DAVIDSON’S RETURN TO KANT

Nathaniel Goldberg
Georgetown University, Washington

1. INTRODUCTION

Post-Kantian history of philosophy—including contemporary Anglophonic philosophy—can be read as a series of returns to Kant or reinterpretations of Kant’s views in light of new circumstances. This is certainly true of the philosophy of Donald Davidson, one of the most influential Anglophonic philosophers of the 20th century. In fact, Davidson portrays himself as standing at the historical end of a philosophical debate initiated by Kant. Nonetheless, in this paper, I argue that Davidson, rather than standing at its end, stands at—or near—its start. For, I argue, Davidson returns contemporary Anglophonic philosophy to something very much like Kant’s original position in epistemology, though reinterpreting that position in light of Davidson’s own preoccupation with language.

That philosophical debate initiated by Kant concerns the tenability of certain distinctions. Roughly, Kant thought that there were three types of judgments: analytic and synthetic a priori judgments are constitutive of the conceptual scheme in which rational beings organize the raw data of sensation into synthetic a posteriori judgments, which are empirical.1 Kant’s tripartite distinction thus involved a dualism between constitutive principles and empirical claims. For Carnap, talk of “a priori” and “a posteriori” gave way to “analytic” and “synthetic” simpliciter; and, with their linguistic turn, “judgments” gave way to (indicative) “sentences.” Further, Carnap argued that different analytic sentences constituted different “linguistic frameworks,” his phrase for conceptual schemes. Nonetheless, analogous to Kant, Carnap

1 Though Kant relied on these distinctions throughout his Critical philosophy, they are most central to Kant 1787.

In this paper, citations are to the original year of publication. Page references to works other than Kant’s are to the reprinted editions, if any, indicated in my list of works cited. Page references to Kant’s works are given by the Academy pagination. In all cases, emphasis in quotations is in the original unless noted otherwise. In the case of Kant, I have retained the translators’ italics for foreign expressions and bold for all other words that Kant emphasizes.
claimed that in such frameworks language-users organize sense-data into synthetic sentences, which are empirical.²

Quine’s attack against analytic-synthetic dualism purportedly showed that at the level of individual sentences one could not distinguish between matters of language, on which Carnap’s analytic sentences depended solely for their truth, and matters of extralinguistic fact, on which Carnap’s synthetic sentences depended jointly with language for their truth. So Kant’s three kinds of judgments gave way to Carnap’s two kinds of sentences, giving way to Quine’s one kind of sentence, which was empirical. Nonetheless Quine, like Kant and Carnap, maintained the distinction between a conceptual scheme (Carnap’s “linguistic framework” and as quoted momentarily Quine’s “language”) and empirical content (“sense-data” and “extralinguistic fact”); Quine merely argued that, though “[i]t is obvious that truth in general depends on both language and extralinguistic fact” (1951, 36), this “double dependence ... is not significantly traceable into the statements ... taken one by one” (42, my emphasis).³ Were it so traceable, and a sentence true merely in virtue of language, then that sentence would be analytic. So, for Quine, and Davidson agrees, the existence of an analytic sentence presupposes the existence of a conceptual scheme.

Davidson (1974a) describes himself as entering the scene by arguing against scheme-content dualism, eliminating this final distinction in Kant’s epistemology. To see Davidson’s argument, as well as to see how Davidson returns to Kant, let me consider Davidson’s views.

Davidson (1974a) describes himself as entering the scene by arguing against scheme-content dualism, eliminating this final distinction in Kant’s epistemology. To see Davidson’s argument, as well as to see how Davidson returns to Kant, let me consider Davidson’s views.

² Carnap developed his work on linguistic frameworks, and their relation to analytic-synthetic dualism, in Carnap 1934, fully articulating it in Carnap 1950. Several authors, including Coffa (1991), Friedman (1999, 2001), and Hanna (2001), have recently investigated connections between Kant and Carnap.

³ Quine exegesis can be controversial. I am claiming only that Quine allows an in-principle distinction between scheme and content. According to Quine, that distinction might be impossible to make in practice.

Still, Quine seems to argue that some kind of distinction can be made even in practice:

We cannot strip away the conceptual trappings sentence by sentence and leave a description of the objective world; but we can investigate the world, and man [sic] as a part of it, and thus find out what cues he could have of what goes on around him. Subtracting his cues from his world view, we get man’s net contribution as the difference. This difference marks the extent of man’s conceptual sovereignty—the domain within which he can revise theory while saving the data (1960, 5, my emphasis).

Quine’s idea seems to be that a conceptual scheme, over which epistemic agents are sovereign, is what remains after the world’s contribution to sentential truth is removed. Empirical content, over which the world is sovereign, would then be what remains after the agent’s contribution to sentential truth is removed.
2. DAVIDSON’S VIEWS

Davidson did not begin by arguing against scheme-content dualism but for an extensional account of meaning or interpretation. Davidson (1967) contends that one can, with Quine, reject intensional objects such as meanings and intensional properties such as analyticity without rejecting the notion of meaning altogether. Davidson argues that constructing an extensional Tarski-style theory of truth for a natural language provides a theory of meaning for, or equivalently interprets, that language. According to Davidson, though no uniquely determinate theory will emerge, a linguistic alien means by a particular utterance whatever such an extensional theory would entail that she mean by it. Further, the alien believes, or equivalently holds true, whatever an interpreter in constructing such a theory of meaning needs to be able to take the alien to believe. Now, according to Davidson, necessary conditions on constructing a theory of meaning include that the construction be holistic and that the interpreter apply the principle of charity—roughly, that an alien’s beliefs generally be true by her interpreter’s own lights. Nonetheless Davidson does not think that all aliens are interpretable; he himself contends that all known nonhuman animals are not. Thus, when Davidson describes the principle of charity, he cannot mean that all aliens have beliefs. Rather, Davidson’s claim that an alien’s beliefs generally are true by her interpreter’s lights must amount to something like the claim that, if an alien has beliefs, then the alien’s beliefs generally are true by her interpreter’s lights.

Now Davidson’s account of meaning is intimately connected to his argument against scheme-content dualism, the last dualism that contemporary philosophy inherits from Kant. But how should we understand the dualism? When talking

4 “What a fully informed interpreter could learn about what a speaker means is all there is to learn; the same goes for what the speaker believes” (Davidson 1983, 148, my emphasis). As explained in note 9, Davidson means by this that successful radical interpretation is sufficient to construct a theory of meaning and belief, while still allowing that the radical interpreter’s evidence not exhaust all the evidence usable in constructing such a theory.

5 Davidson formulates the principle of charity differently in different places. For critical discussion of this, see Goldberg forthcoming.

6 Nor am I the only one to read Davidson this way. Evnine, discussing the principle of charity, writes that on Davidson’s view: “[N]o one can be considered as having any beliefs at all, if they [sic] cannot be considered as having largely rational, and even true, beliefs” (1991, 174, my emphasis). But then, if no one can be considered as having largely true beliefs, then no one can be considered as having beliefs. And so Evnine also takes the principle of charity, for Davidson, to involve an implicit conditional.
about traditional scheme-content dualists such as Kant, Davidson (1974a) suggests that the dualism traditionally involved two contributions to the truth of empirical beliefs: concepts given by the epistemic agent, and some sort of nonconceptual content given by the world. On some views, the concepts organize the nonconceptual content into discrete units that then become the subject of beliefs when true. On this picture, a conceptual scheme would be the total system of concepts, and so the epistemic agent’s total contribution to the truth of empirical beliefs, while empirical content would be the total nonconceptual content given by the world itself. Now, for Davidson, beliefs are sentences held true; and Davidson, like Carnap and Quine, would understand any epistemic agent’s own contribution to truth as linguistic. Thus a conceptual scheme becomes the total linguistic contribution to the truth of sentences held true, empirical content the total extralinguistic (i.e., empirical) contribution to their truth. Finally, for Davidson, a conceptual scheme and empirical content are each a necessary counterpart of the other: should one exist, then so would the other.

Davidson’s chief argument against scheme-content dualism is that, from the perspective of any Davidsonian interpreter, there could never be any evidence of the dualism; since we are all Davidsonian interpreters, scheme-content dualism is unsustainable. Davidson contends that evidence of scheme-content dualism would, ceteris paribus, be the possibility of users of different languages having a significant range of different beliefs. For Davidson, however, since having beliefs requires being able to be attributed beliefs during interpretation, and interpretation requires being attributed beliefs generally true by one’s

7 Below I consider whether the best way of understanding Davidson is taking him to identify beliefs with particular, rather than counterinterpretable sets of, sentences held true.

8 Davidson writes: “It is essential to this idea [of a conceptual scheme] that there be something neutral and common that lies outside all schemes” (1974a, 190); this “something” would be empirical content. Likewise, for Davidson, it is essential to the idea of empirical content that there be something that can allow the content, itself nonlinguistic, to contribute to the truth of sentences, themselves linguistic; this “something” would be a conceptual scheme.

9 Thus I take Davidson to be a kind of verificationist. Though his verificationism is not Dummett’s (1976), Davidson does say, as quoted in note 4: “What a fully informed interpreter could learn about what a speaker means is all there is to learn; the same goes for what the speaker believes.” The same sort of verificationism, of what a fully informed interpreter could learn or conclude, is operative in Davidson’s argument against scheme-content dualism; he writes, as quoted in note 12: “If I am right, then there never can be a situation in which we can intelligibly compare or contrast divergent schemes, and in that case we do better not to say that there is one scheme, as if we understood what it would be like for there to be more.”
Davidson’s Return to Kant

interpreter’s lights, no alien could fail to have beliefs generally true by her interpreter’s lights. Davidson takes this to show that no alien could have a significant range of beliefs different from those of her interpreter. But then, from the perspective of an interpreter—the only perspective that we as language-users have—scheme-content dualism is unsustainable. Davidson thus takes himself to have dissolved the last dualism that Kant bequeaths to contemporary philosophy.

Now, if Kant is correct that “consistency is the highest obligation of a philosopher” (1788, V.24), then Davidson’s use of the principle of charity must be consistent with the rest of his views. To see whether it is, consider Adam’s interpreting Beth, a linguistic alien. According to Davidson, there is no uniquely correct theory of meaning for Beth’s language. Nonetheless, according to him, so long as Adam constructs an extensional theory of meaning from Beth’s utterances that is constrained by holism and the principle of charity, “[n]othing more is possible, and nothing more is needed” (1973, 197) to determine what Beth means and believes.

Imagine that Beth utters “Snow is white” and “Grass is green.” Imagine also that Adam uses holism and the principle of charity to construct an extensional theory of meaning from these and other utterances, from which it follows that Beth means by these that snow is white and grass is green, respectively. Now, for interpretation to be constrained by the principle of charity, Adam needs to attribute to Beth beliefs generally that are true by his lights. Here he might need to attribute to Beth the beliefs that snow is white and that grass is green. But he would need to attribute to her more than just those. Davidson thinks that beliefs can be “identified and described only within a dense pattern of beliefs” (1977, 10).

One might object that an interpreter’s needing to take sentences held true by an alien generally to be true by her interpreter’s lights does not entail that no significant range of such sentences could fail to be false by her interpreter’s lights. Here I give Davidson the benefit of the doubt; nonetheless see Goldberg forthcoming.

Why does Davidson not take himself to have shown that there is only one scheme, common to all language-users? Davidson responds: “If I am right, then there never can be a situation in which we can intelligibly compare or contrast divergent schemes, and in that case we do better not to say that there is one scheme, as if we understood what it would be like for there to be more” (1974b, 243). Thus, according to Davidson, if one cannot verify the existence of different conceptual schemes, then it makes no sense to say that all those interpretable have the same scheme. Davidson explains: “if we cannot intelligibly say that schemes are different, neither can we intelligibly say that they are one” (1974a, 198).

Nonetheless, as I conclude below, Davidson does in fact show that there is only one scheme, common to all language-users.
Adam could attribute to Beth the beliefs not only that snow is white and that grass is green, but also that snow falls from the sky, that white is a color, that white is not green—and a potential infinity of other such beliefs, generally true by Adam’s lights. Further, Adam interprets Beth’s utterances in light of Beth’s having these beliefs. But then what emerges from this instance of interpretation is that Adam, through the process of interpretation, himself comes to believe that Beth’s beliefs generally are true. To simplify matters, suppose that all concerned are Anglophones. Then, for Adam to believe that Beth’s beliefs generally are true, Adam’s interpreter needs to be able to attribute to him the holding true of the English sentence “Beth’s beliefs generally are true.” I now want to argue that Adam needs to hold the sentence true come what may; this, it turns out, implies that Davidson resurrects both analytic-synthetic and scheme-content dualisms, returning philosophy to something very much like Kant’s view—though “reinterpreted” in terms of Davidson’s account of interpretation.

Consider. Adam, trying to interpret Beth, needs to apply the principle of charity. This includes his allowing Beth to be uninterpretable and hence have no beliefs. Nonetheless, if Adam succeeds in interpreting Beth, then he must himself come to believe that Beth’s beliefs generally are true. Further, his believing this is a direct consequence of his constraining interpretation with the principle of charity. Because that principle involves an implicit conditional, any belief formed as a direct consequence of constraining interpretation with it would itself involve a conditional. Hence Adam’s belief that Beth’s beliefs generally are true must itself amount to something like the claim that, if Beth has beliefs, then her beliefs generally are true. This is a substitution instance of the principle of charity, and might roughly be formulated as \([b \rightarrow g]\).

One might object that, for Davidson, Adam believes at the start of interpretation that Beth’s beliefs generally are true, because Adam needs to apply the principle of charity. And applying that principle involves believing its content. So I need not have shown that Adam comes to believe through the process of interpretation that Beth’s beliefs generally are true.

Yet, on the one hand, it is unclear that the propositional attitude that Adam bears toward the principle of charity is itself believing. For Davidson, the principle of charity is merely a methodological principle that interpreters employ; perhaps interpreters merely suppose the principle of charity or treat it only as a useful heuristic. It is unclear that they believe it. On the other hand, perhaps Davidson does think that interpreters, to use the principle of charity, believe it at the start of interpretation. Since Beth is a linguistic alien and Adam her interpreter, Adam would then believe at the start of interpretation that Beth’s beliefs generally are true. Nonetheless my present goal is merely to show that Adam believes that Beth’s beliefs generally are true. Whether he believes this at the start or through the process of interpretation, he believes it nonetheless.
For Davidson, nothing can come to result in Adam’s believing \( [b \rightarrow g] \) false. The negation of \( [b \rightarrow g] \) is \( [b \land \neg g] \), entailing that Adam would believe that Beth has beliefs and that it is not the case that they generally are true. But, according to Davidson, no interpreter can attribute to an alien any beliefs, unless the interpreter attributes to the alien beliefs generally true by her interpreter’s lights. And this would eventually influence what the interpreter himself comes to believe about the alien.

More specifically, suppose that Adam tries to interpret Beth. For Davidson, and in light of what I have shown above, if Beth is interpretable, then through the process of interpretation Adam needs to come to believe that Beth’s beliefs generally are true: \([g]\) Conversely, if Beth is uninterpretable, then Adam cannot come to believe that Beth has beliefs and that they generally are not true, since constraining interpretation, and with it belief-attribution, with the principle of charity would never allow Adam to come to believe that. Instead, Adam needs to come to believe that Beth has no beliefs: \([-b]\) So come what may, through the process of interpretation Adam needs to come to believe \([\neg b \lor g]\) But this is logically equivalent to \([b \rightarrow g]\), roughly formalizing Adam’s belief that Beth’s beliefs generally are true. Further, and at any rate, even if there is no fact of the matter about what Adam “really” believes, there is at least one theory of meaning whose construction requires attributing to Adam this belief, viz., the one hypothesized. Hence, for Davidson, constructing at least one theory of meaning requires that Adam necessarily believe come what may that Beth’s beliefs generally are true.\(^{13}\)

\(^{13}\) One might object that because, for Davidson, beliefs are sentences held true, Adam would necessarily believe come what may that Beth’s beliefs generally are true only if he necessarily held some sentence true come what may. Supposing Adam an Anglophone, I concluded that the sentence would be “Beth’s beliefs generally are true.” Yet, the objector might continue, it is an empirical fact that by “generally” Adam does not mean never, nor by “never” generally. And there is no reason why Adam could not come to mean by “generally” never and by “never” generally. Should Adam come to mean by “generally” what he now means by “never,” and my reasoning otherwise be correct, then Adam would come to hold “Beth’s beliefs generally are true” false. But then, the objector would conclude, Adam need not hold “Beth’s beliefs generally are true” true come what may.

Yet taking beliefs to be particular sentences held true generates problems for Davidson independent of any that I have raised. I believe many of the same things as Turkish speakers do, yet we hold few if any of the same sentences true. Further, Davidson ubiquitously claims that all language-users generally share the same beliefs, and it certainly is not the case that all language-users generally hold the same sentences true. Thus Davidson himself needs to explain how speakers of different languages can have the same beliefs. And he needs to do so without appealing to propositions, since Davidson follows Quine in rejecting such entities.
How would Davidson explain this? Though he does not say, let me suggest the following on his behalf. For Davidson, a belief is a sentence the holding true of which needs to be attributable to an alien during interpretation; according to Davidson, beliefs themselves must be interpretable. Now when, e.g., François holds true “La neige est blanche” and Franco “La nieve es blanca,” Davidson, I maintain, should allow each to believe the same thing, because each sentence held true is interpretable as “Snow is white” in English as currently used.

Thus I suggest that, for Davidson, a particular belief is expressible by any member of the set of sentences held true that are cointerpretable as a particular sentence held true in a particular language at a particular time. But then, when Adam holds true first “Beth’s beliefs generally are true” and then “Beth’s beliefs never are true,” Adam believes the same thing, since ex hypothesi each sentence is interpretable as “Beth’s beliefs generally are true” in English as Adam first used it. This, after all, is how the objection was set up: Adam holds true “Beth’s beliefs generally are true”—and so believes that Beth’s beliefs generally are true—but comes to change what he means by “generally” to never. He then comes to hold true “Beth’s beliefs never are true.” But ex hypothesi Adam holds this true because he does change the meaning of “generally,” and, for Davidson, meaning changes are changes that an interpreter needs to be able to detect. (As explained above, for Davidson, an alien means by a particular utterance whatever an interpreter’s theory of meaning for that alien’s language would entail that she meant by it. See also note 4.) Hence ex hypothesi Adam would come to mean by “Beth’s beliefs never are true” what he formerly meant by “Beth’s beliefs generally are true,” viz., that Beth’s beliefs generally are true. His interpreter would then be able to interpret both these sentences held true as the same belief. Thus Adam needs at any one time to hold true come what may some member of the set of sentences cointerpretable as “Beth’s beliefs generally are true” as currently used. But then Adam can be interpreted as needing to hold true come what may “Beth’s beliefs generally are true” as expressed in his current language. And so there remains one theory of meaning—viz., one indexed to Adam’s current language—in which Adam can be interpreted as necessarily holding this sentence true come what may. (Even if Davidson rejects my suggestion as to how belief identity can be preserved through meaning change, Davidson himself, recall, needs to explain how such identity can be preserved from one language to another, e.g., from François’s “La neige est blanche” to Franco’s “La nieve es blanca.” But any explanation that Davidson can give to that would also explain how belief identity can be preserved from one language at one time to another, and so from Adam’s “Beth’s beliefs generally are true” to “Beth’s beliefs never are true.”)

One might also object that, in light of Quine’s claim that nothing “is immune to revision” (1951, 43), which Davidson presumably endorses, Adam should be able to revise the principle of charity itself. But, if Adam can do so, then he need not hold his belief, itself formed as a direct consequence of constraining interpretation with the principle, true come what may.

Yet Adam is ex hypothesi a Davidsonian interpreter. According to Davidson, the principle of charity is a necessary condition on constructing a Davidsonian theory of meaning for an alien’s language. But then employing the principle of charity is a necessary condition on being a Davidsonian interpreter oneself. Adam qua such an interpreter cannot then revise the principle of charity. In fact, the principle of charity is
3. DAVIDSON'S RETURN TO KANT

So why does it matter that Adam needs to hold this sentence true come what may? As explained earlier, according to Quine, an analytic sentence would be true merely in virtue of language, a synthetic sentence true in virtue of language and extralinguistic fact. As also explained, the existence of an analytic sentence presupposes the existence of a conceptual scheme, since Quine’s “language” amounts to Carnap’s “linguistic framework” and Davidson’s “conceptual scheme.” In Davidson’s formulation, an analytic sentence would therefore be true merely in virtue of a conceptual scheme.

Nonetheless Quine (1951) offers another characterization of “analytic”: “[I]t becomes folly to seek a boundary between synthetic statements, which hold contingently on experience, and analytic statements, which hold come what ever.

the wrong kind of thing to revise. For Davidson, Adam can only revise sentences meant and believed, and not necessary conditions on constructing sentences meant and believed.

Now one might argue that Davidson’s extensional account of meaning, when described from the perspective of a radical interpreter (interpreting based upon the alien’s mere behavior, sans any direct insight into her language), is modeled after Quine’s (1960) account of radical translation. And radical translation is part of the holistic project of science; concerns of extensionalism, holism, and Quine’s own limited use of the principle of charity are not conceptually prior to concerns of the radical translator himself. But then, one might argue, neither should they be for Davidson: the Davidsonian interpreter, radical or otherwise, should be able to revise the principle of charity.

Nonetheless Quine’s radical-translation thought experiment describes translation only from the perspective of the radical translator. Conversely, Davidson’s radical-interpretation thought experiment describes interpretation from the perspective of the radical interpreter and from a perspective external to it. For Davidson puts a priori constraints on interpretation, assuming something akin to a Kantian transcendental perspective, here independent of the practice of interpretation. Quine seems never to assume an analogous perspective, because, for him, there allegedly is none. This explains why Quine and Davidson use their thought experiments for different ends: while Davidson introduces radical interpretation to describe a priori constraints on interpretation, Quine introduces radical translation to describe results from translation (concerning, e.g., the ontological status of intensional meanings). It also explains why Adam qua radical interpreter cannot revise the principle of charity: that principle is forced on Adam from an external perspective that is fixed.

14 Cfr. Davidson: “I once wrote that Quine subscribed to what I called the dualism of scheme and content, and I suggested that accepting this dualism constituted the third dogma of empiricism…. What I had in mind as the scheme was language” (1990, 69). This is also how McDowell (1996, 137) understands what Quine means by “language.”
may. Any statement can be held true come what may, if we make drastic enough adjustments elsewhere in the system” (43). Now, according to Carnap, sentences expressing logical and mathematical truths, which Carnap takes to be merely linguistic truths, are analytic. They are meant to hold come what may, where what would “come” would be experience. But, according to Quine, any sentence, and a fortiori any expressing a previously thought “empirical” truth, can be held true come what may and so be analytic; hence no sentence need be so held true. But then, according to Quine, Carnap’s “analytic” is an arbitrary designation, unable to do the work that Carnap requires. Thus, for Quine, for a sentence to be analytic in the requisite sense, that sentence would need to be held true come what may. But Quine denies that there are any such sentences; this is the force of his claiming that no sentence “is immune to revision” (1951, 43). Nonetheless, if a sentence needed to be held true come what may, then it would be true merely in virtue of language and independent of experience, since experience would be what would come—and where “language” is Quine’s phrase for Carnap’s “linguistic framework” and Davidson’s “conceptual scheme.”

Davidson would agree with Quine’s understanding of analyticity, since Davidson claims to be “Quine’s faithful student” (Davidson 1983, 144) concerning the analytic-synthetic divide. Further, Davidson would agree that no sentence need be held true come what may, because he would agree that no sentence is true merely in virtue of a conceptual scheme. On the one hand, Davidson, a professed holist like Quine, would agree with Quine that experience holistically affects the truth of every sentence; and, because experience is always changing, no sentence need be held true come what may. On the other hand, Davidson uses his account of meaning, including the principle of charity, to argue against the existence of a conceptual scheme in the first place, and so against the possibility of such a scheme’s staying fixed come what may. But Davidson does allow there to be sentences needing to be held true come what may, and so which are analytic. On Davidson’s view, after all, Adam necessarily holds “Beth’s beliefs generally are true” true come what may.

15 One might object that a God-given belief might need to be held true come what may, while not being true in virtue of a conceptual scheme. Yet it is unclear why such a belief would not be so true, if a conceptual scheme is understood not merely as the epistemic agent’s own but any epistemic agent’s, including God’s, contribution to the truth of beliefs.

16 Nonetheless what Davidson and Quine each take to be experience differs. According to Davidson (1974a, 1983), Quine’s “experience” is a species of empirical content, whose existence Davidson rejects.
But then, for Davidson, Adam’s sentence is necessarily held true come what may and true merely in virtue of a conceptual scheme. Consider. According to Davidson’s account of meaning, Beth’s beliefs generally are true by Adam’s lights. That follows from the way in which the account works, including its reliance on the principle of charity. Now this says nothing about whether sub specie aeterni Beth’s beliefs generally are true by Adam’s lights. But it does say that relative to Davidson’s account they are. And that is why Adam necessarily holds the belief true come what may: because it is true merely in virtue of Davidson’s account of meaning itself regardless of what experience might come. But then that account, and its reliance on the principle of charity, must itself amount to a conceptual scheme. Hence, for Davidson, his account of meaning is the interpreter’s contribution to the truth of meanings and beliefs, independent of what the world might itself contribute. And, for Davidson, since scheme and content are each a necessary counterpart of the other, what the world itself might contribute to the truth of meanings and beliefs would be their empirical content. And so, while Adam’s belief that Beth’s beliefs generally are true, true merely in virtue of Adam’s conceptual scheme, would be analytic, his belief, e.g., that Beth is a brunette, whose truth is in Quine’s phrase “contingent on experience,” would be synthetic.

Further, Davidson’s argument against scheme-content dualism amounted to the claim that no interpreter could ever have any evidence of scheme-content dualism. Nonetheless Adam’s own interpreter could have evidence of Adam’s employing a conceptual scheme, since Adam’s own interpreter could have evidence that Adam necessarily holds a sentence true come what may.

Thus Davidson’s account of interpretation resurrects scheme-content dualism, while Davidson uses that account to argue against the dualism. But there is a more important lesson in all this, viz., that Davidson returns contemporary philosophy to something very much like Kant’s own position in epistemology. Recall from above that Kant’s a priori judgments were meant to be constitutive of the only possible, and therefore universal, conceptual scheme, grounding Newtonian physics and ordinary experience alike. But this means that, for Kant, there was only one possible set of constitutive principles—those ultimately concerned with Newtonian physics. In more Kantian terms, all empirical judgments had to accord with principles constitutive of Newtonian space and time. Carnap, writing in the wake of relativity theory and quantum mechanics, rejected Kant’s view that there was a single conceptual scheme and set of constitutive principles. This is why, as explained above, Carnap accepted the existence of different linguistic frameworks, each constituted by different analytic sentences (Carnap’s constitutive principles).

Now Carnap, like Kant, took these constitutive principles to determine rational standards such as correctness, validity, and truth. For Kant, it was
rational to entertain an alleged empirical judgment only if that judgment accorded with principles constitutive of Newtonian science. Carnap, however, rejecting the universal necessity of Newtonian science, likewise had to reject universally rational standards; Carnap’s allowing multiple sets of constitutive principles allowed standards of rationality relative to each set, and so no universal rationally emerged. In fact, for Carnap, while questions asked internal to a conceptual scheme were rational, those asked external were merely pragmatic, governed by such standards as efficiency, fruitfulness, and simplicity. In particular, for Carnap, questions of which constitutive principles to adopt in the first place were not rationally but merely pragmatically answerable. And so, insofar as one agrees with Kant and Carnap that constitutive-empirical dualism makes sense, and with Carnap—and contemporary science—that Newtonian physics is not universally correct, one
relative to a set of constitutive principles or otherwise. Instead, supposing them true or false is merely more or less pragmatic. For Carnap, the sentence “One plus one equal two” was correct relative to those principles constitutive of standard arithmetic, false otherwise. For Quine, that sentence was correct only insofar as it is efficient to suppose it so.

Hence, if one accepted Quine’s response to Carnap, then Carnap’s rationality relativized to particular constitutive principles, and pragmatism between constitutive principles, gave way to Quine’s thoroughgoing pragmatism. All there was to inquiry were matters of efficiency, fruitfulness, and simplicity. The traditionally cognitive enterprise of epistemology became the merely pragmatic enterprise of warping heritage to sensory promptings. Knowledge itself was reduced to something like the set of “convenient” beliefs. The possibility of universal rationality seemed, in Friedman’s phrase, “irretrievably lost.” It went the way of Newtonian physics.

Nonetheless let me make a suggestion. Though I cannot here defend this, I suggest that, if I am right about Davidson, then he may have found a new path to securing universal rationality, and in so doing to have returned philosophy to a Kantian course. Consider. Davidson would also think it wrong to follow Kant in taking the constitutive principles of the Newtonian conceptual scheme to express “timelessly fixed categories and forms of the human mind.” Twentieth-century physics shows that. But Davidson need not agree either with Carnap, that rationality must be relativized, or Quine, that it must give way to mere pragmatism. Instead, Davidson might be able to locate universal rationality in something other than Newtonian physics, viz., interpretation, whose constitutive principle, Davidson has unknowingly argued, is universal.

Consider. For Davidson, the principle of charity has the character of a Kantian a priori judgment, since each constitutes a universal conceptual scheme. According to Davidson, all rational beings are language-users, and all language-users are ultimately Davidsonian interpreters; according to him, his extensional account of meaning is the only account of meaning usable by language-users. Thus, for Davidson, that account turns out to be not merely a conceptual scheme but rather the universal conceptual scheme in interpretation—the conceptual scheme used by all interpreters when interpreting any other. Though that account allows multiple theories of meaning for the same language—interpretation is indeterminate—Davidson nonetheless insists that all resulting theories are mutually interpretable. So while, for Kant, the universal conceptual scheme concerns Newtonian physics, for Davidson, it concerns interpretation. But then, for Kant, questions about physics, and, for Davidson, questions about interpretation, all seem internal to a conceptual scheme and set of constitutive principles: those, e.g., of Euclidean geometry, and the principle of charity, respectively.
Further, for Davidson, because questions about what particular aliens mean in particular contexts are internal to Davidson's conceptual scheme, his account of meaning, such questions are answerable not merely pragmatically but rationally. For Davidson, there is no uniquely correct interpretation of any utterance. Nonetheless, for Davidson, it is correct to say that "La niege est blanche" means in French that snow is white, only if it can be constructed via Davidsonian interpretation. And, since all language-users employ the same conceptual scheme and constitutive principle, all language-users could (at least in theory) evaluate whether that would be a correct interpretation. Thus, for Davidson, unlike for Carnap, standards of correctness need not be relativized to different constitutive principles—since, for Davidson, unlike for Carnap, there seems to be a universal constitutive principle, the principle of charity. Nor need the claim that "La niege est blanche" means in French that snow is white be correct in the sense of being merely pragmatic, as Quine would have it. For Davidson seems to think that interpretation can be rationally evaluated relative to the principle of charity: a theory of meaning is correct "that satisfies the formal constraints on a theory of truth, and that maximizes agreement" (1973, 136), where agreement is maximized by applying the principle of charity. And, to the extent that a theory veers from respecting the principle of charity, that theory is incorrect or in error: "the residue of sentences held true translated by sentences held false (and vice versa) is the margin for error (foreign or domestic)" (1967, 26). So, for Davidson, the principle of charity itself seems to be constitutive of the rational standard of correctness. Hence one need not chose between Carnap's relativized rationality and Quine's thoroughgoing pragmatism—so long as one adopts Davidson's account of meaning.

4. CONCLUSION

Davidson's ultimate lesson might then be that universal rationality is not to be grounded, as Kant thought, in Newtonian physics, but instead in interpretation—an endeavor whose constitutive principle, the principle of charity, remains constant through scientific change. Davidson just does not realize that his showing this involves his showing that there is a universal interpretive conceptual scheme with a universal interpretive constitutive principle. So Davidson returns to Kant with a variation. Like Kant, Davidson tries to secure universal rationality—and so rejects the rational relativism and mere pragmatism of post-Kantian philosophy. Unlike Kant, however, Davidson tries to secure this rationality by appealing not to Newtonian physics but to his own account of meaning and interpretation. In short, Davidson returns to Kant by re-interpreting Kant's epistemology in terms of (linguistic) interpretation.
itself. Thus, 200 years after Kant's death, central strands of Kant's epistemology have at Davidson's hand been rewoven into interpretive garb.

WORKS CITED


Doscientos años después
Retornos y relecturas de Kant

Two hundred years after
Returns and re-interpretations of Kant
JOSÉ MARÍA TORRALBA  
EDITOR

DOSCIENTOS AÑOS DESPUÉS. RETORNOS Y RELECTURAS DE KANT

TWO HUNDRED YEARS AFTER. RETURNS AND RE-INTERPRETATIONS OF KANT

Comunicaciones a las XLII Reuniones Filosóficas
Papers delivered at XLII Reuniones Filosóficas

Cuadernos de Anuario Filosófico
Nº 174: Doscientos años después. Returnos y relecturas de Kant. Two hundred years after. Returns and re-interpretations of Kant

© 2005. José María Torralba (ed.)

Redacción, administración y petición de ejemplares
CUADERNOS DE ANUARIO FILOSÓFICO
Departamento de Filosofía
Universidad de Navarra
31080 Pamplona (Spain)

http://www.unav.es/publicaciones/cuadernos
E-mail: cuadernos@unav.es
Teléfono: 948 42 56 00 (ext. 2316)
Fax: 948 42 56 36

SERVICIO DE PUBLICACIONES DE LA UNIVERSIDAD DE NAVARRA.