

Triangulation, the Third Dogma, and the Problem of Objectivity

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Abstract

In the latter part of his career, Donald Davidson introduced a model of communication involving two creatures interacting with each other and a mutually perceived object. My view is that Davidson's introduction of this triangulation model was occasioned by a long-running debate with his mentor, W. V. O. Quine. This debate concerned interpretation, a topic important to both thinkers. The focus of the debate was what to take as the stimuli that cause speakers to utter certain sentences about their environment. Quine favored the proximal cause, the stimulation of one's sensory receptors; Davidson favored the distal cause, the objects themselves. This paper concerns the proximal-distal debate and its role in motivating Davidson's introduction of triangulation.

While the proximal-distal debate concerns interpretation, I aim to make clear why Davidson came see the debate as a "minor corollary" of a more fundamental difference with Quine concerning epistemology. Generally, Davidson rejects Quine's epistemology as embodying an empiricist version of the dualism of scheme and content. Quine's motivation for taking proximal stimuli as central for meaning and epistemology derives from his epistemic project of accounting for our conceptual sovereignty in building conceptual schemes (and in particular, different ontologies) to match the input of our sensory receptors. Now, since radical translation involves the matching of *proximal stimuli*, Quine avoids the problem of error attribution; moreover, because proximal stimuli are *matched*, sentences conditioned to them can serve as objective checks on conceptual schemes and so common content. Rejecting scheme-content dualism in favor of the distal theory makes it difficult for Davidson to account for error attribution in the context of interpretation and objective truth in the context of epistemology. Indeed, for Davidson the problem of error is just the epistemic problem of objectivity seen in the mirror of meaning. I argue that triangulation is meant to address the problem of objectivity by accounting for our concept of error as arising *within* the context of two minds communicating about a shared world rather than by analyzing objectivity as an epistemic relation *between* mind and something external to it.

Keywords: triangulation, Davidson, Objectivity, Quine.

1 Introduction

Donald Davidson's notion of triangulation is the interaction among two or more creatures and a common object. Davidson maintains that triangulation is an essential element in the emergence of thought and language. He introduced the notion of triangulation in the middle part of his career and although it has received some attention recently, commentators have tended to find his arguments concerning triangulation unpersuasive. In this paper I do not aim to defend Davidson's uses of triangulation directly, but instead I wish to provide a more sympathetic interpretation than is typically found in the secondary literature.^{*1} Rather than look at the recent literature on triangulation, I look at one of the earliest responses to triangulation in print, Dagfinn Follesdal's^{*2} contribution to the *Library of Living Philosophers* volume on Davidson published in 1999 and Davidson's response^{*3} to that paper in the same volume. I attempt to make clear Davidson's response and what I think Follesdal got right and wrong about triangulation. Follesdal was likely right that triangulation was born out of a debate with W. V. O. Quine, the proximal-distal debate. But Follesdal missed that the purpose of introducing triangulation was to solve the problems of objectivity and error that arise as a result of Davidson's rejection of the third dogma of empiricism he attributes to Quine and which, according to Davidson, is the real source of that debate.

In the first section, I discuss Follesdal's interpretation of triangulation and the proximal-distal debate between Quine and Davidson. In the following section, I discuss Davidson's criticisms of Quine's epistemology and in particular Davidson's rejection of the notion of conceptual schemes. In the third section, I discuss the relation between Davidson's rejection of conceptual schemes and the problem of objectivity. In the fourth section, I look at Davidson's motivation for introducing triangulation as a means of solving the problem of objectivity. In the next section, I argue that Follesdal's criticisms of triangulation as a causal theory of perception miss their mark. I suggest that triangulation makes the concept of error possible, and that this is Davidson's solution to the problem

¹ * Cf., Pagin, Peter (2000) "Semantic Triangulation." people.su.se/~ppagin/papers/Triang.pdf. Bridges, J. (2006) "Davidson's Transcendental Externalism." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 73: 290–315. Lepore, Ernest and Ludwig, Kirk (2007) *Donald Davidson Meaning, Truth, Language and Reality*, Oxford University Press, pp. 404-412.

² * Follesdal, Dagfinn (1999) "Triangulation." In *The Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, Hahn (ed.), Open Court, pp. 719-728.

³ * Davidson, Donald (1999) "Reply to Follesdal." In *The Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, Hahn (ed.), Open Court, pp. 729-732.

of objectivity. In the final section, I discuss a second role that Davidson attributes to triangulation, namely picking out the distal cause as the salient one for thought and language, and argue that that role is intimately bound up with Davidson's solution to the problems of objectivity and error.

2 Follesdal and the Problem of Error

Follesdal begins his paper with a discussion of Quine's insight into the social aspect of language. By introducing the notion of stimulus meaning to account for the role of perception in meaning and epistemology, Follesdal suggests that Quine abandoned that insight. According to Follesdal, Davidson recognized Quine's "problems with perception" and in response gave no place to perception in his own approach to interpretation. Davidson's formulation of the principle of charity bypassed perception, suggesting that interpretation should maximize agreement: correlate sentences agreed upon.

On Follesdal's interpretation, while Davidson early emphasized agreement in interpretation, he later emphasized triangulation. The reason for the change was in part because of a problem Follesdal raised in conversation with Davidson, the problem of error. Follesdal gives a simple example: I suspect "Gavagai" means *Lo a rabbit*, but when I ask "Gavagai?" in the presence of a rabbit hidden from a native by a tree, on the distal theory the native's dissent is evidence against the hypothesis that "Gavagai" means *Lo a rabbit*. When we attribute meaning and beliefs, then, we must take into account perception. Maximizing agreement is the wrong approach.

According to Follesdal, this led Davidson to his triangular causal theory of perception.

How does Davidson solve the problems of perception? He turns to a causal theory of perception and says that the object, event, or situation an expression relates to is the last common cause in the two infinite causal chains that lead to the sense organs of the teacher and learner in the learning situation.^{*4}

It is not immediately clear how this solves the original problem. Follesdal has moved from interpretation to language learning. Since an interpreter does not have access to the learning situation, this would be of no help in the tree-occlusion case. The suggestion seems to be that the interpreter attributes meaning based on cases like the learning situation, where error does not occur, and in light of that attribute error where necessary. Triangulation therefore avoids what the principle of charity would seem to counsel, namely attributing to the native the belief that there is a rabbit present. I suggest below that this characterization of triangulation as concerned with perception is incorrect. However, I think Follesdal is right to relate the introduction of triangulation to cases of error, since for Davidson error is intimately related to the concept of objectivity, and triangulation's primary purpose is to account for our possession of that concept.

⁴ * Ibid 1, p. 724.

Davidson later and in more than one place^{*5} considers the same tree-occlusion example in the context of discussing triangulation. In each case, the point Davidson makes does not concern perception as Follesdal suggests. Rather, as Davidson discusses it in his response to Follesdal, the tree-occlusion example is considered in relation to error making possible the concept of objectivity:

Most of the time, one assumes, the reactions of the troop to a threat or a treat are simultaneous. The exceptions provide the entering wedge for correction and the dawning of a sense of an independent reality and of the possibility of error...these are the only plausible conditions under which private responses can generate thoughts of a shared and public world.^{*6}

I am suggesting that Davidson did not take the example to suggest a causal theory of perception. Davidson did, as Follesdal suggests, take the example to indicate that he had a problem on his account, the problem of error. Davidson uses triangulation not as a replacement for the principle of charity, but rather for the very different purpose of solving the problem of objectivity by providing a solution to the problem of error. So while triangulation may have been born out of considerations of interpretation and in particular differences with Quine over the location of the stimulus, the role Davidson saw triangulation playing in thought and speech was quite different than that suggested by Follesdal.

Davidson admits in his response to Follesdal that by rejecting Quine's notion of proximal stimuli, Davidson was creating for himself the problem of error. Proximal stimuli allow for avoiding the problem presented by the tree-occlusion example. Quine's radical translator would simply include the proximal stimuli caused by the tree in the negative stimulus meaning of "gavagai." This is natural, since proximal stimuli are Quine's substitute for sensory data and the like—the traditional empiricist's account of subjectivity, or how things seem to the subject. Davidson agrees with Follesdal that interpretation on the basis of maximizing agreement is a source of the problem of error. Maximizing agreement does not easily allow for attributing error.

Why does not Davidson accept Quine's theory of perception? The answer is found in the differences between their epistemologies. That epistemology is the real issue between Quine and Davidson in the proximal-distal debate is made clear in the first paragraph of Davidson's response. Regarding Quine's "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," Davidson writes:

...for all its revolutionary criticism of reductionism and the synthetic/analytic distinction, it seemed to me to retain the equally untenable empiricist dualism of 'the tribunal of

⁵ * Cf., Davidson, D. (2001) "What Thought Requires," *The Foundations of Cognitive Science*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, in *Problems of Rationality*, p. 142; and Davidson, D. (2002) "Quine's Externalism," *Grazer Philosophische Studien: Internationale Zeitschrift für Analytische Philosophie*, 66, p. 295.

⁶ * *Ibid* 2, p. 731.

experience' and conceptual scheme. Despite his principled insistence on the public nature of language, Quine's epistemology from beginning to end remained based on private, pre-conceptualized, data.^{*7}

This private, pre-conceptualized data is the real source of the proximal-distal debate, as Davidson says in the following sentence: "My difference with Quine on the question of whether linguistic communication should depend on the proximal or the distal stimulus was a relatively minor corollary of a deeper disagreement about epistemology."^{*8}

In what follows, I explore the way in which the debate with Quine was related to this deeper disagreement about epistemology. My thesis is that with Davidson's rejection of Quine's empiricist epistemology, and in particular the distinction of scheme and content, Davidson came to realize the problem of error was related to the deeper problem of objectivity. By solving the problem of error, Davidson would have a solution to the problem of objectivity. It is this latter problem that triangulation is meant to solve, and triangulation does so by solving the former problem.

3 The Third Dogma

The third dogma, or the dualism of scheme and content, can take many forms, but according to Davidson Quine's form results from his rejection of the analytic-synthetic distinction. Giving up the dualism of analytic and synthetic statements while retaining a notion of empirical content "... suggests instead a dualism of quite a different sort, a dualism of total scheme (or language) and uninterpreted content."^{*9} Indeed, to make sense of comparing conceptual schemes, a non-conceptual sort of evidence must be specified: "It is essential to this idea [of conceptual schemes] that there be something neutral and common that lies outside all schemes."^{*10}

Davidson rejects the distinction between scheme and content for two reasons. First, he rejects as unintelligible the idea of radically different conceptual schemes. Second, and more to our purposes, Davidson rejects the idea of non-conceptual evidence. While proximal stimuli are causally involved in perception, only things with propositional content can serve as evidence.

With conceptual schemes comes conceptual relativism, but with their rejection Davidson claims we get the objectivity of truth.

In giving up dependence on the concept of an uninterpreted reality, something outside all schemes and science, we do not relinquish the notion of objective truth—quite the

⁷ * Ibid.

⁸ * Ibid.

⁹ * Davidson, D. (1974) "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme." In Davidson, D. (1984) *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*. New York: Clarendon Press, 190.

¹⁰ * Ibid, p. 190.

contrary... 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.*¹¹

I suggest that this unmediated contact with reality *just is* the source of the problem of objectivity that triangulation is meant to solve, for if we have unmediated contact with reality, it is unclear where the sense of objectivity comes from. Indeed, one might say that with the problem of objectivity comes also the problem of subjectivity, the problem of making sense of the idea that our beliefs are our own, held independent of the world they concern. Subjectivity and objectivity come as a package, and the rejection of scheme-content dualism is the rejection of one traditional view of the contrast between subjectivity and objectivity. Davidson needs a way of making the subjective-objective contrast that does not suppose a division of scheme and content, and triangulation is a central element of his account of that contrast.

4 Schemes and Objectivity

For Davidson, rejecting the scheme-content distinction is giving up the last element of empiricist foundationalism. And the alternative to foundationalism is coherence—thus Davidson’s paper entitled “A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge.”*¹² As Davidson put it, “A major reason, in fact, for accepting a coherence theory is the unintelligibility of the dualism of a conceptual scheme and a ‘world’ waiting to be coped with.”*¹³ In “Afterthoughts,”*¹⁴ Davidson describes his position as the principle that only beliefs can support beliefs. This is because only something propositional can serve as evidence and so provide epistemic support. We therefore cannot step outside our beliefs and compare them with the world, the world serving as unconceptualized evidence for those beliefs. “No such confrontation makes sense, for of course we can’t get outside our skins to find out what is causing the internal happening of which we are aware.”*¹⁵ Although our beliefs about the world are certainly caused by the world, searching for those causes would only result in more beliefs.

Our not being able to stand outside of ourselves and ascertain the truth of our beliefs is the

¹¹ * Ibid, p. 198.

¹² * Davidson, D. (1983) “A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge.” In Davidson, D. (2001) *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*. New York: Clarendon Press.

¹³ * Davidson, D. (1989) “The Conditions of Thought.” In Brandl and W L. Gombocz (Eds.), *The Mind of Donald Davidson* (pp. 193-200). Amsterdam: Rodopi, p. 140.

¹⁴ * Davidson, D. (2001). “Afterthoughts.” In *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, New York: Clarendon Press, pp. 154-157.

¹⁵ * Ibid 12, p. 144.

reason Davidson gives in the paper “The Problem of Objectivity” for that problem:

The problem is to account for our having the concept of objectivity—of a truth that is independent of our will and our attitudes. Where can we have acquired such a concept? We cannot occupy a position outside our own minds; there is no vantage point from which to compare our beliefs with what we take our beliefs to be about.^{*16}

The problem of objectivity is the problem of understanding how we can come to possess the concept of objectivity given that we cannot compare our subjective beliefs with an objectively independent world. The problem is generated by Davidson’s epistemology and in particular his rejection of the scheme-content distinction:

Although sensation plays a crucial role in the causal process that connects beliefs with the world, it is a mistake to think it plays an epistemological role in determining the contents of those beliefs. In accepting this conclusion, we abandon the key dogma of traditional empiricism, what I have called the third dogma of empiricism. But that is to be expected: empiricism is the view that the subjective (‘experience’) is the foundation of objective empirical knowledge. I am suggesting that empirical knowledge has no epistemological foundation, and needs none.^{*17}

Davidson never explicitly discusses the relation between the problems of error and objectivity. He tends to mention both error and objectivity together, suggesting that a creature’s coming to have the concept of error is necessary and sufficient for having the concept of objective truth. Nowhere, as far as I am aware, does he argue for this connection between error and objectivity. He does, however, suggest that the problem of error and the problem of objectivity have the same origin. As we have seen, the problem of objectivity arises because of the rejection of scheme-content dualism and the foundationalist empiricism that locates subjectivity in private objects before the mind. Without foundationalism—some basis for our knowledge in subjective certainty—we get the problem of error:

The demise of the subjective as previously conceived leaves us without foundations for knowledge, and relieves us of the need for them, but new problems then arise that cluster around the nature of error, for error is hard to identify and explain if the holism that goes with a nonfoundational approach is not somehow constrained.^{*18}

Davidson’s coherentism, like traditional coherence theories, has difficulty accounting for error since

¹⁶ * Davidson, D. (1995) “The Problem of Objectivity.” In Davidson, D. (2004) *Problems of Rationality*. New York: Clarendon Press, p. 7.

¹⁷ * Davidson, D. (1989) “The Myth of the Subjective.” In Davidson, D. (2001) *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*. New York: Clarendon Press, p. 46.

¹⁸ * Ibid, p. 47.

the only constraint on such systems of beliefs is coherence. Many, incompatible coherent theories being possible, recalcitrant data can always be accommodated. So while Quine's proximal approach to translation avoids error, error presents a problem for Davidson's distal epistemology.

5 Triangulation Introduced

Davidson originally introduced triangulation in the context of arguing that thought requires language. Thought requires the concept of truth, and this concept requires interpretation—i.e., for Davidson, linguistic communication. Important for our purposes is the claim that possessing the concept of truth requires linguistic communication. The argument for this thesis has two steps: the concept of truth requires triangulation, and the only thing that could make triangulation sufficient for the concept of truth is if the triangulating creatures engage in linguistic communication. Our focus is the first of these two steps, the connection between triangulation and possession of the concept of truth.

Davidson first argued for the thesis that thought requires language in his paper "Thought and Talk."¹⁹ Seven years later, Davidson introduced triangulation for the first time in print, and he did so in connection with the concept of truth. He suggests that a notion of intersubjective truth is sufficient for the concept of objective truth, and then he offers an analogy to suggest why the notion of intersubjective truth is necessary for the concept of objective truth.

Our sense of objectivity is the consequence of another sort of triangulation, one that requires two 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.²⁰

Notice that, contra Follesdal's interpretation, Davidson says nothing about causation here and nothing in the way of giving an account of perception. Indeed, there is not yet any mention of error. The picture painted is two creatures communicating their beliefs about a shared world. In this context we get the idea of the subjective—our beliefs are our own—and the objective—our perspectives on one independently existing world.

In reflecting on his discussions of triangulation, Davidson mentions neither perception nor causation. He does, however, mention error:

My recent emphasis on the triangle that connects the radical interpreter, her interpretee, and

¹⁹ * Davidson, D. (1975) "Thought and Talk." In Davidson, D. (1984) *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*. New York: Clarendon Press, pp. 155-170.

²⁰ * Davidson, D. (1982) "Rational Animals." In Davidson, D. (2001) *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*. New York: Clarendon Press, p. 105.

the world is... a somewhat recent conviction not only that this triangle is essential to understanding others, but that it is also essential to the awareness of objectivity, the fact that error is possible, and that there is a distinction between what is believed and what is the case.^{*21}

Davidson maintains that if we can make sense of error, we will have a solution to the problem of objectivity. If we can show how creatures could come to see their beliefs are sometimes false, that would be sufficient to show they have a notion of objective truth, of truth being independent of their beliefs. This is where Follesdal's tree-occlusion example comes in. The difference in responses of the two creatures opens up the possibility that the creatures will come to see that they have different perspectives on the same reality. In turn, this makes possible a contrast between their subjective beliefs and an objective reality. The problems of objectivity and error arise from the same epistemic holism that results from rejecting foundationalism and the traditional distinction between subjectivity and objectivity in terms of scheme and content. The solution to these two problems is to introduce two creatures responding to the same object and the responses of one another to that object. While we cannot stand outside of ourselves to compare our beliefs with the world, we can compare our beliefs with the beliefs of others who are standing outside of ourselves.

6 Follesdal's Criticisms of the Causal Theory of Perception

Follesdal concludes his article on triangulation with the criticism that causal theories of perception do not work. He admits to "unease when adherents of causal theories of perception or of reference speak as if causality can individuate objects."^{*22} In this section and the last we will see why Davidson could not agree more with this statement.

It should be clear that not only was Davidson not giving a causal theory of perception, but he simply *could not* have been doing so. Davidson's rejection of causation as playing an epistemic role was one reason for the rejection of the scheme-content distinction of which the proximal-distal debate with Quine was a minor corollary. Indeed, in Davidson's response he agrees with Follesdal that a causal theory of perception will not work. Moreover, Davidson agrees for essentially the same reason: perception is propositional and is irreducible to non-intentional notions such as causation: "[Perception] demands the apparatus of propositional thoughts with truth conditions and the awareness of possible error."^{*23}

Davidson follows this last statement with comments that should remind us of the final passage of the conceptual schemes paper, where Davidson claims that the rejection of a notion of conceptual

²¹ * Ibid 2, p. 310.

²² * Ibid, p. 724.

²³ * Ibid., p. 732.

schemes results in seeing we have unmediated contact with the world.

Triangulation emphasizes the importance of shared experiences where the fact of sharing registers on the sharers....Our thoughts neither create the world nor simply picture it; they are tied to their external sources from the beginning, those sources being the community and environment we know we jointly occupy.^{*24}

I suggested earlier that in the final passage of the conceptual schemes paper, while Davidson claims we get objectivity by giving up the distinction of scheme and content, he nevertheless forces on himself the task of accounting for the objective-subjective contrast without that distinction. He does so with the additional element seen in this passage, namely the community with which we share the world. Communication of beliefs about the world allows us to transcend our subjective perspective and come to an idea of a shared public world.^{*25} The concept of error and the concept of objectivity it makes possible, and not a causal theory of perception, were Davidson's concern in introducing triangulation.

7 Triangulation's Second Function

Until now I have discussed one of the two functions that Davidson attributes to triangulation, namely making possible the concepts of error and objective truth. In this section I discuss the other function Davidson attributes to triangulation, that of making distal objects the content-determining causes of a creature's responses to those objects. It will perhaps seem odd that I discuss this second function last, since the proximal-distal debate seems to be just about that. I justify taking a top-down approach—beginning with the conceptual and ending with the non-conceptual—by suggesting that the second function of triangulation can only be understood appropriately in the context of the first. Unfortunately, Davidson's lack of explicit discussion of the relation between the two functions has encouraged readers to treat the two separately. As a result, commentators have tried to find in triangulation a way of individuating distal causes—as does Follesdal—that does not require communication or a concept of error. I argue that this is mistaken.

Davidson's discussion of the second function of triangulation often occurs in the context of discussing the triangulation that occurs among creatures that lack both thought and language. Creatures in groups triangulate predator or prey, signaling the presence of these objects of interest to the rest of the group by their typical reactions. The responses involved in nonlinguistic triangulation may be either inborn or learned.

Davidson agrees with Quine that for learning to take place, we must have inborn tendencies to

²⁴ * Ibid, p. 732.

²⁵ * Davidson is fully aware that readers will protest that an intersubjective perspective is not the same as an objective perspective. He addresses this issue, and indeed appeals to triangulation in doing so.

generalize or find things similar. Davidson disagrees with Quine, however, and claims that we are built to find distal objects similar, not the proximal stimulation they cause. This is a point that Davidson stresses repeatedly in his discussions of triangulation, but it is rarely mentioned in the secondary literature on triangulation. Only a few commentators have asked the obvious question: If we are built to find distal objects similar, what is triangulation's role in determining the distal object as the cause of a creature's responses?

The answer to this question is that the similarity found in distal objects is *subjective* similarity. The necessity of a second creature is not that without the second creature, the first would not be responding to the distal object; rather, the necessity is that without the second creature, this subjective similarity would not allow for responses to an objective world.

Essential to a proper reading of Davidson's discussions of triangulation are two related phrases Davidson uses repeatedly. *Finding similar* is Davidson's way of talking about subjective similarity, while *similarity responses* are responses of a creature that indicate that some class of objects or events are found similar by that creature. Both subjective similarity and similarity responses occur at different stages of the triangulation process.

1. The two creatures find the same (distal) objects similar.
2. The two creatures respond to objects found similar.
3. The two creatures find the responses of the other creature similar over time.
4. The creatures respond to the responses of the other to the object.
5. The creatures find the responses of the other creature to their responses similar over time.

The role of the first sort of similarity response is to allow each creature to correlate objects found similar with responses of the other creature found similar. The second creature's responses to the first creature's responses allow the first creature a check on its own responses to things found similar. In cases of error, the similarity responses of the two creatures diverge; one has found things similar where the other has not. A creature will have access to its own possible error by noting the responses of another creature to its responses; the second creature allows the first creature to know when, in the eyes of the second creature, the first creature is not responding in the same way to the same sort of object.

If this characterization of triangulation is correct, it should be clear that the two functions of triangulation are inseparable. The basic idea is relatively simple: if a creature is responding to a determinate set of distal objects, error should be possible. Subjective similarity is insufficient to pick out a determinate set of distal objects, since whatever seems subjectively similar just is similar for that creature. That is, subjective similarity does not allow for error, since it does not allow for a distinction between how things seem to a creature and how things really are. So only if triangulation can allow for responses to objects that allow for error will a creature be responding to a determinate

class of distal objects; and conversely, only if the creature is responding to a determinate class of distal objects will error be possible. The two functions of triangulation are two sides of the same coin.

Just as these two functions are inseparable, so is the necessity of linguistic communication for both. That is, nonlinguistic triangulation will result in neither error nor responses to a determinate class of distal objects. Davidson cannot consistently claim that nonlinguistic triangulation is sufficient to pick out distal objects and yet deny that it is sufficient for error. In both cases, I maintain, his view is that triangulation makes these possible, but only with linguistic communication will determinate objects be responded to with the possibility of error.

Only with the gradual emergence of thought and language is a creature able to understand another creature's take on the world. Indeed, Davidson is explicit that only with the ability to understand and explain errors will the problem of error be solved.^{*26} Similarly, the distal object is not picked out in triangulation in a way such that, absent communication, a determinate object is being responded to. Both functions of triangulation are complete only once triangulation goes linguistic. Nonlinguistic triangulation is therefore necessary, but not sufficient, to pick out content-determining causes.^{*27} Davidson's thought, I suggest, is not that nonlinguistic triangulation picks out the object that *thereby* becomes the content of thought; his view is rather that such triangulation *makes objects available* to become the common causes and so the objective subject matter of linguistically triangulating creatures *once thought emerges*. Davidson is in complete agreement with Follesdal, then, that causal theories cannot individuate objects. My top-down approach is therefore justified because Davidson's account of the contrast between subjective and objective similarity, as well as his account of responding to determinate distal objects, are properly understood only in the context of the problem of objectivity.

8 Conclusion

Follesdal was right to relate triangulation to the proximal-distal debate between Quine and Davidson. And it is fairly clear that Follesdal's tree-occlusion example left a lasting impression on Davidson. Triangulation was originally introduced to argue that two perspectives on a shared world are necessary for the concept of objectivity. With the problem of error made clear by Follesdal's example, triangulation came to be more clearly about how to conceive of the distinction between the

²⁶ * See Davidson, D. (2004) *Problems of Rationality*. New York: Clarendon Press, p. 145.

²⁷ * Davidson complicates things by at times talking as if nonlinguistic triangulation is sufficient to pick out particular distal causes. But I think the more consistent and charitable interpretation is that our inborn subjective similarity standards are necessary for linguistic communication about distal objects to take place and with the emergence of thought and language come to be about determinate objects.

subjective and the objective. Error is a difference between how things seem and how they are, and triangulation allows for a gap between how things seem to two creatures. Without a scheme-content distinction, the beliefs of another creature are the only resource one has to draw on to understand the appearance-reality distinction.

It is hard to say when, over Davidson's long and productive career, he became clear on these issues. Seven years passed between Davidson's first use of triangulation as a simple metaphor concerning objectivity; and its reintroduction, fully worked out in terms of shared similarity standards and responses and the two functions they conspire to make possible once language comes on the scene. Between these two publications, Davidson published his coherence theory paper, arguing that only beliefs support beliefs. And contemporaneous with the reintroduction of triangulation Davidson published a paper on the myth of the subjective, arguing against the traditional view of subjectivity as internal, mediating objects. But it would be six years before Davidson wrote an article devoted to the problem of objectivity. What is clear is that consistently, from its introduction through all subsequent discussions, triangulation was Davidson's account of how we come to see that the truth of our beliefs is independent of our holding those beliefs.

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