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IS INTERNAL REALISM A PHILOSOPHY OF SCHEME AND CONTENT?[1]

EVAN THOMPSON

I. The Aporia of Representation

Hilary Putnam has remarked that metaphysical realism is less of a *theory* than a *model* of the relation between any correct theory and the world.[2] The model assumes that there is some way that the world is and that our theories are correct to the extent that we are able to represent the world accurately. But the world is independent of any of our representations; indeed, for all we know, we might be incapable of accurately representing the world.

Arguments against metaphysical realism often accept a crucial feature of the realist model. That feature is the view that cognition is essentially *representation*: the anti-realist typically claims that we cannot get outside our representations to compare them with what they supposedly represent. He argues that no content can be given to the notion of a reality independent of all representations; we can retain talk of the world, therefore, only relative to some system of representation.

This notion that we are linked to the world *via* representations gives rise to an *aporia* that neither the traditional realist nor anti-realist seems able to disentangle. The realist naturally thinks that there is a difference between representation and that which is represented; such a distinction seems, after all, to be required by the very concept of representation. Thus we might be able to *ascertain* truth only by looking to the coherence of our representations, but *truth itself* is a matter of the way the world is, which we get some sense of, perhaps, by inferring to the best explanation. But if, as the anti-realist points out, *all* talk is theory relative, then *a fortiori* so is talk of the world; indeed *the very concept of the world* must be theory relative. In other words, *the very idea of something independent of representation is itself only another representation* – at best a limiting concept, at worst an empty notion. Here, then, is the *aporia*: the realist's notion of the world collapses into unintelligibility; the anti-realist, on the other hand, is led to claim that *reality is*

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[1] An abridged version of this paper was read at the University of Toronto. I wish to thank the audience for their comments, especially David Checkland, Don Dedrick, Victoria Mcgeer, and Mark Mercer. Special thanks are due to L.W. Ferguson for reading this essay in its various stages and offering many helpful suggestions and criticisms.

[2] Hilary Putnam, *Meaning and the Moral Sciences* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 123.

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representation, an unwelcome consequence if he does not wish to embrace a form of absolute or generative idealism.

Much of Hilary Putnam's recent writing is concerned with the difficulties for realism that I sketched above. Faced with such difficulties, Putnam has chosen to abandon metaphysical realism in favour of what he calls "internal realism."[3] Other philosophers, however, have been led to reject the strong notion of representation agreed to by both parties of the dispute. Donald Davidson, in particular, has argued against the idea that there are conceptual schemes which carve up or organize an otherwise neutral experience.[4] His point is that the dualism of scheme and content gives us conceptual relativity, hence anti-realism. But whereas Davidson takes the denial of conceptual schemes to support realism, Richard Rorty suggests that once we drop the notion of representation, we can move beyond both realism and anti-realism.[5]

Putnam's and Davidson's positions are often thought to be quite close. But since Putnam's new position rests on a distinction between "externalism" and "internalism," it is natural to ask whether it relies on the dualism of scheme and content.[6] If Putnam is committed to the scheme idea, does his position succumb to the objections that Davidson has raised against the very idea of a conceptual scheme? I will argue that internal realism is largely unsatisfactory because of its fundamental commitment to the scheme idea. There are, then, deep differences between Putnam and Davidson that are often missed by proponents of both realism and anti-realism. My Davidson inspired critique of Putnam prepares the way for an assessment of Davidson's claim that "with a correct epistemology we can be realists in all departments."[7] I side with Rorty in thinking that Davidson shows us how to move beyond the realist/anti-realist debate. The implications that I draw from the demise of representation, though, differ from Rorty's, for there are, I think, substantive *philosophical* issues that remain even after the strong notion of representation is abandoned.

[3] See Hilary Putnam, "Realism and Reason," *Meaning and the Moral Sciences*, pp. 123–140, and *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge University Press, 1981).

[4] See Donald Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford University Press, 1984).

[5] See Richard Rorty, "The World Well Lost," *Consequences of Pragmatism* (University of Minnesota Press, 1982); *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton University Press, 1979), Chapter VI; and "Pragmatism, Davidson, and Truth," in *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, ed. Ernest LePore (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), pp. 333–355.

[6] Davidson has remarked that he takes internal realism to involve the scheme idea. See *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, p. xviii, and "A Coherence Theory of Knowledge and Truth," in *Truth and Interpretation*, p. 309.

[7] Donald Davidson, "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge," In *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, ed. Ernest LePore (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 307.

II. Internal Realism

According to Putnam, the metaphysical realist or "externalist" holds that "the world consists of some fixed totality of mind-independent objects. There is exactly one true and complete description of 'the way the world is'. Truth involves some sort of correspondence between words or thought signs and external things and sets of things."[8] The "internalist" holds that the question "*what objects does the world consist of?* is [one] that it only makes sense to ask *within* a theory or description,"[9] There might be more than one true description of the world and truth should be conceived as an idealization of rational acceptability, as "some sort of ideal coherence of our beliefs with each other and with our experiences *as those experiences are themselves represented in our belief system* . . ."[10] *Prime-facie*, then, it seems that Putnam is committed to a scheme idea. But there are a number of theses bound up in his statement of the two positions, which we need to unravel to understand just how internal realism amounts to a philosophy of scheme and content.

Externalism involves two theses, which, as Ian Hacking observes, Putnam runs together: (1) that the world consists of a *fixed totality* of objects and (2) that these objects are *mind-independent*.[11] These two theses are logically distinct: the way the world is could be mind-dependent and yet the number and kind of objects fixed. If, for example, the mind's organizational capacities lacked a certain plasticity, then the objects of the world could be *mind-dependently fixed*. On the other hand, merely from the fact that the world admits of various categorial descriptions, it does not follow that all such categories are mind-dependent. After all, Putnam himself has argued (in his externalist period) that a sophisticated realist should not hold that there is necessarily one true description of the world. It is a *property of the world itself*, perhaps, that it admits of various alternative, true descriptions.

The problem with this move, as we have already seen, is that it is difficult to make sense of "the way the world is" independent of any description. We may retain a notion of the world as that which the various true descriptions are about, but we lose any conception of *how* the world is that is not theory relative.[12]

If one is persuaded by these considerations and wishes to retain talk of the world, then one might attempt to explicate the notions of truth

[8] *Reason, Truth and History*, p. 49.
[9] *Ibid.*
[10] *Ibid.* p. 50.
[11] Ian Hacking, *Representing and Intervening: Introductory Topics in the Philosophy of Science* (Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 94–95.
[12] See Hilary Putnam, *Meaning and the Moral Sciences*, p. 132. Cf. Nelson Goodman, "The Way the World is," *Problems and Projects* (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merril, 1972) and *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1978), especially Chapter 1.

and reference relative to a scheme. Indeed Putnam's formulation of internal realism seems to be motivated largely by worries about reference. His theorem is that *"no view which only fixes the truth-values of whole sentences can fix reference,* even if it specifies truth-values for sentences *in every possible world."*[13] He thinks that this theorem should convince us to give up the idea that words stand in any one-to-one correspondence to mind-independent things and he invokes a reading of Kant in which the noumenal world gives rise to our system of representation, but without *"even a one-to-one correspondence between things for us and things in themselves."*[14]

Putnam's worry, however, is not really Kant's. The problem, for Putnam, is not that there is *no* one-to-one correspondence, but that there are *too many.* To determine that only *one* matching holds we would need to have referential access to mind-independent things. These considerations might tempt one to give up the notion of reference entirely. One could, following Davidson, see reference as merely a posit whose function is exhausted in stating the truth-conditions of sentences or, following Rorty, take "talking about" as the crucial notion.[15] But Putnam wishes to keep reference as an *explanatory* concept, and so these moves do not seem open to him. The way to retain reference, he thinks, is to hold that words correspond to things within the conceptual scheme of those who employ the words: " 'Objects' do not exist independently of conceptual schemes. *We* cut up the world into objects when we introduce one or another scheme of description. Since the objects *and* the signs are alike *internal* to the scheme of description, it is possible to say what matches what,"[16] The *formal* specification of primitive reference within a scheme, then, is trivial. (For example, where "magpie" is a primitive term one will merely say: "magpie" refers to magpies.) It is tautologous and what Putnam calls a "contextual a priori truth."[17] Within a scheme, then, objects will "intrinsically belong under certain labels; because those labels are the tools we used to construct a version of the world with such objects in the first place."[18]

Internal realism thus gives up the idea that *language* mirrors the world. Instead it holds that *speakers* mirror the world by constructing a symbolic representation of their environment. Putnam argues that the picture theory of language was wrong as a theory of meaning, but not as a theory of the function of language. To account for the contribution of language to the success of cognitive activity we need to have

[13] *Reason, Truth and History*, p. 33.
[14] *Ibid.*, p. 63.
[15] See Donald Davidson, "Reality without Reference" and "The Inscrutability of Reference," *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretations*; and Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, pp. 284–295.
[16] *Reason, Truth and History*, p. 52.
[17] *Meaning and the Moral Sciences*, p. 137.
[18] *Reason, Truth and History.*, p. 54.

correspondence accounts of truth and reference. Speakers interact causally with the world and the viability of their actions is thought to be a function of the accuracy of their representations. Internal realism is *internalism* because the correspondence between representations and the world is determined *within a scheme*; it is *realism* because within the scheme correspondence theories are used to explain behaviour. By making realism internal Putnam is able to retain his earlier insistance that *realism is an empirical hypothesis* to explain the success of theory construction and the contribution of linguistic activity to cognition in general. To construe realism as an empirical hypothesis is, then, to lean towards a naturalized epistemology: evolution is thought to produce in us systems of representation whose sentences or sentence-analogues are largely true. But since truth-conditions underdetermine reference, there can be no *unique* mapping between referential expressions and states of affairs. Reference, however, is not an empty notion. Its formal triviality within a scheme is offset by the content it gains in naturalized, causal explanations of behaviour.

Putnam seems to use "conceptual scheme" in two senses. He says that for an internalist there can "be equally coherent but incompatible conceptual schemes which fit our experiential beliefs equally well."[19] Here a conceptual scheme is merely a theory. One can have equally coherent but incompatible theories because the terms of any given theory can be mapped on to things in equally adequate, but incompatible ways. On the other hand, Putnam argues along Davidsonian lines that we must employ a principle of charity in interpretation. Success in interpretation requires that the beliefs of others come out intelligible to us. Putnam thinks that this requirement forces us to attribute shared *references* and *concepts* to others, though we may attribute different *conceptions* to them. This point is reminiscent of Davidson's that no partial failure of translation can force us to attribute different *concepts* instead of merely different *beliefs*.

The point here is that Putnam's invocation of a principle of charity conjoined with his making reference relative to a scheme seems to entail that *there must be only one conceptual scheme shared by all those beings whom we regard as persons*. Putnam does say, however, that "the choice of a conceptual scheme necessarily reflects value judgements" and that such a choice "is what cognitive rationality is all about."[20] These claims must mean merely that all *theory choice* is value laden. They cannot mean that we can choose conceptual schemes in the strong sense of a scheme as a system of representations that guarantees concepts will be shared and prevents our access to an external point of view.

If my construal of his argument is right, then Putnam must be

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 73.
[20] *Ibid.*, p. 212.

committed to the idea that all persons share a conceptual scheme. *Conceptions* may vary, but *concepts* do not. Human nature, Putnam suggests, "isn't all that plastic."[21] Now does this view fall prey to Davidson's objections to scheme ideas generally? We must now pause to consider Davidson's arguments.

III. Davidson's Realism Without Representation
Davidson has, I think, three related objections that form his argument in "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme."[22] I will summarize these objections, but it is important to note that they are tied to his subtle and programmatic views on interpretation, and that we enter his program here somewhat in the middle of things. (Davidson describes his metaphysical views as "philosophical fallout" from his views on truth and interpretation.)

(1) For the idea of a conceptual scheme to have application, it must have criteria of identity. We can associate having a language with having a conceptual scheme. For there to be a difference in scheme, however, the languages must not only differ, but fail to be intertranslatable. A conceptual scheme is thus identified with a set of intertranslatable languages; we discover a difference in scheme, then, when we come upon a language that cannot be translated. But, Davidson argues, we cannot make sense of total failure of translation nor, therefore, of the idea of radically divergent conceptual schemes. We cannot, then, fulfill the conditions for identifying schemes, and so the idea has no application.

(2) The dualism between scheme and content subtly retains the dualism of analytic and synthetic truths. Analytic truths are sentences certified to be true *a priori* (even if conventionally) by the scheme; synthetic truths are those empirically true sentences that give the scheme its content. Any complete rejection of the analytic/synthetic distinction must, then, reject the scheme/content dualism. (Rorty takes this objection to be Davidson's central argument, i.e., the one that is most closely tied to the substance of Davidson's views on interpretation.)

(3) The two main metaphors used to explicate the scheme/content distinction – that of "organizing" and of "fitting" experience – cannot be given any interesting content. Organization applies to pluralities: one organizes something by rearranging that of which it consists. Languages may contain different ranges of predicates, and so have various nonequivalent expressive powers, but we can make this point only

[21] *Meaning and the Moral Sciences*, p. 56.
[22] My reconstruction of Davidson's discussion here is influenced by Robert Kraut's presentation in his essay "The Third Dogma," in *Truth and Interpretation*, pp. 398–416. Kraut thinks that Davidson gives *four* arguments, but what Kraut takes to be the third argument I see as a way of linking the idea of untranslatable languages to the stock of metaphors that are used to explicate the scheme idea.

against the background of a largely shared ontology. This shared ontology suggests that languages will individuate objects and events, or the regularities in experience, in familiar and common ways. The metaphor of "fitting," on the other hand, requires that we think of two languages that fit the *totality of actual and possible sensory evidence* equally well, but are not intertranslatable. Here Davidson implicitly rejects any strong metaphysical realist notion of truth (or, perhaps, begs the metaphysical realist question), for he claims that *fitting all possible sensory evidence* adds nothing to the simple concept of *being true*. The criterion for individuating schemes now becomes *largely true but not translatable*. ("Largely true" allows for disagreement over details.) But, argues Davidson, we don't understand the notion of truth applied to a language apart from that of translation and, again, we can make no sense of the idea of an untranslatable language.

Davidson's conclusion is not that we all share a scheme, but that, since we have been unable to give adequate content to the scheme idea, the idea has no application. As he concludes in another essay, "there can never 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."[23]

Recent scheme ideas have arisen primarily as a way of explaining how some range of sentences that, say, a scientific community comes to accept may not mean what they did for previous experimenters. When we give up the analytic/synthetic distinction we can no longer distinguish sharply between meaning and theory. Since meaning is permeated with theory, what speakers come to accept may not be the same as what they previously rejected. The meanings of the terms have shifted, and so the language has changed. If the meanings have changed profoundly, we might be tempted to say that there has been a shift in *concepts* and thus that the speakers have acquired a new conceptual scheme.

Both Putnam and Davidson cast doubt on the ideas of radical conceptual change inspired by such scheming. But, as we have seen, Putnam retains the scheme idea by implicitly holding that we all share a scheme. I am with Davidson. As far as I can see, the only ground that Putnam has for wishing to retain the scheme idea is his conviction that we need the notion of *representing the world* to explain the success of behaviour. This "naturalized" sense of "representation," however, is *sub-personal* and *causal*, not *epistemic*.[24] Thus unless one fully embraces

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[23] "Psychology as Philosophy," in his *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 243.
[24] Rorty discusses the difference between the causal and epistemic senses of "representation" in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Chapter V, especially pp. 244–256.

a naturalized epistemology (which Putnam does not wish to do[25]) the notions of mental representation and conceptual scheme will probably not overlap in a way sufficient for Putnam's point, Indeed, Putnam himself has recently argued that "the theory of interpretation and cognitive psychology deal with quite different projects and . . . to a large extent success in one of these projects is independent of success in the other . . . To have a description of how a system of representations works in functionalist terms is one thing; to have an *interpretation* of that system of representations is quite another thing."[26]

There seem to be two senses in which Putnam considers realism to be an empirical hypothesis. On the one hand there is the thesis, held by the majority of cognitive scientists, that cognition is to be explained by postulating sub-personal systems of representation. On the other hand, there is the claim that scientific realism is the best account of theory construction. These two theses are independent: one need not support the latter by appeal to the former. Thus consider the possibility that cognition cannot be explained as the result of operations on representations. Terry Winograd, for example, has described his research as a step by step abandonment of this hypothesis[27] and despite Rorty's claim that the naturalized, causal notion of representation has nothing to do with the image of an epistemic mirror of nature,[28] some neuroscientists and philosophers have argued that even the nonepistemic, sub-personal represenations of cognitive science are part of a general "representationist program" in science and philosophy, one that has serious problems when applied to the biology of cognition.[29] My point is that if the prospects of realism are to be tied to the success of representational theories of mind in cognitive science, then realism as an empirical hypothesis in the first sense might have to be abandoned should these theories prove inadequate. Of course, scientific realism might still be necessary to explain the status of the supposedly better successor theories. But the point here is that any decision about sub-personal, metal representations is likely to underdetermine an explanation of scientific theory construction and of the proliferation of cultural practices in general. That proliferation, however, conjoined with the

[25] See his "Why Reason Can't Be Naturalized," in *Realism and Reason: Philosophical Papers, Volume 3* (Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 229–247.
[26] Hilary Putnam, "Computational Psychology and Interpretation Theory," in *Realism and Reason*, p. 150.
[27] See Terry Winograd, "What Does it Mean to Understand Language?", *Cognitive Science* Volume 4, 1980, pp. 209–241.
[28] *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, pp. 246–247.
[29] See Francisco Varela, "Living Ways of Sense Making: A Middle Path for Neuroscience," in *Disorder and Order, Proceedings of the Stanford International Symposium, 1981*, ed. Paisley Livingston (Anma Library, 1984), pp. 208–224; and Christine Skarda, "Explaining Behavior: Bringing the Brain Back in," *Inquiry*, 29, pp. 187–202.

conviction that we cannot separate meaning from theory, was what the conceptual scheme idea tried to explicate.

Davidson's point, again, is that a thorough going acceptance of Quine's arguments against the analytic/synthetic distinction should convince us to give up even the distinction between meaning and theory *relative to a scheme*. Putnam, as we have seen, holds that there are *contextual a priori truths*, and so retains a notion of *conventional analyticity*. Specifications of primitive reference, such as " 'Cows' refers to cows," are logical truths relative to the theory for which the terms are primitive. But once one makes this move, it is hard not to admit the possibility of different conceptual schemes. Putnam would block the move by insisting that there is ony one scheme, one shared "internal" viewpoint. But then the notion of a conceptual scheme begins to seem as empty as the metaphysical realist's notion of the way the world is. At best both are limiting concepts. Putnam is thus faced with a dilemma: he must either give up the very idea of a conceptual scheme or embrace the conceptual relativism he criticizes. Putnam's dilemma gives credence, then, to Davidson's claim that "[g]iven the dogma of a dualism of scheme and reality, we get conceptual relativity, and truth relative to a scheme."[30]

What are the implications for realism and anti-realism once we abandon the dogma of scheme and reality? Davidson argues that what there is to meaning is given by the truth conditions of sentences. Whether a sentence is true is a matter only of the meaning of the sentence and the way the world is. Truth is relative to a sentence, a speaker, and a time, but there is no need for a further relativization to a scheme. Speakers can disagree over whether a sentence is true only if they disagree about its meaning or about the way the world is. Since truth is no longer relative to a scheme, but merely to a language, it is possible, Davidson thinks, to recover the idea of truth as correspondence. All that is needed for correspondence is a relation between language and something else. That relation is explicated through Tarski's concept of satisfaction, which maps the variables of sentences onto the entities of the world. There can be many mappings, but Davidson holds that reference is a theoretical notion whose function is exhausted in stating the truth conditions for sentences. Putnam's worries about reference thus do not arise for Davidson because he simply gives up the concept of reference as basic to the theory of meaning. Davidson agrees, however, with the anti-realist that we cannot understand what it would mean to confront reality directly to examine the status of our beliefs. He thus argues for a "coherence theory of truth and knowledge," but one from which correspondence follows.

[30] "On the Very Idea of A Conceptual Scheme," p. 198.

Putnam, however, thinks that the homophonic translations generated by Tarski's theory (when the object language is contained in the meta-language) express merely tautologies. He argues that the "property to which Tarski gives the name 'true-in-L' is a property that the sentence 'Snow is white' has in every possible world in which snow is white, *including worlds in which what it means is that snow is green* . . . [But a] property that the sentence 'Snow is white' would have (as long as snow is white) no matter how we might use or understand that sentence isn't even doubtfully or dubiously 'close' to the property of truth. It just isn't truth at all."[31]

Once we give up the scheme idea, however, and with it the notion of conventional analyticity, T-sentences become empirical generalizations about speakers. A theory of truth that serves to interpret must be *empirical*, and so it *cannot assume* that the meta-language contains the object language. That the object language might be so contained is something to be verified.[32] Radical interpretation, Davidson insists, begins at home.[33] It is, then, a *contingent fact* that "snow is white" means snow is white; it could have been used to mean that snow is green. Thus the T-sentence " 'Snow is white' is true in L if and only if snow is white" cannot be tautologous as Putnam claims. Davidson also suggests that since a theory of interpretation generalizes about speakers, its theorems must not only be true but *support counterfactuals*.[34] The T-sentence " 'Snow is white' is true in L if and only if snow is white," given as part of an empirical theory for speakers who used "snow is white" to mean snow is green, would presumably not support counterfactuals or meet the other empirical requirements on a theory of truth. (Nor presumably would the T-sentence " 'Snow is white' is true in L if and only if snow is green" given for English.) Putnam's objections might not hold, then, once a theory of truth goes empirical.

These objections are not, however, really directed against Davidson, but against the view that Tarski's work should be seen as a solution to the *philosophical* problem of truth. Putnam remarks that Davidson's key move of taking truth as a primitive notion is actually incompatible with Tarski's approach.[35] He does not elaborate upon this remark, but perhaps he means to allude to a discrepancy that Davidson came to realize as his work progressed, namely, that Tarski could take translation for granted while explaining truth, whereas Davidson cannot. A theory of meaning that begins in radical interpretation cannot

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[31] "A Comparison of Something with Something Else," *New Literary History*, Volume XVII, Autumn 1985, p. 64.

[32] See "In Defense of Convention T," *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, pp. 68–73.

[33] See "Radical Interpretation," *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*.

[34] See "Truth and Meaning," *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, p. 26, n. 11.

[35] "A Comparison of Something with Something Else," p. 72.

assume translation, and so Davidson reverses the order by taking truth as primitive. But though primitive, the notion is hardly without content: its content derives from the requirements of constructing an adequate theory of interpretation for another. There is, then, a sort of bootstrapping process at work: to get a theory of interpretation off the ground truth must be taken as primitive. But the requirements of interpretation immediately demand that truth be relativized to sentences, speakers, and times. Further constraints follow, such as the principle of charity which provides a background of agreement within which disagreement can be intelligible. In other words, the necessities of interpretation quickly bestow upon the primitive notion of truth a quite substantive content.

This interpretation of Davidson is compatible with Rorty's claim that truth is not, for Davidson, an explanatory notion. Rorty's point is that "if 'correspondence' denotes a relation between beliefs and the world which can vary though nothing else varies – even if all the causal relations remain the same – then 'corresponds' cannot be an explanatory term. So if truth is to be thought of as 'correspondence', then 'true' cannot be an explanatory term."[36] In other words, explanations do not appeal to *truth itself*, but to the *content of true beliefs* as evidenced in speakers' holding certain sentences true at certain times. But this point should not mislead one into thinking that the notion of truth is without content in the way redundancy theories of truth suggest. T-sentences state nontrivial facts about how sentences are used in communication. Truth, though primitive, is not trivial.[37]

Putnam might have his finger on a deeper problem, though: the empirical constraints on Davidson's theory might seem somewhat promissory, especially since Davidson has not indicated just *how* the theory is supposed to support counterfactuals. In the absence of such indications, we cannot fully evaluate what it means for a theory of truth to serve as an empirical theory of interpretation.

At any rate, Davidson's realism is neither internal nor metaphysical. Metaphysical realism makes truth "radically non-epistemic." All of our beliefs and theories could be false because we might be unable to represent the world as it really is. Davidson thinks, however, that although any particular belief might be false, we cannot allow that all might be. We might call Davidson a "direct realist" because he admits no epistemic intermediaries between our beliefs and the world: "In giving up the dualism of scheme and content, we do not give up the world, but re-establish unmediated touch with the familiar objects whose antics make our sentences and opinions true or false."[38]

[36] "Pragmatism, Davidson and Truth," p. 341.
[37] Cf. Putnam's "Vagueness and Alternative Logic," in *Realism and Reason*, pp. 271–286.
[38] "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," p. 198.

The debate about realism arose over the relation between representa-
tions and the world. Davidson rids us of representations and gives us the
world. The claim that we are in direct contact with a world not of our
own making is a strong realist claim. But the intuition which
traditionally motivated realism – that truth is radically non-epistemic –
has not been preserved.

To make sense of where we are we might distinguish a weak and a
strong sense of "representation." In the weak sense we speak of a
speech act representing its conditions of satisfaction. A statement's
satisfaction conditions are its truth conditions, which, for Davidson, are
specified by a Tarski-style theory of interpretation. (Of course a
sentence does not represent *tout court*: a sentence has meaning only in
the context of a language, and so can be treated as a representation only
in the context of a language, and so can be treated as a representation
only when we abstract from the language in which it figures.) The weak
sense becomes strong when it is conjoined to a distinct ontology of
mental representations or conceptual schemes. Only when we have *this*
notion of representations does it make sense to worry about the
accuracy. The weak sense, at least in its Davidsonian form, is *purely
semantic*, not *epistemological*. Various inferences can, however, be
drawn from giving up epistemic representations. Rorty thinks that "we
no longer have dialectical room to state an issue concerning 'how
language hooks on to the world'."[39] Davison seems to confirm this point
when he writes in "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs" that he has
"erased the boundary between knowing a language and knowing our
way around in the world generally."[40] But Davidson also implies that
the realist should never have explicated his position in terms of
representations or conceptual schemes in the first place.

IV. Beyond Realism and Anti-Realism
I wish now to separate two elements in Davidson's philosophy, which I
will call the "interpretative" and the "epistemological." It seems to me
that there is a tension between these two elements in Davidson's recent
writings. The interpretative element is exemplified by Davidson's
concern with the problems of interpretation and communication. The
epistemological element is exemplified by his desire to answer the
sceptic. The connection between the two is Davidson's attempt to
ground his realism in a consideration of what is required for communica-
tion. Davidson argues that once we appreciate what is needed for us to
interpret, sceptical worries cannot be given substance and realism is
vindicated. The tension arises because Davidson's direct, semantic
realism does not depend on the strong, epistemic notion of representa-
tion; it makes use only of the semantic relation given in a Tarskian

[39] *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 265.
[40] "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," in *Truth and Interpretation*, p. 446.

concept of satisfaction, and such a relation between language and world simply falls out in interpretation. As Rorty notes, to appeal only to this weaker relation simply removes epistemology from the centre of the philosophy of language.[41] Epistemology presupposes the separation of subject and object, and then worries about how to connect them. The connection is usually attempted by invoking a medium of representations or conceptual schemes. By shifting his attention to the problems of interpretation, however, Davidson seems to be implicitly rejecting the epistemological problematic. To suppose that the relation between language and world falls out in interpretation is to give up any clear difference between knowing a language and knowing one's way in the world. Realists and anti-realists, however, are both worried by the problems of whether things are as they are talked about and how we could know one way or the other. Realists, in particular, will argue that the relation between language and world established in a theory of interpretation may be adequate for *understanding*, but it cannot settle any further *metaphysical* issues.[42]

Take, for example, Davidson's argument against the scheme idea. Some have found fault with the argument because it relies on an unstated verificationist premise: Davidson argues that no evidence could force us to decide that something was an untranslatable language rather than not a language at all. Since we could never be in a position *to judge* that others had radically different conceptual resources, therefore we cannot make sense of there *being* different conceptual schemes. But this argument shows only that we could not understand what is not translatable into our language, that we cannot separate the notion of understanding a conceptual scheme from that of translation into a language we know. Thus the argument demonstrates only that we could not know whether there are alternative schemes, not that there is none.

Several responses to this criticism are possible. We can, of course, simply embrace the verificationism and claim that if we don't, nothing will prevent us from postulating untranslatable languages whenever we encounter systematic regularities in any kind of behaviour. The present philosophical consensus, however, does not support verificationism, and even if it did it is hard to imagine how verificationism could be made consistent with a defense of realism. But merely to point out Davidson's reliance on a verificationist principle is hardly to refute his position. Some have suggested, therefore, that Davidson's arguments should not

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[41] See *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Chapter VI.
[42] See Clark Glymour, "Conceptual Scheming, or Confessions of a Metaphysical Realist," *Synthese* 51 (1982), pp. 169–180. Cf. also Paul Horwich's discussion of the differences between metaphysical realism and semantic realism in his "Three Forms of Realism," *Synthese* 51 (1982), pp. 181–201.

be seen as demonstrative, but as dialectically or rhetorically persuasive.[43] I agree that they are persuasive, largely because they suggest a way of disentangling philosophy from the *aporia* of representation. But Davidson does write as if his arguments are demonstrative, for he occasionally offers what look like transcendentally motivated refutations of scepticism.[44] It seems worth pointing out, then, that once one attempts to engage the sceptic directly on his own epistemological terrain and to refute him with positive arguments, he cannot be prevented from replying that there is no legitimate inference to be made from language to the world, or from epistemology to ontology in general. In the context of Davidson's views on interpretation, the sceptic will argue that the burden of proof is on those who make the *a priori* claim that there could not be untranslatable languages, and that no argument which shows only that *we could not be in a position to know* whether something was an untranslatable language can possibly settle the issue.

Nevertheless, I cannot see how to draw the distinction between "demonstrative" and "persuasive" except in a loose way. The distinction is not helpful here anyway, since the argument between the sceptic and those who would refute him is inseparable from a general dispute over the status of philosophical arguments, indeed over the very notion of reason itself. In the context of interpretation, Davidson's claim is that one could have no *reason* for holding that some range of phenomena is an untranslatable language. The sceptic deceives because he appears to appeal to reasons where he has none. In other words, to maintain his position the sceptic must divorce the holding of beliefs from reasons in general, in which case he forgoes the possibility of conversation.[45]

On the other hand, there may be no univocal notion of "reason" operating in the dispute. The sceptic is actually a metaphysical realist: he too must hold that truth is "radically non-epistemic." Unlike the metaphysical realist, he might not *desire* an "outside perspective" on our place in the world, but *he must suppose that the notion is in some way intelligible*. Davidson, of course, rejects this supposition and the notion of representation it presupposes. As Rorty notes, the only outside vantage point Davidson gives us is that of "the mundane standpoint of

[43] See Richard Eldrige's suggestion, in his "Metaphysics and the Interpretaion of Persons: Davidson on Thinking and Conceptual Schemes," *Synthese* (66) 1986, pp. 477–503, that "[w]hat Davidson may inadvertently have managed to do is to speak on our behalf, offering us an interpretation of our being or position in the world. This interpretation gains its attractiveness not from demonstrative argument, but from the way in which it voices part of our sense, in our historical situation, of our powers and prospects in nature" (p. 478).

[44] See "The Method of Truth in Metaphysics," *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, and "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge."

[45] I owe this way of making the point to Mark Mercer.

the field linguist trying to make sense of our behavior."[46] Davidson's
verificationism, then, may amount to nothing more than the claim that
the field linguist would have no use for the hypothesis of an
untranslatable language. To adopt such a standpoint, however, is
implicitly to abandon the epistemological problematic and to give
priority to the problems of *interpretation*: as Davidson points out,
worries about how well one has understood another, or about the truth
of any specific range of another's utterances, are intelligible only when a
background of agreement is already in place. To claim that epistemology
rests on interpretation does not, however, *refute* the sceptic on the basis
of shared reasons. There simply is no need to attempt to refute the
(philosophical) sceptic once one adopts the standpoint of the field
linguist. Rorty is thus right, I think, to maintain that there is no *general*
answer to the sceptic; there are only case by case arguments to be
made.[47] Here the case proceeds by exhibiting the *aporia* of representa-
tion and the lack of dialectical room for sceptical worries once we
abandon the notion of representation. Davidson, however, seems to
remain precariously poised between epistemology and interpretation by
indicating that a general refutation of scepticism becomes available once
we adopt the standpoint of the field linguist.

I have raised these considerations to make way for what I consider to
be the real difficulties in interpretation. These difficulties are not the
doubts that the sceptic or metaphysical realist raises when he wonders
whether world and language could ever meet. The difficulties that I wish
to emphasize are the hermeneutic ones studied by anthropologists,
historians, and literary theorists.

Rorty approves of those elements in Davidson's philosophy that
proceed from the mundane standpoint of the field linguist. The
standpoint is mundane in comparison with the traditional realist or anti-
realist desire for a privileged *a priori* perspective. But Davidson's field
linguist is not, of course, any historically or culturally located interpreter.
Davidson, in traditional philosophical fashion, factors out, as it were, all
cultural features of his speakers who are necessarily interpreters. His
theory is empirical, but it is not infrequently motivated by transcendental
considerations. Somewhat like Hobbes' "state of nature," Davidson's
field linguist is a distinctly *philosophical device*. Thus just as Hobbes
showed us a new conception of political life by devising a hypothetical
state of nature, so Davidson reveals features of language and interpreta-
tion by adopting the stance of some hypothetical field linguist. For
example, one feature of language that is revealed in such a procedure is

[46] "Pragmatism, Davidson, and Truth," p. 339.
[47] See Richard Rorty, "Verificationism and Transcendental Arguments," *Nous* 5, 1971,
pp. 3–14; and "Transcendental Arguments, Self-Reference, and Pragmatism," in
Transcendental Arguments and Science, eds. P. Bieri, R.P. Horstmann and L. Kruger
(Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1979), pp. 77–103.

that truth cannot be a simple property of sentences; it is, rather, a relation between sentences, speakers, and *times*. To mention another familiar example, Davidson is known for claiming that a proper analysis of adverbial locutions requires quantifying over *events*. Davidsonian theories of interpretation are distinctly philosophical, then, for they require one to make *ontological* decisions.[48] Such decisions seem to involve a sort of reflective equilibrium on the part of the interpreter – a balance among his views on belief, meaning, logical form, and ontology. One might even suggest that the achievement of reflective equilibrium in interpretation is, for Davidson, the proper task of the philosopher.

The notion of the field linguist is, therefore, decidedly *not mundane*; it represents a specifically *philosophical* way of thinking about inter-pretation. It is important to realize that the situation of any sensitive, culturally embodied interpreter is not *described* by the philosopher's device of the radical interpreter. Indeed, this device is precisely a way of attempting to abstract from such embodied features to bring the distinctly philosophical problems about belief and meaning into focus. Philosophically, the device is quite powerful, but there are limits to what the hypothetical can show us about phenomena whose substance ultimately derives from the many traditions and interpretative com-munities in which we live. Any unreflective appropriation of Davidson's transcendental considerations, an appropriation that forgets the limits of the hypothetical, might mislead one into thinking that we must always achieve understanding in interpretation. But it is possible to imagine situations where understanding would not be forthcoming simply because the interpreters are insensitive and incompetent. (One need only consult the history books for examples.) And even when interpretation goes rather well, it is a never ending task: our understanding is always revisable.

Davidson is probably aware of the failures that are possible in interpretation. Nor need his views prevent him from acknowledging that *our* language may have to adapt as we attempt to interpret another. We must begin by assuming a background of agreement, but to achieve a deeper understanding we may have to alter our beliefs and language as we go along.[49] Davidson has recently begun to discuss (in his "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs") how we must modify our assumptions about another as interpretation proceeds. But such changes in belief and language, and the difficulties that they cause for interpretation, have been the *explicit* concern of those writers who often resort to the scheme idea to explain, say, incommensurability. We can accept the idea that

[48] Cf. Doroethea Frede, "Beyond Realism and Anti-Realism: Rorty on Heidegger and Davidson, "*Review of Metaphysics* 40 (June 1987), pp. 733–757.
[49] I owe an appreciation of this point to conversations with Mark Mercer and to his paper "Davidson's Coherentist Realism," presented at the October 1986 meeting of the Ontario Philosophical Society.

there is no such thing as a scheme or representational medium
interposed between us and the world while making merely the inference
that we should not explicate incommensurability by appealing to the
dualism of scheme and content. The problem of incommensurability is
primarily empirical: it arises in the work of historians, anthropologists,
and literary theorists when they attempt to make sense of what seem to
be widely divergent systems of belief. We can give up the difference
between knowing a language and knowing our way around in the world,
and yet hold with Whorf that the Hopi way in the world and ours cannot
be "calibrated." Davidson is right to insist that we must assume an
overall agreement to make sense of differences in belief. We must
concur about all sorts of things, such as that cows eat grass, that snow is
white, that people must eat to survive. But Davidson is, in Hacking's
words, a "superholist."[50] (Remember that a Davidsonian theory is
meant to interpret *all utterances, actual and potential*, of a speaker.)
Thus he seems to think that these mundane agreements are enough to
preclude incommensurability. I am suspicious of superholism. Feyer-
abend might have been mistaken in thinking that " 'there is still human
experience, as an actually existing process' independent of all
schemes,"[51] but he was right, I think, to insist that theories and practices
proliferate, and that the connections among them are often loose and
chaotic.[52] These loose connections indicate that our everyday, superficial
agreements with another may not help all that much in resolving our
differences. That possibility is all that is needed, I think, to warrant
occasional talk of incommensurability, where incommensurability
simply means that one language may have a range of expressions that
cannot be translated into another language without remainder.[53] In such
a situation, one may have no choice but to learn the foreign range of
expressions and incorporate it directly into one's language. (Isn't this all
that Kuhn ever really claimed?) What we learn from Davidson is that we
need not, and indeed should not, support such an appeal to incom-
mensurability with the metaphysical idea of scheme and content. We
should instead make the case directly in anthropology, literary theory,
and the history of science.

[50] See Ian Hacking, "Styles of Scientific Reasoning," in *Post-Analytic Philosophy*, eds.
John Rajchman and Cornel West (Columbia University Press, 1985).
[51] "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," p. 191. The embedded quotation is
from Paul Feyerabend, "Problems of Empiricism," in *Beyond the Edge of Certainty*, ed.
R.G. Colodny (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1965), p. 214.
[52] Ian Hacking has argued that we can reject superholism without embracing atomism
or building-block theories of language. The alternative is to see language as made up of
many loosely fitting regions of sentences that need not add up to one whole. See his "The
Parody of Conversation," in *Truth and Interpretation*, pp. 447–458.
[53] See Thomas Kuhn, "Commensurability, Comparability, and Communicability,"
PSA 1982, Volume 2, pp. 669–688.

My distinction between epistemology and interpretation was meant to bring out a tension in Davidson's philosophy. Now that the task of distinguishing these two elements in Davidson's writings has been accomplished, I would caution against further uncritical use of the distinction. For one thing, Davidson simply leaves open questions about interpretation that often worry hermeneutically inclined philosophers. To provide a theory of interpretation for a group of speakers, though it does determine an ontology, does not involve decisions about, say, the cognitive status of literature in relation to science or about how to interpret the theoretical claims of science. Davidson's procedure might even suggest that once we have solved for meaning in radical interpretation there are no further questions of interpretation to be asked. To be "realists in all departments" implies that we should simply take the interpreted sentences at face value. There is a sense, then, in which Davidson is not concerned with interpretation at all; perhaps hermeneutics in Davidson's eyes is just another form of "adventitious philosophical puritanism."[54]

Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to assume that such a procedure provides a straightforward vindication of realism. Davidson does seem to think that he has vindicated realism, but I suggest that he has shown us a way of continuing to do philosophy after representation (*pace* Rorty) and beyond the realist/anti-realist debate.

Recall that the philosophical device of the field linguist abstracts not only from cultural conditions in general, but also from the detail of local, pragmatic situations (e.g., problems of understanding within and among the paradigms, disciplinary matrices, and research programmes of a given science). *But these conditions and situations are precisely those in which substantial epistemological and hermeneutical issues arise. Davidson's realism cannot address, then, the realist/anti-realist disputes that arise within these situations.* Davidson grounds the claim "that knowledge is of an objective world independent of our thought or language"[55] by trying to show that most of our beliefs must be true. But these true beliefs are the commonsense, everyday beliefs that most people share; they are not, for example, beliefs about particle physics, selection in biology, authorial intention in literature, or representation in painting, Recent anti-realism, however, has not arisen as a challenge to commonsense; it has arisen in cognitive domains of perplexing complexity, such as particle physics and literary theory. Only if one accepts a superholist view of belief and meaning will one suppose that Davidson's defense of commonsense realism is also a gobal vindication of realism. I suggest, therefore, that by adopting the stance of the

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[54] See "Truth and Meaning," *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, p. 31. I owe this point to Don Dedrick.
[55] "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge," p. 307.

radical interpreter to achieve a *global* perspective on belief and meaning, Davidson has shown us how *local* issues about realism and anti-realism must ultimately be.

To give up the strong notion of representation, which both traditional realists and anti-realists presupposed, and to insist that issues about realism are relative to a given cognitive domain, is tantamount to embracing pragmatism as one's overall philosophical strategy. Such a strategy, by emphasizing the salience of local concerns, is, of course, global: it ranges across the multitude of cognitive domains in a characteristically philosophical manner. Philosophy is, therefore, not given up as a moribund pursuit; on the contrary, it is indispensable because a proper appreciation of "first-order" pursuits requires recognition of the "second-order" issues that these pursuits naturally generate.[56] These second-order issues are likely to be distinctly philosophical, but they need not require for their formulation the image of the mind as a mirror of nature.

I would give up both realism and anti-realism, then, in favour of what could be called a *pluralist pragmatism.* What the pluralist insists on is that there is no foundational version, one which anchors all the rest or to which all others can be reduced. The pragmatist insists that the world is both *found* and *made*: it is made in the finding and found in the making. To erase the boundary between knowing a language and knowing our way in the world gives us a fresh appreciation of the world. That world, however, is not given, waiting to be represented. We find the world, but only in the many incommensurable cognitive domains we devise in our attempt to know our way around. The task of the philosopher is not to extract a common conceptual scheme from these myriad domains and to determine its faithfulness to some uncorrupted reality; it is, rather, to learn to navigate among the domains, and so to clarify their concerns in relation to each other.

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[56] Cf. Joseph Margolis, *Pragmatism without Foundations: Reconciling Realism and Relativism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986).