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RADICAL INTERPRETATION AND SCEPTICISM

Abstract

A. Overview

This doctoral dissertation is a discussion of Donald Davidson's arguments against scepticism. I will focus in the so-called global scepticism, i.e. the idea that we could be mistaken about almost every belief we hold or, in other words, that all or most of our beliefs could be false. I will defend that global scepticism is only conditionally correct in the sense that it is entailed by some philosophical positions we are not forced to endorse.

This does not mean that we can get a definitive victory against global scepticism. My position is that we cannot refute categorically the sceptical threat. All we can do is, first, to show that the sceptical thesis presupposes some controversial philosophical views that are less than compelling and, second, to present an alternative to the sceptic's philosophical presuppositions that does not invite to scepticism.

This view is strongly inspired by M. Williams' idea of a theoretical diagnostic of scepticism. In his book *Unnatural Doubts* he distinguishes between constructive and diagnostic answers to scepticism. Constructive philosophers aim to give a positive theory of knowledge by taking seriously the sceptic question. For them scepticism is a false but legitimate position. Thus they try to offer reasons to refute the sceptical threat by showing that we do possess the very knowledge the sceptic holds we lack. By contrast, diagnostic answers to scepticism claim that there is something wrong with the sceptical question itself. Rather than giving an answer to it, they examine the legitimacy of the sceptical challenge. Williams distinguishes two kinds of diagnosis of scepticism: therapeutical and theoretical diagnosis. The former considers that, although sceptical arguments seem to have meaning, they really do not. Contrary to this, theoretical diagnosis holds that, although there is

nothing wrong with the sceptic's uses of words, the problem she raises is neither intuitive nor natural. According to this approach, the sceptic depends on distinctive philosophical ideas that are not compulsory and have to be discussed before facing the sceptical question itself. This answer does not constitute a final victory against scepticism. It only shows that epistemology leads to scepticism only if we embrace some philosophical positions that are, at least, controversial.

If global scepticism is the main issue of this dissertation, Davidson's philosophy is the point of view from which it is considered. Davidson holds that a correct understanding of language and thought leads to the conclusion that most of our beliefs are true. This conclusion rules out the global sceptic thesis: the possibility of being mostly mistaken about the world. The problem with Davidson's arguments is that they can be understood in very different ways and, depending on the interpretation, they have very different consequences for the sceptical threat. Davidson's arguments can be read as a refutation of scepticism, as a dissolution of the sceptical problem or as a philosophical alternative to the sceptic's philosophical background. Depending on what reading we choose we will find Davidson facing differently the problem and saying different things to the sceptic. His article 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge' supports the first reading by and it is intimately linked to the idea of an omniscient interpreter. What characterizes this approach is that it assumes that the sceptic is right in worrying about the possibility of having a mostly false cluster of beliefs and that we should offer her a reason for believing that we have the knowledge she maintains we lack. If this approach worked we would get a great victory against the sceptic. But the problem is that it does not work. In order to show that we have the knowledge that sceptic claims we lack we have to appeal to the idea of an omniscient interpreter that it is itself a very problematic assumption. The problem with an

omniscient interpreter is not only whether or not there is such a being, or whether it presupposes the very knowledge that the sceptic denies we possess. The real problem with such an interpreter is that it spoils the idea that a correct understanding of language and thought rules out the possibility of massive falsity in our beliefs. From such understanding all that can be proved with the help of an omniscient interpreter can be proved without it. But Davidson seems to wish to go a step beyond such an understanding in order to definitively overcome scepticism. The problem is that this step is illegitimate.

The problems generated by the appeal to the notion of an omniscient interpreter forced a change in the way Davidson faces the sceptical challenge. If we accept the possibility of communicating with other people on the basis of false beliefs, it seems that no interpreter, omniscient or not, and no argument could help us against scepticism. If this is sound, then the natural way of facing the sceptical threat is to show that such a possibility is not a possibility at all, which amounts to claiming that the sceptical threat hides an internal contradiction that reflection on the problem would bring to light. In Davidson's case a correct understanding of language and thought would show that knowledge of an external world and other minds is required to make subjective knowledge intelligible. Subjective knowledge is something the sceptic must admit as the starting point of his doubts. The sceptic claims that my beliefs could have the content that I consider they have while, at the same time, being mostly false. If it could be proved that the first member of the conjunction depends on the falsity of the second member, the sceptical possibility could be definitively rejected. We could say in that scenario that the sceptical problem has been dissolved rather than merely solved.

Understood in this way, Davidson's argument can be considered a transcendental argument. Anti-sceptical transcendental arguments try to show that the sceptical hypothesis

has as a necessary condition the truth of the very beliefs it challenges. However, this kind of argument has serious problems. The sceptic can always claim that what is a necessary condition of the sceptical hypothesis is not the truth of the beliefs challenged, but the belief in their truth. The strong conclusion follows only if we assume verificationism or idealism, but the assumption of any of these doctrines would mean a victory rather than a defeat of the sceptic. On the other hand, if we interpret them modestly, that is, as stating what someone must believe in order to consider something as possible, nothing is proved against the sceptic. If Davidson cannot overcome these problems, this second way of building his sceptical strategy would be ruined.

I will defend that Davidson's philosophy is better understood as what Williams calls a theoretical diagnostic of scepticism and that this strategy is the best way of facing the sceptical challenge. This strategy has two moments. The first one is what we may call Davidson's negative program and it is illustrated by his criticism to empiricism. This negative program is a criticism of the philosophical views associated to scepticism. In Davidson's case, his main target is representationalism, i.e. the idea that we know the external world through some mental intermediary directly known by the agent, while our knowledge of the external world is always indirect and mediated by this mental intermediary. Intimately related to this position is internalism, a position that Davidson criticizes along with representationalism. Empiricism is an illustration of this problem and a direct highway towards scepticism and this is why Davidson's rejects such a view. On the other hand we find what we may call the positive program. It is not only necessary to point out that scepticism is essentially associated with some controversial philosophical views. It is also necessary to offer an alternative to those views in order to show, at least, that they are not compulsory and that this alternative can explain all the facts explained by the

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sceptical opponent. As an alternative to internalism and representationalism Davidson offers an externalist view of thought and language that makes of the external world a condition of possibility not only of our knowledge of that world, but of thought in general. This externalism is grounded in the phenomenon of triangulation.

This move is not a victory against the sceptic. This is so because the sceptic can also explain the facts explained by the non-sceptical approach, even though his explanation is hard to believe. If we were, as Ramberg has called them, willing sceptics, the existence of an externalist alternative would not be compelling enough to abandon scepticism. But if we are not willing sceptics, a view is available that does not lead to scepticism. For those seeking a refutation of scepticism, this will be a philosophical scandal, but for those just wishing to avoid joining the sceptical club, it can be enough.

B. Extended abstract

Introduction

A sceptical stance, understood as the attitude of looking carefully, of doubting about the certainties of daily life, is constitutive of philosophy. However, this sceptical stance is not philosophical scepticism. Philosophical scepticism is the move from this sceptical attitude to the negation of the very possibility of knowledge. Of the different historical and conceptual kinds of scepticism, global scepticism is the most interesting, for it challenges our sense of responsibility for our actions. Our actions are essentially based on our beliefs. Therefore, if our beliefs failed to be knowledge, our life could not be claimed to be under our own control. If Davidson's idea of the centrality of truth for belief were correct, this kind of scepticism could be overcome. The task of this dissertation is to discuss whether this idea is true and how it should be understood.

1 Radical interpretation and charity

Radical interpretation plays a central role in Davidson's philosophy. It is first examined as a crucial thought experiment to test whether an interpreter lacking previous knowledge of the meaning of the speaker's words can build a suitable Tarskian truth theory for a language. The problem is that the radical interpreter does not only ignore the meanings, but also the propositional attitudes of the speaker, and therefore, must begin from scratch, not only language interpretation, but also belief attribution. Even it we

assume that we can recognize in the interpretee the attitude of holding a sentence as true, we still ignore both the meaning of the sentence and the content of his beliefs. This circularity of meaning and belief attributions can only be broken through the principle of charity. This principle consists in the assumption that the interpretee's beliefs are coherent and true. The methodological advice that follows from the charity principle is then to attribute to the interpretee's the beliefs the interpreter would hold true in similar circumstances. Once fixed the most basic beliefs, the interpreter can go on building a semantic theory for the language of the speaker.

Some questions arise about the principle of charity. The first one is the possibility of a divergence in beliefs between the interpretee and the interpreter, that is, that one of them takes generally as true what the other considers as false. The second is whether, even if it this convergence is admitted, the outcome of the principle of charity is truth or only agreement. Though both questions are important, the first one is the most radically dangerous for the process of radical interpretation. If we admit the possibility of a person having a cluster of mostly false beliefs the principle of charity would be out of place in interpretation. This would have devastating consequences for Davidson's theory of meaning. Since the case of radical interpretation is crucial for testing whether a theory of truth can work as a theory of meaning and such a theory cannot be built because there is a possibility that makes it impossible, Davidson's programme requires the exclusion of such possibility. This is why Davidson has to rule out the possibility of radically different worldviews.

2 Charity and empiricism

Before addressing (in chapter three) Davidson's first attempt to defeat scepticism, chapter two examines Davidson's negative program, his anti-representationalism. This anti-representationalism is exemplified in Davidson's attack to empiricism and this chapter deals with Davidson's arguments against this view. Empiricism can be considered from two points of view: the origin of knowledge and its validity. Davidson has no problem in recognizing the value of the senses as sources of our knowledge or, as he usually says, as causes of our beliefs. But this role is not enough for empiricism. Empiricists attribute a special validity to the knowledge acquired through the senses holding that it is privileged because of its passive character and that this privileged status entitles it to be the foundation of the rest of our knowledge.

Empiricism has many faces, but Davidson criticizes all of them. For him empiricism is a view that drives us inevitably toward scepticism. This is so because empiricism essentially appeals to representations as intermediaries between mind and world. These intermediaries are the bases of the rest of our thoughts and constitute the ultimate evidence accessible to the subject. Davidson criticism will be directed to the multiple manifestations of this idea because, as I said, it constitutes a straight road to scepticism.

The first criticism is the lack of intelligibility of empiricism denounced by Davidson in his article "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme". In this article Davidson discovers that the intelligibility of empiricism, even of an empiricism, like Quine's, depurated of the two first dogmas of empiricism – the distinction between analytic and synthetic statements and the idea that all meaningful statements could be reduced to some basic empirical statements- requires of the distinction between empirical content and conceptual scheme. What Davidson shows in that article is that the dualism of scheme and

content cannot be stated coherently and that the criterion usually offered to distinguish between different conceptual schemes does not work. This criterion is incommensurability between schemes. The dualism of scheme and content entails that we can make sense of the notion of mutually untranslatable languages. Davidson argues that we cannot make sense of the idea of a complete or even a partial failure of translation. The conclusion is that, in absence of a criterion to distinguish between schemes, that is, of an identity criterion for them, we cannot make sense of the dualism of scheme and content, the very distinction empiricism is based on.

The second line of criticism targets the empiricist notions of content and evidence. Empiricism, conceived of as theory of content, holds that the ultimate source for the content of our beliefs about the external world is the subject's internal representations. Hence, what gives the content of beliefs and sentences in the long chain of causes from the external world to the subject are internal events. The consequences of this doctrine, if internal states are conceived as something like Cartesian or Humean ideas, are well known: ideas become a veil for our knowledge of the external world. But Davidson directs his criticism also against more scientifically respectable versions of empiricism, as Quine's. In addition to the problem of the underdetermination of meaning by stimulus meaning, Quine's version of empiricism leads to scepticism and makes of communication a sort of permanent miracle. If all available evidence for attributing content is subjective, how objective and other minds knowledge can be build from it is a mystery, no matter how the subjective element is characterized. Thus, the important thing about representations is not how they are characterized, but their representational nature itself. Therefore, Davidson rejects proximal theories of content and defends a distal theory of content, that is, a theory that takes external events as the contents of sentences and of the thoughts sentences express.

As a theory of evidence empiricism maintains that experience is the foundation of knowledge. According to this view what makes sentences and beliefs true are bits of experience that serve as evidence for them. Quine attacked the idea that experience could be apportioned sentence by sentence, but he still held that experience, although holistically, was all the evidence a theory might have. Davidson rejects the idea that experience is the ultimate source of evidence for knowledge, but he does not oppose a distal theory of evidence to a proximal theory, as he did in the case of content. The problem of empiricism conceived as a theory of evidence is not only that the ultimate source of evidence is subjective. The problem is the very notion of evidence, whether proximal or distal. Davidson's position is then what we may call a non-theory of evidence. For him, no thing - experiences included- can serve as a justification for a belief except another belief. Davidson opposes to foundationalist views of knowledge a peculiar coherentism according to which we cannot get out of our skin of beliefs to find something more fundamental to base our beliefs on.

This rejection of empiricism has given rise to attempts to formulate versions of empiricism not committed to the scheme-content dualism. The most elaborated and influential of these attempts is McDowell's "minimal empiricism". McDowell agrees with Davidson that the dualism of scheme and content is untenable, but claims that some form of empiricism is required to account for our thoughts having content. According to McDowell, the real problem with the dualism of scheme and content is that experience cannot do the job of providing evidence for judgements because it is out of the realm of the conceptual. The moral is that we have to conceive of experience as belonging to the conceptual sphere. Conceptual capacities are involved in experience, and what is characteristic of experience is not its non-conceptual nature, but its passiveness. This is the characteristic of what

McDowell calls 'appearings', which are the foundation of our beliefs. But, although McDowell's new conception of experience succeeds in avoiding current criticisms made to empiricism, it fails to solve all its difficulties. The passiveness of appearings, that is their *prima facie* chief epistemological virtue, is also their sin. The subject is not committed to the truth of the content he or she experiences and, therefore, this content cannot be used as justification for anything. Applying McDowell's own diagnostic to other kind of empiricisms, appearings only offer exculpations when we wanted justifications.

3 Belief and truth

We can now turn to Davidson's anti-sceptical arguments. In 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge', Davidson tries to give a positive answer to scepticism. The argument accepts the legitimacy of the sceptical doubts about the truth of our most basic beliefs and, therefore, tries to give a direct answer to it. This answer is presented as a refutation of the sceptical hypothesis that shows that we do have the knowledge the sceptic thinks we lack. That is, the sceptical hypothesis is possible, but false. Davidson rejects foundationalist views of knowledge and embraces coherentism, the view that nothing except another belief can justify a belief. The problem with foundationalism is, first, that the ultimate evidence is difficult characterise and, second and more important it is a mystery how such an evidence can do the job of justifying our beliefs. Experiences, which are the best candidates, cannot be, in order to be basic, beliefs, for, if they were, we should ask what justifies their privileged foundational status. But, if experiences are not believed, then it is a mystery how experience could justify anything. The only way out from this dilemma is coherentism. But coherentism has its own problems, the most serious of which is scepticism. The reason is that coherentists have to rule out the possibility of a cluster of

beliefs hanging together but being false. Consistency is not enough: we need a positive argument against the possibility of an internally coherent but false system of beliefs.

Davidson's way out of this problem appeals to a correct understanding of language and thought. This correct understanding is derived from the analysis of radical interpretation and the role played in it by the principle of charity. The principle of charity has to be applied inescapably in radical interpretation and that means that, from the point of view of the interpreter, it is not possible to interpret a speaker and, at the same time, consider that the speaker's beliefs are mostly false. The sceptic, however, could argue that, even assuming that the interpreter needs to take the interpretee's beliefs as true, the problem remains of whether the point of view of the radical interpreter is veridical. It could be possible for the interpreter and the interpretee to be in agreement about what they hold as true and to communicate efficaciously with each other, but on the base of false shared beliefs. If wee seek a refutation of the sceptic based on a correct understanding of language and thought, we need an answer to this challenge. But in "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge" we do not find such an answer. Instead, Davidson introduces the notion of an omniscient interpreter of fallible speakers like us. Ex-hypothesi, this being knows everything that can be known, included the causes of any person's assents to any sentence. Davidson thinks that, in spite of his omniscience, he will have to use the principle of charity to access our thoughts. Charity is then also forced on the omniscient interpreter. To get a correct understanding of our thoughts, the omniscient interpreter has to find our beliefs mostly right. It follows that our beliefs are true under the standards of this particular interpreter. But, since this interpreter is omniscient, this entails that that they are objectively true. Therefore we can rule out the sceptical hypothesis.

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There are at least three problems with the omniscient interpreter argument. The first one, pointed out by S. Haack and Foley and Fumerton, is that it seems that the validity of the argument is merely conditional and it needs a proof of the existence of an omniscient interpreter. Of course, if there were an omniscient interpreter and he interpreted me, then I would be mostly right about the world. But I need the antecedent in order to assert the consequent. Without a proof of its existence the appeal to an omniscient interpreter would be of no use, and Davidson does not give such a proof.

The second criticism claims that, even if we granted the existence of an omniscient interpreter, the sceptical hypothesis would not be refuted. Brueckner and Williams have claimed that the omniscient interpreter argument merely replaces the problem of the truth of my beliefs by the problem of the knowledge of my own mental states. If I were a brain in a vat, the omniscient interpreter would attribute to my beliefs the right contents, that is the contents that would make them true. These contents would consist in electric currents and my beliefs would be true about them. However, I take it that my beliefs are about normal objects and events in the world and, relative to them my beliefs are mostly false. So, unless it is assumed that the contents attributed by the omniscient interpreter coincide with the self-attributions of the interpretee, nothing is proved against the sceptic.

These two criticisms are powerful, but I think that they are based on serious misunderstandings about Davidson's views on language and thought. These misunderstandings are, to a big extent, generated by Davidson himself, for, in 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge', he takes too a short way against scepticism. Instead of offering a view based on the nature of thought and language, he appeals to a creature that, as Vermazen has pointed out, does not make sense from the point of view of radical interpretation. This leads to the third and more important objection against the

appeal to an omniscient interpreter: that it is unnecessary for, as Stroud has shown, everything that can be proved with it can be equally proved without it. Moreover, this argument stands in the way what it should be of an argument really based on the real nature of language and thought. This kind of argument will be offered by Davidson in other articles and will be examined in the following chapters.

Before considering the argument, it is interesting to discuss M. Williams' diagnosis of Davidson's anti-sceptical strategy. Williams interprets Davidson as trying to give a direct answer to scepticism because he accepts the rules of the game given by the sceptic, i.e., the acceptance of the possibility of a coherent but mostly false cluster of beliefs. This forces Davidson to generate correspondence from coherence. But this cannot be done. The only way would be to grant the interpreter a privileged access to the causal relations between the world and the beliefs of the interpretee. But this cannot be assumed without begging the question against the sceptic and, even if it could be assumed, as in the case of the omniscient interpreter, it would still be possible to doubt that both the interpreter and the interpretee assign the same contents to the same sentences. Thus, it seems that this strategy is condemned to failure. Williams does not offer any way out to Davidson's attempt to refute scepticism. I agree with this but, as I defend in the rest of the Dissertation, following Rorty and Davidson himself, Davidson's philosophy can be interpreted as proposing an indirect answer to scepticism, that is, an answer directed against the legitimacy of the sceptical question. Chapters four, five and six discuss Davidson's anti-sceptical answer based on his promise of a correct understanding of language and thought. The aim of this answer is the dissolution rather than the solution of the sceptical challenge. What a correct understanding of language and thought tries to show is that the sceptical question is not legitimate. The sceptic has misunderstood the real nature of language and

thought she is jeopardizing. The explanation of the proper nature of thought should show that the sceptic's alleged problem is ill grounded and, therefore, there is no need to find a solution to it, for there is no genuine problem to solve. As we will see in chapters five and, fundamentally, six, the best understanding of Davidson's argument is as a transcendental argument. So conceived, Davidson's argument would show that global scepticism is incompatible with the very existence of thought and that the sceptical is the result of a serious misunderstanding of the real nature of thought and language.

4 Externalism and internalism

A crucial element in Davidson's transcendental argument will be his defence of a qualified externalism. I say qualified because Davidson's externalism tries to accommodate several elements usually considered mutually incompatible. In particular, his externalism tries to accommodate the view that the external world is essentially constitutive of the content of our thoughts with a privileged first person authority of the subject about his own mental content. These ideas have been traditionally viewed as forcing an election between externalism and internalism, two irreconcilable positions. Internalism is the view that everything needed to determine the mental contents of someone's thoughts is internal to the subject, is "in his head". Descartes' view of thought is the paradigm of internalism. All my ideas could be the same as they are without the contribution of an external world. Their contents would remain invariable and the subjects would have an incorrigible direct access to them. This latter claim is surely the main attractive of Internalism, for it acknowledges our special first person authority regarding our own thoughts. The main problem of this position is well known: it inevitably leads to scepticism, making it impossible to bridge the gap between the knowledge of our mental contents and the knowledge of the external world

and of the other minds. Internalism tries to warrant subjective knowledge against the sceptic's hands by appealing to subjective intermediaries: internal representations. But internalist attempts to derive the rest of the knowledge from this first person direct access are jeopardised by these very intermediaries, for internal representations become a veil that blocks the access to the external world.

Davidson's rejects internalism and hence embraces externalism, the doctrine that the contents of our mental states and sentences are at least partly determined by the external world. The problem with externalism, at least in its most orthodox presentations, is that it threatens first person authority. Davidson's anti-sceptical strategy needs to preserve first person authority because, without it, radical interpretation would be impossible, and it is in the analysis of radical interpretations that his view on the nature of thought and language is based. The incompatibility with first person authority will be the main criticism of what we may call perceptive or causal externalism. This view holds that the content of some terms is, at least, partially determined by what they refer to, independently of the representations speakers may associate to them. Two persons can use the same term to refer to different substances and ignore this fact, even if they associate the same description to the terms. This is what happens in Putnam's Twin Earth thought experiment, in which where the term water referred to different substances in the Earth and its twin before 1750 although nobody knew that fact.

In this kind of externalism the content is given by the reference of the terms, even if that reference is completely ignored by the users of the language. The problem is that this view makes room for the possibility of a divergence between an agent's knowledge of the content of her own mental states and their real content, what Bilgrami has called a bifurcation of content. If this is what externalism amounts to, externalism resembles more a

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necessary element for the intelligibility of scepticism than a solution to it. This is so because either we hold scepticism is true by accepting that all my beliefs can be false relative to the content I assign to them, or we invite the sceptic by the back door for, even if my beliefs are true relative to the real external objects they are about, I might ignore the content of my own mental states. Davidson considers that a view that brings us to a bifurcation of content must be rejected, even though a qualified externalism is necessary to overcome scepticism.

A second kind of externalism is social externalism. Social externalism holds that what a person means by his words is not determined uniquely by this person's mental states and that the social environment determines the meaning of what that person says. Thus, as Burge holds, a deviated use of the word 'arthritis' is interpreted by appealing the meaning attributed to the word in the community the misuser of the word lives in. This is an anti-individualistic doctrine and it is precisely because of this anti-individualistic character that Davidson rejects it. Davidson considers that in order to understand someone it is not necessary to appeal to any previous knowledge of the conventions that govern the meanings of his words in a community. In this sense Davison's view of language is deeply individualistic: the meaning of what a person says is determined only with the need of relevant facts about this person and its environment. In other case radical interpretation would be an impossible task because in order to understand someone we would have to possess in advance a detailed knowledge of the meanings of his words in the community she belongs to. This would endanger the whole Davidsonian project because social externalism would preclude the very possibility of radical interpretation, which is the starting point of Davidson's approach to language and thought. Though Davidson will give a central role to society in his qualified externalism, conventions and their knowledge will

not be essential to the understanding of another person's thoughts and they will not reveal the real nature of meaning and thought.

5 Triangulation and scepticism

Let's turn now to Davidson's externalism. The central thesis of Davidson's externalism is anti-representationalism. For Davidson representationalism is the source of what Bilgrami has called the bifurcation of content. When we allow the existence of internal representational objects in the theatre of mind we are directly aware of, the sceptical problem is unavoidable, even if we hold that external objects determine the real mental content of those thoughts. This is so because representations constitute a veil for mind and this veil makes not only access to the external world impossible, but it also endangers agent's self-knowledge. Davidson rejects such intermediaries between mind and world and takes seriously the idea that the external cause has to be constitutive of mental content, while claiming that the subject cannot ignore this external cause. This cause has an important role in the case of radical interpretation. When content is not fixed, the only way of penetrating in other person's thoughts is precisely the convergence in a common external cause. If this did not happen, communication would become in an impossible task.

The answer to scepticism has to be found in radical interpretation. However, this case has been partially pushed into the background with the years in favour of a more basic case, the case of triangulation. Davidson's appeal to this case is no accident. As Ramberg has pointed out, in radical interpretation we take for granted that thought exists and is out there waiting to be interpreted. There are two creatures already possessing thought and the problem is how one of them can penetrate the other's thoughts. The problem is that this case fails to account for the possibility of thought, precisely because thought is taken for

granted. This is why Davidson turns his attention to triangulation. In triangulation thought is not assumed, but explained. More precisely what is explained is the very possibility of communication in general. The case of triangulation involves two creatures and an external focus they respond to. Thus, when one of those creatures recognizes a response of the other creature to the external stimulus, then the first creature gives a response to that recognition, and this response can, in turn, be recognized by the other. This case is a case of communication, but a case that needs not be human. It can be applied to lions, dogs, even fishes. But it involves what is minimally required to understand the essence of communication, even of non-human communication. What is needed is an external world and two creatures that respond to it and able to recognise these responses.

This basic fact will be crucial for Davidson's externalism. It is crucial because the case assumes the existence of an external world recognized by two creatures that are also able to recognize their responses to that world. If this recognition is essential to understand language and thought the sceptical possibility is not a possibility at all. If the sceptic were right, we would lack knowledge of an external world and of other minds. But if these kinds of knowledge are a condition for having thoughts, then the sceptic's hypothesis leads to contradiction and, therefore, his challenge would be a false challenge we do not have to answer.

However, triangulation is not enough to explain the possibility and emergence of thought. Something has to be added. Truth is the element that allows the existence of language and thought. What distinguishes a rational creature from other beings is the possession of this concept, a concept that allows for the distinction between right and wrong applications of concepts. But truth is not a magical property, as it seemed in the case of the omniscient interpreter who possessed the concept perpetually. Truth must arise in the

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process of triangulation itself and has to be connected with the use of language. Davidson establishes this connection by holding that truth is only possible in a social context. The distinction between right and wrong uses of language, the possibility of making mistakes, requires the existence of a community of minds. Thus, triangulation is implemented with social control in order to explain the possibility of making mistakes, of correct and incorrect uses of language.

How this approach gives an answer to scepticism is the aim of Davidson's article "Three varieties of knowledge". Before addressing the issue, it is important to realize that we are facing a Kantian strategy. The sceptic maintains that subjective knowledge is independent of objective and intersubjective knowledge. If it could be shown that these two kinds of knowledge are indispensable for subjective knowledge, then we would have shown that the sceptic's doubts are self-defeating, for, to have the thoughts I have, I must possess the very knowledge the sceptic claims I lack. Davidson argues transcendentally in order to show that the sceptical possibility is not a possibility at all, given the elements that scepticism himself has to assume.

Radical interpretation is yet the crucial case to investigate those issues, though considered from the point of view of triangulation and the possibility of thought. Based on this case, Davidson argues that subjective, intersubjective and objective knowledge are mutually irreducible and indispensable. Moreover, he considers that possibility of any of these kinds of knowledge is contingent upon the existence of the other two, without assigning priority to one of them. Intersubjective knowledge is essential to the other two kinds of knowledge because, in absence of communication with other people, our own thoughts would lack content. This is so because intersubjective knowledge makes room for the concept of truth and without appreciating the possibility of being right or wrong there is

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not possibility for the emergence of thought. Objective knowledge is also indispensable, because knowledge of other minds requires the ability to triangulate with other people, and this presupposes the ability to identify the external causes of their thoughts, that is, objective knowledge. Finally, subjective knowledge is indispensable because we cannot attribute thoughts to other people without knowledge of our own mind, without the ability to identify the content of our own thoughts. Therefore, there are three mutually irreducible kinds of knowledge and none of them has a priority over the others.

In chapter three we concluded that the principle of charity secured agreement, but nor truth. This was the reason why Davidson's direct anti-sceptic strategy had to appeal to an omniscient interpreter. The answer to this problem now changes. Truth is only possible insofar as intersubjective knowledge makes room for it. That means that, at least in the first stages of interpretation, it is impossible to take a creature as a thinking being and, at the very same time, consider him as being mostly wrong about the world. And there is no way of evaluating truth independent of interpersonal communication. Therefore it is agreement in what is considered true that allows for communication, and this agreement is the only way of measuring truth. Hence, the sceptical possibility cannot arise because it supposes the possibility of somehow measuring the truth of a person's thoughts independently of communication with this person.

6 Transcendental arguments and invulnerability

We can now evaluate the scope and the strength of Davidson's indirect strategy against scepticism. The central thesis of Davidson's anti-scepticism is the veridical nature of belief. Interpreted positively as asserting that most of our beliefs are true, the thesis is of no epistemological help because it is extremely vague. To say that most of our beliefs are

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true means that truth can be the mark of half plus one of our beliefs or all except one, all this applied to a potentially infinite set. Moreover, and leaving aside the ungrateful task of counting beliefs, since Davidson's philosophy lacks of a criterion to discriminate truths and falsehoods, his conclusion cannot be used to distinguish knowledge from non-knowledge. The claim that belief is in its nature veridical has then to be interpreted negatively, as denying the possibility of massive error. This conclusion is too general to be useful as a positive account of knowledge. However, in spite of its extremely general character, it could serve as a first step of more concrete epistemological tasks. If Davidson's arguments supported his conclusion, epistemology could avoid the discussion of all sceptical scenarios having global falsehood as a consequence. The problem is whether or not, and to what extent, this negative conclusion can be conclusively established.

In 'Radical Interpretation and Scepticism', Barry Stroud Davidson's and Kant's anti-sceptical strategy and interprets Davidson as offering a transcendental argument. Stroud finds in Davidson a transcendental strategy that, depending on the strength of its conclusion, could be very useful against scepticism. Stroud finds in Davidson's writings two readings of his own considerations on radical interpretation and the principle of charity. What he calls the strong reading defends that we have a correct view of the world and that our beliefs are, in fact, mostly true. In that case we would be facing a strong transcendental argument. The weaker reading says that an interpreter cannot find the interpretee massively mistaken about the world. We would be facing then a modest transcendental argument. The difference between both readings is that while the second defends the veridical character of beliefs only relative to the point of view of the interpreter, the first is absolute: it asserts that, independently of any point a view, we have a basically true view of reality. It is

important to appreciate that the strong reading does not follow from the weak one and, hence, that a defence of the latter does not entail the former.

Stroud considers that the strong reading simply does not follow from Davidson's considerations on radical interpretation. Neither the appeal to an omniscient interpreter nor the appeal to causality can bridge over the gap between the mental and the physical. In the first case Stroud argues that the appeal to an omniscient interpreter adds nothing to the case of a fallible radical interpreter. What follows in that case is that nobody, including an omniscient interpreter, can discover and identify someone's beliefs as being mostly false. But an omniscient interpreter does not rule out the possibility of a mostly false cluster of uninterpreted beliefs. On the other hand, the appeal to causation in radical interpretation is useless because it is not a pure case of causation, but a case of identification and attribution of causes. That A believes that C causes B to believe something is not a case of pure causation. The causation relation falls under the scope of psychological verbs. Interpreter and interpretee have beliefs about the causes of each other's assent, but this allows for the possibility of communication based on shared but false beliefs about the causes of each other thoughts. Therefore, this appeal to causation cannot avoid the sceptical scenario.

However, Stroud defends that the strong conclusion is not needed to avoid global scepticism. The weak one suffices. Stroud considers that, contrary to the opinion of authors like Strawson, modest transcendental arguments of the kind of Davidson's can play an important role against scepticism. First of all Stroud makes it clear that an extremely general answer to scepticism like Davidson's fails to prove that we do have knowledge, and that this holds even in its strong reading. A general answer to scepticism like Davidson's do block scepticism from start, but this result can be achieved by the weak version alone. The sceptical hypothesis must state that we do have the beliefs we take ourselves to have and

that these beliefs are false. If these requirements were not met, the sceptical possibility would be just an abstract possibility. But not even the sceptic can consistently consider these requirements. Belief attribution implies viewing attributed beliefs as mostly true. Therefore, the possibility of a mostly false cluster of beliefs is just an abstract possibility, not a hypothesis that can be applied to a particular case, because to identify beliefs is to count them as true. According to Stroud the situation is similar to someone who says that it is not raining and she believes that it is raining. Nobody could ever make this assertion, even though it is possible to believe that it is raining while it is not. But this is the situation of the attribution of a false cluster of beliefs. Nobody can attribute to someone a cluster of beliefs and hold that they are false. This does not mean that such a situation is impossible: it is just that nobody can consider it consistently. Therefore, Stroud concludes, we are invulnerable to the sceptic threat.

This invulnerability is not a victory over the sceptic. Invulnerability does not imply in any sense that scepticism is false. It only means that scepticism is a possibility that nobody could be in a position to assert coherently. Thus we are not facing a full-blooded answer to scepticism because it tries neither to defeat nor to dissolve it. This does not mean that it lacks interest. It is, as C. Hookway has suggested, an absolutely defensive strategy. It does not try to convince the sceptic to abandon scepticism; it only makes us invulnerable to his threat. It does not try to rescue the sceptic from his scepticism; it only tries to prevent us from embracing it.

Davidson does not agree that invulnerability is enough to overcome scepticism. He accepts some of Stroud's criticisms and even admits that global scepticism is a possibility. However, he defends that at least in a minimal sense his externalism must be true. Though the possibility of being globally mistaken is real, it is so only because we have experienced

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the world previously and we have done it under the empire of truth. We can be globally mistaken only about a world we have previously truly experienced.

How do we have to interpret this latter claim? If Davidson admits global scepticism as a possibility, to interpret his strategy as a refutation or a dissolution of scepticism seems a mistake. Before considering this issue it is worth analysing Stroud's approach. Stroud's answer to scepticism is too restricted to face the sceptical challenge. Its main problem is that it applies only conditionally, that is, in cases of radical interpretation. Nothing is said about the contexts in which there is no interpretation or meaning is already fixed. In the first case the sceptic may reply that the only thing that follows from the case of radical interpretation is that nobody could discover that the brain in a vat has thoughts. But the sceptical scenario does not require the possibility of such discovery. The sceptic scenario only asserts that I could be a brain in a vat, not that someone could discover the content of my thoughts in that situation. On the other hand, the sceptic can also argue that an argument is needed to show that all cases of interpretation are cases of radical interpretation. In absence of this argument, the sceptic can defend his case in situations in which meaning is already fixed – even in a case of radical interpretation and by using charity in this process- and normal causes of beliefs have been replaced by other causes that produce the same neuronal states as the original, and about which the interpretee's beliefs would mostly false. Thus, we have to prove against the sceptic that the latter is not the case and, of course, we are not in a position to do that.

Stroud puts too much weight in the idea that the sceptic needs a disengaged point of view. But this is not so. The sceptic only needs to posit an advantageous position, no a disengaged one. She does not have to hold that somebody could decipher a speaker's utterances in radical interpretation and then find the speaker's beliefs mostly wrong. She

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just needs to imagine the possibility of a successful interpreter who, once she has managed, through a normal process of radical interpretation, to determine the meanings of a speaker's idiolect, creates a radically new and misleading environment in which different causes produce in the speaker's brain the same effects. Of course, the deceiver needs to be in a better epistemological position than the brain in the vat to be able to tell the story, but this is not a strange philosophical position we are forced to reject.

¿Does Davidson's own argument give a satisfactory response to the sceptic? Davidson holds that one can only be misled about a world previously experienced veridically. He makes the same point when he claims that if our past causal story had been different, then the content of our thoughts would also be different. But this alone is no threat for the sceptical position. The appeal to the possibility conditions of thought and language is powerless against scepticism unless Davidson's modest externalism is not implemented with something else.

To strengthen Davidson's position we must combine two ideas. The result of is not a refutation, either direct or indirect, of scepticism, but an alternative to it. The first idea is Hookway's defensive strategy against the sceptic. Maybe we cannot rescue him from his scepticism, but we can try to avoid his invitations to doubt. The second is Williams' idea of the lack of naturalness of the sceptical position. The sceptic is not a common person that has reached the unpleasant conclusion that we cannot claim having knowledge. The sceptic is a philosopher holding many important philosophical positions without which his challenge would not even arise. These positions include representationalism and internalism, two ideas Davidson's criticizes in his writings. Without them it is impossible to build a sceptical scenario and, therefore, they have to be defended, not taken for granted.

Davidson's philosophy achieves this defensive task by offering a view of language and thought that does not invite in its own terms to scepticism. Davidson's minimal externalism does not refute scepticism. But it provides an alternative way of explaining thought and language that does not appeal to representations. This, in a sense, is not enough, for it can be argued that the sceptical doubt can also arise in a Davidsonian context. Sceptical scenarios like the brain in the vat case can be imagined to take place after the process of radical interpretation has been carried out. The sceptic could even grant Davidson's views on the possibility of language and thought without being forced to withdraw the challenge. All she needs to defend is the possibility of a brain in a vat being interpreted according to normal causes and of these causes being later replaced by other causes with similar effects in his mind. This brain in a vat would not realize the change and would then be mistaken about the actual causes of his thoughts. The fact that the sceptical scenario can emerge even in a Davidsonian context shows that Davidson's externalism does not rule out global scepticism.

This story is possible, but its possibility is essentially linked to representationalism, and this is a philosophical position that cannot be taken for granted. The appeal to brain states is not less representationalist that the appeal to Humean ideas: their scientific status does not make them less representation. Brain states representationalism assumes that we can individuate brain states types with a determined content and, thus, produce brain state tokens carrying this content intrinsically. And this is supposed to work not only for memories, but also for new thoughts. Thus, the mad doctor can invent a new life for me because she can provoke new combinations of my brain states so that I experience stories I never lived. This is so because brain states have a representational content and can be combined to generate new thoughts.

Representationalism, however, is not a natural doctrine rooted in everyday life experience or grounded in plain common sense, but a philosophical doctrine with its own problems: if the content of a term is given by a brain or mental state, how can languages be learned? How can we account for its public character? How can I discover the content of other people's mental states? What are they representations of? Maybe a representationalism answer to all this problems can be found, but the burden of proof is now in the sceptic's side, not in the non-sceptic's, for representationalism is not compulsory. Of course, representationalism and internalism are philosophical options, but they are not the default common sense philosophy. They must be argued for before presenting a sceptical scenario. Once we reach this point, the fact that it paves the way to scepticism becomes itself a reason that counts *prima facie* against representationalism. But this is not a refutation. One can choose scepticism, but not because there is no philosophical alternative.

7 Conclusions

What have we learned from the discussion of Davidson's approach to scepticism? First, that global scepticism is an unavoidable problem in its own terms. Once we accept the sceptic's basic philosophical assumptions, there is a straight road to scepticism. Second, that we are not forced to accept these assumptions. We can hold an explanation of language and thought that does not rest on representations and points out the problematic character of representationalism. The outcome is not a victory against the sceptic, for we have not refuted his position. We do have built an alternative philosophical framework, but this is not a refutation. For Kant this was a scandal, but we can hold with Heidegger that maybe

the scandal is to carry on trying to build a refutation that it is not possible and, more important, it is not needed.