Davidson's Final Account of Objective Truth

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Donald Davidson's work gives central place to a primitive concept of objective truth. Elements of his epistemology, however, make accounting for our possession of this concept difficult. In order to provide such an account, Davidson introduced the notion of triangulation. In the current paper, I discuss the three contexts in which triangulation occurs: ostensive learning, normal linguistic communication, and radical interpretation. My thesis is that triangulation came to transform Davidson's view of radical interpretation in the process of thinking about the details of ostensive learning and linguistic communication, and this view is Davidson's final account of the concept of objective truth.

Below, I being by reviewing the background necessary for making sense of Davidson's introduction and uses of triangulation. Next, I contrast *basic triangulation*—that which can and does occur with creatures that lack thought and language—with Davidson's later discussions of triangulation in the context of ostensive learning. I also look at normal linguistic communication and radical interpretation in light of the account of ostensive learning (all three involving *linguistic triangulation*). Finally, I apply the distinction between basic and linguistic triangulation to radical interpretation in giving my take on Davidson's final solution to the problem of objectivity.

Davidson is a non-reductionist about mind and language. His proposal is to give non-intentionally specified necessary, but not jointly sufficient, conditions for the emergence of thought. In particular, Davidson maintained from early in his career that the concepts of belief, truth, and error are interrelated and cannot be reduced to either the non-intentional or to concepts simpler or more basic. Our understanding of

these concepts comes in our awareness of their relations to one another and to the sorts of evidence we have for their application. Moreover, conceptual content requires such concepts and inherits its normative features from occurring in judgments along with possible error. Error allows for the distinction between belief and truth and gets its grip in the context of interpretation. To provide a non-reductive account of the emergence of thought and language therefore requires a non-intentionally specifiable set of conditions necessary for the emergence of determinate mental content along with the concepts of belief, truth, and error, as well as linguistic communication. Triangulation is best seen as the framework that makes possible the emergence of thought and language and the concepts necessary for that emergence.

The roots of triangulation can be traced to the debate between Davidson and W. V. O. Quine over the location of the stimulus that provides the interpretation of observation sentences in radical interpretation.[1] Quine favors proximal stimulation of the sense organs because of its avoidance of error. This starting point is appropriate for his epistemic goal of accounting for how people come to have a theory of the world—along with the reification of objects—from the paltry evidence provided by their proximal stimuli. Davidson rejects the notion of proximal, mediating, non-conceptual evidence. Simply put, causes of beliefs are not reasons for beliefs.[2] While objects in the world cause our beliefs, Davidson rejects any foundationalist picture according to which we can compare our beliefs with their causes so as to provide evidence or reasons for those beliefs. Only beliefs (things with propositional content) can serve as evidence for beliefs.[3]

1) Davidson, D. (1982) “Empirical Content.” In Davidson, D. (2001) Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective, New York: Clarendon Press.
2) Davidson, D. (2001). “Afterthoughts.” In Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective, New York: Clarendon Press.
3) Davidson, D. (1983) “A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge.” In Davidson, D. (2001) *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*. New York: Clarendon Press.

But this rejection of foundationalism led to two related problems for Davidson, the problems of error and objectivity. The problem of error is making sense of attributing error in the context of interpretation on the basis of distal stimuli; if distal stimuli determine both the meaning attributed and the truth of the belief attributed (since meaning is cashed out in terms of truth conditions), speakers will always be right—which means there is no wrong, and so the idea of being right or wrong, and so the idea of truth, gets no grip.[4] The problem of objectivity concerns how to account for our concept of truth as independent of belief, given access to nothing outside our own web of beliefs, beliefs that are directly about the objects that make them true (as opposed to representational states that mediate mind and world).[5]

Two theses are of particular importance for Davidson's work on objectivity. The first is the causal thesis, according to which the objects that cause speakers to hold true observation sentences determine the content of those sentences.[6] The importance of this thesis is seen in Davidson's claim that a solution to the problem of objectivity will not be found in an epistemic account of objectivity—in the sense of comparisons of beliefs with the outside world—but rather in a semantic account of the causal role of objects in interpretation.[7] Davidson suggests that while a believer cannot compare his or her own beliefs with their causes, an interpreter of the speech of that believer must take into account the causes of the believer holding sentences true. An understanding of interpretation should therefore give us an understanding of what makes possible our concept of objectivity. Triangulation, as we will see, makes this basic causal relation possible.

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4) Davidson, Donald (1999) "Reply to Follesdal." In The Philosophy of Donald Davidson, Hahn (ed.), Open Court, p. 730.

5) Davidson, D. (1995) "The Problem of Objectivity." In Davidson, D. (2004) *Problems of Rationality*. New York: Clarendon Press.

6) The causal thesis follows from—with additional assumptions—but is not identical to the distal thesis regarding radical interpretation.

7) Davidson, D. (1982) "Empirical Content." In Davidson, D. (2001) Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective, New York: Clarendon Press.

The second thesis relevant to solving the problem of objectivity is Davidson's rejection of linguistic conventions as playing a necessary or constitutive role in linguistic meaning.[8] With this rejection we lose any hope of making sense of error and objectivity in terms of the practices of linguistic communities. The rejection of conventions led to Davidson proposing his own account of communication. According to that account, the norm of communication is a function of the intentions of speakers to be interpreted in the way intended, and the listener providing the speaker with some indication of the success or failure of this intention. Linguistic normativity is provided by the notion of *going on as before*, Davidson's substitute for the notion of following a shared rule.[9] In communication, the speaker intends to go on as before in the use of language, and the listener provides the normative check on the success of this intention. Triangulation makes possible both the causal determination of content and going on as before.

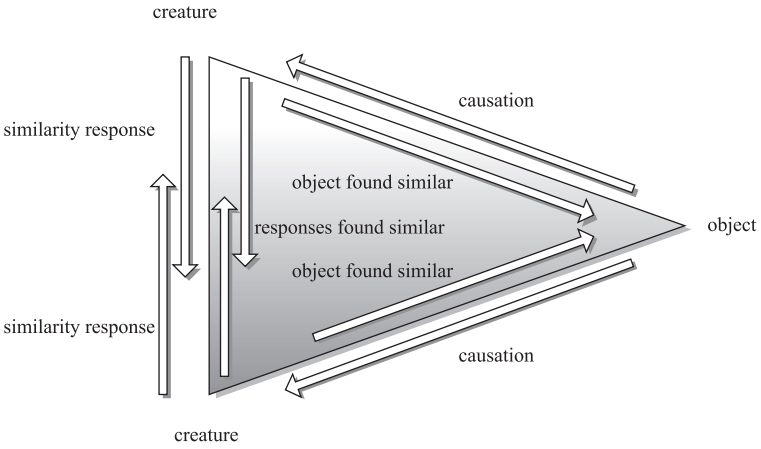
My interpretation of how this works is perhaps made clearer by contrasting it with the prevailing interpretation among commentators on triangulation. In contrast to those interpretations according to which triangulation is a common-cause account of content, I suggest that the common cause is picked out by triangulation. That is, there is no "the object" that we can say, independently of and prior to triangulation, that will be "the cause" of the responses of triangulating creatures. As is well known from discussions in the philosophy of science concerning the pragmatics of causal explanations, "the cause" of an event often depends on our explanatory interests. In essence, these explanatory interests are on Davidson's account *built into* creatures like us; we need to know what objects others are responding to, and so we are born discerning what those objects are. Moreover, we are born responding to objects in

8) Davidson, D. (1986) "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs." In Davidson, D. (2005), *Truth, Language and History*, New York: Clarendon Press.

9) Davidson, D. (1992) "The Second Person." In Davidson, D. (2001) *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*. New York: Clarendon Press.

ways that reveal what objects we find similar; Davidson calls theses responses *similarity responses*. I claim then that triangulation is best understood as the convergence of *inborn shared similarity responses* of two creatures on a single object. Figure 1 illustrates this.

Figure 1 Triangulation



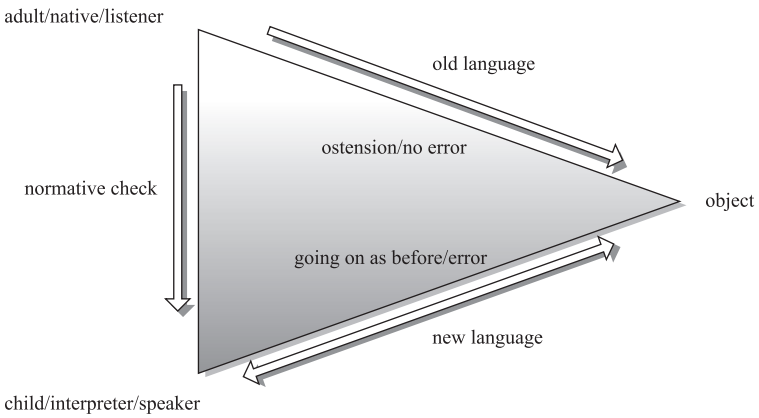
The arrows *within* the triangle represent the inborn standards of similarity of each creature as metaphorically reaching out to an object. Because the creatures share such similarity standards, the same objects are found similar by both creatures. As a result, that object and objects found similar to that object cause the similarity responses of each creature—represented by the arrows *outside* the triangle. Finally, by correlating objects found similar and responses of the other found similar, a distinction between objects *found* similar and objects that are *in fact* similar is made possible. This distinction is necessary for determinate content, and for distinguishing between mere discrimination and concept possession, since it makes for a distinction between things in the extension of a concept and things that seem or appear to be in the extension.

The necessity of language for error and conceptual content depends on Davidson's view that to have a concept of error requires the ability to give reasons and explain errors. Concepts inherit their normativity from judgments in which they occur, judgments to the effect that an object in question belongs to a certain class. Such judgments require the awareness of possible error. Davidson's early discussions of triangulation concerned such judgments and the necessity of the linguistic communication of the content of such concepts for the concept of objectivity. Davidson's later discussions of triangulation are concerned with the way in which triangulation makes possible error in the breakdown of correlations between objects found similar and the similarity responses of the other creature. Such breakdowns are not sufficient for the concept of error, but they do provide space for the application of a concept of error. To have this concept requires not only the awareness of error but also the ability to explain error by means of linguistic communication.[10] Concept possession therefore requires language use in the giving of reasons for judgments and reasons for error. Concepts find their home in *the practice of reason giving* and so resist reduction or naturalization.

How does triangulation make possible the linguistic communication necessary for such sophisticated practices? Here, we must bring together Davidson's idolectic account of communication with triangulation as it occurs in ostensive language learning. Reflection on ostensive learning resulted in a shift in Davidson's view of interpretation; the consequence is Davidson's final account of objectivity. Figure 2 illustrates the analogous way in which ostension figures in ostensive language learning, interpretation, and linguistic communication.

10) Davidson, Donald (1999) "Reply to Follesdal." In The Philosophy of Donald Davidson, Hahn (ed.), Open Court, p. 730.

Figure 2 Ostension



Consider first ostensive language learning. The adult says a word and points to an object; this is the arrow at the top of the triangle indicating the adult's old or preexisting language. The inborn similarity standards shared by adult and child allow for the triangulation of the object; both find the object to belong to the same class, and the child finds the spoken word to belong to a class. The child then imitates the adult, responding similarly when the child encounters objects found similar to the originally ostended object. This is the child's new bit of language—the bottom arrow representing this correlation—and the adult provides the normative check—the arrow on the left—as to whether the child has gone on as before or is in error. The result, often enough, is that the new language of the child resembles the old language of the adult and so allows for increasingly sophisticated communication and so the emergence of language and thought.

Next, consider linguistic communication. Davidson does not consider ostension in connection with his characterization of communication, for the obvious reason that ostension does not typically occur in linguistic communication. Nevertheless, the other elements of the triangle are present in his account. According to that account,

communication requires that a speaker make himself interpretable to a listener. In particular, the speaker must intend to be interpreted in a certain way; the speaker must believe that the listener will be able to recognize this intention; and the speaker must be justified in this belief. The connection between ostensive learning (and triangulation) and Davidson's idolectic characterization of communication is provided by the notion of going on as before. If the listener is to interpret the speaker correctly, the listener must form correct expectations as to how the speaker will go on. The speaker, therefore, must intend to go on in a certain way, intend the listener to recognize this intention, and be justified in believing the listener recognizes this intention. We can now ask the question: In virtue of what are the responses of the speaker relevantly similar? Davidson's answer is that the responses are similar in virtue of the responses of the other creature. That is, the responses of the speaker are similar—the speaker goes on as before—as determined by the responses of the listener. The listener therefore provides the normative check for the speaker. If we consider the case of a malapropism, the analogy with ostensive learning becomes clearer. The speaker uses a word in an unusual way. The listener is able to infer the intended meaning given contextual clues and background knowledge (this is triangulation in an extended sense, and would be in the literal sense if an ostended object were involved). The speaker goes on in the same way in this non-standard use of the word, and the listener continues to give it the non-standard interpretation. The speaker has, in a sense, created a new language, but as long as the speaker goes on in the same way, the listener is able to assign the interpretation intended by the speaker. Whether or not the speaker has gone on in the same way is determined by the responses of the listener.

Finally, consider the case of radical interpretation. The native utters an observation sentence in the presence of an object. The interpreter imitates the utterance and goes on to produce similar utterances in the presence of objects found similar. As in ostensive learning, though, the original pairing for the interpreter is sight and sound; what the native or the native's community mean by such utterances is

irrelevant. A sound is being given a use, and the process of ostension establishes this use. Subsequent utterances of similar sounds by the interpreter will have as their content objects relevantly similar to the object involved in the original ostension. The correctness (relevant similarity[11]) of the interpreter's utterances over time will be determined by the responses of the native. In this way, the interpreter has learned a new language, one modeled on the language of the native.

The significance of ostension becomes clear if we think of radical interpretation as having two stages corresponding to basic triangulation and linguistic triangulation. In the first, non-normative stage, the native utters a word or phrase and gestures to an object. The shared similarity standards of interpreter and native pick out the same object, and the object then serves as the standard of comparison of subsequent responses of the interpreter. For this reason, doubt in the case of the original ostension is impossible; the original pairing is a non-normative, causal association for the interpreter. In the next stage, the interpreter responds to the object with a sound similar to the utterance of the native, though this similarity is not necessary. What is necessary is that the interpreter go on as before, meaning that whatever response he makes to the object, he responds similarly to objects found similar in the future. Similar, of course, in the eyes of the native. The responses of the native then serve as a check on whether the interpreter is succeeding in going on as before. The second stage of ostension therefore introduces an element of normativity by making error possible. In this way, the interpreter comes to speak a new language of his own, but one that because it is modeled on that of the native will serve for the purposes of linguistic communication.

With this two stage view of interpretation we have Davidson's solutions to both the problems of error and objectivity. The first ostension lacks normativity and the

11) Davidson, D. (2001) "Externalisms." In P. Kotatko, P. Pagin, G. Segal (Eds.), *Interpreting Davidson* (pp. 1-16). Stanford: CSLI Publications.

object ostended comes to play a constitutive role in the content of what will be the interpreter's future verbal responses. The importance of this for objectivity is that while neither native nor interpreter can compare their beliefs with what cause them, a brute causal relation between native and object grounds the content the interpreter's responses will come to have. A standard of objectivity is therefore made possible by both the original object ostended and also the inborn similarity responses shared by native and interpreter that determine what objects are relevantly similar to the original object. With the second stage we see how error is made possible. Relative to the original ostension, the native's responses serve as a check on the responses of the interpreter. When the interpreter makes a mistake in the eyes of the native, the native's response serves to indicate that the current object is not relevantly similar to the originally ostended object or that the current response is not relevantly similar to the interpreter's past responses. Both the object and the native provide essential elements in the *objective standard* against which the interpreter's responses are measured.

Here, then, is my interpretation of Davidson's final account of our concept of objectivity—of a world independent of our beliefs about it—as it arises in a semantic rather than an epistemic context. The following steps are involved:

1. The original ostension by the parent/native picks out an object as salient.
2. The response of the child/interpreter establishes a relation between responses and the originally ostended object.
3. Responses of the adult/native to the responses of the child/interpreter provide the check on whether or not the child/interpreter is going on as before.
4. The object then plays the role of what is constant for both individuals against which the check on response similarity makes sense.
5. So, we get a notion of objectivity: objects are independent of the responses of the creatures triangulating them.

Davidson's claim, then, is that our concept of objective truth arises in understanding the role of the world in interpreting one another. Understood as a convergence of shared inborn similarity responses, triangulation is the scaffolding that supports the emergence of this concept of objective truth, as well as thought and language. With that emergence, we come to engage in the practices of reason giving and error explanation, practices that are on Davidson's view ineliminable elements of what it is to be a rational animal.