

Triangulating Triangulation

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The objectivity which thought and language demand depends on the mutual and simultaneous responses of two or more creatures to common distal stimuli and to one another's responses. This three-way relation among two speakers and a common world I call 'triangulation'. In the end, the idea is as simple as that of ostensive learning, but with an insistence that triangulation is not a matter of one person grasping a meaning already there, but a performance that (when fully fleshed out) bestows a content on language. This thesis, and its ramifications for philosophy of mind, language, and epistemology, turn up again and again in my work after 1982. – Donald Davidson¹⁾

In the latter part of his career, Donald Davidson—one of the most influential philosophers of the 20th century—introduce a model of what makes thought and language possible that most commentators have found entirely unconvincing. That notion is what Davidson called *triangulation*. One reaction is to claim that despite his brilliance, Davidson's introduction of triangulation was a blunder. I take a more charitable view. In this paper, I introduce the notion of triangulation and argue that the main point of triangulation is found in the passage above: triangulation provides conditions necessary for the possession of the concept of objective truth in its role in determining mental content and linguistic meaning. In what follows, I first explain why triangulation is in need of explication. I then tell what triangulation is in more detail. Next, I explain the origins and development of triangulation in Davidson's thought as it developed over his career. Finally, I show how the interpretation I

1) Davidson, D. (2001) *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*. "Introduction." New York: Clarendon Press, p. xiv.

provide avoids common criticisms based on misinterpretations of triangulation's motivations and uses.

The difficulty of triangulation

Understanding triangulation is difficult. There are several reasons for this difficulty having to do with the breadth and interconnectedness of Davidson's views, Davidson's writing style, and the development of his views over time.

Davidson is one of the relatively few recent examples of a system builder. Unlike the philosophers of old, contemporary philosophers tend to be quite specialized and to publish articles rather than books. Articles are self-contained and meant to be understood to a large degree in isolation. Davidson's work covers many fields within philosophy: mind, language, epistemology, action theory, etc. And yet, despite its diversity, Davidson's work is an interconnected whole. Triangulation, as I will argue below, is an essential part of this whole.

Despite being a system builder, like other philosophers Davidson also writes in article form. Indeed, his articles are published in various (sometimes quite obscure) places and require considerable effort to bring together. This is particularly true of triangulation: Davidson discusses triangulation in articles in well-known journals, obscure journals, and responses to papers published in book form.

Each of Davidson's articles depends for its proper understanding on an understanding of other of Davidson's articles. But the same is true for those other articles. The result is that understanding any one article requires as a background an understanding of most of Davidson's other articles. This holism of understanding is true of triangulation as of most other elements of Davidson's views.

A related reason for the difficulty of understanding triangulation is Davidson's writing style. Davidson tends to present burden of proof arguments. In particular, he considers various proposals on a given topic and, finding them all lacking, presents

his own view in condensed form at the end of the article. To get a complete picture of his view on any topic, then, one must pull together several of these dense passages. Again, this is true of triangulation. Indeed, Davidson's introduction of triangulation occurs in the *last paragraph* of the paper "Rational Animals." Davidson nowhere has an article that deals solely with triangulation. Most presentations of triangulation occur at the end of papers and are geared specifically to the topic of the particular paper. To achieve a complete understanding of triangulation therefore requires looking at numerous articles.

As just mentioned, triangulation does not have a single use. Davidson uses triangulation to account for the objectivity of thought, the origin of the concept of truth, and the normativity of meaning. With its help, Davidson argues against skepticism and for both social and perceptual externalism. And in light of triangulation, Davidson argues that thought requires language. Moreover, Davidson describes triangulation in different contexts: triangulation that occurs among creatures lacking language and thought, that which occurs in ostensive language learning, and that which occurs in radical interpretation. Making sense of these various uses and their contexts is necessary for understanding what triangulation is generally and this general understanding then provides the background necessary for understanding each of the various uses.

As with any author as prolific as Davidson, his views developed and occasionally changed over the years, and these developments interacted in complex ways. While I think there is a central, key use of triangulation, Davidson's description of triangulation changed over time in relation to other theses Davidson came to hold. This is particularly true in two senses. First, there was an interval between Davidson's first introduction of triangulation and his later reintroduction of it. In the interim, I maintain, theses developed that relate directly to the new shape triangulation took with its reintroduction. Second, after its reintroduction, triangulation developed as Davidson's emphasis in thinking about triangulation moved from radical

interpretation, through communication, and finally to the ostensive learning of a first language. This last change of emphasis then resulted in changes in his view of radical interpretation. It was only then that Davidson found a final solution to the problem to which triangulation had originally been addressed.

To understand triangulation, therefore, we must attempt to construct a complete picture from fragments and do so in the context of Davidson's other views. One reason to attempt this rather daunting task is that those who have dealt with triangulation in the secondary literature have tended to consider it in isolation from Davidson's other views. As a result they have evaluated triangulation uncharitably. The current paper attempts to rectify this situation.

Let me briefly give two examples of a common mischaracterization of triangulation, namely that triangulation is *an argument*. Verheggen (2011) discusses Davidson's "triangulation argument" for the thesis that thought requires language.²⁾ Problems: triangulation is a model, not an argument; triangulation has multifarious uses, not just the use in arguing that thought requires language; and triangulation's use in arguing for that thesis is not its original or primary use, as I argue below. Myers (2011) writes "Davidson's later writings on these matters are dominated by what he calls his triangulation argument."³⁾ Picky I might be, but Davidson never once uses the phrase "triangulation argument," nor does he refer to any single argument as bearing a special relationship to triangulation. Myers goes on to write that, "The question the triangulation argument is supposed to answer is this: what makes it the case that a person's particular propositional attitudes have the specific contents they do?"⁴⁾ Notice that these two characterizations differ in what "the" triangulation argument's conclusion is: one concerns thought possession, the other concerns the

2) Verheggen, Claudine (2011). "Triangulation and Philosophical Skepticism." In Amoretti and Preyer (2011) *Triangulation*, Philosophical Analysis, Ontos Verlag, p.33.

3) Myers, Robert (2013). "Interpretation and Value. In Lepore and Ludwig (2013), *A Companion to Donald Davidson*, Blackwell. p. 323.

4) Ibid.

content of thought. My view is that both of these uses are elements of Davidson's account of our possession of the concept of objective truth. This central use of triangulation is discussed in the context of *various* arguments, none of which is privileged.

Triangulation introduced

Let me begin with a few passages by way of introducing triangulation. Davidson originally introduced triangulation as an analogy. As we know from geometry class, triangulation is the determination of the distance of one point from a second point by locating a third point, measuring the distance between the second and third point, and measuring the angles at the second and third points. Although this is the usual meaning of “triangulation,” Davidson does not mention this geometrical problem. Instead, he imagines an individual moving about, perceptually triangulating objects and thereby coming to have a feel for their distance from the individual. Davidson then compares this perceptual triangulation with a conceptual notion of triangulation: two individuals discussing their shared world are able to compare their subjective perspectives on that common world and thereby come to have a notion of objective truth. (Here, “objective” means: true independent of belief.) Here is the passage in which Davidson first introduces triangulation, found at the end of the article “Rational Animals”⁵):

If I were bolted to the earth, I would have no way of determining the distance from me of many objects. I would only know they were on some line drawn from me towards them. I might interact successfully with objects, but I could have no way of giving content to the question where they were. Not being bolted down, I am free to triangulate. Our sense of objectivity is the consequence of another sort of triangulation, one that requires two

5) Davidson, D. (1982) “Rational Animals.” In Davidson, D. (2001) *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*. New York: Clarendon Press.

creatures. Each interacts with an object, but what gives each the concept of the way things are objectively is the base line formed between the creatures by language. The fact that they share a concept of truth alone makes sense of the claim that they have beliefs, that they are able to assign objects a place in the public world. The conclusion of these considerations is that rationality is a social trait. Only communicators have it.⁶⁾

Davidson's concern is with the comparison of perspectives that linguistic communication allows, for he argues that such communication gives creatures like us the ability to conceive of an objective reality.⁷⁾ While this passage occurs at the end of an article arguing that thought possession requires linguistic communication, note that the immediate use of triangulation is to explain our concept of objective truth. Too many commentators have missed this point, assuming that the use in "Rational Animals" is the driving motivation behind Davidson's introduction of triangulation.

In one of his last descriptions of triangulation, Davidson gives an explanation of how triangulation can make possible the notion of objective truth—by making possible the notion of error—for creatures that lack thought and speech.

To take the simplest case, consider two individuals jointly interacting with some aspect of the world. When the pair spot a lion, each hides behind a tree. If the individuals are in sight of one another, each also sees the other hide. Each is therefore in a position to correlate what he sees (the lion) with the other's reaction. If the situation is repeated, a consequence is that if one individual sees a lion when the other does not, the one who does not see the lion is apt to treat the first's reaction as a conditioned stimulus, and also hide. Now consider a situation in which each sees the same lion, but one of the individuals, because the light is poor, or a tree partially obscures the lion, reacts as he normally reacts to a gazelle. This turns out to be a mistake. This little skit cannot, in itself, explain conceptualization or grasp of the idea of error on the part of either observer. It does no more than indicate the sort of conditions in which the idea of error could arise. Thus it suggests necessary (though certainly not sufficient) conditions for conceptualization.⁸⁾

6) *Ibid.*, p. 105.

7) Note that because this claim is relativized to certain kinds of creatures, Davidson's conclusions involving triangulation are not wholly a priori.

8) Davidson, D. (2001) "What Thought Requires." In Davidson, D. (2004) *Problems of Rationality*. New York: Clarendon Press, pp. 141-142.

This little skit, as Davidson calls it, is an example of triangulation: two creatures reacting to a commonly perceived object and the reactions of the other creature to that object. Although separated by nearly twenty years, one can see in these two passages a very similar concern with objectivity and the necessity of the comparison of one's own perspective with that of another for the concept of error or objectivity.

While these two passages provide a rather simple way of introducing triangulation, these descriptions leave out an element fundamental to triangulation that Davidson often stresses. As seen in the passage above in which Davidson first introduces triangulation, Davidson initially only had in mind two creatures comparing their perspectives on a common world. But when he returns to the topic of triangulation seven years later, Davidson includes a detailed specification of what makes this sort of comparison possible. Fundamental to the process are inborn similarity standards shared by the triangulating creatures: the two creatures must find the same objects similar, and they must find the reactions of one another to those objects similar. Most commentators concentrate on causal descriptions of triangulation lacking any mention of shared inborn similarity standards. As a result, they are baffled as to how Davidson imagines causal relations individuate mental content.

Triangulation is the framework⁹⁾ within which the simultaneous emergence of the concepts necessary for thought and language occurs. This contrasts with reductive approaches to thought and language. A simple reductive account might reduce meaning to thought—the meaning of my words are the thoughts expressed—and reduce thought to certain physical processes occurring in the brain. The criterion of success of such a reductive project would be accounting for meaning in terms of thought without essential appeal to semantic concepts; and accounting for thought in

9) Or perhaps a better analogy would be *scaffolding*: with triangulation in place, thought and language can emerge.

non-intentional terms. Such a reduction would fit language and thought into a physicalistic framework.

Davidson rejects such projects. With respect to thought and language, Davidson is a non-reductive physicalist. First, as he argued in “Mental Events,”¹⁰⁾ mental states and events are identical with but cannot be reduced to physical states and events. The mental and physical are governed by different constitutive principles—the mental, rationality, and the physical, strict physical laws—and this prevents any reduction of one to the other. Second, as Davidson argued in “Thought and Talk,” language cannot be reduced to thought, since thought requires language.

Many interpretations take triangulation to be primarily concerned with Davidson’s argument that in order to have thought we must have language. The argument, briefly put, is that thought requires the concept of objectivity, and the concept of objectivity requires linguistic communication. Triangulation makes its appearance in the second step of the argument in support of the claim that the concept of objectivity requires linguistic communication. Although Davidson clearly makes such use of triangulation, I suggest below that triangulation’s primary role is in solving the problem of objectivity (described below).

Non-reductive accounts are criticized on the grounds that the only conditions they can give for the sufficiency of thought or language involve thought and language. Such an account would not seem to shed light on either thought or language. Davidson’s account is often charged with such circularity, for he argues that thought requires the concept of objectivity, but to have this concept one must linguistically communicate the content of *one’s thoughts* with other speakers. Thought, we are told, requires thought. Trivially true, but not particularly informative.

10) Davidson, D. (1970) “Mental Events.” In Davidson, D. (1980) *Essays on Actions and Events*. New York: Clarendon Press.

I suggest that this sort of circularity objection can be avoided if we understand that Davidson's account, though non-reductive and so unavoidably circular, is not viciously so. Vicious circularity is direct and so uninformative; non-vicious circularity is indirect and so potentially informative. Davidson's view is that while we cannot give non-intentionally specified sufficient conditions for thought or language, we can give a set of necessary conditions which make possible the emergence of thought and language. Davidson claims that certain concepts are both necessary for thought possession and are primitive in the sense of not being explicable in terms of simpler concepts. Included among the primitive concepts are the concepts of belief, truth, objectivity, and error. While these concepts cannot be reduced to or explicated in terms of other more basic concepts, an informative account of these concepts can be provided by showing their interrelations and the roles they play. Davidson's suggestion is that these primitive concepts are best understood in terms of the roles they play in interpersonal understanding and in particular linguistic communication. Triangulation is the non-intentionally specified set of conditions necessary for the emergence of this set of related concepts, and in particular the primitive concept of objective truth. Triangulation, we will see, also makes possible the emergence of mental and linguistic content, on the one hand, and linguistic communication on the other. So thought requires a set of interrelated concepts, and having this set of interrelated concepts requires linguistic communication. But the framework that makes possible the concurrent emergence of these concepts, determinate content, and linguistic communication is the non-intentionally specified set of conditions that Davidson calls *triangulation*. So, while it is true that Davidson claims that thought requires language which in turn requires thought, the account is not (or at least not obviously) viciously circular.

The development of triangulation

In order to fully understand triangulation it is necessary to understand the reasons for its introduction and its development over time. For convenience, I divide Davidson's work into three periods. In the early period, we see the views that motivate the introduction of triangulation in the passage seen above from the paper "Rational Animals." This paper marks the beginning of what I think of as Davidson's middle period, during which Davidson published material relevant to understanding triangulation but nothing on triangulation itself. The publication of "The Conditions of Thought"¹¹⁾ seven years after triangulation's original introduction marks the beginning of the late period, the period in which all of Davidson's work on triangulation occurred. In that paper, Davidson characterizes triangulation in very different terms from the analogical way in which it was originally presented, a quite detailed characterization that serves as the basis for all later discussions of triangulation. Nevertheless, the central role of triangulation in making possible the concept of objective truth never changed.

With these three periods in mind, I suggest the following broad themes. First, the notion of triangulation cannot be understood apart from the problems that appear in the early period that triangulation is meant to address, namely the problems of error and objectivity. Second, the details of triangulation developed out of work Davidson did in the middle period that provided material for the solution to those problems from the first period. Third, in the late period, Davidson developed his earlier idea of triangulation in light of the material provided in the second period and used triangulation to arrive at his final solution to the original problems. This late period, in turn, had roughly three stages of focus: first, the role of triangulation in providing

11) Davidson, D. (1989) "The Conditions of Thought." In Brandl and W L. Gombocz (Eds.), *The Mind of Donald Davidson* (pp. 193-200). Amsterdam: Rodopi.

for determinate mental and semantic content; second, the role of triangulation in making possible a concept of error; and third, the role of triangulation in making possible linguistic communication. All three roles of triangulation are elements in Davidson's final account of objectivity. I will also suggest that this final account did not come together until the connection between triangulation and ostensive learning came to be reflected in Davidson's account of radical interpretation.

The motivation for Davidson's introduction of the notion of triangulation is found in the context of a debate he had occurring over the space of several years with his mentor W. V. O. Quine. That debate concerned a topic central to both of their general philosophical positions, namely radical interpretation, or the interpretation of the speech of someone from scratch without the help of bilingual aids. This thought experiment is meant to shed light on the nature of knowledge and linguistic meaning. The debate itself involved the very beginnings of radical interpretation, in which the interpreter observes the native utter sentences in the presence of objects and interprets the sentences on this basis. While Davidson's view is that the distal object should be taken as the cause of the native's holding the sentence true and so as the content of that sentence, Quine argued that the better candidate for translating the sentence is the proximal stimulation of the native's sensory receptors.

The distal approach is the most natural, and at times even Quine slips into writing about interpretation as concerning socially perspicuous objects rather than the in principle observable but in practice non-observable proximal stimuli. According to Davidson's retrospective account of the debate, however, the distal approach makes *error* hard to explain. If one interprets sentences in terms of the distal objects and events that cause their utterances, then those sentences will always be true when uttered.

What then of the proximal approach? It avoids problems of error by basing interpretation on something proximal, where error is unlikely to occur. Davidson's

rejection of the proximal approach is based on the epistemic differences that Davidson came to see as underlying the proximal-distal debate. While early on, Davidson treated the debate with Quine as primarily a problem concerning interpretation, he later came to see the debate as a symptom of a deeper epistemological difference with Quine. Quine's epistemology was empiricist and in particular a form of what Davidson rejected as scheme-content dualism. On this view, language is a scheme that organizes or fits experience—the content of the scheme—this content on Quine's approach being characterized in terms of proximal stimuli. It is because they are the evidence for conceptual schemes that Quine appeals to *unconceptualized* proximal stimuli. Quine's goal was to account for our concepts of distal objects in terms of their roles in organizing and predicting our proximal stimuli. Davidson rejected scheme-content dualism on the grounds that proximal stimuli—or other unconceptualized empiricist characterizations of experience—are the wrong sorts of things to serve as evidence. Evidence must be propositional in character; only beliefs support beliefs.

Davidson's problem of error is related to a different yet not unconnected problem, the problem of objectivity. Both problems derive from Davidson's rejection of scheme-content dualism and embracing the coherence theory that follows in its wake. For once one rejects as Davidson does all epistemic intermediaries, erasing any and all divides between mind and world, one must assume that we have direct contact with the distal objects we think and talk about. But this makes error hard to explain from the perspective of an interpreter attributing beliefs to a speaker. It also becomes difficult to see how we could ever come to possess the contrast between what is believed and what is true, the way things seem and the way they are, or the contrast between appearance and reality. What Davidson describes as the problem of objectivity is also a problem of subjectivity: where do we acquire the idea that our beliefs are independent of the world they concern if we have direct, unmediated access to that

world? Since truth is the most central concept to Davidson's account of language and thought, this problem is the problematic that defines much of the rest of his work in this area—the problematic triangulation is meant to solve. The solution, though, had to await two theses Davidson developed in his middle period.

The first thesis is that in central cases, the causes of our utterances and the beliefs they express determine the contents of both. Though following from reflection on radical interpretation¹²), this causal-semantic thesis is developed in the context of a discussion of the epistemological dilemma between foundationalism and coherence theories of knowledge. Davidson rejects foundationalist theories—of which scheme-content dualism is a species—and feels pressured to hold a coherence theory view. The well-known problem with coherence theories is that mutually incompatible theories can be individually coherent. Davidson suggests, though, that *actually held* coherent sets of beliefs are different from merely possible coherent sets; they have in their favor a presumption of truth. The reason for this is seen in the way actually held sets of beliefs get their content. Basic empirical beliefs, like those attributed at the beginning of radical interpretation, get their content from causal relations to the world. The solution to the problem of objectivity, then, is not to give an *epistemic* account of objectivity in terms of the contrast between internal representations and an external reality that causes those representations. The solution rather is a *semantic* account of the way in which causality figures in the determination of the content of thought and speech. Part of triangulation's role in the solution to the problem of objectivity, I suggest, is this semantic determination.

The second thesis from the middle period—relevant to understanding the reintroduction of triangulation in the late period—is related to Davidson's account of

12) I should mention that some authors confuse this thesis with triangulation, claiming that triangulation is the motivation for thinking that causes determine content. I maintain that this causal thesis is independent of triangulation and indeed prior to it (chronologically and conceptually).

linguistic communication. While many accounts of meaning make essential appeal to linguistic conventions, Davidson rejects any necessary or constitutive role for conventions. He offers a different account of linguistic communication, one in which speakers intend and attempt to get listeners to assign certain interpretations to their speech, and listeners provide whatever feedback is required for the speaker to be justified in believing the intention has been recognized by the listener. My suggestion is that Davidson's rejection of conventions and his alternative characterization of communication are essential for understanding triangulation. Indeed, if we combine the causal thesis with this account of communication, we can abstract out a picture of what triangulation makes possible: a speaker intends to get another person, an interpreter, to recognize the speaker's intention to mean by an utterance the cause of the belief expressed by that utterance. The interpreter, in turn, provides feedback concerning the success of that intention—letting the speaker know whether or not the interpreter took the speaker to mean the object in question. One key to understanding triangulation is this: not only must the speaker's intention be recognized by the listener, but the listener must provide justification for the speaker's belief that the listener has recognized this intention. Triangulation makes this recognition possible.

In the third and final period, Davidson reintroduces triangulation and provides a developed description of it in “The Conditions of Thought.” In trying to make clear what precisely Davidson has in mind by triangulation, I should explain why I reject one common interpretation. On that interpretation, triangulation is introduced to rule out proximal stimuli as content determining, by claiming that the content determining cause is the distally located *common cause* of the responses of both speaker and interpreter (the common cause being the one triangulated). Given this common-cause interpretation of triangulation, it is often objected that there are too many candidate common causes of the responses of communicating creatures (since any cause of a

common cause is itself a common cause). The account is therefore inadequate. I reject this common-cause interpretation. Davidson's view is that triangulation makes possible the responses of two creatures to a common cause. Briefly, creatures like us are born finding the same distal stimuli similar, and it is such shared inborn standards of similarity that make possible both communication—including radical interpretation—and the ostensive learning of one's first language.

The importance of triangulating an object is not that triangulation picks out the distal stimulus rather than proximal stimuli as relevant to content determination; the importance is that by triangulating an object, a contrast is made possible between objects creatures *subjectively* find similar and objects being *objectively* similar. (Here, "subjective" does not mean internal or private, but merely belonging to an individual.) It is only thus that creatures can be said to be responding to objects qua objects—that is, independently existing objects. This characterization of triangulation is therefore the beginnings of Davidson's solution to the problem of objectivity.

In order to understand this solution, we must look at Davidson's views on the concepts of error and objectivity. For Davidson, concept application requires judgments that a given object belongs to a certain class. It follows that concept possession requires determinate content—concepts pick out determinate classes—and awareness that a given object thought to belong to the class might not in fact belong to the class—i.e., an awareness of possible error. Davidson's presentations of triangulation in the late period, beginning with the *Conditions of Thought* paper, focus on how triangulation makes possible determinate conceptual content. Later, the focus comes to be triangulation's role in making possible the concept of error. In both cases, Davidson argues that linguistic communication is also necessary. Determinate conceptual content requires communicating this content with the creature with which one is engaged in triangulation. And the concept of error requires communicating reasons or explanations for cases of error. Both instances involve giving reasons for

the judgments involved in concept application. And both instances are crucial for having the concept of objectivity.¹³⁾

It is thus important to see the way in which triangulation makes possible linguistic communication. I suggest that as Davidson came to emphasize ostensive language learning as a case of triangulation, his treatment of triangulation changed. In particular, while early treatments of triangulation did not distinguish between the roles played by triangulating creatures, in later discussions of ostensive learning the differences between teacher and child became salient. Considered from the perspective of the child, triangulating with the adult not only makes possible determinate content—the object ostended—but the teacher’s responses to the child also make possible a notion of linguistic normativity. The adult provides a check on the correct or incorrect use of language by the child.

I suggest that this view is a convergence of Davidson’s idiolectic view of communication and an emphasis on response similarity in triangulation. For Davidson, in ostensive learning meaning is created rather than passed on, and in particular the bit of language the child develops in ostension is not the adult’s language, but a new language modeled on the language of the adult. This is important because the object ostended comes to play a constitutive role in the meaning of the child’s utterances. Recognition of this creation of a new language is also important because it follows from Davidson’s rejection of scheme-content dualism and the direct connection with the world we have as a result. In ostensive learning, the object is not used by the parent to get the child to recognize a previously existing meaning of the word or phrase uttered. Instead, a connection is established between this object—and

13) If the content of this paragraph raises a red flag concerning circularity, one must think back to the earlier discussion of non-reductive accounts that are non-viciously circular. I will admit, however, that Davidson’s requirements on thought are quite strong. Again, one must imagine the gradual and simultaneous emergence of thought and language. In Wittgenstein’s phrase, light dawns gradually over the whole.

objects similar to it—and this utterance—and utterances similar to it. Triangulation, properly understood as involving shared inborn similarity standards, makes the word-object pair of this occasion the paradigm against which future pairs will be compared.

I also suggest that a shift in Davidson’s view concerning interpretation occurred in light of this account of ostensive learning, resulting in Davidson’s final solution to the problems of error and objectivity. Like ostensive learning, interpretation was originally conceived as the interpreter learning a *preexisting* language, that of the native. On the later account, the interpreter, like the child, is engaged in the ostensive learning of a language, a *new* language modeled on the native’s. As such, what is true of ostensive learning is also true of interpretation: the role of the object ostended establishes a use for the newly acquired bit of language. The originally ostended object and utterance provide the objective standard against which the native judges future responses of the interpreter to be correct or incorrect. We thus have Davidson’s final solution to the problems of objectivity and error in the standard provided by world and interlocutor. This solution is made possible by the shared inborn similarity responses that converge on and thereby triangulate objects. The object—with which we have *unmediated* contact—is the standard against which the listener judges the truth—the *objective* truth—of the utterances of the speaker; and the responses of the listener provide the speaker with that objective standard of truth.

Misinterpretations of triangulation

I next look briefly at the criticisms of Davidson’s use of triangulation made by Jason Bridges in his “Davidson’s Transcendental Externalism.”¹⁴⁾ This article is fairly representative of the way commentators read Davidson’s work on triangulation,

14) Bridges, J. (2006), “Davidson’s Transcendental Externalism.” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 73: 290–315.

and it also is quite clear about the background assumptions the author makes—assumptions which, I maintain, lead him to misread Davidson.

Bridges begins by distinguishing two projects Davidson engaged in during the latter part of his career: one, the epistemological project of defending a non-empiricist account of knowledge and thereby securing a defense against skepticism; the other, the metaphysical/transcendental project of showing that triangulation is a necessary condition of thought. On my view, this division is confused for several reasons. First, triangulation arises out of Davidson's non-empiricist account of knowledge and his semantic solution to the epistemic dilemma he faced; to separate the epistemic and content-determining roles of triangulation into two separate projects is to fundamentally misunderstand them. Second, securing a defense against skepticism is a happy result of Davidson's non-empiricist account of thought and language based on triangulation, not a motivation for Davidson's rejection of empiricism. Third, the arguments concerning triangulation's necessity for thought are but one use of triangulation, and not in my view Davidson's motivation for introducing triangulation. As I have suggested, triangulation is Davidson's solution to the problems of error and objectivity that arose as a result of his rejection of empiricist foundationalism and scheme-content dualism.

Taking triangulation as unconnected with what Bridges calls the epistemological project leads I suggest to the criticisms he makes of what he sees as the metaphysical project involving triangulation. That metaphysical project is Davidson's argument that since the concept of truth is required for thought, and triangulation is required for the concept of truth or error, it follows that triangulation is required for thought. Like many other commentators, Bridges complains that Davidson has not made compelling the necessity of the second creature for making possible the notion of error (and so objective truth). Bridges argues that regardless of how the second creature responds (to an object and/or to the first creature), it is the first creature's past conditioning with

respect to an object (type) that is relevant to that creature's expectations being thwarted; the second creature's expectations being thwarted or not plays no role.

This sort of criticism is fairly standard. The understandable response to Davidson's claims concerning triangulation and the concept of truth is that a single creature can compare its experiences *over time* and find itself in error. It is difficult to understand Davidson's position here unless one keeps in mind his rejection of scheme-content dualism. In this connection, Davidson appeals to Wittgenstein's distinction between thinking one is following a rule and actually following a rule, but I think this characterization encourages the objection. The objector imagines one can compare two inner episodes and given their discrepancy infer an objective world for them to be right or wrong about. This is precisely what Davidson denies. The problem of objectivity follows from rejecting an inner, subjective perspective on an outer, objective world. The objection, in other words, assumes the scheme-content distinction. How, Davidson might ask in response, is a lone creature with direct contact with the world to compare its differing responses to those directly perceived objects? With no gap between object and response it is hard to make sense of this question.

The second line of criticism takes issue with Davidson's claim that triangulation is necessary to determine the cause of a creature's responses. Criticisms of this argument of Davidson's at times involve a claim of circularity: in order that the second creature play a role in the establishment of a cause of the first creature's responses, the first creature must already *conceive of* the second creature and the object. Since to conceive of the creature and object is to have thought—and so for there to be determinate causes of one's responses—the account assumes what it purports to explain. Bridges puts the objection this way:

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.¹⁵⁾

This sort of circularity objection is common but seems to miss the point made above about non-reductive yet non-viciously circular accounts. While Davidson does require that we *eventually* become aware of the semantic role of causation in ostension—and so have concepts of people and objects—triangulation makes possible determinate mental content by being the convergence on objects of shared inborn similarity responses, responses that are not contentful until much later. Only with the *emergence* of thought *and* talk *and* the ability to share one's reasons and explanations of error can we fully grasp the appearance-reality distinction. From Davidson's perspective the burden of proof is on the objector to give an alternate account of our concept of objectivity that does not assume scheme-content dualism.

15) Ibid., p. 17.