prior theory expresses how he is prepared in advance to interpret an utterance of the speaker, while the passing theory is how he does interpret the utterance. For the speaker, the prior theory is what he believes the interpreter's prior theory to be, while his passing theory is the theory he intends the interpreter to use.

Davidson, 2005, 101

The distinction makes it possible to distinguish what Davidson calls *first meanings*, even where idiosyncratic, from *speaker's meaning*, but it spells trouble for a combination of views of how communicative ability relates to language mastery:

The asymptote of agreement and understanding is when passing theories coincide. But the passing theory cannot in general correspond to an interpreter's linguistic competence. Not only does it have its changing list of proper names and gerrymandered vocabulary, but it includes every successful—i.e., correctly interpreted—use of any other word or phrase, no matter how far out of the ordinary.

Davidson, 2005, 102

Communicative success, on this view, is a matter of transient convergence: "knowing a passing theory is only knowing how to interpret a particular utterance on a particular occasion" (Davidson, 2005, 19). If we spell out the nature of semantic competence with reference to knowledge of a truth

theory for a language, then we cannot also think of that competence as something stable, shared, and learned. As Davidson puts it: "We must give up the idea of a clearly defined shared structure which language-users acquire and then apply to cases" (Davidson, 2005, 19).

There is much to attract Rortyans to this view (see, e.g., Rorty, 2000). For our purposes, the relevant point is that the paper suggests a shift in what accounts for communicative success, and so also in what may be derived from such success. As long as we think that actual communicative success attests to a substantive, shared structure, we will be tempted to think of the features of that structure as in some sense defining the limits of what we are able to say, think, or know about the world. This is the real import of the idea of a conceptual scheme, and herein lies its connection to a representationalist conception of knowledge. By contrast, Davidson's attack on conceptual schemes is important because it helps clear the way past just those assumptions that make conceptual schemes a natural and interesting thing to imagine. Instead of structures—languages, conceptual systems—Davidson moves communicators and their activity into the center of explanation. That there are no conceptual schemes means that the linguistic resources of communicating agents are by their nature plastic, transformable, and adaptable in response to the situations of communication they are deployed in; if we want to say what is special about linguistic communicators, we need to consider the skills that support this process.

The third-person perspective, as Davidson develops it to a story about agents coordinating their responses in a shared world, contributes to a shift away from representationalism; instead of asking how it is that the rational subject can come to have knowledge of an objective world, Davidson, as pragmatists read him, asks how it is that organisms like us coordinate our activities into rational, communicating agency. The immediate objection is that we are communicating agents precisely because of our knowledge. But that is precisely where pragmatists want to stretch philosophical intuition: Our hunch is that the concept of knowledge will fall nicely into place, connected to our needs, wants, and interests, once we are allowed to address the question of what it is to be a communicating agent without importing representationalist assumptions.

From this point of view, the charge of verificationism seems simply misplaced, for this is just the charge that no amount of belaboring how things appear to us can get us to how they really are. For the pragmatist, the point is to get away from the representationalist vocabulary that sustains the idea of this gap, the idea that reality may contrast with our

picture of it in general, and not just in some particular respect or on some particular occasion. Consider, in this light, the line of objection discussed in section 2, that there may be truths not expressible in a particular language, and that there may be conceptual variation between speakers exceeding what can be captured in the resources of the language of one of them. These protests against Davidson presuppose an idea of communicators working within fixed schemes of concepts or stable languages—communicators with fixed repertoires that limit what they can know or say. But from the pragmatist perspective elaborated here, these worries fall away. For the dynamical, adaptive nature of interpretation that characterizes successful communication just is the ability to transcend at any moment the resources depicted in the frozen abstraction of a truth theory. This means, too, that although successful communicators believe true things about the world, there is no picture of the world such that all successful communicators share it; we have cut off the ascent (if that is what it is) from the idea of communication as a practice that puts speakers in touch with each other and the world to the idea of a general picture of the world that they all share, even if as abstract a picture as a general ontological structure. We can happily take ourselves to be in touch with the world, locally and perspectivally, but not with a general structure of all such being in touch.

Davidson's "method of truth in metaphysics" is impressive, but it is in the end not in itself very damaging to ametaphysical readers of Davidson. The real battle concerns how to understand Davidson's claims about the meaning-constituting role of reason, the social nature of thought, and the veridicality of belief. If we allow these to be cast in the mode of constructive representationalism, as purported philosophical discoveries about how things must be, a route from appearance to reality, then, sure enough, the formal semantics of the Davidsonian program is also reinflated into representationalist ontology, in spite of Davidson's own view—famously dim—of the promise of a theoretical notion of representation. However, as I have tried to make vivid in the discussion of the idea of a conceptual scheme, it is possible to resist this tendency. Instead of reading Davidson through the metaphors of representationalism, and as subject to the vocabulary that entrenches them, pragmatists will want to read Davidson's work as a contribution to the struggle to break free from those metaphors and that vocabulary. If this succeeds, then formal semantics and the "demands of a truth theory" will no longer strike us as the way, finally, to answer "perennial" philosophical questions about what there is and what we can know.

5. Concluding doubts

Metaphysics belongs to metaphysics. That is to say, the pragmatist takes the idea of the metaphysical as a category of inquiry as part of the broad project of supporting a representational conception of knowledge, of communication, and of human agency. It belongs, in a word, to the “world-picture” view of knowledge and agents. The central characteristic of this picture is to enforce a principled distinction between what we believe or know, that is, our representations, and what we do, that is, how we act in subjective response. The general structure of the world, the ultimate nature of reality, the general categories of being: These are all notions that we deploy, typically, to prop up this picture. The pragmatist, by contrast, thinks of all knowledge as a form of active, interested engagement with the world, not as a matter of peeling away the distorting influence of interest from receptive representational capacities.

The challenge I have addressed here is that this supporting idea of metaphysics, that there is such a general picture, is one to which Davidson appears explicitly to ascribe. This is also what informs the metaphysical readings of his work. From this perspective, Davidson’s contribution is twofold: He provides a view of meaning that entails bold and striking claims about the relation between our beliefs and those of others, and between our shared picture of the world and the world itself. This, in turn, supports the elaboration of a specific way, encapsulated in “The Method of Truth in Metaphysics,” to determine the large features of our shared picture—where, so to speak, its joints lie. However, I have suggested, metaphysical success is at best conditional; Davidson’s account gets us across the gap between subjective appearance and objective reality only by diminishing it.

From the pragmatist side, things look different. Verificationism is what antirepresentationism looks like when viewed through metaphysical spectacles. This is not a mandatory prescription. One finds support for the “world-picture” view in Davidson principally by taking communication to depend on a system of learned regularities that delineate not just a language, but also what a speaker is capable of thinking and uttering—on the idea of the mind as a structured system of propositions forming what we might call a global outlook. This image of mind as, for philosophical purposes, a set of propositions adding up to a picture of reality tempts one to read Davidson’s reflections on conceptual schemes as pertaining to the relation between how things appear to us to be and how they actually

are. But there are clear indications in Davidson's writings, most strikingly present in "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs", of a different view, one that rejects the idea of a global outlook and challenges the representationalist roots of that notion. On this alternative, pragmatist view, we place the dynamic nature of actual communicative encounters at the center of our account. We see the idiolects specified by truth theories as idealized moments, abstracted out of the dynamic process of collaborative interaction that is communication, and not as an actual picture of a temporary mind from which a global view of things may be extracted. We emphasize the capacity for adaptation and change, the historicity of meaning, the contextual and shifting nature of communication-supporting agreement, and the ubiquitous sensitivity (and resulting malleability) of concepts to practical interest. On this view, that communicators on the whole interact knowledgeably in the world does not mean that there is some general picture to be uncovered that they must all share. We are all knowledgeable about the world, but there is no particular general picture we must have in common, no master constraints to which we are all subject.

What, then, are we to say of Davidson's method of truth in metaphysics? Using the structure of a truth theory to say something about the most general categories of ontology—there are objects, there are events—Davidson purports, sure enough, to display general features of reality. He writes:

Metaphysics has generality as an aim; the method of truth expresses that demand by requiring a theory that touches all the bases. Thus the problems of metaphysics, while neither solved nor replaced, come to be seen as the problems of all good theory building. We want a theory [...] that accounts for the facts about how our language works. What those facts are may remain somewhat in dispute, as will certainly the wisdom of various tradeoffs between simplicity and clarity. These questions will be, I do not doubt, the old questions of metaphysics in new dress. But the new dress is in many ways an attractive one.

Davidson, 1984a, 214

The pragmatist, as we have seen, has no reason to recoil from aspirations to explanatory generality per se. The pragmatist's skepticism toward metaphysics is that the historical project of epistemology is representationalist in nature, fostering the regulative idea of a chief vocabulary, a scale, a hierarchy of forms of description, a hierarchy that may be discovered, that would be independently authoritative, and final. Pragmatists go after this ideal whenever and wherever they find it, because, we think, it sells

human freedom short. We think this, though, not because we imagine, frivolously, that our freedom is fostered by our ignoring reality. We don't doubt that the world constrains us in intransigent ways. What we doubt is the fruitfulness of the pursuit of a final, independently authoritative account of the general structure of such constraint. That project, we claim, turns its back on cultural politics; it sells freedom short by diminishing our active participation in, and thus our willingness and ability to take responsibility for, any particular rendering of our relations to the world, to each other, and to ourselves. The ascent to explanatory generality by itself, however, need have no such effect—once it is decoupled from the representationalist framework, from the idea that we are specifying features of global out-looks, features that must be true of any such. There may be, as Davidson acknowledges, many lines of ascent to generality, different ways of specifying structure—what we must turn our backs on is the idea that they will take us from what merely appears to us to be so to what is really real.

It is, then, the penultimate sentence in the quotation above from which the pragmatist should dissent. The questions raised by the semantic exploitation of truth-theoretic structure are indeed different questions—when they are liberated from representationalist epistemology and no longer serve those purposes that make the pragmatist stand against metaphysics. Should we then say that Davidson's self-proclaimed pursuit of metaphysics isn't really metaphysics after all, that he misdescribes his own most useful contribution? We might be stuck with this option, as an expression of minority protest, if representationalist thinking prevails and remains the lens through which Davidson's contributions are generally assessed. For in this case, the best we can hope for is to continue taking swipes at metaphysics, using whatever resources are to hand. Then again, perhaps Davidson's own sense that a major shift is occurring in philosophical intuitions about what it is to be a communicating agent in the world will turn out to have been prescient.⁵ Perhaps the "world-picture" view is fading. In that case, it won't matter very much how Davidson describes his contribution, and the hopeful thing to say will be that metaphysics did not belong to metaphysics after all.

⁵ Regarding the dualism of the subjective and the objective, mind and nature, Davidson says, "Some of [...] [the associated] ideas are now coming under critical scrutiny, and the result promises to mark a sea change in contemporary philosophical thought" (Davidson, 1984a, 39).

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