

# Demystifying Davidson: Radical Interpretation meets Radical Enactivism

*Daniel D. Hutto\* and Glenda Satne\*\**

*\* University of Wollongong*

*\*\* University of Wollongong and Alberto Hurtado University*

## *Abstract*

Davidson's signature ideas on the holism and autonomy of propositional thought have led some exegetes to hold that he advances a kind of transcendentalism that is discordant with a satisfactory naturalism. On the other hand, Davidson's work has strong connections with naturalism, as some Quinean strands of his thinking make apparent. Two strands can thus be identified in Davidson's thought. One emphasizes features of thought that set it apart from the rest of nature. The other seeks to locate thought within nature. Taken to extremes these different strands in Davidson's thinking come into tension. After summarizing both strands, we diagnose the apparent tension between them and propose a way to overcome it by making central appeal to the Radical Enactivist claim that minds can be intentionally directed to the world without contentfully representing it. By expanding our thinking about the character of the mental along radically enactivist lines it becomes possible to defend some of Davidson's most important insights about minds while also promoting a satisfactory and demystifying naturalism.

*Keywords:* Radical Interpretation, Naturalism, Intentionality, Radical Enactivism

*«I don't think the issue whether animals have beliefs is in itself of any importance—one can use words as one pleases. But if you want to talk about pre-linguistic thought, you need to explain precisely what you have in mind».*

Donald Davidson, 10th November 1991 (personal communication).

## 1. Introduction

Any naturalist worth his or her salt, even if methodologically non-reductionist, should seek to make the connections between contentful thought and the natural world non-mysterious.

Davidson's signature ideas on the holism and autonomy of propositional thought have led some exegetes to hold that he advances a kind of transcenden-

talism that is discordant with a satisfactory naturalism (see for example Maker 1991; Cutrofello 1999; Genova 1999; and Barth 2011).

## 2. Two Strands in Davidson's Thought about Thought

Many of Davidson's central claims promote a reading of his work that is hard to square with the more naturalistic strands of his thinking. These claims are that:

1. Mastery of natural language is a condition for having objective thoughts—namely, thoughts that can be true or false, correct or incorrect—about anything at all.
2. There are holistic connections between thought and language; between meaning and belief.
3. It is only by mastering natural language that one enters into or breaks into the holistic interpretative circle that holds between belief and meaning.
4. How we come to master contentful language and thought cannot be understood or explained 'from the outside'—for example, by adopting the perspective of and using the resources of the empirical sciences.

By Davidson's lights the domain of propositional thought depends on interpretative practice and this reveals the former to have special constitutive features that distinguishes it from the rest of nature.

Davidson reaches this conclusion by building on and substantively adjusting Quine's thought experiment of the radical translator. Davidson introduces the idea of a field interpreter—an interpreter who has nothing but his observations to go on when interpreting others.<sup>1</sup> Ultimately, this imaginative exercise is meant to bring out why someone in such circumstances has no choice but to rely on constitutive principles of charity if she is to recognize the existence of contentful minds.

The radical interpreter must call on such principles if they are going to break into the holistic circle.<sup>2</sup> As Davidson puts it:

We do not know what someone means unless we know what he believes; we do not know what someone believes unless we know what he means. In radical interpretation we are able to break into this circle (Davidson 1984: 27).<sup>3</sup>

Radical interpreters must break the holistic circle obtaining between belief and meaning without calling upon either a detailed theory of meaning or a detailed theory of belief for the subject—both of which they are simultaneously trying to develop.

How then can they proceed? As they cannot assign a single propositional attitude to a subject without assigning a host of others it seems that getting radi-

<sup>1</sup> See Malpas 1992, for a discussion of the important differences between Quine's thought experiment and its grounding assumptions and those of Davidson's. As Malpas stresses, in Davidson's hands, "the horizons of translations become much wider [...] talk of interpretation rather than translation is a mark of this broadening in conception as much as a of a more semantic emphasis" (1992: 43).

<sup>2</sup> Davidson 1984: 167, 1986a: 315, 1990b: 309.

<sup>3</sup> See also Davidson 1984: 101, 127, 134, 141-42, 144, 146, 153, 156, 186 and Davidson 1986a: 314.

cal interpretation off the ground is a straightforward impossibility. Interpreters need to make some initial assignments prior to having either a developed theory of meaning or belief and yet they cannot make any contentful attributions without such theories. What can be done?

The problem can be resolved if there is “some simple attitude that an interpreter can recognize in an agent” (Davidson 1990b: 322). Of these simple attitudes Davidson writes:

The assumption that such attitudes can be detected does not beg the question of how we endow the attitudes with content, since a relation, such as holding true, between a speaker and an utterance is an extensional relation which can be known to hold without knowing what the sentence means. I call such attitudes non-individuative, for *although they are psychological in nature, they do not bestow individual propositional contents on the attitudes* (Davidson 1991a: 158, emphasis added).

Elsewhere Davidson tells us that, “certain attitudes toward sentences can be fairly directly inferred [...] From such acts it is possible to infer that the speaker is caused by certain kinds of events to hold a sentence true” (Davidson 1990b: 318). From this humble beginning, anyone in the situation of a radical interpreter would need to carefully observe speech behavior in relation to the environment.

The radical interpreter’s method would be to carefully observe a speaker in various situations, over time. Should a consistent and coherent pattern be discerned, the radical interpreter would be able, in principle, to discover any re-occurring structures within the series of utterances. On this basis, it would be possible, in principle, to construct empirical hypotheses about what any given sentence in the other’s language means.

Still, locating such patterns—however coherent they are—is not sufficient for assigning contents to another’s utterances. As long as it assumed that the constraints imposed by content holism are in play the radical interpreter is still in a predicament. For we must wonder how it is possible to move from finding appropriately robust patterns in another’s utterances to assigning content to those utterances.

The way Davidson answers this question reveals what is most important to his vision of mind and language. He maintains that a radical interpreter would have no choice but rely on normative principles of charity if she were to get at the propositional content of another’s speech and thought. For a radical interpreter to discover a complex pattern of contentful speech at all she must be making certain important *a priori* assumptions about the other. The basic assumptions a radical interpreter must make are:

- A. The subject is trying to make assertions about certain features of the world.
- B. The subject’s assertions are mostly competent and correct (Davidson 1980: 256).

Consequently, the very possibility of contentful interpretation rests on making the charitable assumption “that we can dismiss *a priori* the chance of massive error” (Davidson 1984a: 169). Of course, local errors must be allowed for, since no one is ever perfectly consistent or logical in his or her speech and thought. Showing sensitivity to this fact, one of Davidson’s principles of charity bids the radical interpreter to note and forgive occasional errors in trying to make best

overall sense of the other's patterns of responses. Thus, he tells us "it cannot be assumed that speakers never have false beliefs. Error is what gives belief its point".<sup>4</sup>

Going the other way, there are—of course—limits to charity. Should the radical interpreter fail to find a sufficiently robust and coherent pattern in the other's behavior that fits with these charity assumptions she would have to abandon the idea that she is dealing with a thinking, speaking agent at all. Crucially, either the radical interpreter makes charitable assumptions and discerns sufficient consistency in the patterns of behavior of the other or she foregoes the attempt to ascribe propositional content.<sup>5</sup> In the absence of a sufficiently robust pattern of behavior there is no basis for ascribing propositional content or supposing it exists.

These reflections on radical interpretation lead Davidson to endorse the thesis of the autonomy of the mental—a thesis which can be understood in more or less realistic terms. In all versions, the root idea is this: propositional attitudes stand in appropriate kinds of holistically and normative relations. The mental exists if, and only if, the relevant forms of rationality are present. Minds only exist in the space of reasons. This is allegedly why when rationality is missing we must switch to another scheme for understanding an agent's behavior. In such cases a move to non-mental concepts and explanatory schemes becomes necessary precisely because minds, properly understood, are absent.

Mental concepts, for Davidson, are irreducible to the concepts of other discourses, most saliently those of the natural sciences, because of "the normative character of mental concepts" (Davidson 1987: 46). The idea is roughly this: we cannot assign length without a physical framework. Similarly, if Davidson is right about radical interpretation, we cannot ascribe propositional attitudes without a normative, interpretative framework. The mental has special constitutive features. Thus, as long as we conceive of people as rational we cannot operate with a system for ascribing propositional content that can be reduced to a system of descriptions given in, say, the vocabulary of an impersonal scientific discourse. Ascribing propositional content is, for this reason, irredeemably unlike the way in which we understand the behavior of 'mindless' entities (Davidson 1991a: 162-163, see also Davidson 1996).

On the one hand, the thought experiment of radical interpretation is meant to reveal how, for creatures like us, it would be possible in principle to make attributions of content. In this way, contemplating the extreme limit case of the radical interpreter is meant to reveal the essential contours of our actual interpretative practice. Davidson aims to show how the mental can be made accessible by extensional tools and thus made amenable to empirical test. After all, Davidson tells us that "A theory of meaning is [...] an empirical theory: its ambition is to account for the workings of a natural language. Like any theory it may

<sup>4</sup> Davidson 1984: 168. Hence, in such cases "The best we can do is cope with error holistically, given his actions, his utterances and his place in the world. About some things we will find him wrong, at the necessary cost of finding him elsewhere right" (Davidson 1986a: 318). Errors must arise against the background of a largely coherent pattern of successful utterances. Hence we can only ascribe error if we assume that the speaker/thinker has largely correct views about the world (cf. Davidson 1980: 221).

<sup>5</sup> Davidson 1984: 152, 159, 197; 1986b: 323, 1986a: 317, 319.

be tested by comparing some of its consequences with the facts” (Davidson 1984: 24). Noting its origins and inspiration, Davidson’s project, in this regard, has “naturalistic commitments of a recognizably Quinean kind” (Sinclair 2002: 162).

On the other hand, pulling in a different direction, what the thought experiment of radical interpretation reveals is that there is no possibility of making intelligible the connections between the domain of the mental and the rest of the world using the resources of the natural sciences.

These observations reveal that there are two strands that can be identified in Davidson’s thought. One emphasizes features of thought that set it apart from the rest of nature. The other seeks to locate thought within nature. Taken to extremes these different strands in Davidson’s thinking come into tension. For example, some exegetes of Davidson hold that our capacity to think contentful thoughts should be regarded as transcendental in a particular sense: namely, that our ability to think such thoughts is a condition on the possibility of having an objective view on the world—a view that cannot be made intelligible within an exclusively scientific image of the world.

Barth (2011) exemplifies. He emphasizes the strand in Davidson’s thought that focuses on the autonomy of the mental and sees thought as dependent on language in a way that makes it difficult to square with Davidson’s naturalistic agenda. Thus Barth (2011) provides a shining example of an interpreter of Davidson who regards the latter’s principle of charity, “as a kind of transcendental principle, and, further, take[s] Davidson’s defense of [it] as involving a transcendental proof or argument” (Barth 2011: 174).

Barth (2011) offers a transcendental argument for holding that the general capacity to have thoughts depends on linguistic mastery.<sup>6</sup> He attempts to demonstrate that mastery of language is what makes thought possible. In doing so, he defends a version of what he calls Enabling Ontological Lingualism, advancing an ontological version of a strong dependency claim—namely, that “a subject can only possess thoughts if she also masters a natural language” (Barth 2011: 12). Barth’s claim is both universal in scope and conceptual in its modal strength. It is universal in scope because Barth aims to establish that “all thought depends on the mastery of a natural language”; and it is conceptual in character because he holds that “the possession of (propositional and non-propositional) thoughts conceptually depend on a mastery of a natural language”.<sup>7</sup> Thus, according to Barth, “we cannot conceive of a subject possessing thoughts without conceiving of her mastering a natural language” (*ibid.*). He dubs the total package of his position Universal Conceptual Lingualism (*ibid.*).

Importantly, even though Barth (2011) advances an a priori conceivability argument that is modally strong, it is not grounded in any of form of conceptual analysis but rather takes the form of a transcendental argument. His argument satisfies two requirements revealing it to be transcendental in character. The first is that it is “an a priori investigation into the conditions of possibility of inten-

<sup>6</sup> In this vein Barth 2011 seeks to improve Davidson’s ‘belief-argument’, described in section 3 below, in order to bring it into “convincing shape” (Barth 2011: 17).

<sup>7</sup> Barth 2011: 13. In saying this Barth 2011 is not endorsing the trivial idea, advanced under the auspices of Local Ontological Lingualism, that having certain kinds of thoughts—say thoughts about atoms or quarks—depends on mastery of sophisticated theoretical discourse, hence mastery language (Barth 2011: 13).

tionality”; the second is that the outcomes of his “investigation are neither synthetic judgements a posteriori gained by empirical research, nor analytic judgements a priori gained by conceptual analysis” (Barth 2011: 15). As a consequence, Barth’s reading of Davidson highlights aspects of the latter’s thinking that make it seem incompatible with a naturalistic agenda.

Going in the other direction, some authors emphasize a naturalistic strand in Davidson’s thinking. Sinclair (2002), for example, argues that the most serious objection to readings of Davidson that exclusively focus on the transcendental elements of his philosophy is that they misconstrue the nature of the divide between the a priori and empirical. According to Sinclair we need to recognize that “Davidson’s use of a priori principles maintains a much tighter connection with the empirical by being responsive to empirical facts about us humans” (Sinclair 2002: 175).

Thus Sinclair reminds us that:

Davidson’s interest in what makes interpretation possible can then be captured in this question: what conditions need to be fulfilled so that creatures like us, creatures with a specific evolutionary history, certain inherited, and learned traits, are able to participate in the activity known as interpretation? The principle of charity emerges as an answer to this question, not solely based on a priori considerations but by paying close attention to our nature as biological creatures. ‘Necessary’ should be read here as necessary for creatures like ourselves, creatures with a certain evolutionary history, and a specific set of sensory modalities and traits that are specific to us (Sinclair 2002: 179).

Underscoring these points, Sinclair (2002) reveals why it is a mistake to forget Davidson’s Quinean background. A fundamental Quinean idea is that philosophy and science are continuous. Thus, for Quine, there is no hard and fast distinction—no in-principle barrier between the two. This assumption is strongly linked to Quine’s views that no belief is beyond revision and that when deciding which of our beliefs we should revise, we must take our lead from developments in and findings of the natural sciences.<sup>8</sup>

In Davidson’s hands we find a remnant of this Quinean naturalistic legacy in that Davidson’s use of a priori principles, such as the principle of charity, is “informed by empirical facts about us human creatures” (Sinclair 2002: 171). There is at least this much residual Quinean influence on Davidson’s approach.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Sinclair 2002 calls this ‘the continuity requirement’. As he describes it, for Quine “there is no independent a priori philosophical perspective that remains insulated from scientific inquiry. To engage in philosophical investigation is to work from within the same understanding of the world provided by science, and to reject the claim that philosophy can justify the results offered by science” (Sinclair 2002: 165).

<sup>9</sup> While we agree with Sinclair that Davidson is a naturalist of sorts, Sinclair 2002 occasionally goes too far and reads too much Quine into Davidson. For example, at one point Sinclair says that, “Davidson’s constitutive principles are themselves susceptible to empirical revision, since they are responsive to empirical features of human biological creatures. Empirical discoveries that suggest changes in our understanding of ourselves may then prompt changes to these constitutive principles” (Sinclair 2002: 177). This can make it sound as if there exist principles of charity that we might actively update in the light of empirical findings. Whereas at most what might be said is that things could contingently

Even so, Davidson is a quite different kind of Quinean than those who maintain that all bona fide philosophical questions must be answered, in the end, by testing out empirical hypotheses.<sup>10</sup>

Naturalists such as Fodor insist that we can only use the resources of the special sciences for understanding mental phenomena if those sciences assume the mental operates in a law-like manner and exhibits a nomological dependence on the laws of a more basic science. Davidson famously disagrees. He promotes the view that the mental exists in its own autonomous, anomalous domain and that we neither need nor should expect to find any strict psychophysical laws that will connect that domain to the other sciences. Hence, his “conception of naturalism recognizes a set of rational normative concerns that cannot be addressed within the explanatory interests of natural science” (Sinclair 2002: 180).

Indeed, it is these transcendental aspects of Davidson’s thinking that reveal that the questions of interest to him were never wholly empirical. In the end, to make good on Davidson’s brand of naturalism, we must see the development of radical interpretation as being “informed by a commitment to a naturalistic view of philosophy, but one that does not look to a unified scientific methodology as the sole model for explanation. This then loosens the constraints on what counts as legitimate explanation, *making room for a kind of inquiry that is not itself part and parcel with natural science*” (Sinclair 2002: 162, emphasis added). Thus, speaking of the role of radical interpretation in Davidson’s thinking, Sinclair tells us that “Davidson’s insistence that there is an additional question to be pursued here beyond an empirical concern with actual interpretation is not easy to make sense of in naturalist terms” (Sinclair 2002: 171).

To fully explicate the character of this sort of relaxed naturalism would require providing—as Sinclair observes:

*a characterization of normative phenomena which demonstrates how they can be seen as the product of natural capacities, capacities that are explained through scientific methods. This is an important aspect of radical interpretation not often emphasized, where our interpretive abilities are depicted as the result of natural capacities, and as being the product of innate and learnt traits. Radical interpretation purports to show how it is possible for us, given such natural capacities, to accomplish our interpretive feats successfully* (Sinclair 2002: 178, emphasis added).<sup>11</sup>

change about our interests and practices such that the constitutive principles might alter or cease to apply altogether.

<sup>10</sup> As Davidson says—in reply to Fodor and Lepore’s accusations that radical interpretation is empirically refuted—“I do not think I have ever conflated the (empirical) question how we actually go about understanding a speaker with the (philosophical) question what is necessary and sufficient for such understanding. I have focused on the latter question” (Davidson 1994: 3).

<sup>11</sup> Expressing the same point elsewhere Sinclair 2002 emphasizes that, “Davidson uses his model of radical interpretation to highlight these important irreducible features of our intentional vocabulary, features that reflect our interest in viewing others as rational agents. The project is also informed by our empirical conception of ourselves as biological creatures, demonstrating that our view of ourselves as agents cannot be separated from important empirical features concerning the type of creatures we are” (Sinclair 2002: 180).

We believe it is possible to pursue a satisfactory naturalism that is importantly relaxed in these respects and resists the reductive agenda of strict naturalists.<sup>12</sup> We also believe it is possible to address the aforementioned characterization challenge in a way that meets Sinclair's demand. However, we hold that doing so requires adjusting Davidson's thinking in some important respects. Before saying how we propose to pull off the trick (which is the work of section 5) we will first say a bit more about what we find attractive in Davidson's views and in what ways we find his official position to be problematic.

### 3. What is Right in Davidson's Thought about Thought

Davidson is renowned for holding that being able to think contentful thoughts about an objective world requires mastery of natural language. He defends this position through a mix of philosophical arguments, supported by observations about a range of relevant facts. As he puts it, when asking whether animals are rational creatures capable of propositional thought "the question is not entirely empirical, for there is the philosophical question what evidence is relevant to deciding when a creature has propositional attitudes" (Davidson 1982/2001: 95).

Observations about the holistic nature of propositional thought provide one reason for thinking there is a connection—perhaps a strong one—between thinking such thoughts and the mastery of natural language. Although when discussing the holism of the mental Davidson tends to focus on and privilege beliefs, his observations apply to the content of propositional attitudes quite generally. If content holism is true then what a person thinks about a given topic is constrained, in part, by the content of their other thoughts. Thus the content of my thought that 'Australia is teeming with dangerous flora and fauna' is fixed by other things I think—'Australia is south of Indonesia', 'The box jellyfish is a dangerous animal', 'South is not east', 'Australia is a country', and so on (Davidson 1985: 475; Davidson 1984: 257). The content of any propositional attitude is fixed by such connections and thus exists in a 'logical geography' of contents.

To chase out all the connections of any given propositional content with precision would be to pin down its intensional (with-an-s) content. It is only if we discern the existence of such holistic patterns that we can legitimately ascribe thoughts with propositional content. Yet Davidson argues that the only evidence we find of the existence of such holistic contents is in the fine-grained patterns inherent in speech.<sup>13</sup> For without speech it will not be possible to differentiate between a wealth of possible contents and to justify any particular attribution.

As a matter of fact, we only find the kinds of finely discriminating patterns of behavior—those that would warrant the ascription of contentful thought—in the speech acts of those who have mastered natural language (Quine 1960: 3).

On its own this observation does not, as Barth (2011) recognizes, establish that holistic thought depends on language. At most it establishes that speech acts in natural language provide our best evidence for the existence of contentful

<sup>12</sup> See Hutto and Satne 2015, and Hutto and Satne forthcoming-b.

<sup>13</sup> On the basis of observations about content holism, he claims "it is clear that a very complex pattern of behavior must be observed to justify the attribution of a single thought [...] I think there is such a pattern only if the agent has language" (Davidson 1982/2001: 100).



thoughts. As such this observation of Davidson's, even if true, at best only establishes that the 'attribution conditions' for thought depend on natural language (Barth 2011: 55).

The strongest line of argument for the idea that the ability to think contentful thoughts depends on mastery of natural language is found in Davidson's claim that it is necessary to master the concept of belief in order to have a belief, and that it is necessary to master natural language in order to master the concept of belief (Davidson 1982/2001). For Davidson, having the concept of belief is a necessary ingredient for having a contentful perspective on an objective world.

If Davidson is right, the only way of becoming acquainted with the subject-object contrast is to become acquainted with and sensitive to relevant intersubjective standards. There is no other way—no other path—for acquiring the idea that there are other—divergent, contrasting—contentful perspectives on things. Command of the notions of objective truth and error only arise in the context of interpretation: it is in this context that notions of subjective and objective emerge, as it were, simultaneously. In Davidson's words:

Communication depends, then, on each communicant having, and correctly thinking the other has, the concept of a shared world. But the concept of an intersubjective world is the concept of an objective world, a world about which the communicant can have beliefs (Davidson 1985: 480, 1984: 170, 1990b: 314).

The concept of shared world is a necessary basis for having contentful thoughts and, if Davidson is right, that concept only arises in the context of mastering a language. For him, it is only through learning how to interpret the speech of others that it becomes possible for a creature to adopt a contentful perspective on the world. This is because, he argues, only creatures that are aware of a subjective-objective contrast can ascribe propositional contents to the speech and thought of others, and hence, are able to have contentful attitudes themselves. Putting all of this together we reach the conclusion that mastery of natural language is necessary both for interpreting the contentful utterances of others and having contentful thoughts oneself. This line of thought is repeated in Davidson's remarks about triangulation creating the space needed for error (Davidson 1986a). It is safe to say that it constitutes his basic argument for the dependency of thought on language.

In sum, Davidson thinks mastery of natural language makes propositional thought available for an agent because mastery of natural language requires engaging in special sorts of intersubjective practices—practices that put agents in a position to grasp the notion of having a contentful perspective on an objective world. For all of these reasons, Davidson maintains, to be a believer of propositions requires "the gift of tongues" (Davidson 1985: 473).

Davidson presents his main argument about what is involved in acquiring a sensitivity to the requisite intersubjective standards in terms of mastering a nest of inter-related concepts—of belief; of a shared world; of an intersubjective world; of an objective world and so on. We deem this commitment to be prob-

lematically overly intellectualist. Softer, and more plausible variants of this basic argument are, however, available.<sup>14</sup>

At its simplest, it is possible to reformulate the central idea of Davidson's argument so that it does not require mastery of concepts per se but holds only that creatures capable of contentful thought will have adjusted to the norms of communicating with and interpreting others in language. Natural language is a practice that enables a meeting of minds that generates the right kind of cognitive friction—namely, the kind of cognitive friction that is needed to develop the shared norms that enable speakers to get to grips with the possibility of there being contrasting perspectives on a shared world. A much revised, and less conceptually grounded, version of Davidson's belief argument might be developed to show that having a contentful perspective requires being a creature that is acquainted with the possibility of there being other contentful perspectives on a shared world—perspectives that can be true or false. It is possible to make such adjustments while agreeing with Davidson that mastery of natural language is one way—our way—of coming to be acquainted with the possibility of there being contentful perspectives on a shared world.

Still, even modified in these important respects, on their own, these Davidsonian considerations only succeed in showing that mastery of natural language is sufficient, but not necessary, for understanding and developing a contentful perspective—a perspective that can be right or wrong—on a shared world (Barth 2011: 60). Learning to interpret others by participating in discursive, linguistic practices is at least one way to acquire a contentful view on things: it is one way to acquire the capacity to think thoughts for which the question of truth can arise. Those who master a particular kind of intersubjective practice—one that respects special kinds of norms—can master contentful thinking.

Drawing these threads together, if modified in important respects, there is a version of Davidson's master argument for thinking that contentful thought depends on language that both holds promise and which has the potential to be rendered compatible with the naturalistic strands in his thinking.

#### 4. Challenges to Davidson's Thought about Thought

More work needs to be done if we are to take full advantage of the proposed adjustments to Davidson's dependency claims outlined in the previous section and to show how Davidson's thinking can be rendered fully compatible with a satisfactory naturalism.

There are residual issues to address before the apparent tension can be resolved. The main difficulty is to see how Davidson's conception of the mental as autonomous and holistic can be thought to fit within the natural world. Namely, we need to determine whether—and how—it is possible to make the connections between contentful thought and the rest of the natural world non-mysterious. Davidson was famously skeptical about providing a positive answer to the question of how the mental can emerge in a natural world. He held that

<sup>14</sup> Barth 2011 holds that despite many formidable arguments designed to defeat it, a modified version of Davidson's belief argument can be fashioned that avoids the standard objections and which is promising. See Barth (2011: 53-74) for a detailed discussion of the options and his own reconstruction of Davidson's belief argument.

we lack the descriptive resources needed to give such an account—namely, that we face a characterization problem. He writes:

The difficulty in describing the emergence of mental phenomena is a conceptual problem: it is the difficulty of describing the early stages in the maturing of reason, the stages that precede the situation in which concepts like intention, belief, and desire have clear application. In both the evolution of thought in the history of mankind and the evolution of thought in an individual, there is a stage at which there is no thought followed by a subsequent stage at which there is thought. To describe the emergence of thought would be to describe the process which leads from the first to the second of these stages. What we lack is a satisfactory vocabulary for describing the intermediate steps (Davidson 1997/2001: 127).

Davidson thinks that we lack the requisite vocabulary because he is committed to the idea—in line with his views on the holism of the mental—that minds can only be discerned and characterized by ascribing propositional contents to them. In his view, “words, like thoughts, have a familiar meaning, a propositional content, only if they occur in a rich context, for such a context is required to give words or thought a location and a meaningful function” (Davidson 1997/2001: 127).

A fortiori, for him, nonverbal thought cannot be characterized because it lacks the necessary links with contentful attitudes—it stands outside of the network of propositional attitudes. For this reason, Davidson doubted that there could be “a sequence of emerging features of the mental [...] described in the usual mentalistic vocabulary” (*ibid.*).

As a consequence of this lack of vocabulary—this characterization problem—Davidson thinks we are without the resources for making sense of the connections between contentful attitudes and the rest of nature. In his way of setting things out, the characterization problem leads to a connection problem, which in turn generates an explanatory continuity problem as a special instance.

In the end, Davidson sees no way to draw intelligible connections between our capacity for contentful thought and the cognitive capacities of our younger selves and our immediate evolutionary ancestors. Anyone convinced of Davidson’s package of views about holism will see necessary links between thought, talk and interpretation which imply that there is no way of making intelligible or explaining the natural origins of content. Such an approach renders mysterious the ontogenetic and phylogenetic history and development of propositional forms of thought.

These lines of reasoning explain why Davidson was not interested in empirical speculations about, investigations into, or attempts to explain how our capacity to think propositional thoughts actually arose in ontogeny and arises in phylogeny. As he says:

The approach to the problems of meaning, belief, and desire which I have outlined is not, I am sure it is clear, meant to throw any direct light on how in real life we come to understand each other, nor how we master our first concepts and our first language (Davidson 1990b: 325).

Davidson, on the one hand, recognizes that contentful perspectives arose and arise in the world and yet holds, on the other hand, that we are conceptually debarred from explaining how this could be so. Pointing to this combination of

views, McDowell observes that Davidson's position "smacks of magic" (McDowell 1998: 410). Is it possible to keep what is best in Davidson's work while avoiding this charge? Is it possible to demystify Davidson?

### 5. A Radically Enactive Answer

Davidson thinks that we lack the requisite vocabulary for describing the stages that precede the emergence of thought. This is because he holds fast to the idea that minds can only be discerned and characterized by ascribing propositional contents to them. For him, the problem boils down to this:

We have many vocabularies for describing nature when we regard it as mindless, and we have a mentalistic vocabulary for describing thought and intentional action: what we lack is a way of describing what is in between. This is particularly evident when we speak of the 'intentions' and 'desires' of simple animals. We have no better way to explain what they do (Davidson 1997/2001: 128).

We think the characterization problem, as Davidson presents it, can be dissolved. Our diagnosis of how to achieve this is that it requires relaxing the condition on how we discern and characterize minds. This proves pivotal, since once the characterization problem is dealt with—once we clarify why it is not a problem—it becomes clear that there is no conceptual barrier that prevents us from dealing adequately with the connection and continuity problems.

The first step is to dissolve the characterization problem as Davidson sets it up. We think that can be achieved by expanding and enriching our ways of thinking about the mental so as to include recognition of the world-directed, intentional attitudes that lack fine-grained content—indeed, that lack any kind of content whatsoever.

For some the very idea of contentless intentional attitudes is a nonsense—it seems a conceptual impossibility. Such resistance is to be expected from anyone who holds that intentionality—whatever form it may take—necessarily entails content. If we combine Davidsonian observations about the dependency of contentful thought on language with the idea that all forms of intentionality are necessarily contentful, then we reach the strong conclusion that "*all* thought depends on the mastery of a natural language" (Barth 2011: 13, emphasis added); namely, that "the possession of (propositional and non-propositional) thoughts conceptually depend on a mastery of a natural language".<sup>15</sup>

Propositional as well as non-propositional thoughts are intentional in that they are of or about something. What they are of or about is their intentional object [...] *The contents of thoughts have a representational dimension in virtue of being intentional.* They represent objects as being so-and-so in virtue of referring to objects and in virtue of characterizing these objects under some aspects (Barth 2011: 9, emphasis added).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* Or again, as Barth elsewhere puts it, "the possibility of both propositional and non-propositional thoughts depends on language" (Barth 2011: 8). Barth distinguishes propositional and non-propositional thought in the following way: "Propositional thoughts do not only exhibit a representational dimension but also an inferential dimension [...] Non-propositional thoughts are not inferentially significant" (Barth 2011: 9-10).

Every form of thought exhibits intentionality and hence is representationally contentful, according to Barth. If we accept Barth's conceptual stricture then the very idea of a contentless intentional attitude is a non-starter and the characterization problem stands.

To escape this trap we need to show that we can make sense of the idea of contentless intentional attitudes and that we can understand their characteristics. Picking up on Davidson's comment about non-verbal animals, it helps to focus attention on the much-discussed example of Malcolm's barking dog (Malcolm 1997: 49-50). How should we characterize the mind of the dog that finds itself in the following circumstances: The dog sees a cat. It gives chase. The cat leaps into a tree. The dog circles around the base of the tree, barking. Yet unbeknownst to the dog, the cat slips away. The dog continues to bark.

We are naturally inclined to say that the dog believes that the cat is up the tree and that it wants to get at the cat. Yet, as Davidson cautions when discussing this very case, there is not enough in the totality of the dog's patterns of behavior to justify ascribing it any contentful attitudes (Davidson 1982/2001: 97-100). The trouble is that "it does not seem possible to distinguish between quite different things that the dog might be said to believe" (Davidson 1982/2001: 97). For example, we lack grounds for ascribing the concepts 'tree' or 'cat' to the dog as opposed to a multitude of other possible concepts.

Maybe the dog is not thinking about the cat as a cat. Maybe it is operating with a more general concept of 'animal'. Or perhaps it is thinking that there is 'something chaseable' in the tree. Or it might be having countless other possible thoughts on the topic of its quarry. What sort of mistake the dog makes, if any, depends on the precise content of its thoughts, but we have no principled way of determining what those putative contents might be, or indeed if there are any such contents in play. The crux is that, "We want to say the dog believes something—but we do not seem able to say what" (Armstrong 1973: 25; see also Stich 1979: 18).

Taking everything into account about the full repertoire of the dog's behavior, Davidson's lesson is that we lack evidence for assigning it any particular set of contentful attitudes and, thus, we lack any justification for supposing that it has any such attitudes.

Our difficulty in assigning any content to the dog's thoughts in this case reveals that we have no reliable way of characterizing its state of mind in mentalistic terms as long as we restrict ourselves to using the machinery of the sort that would be available to a Davidsonian radical interpreter.

One way of going beyond the resources of radical interpretation would be to bet that the notion of content will be vindicated and shown to be part of the theoretical vocabulary of mature sciences of the mind. Should that prove true, then we might rely on such sciences, as opposed to our interpretative practices, to make well-grounded assignments of contents to non-verbal states of mind. In that case, we could join with Carruthers in saying that although we "find ourselves forced, implausibly, to describe animal and infant thoughts using adult human concepts and categories, this is our problem, not theirs" (Carruthers 1998: 220). Those who assume that the notion of content will feature in the mature sciences of the mind thereby have a basis for remaining faithful to the idea that all thought must be contentful. They can hold that if non-verbals have intentional attitudes then these attitudes must be contentful attitudes, even if we have difficulty knowing which contents to ascribe to them using our everyday

resources. The issue is highly contentious. Nevertheless, there are many reasons for doubting that the notion of content will feature in the mature sciences of the mind (see Hutto and Myin 2013 and 2017 for detailed discussion).

Alternatively, we might not restrict ourselves to using only the resources available to a radical interpreter. We might come at the issue from a different angle—saying instead that the dog has attitudes that are directed towards the cat and the tree without assuming that such attitudes are contentful. If we can make sense of the idea of contentless intentional attitudes, then we can avoid the intractable problem of trying to characterize, *per impossibile*, the content of such attitudes. Crucially, to accept that the dog has intentional attitudes that are not propositional attitudes absolves us of trying to specify the content of the dog's attitudes. This is good news because, as we have seen, the dog's behavior does not exhibit a pattern that would warrant the ascription of content.

Nevertheless, in chasing the cat up the tree the dog still exhibits a complex pattern of behavior that exemplifies a world-directed mentality—even if the dog's intentional attitudes are contentless there can be rich connections between what the dog thinks, feels, intends and desires. Our awkward attempts to assign content to the dog's attitudes can be understood as a way of picking out which aspects of the situation that the dog is directed at non-contentfully. We can say of the dog—and other creatures of a similar mindset—that it is directed at the situation—and so qualifies as having intentional attitudes—even though such attitudes are not contentful (see Hutto 2008). The idea that the most basic kinds of mentality are world-directed yet contentless is the driving idea behind radical enactivism (Hutto and Myin 2013, 2017).

Why believe in such non-contentful yet intentional attitudes? As Davidson himself implicitly and uneasily acknowledges when introducing the characterization problem, in certain circumstances we need to make sense of the attitudes of non-verbal animals, infants and adult humans even though we lack any justification for ascribing them contentful attitudes.

On a more positive note, once unshackled from the restricting idea that all intentionality must be contentful, we can find plenty of examples of non-verbal mentality that cry out to be understood and characterized by making comparisons—noting similarities and differences—with our most basic and more sophisticated ways of thinking about the world. Wittgenstein chides those who assume that animals are incapable of thought, merely because they cannot talk, along these lines. Challenging this assumption, he stresses: “[T]hey simply do not talk. Or to put it better: they do not use language—if we except the most primitive forms of language” (Wittgenstein 1953, §25).

It is important to be clear that, in saying this, we are not offering a straight solution to Davidson's characterization problem but rather showing how—by appealing to a richer conception of the mental—the characterization problem *as he poses it* can be defused.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> There are other versions of the characterization problem that should also be avoided. In particular, it is important not to construe it as a “missing link” problem, the solution to which is supposed to consist in finding intermediate steps. We agree with Sultanescu (2015) that seeking to solve Davidson's characterization problem is a fool's errand if doing so requires being able to positively characterize each stage of thought, from the inside. For if that were necessary for solving the problem then, a bit like Zeno's paradox,

Bar-On (2013) makes a similar move. She attempts to address Davidson's philosophical challenge of explicating the relevant connections and continuities head on by first addressing the characterization problem. She aims to achieve the latter by making appeal to expressive attitudes in order to characterize non-propositional states of mind. As she explains, "although these are mentalistic descriptions, which do not carve behavior in purely causal terms, they do not presuppose the full battery of concepts that inform our descriptions of each other" (Bar-On 2013: 329). Thus she aims to show that there are commonsense descriptions of the expressive behavior available that "can guide us towards a natural intermediate stage in a diachronic path connecting the completely unminded parts of the animal world with the fully minded, linguistically infused parts that we humans now occupy" (Bar-On 2013: 330).

However, she does not sufficiently disentangle the characterization problem, connection and continuity problems. This failure leads her to misrepresent what needs to be done in order to deal with the latter problems. Hence, Bar-On holds dealing with the latter problems requires doing the conceptual work of fusing "the scientific image and the naive commonsense image" (Bar-On 2013: 329). Although we agree that all these problems are related, we do not think that solving the connection and continuity problems requires the kind of fusion that Bar-On describes.

We should not conceive of solving the connection and continuity problems as requiring the fusing of the two images. Rather such problems and mysteries can be dealt with by making illuminating connections between relevant domains of discourse. In this latter vein, we propose a different way of showing how there can be, as Bar-On (2013) puts it, a "*scientific* account of the emergence of our mental states and the sort of communication they underwrite" by providing a "legitimate *philosophical characterization* of such a progression".<sup>17</sup>

In sum, we can avoid having to solve the characterization problem in Davidson's terms if we recognize the possibility of there being intentional attitudes that lack content. Upon doing so, it becomes possible to see how to overcome the connection problem, and its more specific instantiation of phylogenetic and ontogenetic continuity problems (for further details on how to deal with these latter problems see Hutto and Satne, forthcoming-b).

To understand our preferred way of dealing with the characterization problem it is important to note that contentless intentionality is not supposed to characterize an intermediate evolutionary stage that sits between contentful

we could replay the worry at every micro-step of the process with the result that "the intermediate steps between primitive intentionality and contentful intentionality cannot in fact fully be accounted for" (Sultanescu 2015: 639). Accordingly, however much we might succeed in narrowing the imaginative gap there would be no way to close it completely. Thus even if expressive or intentional attitudes are allowed into the story, if they are used to fill in the "intermediate steps" between contentful and non-contentful attitudes, we can always ask how exactly the gap between such attitudes and "contentful goings-on is supposed to be bridged" (Sultanescu 2015: 646).

<sup>17</sup> Bar-On 2013: 303, emphases added. Accounting for the emergence of the mental requires working under the auspices of Relaxed Naturalism (as we argue in Hutto and Satne 2015, Hutto and Satne, forthcoming-b). For Relaxed Naturalists philosophy provides the structural steps of the story while the human, social and natural sciences are called in to fill in the details.

thinking and non-intentional behavior. On the contrary, contentless intentionality works as a platform that enables the emergence of complex practices—namely discursive practices that provide the special resources for bringing content into being in the natural world.<sup>18</sup>

Distinguishing contentless Ur-intentionality from contentful intentionality enables us to understand how it is possible for interpreter and interpreted to triangulate, to target and be directed at the same focal points, and to do so in similar ways even though they may lack thoughts with propositional or other content.

In addition, broadening our understanding of the varieties of intentionality in this way opens the door to giving an account of the directedness of contentless intentional attitudes in biosemiotic terms. Such an account of basic intentionality is wholly compatible with the possibility that having contentful attitudes depends, as a matter of fact, on mastering special kinds of linguistic practice (Hutto and Myin 2013: ch. 4; 2017: ch. 5; Hutto and Satne 2015). By availing ourselves of a distinction between contentless and contentful forms of intentionality, it becomes possible to connect Davidson's vision of the mental with explanations in the sciences of the mind.

To illustrate, consider the role Davidson suggests that triangulation plays in the primitive learning situation. In a number of places he emphasizes the importance of learners and teachers exhibiting a similarity of response to similar objects or features of the world. In triangulating, he assumes that there must be a commonality to what the learner and teacher target—what they naturally group together (Davidson 1992: 264). At its simplest, our suggestion is that it is no accident that learners and teachers are capable of such acts of joint attention. We can make sense of the attitudes involved in such primitive feats of triangulation by understanding them as contentless but world-involving intentional attitudes—attitudes that can be primarily understood as a gift of our biological heritage. This proposal is perfectly in tune with the naturalistic strand in Davidson's thought—the one that emphasizes that it is “because of the way we are constructed (evolution has something to do with this), that we find these responses natural and easy to class together” (Davidson 1991b: 200).

## 6. Conclusion

We contend that it is, in the final analysis, possible to show how content could have arisen in the natural world without gaps. This can be achieved without having to attempt the impossible—namely, without having to solve the characterization problem in Davidson's terms. That would require imagining the content of a missing mental link; a strange centaur; an intermediate state of mind that sits somewhere between purely intentional attitudes and properly contentful attitudes. Instead of providing such a contentful characterization, we propose expanding our thinking about varieties of intentionality and thus making it possible to defend some of Davidson's important insights about minds—specifically, modified versions of the four claims set out in section 1—while also promoting a satisfactory and demystifying naturalism.

<sup>18</sup> We have developed this kinky account of cognition more fully in Hutto and Satne (2017) and Hutto and Myin (2017).



## References

- Armstrong, D.M. 1973, *Belief, truth and knowledge*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bar-On, D. 2013. "Expressive communication and continuity scepticism", *Journal of Philosophy*, 110, 6, 293-330.
- Barth, C. 2011, *Objectivity and the language-dependence of thought*, London: Routledge.
- Carruthers, P., 1998, *Language, thought and consciousness*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Cutrofello, A. 1999, "The transcendental pretensions of the principle of charity", in L. Hahn (ed.), *The philosophy of Donald Davidson*, La Salle: Open Court, 333-41.
- Davidson, D. 1980, *Essays on actions and events*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Davidson, D. 1982, "Rational animals", in Davidson 2001.
- Davidson, D. 1984, *Inquiries into truth and interpretation*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Davidson, D. 1985, "Rational animals", in Lepore, E. and MacLaughlin, B. (eds.), *Actions and events: Perspectives on the philosophy of Donald Davidson*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Davidson, D. 1986a. "A coherence theory of truth and knowledge", in Lepore, E. (ed.), *Truth and interpretation: Perspectives on the philosophy of Donald Davidson*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Davidson, D. 1986b, "Empirical content", in Lepore, E. (ed.), *Truth and interpretation: Perspectives on the philosophy of Donald Davidson*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Davidson, D. 1987, "Problems in the explanation of action", in *Metaphysics and morality*. Oxford: Blackwell, 34-49.
- Davidson, D. 1990a, "Afterthoughts, 1987", in Lepore, E. (ed.), *Reading Rorty: Critical responses to philosophy and the mirror of nature*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Davidson, D. 1990b, "The structure and content of truth", *Journal of Philosophy*, 88, 6.
- Davidson, D. 1991a, "Three varieties of knowledge", in Griffiths, P. (ed.), *A.J. Ayer: Memorial essays*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 153-66.
- Davidson, D. 1991b, "Epistemology externalized", *Dialectica*, 45, 2-3, 191-202.
- Davidson, D. 1992, "The second person", in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 17, 255-67.
- Davidson, D. 1994, "Radical interpretation interpreted", *Philosophical Perspectives*, 8, 121-28.
- Davidson, D. 2001, *Subjective, intersubjective, objective*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Davidson D. 1996, "Subjective, intersubjective, objective", in Coates, P. and Hutto, D. (eds.), *Current issues in idealism*, Bristol: Thoemmes Press.
- Davidson, D. 1997, "The emergence of thought", in Davidson 2001.
- Davidson, D. 1999, "The emergence of thought", *Erkenntnis* 51, 1, 7-17.
- Genova, A.C. 1999, "The very idea of massive truth", in L. Hahn (ed.), *The philosophy of Donald Davidson*, La Salle: Open Court, 167-91.
- Hutto, D.D. 2008, *Folk psychological narratives: The sociocultural basis of understanding reasons*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

- Hutto, D.D. and Myin, E. 2013, *Radicalizing enactivism: Basic minds without content*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press
- Hutto, D.D. and Myin, E., 2017, *Evolving enactivism: Basic minds meet content*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Hutto, D.D. and Satne, G. 2015, "The natural origins of content", *Philosophia*, 43, 3, 521-36.
- Hutto, D.D. and Satne, G. 2017, "Continuity scepticism in doubt: A radically enactive take", in Durt, C., Fuchs, T. and Tewes, C. (eds.), *Embodiment, enaction, and culture*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 107-128.
- Hutto, D.D. and Satne, G. forthcoming-b, "Naturalism in the Goldilock's zone: Wittgenstein's delicate balancing act", in Raleigh, T. (ed.), *Wittgenstein, philosophy of mind and naturalism*, London: Routledge.
- Maker, W. 1991, "Davidson's transcendental arguments", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 51, 345-60.
- Malcolm, N. 1977, "Thoughtless brutes", in his *Thought and knowledge*, New York: Cornell University Press.
- Malpas, J.E. 1992, *Donald Davidson and the mirror of meaning*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- McDowell, J. 1998, "Reply to commentators", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*. 58, 2, 403-31.
- Quine, W.V.O. 1960, *Word and object*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Sinclair, R. 2002, "What is radical interpretation? Davidson, Fodor, and the naturalization of philosophy", *Inquiry*, 45, 2, 161-84.
- Stich, S. 1979, "Do animals have beliefs?", *The Australian Journal of Philosophy*, 57.
- Sultanesco, O. 2015, "Bridging the gap: A reply to Hutto and Satne", *Philosophia* 43, 639-49.
- Wittgenstein, L. 1953, *Philosophical investigations*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.