

Davidson's Normativity

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1. Introduction

Davidson's "The Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme"¹ was a powerful and influential paper. It largely ended a prolonged discussion of the rationality of other cultures,² undermining particularly the claim argued at the time that there was a universal, non-culture relative core of rationality and protocol sentence-like description that provided grounds for judging the rationality of other cultures.³ It blunted the impact of some of the more exuberantly relativistic interpretations of the implications of Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*⁴. But the paper introduced one of the least well understood Davidsonian arguments, his attack on what he called "The Third Dogma of Empiricism" after Quine's "Two Dogmas of Empiricism."⁵ The Third Dogma was the scheme-content distinction. The paper is basic to understanding the later Davidson. Its treatment of error pointed directly toward Davidson's most controversial claims, in "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs"⁶ about the non-existence of "language" as the term is usually understood: the model for the interacting language speaker correcting for error is generalized from the model of the translator in "The Very Idea."

Davidson himself thought the implications of the argument were radical, and specifically thought that it opposed to the kind of Kantianism that was present when it was written and has since, under slightly different forms, become conventional wisdom in Anglo-American philosophy, in which normative concepts constitute the world for us. Variants of this view range from the idea that normative concepts are subject to either a small or large amount of local linguistic variation to the idea that there is a large common core of reason that anyone in any culture who is properly brought up will come to recognize as binding. The essay was directly concerned with the kind of conceptual relativity supposedly warranted by the variation in concepts between languages. But as Davidson put it in the essay, the argument showed that it was also unintelligible to say “that all mankind — all speakers of language at least — share a common scheme and ontology.”⁷

The way his paper has come to be interpreted in much of the subsequent discussion assimilates it to a form of conventional wisdom to which it was opposed. This occurred through two main steps. The first was to read Davidson as having established the necessity of some sort of logical or rational core to human thought that is transcultural or culturally invariant by showing that translatability was transitive, that is that my translation from language L to language P would not be a translation if it did not include the translations into L from Language N. This reading is based on a supposed dilemma: if the relation of translatability was not transitive, it would imply

the possibility of incommensurable schemes, and if it was transitive, it would imply that our standards are the only standards,⁸ which in turn implied that there was after all a universal scheme. If Davidson is consistent in rejecting the possibility of incommensurable schemes, it would mean that Davidson was in fact a scheme-content thinker himself, and his reservations about the scheme-content distinction were a matter of detail.

The detail was vaguely understood in terms of the idea of independence. What Davidson had showed was that there could be no understanding of schemes and content independently of one another. Accordingly, one interpretation was that he was proposing a novel 'interdependence' model of the relation between the two.⁹ Another interpretation deradicalized it in a different direction, by suggesting that his point had to do with "the metaphors that sustain the picture of an independent scheme and worldly content"¹⁰ rather than the idea itself. The reinterpretation made Davidson's argument about content rather than about schemes. Davidson's explicit denial that there was "a neutral ground, or a common coordinate system" between schemes,¹¹ was taken to rule out an independent realm of "content," but it was not taken to rule out an independent realm consisting of a common "scheme." Indeed, it was reinterpreted in terms of the Kantian idea that, as John McDowell puts it, the world "cannot be constituted independently of the space of concepts, the space in which subjectivity has its being."¹² The distinction between denying our ability to step outside the

conceptual—the Kantian thesis—and denying the scheme-content distinction, meaning denying common content, common schemes, and the independence scheme and content alike—Davidson’s thesis—was taken to be a distinction without a difference. The reinterpreters assumed that the language of the conceptual, and of normative reason, are inescapable and ineliminable by any argument about schemes, because Davidson could not have possibly, or intelligibly, meant to challenge this foundation of contemporary philosophy.

The conventional accommodation or re-normalization of Davidson’s argument was made plausible through a feature of Davidson’s argument in this same paper: the claim, as it became interpreted, that massive error about widely held beliefs is impossible. If this is the case, that is, if skepticism about significant ordinary beliefs is itself necessarily incoherent, this fact can in turn be taken to imply that various commonplace metaphysical views about ordinary beliefs are warranted. If the separate and autonomous existence of the world and the normative authority of reason are such facts, or are entailed by such facts, these facts, together with the idea that there is some sort of universal rationality, take us back to and support a basically Kantian picture of the metaphysical structure of the world, in which universal rationality interacts with a world which we can’t be very wrong about. What Davidson saw as radical, in short, became, through these reinterpretations, validation for the default anti-naturalist philosophy of the present. Davidson, on this account, becomes the thinker who

undermined Quine's arguments in "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" from within, reestablishing the synthetic *a priori* in the new guise of the notion of normativity. On this view, Davidson's acknowledgment that rationality, intentionality, and belief are "normative," together with his rejection of massive error, commits him to some variant of the Kantian doctrine of normativity of Sellars,¹³ Haugeland,¹⁴ Robert Brandom,¹⁵ and McDowell,¹⁶ perhaps with some idiosyncratic variations with respect to the precise location of the normative, for example, or of the nature of the interaction between the normative and the non-normative.

Davidson's own argument that meaning, intentional ascriptions, and rationality are mutually dependent, and that they arrive together in the description of intentional action seems congenial to this reading, because it serves to make these idiosyncratic differences less significant. Davidson might locate the normative in the universal psychological properties of the interpreting agent rather than in language, as in Brandom, or in some sort of nomic realm whose normative constraining character must be recognized, as in McDowell. But meaning, intentional ascriptions, and rationality all must be there in some fashion. The rest is detail.

The oddity of this outcome is worth reflecting on. The target of the original paper was the scheme-content distinction itself. The Kantian form of this distinction was an especially visible part of this—the term "scheme" is an echo of Kant's language. The picture of the rational ordering mind organizing the Kantian manifold was transmitted

to Kuhn via the neo-Kantian historians of science, such as Alexandre Koyre, who were admired by Kuhn and who played a large role in the background of Kuhn's use of the notion of paradigms. So the Kantian tradition is clearly the target of Davidson's paper. What made the paper so radical, as Richard Rorty routinely pointed out in conversation, was the way in which the argument against the scheme-content distinction could be extended throughout the history of philosophy, to undermine such variants as the concept- percept distinction, the word-world distinction, and so forth. The unradical result described above— that it is taken in support of the current 'idealist' variants of the scheme-content distinction— is in open conflict with Davidson's initial point.

In what follows I will try to restore this original point. I will not be concerned with the details of this "idealist" re-interpretation of Davidson, but I will try to show why he thought the argument of this paper had radical implications, and explain what it had radical implications for. Its target, I will argue, is the whole commonplace normative conception of concepts. His approach was to show why this conception was unnecessary and deeply problematic. Explicating the argument requires more than textual analysis: the arguments to which "The Very Idea" is now being assimilated, such as those of McDowell, Brandom, and Haugeland, were not available at the time the paper was written and were in part devised to take advantage of Davidson's claims, so the original paper does not respond directly to them, and can even be construed,

with effort, to support them. But the original point can, with a bit of contextualization, be reconstructed, and once reconstructed, can be seen to be the basis of the even more radical claims made in such later papers as "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," "The Third Man," and "The Social Aspect of Language." It is an oddity of this discussion, though not an entirely mysterious one, that some of the relevant distinctions between Davidson and the normativists map onto, and are reproduced in, social theory.

Brandom, at the beginning of "Making it Explicit," quotes Weber's phrase "the disenchantment of the world," and offers a project of re-enchantment in its place.

Sellars' appeal to the idea of collective intentionality, which was in turn a core of his ideas about norms, was consciously echoing Durkheim. As we will see, the differences between Davidson and the normativists follow this familiar fault line between theories of obligation collective facts and individualist social theory.

2. What is Impossible?

There is a kernel of truth to the conventional appropriation of the argument of "The Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme." The paper does rest on an impossibility argument, about intelligibility and the limits of intelligibility, and the argument has complex implications, far beyond the issue of conceptual relativism. But the implications are not congenial to the Kantian picture, as Davidson knew, and he contrasted it to the views of

the main Kantian of the time, Strawson. The argument develops from an observation about incommensurability: that

Whorf, wanting to demonstrate that Hopi incorporates a metaphysics so alien to ours that Hopi and English cannot—as he puts it “be calibrated,” uses English to convey the contents of sample Hopi sentences. Kuhn is brilliant at saying what things were like before the revolution using—what else?—our post-revolutionary idiom.¹⁷

Davidson’s point is that it is impossible to do otherwise. If we were faced with genuine incommensurability—speakers with a truly alien conceptual scheme—we would not even be able to understand them sufficiently to say so.

Davidson’s approach to the issues goes through the problem of evidence: the evidence of “different schemes” takes the form of sentences. It is normally understood that having languages is associated with having a conceptual scheme in such a way that differences in one imply differences in the other. Benjamin Whorf, for example, uses linguistic evidence from the Hopi to make claims about their conceptual schemes, and the literature on conceptual differences in science emphasizes shifts in the meaning of terms in the context of different theories. If we restate the idea of incommensurability and intelligibility at the level of the linguistic evidence, it becomes a claim about

translatability, specifically about what could count as a successful translation, and what follows from failures of translation. As Davidson puts it, "it seems unlikely that we can intelligibly attribute attitudes as complex as [the ones that would allow us to recognize something as speech behavior doing something as complex as making an utterance the speaker believed in] unless we can translate his words into ours."¹⁸ The limits of intelligibility, in short, are the limits of translation. Failure in translation makes for, and is evidence of, failure in understanding.

Davidson considers two possible kinds of failure of translatability, partial and total, and argues first "that we cannot make sense of total failure," and then examines cases of partial failure.¹⁹ The case against total failure provides the kernel for the conventional interpretation. But the case of partial failure has the more radical implications. The impossibility argument arises in connection with purported cases of total failure of translation: the conclusion of the argument is that the only evidence in the first place that an activity is speech behavior is evidence that it can be interpreted in our language, whether directly or through translation. This turns out to have a crucial implication for the transitivity of translation: to ascribe the speech behavior "translating" to someone in translating into yet a third language requires us to translate the translation, since otherwise we would not be able to say whether we were properly translating their utterances as translation. In short, we need to know that they are not faking translation. This criterion holds for the rest of translation. This is the argument

that seems to lead back to a universal core of rationality. But Davidson also makes an argument that seems to point in the opposite direction, toward the detail-oriented capacities of interpretation that are central to ordinary human interaction and understanding, as when he observes that translation requires a command of the “multitude of finely discriminated intentions and beliefs” required to interpret speech as a form of human conduct. This is an important tension in his argument to which we will return. It is resolved by his normativist interpreters in the direction of normative universal rationality or the normative conceptual preconditions for language. But these options, as we have seen, seem to be ruled out, and are indeed the target, of the argument itself.

The next step in the argument involves the contrast between mutual “contamination” of meaning and theory, that is, about what is claimed to be true—something which follows from giving up the analytic-synthetic distinction.²⁰ What appear to be “changes in meaning” between scientific theories, an essential element of the claim that paradigms are incommensurable, always also involves changes in what is said to be true. Failure of translation thus means failure to translate as true claims made with the same terms, so that one must say either that the meanings of the terms rather than the terms themselves must be different or that the previous claims were false. But the appeal to meanings turns out to be less than helpful, and indeed to be empty: “meanings” in the sense of meanings in the head, are inaccessible: we don’t know

whether people mean the same thing as we do by the same words; we know only what they do and say. And thus the idea that truth is relative to a conceptual scheme turns out to mean nothing more than that the truth of a sentence is relative to the language in which it belongs.²¹

There is another oddity. The argument of the paper does not support the idea of a universal core of rationality common to all cultures. Indeed, it explains why the idea – promoted at the time by Martin Hollis,²² who was concerned with the closely related question of whether we could attribute beliefs to people who did not possess *modus ponens*– could be given no determinate content. The reasons are Quinean. Translation operates on sets of logically and semantically linked sentences, which are open to multiple interpretations, in which the truth or falsity of any given sentence are relative to the role they play in the set as a whole, a role which can be omitted or altered depending on the roles played by the rest of the sentences and their content. Consequently “possessing *modus ponens*” is a feature not of the content of the heads of the natives whose beliefs are being interpreted, but of the translations we use to make sense of them. Whether the translations ascribe *modus ponens* to them or not reflects choices made by the translator that could have been otherwise and still produce intelligibility. Without such universally rational content there is nothing universal for the universalizing version of the Kantian project to work with, which gives us a reason to doubt this interpretation of Davidson.

3. The Quinean Background

As is evident from this reference to holism, Davidson's paper, and his work in this area in general, deals with a series of problems left over from Quine. In describing his position I have used Quinean language, for the most part, and done so intentionally — separating the Quinean elements from the Davidsonian ones cannot be done without an understanding of the issues that Davidson is addressing, and avoiding, in this paper.

Quine left an unresolved problem: how to reconcile the fact that a) the data for understanding human action and language were necessarily behavioral, for the language learner as well as for the interpreter and translator learning from scratch with b) the widespread philosophical (and general) use of notions of intention and meaning, and c) the raw fact that people do seem to be able to interpret one another, learn one another's languages, and do so in terms of intentions and meanings.

Quine himself was willing to treat this question as a matter of what would be found in a fully naturalized scientific account of these matters. This meant that notions like meaning and intention needed to be regarded as theoretical terms in an as yet uncreated predictive theory of behavior. But in their usual form they did not work very well in this role: behavioral evidence was insufficient to produce a reasonably determinate fact of the matter of either meaning or intention. So interpretation was left hanging by Quine. Moreover, the relativistic consequences of Kuhn seemed to follow

from Quine's attack on the analytic synthetic distinction, which undercut the idea of universal *a priori* rational standards by relativizing considerations previously regarded as *a priori* to the status of part of a "theory" which faced the evidence as a whole. This, together with the underdetermination of theory by data, implied that there might be a number of theories which had different logical elements, had different true sentences, but were equally predictive, and that this was an irreducible situation. The germs of the idea of underdetermination and the relativism of logical elements and mathematical framework were already present in Logical Positivism. But Quine showed that these issues could not be dealt with merely by using such notions as convention to characterize the theoretical elements in question. This left a variety of puzzles about meaning: if the truth of the sentences is relative to the theory as a whole, didn't this imply that meanings changed between theories, and were thus incommensurable, making the notion of scientific progress impossible to formulate neutrally, as Paul Feyerabend pointed out?²³

Davidson's approach to interpretation took for granted the same evidential base. But he dealt with it in a different way. He took over from G. E. M. Anscombe the notion of "under a description," and proceeded by treating intentional and meaning questions as arising under a particular description. The description, it is important to note, is in some sense a description of choice, an option, though exactly in what sense is an important consideration to which we will return. We could describe in the language of

physical or neurophysiological science instead. But if we did this the problem of interpretation would be inaccessible to us. The question for Davidson involved the conditions of interpretation, i.e., of getting a reasonably determinate answer to questions about intentions and meanings using the behavioral evidence we necessarily work with. "Radical interpretation" was simply interpretation under these conditions without other background knowledge, such as prior knowledge of the meanings of utterances, which is to say interpretation with the raw behavioral evidence alone. The question was what more would be needed to make any sense of this evidence in terms of meanings and intentions, or to put it differently, the implications of the choice of description in terms of intentions and meanings.

Davidson's answer was rationality, which enabled the attribution of intentions on the basis of behavioral data and knowledge of the meanings of the utterances that are part of the behavior, if there are any. The model is this: if I can take an utterance as a sincere expression of belief, and have data about behavior, I can infer meaning; if I have knowledge of meaning and behavior, I can infer intention; and if I have knowledge of meaning and intention, I can predict— to a sufficient extent at least— behavior. But none of this inferential machinery works unless the agents being interpreted are in some sense rational, and thus behave in accordance with their intentions and beliefs. One question this raises is the status of the notion of rationality here: in what sense is it optional? If it is necessary for talk about intention and meaning, is it not necessary

simpliciter, and thus just an example of synthetic *a priori* truth? Isn't the argument a *reductio* of Quine's "Two Dogmas" rather than an extension consistent with it? This reasoning is the core of the idealist interpretation of "The Very Idea." Davidson's appeal to a 'normative' notion of rationality seems like a straightforward capitulation to the notion of scheme.

The argument is superficially compelling. The idea is that the possible intransitivity of translation would be a refutation of the idea that there were no such things as incommensurable conceptual schemes, and that transitivity of explanation would require that we had, so to speak, all the resources for translating all languages in advance, because only this condition for the possibility would exclude the possibility of finding a language A that the speakers of B could translate from speakers of C, who could translate into B, but could not translate into A. The thought behind this is that whatever is needed to translate into A already has to be there in C. In the usual forms of this argument, this amounts to saying that "we" now must have whatever resources are necessary to translate out of any conceptual scheme. This in turn raises the question of whether speakers of some other language D might not have this capacity, specifically whether speakers of the language of a primitive society might be incapable of translating into and thus understanding our language. And since this does not seem to be an empirical question, and Davidson's argument is not at first blush an empirical

argument, it must be a question not about what they could do but about what they possibly could do—justifying the Kantianization of the issue.

Davidson has a different and much more limited argument: if the speakers of C happen upon speakers of B translating A, if they could indeed translate B, they would, *ex hypothesis*, be able to translate these translations of A as well. Why would this follow but not necessarily imply the sufficiency of a single starting point for translation? The point is basic to Davidson's understanding of translation in this text: a translation is not merely a "translation manual" consisting of sentence correspondences. It is instead a combination of correspondences and explanations of the failures of correspondence that occur when something is accounted true in one language and false in another. These explanations take the form of what J. L. Mackie in a different context called "error theories." The example Davidson gives is a paradigmatic error explanation:

If you see a ketch sailing by and your companion says "Look at that handsome yawl," you may be faced with a problem of interpretation. One natural possibility is that your friend has mistaken a ketch for a yawl, and has formed a false belief. But if his vision is good and his line of sight favourable it is even more plausible that he does not use the word yawl quite as you do, and has made no mistake about the position of the jigger on the passing yacht.²⁴

The hypothesis that he uses the word differently, in this particular behavioral context, requires us to attribute a whole set of correct beliefs (and norms of correspondence, as Davidson puts it) to our companion: that he or she has counted the masts and sails correctly, that he or she can count, that he or she is talking about the same boat, that he or she is not kidding, or testing our knowledge of nautical nomenclature, and so forth. This list could be extended. Davidson's point is that the number of correct beliefs we must attribute when we attribute error to the false ones is high. And the more extensive the error, the larger the number of beliefs in the web of belief we must rely on to explain the error. This is why massive error is unintelligible: making massive error intelligible would require an even more massive pool of correct beliefs to draw on to explain the error.

The significance of the interdependence of meaning and theory is that translations are like theories in that they already involve truth claims about the world, that they depend on the correctness of explanations and of the theories backing explanations of error, and that they are in this respect heir to all of the problems of theoretical explanation not only in the sciences, but in psychology and for that matter the social sciences, where they play a role in backing the explanations of error that translations inevitably involve. This means that they are also characterized by the usual infirmities of such theories: that they are underdetermined by the facts, so that alternative theories may be consistent with the facts, that new data, for example new behavioral evidence,

may require changes in the theories, and so forth. Davidson is explicit about this. The method forced on us of getting a first approximation by attributing to sentences of a speaker the “conditions of truth that actually obtain (in our opinion)” allows for meaningful disagreement. And the disagreements can wind up in a variety of ways: if we are in the position of the companion, we might find ourselves learning a lesson about the differences between ketches and yawls, and thus resolve the disagreement in favor of the hearer. But we might discover that we have a disagreement that present data cannot resolve.

If we cut this reasoning down to the basics, we get something like this: interpretive charity is required by the economy of error explanations. The term means two things: we need to attribute rationality—in a sense yet to be defined—to the people we interpret, and we need to attribute a minimum of error. Attributing rationality is a precondition for any interpretation involving error, because attribution of error, at least of the kind relevant to Davidson, namely errors in utterances with truth relevant content, requires an attribution of rationality: an error for Davidson is a rational but wrong response something, and belief in this erroneous thing can be accounted for by reference to other wrong beliefs which are rationally connected to the wrong response. In constructing error explanations, one soon reaches a vague limit beyond which the error explanations are impossibly complex and insupportable, since each attribution of error requires a larger set of attributions of erroneous background belief—the beliefs

that rationally support the error. Charity in interpretation avoids reaching this limit; attributing massive error is attributing something beyond this limit.

The upshot of this for everyday metaphysics can be illustrated by a simple example. Consider the Hindu belief that the world is an illusion. We have no trouble translating the relevant sentences, for the simple reason that the translation manages to preserve all our ordinary beliefs. Everything in an illusion appears just as the real thing would—otherwise it would not be an illusion. My belief that the coffee shop down the street serves espresso survives whether or not the espresso, the street, the shop and the rest of it are illusions, because there is no difference between real and illusory espresso other than whether it is real. If we translate the terms they refer to the same thing, with the exception that we need to add an illusion operator to each sentence in the translation of the target language. But the addition does nothing beyond connect the sentences to the belief that the world is an illusion. And what goes for illusion goes for the rest of metaphysics—the noumenal world, empirical reality, the phenomenal world, and the rest of it. There are no interesting implications of the problem of massive error for metaphysics, since in these cases there is no massive error. There is only a very economical kind of error, or alternatively a kind of underdetermination, about metaphysical facts. There is a question of whether this holds for the “fact” of normativity itself, and here there is an ambiguity. Taken by itself, it seems that the pattern with normativity mimics the pattern for “the world is an illusion.” Nothing

much changes whether or not we say, e.g., that normativity is a fiction or that it is real. But if normativity in the requisite sense is part of the machinery that allows us to speak in this way in the first place, namely as a condition of interpretation, matters would be different.

It might seem that we ought to get more metaphysical bang out of transitivity, especially the apparent requirement that we somehow have the resources for all possible translation, in advance, so to speak. But this is not the requirement it appears to be. Focusing merely on the problem of the truth theory for a language, and ignoring the role of error, obscures important features of translation, and also obscures the reasons translation does not require us to have all the resources for all possible translations—the resources that would define the conditions for the possibility of translating all languages, in advance. Just as theories in science grow, our theories of error and our powers of translation grow in the course of translating from one language to another. This bears on the problem of transitivity. Davidson need only argue that the augmented power of translation we possess when we adequately translate B from A enables us to translate C from B, not that we can translate C with the resources of A. What his explicit argument excludes is the following case: the speakers of C claiming that they can understand B perfectly, but not A as translated into B. This would mean that they couldn't understand the correspondences and the explanations of error. Davidson's point is that this would be evidence that they did not understand B. But

without the learning and error theorizing we did when we translated, translators starting with A might indeed be unable to understand C.

This suggests that truncating the discussion of rationality and translation into a discussion of the fixed (and pre-fixed) “conditions for the possibility” of translation is beside the point. The conditions of translation are of a piece with, and depend on, our ever-changing knowledge of the world. But saying this raises questions about the nature of rationality for Davidson himself, and about the larger problem of normativity that the normative concept of rationality points to. For Davidson, “the concepts we use to explain and describe thought, speech, and action, are irreducibly normative.”²⁵ What does this mean? Even if we de-Kantianize the problem of conditions for the possibility of translation, it seems, we are forced back into another form of the scheme-content distinction by the assumption of rationality and by the normativity of word-world relations. Or is there another, better, interpretation of these two things?

Davidson’s actual comments are tantalizing. He does say that interpretive charity is non-optional and also sufficient for translation, and he does refer to norms of correspondence, meaning by this something analogies to the correspondence rules of the layer cake model of scientific theories. He could have said, but does not, that interpretation requires an assumption of rationality and an assumption of certain common human norms of correspondence,²⁶ and that these are both non-optional and universal. Instead he says the following:

The ineluctable normative element in interpretation has, then, two forms. First, there are the norms of pattern: the norms of deduction, induction, reasoning about how to act, and even about how to feel given other attitudes and beliefs. These are the norms of consistency and coherence. Second, there are the norms of correspondence, which are concerned with the truth or correctness of particular beliefs and values. This second kind of norm counsels the interpreter to interpret agents he would understand as having, in important respects, beliefs that are mostly true and needs and values the interpreter shares or can imagine himself sharing if he had the history of the agent and were in comparable circumstances²⁷

The norms of correspondence are norms of interpretation, but not in the sense of rules that help decide between interpretations: they are instead a feature of making intelligible interpretations in the first place. The norms of pattern correspond to the notion of rationality. But they are not quite the same as the notion of rationality, and this is where Davidson separates himself from the Kantian interpretation. Or does he? Do they constitute a scheme, or the essential normative core of a scheme? Or do they have a different status? These are the questions on which the argument against the scheme content distinction seems to hang. And they cannot be answered directly.

Davidson might have answered them by also arguing that these two kinds of norms would be sufficient for interpretation or translation universally, that is to say of all languages, as well as necessary, thus making them into a common scheme of a kind. He might also have said that the consideration of necessity amounts to a transcendental argument that we ourselves must be committed to these necessary elements in a metaphysical sense, that is to say, as part of our own theory of the world, and to derive from this commitment such results as a commitment to the metaphysical necessity of “normative reason” and the like. This, or some variant, is the argument that his idealist interpreters would like to read into him. But he does none of these things, and seems instead to treat the arguments about conceptual schemes as a fully sufficient alternative to these arguments. Moreover, Davidson thinks that his arguments also preclude the appeal to a universal kind of normative reason, or makes it unnecessary. And because they are arguments that are assertions about necessity, about the necessity of a univocal account of normative reason construed in a certain way, showing them to be gratuitous amounts to denying them.

How does Davidson’s alternative work? He says instead that interpretive charity is required to make sense of others, and that interpretive charity requires something that seems to go beyond and perhaps is different from the assumptions listed above, namely the acknowledgment that most of the beliefs of others are true, which implies that most of our beliefs are also true. But it also seems that there has to be something

behind this—the things that make the beliefs true and the judgements of their intentions and utterances rational. And here is the trap that the idealist interpretation relies on. If we acknowledge the necessary role of “rationality,” it seems, we are back to the Kantian picture, with rationality having the status of “scheme.” The issue of what is behind understanding turns out to be decisive, and Davidson, I will argue, has an answer to this question that differs from the usual normativist one, and also precludes it. But it will take some background to get to this answer and explain its significance.

4. Getting Rid of Concepts: A Brief Excursus

Quine’s example of the translation of “gavagai” as either rabbit or undetached rabbit part, for example, points to a central feature of translation: that the same things can be translated in multiple ways, that these ways have different ontological implications, and that some divergences at least, are ineliminable. We can correct erroneous translations on the basis of the behavioral evidence, but we cannot eliminate translations but one. Holism, similarly, implies that adjustments in one part of a translation explanation can be made which have the effect of preserving a given translation hypothesis. Davidson assumes all of this, and it is especially relevant in the case of error, which is not a well-developed Quinean theme, in large part because of Quine’s focus on ostensive definition and willingness to give up on “meanings” as ordinarily understood. But the same considerations about the web of belief hold for

Davidson. As we have seen, an error explanation is an explanation that necessarily relies on the rest of the web of belief, and if too much of this web is claimed to be erroneous, we have nothing out of which a coherent error account can be constructed.

Why is this important? Why is it anything other than an exercise in hypothetical anthropology of no philosophical interest, which is how P. M. S. Hacker dismisses it?²⁸ To answer this question and to see the radical character of Davidson's argument, as well as the way in which this paper foreshadows and grounds the later papers, it is important again to see what Davidson and before him Quine did not say, and why they thought that what they did say precluded the kind of philosophy represented by Brandom and McDowell. The story can begin with Quine's systematic substitution of "sentences" for "propositions." Avoiding the language of Gottlob Frege was an attempt to avoid Platonism about concepts—the idea that concepts were out there in some sort of ether of thought, which the mind engaged, or acquired. This language was common in the "analytic" philosophy of the time, and in the specific context of Davidson's paper, the problem of other cultures. Peter Winch, in *The Idea of a Social Science*,²⁹ had operated with a notion of concepts as the mental stuff of society, and imagined that one could have, and because actions could only be understood under descriptions containing these concepts, had to have, a social science that began with the analysis of these concepts.

The metaphors, which were common to all the standard figures of Ordinary Language philosophy at the time, are telling. Concepts are possessed by people and are therefore shared, object-like things: possessions that one acquires. It was this autonomous existence that enabled them to be subject to a special kind of inquiry, conceptual analysis. The specific character of action was that it was done for reasons, and therefore involved concepts, the concepts possessed by the agents that supplied the relevant stock of descriptions. Behavioral descriptions were not the descriptions of the agents themselves, did not supply reasons for action, and were thus strictly speaking irrelevant to action explanation. This same picture of concepts was the source of conceptual relativism. If concepts were possessions, different people or members of different social groups or people living in different eras had different conceptual "possessions." They would say different and incommensurable things about the world, and these different things would each be true or false under the descriptions allowed by the concepts they possessed. Concepts they didn't possess would be, by definition of the term "possession," inaccessible and unintelligible to them, that is to say incommensurable, until they came into possession of them. The only apparent solution to this problem of relativism was to insist that somehow people really possessed, at some prelinguistic Ur-level, all the same concepts, despite the surface diversity of actual usages and for that matter beliefs about the world.

Quine did not ignore these considerations of diversity: they are central to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which became the Sapir-Whorf-Quine hypothesis and in such slogans as “ontology recapitulates philology.” But Quine had already stepped off the “concepts as possessions” path by being “as behaviorist as any sane person could be.” And Davidson was on the same path. But Davidson realized that to deal with meaning, rational action, and the like, it was not enough to be behaviorist. So he set about constructing an alternative account that gave as little as possible away to the picture of concepts as possessions that Quine had abandoned in favor of the language of sentences, theories, and holism. This is the motivation for his attempt to restate the slogans of the “concepts as possessions” model in terms of language. When faced with the problem of conceptual incommensurability, that is to say the condition of possession of mutually unintelligible concepts, he asks what it means in terms of sentences, and concludes that it is no more than, in terms of the evidential base, failure of translation. By moving to the behavioral level, then to sentences, then to the holistic theory-like individual webs of belief which individuals managed with, Quine not only avoided the “concepts as possessions” model and its implications, he precluded it: the evidential base is behavioral, which is more basic than anything the concepts as possessions model operated with, and Quine could account for the diversity that was revealed in the form of this evidence without appealing to this model. The point of this argument was to make the concepts as possessions model is superfluous for

explanatory purposes. In Quine's exchange with Sellars, this was precisely what was at issue. Sellars wanted to show that even Quine had to accept mathematical concepts, and thus be dragged into the space of reasons, however unwillingly. Quine demurred³⁰.

When Davidson translates the problem of conceptual relativism into the problem of linguistic relativism, he is following Quine, with the same intent: to avoid the commitments implicit in the term concepts and to avoid the possessions model of concepts.

What is the significance of this? Nothing, according to the normativists: the use of "sentence" rather than "proposition" was an eccentricity that doesn't change anything. The same problem, of understanding concepts and their normative force exists regardless of what one calls these things, because it stands behind our usages, including our usages of sentences. But something does change that is important. "Concept" in the normativists' usual sense is not only a normative concept— though it need not be, as there are plenty of naturalistic accounts of concepts as psychological facts that are not normative (e.g. Gallese and Lakoff, 1999, Stich, 1992³¹)— it is a collective one. Concepts, in the possessions model, are out there to be shared by people, to be "possessed" by multiple people. And this is the model of concepts in Brandom, and the model of reason in McDowell as well. Indeed, this is a feature of most notions of scheme— there is nothing private about them. They are jointly held, shared, whether by a group or by all intelligences.

A behaviorist account, in contrast, is not intrinsically committed to collective objects of this sort. They may prove to be explanatory necessities, which is to say that there may be something we want to explain that cannot be explained without appealing to collective objects. But then again there may not. It may be that language itself, understood as a collective object, is a fiction which is not needed to explain anything we want to explain, such as the actual linguistic interaction between two people or two people and the world. And this is what Davidson does in fact later argue. But this gives us another puzzle. How can anything be normative without also being collective in the requisite sense? McDowell and Brandom are fond of the metaphor of binding and being bound as a way of thinking about the normative. How can we be “bound” by the norms of rationality, for example, unless they are, to use the phrase of Durkheim, “external” and also shared? What is in common between these cases is the same idea: each involves error and correcting for error in the course of interpretation. Understanding the centrality of this idea is our next concern.

5. Intelligible Error

We often are compelled to translate, as Davidson points out, by treating the translation as a correct translation of a false belief: a case of explicable error. But error is not a behaviorist notion. It is “normative,” and perhaps it is the root normative notion. So to say that considerations of error are inseparable from translation is to accept the role of

the normative. And of course there is more normativity to be found in the conditions for translation or interpretation. Rationality is one of the conditions, and it is a normative notion. So to say that assumptions of rationality are necessary for interpretation seems not only to concede that some scheme-like element is necessary, but to refute Quine's Two Dogmas and concede the Kantian point by resuscitating synthetic *a priori* truth.

Or does it? One way of putting this issue is to separate two distinct aspects of "normativity." One is the sense of the normative as binding, as external and constraining—the Durkheimian sense—from a different sense, which can be labeled "intelligibility." As long as we are associating these as sociologists—an association which is neither accidental nor irrelevant, since both of them were drawing from neo-Kantianism, in different ways—we can call this second kind "Weberian." Durkheim was concerned with the binding character of obligation as it was experienced differently in different societies. Weber was concerned with subjectively meaningful behavior, and with the problem of making the behavior of other people intelligible, something he, like Davidson, thought necessarily meant "intelligible to us in our own terms." There is a normative issue here—intelligibility is a normative notion. But it is a different kind of normative notion than correctness or rationality in the "binding" sense. Understanding a subjectively intended meaning, to use the translation of Weber's phrase, is, at least on the surface, a normative as distinct from a causal matter.

Davidson's problem, like Weber's, involves the problem of intelligibility, not the problem of supposed binding norms.³² Explicable error is intelligible error. Translation which incorporates a hypothesis that accounts for the error and makes it intelligible extends the limits of intelligibility—extends them as far as they go. His argument is about the limits of intelligibility: there is no language recognizable as such beyond the intelligible. But we do not reach the limits of the intelligible without charitably extending the readily intelligible to incorporate the less readily intelligible, namely that which is not intelligible without a hypothesis about error. And these hypotheses about error necessarily rely on having already made other parts of the web of belief intelligible. As we have seen, this is the basis for the claim that massive error is not intelligible: it is not intelligible because the hypothesis of massive error amounts to denying to the constructor of explicable error accounts the material needed to construct these accounts. To explain the error of a sailor's failed attempt to keep the main from backing, we need to assume that he knows what the main is, has correctly perceived the wind, knows what the tiller is supposed to do, and so on. If we deny this, we open up the explanation of his actions to such hypotheses as these: he is communicating with Martians; he doesn't experience the wind and sea as we do but in some unknown way. And these begin to hit against the limits of the intelligible, because they are explanations of error that are themselves barely intelligible, or unintelligible to us, at least presently. The use of anthropological examples is highly relevant to the problem of

the limits of intelligibility. And by considering the problem of understanding other cultures analog we can see the deep differences between Davidson and the “concepts as possessions model” more clearly.

Anthropologists face a problem which grew into the problem that in the philosophy of social science that was part of the context of “The Very Idea.” The problem was identification: we try a translation of the utterance of a member of a primitive society, and get something like this: “my blood is boiling.” We are faced with the following kinds of alternatives: the members of the society actually believe that their blood is boiling; we just don’t understand the utterance, meaning we have gotten the translation wrong in a way that can’t be corrected, which would also mean that our translation of blood and boiling in other contexts, and therefore our translation project as a whole, is called into question; the utterance is false but metaphorical; the members of the society have a set of beliefs about blood and boiling that make it possible for them to erroneously believe that their blood could in fact be boiling. In the case of the last two explanations, there is also a significant amount of variation in possible hypotheses consistent with the facts. Metaphors can be interpreted in multiple ways, and the background belief structures about blood and boiling might also be constructed in various ways.

This seems like a methodological or epistemic problem — a real problem for anthropologists, perhaps, but not one for anyone else, and in any case is unilluminated

by the considerations of hypothetical anthropology Davidson adduces, which don't tell us which to accept. But if we keep the contrast to the 'concepts as possessions' picture in mind, we can see that there is more at stake here. The concepts as possessions picture had an answer to this problem: that concepts are the sorts of things we could ourselves come to possess or grasp, and then analyze. The problem of understanding a primitive society was thus one of grasping their concepts. Not only Kantianism but the problem of rule-following inherited from Wittgenstein lie behind this imagery, and these were assimilated in the form of an argument that possessing a concept consisted in grasping a rule. But as a solution to the identification problem, the grasp and possession model was a fiasco. Grasping was a primal act that operated on mysterious entities. There were no grounds for saying one was correctly grasping or not—correctness itself, knowing what accorded with the rule, presupposed grasping the rule. There is also a problem about evidence. For grasping, evidence is not so much irrelevant as insufficient. In particular, there is a mystery about the normative force of the concept or rule—if possession was no more than conformity with some set of behavioral patterns, what would the source of its normative force be? Is it some sort of mysterious added element?

Davidson's approach avoids these questions, by starting at a different point. The problem of identifying beliefs, of finding out what is believed and who believes it, in the famous formulation of Marcel Mauss, is a hypothesis testing-like epistemic process,

in which we employ what we know about ourselves and our beliefs to construct accounts of others' beliefs until our accounts begin to more or less match their behavior. Behavioral evidence is all we have, and all we want to explain, though we may employ non-behavioral terms, such as "belief" itself, in order to do the explaining. Error is intrinsic to the process of hypothesis testing, in the sense that we can get the attribution of belief wrong, in which case we can't predict what others will do or say in a way that accords with the attribution of belief we hypothesize. But there is more to it than just predicting. We also want to make sense of the beliefs as beliefs— to make them intelligible. To put the point in a way that will help later, we want to be able to follow others, to follow their reasoning. But this is inseparable from attributing beliefs in the first place, so it is normally not an issue. The point, however, is important. If we can't reason with others we can't attribute belief.

Where does the grasp or possession model of concepts and the problem of rules fit in with this? In terms of interpreting other cultures, these things cannot come first. We cannot first grasp others' concepts and then come to understand their utterances. Yet the possession model has a strong bias toward this kind of formulation: if we are using a concept, it is because we have grasped the rule behind it, or the concept. Our grasp is presupposed, and it is a necessary condition for "really" using it. This is the point of the celebrated arguments about the regress problem made in the first chapter of Brandom's *Making it Explicit*.³³ Really using it, for Brandom, amounts to being able to give

justificatory reasons about its use. The chain of justifications has to end somewhere.

Because justification is normative, it has to end in something normative. For Brandom it ends in the normativity of language, which is in turn made normative by our “commitments” to the score-keeping system that allows for the social regulation of error.

Davidson has none of this machinery. Why? The answer is closely related to the reason he also lacks the Brandom-McDowell imagery of constraint. For Davidson, not only does the problem of intelligibility come first and get solved by the hypothesis testing-like process of translation, it ends there. The claim that the rule-following, concept-possession model deals with something more fundamental, which is common to many of these interpretations and dismissals of Davidson, depends on showing that they are “necessary” in the first place. They are not, for Davidson. To deal with the behavioral evidence is not only enough, it is all there is. The whole machinery of the concepts as possessions model is not so much beside the point in relation to this evidence, since it is after all an attempt to account for it, as it is unnecessary for accounting for it. The accounting is done once the beliefs have been identified. There is no higher form of knowledge about these beliefs that result from “grasping” the concepts or having a normative commitment to them and the like. The only knowledge we have is this hypothesis testing-like knowledge.

6. Where is the Normative?

For alien cultures, the normativist is inclined to say, this makes sense. We cannot penetrate their inner life, their normative commitments, their space of reasons. We can only make up hypotheses, provide error accounts, and the like. But for our own culture, we are in a different situation. Our statements about other cultures may be behavioral and explanatory. For ourselves, as Joseph Rouse argues, they are “expressivist.” The reasons are our reasons; the normative commitments are ours; we have privileged access to them. Davidson is having none of this, either. One of the most visible consequences of the argument of “The Very Idea” is that the supposed distinction between cultures, i.e., between our concepts, our rationality, and theirs, is eliminated. The difference is language, which is treated in a demystified way rather than as a mysterious order of shared presuppositions. But any other explanation of “their” beliefs is in terms—error—that equally apply to the people in our own culture using our own language. So there is no “ours” to go with the “theirs.” There is no collective fact of shared concept possession behind their beliefs because there is no fact of concept possession in the Kantian sense in Davidson.

The full implications of this reasoning are drawn out in “A Nice Derangement,” which extends the use of the notion of error to ordinary linguistic interaction.³⁴ When we deal with other people, we are constantly doing precisely what the anthropologist is doing: we are interpreting their behavior, revising our interpretations in light of our

attempts to make sense of it, and attributing beliefs to them, attributions which often include error hypotheses. We could not function as language users or human beings without doing this. Making intelligible is a continuous process. Making inferences about what someone intends to mean, whether they are sincere, ironic, speaking metaphorically, or erroneously, is ubiquitous, and a part of every human interaction. Moreover, this process is logically fundamental and perhaps ontogenetically fundamental: logically, because for the grasps model to make sense, there is a two stage process in which the interpreter of language learner first needs to identify something that is later fully grasped. In McDowell, for example, it is not until the traditional age of reason that the well-brought up child grasps the normativity of reason.³⁵

Learning, including language learning, is an embarrassment to the possession model. For Brandom, embracing the interdependence of inferences about rationality together with the idea of meanings as rooted in normative practices of justification underwritten by “commitment” forces him into the odd position of arguing that the prelinguistic individual does not have genuine intentions, which in turn raises the question of how they could have genuine commitments. Davidson avoids this problem by avoiding the collective possessions model. Does he fall into it in another form?

For the normativist, the answer is “yes.” Davidson is a fellow traveler who also acknowledges the necessary role of the normative. He simply locates the normative elsewhere. But the difference is one of emphasis only: Davidson stresses one part of the

triangle, the part that involves the assessment of the rationality of the intention behind utterances, which tells us whether the speaker intended to speak truly and descriptively, which enables us to infer meaning. Meaning itself, they would say, is accounted for by the normativity of the system of linguistic practices, and rationality is accounted for by the recognition of the binding character of the universal norms of rationality, a recognition that eventually comes to every well-brought up person, regardless of their culture. Other normativists, in short, are filling in gaps which Davidson, by such usages as “norms of correspondence,” acknowledges.

But why should Davidson accept any of this? Consider the demands and complexity of Brandom’s account in *Making it Explicit*. Meanings are not something in the interactional flux, but are rooted in a complex and massive tacit system of normative score-keeping practices which we have access to in filling in the enthymemes or missing premises of ordinary speech, especially in the context of justification. We and our peers in our linguistic community are committed to this system personally and in the collective voice, as with Sellars’ notion of collective intentionality. This commitment, necessarily, is a kind of blank check written by our pre-linguistic and thus pre-intentional selves. We commit to a system in which individuals participate in a way not dissimilar to participation in Platonic forms, that is to say partially, since none of us has within ourselves all the meanings or inferences that are part of the concepts that make up the system. The point of Brandom’s famous regression argument is to establish this:

justification has to end someplace, but the place it ends has to be normative, and thus behind each rule is a normative end point which is a commitment to a system of this sort.

For Davidson, this whole machinery of a fixed set of normative practices revealed in the enthymemes of ordinary justificatory usage is simply unnecessary. We have no privileged access to meanings which we can then expressivistically articulate, because there is nothing like this—no massive structure of normative practices—to access.

Instead we try to follow our fellow beings and their reasoning and acting, including their speaking: we make them intelligible. And we have a tool other than the normal machinery of predictive science that makes this possible: our own rationality.

Rationality is normative, but not in the sense of McDowell. It is not the rationality of constraint. Our only constraint is the limit of our capacity to make intelligible. There is no gap between what we can recognize as intentional and meaningful, and what we can make intelligible – that is to say what we can follow, which includes intelligible error.

Justification has no special status of the kind accorded it by Brandom. It is just another piece of behavior: the child learns that saying “why, Mommy, why?” gets a reaction.

Eventually they come to follow the answers, to make them intelligible to themselves, and to provide them when elicited, but nothing about this activity of giving answers and asking questions gets beyond the behavioral facts, except for the matter of following or making intelligible.

For the normativist, this reply makes a fatal error: it falls back into a variant of the position they themselves hold, namely that normative rationality is “necessary.” The fact that Davidson locates the relevant kind of normativity elsewhere, namely in the interpreting agent, is to fall back into the synthetic *a priori*, which has to be the source of these normative constraints. But it is worse than their own accounts, because it is mysterious, groundless, and arbitrary— the sort of thing that Quine correctly objected to. Moreover, they would say, Davidson leaves us with no account of the normativity of that which is generally recognized as normative, such as rule-following, $2 + 2 = 4$, and so forth.

What does Davidson say about this mare’s nest of issues? He says something about rationality and its normative character, but not what the normativist wants to hear. For the normativist, rationality is itself a possession, an acquisition like a concept but more fundamental, more universal. Intelligibility depends on something else: the abilities we have to follow the thinking of others. The child’s game of “step on a crack, break your mother’s back,” is intelligible— intelligible error, perhaps, but also represents a form of reasoning that we share with primitive people and indeed all peoples. And it would be hard to construct a “theory” of this kind of inference that would make it rational.

But it is also hard to construct empirical theories of human reasoning: of what “empirical” rationality, meaning how we actually infer, rather than normative

rationality actually is. Worse, there is an odd dependence of empirical theorizing on normative theories of rationality, normative theories that are false as empirical theories. This was among the lessons he learned from the experimental study of decision-making in which he participated in the 1950s. Decision theory, which is usually called a normative theory in this literature, is false as an empirical theory of rationality. People do not make decisions in the way that normative decision theory defines as rational. But 'normative' decision theory is indispensable in at least this sense: to study actual decision-making it is needed as a starting point. Biases, errors, and the like are biases and errors in comparison to it. And there seems to be no option here. Without notions like bias we don't have a language for describing actual decision-making. There is no "empirical theory" of decision-making that is an alternative to the normative account, but only one which depends on the "normative" theory in this odd way.

The normativist would argue that this a case of *a priori* truth? Normativists read indispensable as necessary, and necessary in the manner of synthetic *a priori* truth. But this case doesn't fit the pattern. Empirically, it is not truth at all. But it seems to fit with other cases in which the "theory" is so deeply ingrained in our construction of empirical accounts that we can neither find an alternative to it nor dispense with it. Davidson suggests measurement theory as an example of this: it too is a case of empirical theory as classically understood, but as an empirical theory it is also literally false. The oddity has been remarked on in the literature on testing the theory of relativity: measurements

were made in accordance with the theory that relativity was to displace, rather than in relativistic terms³⁶. What confirmed the theory were the errors that appeared using the old measurement theory. But this did not displace the old measurement theory, which was as Newtonian as ever.

In the case of rationality, there is an analogous problem. The fact that the theories we have of rationality are false as empirical theories of human decision-making gives us no reason to discard them as normative theory, or to stop treating them as indispensable for our various theoretical and even practical purposes. But this indispensability does not confer on them any sort of metaphysical status, much less warrant any sort of claim about the metaphysical necessity of the normative as some sort of special ideal realm equivalent and co-existent with the empirically real. And indeed, rationality has properties in relation to the task of making intelligible that point in a different direction entirely.

The different direction is to acknowledge the actual diversity of the relevant kind of rationality. The rationality needed is “rudimentary”³⁷ and the notion of reasonable belief “flexible”³⁸ –very flexible. Davidson indicates how flexible in the following:

The issue is not whether we all agree on exactly what the norms of rationality are; the point is rather that we all have such norms and we cannot recognize as thought phenomena that are too far out of line. Better say: what is too far out of

line is not thought. It is only when we can see a creature (or 'object') as largely rational by our own lights that we can intelligibly ascribe thoughts to it at all, or explain its behavior by reference to its ends and convictions.³⁹

The contraposition of this shows how flexible the notion of rationality is for Davidson.

If we can recognize something as thought, it is "rational" in the relevant sense.

Recognizing something as rational is a matter of being able to follow someone's thought— to simulate their thinking well enough that their differences can be allowed for as normal or explained and this made intelligible as error. The normative element is not rigidly fixed, unarguable, or even free from conflict, such as those between kinds of inference that we can follow, but which lead to conflicting conclusions. This is not the kind of rationality that provides the kind of constraint and ultimate justificatory ground which is the concern of Brandom or McDowell. The only constraints are interpersonal: we are constrained in our understanding by the limits of what we can follow and we are constrained in communicating by the limits of what others can follow, and constrained in what counts as thought by the requirement that for something to be recognized as thought, it must be the kind of thing the recognizer can follow.

What I am calling "following" is an act of imagination.⁴⁰ This is something different from "possession of a concept." The substance is frankly psychological rather than normative in the sense of Brandom, McDowell, or the rule-following literature. It is

perhaps best understood in terms of the idea of simulation in cognitive science. And it is this idea that suffices to account for our capacity to make sense of others, for intelligibility as distinct from beliefs about rightness. This is what the rule-following literature stumbles on: it cannot distinguish “possession” from “following” another person’s thinking. Partly this is a matter of the diet of examples: following the idea of “addition of two” and possession, if there is such a thing, are the same; translating and possessing seem different. Davidson could simply make the point that following is basic to, and sufficient, for both. Our capacity for learning the rule of adding two is our capacity for following the teacher, and there is no additional mystery. We do not need an additional concept of possession to account for the behavioral facts. Nor do we need some notion of the intrinsic normativity of a rule, a notion of commitment, or any reference to community. The concept is “social,” but only in the interactional sense of social: we are following someone else, and getting feedback from our interactions that reassure us that we are following them sufficiently to say we understand them.

Simulation is also not a causal idea—so it is ‘normative’ in a specific sense unlike the Brandom or McDowell sense, not something external and constraining, but a sense linked to the agent’s own capacities. These capacities are, dare I say, naturalizable, not in the sense of the reduction of intelligibility to cause, or the elimination of intelligibility, but “disenchanted”: a capacity that goes with beings with brains with particular kinds of neurons, rather than souls participating in the forms.

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