The 'World' of Donald Davidson: Some Remarks on the Concept

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RESUME: The paper tries to outline the concept of world Donald Davidson operates with in his work. What is interesting about it is that it allows for objectivity by being commonly shared and known and at the same time escapes the trap of positing meanings by consisting of ready-made, referentially scrutable and knowledge justifying entities. In the text to follow I point at some of the main pillars of making this possible.

KEYWORDS: Donald Davidson, objective world, relativity, conceptual scheme, triangulation

By the "'world' of Donald Davidson" I mean the idea of an objective world as a condition of knowledge in the philosophy of Donald Davidson. What is important about the concept of world is that its definition has to deal with a matter quite problematic for Twentieth Century philosophy, namely what there is to know and in what way it is. Ever since the world came to be seen as not consisting of a confronting stretch of things or objects well-defined in their whatness, and the one who is to know – seen as not being the subject with the all-knowing reaching grasp (nowadays a solid tendency in both Continental an Analytical Philosophy), 'world' has become quite an unstable concept. Donald Davidson's 'world' is interesting in that context for it manages to stay objective and shared, independent of one's mind, and at the same time not articulated in positing meanings entities. Yet, it is that one world that we know and in our knowledge corresponds to, and not some other intermediary reality, relativized to a conceptual scheme, one or other.

What seems to be one of the main epistemological problems in a post-Cartesian world is relativity. For when we are not faced with an openly articulated world whose structure is laid bare for us to perceive and describe, articulation becomes an achievement of theory and it gets ever more unclear how it is anchored to the world. The relationship between theory and world, between knowledge and what there is to know, is not stable and fixed but rather dynamic. Being that way not absolute,

knowledge of the world regresses to a point of view, to a conceptual scheme, and competing conceptual schemes cannot be quite measured to one another for the sanction of the one world won't really work as a criterion.

It is exactly this kind of relativity Donald Davidson disagrees with and labels as the third dogma of empiricism in his essay "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme".[1] In the same essay, however, we find that not accepting the very idea of a conceptual scheme does not mean for Davidson to take a step back to the view that language with its conceptual apparatus is a neutral tool for describing reality in a way that there's no ground for the notion that our theories of the world are relative to anything but the world itself. For that would be to hold on to the second dogma of empiricism, as formulated by W.V.O. Quine. By doing that, Davidson can be shown to be operating with a particular concept of world that is objective but not Cartesian. That is what I'll try to do in the first part of the present paper.

I'll then trace the world as playing a major role for the possibility of knowledge in general by being a shared environment, as presented in a later essay of Davidson's, "Three Varieties of Knowledge".[2] It is shared in a kind of direct way, not through conceptual veils or anything like that, and yet it does not epistemologically ground our beliefs so as to be the source of objectifiable evidence in a subject—object kind of epistemological attitude. As can be seen here and – among other essays – famously in "A Coherence Theory of Truth an Knowledge"[3], the kind of interaction between knowing agents and the world that grants the world that particular type of role in epistemology is causation and not justification.

I

In "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" Davidson works towards denouncing the idea of a conceptual scheme by, among other things, disagreeing with two types of person-world relationship, namely the one he ascribes to Peter Strawson and the one he ascribes to Thomas Kuhn. The first he sees as holding on to Quine's second dogma of

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[1] Davidson, Donald; "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Second Edition), CLARENDON PRESS, OXFORD, 2001.

[2] Davidson, Donald; "Three Varieties of Knowledge" in *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, CLARENDON PRESS, OXFORD, 2001.

[3] Davidson, Donald; "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge", *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, CLARENDON PRESS, OXFORD, 2001.

empiricism and the second, to something Davidson himself proclaims the third dogma of empiricism. There we can find a kind of interesting dynamic between the second and the third dogma of empiricism as regards to the person-world relationship. Accepting the former as a dogma can be seen as taking the 'world' away from us by intertwining language and theory in a way that can easily develop into relativity. Concepts are no longer objective by way of unequivocally fitting the world. So we are in a way conceptually veiled from it. But accepting the latter as dogma is accepting the rejection of the radical form such a view of conceptuality can take, namely the conceptual scheme. And thus it in a way brings the world back to us – not in the same manner, though, in which we've had it before accepting the second dogma. And that is the way Davidson takes.

Let us take a closer look at all this. In the words of Strawson:

It is possible to imagine kinds of worlds very different from the world as we know it.[4]

The imaginary worlds of Strawson appear without a change in the point of view. The dualism that allows this multiplication of worlds is that of theory and language or analytic and synthetic truths. To be able to describe worlds entirely different from our own with the conceptual resources of the language we know we have to assume that our concepts have a fixed meaning, independent from the facts we use it to depict. *I.e.*, the requirement is that we have at our disposal a set of concepts whose meaning is not 'contaminated' by the statements we use them to express in order to describe the world and its principles or our theories of the world. That would mean we would be able to draw a strict line between language and theory and that being the line between an autonomous toolkit and the world-descriptions we use it to make. That way different coherent sets of descriptions, adequate to different worlds could be achieved through one and the same language toolkit. And if it is in any way possible to isolate about the truth of a proposition or a statement the purely linguistic component from the one based on facts, then it is possible to tell the analytic from the synthetic truths. Analytic, namely, would be those truths, where the fact-based component is entirely missing and the linguistic component is the one responsible for the truthfulness. In "Two Dogmas

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[4] Cf. Davidson, Donald; "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Second Edition), CLARENDON PRESS, OXFORD, 2001 where Davidson quotes Strawson, Peter; *The Bounds of Sense;* p. 15.

of Empiricism", Quine argues that such an isolation is not a sound one and to claim otherwise amounts to one of the dogmas of empiricism.

> *Modern empiricism has been conditioned in large by two dogmas. One is belief in some fundamental cleavage between truths which are analytic, or grounded in meanings independently of matters of fact, and truths which are synthetic, or grounded in fact.*[5]

Davidson accepts Quine's conclusion and with that excludes Strawson's suggestion. Another way of world-multiplication is Davidson disagrees with is Kuhn's one. There we have one world and a myriad of viewpoints to it. Although strictly speaking there is only one world here, the 'incommensurability' of the different perspectives to it puts us in a position to speak rather of different *worlds*, than of the quite weak 'points of view' when describing the situation. 'Incommensurability' is the term Kuhn uses to name the mutual untranslatability of the different points of view, paradigms, worlds etc. This version of world multiplication overcomes the abovementioned second dogma of empiricism. Moreover, it is grounded on the rejection of what the dogma states. Because here we have a rejection of the clear distinction between theory and language. The meaning of our concepts cannot be abstracted form the theories, the descriptions, the explanations of the world we construct with their help. Hence the untranslatability. Language is not a pure instrument of expression untouched by what it expresses. It cannot be used to 'impartially' describe something new, just because he didn't 'impartially' describe the old one. The meaning of its concepts is untraceably modified by the different descriptions it's used for. Language becomes the refracting prism of the new 'world'.

And so this second version of world multiplication is directly based on the rejection of one of the dogmas of empiricism Quine formulated, namely the dogma of the analytic—synthetic distinction or the language—theory distinction.

Here, however, another kind of dualism Davidson does not accept appears as a precondition. This is the dualism of uninterpreted empirical content and interpreting conceptual scheme which dualism Davidson proclaims the third dogma of empiricism.

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[5] Quine, W.V.O.; "Main Trends in Recent Philosophy: Two Dogmas of Empiricism" in *The Philosophical Review,* Vol. 60, No. 1 (Jan., 1951); p. 20.

The new world is new because it is described in a different language, not because it itself is new. The world, that is, stays the same. So in regards to the new paradigm something stays the same, and that thing is the uninterpreted world content. It is the first member of the dualism. The second member is the interpretation of the content or the conceptual scheme. Although the uninterpreted world content thus appears to be a mediator between the incommensurable conceptual schemes, it cannot mediate the translation between them and make it possible that way for – as Kuhn says[6] – there exists no such language that refers directly and non-theoretically to the world and so none that could provide us with the missing link of the translation. The possibility of such language would mean a step back to the first dogma of empiricism. That aside, the possibility of such language would mean that a vital condition for conceptual relativism or multiplicity of interpretations is missing; this condition, namely, is incommensurability. For without the radical divergence, without impossibility of translation different interpretations wouldn't be different conceptual schemes, different matrixes of meaning but only different explanations within the same scheme, local variations within a common global net. Davidson, however, rejects the possibility that the division of uninterpreted content and interpreting scheme can be a valid one.

> *I want to urge that this second dualism of scheme and content, of organizing system and something waiting to be organized, cannot be made intelligible and defensible. It is itself a dogma of empiricism, the third dogma. The third, and perhaps the last, for if we give it up it is not clear that there is anything distinctive left to call empiricism.*[7]

The test for difference of conceptual schemes appears to be the translatability between them for, as was mentioned, if they are translatable into one another or also if they are commensurable, we have only one conceptual scheme providing for only derivative differences. So too Davidson points out. And then, as he says:

> *Instead of living in different worlds, Kuhn's scientists may, like those who need Webster's dictionary, be only words apart.*[8]

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[6] I am guided here by what Davidson says about Kuhn.

[7] Davidson, Donald; "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Second Edition), CLARENDON PRESS, OXFORD, 2001, p. 189.

[8] Ibid., p. 189.

It must be taken into consideration that rejecting the possibility of a multiplicity of conceptual schemes doesn't mean accepting that we all share a common conceptual scheme. In fact these two statements coincide in the most basic aspect of their not being tenable which is that they both rest on the idea of a conceptual scheme, on the according to Davidson dogmatic dualism of uninterpreted world content and conceptual canvass. The fact that the argument in favour of conceptual schemes radically irreducible to one another is not a tenable one does not mean that all people share a common set of beliefs, that an agreement to all problems is guaranteed. It is more that in order to be able to comprehend difference, it has to be rested upon a background of primary commonness. The statement of absolute difference cannot be rendered comprehensible. Disagreement requires encounter and it can't but happen on a shared ground. And it is as harsher and clearer a disagreement as larger that common ground is.

So Davidson does not see as sustainable the notion of conceptual scheme; the idea of incommensurable conceptual worlds is, according to him, not comprehensible. And parting with conceptual schemes clears the way for us to reestablish a kind of direct connection to the world:

> *In giving up the dualism of scheme and world, we do not give up the world, but reestablish unmediated touch with the familiar objects whose antics make our sentences and opinions true or false.*[9]

In the second part of this paper we shall look into the matter of what that connection is.

II

Even more uncompromisingly so the statement of incomprehensibility of absolute difference forces itself on us when we turn to the way Donald Davidson sees the relationships among what he calls "the three varieties of knowledge". These, according to Davidson, are the three types of empirical knowledge there are: knowledge of the contents of my own mind, knowledge of the world and knowledge of the contents of other people's minds. He believes these three main varieties of knowledge to be

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[9] Davidson, Donald; "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Second Edition), CLARENDON PRESS, OXFORD, 2001, p. 198

interdependent, equally basic and irreducible to one another.[10] None of them is prior to the other two this making the dynamic between them a holistic one. Their mutual interaction he calls triangulation. Each one of them implies the other two as conditions of possibility.

> *If I did not know what others think, I would have no thoughts of my own and so would not know what I think. If I did not know what I think, I would lack the ability to gauge the thoughts of others. Gauging the thoughts of others requires that I live in the same world with them, sharing many reactions to its major features, including its values.*[11]

This is so, Davidson believes, because the content of my own thoughts is not private. It cannot be private for otherwise I wouldn't have a criterion for distinguishing between being right and just thinking I am right about something. This differentiation is a fundamental characteristics of beliefs – if one cannot grasp it one cannot be said to have any beliefs at all, and "belief is a condition of knowledge".[12] Understanding that difference implies understanding the concept of objectivity, of objective truth. The source of objectivity for Davidson is intersubjectivity, interpersonal communication. Thus to be able to know what I think, to have beliefs at all, I have to know what the other thinks, I have to be in communication with him. But the possibility of knowing what the other thinks depends on a shared world we have beliefs about, on knowledge of a shared world. For the only thing I have at my disposal in order to gain that knowledge (of what the other thinks) is his/her behavior, the external show of his/her attitude toward the world, his/her utterances, mainly, paired with the assumption that he/she holds them to be true.[13] So a shared world gives me something without which I cannot interpret the utterances of the other – it gives me the intersection between what my beliefs are about and what those of the other are about. For only in a shared world:

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[10] Davidson, Donald; "Three Varieties of Knowledge" in *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, CLARENDON PRESS, OXFORD, 2001.

[11] Ibid.; p. 219-20.

[12] Ibid., p. 209.

[13] For more on that topic see Donald Davidson, "Belief and the Basis of Meaning", *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Second Edition), CLARENDON PRESS, OXFORD, 2001.

> *an interpreter can perceive, often enough, that an agent has a certain*
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> *sort of attitude towards an object or event the interpreter perceives.*[14]

The point of intersection of these two sets of reactions is the object or event in the world they relate to. I need it to be able to measure the utterance of the other against my own belief toward that object or event in the world. Without such measuring against my own beliefs understanding of the other cannot be achieved and such measuring cannot be done if our only initial information is an utterance and not what that utterance is a reaction to.[15] And if I can't understand the other, as was previously said, I can't understand my own self.

> *Until a base line has been established by communication with someone else, there is no point in saying one's own thoughts or words have a propositional content. If this is so, then it is clear that knowledge of another mind is essential to all thought and all knowledge. Knowledge of another mind is possible, however, only if one has knowledge of the world, for the triangulation which is essential to thought requires that those in communication recognize that they occupy positions in a shared world. So knowledge of other minds and knowledge of the world are mutually dependent; neither is possible without the other.*[16]

Here the fact is distinctly brought to our attention that the state of the world being a shared world is not something we can do without. As was previously mentioned, however, it is not shared through a shared conceptual scheme as an interpreting point of view towards it. It is shared in a way that goes beyond the scheme—content dualism. And better yet – not beyond, but somehow away.

But what is that connection, that unmediated connection that brings the world to us and how is it not susceptible to conceptualization and thus to conceptually incommensurable interpretations? It is a causal connection. That is Davidson's answer.

> *Accordingly I suggest we give up the idea that meaning or knowledge is grounded on something that counts as an ultimate source of evidence. No doubt*

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[14] Davidson, Donald; "Three Varieties of Knowledge" in *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, CLARENDON PRESS, OXFORD, 2001; p. 210.

[15] See 13.

[16] Ibid., p.213.

meaning and knowledge depend on experience, and experience ultimately on sensation. But this is the "depend" of causality, not of evidence of justification.[17]

There is a crucial difference between justifying and just causing. All the accounts that try to "ground belief in one way or another on the testimony of the senses"[18] face the hardly surmountable hindrance of explaining how exactly sensation justifies belief and also what the guarantees are that our sensations are reliable. When the world is counted on as evidence of truthfulness the connection between person and world gets into all kinds of trouble – it gets relativized, unreliable, non-existent; in any way, problematic. Sensations cause beliefs and so they ground them as causes but they do not justify them. Justification comes from within the system of beliefs which, of course, is a whole new story but what matters here is that we don't test our beliefs against the world to confirm them being right or wrong. "Correspondence without confrontation"[19] is what Davidson calls this type of truth theory. So the world we are left with is just that realm we share, that provokes us in certain ways and provides us with the common environment we need to communicate, or, triangulate. It is a rather direct connection. The world as causing does not diverge because we don't count on it to justify and then doubt it. The pressure is off because what matters in the type of causation the world does is the common factor. We all share the causality. And what's different is off-topic here. It only matters what we share – so no drama.

Thus Davidson's 'world' as an epistemological condition refuses to be multiplied in any way. Relativity, uncertainty, incommensurability, subjectivity – nothing suffices. He writes:

> *Two interpreters, as unlike in culture, language, point of view as you please, can disagree on whether an utterance is true, but only if they differ on how things are in the world* they share, *or what the utterance means.*[20]

So, all in all, the shape the 'world' of Donald Davidson seems to take is of a world shared, independent of our thought or language, and objective. But it is, nevertheless, not the

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[17] Davidson, Donald; "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge", *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, CLARENDON PRESS, OXFORD, 2001, p. 146.

[18] Ibid., p. 141

[19] Ibid.; p. 137.

[20] Ibid. p. 139; italics mine.

Cartesian world of objects bearing properties that have to be grasped in one way or another by a lone subject and a method. It is a shared environment towards which we react. Meaning is not born between the world and the person, it is born intersubjectively – in communication between people reacting to a common stimulus. So meanings appear on the level of beliefs ("sentences held true by someone who understands them"[21]), on the level of a system of beliefs, rather, for they are also holistically defined. So things in the world don't bear essences in any epistemologically relevant way. They just are, arranged one way or another, causal and not evidential in their relation towards us.

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[21] Ibid., p. 138.