Triangular Normativity?
Revisiting McDowell's Critique of Davidson

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ABSTRACT: McDowell rejects Davidson's causal account of intentionality on the grounds that it cannot account for the normative features that essentially characterize states like belief and judgment. Curiously, however, McDowell never considers how Davidson's theory of "triangulation," which purports to explain normativity by appeal to the social, rather than intentional, dimension of our thinking, might provide such an account. Absent a reason for thinking that triangulation fails in this explanatory task, McDowell's critique poses no substantial problem for Davidson. This essay aims to fill the gap in McDowell's critique by arguing that neither triangulation, nor any similar account, can square a causal view of intentionality with an acknowledgement of mental normativity. This difficulty gives those who are committed to normativity of the relevant sort good reasons to suspect that intentionality cannot be a strictly causal affair, and that something like McDowell's "minimal empiricism" must be correct.

KEY WORDS: Causal account of intentionality, Davidson, intentionality, McDowell, normativity, triangulation.

In *Mind and World*, John McDowell frames his critique of Donald Davidson in terms of their respective responses to the Myth of the Given. McDowell understands the Myth as the conjunction of two claims: (1) that the ultimate source of justification for our empirical beliefs is sensation, and (2) that unlike the beliefs they justify, sensations do not have propositional or conceptual content. Davidson and McDowell both reject the Myth so defined, and for the same reason: justification is a logical relationship, and logical relationships can hold only between relata that are propositionally contentful. The fact, belief, or judgment *that* a circle is red can justify the belief that it is colored. But neither a red, circular sense-datum, nor an episode of being appeared to redly and circularly, nor the red circle itself, can justify anything.

If this is correct, then the Myth is self-contradictory; its account of the nature of sensation is inconsistent with its account of the epistemic role sensation plays.

Despite their shared rejection of the Myth of the Given, however, Davidson and McDowell recommend precisely opposite strategies for moving past it. Davidson sees (2) as unavoidable and thus proposes that we reject (1). He writes,

> The relation between a sensation and a belief cannot be logical, since sensations are not beliefs or other propositional attitudes. What then is the relation? The answer, I think, is obvious: the relation is causal. Sensations cause some beliefs and in *this* sense are the basis or ground of those beliefs. But a causal explanation of a belief does not show how or why the belief is justified. (1983, 143)

In lieu of the traditional empiricist picture he here rejects, Davidson proposes a coherence theory of justification. He argues that when we properly understand the conditions under which beliefs are attributed – specifically, the "charitable" conditions of radical interpretation – we see that "belief is in its nature veridical," and thus that a belief that coheres with a large body of other beliefs is justified by this very coherence (1983, 146).

McDowell, by contrast, argues that it is (2) that needs to go. The real lesson to be learned from the mythical status of the Given, he contends, is that traditional empiricism has misunderstood the nature of perceptual experience by denying that its deliverances have propositional or conceptual content. He writes,

> [We must] not deprive ourselves of "taking in how things are" as a description of what happens when one is not misled. In a particular experience in which one is not misled, what one takes in is *that things are thus and so. That things are thus and so* is the content of the experience, and it can also be the content of a judgment if the subject decides to take the experience at face value. So it is conceptual content. But *that things are thus and so* is also, if one is not misled, an aspect of the layout of the world: it is how things are. Thus … experience enables the layout of reality itself to exert a rational influence on what a subject thinks. (1994, 26)

While Davidson (1974b, 189) interprets the failure of the Myth as the failure of empiricism itself, McDowell's contention is that once we see our way to a non-Mythical picture of perception – one according to which propositionally structured states of affairs can be given directly in experience – we can unproblematically retain the "minimal empiricism" embodied in (1).

Why should we think that this way of avoiding the Myth of the Given is more promising than Davidson's alternative? McDowell's answer to this question is what interests me in this essay. His primary line of argument is that Davidson's coherentism fails to appreciate, and thus fails to address, the wor-

ries that have traditionally attracted empiricists to the Myth. McDowell notes that "the only motivation for the Myth of the Given that figures in Davidson's thinking is a shallow skepticism, in which, taking it for granted that one has a body of beliefs, one worries about their credentials" (1994, 17), and he grants that Davidson's coherence theory of justification may well be sufficient to respond to this worry. However, the most fundamental concerns that motivate empiricism (and which thus, traditionally, have motivated the Myth) are not about justification, but intentionality. Davidson's coherentism offers nothing to address these concerns; in fact, it positively exacerbates them. The reason, McDowell argues, is that the idea of intentionality essentially involves certain *normative* notions, but these can find no home in Davidson's strictly causal account of the relationship between mind and world. The problem with rejecting (1), then, is that it leaves us unable to explain how our beliefs can rightly be said to have *content*, and this is tantamount to leaving us unable to explain how any of our mental states can constitute beliefs at all.

I think McDowell has put his finger on an important difficulty facing not only Davidson's coherentism, but any attempt to understand intentionality in strictly causal terms. However, as we shall see momentarily, his argument fails to provide adequate support for this contention. Specifically, McDowell's objection overlooks the possibility that, while beliefs have normative features essentially, they do not have these *because* they are essentially intentional, but for some other reason. This lacuna is especially surprising – and especially problematic – given that Davidson himself offers just such an explanation of where doxastic normativity comes from. Under the heading of "triangulation," Davidson argues that it is the *social* dimension of the mental that endows beliefs with their normative features. If this is correct, then we can account for normativity perfectly well without having to suppose that intentionality is anything more than a causal affair. McDowell provides us with no reason – not in *Mind and World* nor anywhere else – to deny that triangulation is capable of carrying out this explanatory task.[1] And absent such a reason, his critique of Davidson fails.

My aim in this essay is to fill the gap in McDowell's argument by showing that Davidson's idea of triangulation cannot explain the normative dimension of belief, and that the reason it cannot do this is precisely that it assumes intentionality to be a strictly causal phenomenon. My discussion will proceed over four sections. In the first, I will articulate McDowell's critique of Davidson and identify in greater detail why it fails to establish its conclu-

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[1] McDowell (2003) does offer some brief remarks that are critical of the idea of triangulation, but his essay does not consider triangulation as a potential explanation of *normativity* and thus does not provide any arguments to the effect that it is incapable of providing such an account.

sion. In the second I will spell out what I shall call Davidson's "bold theory" of triangulation – the one he endorses through most of his career, and which purports to explain doxastic normativity – and in the third argue that it is unsuccessful. In the final section I will consider the "cautious theory" of triangulation that Davidson presents in two essays written near the end of his career. I will argue that the move from the bold to the cautious theory (a move that is plausibly seen as motivated by the very concerns identified in section three) leaves Davidson without a viable response to McDowell's critique.

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I

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McDowell articulates his objection to Davidson most directly in the following passage:

> To make sense of the idea of a mental state's or episode's being directed towards the world, in the way in which, say, a belief or judgement is, we need to put the state or episode in a normative context. A belief or judgement to the effect that things are thus and so – a belief or judgement whose content (as we say) is that things are thus and so – must be a posture or stance that is *correctly or incorrectly* adopted according to whether or not things are indeed thus and so. (If we can make sense of judgement or belief as directed towards the world in that way, other kinds of content-bearing postures or stances should easily fall into place.) This relation between mind and world is normative, then, in this sense: thinking that aims at judgement, or at the fixation of belief, is answerable to the world – to how things are – for whether or not it is correctly executed.
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> Now how should we elaborate the idea that our thinking is thus answerable to the world? In addressing this question, we might restrict our attention, at least tacitly, to thinking that is answerable to the *empirical* world; that is, answerable to how things are in so far as how things are is empirically accessible … And now, how can we understand the idea that our thinking is answerable to the empirical world, if not by way of the idea that our thinking is answerable to experience? How could a verdict from the empirical world – to which empirical thinking must be answerable if it is to be thinking at all – be delivered, if not by way of a verdict from (as W.V. Quine puts it) "the tribunal of experience"? (1994, xi–xii)

This argument is intended as a kind of "immanent critique" of Davidson. Davidson is antecedently committed to the central thesis (about the "normative context" which is required to make sense of belief) of the first paragraph, but this claim, McDowell contends, entails the view of perceptual experience articulated in the second paragraph (experience as a "tribunal") of which Davidson's coherentism is an explicit denial. Let's consider these claims in more detail.

What does it mean to say that a belief has some particular propositional content? What is it that makes, say, my belief that bananas contain potas-

sium the belief that it is – namely my belief *that bananas contain potassium* – as opposed to my belief that the Cubs won the World Series last season or my belief that my butcher is not a space alien? McDowell offers an intuitive answer to this question: to specify the content of a belief is to specify what the world would have to be like for an agent to be *right* in holding that belief. My belief that bananas contain potassium is unique among my beliefs in that it is the only one such that I am right in holding just in case bananas contain calcium. Call this the "doxastic normativity" thesis. Stated generally, it looks like this:

> Doxastic Normativity: An agent A's belief B has the content *that p* iff: A is correct in holding B iff it is objectively the case that p.

This thesis is not uncontroversial (many proponents of pragmatic, coherence, or deflationary theories of truth, for example, would reject it), but I will not attempt to defend it here. It is sufficient for our purposes that Davidson accepts it.[2]

After identifying this point of common ground he shares with Davidson, McDowell restricts his focus specifically to *empirical* beliefs. This restriction is perfectly allowable, since if Doxastic Normativity is true of beliefs in general, then *a fortiori* it is true of beliefs about the empirical world. McDowell's contention is that, when we focus our attention in this way, we see that Doxastic Normativity entails his minimally empiricist understanding of the nature of perceptual experience: the idea that experience constitutes a "tribunal" through which the world itself passes a "verdict" on our thinking. In less metaphorical terms, we can define the view in this way:

> Minimal Empiricism: The world is capable, through experience, of directly justifying (or falsifying) an agent's empirical beliefs.

McDowell is less than fully clear about how we get from Doxastic Normativity to Minimal Empiricism, but the train of thought appears to be as follows: (a) Doxastic Normativity says that it is a belief's relationship *to the world* – not to other beliefs, or the interests of the agent, the customs of the agent's community, etc. – that determines whether the belief is correct or incorrect. Since "correct" and "incorrect" are normative terms, it follows that (b) "the relation between mind and world is normative", that mind and world stand in a distinctively normative type of relationship to one another. But what could this normative relation be? Causal relations are not normative ones. So (c) it seems the only plausible candidate is the one that minimal

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[2] This interpretative claim is, I think, fairly uncontroversial. For evidence that Davidson does indeed affirm Doxastic Normativity, see especially Davidson (1982, 104).

empiricism identifies: that of the world justifying (or falsifying) beliefs via experience.[3]

The main problem with this argument is that it involves an equivocation on the term "normative relation." In saying that "the relation of mind and world is normative", one might mean simply that the normative question of whether a belief is correct or incorrect is settled by appeal to how things stand in the objective world. This rather weak claim does follow from Doxastic Normativity. McDowell, however, clearly means something more robust than this. The move from (b) to (c) requires the idea that mind and world stand in a certain *kind* of relationship – a "normative" kind that includes relations of "answerability" but excludes causal relations. Doxastic Normativity, however, does not entail this strong claim.

What has happened, I think, is that McDowell has unwittingly smuggled a contentious assumption into his argument. He is assuming that a belief's relationship to the world must not only explain *which* of the pair of normative predicates, "correct" and "incorrect", applies to it, but also explain *why* it is that such predicates are applicable in the first place. In other words, McDowell is assuming that the fact that a psychological state stands in a certain type of relation to reality must be what justifies us in placing that state within the "normative context" that renders it intelligible as a belief. McDowell has not argued for this claim, and it is not obvious that it is true. One could accept Doxastic Normativity but deny that the relationship between an empirical belief and reality is norm-governed, holding instead that there is some *other* feature that all beliefs possess in virtue of which the relevant normative concepts apply to them.

McDowell's argument, then, problematically assumes that empirical thinking can be subject to norms of the appropriate sort only if normativ-

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[3] Many of McDowell's readers, including Davidson himself (see Davidson 1999, 107) have found this idea of the world itself justifying beliefs befuddling. Since space is limited, and because my focus in this paper is on McDowell's critique of Davidson, rather than his alternative proposal, I will not attempt a detailed interpretation of the idea here. What I will say, though, is that it seems to me that this befuddlement stems from a failure by many of McDowell's interpreters to appreciate how central his thesis of the "boundlessness of the conceptual" is to his account of intentionality and perceptual experience. McDowell's claim is that *the world itself* – not just our takes on it – is conceptually structured. McDowell finds this idea echoed in the opening lines of the *Tractatus*: "The world is the totality of facts, not of things" (Wittgenstein 2003, 1.1; cited in McDowell 2002, 173). Since facts, unlike things, are propositionally structured, they can serve as justifiers of states like belief and judgment, and on McDowell's view it is through experience that they become cognitively available to agents as such. Thus on McDowell's view experiences are not episodes in which *objects cause* certain mental states, they are episodes in which *facts present themselves* to thinkers. What is most distinctive (and most controversial) about this account is not, in my view, the conception of experience, but the conception of *what is experienced* – of the world – that underlies it. It is a profoundly idealistic (in the Hegelian sense) picture.

ity is built into intentionality itself. Moreover, the approach to explaining normativity that McDowell's argument overlooks is not only a theoretical possibility; it is precisely the approach that Davidson himself employs. Triangulation aims to show how the normative features of belief arise not from the mind-world relationship, but from the speaker-interpreter relationship. According to this account, an isolated human being would causally respond to his environment just as the rest of us do, but the relevant normative concepts would not apply to him, and his psychological states would not count as beliefs. What makes us, but not him, thinkers is that we are engaged in communicative relations with others. Communication does not alter the nature of our commerce with objective reality – that remains merely causal – but it introduces a social context in which we can describe our own behavior and that of others in normative, intensional terms. If this "triangular" account succeeds, then Doxastic Normativity does not, as McDowell charges, pose any substantial problem for Davidson's coherentism.

II

One way to understand the challenge that McDowell's critique purports to pose to Davidson is in terms of the question: What distinguishes a creature who thinks – that is, who has propositional attitudes – from one who doesn't? McDowell's answer, as we have seen, is that the former, but not the latter, stands in a norm-governed intentional relationship to reality.[4] Since Davidson rejects this answer, he owes us an alternative account. This is precisely what the idea of triangulation is supposed to provide.

More specifically, triangulation is supposed to dissolve an apparent conflict between two demands that, according to Davidson, any attempt to specify the difference between rational and non-rational animals must meet. The first of these follows from Doxastic Normativity: if a creature thinks, then it must be appropriate to describe at least some of its interactions with its environment (those which are expressive of its thoughts) in normative terms. It must make sense to call them "correct" or "incorrect." Davidson develops this demand a step further.[5] It is appropriate to describe a creature's behavior as erroneous or correct, he argues, only if the creature herself is *aware* of the difference between error and accord. This requires that the creature grasp certain fundamental concepts. He writes,

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[4] McDowell (1994, 114–21) spells this out in terms of the distinction, borrowed from Gadamer (1989, 438–56), between being "embedded in an environment" and being "open to the world."

[5] McDowell, we may note, would agree with Davidson's development of this point.

> To have a belief it is not enough to discriminate among aspects of the world, to behave in different ways in different circumstances; a snail or a periwinkle does this. Having a belief demands in addition appreciating the contrast between true belief and false, between appearance and reality, mere seeming and being. We can, of course, say that a sunflower has made a mistake if it turns towards an artificial light as if it were the sun, but we do not suppose the sunflower can think it has made a mistake, and so we do not attribute a belief to the sunflower. Someone who has a belief about the objective world – or anything else – must grasp the concept of objective truth, of what is the case independent of what he or she thinks. (1991, 209, Cf. 1982, 104–5)

Let's call this interrelated cluster of concepts – error, truth, belief, and objectivity – the "normative-intensional" concepts. Davidson's claim is that we are warranted in judging that a creature is a possessor of propositional attitudes only if we are also justified in crediting him with a grasp of these concepts.

The second demand that Davidson places on our attempt to specify the difference between thinking and unthinking creatures stems from the conjunction of his interpretationist account of meaning and his causal account of intentionality. According to the former, "what a fully informed interpreter could learn about what a speaker means is all there is to learn; the same goes for what the speaker believes" (1983, 148). And, according to the latter, "what a fully informed interpreter could learn" is the total set of facts about a creature's causally-prompted responses to environmental stimuli. Davidson is not a behaviorist; he does not think that statements about meaning or belief can be reduced to statements about behavior (or, for that matter, to any non-intensional statements.) He does, however, hold that the evidential base that supports interpretive theories of meaning consists only of "behavioural or dispositional facts that can be described in ways that do not assume interpretations," that is, which can be described in non-intensional terms (1974a, 148). Thus whatever it is about thinking creatures that differentiates them from unthinking ones – whatever it is that warrants us in describing their psychological states in normative terms and in ascribing to them a grasp of the normative-intensional concepts – it must be something available from the third-person perspective of an interpreter. The facts that distinguish us from unthinking animals must be facts about our causal interactions with our environments.

These two demands appear to be in conflict with one another.[6] If merely causal relationships are not norm-governed, then it seems that no facts about

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[6] Simon Evnine (1991, 174–79) highlights this difficulty as a tension between two projects in which Davidson is simultaneously engaged, a "causal, explanatory" project and an "interpretive, hermeneutic project." Evnine argues, as I am arguing here, that these two projects cannot be reconciled, though he offers somewhat different reasons for this conclusion.

the obtaining of any such relationships between an organism and its environment could ever warrant us in describing its behavior in normative terms, and thus never warrant us in concluding that it is a thinker. Davidson sees this problem as a version of Wittgenstein's oft-discussed "rule-following paradox." He explains,

> Suppose that each time I point at my nose you say "nose". Then you have it right; you have gone on as before. Why do your verbal reactions count as "the same", i.e., as relevantly similar? Well, I count them as relevantly similar; I find the stimulus in each case the same, and the response the same. You must also, in some primitive sense, find my pointings similar; the evidence for this is your similar responses. But there is nothing in the offing to let you tell whether or not your reactions are relevantly similar. No matter what the stimuli, your similar reactions will indicate that you found something similar in the situations; and apparently dissimilar responses to the same stimulus can equally be taken to show that you took the stimulus to be different, or that for you this is a similar response. As Wittgenstein says, by yourself you can't tell the difference between the situations seeming the same and being the same. (1994, 124)

The basic difficulty here is that your causally-prompted responses to stimuli support only the claim that you are exhibiting a certain disposition, but dispositions, on their own, have no normative import. One's behavior cannot violate or accord with a disposition. Suppose I observe that you utter "nose" in response to my pointing at my nose ten consecutive times, and I form the hypothesis that you are following a rule stating that "nose" is to be applied only to noses. But then, on the eleventh pointing, I point to my ear, and you say "nose" again. Is this evidence that you have made an error? Not necessarily. It might only reveal that my earlier hypothesis was incorrect. Perhaps "nose" in your language refers to *any* facial feature, or to all noses and ears, or to all noses and *my* ear. No matter how unexpected your responses, in each case some re-jiggering of my meaning hypothesis would entail that you have not deviated from your previous pattern, but only that the pattern was not what I had previously taken it to be. As Wittgenstein puts the point, "This was our paradox: no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be brought into accord with the rule. The answer was: if every course of action can be brought into accord with the rule, then it can also be brought into conflict with it. And so there would be neither accord nor conflict here" (2009, sec. 201).

Davidson's "triangular" solution to the problem is similarly Wittgensteinian in spirit – or, at least, it accords with what many commentators have taken the spirit of Wittgenstein's solution to be.[7] Davidson argues that

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[7] As we will discuss below (section IV), McDowell has a very different reading of the thrust of Wittgenstein's reflections on the paradox.

the paradox is operative only when we consider a speaker in isolation. If she occupies a social context of the relevant sort, however, then facts about her intersubjective relationships can support the claim that she is acting in accordance with a rule.

This solution is best understood as unfolding over two phases. In phase one, Davidson highlights the fact that, unlike the isolated creature, social creatures may be disposed to respond not only to objects and events in their environment, but also to the responses that others give to those objects and events. This "triangular" situation is what first opens up the space in which normative-intensional concepts can find a home. He writes,

> Wittgenstein has suggested, or at least I take him to have suggested, that we would not have the concept of getting things wrong or right if it were not for our interactions with other people. The triangle I have described stands for the simplest interpersonal situation. In it two (or more) creatures correlate their own reactions to external phenomena with the reaction of the other. Once these correlations are set up, each creature is in a position to expect the external phenomena when it perceives the associated reaction of the other. What introduces the possibility of error is the occasional failure of the expectation; the reactions do not correlate. Wittgenstein expresses this idea when he talks of the difference between following a rule and merely thinking one is following a rule; he says that following a rule (getting things right) is at bottom a matter of doing as others do. Of course, the others may sometimes be wrong. The point isn't that consensus defines the concept of truth but that it creates the space for its application. (1997b, 129)

The difficulty encountered in the "nose" example was that neither I nor you had any standard by which to evaluate your behavior other than that behavior itself. In the triangular situation, however, an *external* standard appears: we can judge the behavior of one speaker by reference to the behavior of the other. As Kathrin Glüer (2008, 1016) explains, "If the reactions of two creatures to some kind of object or event normally agree, but on some particular occasion differ from each other, at least one of them deviates from the regularity in their joint behavior. Such discrepancy is not sufficient to determine who is deviating, but … it is necessary for applying the concept of deviation at all."

At times Davidson writes as if phase one were, on its own, enough to account for the normativity that characterizes belief.[8] His considered opinion,

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[8] For example, "If you and I can each correlate the other's responses with the occurrence of a shared stimulus … an entirely new element is introduced. Once the correlation is established it provides each of us with a ground for distinguishing the cases in which it fails. Failed natural inductions can now be taken as revealing a difference between getting it right and getting it wrong, going on as before, or deviating, having a grasp of the concepts of truth and falsity." (1994, 124)

however, is that the mere existence of the triangular situation is not enough to account for thought. There are two reasons for this. The first is that the triangular situation is frequently realized among animals – Davidson mentions fish and monkeys – which we do not ordinarily credit with propositional thought (1997b, 128–30, 1997a, 141). The second is that at the end of phase one we still have not fully escaped the rule-following paradox. When the triangular situation obtains, the behavior of one creature *can* function as a standard by which to evaluate the behavior of the other, but there is not yet any guarantee that it does so function. The second creature's behavior constitutes a norm for the first's only if the first *recognizes* it as such. But the mere fact that the first creature reacts to the responses of the second does not entail that it recognizes these as providing a norm for her behavior. Because of this, we can conclude only that the existence of the triangular situation described in phase one is "necessary for thought … not sufficient" (Davidson 1997b, 130, cf. 1992, 119).

What more is needed? The answer, Davidson claims in phase two of the triangulation account, is that the interactions between the creatures in the triangular situation must be complex enough constitute *communication* (1992, 121, 1991, 209–10). To communicate is not merely to emit sounds in the presence of another person, but to do so with the intention of being understood by the other person. Davidson argues that the introduction of such an intention has the effect of bestowing on the hearer's expectations a normative force that they otherwise lack. To intend to be understood is to intend to be interpreted in a certain way by one's audience. Interpretation, in turn, is at the most basic level a matter of the interpreter's correlating types of utterances with types of stimuli. Interpretation proceeds unproblematically when the speaker gives responses that the interpreter finds similar to stimuli that she also finds similar, when the interpreter can match the speaker's utterances with their causes type for type. When the interpreter's expectations concerning the speaker's behavior are disappointed, then, understanding will be impaired. And this means that to the extent that the speaker's behavior deviates from what the interpreter expects, the speaker's intention to be understood will go unfulfilled. In this way, an interlocutor's (informed[9]) expectations about how a speaker will respond to a given stimulus constitute a standard – a norm – by which to judge the success or failure of the speaker's utterances. As Davidson writes, "The answer [to the problem posed by the rule-following paradox] is that the intention of a speaker to be interpreted

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[9] Obviously, the expectations of an interpreter who is largely unfamiliar with the speaker's linguistic habits (one who is just getting started with the project of interpreting the speaker) will not be normative for that speaker. But, in this case, neither can the speaker and interpreter really be said to be *communicating* with one another.

in a certain way provides the "norm"; the speaker falls short of his intention if he fails to speak in such a way as to be understood as he intended" (1992, 116, cf. 1994, 120).

Once this norm is operative – and only then – it makes sense to attribute a grasp of the concept of error (and thus also the other normative-intensional concepts that are required for thought) to a speaker in the triangular situation. Such a speaker must make use of the concept of error in her attempts to determine the extent to which she has realized her communicative intentions. She will look to the interpreter's responses to her behavior to see whether the interpreter has attributed an error to her or not. And this can, in turn, lead her to apply this concept to herself – to recognize the possibility that her own beliefs are mistaken. As Maria Lasonen and Tomás Marvan explain,

> What we might label "second-order reactions" – mutual reactions of two beings to each other – create a space for the observation that there is a gap between what one believes and what others believe, and this intersection of two points of view grounds the notion of objectivity … Suppose I utter a sound in the presence of an object, expecting things to go smoothly, expecting you to make a certain response. Surprisingly, a friction between our responses occurs. I am befuddled: was I wrong in thinking that the same object appeared? Only when such an awareness of the discrepancy is present can the notion of objectivity arise. (2004, 183)

In this way, we arrive at the conclusion that Davidson needs to escape Mc-Dowell's critique: that "communication, and the knowledge of other minds that it presupposes, is the basis of our concept of objectivity, our recognition of a distinction between false and true belief" (Davidson 1991, 217).

III

Whatever insights Davidson's triangular account of mental normativity might yield, it suffers from a fatal flaw: it presupposes what it is supposed to explain. Communicative intentions are intentions, and intentions are propositional attitudes. Thus we cannot informatively answer the question, in what consists the difference between animals with propositional attitudes and those without, by citing the fact that the former intend to communicate something to another by their utterances while the latter do not. Or, to state the problem differently: Davidson's second demand was that the difference between thinking and unthinking creatures track some fact that is statable in non-intensional terms, but the fact that some creature *intends* to be understood by an audience does not meet this requirement.

The objection that triangulation fails because it presupposes what it aims to explain is now fairly common in the secondary literature on David-

son.[10] But, while this objection is sound, it is not terribly illuminating. The objection shows that triangulation, at least as Davidson formulates it, does not succeed in reconciling Doxastic Normativity with a causal account of intentionality. But the objection does not entail, or even suggest, what McDowell contends: that no such reconciliation is possible. After noting the objection, one might still think that in appealing to intentions in phase two of the triangulation argument, Davidson has simply given up too soon. Perhaps there is some other fact about social creatures that he has overlooked – one that is stable in non-intensional terms, and so not question-begging – that would justify the attribution of normative-intensional concepts to an agent. This, I want to argue, is not the case. But to see why not, we need to look at the problem Davidson faces from a slightly different angle.

To begin, we may note a distinction between two different kinds of concepts: what we might call "inherently normative" and "merely discriminatory" ones. The majority of the concepts we employ are of the second variety. If I have a grasp of the concept "elk," for example, then I am prepared to distinguish elk from other kinds of items in my experience, to sort out the elk from, say, the moose and caribou. In some cases, of course, the fact that an animal happens to fall into the "elk" category will have positive or negative implications – if I am on an elk hunt, I will take it as a *good* thing that an animal in my vicinity falls into the category "elk" rather than "moose" – but there is clearly nothing normative in the concept "elk" itself. There is no sense in which an animal, *qua* animal, ought to be an elk rather than a swan or an alligator. The concept "elk" is essentially only discriminatory; it is simply one category among others that an item might fall into. The concepts of truth and falsity are also discriminatory – to judge that a belief is false is to place it in the category "false" rather than "true" – but there is more to it than this. "False" is not just one way a belief might happen to be alongside "true."[11] Unless I understand that false beliefs are *erroneous*, that "false" is a category a

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[10] Pagin (2001), Bernecker (2013), and Glüer (2008) all present versions of this objection. However, in my opinion each of them arrives at this conclusion much too quickly. Pagin and Bernecker both suggest that Davidson endorses the solution to the rule-following paradox, commonly attributed to Wittgenstein, according to which the necessary social norm is provided by shared linguistic rules – Bernecker, for instance, refers to an implicit "agreement with a language community" – and then argues that agreement presupposes belief. The problem here is that Davidson explicitly rejects this "conventionalist" solution to the paradox and develops his own solution in explicit contrast to it (see especially Davidson 1992, 1994). Glüer does not make this interpretive mistake, but neither, it seems, does she recognize the second phase of Davidson's argument. She simply cites a passage illustrative of phase one and then observes that, so conceived, "triangulation involves the very capacities it was to make possible."

[11] This is the case only when we consider "true" and "false" as properties of attitudinal states like belief, assertion, and judgment. As purely semantic categories (i.e., simply as properties of propositions that no one is affirming), "true" and "false" are merely discriminatory.

belief, *qua* belief, ought not fall into, the category I am employing is not that of falsity at all. Concepts like "truth" and "falsity" (alongside, perhaps, others like "justification" and "consistency") are *inherently* normative. They are, as Sellars (1962, 44) puts it, "fraught with 'ought'."

A strictly causal account of the mind-world relation like the one Davidson endorses has, on the surface, at least, little difficulty in accounting for a creature's possession of merely discriminatory concepts. To possess such a concept, on this view, is to be disposed to respond differentially to stimuli of a certain type. To say that I possess the concept "elk" is to say that there exist at least some circumstances in which the presence of an elk would elicit a unique response from me, a different one than would be elicited by a moose or a caribou. If I am conditioned to utter "There's an elk" when, and only when, an elk is present, or, during elk season, to shoot only at elk and not at other animals, then I have the relevant concept. This is not simply because these behaviors are sufficient *evidence* that I have the concept, but because the disposition to exhibit them *is* the possession of the concept. The discrimination or categorization involved in possessing a concept occurs in and through my differentially responsive behavior.

However, as Davidson and McDowell jointly insist, merely producing certain differential responses is not sufficient to warrant attributing an entity with propositional attitudes. A thermostat regularly gives a definite type of response to a definite type of event, but it does not think. In fact, on Davidson's account not even dogs, whose patterns of response are exponentially more complex than those of thermostats, make the cut (see 1982). As we have seen, Davidson argues that for a creature to have concepts at all, those concepts must belong to a wide network at the center of which are the concepts of objective truth and falsity. One way to put this is to say that for discriminatory behavior to count as the possession of a discriminatory *concept*, the creature whose behavior it is must be in possession of at least some concepts that are not merely discriminatory, but inherently normative (see Davidson 1997b, 125, 2001c, 137, 1997a, 139). The challenge McDowell's critique poses to Davidson is that of finding room in a causal account of intentionality for the possession of concepts of this type.

Putting the challenge in these terms allows us to see more clearly why Davidson's idea of triangulation is of no help in responding to it. As he presents it, the initial invocation of the triangular situation (phase one of the account) takes us at least part of the way toward explaining normativity, and the appeal to intentions (phase two) is needed only to complete the picture. But this rests on a confusion of the normative character of intensional concepts with their *second-order* character – that is, their status as concepts that apply only to other instances of applying concepts.[12] A merely causal

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[12] Lasonen and Marvan, in the passage cited above, make this mistake explicitly.

story can explain a creature's capacity for second-order discriminatory behavior, and it is plausible to think that social interaction would be at the heart of this explanation, since creatures typically do not respond to their own responses, but do respond to those of others. Phase one of the triangulation account, perhaps, sheds some interesting light on this phenomenon, but in doing so it does not bring us even the slightest bit closer to an explanation of normativity. Phase one, in other words, shows us how a creature disposed to a relatively simple pattern of differential response might acquire one of considerably greater complexity, but it does not reveal how normativity does, or even could, emerge out of this pattern. It is not until phase two that normativity is on the scene at all, but here, as we have seen, it is on the scene only because it has been presupposed. The account Davidson needs to provide falls entirely in the gap between the two phases. What is needed is some pattern of behavior, describable in merely causal terms and available to the third-person perspective of the radical interpreter, whose presence would indicate that at least some of the second-order concepts a creature possesses are inherently normative.

It is difficult to see, however, what such evidence could be. Imagine two creatures that are both complex enough to detect similarities and differences between kinds of utterances and respond differentially to them. One is a full-blooded thinker; she possesses the inherently normative concepts of objective truth and falsity. She responds to utterances she takes to be true by saying "That's true" and to ones she takes to be false by saying "That's false." The second creature is just like the first except that he is not a genuine thinker. He lacks an appreciation of the appearance/reality distinction, the concept of error, and the like, but is capable of reliably discriminating between those of others' utterances that he would feel compelled to make under similar circumstances, and those he would not. He responds to utterances of the first type by saying "That's true," and to the second by saying "That's false." Suppose, further, that both creatures have the same "beliefs" in the sense that the utterances the second creature would feel compelled to make are the same as those that the first creature holds true. In such a case their behavior will be identical; there will be no way for an outside observer to to tell them apart.[13]

The moral of the example is this: in explaining mental normativity, what we need to account for is not the ability to categorize certain types of items (beliefs and utterances) but the ability to place items into a certain type of

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[13] The fact that the creatures might apply these predicates to themselves, not just other speakers, makes no difference here. The second creature might well remember one of its past utterances, recognize that this is no longer an utterance it would feel compelled to make, and say of the utterance "That's false." But this would only be to discriminate between his past and future utterances, not to see the former as erroneous.

category (inherently normative ones). The difference between merely discriminatory and inherently normative concepts, in other words, lies in their intension, not their extension. The extension of a concept, however, is *all* that could be captured in a series of causal interactions between an organism and its environment, all that could be gleaned from the patterns of behavior available to Davidsonian interpreters. Such an interpreter can, perhaps, identify which items in a creature's surroundings prompt it to apply a certain concept, but the interpreter has no way of discerning why the creature so applies it. He cannot know what the creature's *reasons* are for applying the concept, only the external causes of the application. In the example, the interpreter has no way of telling whether the creature says "true" in response to an utterance because she takes that utterance to reflect the way things stand in the objective world or only because it is relevantly similar to her own disposition. Whatever it is that separates merely discriminatory behavior from thinking – and Davidson assures us there must be *something* that does this – it is not something an interpreter could discover by observing a creature's causal interactions with its environment, even if this environment includes other creatures.

IV

Through most of the eighties and nineties, Davidson maintained the position we have been considering: that triangulation is capable of explaining how it is that normative predicates like "correct" and "incorrect" can be rightly applied to creatures that are only causally related to their surroundings. However, in two late essays – "Externalisms" (2001b), presented as part of a 1996 conference on his work, and "Comments on the Karlovy Vary Papers" (2001a), written in response to the the other papers presented at that conference – Davidson appears to back off of his earlier claim, defending instead a more cautious thesis about what triangulation can accomplish.

Davidson's retreat from the original, "bold" version of triangulation to the cautious one results in large part from his recognition that phase two of the bold account is question-begging. He writes,

> Mere similarity of response is obviously not enough for thought … not even when one animal's responses to events and features of the world serve to touch off responses appropriate to those same events and features in other creatures. This triangular arrangement is a necessary, but not sufficient condition, of thought … What must be added to the basic triangle of two or more creatures interacting with each other through the mediation of the world if that interaction is to support thought? The unhelpful answer is that the relation between the creatures must include linguistic communication … The reason this answer is not very helpful is that it assumes what was supposed to be explained. Of course if there is language there is thought, so it cannot be easier to explain the former than the latter. (2001b, 13)

In light of this realization, "triangulation" in the cautious account comes to refer *only* to the obtaining of the basic triangular arrangement (i.e., to phase one of the bold account). And thus Davidson no longer claims that triangulation is a necessary and sufficient condition for thought. It is, he contends, only necessary. In fact, he now recognizes that *no* non-question-begging elements could be added to the basic triangular arrangement that would make it sufficient. He explains, "If it [triangulation] or it in addition to any non-intensionally described conditions, were sufficient as well as necessary, we could reduce the intensional to the extensional, and this is not, in my opinion, possible" (2001a, 293).

This shift in Davidson's thinking appears to be motivated by the very sorts of concerns we noted above, and insofar as the cautious theory is immune to these, the change is for the better. However, the change is also tantamount to an admission that Davidson has no viable response to McDowell's critique. If neither the intentional nor the intersubjective features of belief are sufficient to secure the applicability of normative concepts to our thinking, then what *does* secure it? Davidson offers the salutary suggestion that "what further progress we can make" in answering this question "will be in the direction of theory building within the realm of the rational, not reduction of that realm to anything else" (2001b, 13). But Davidson needs more than the hope for a future theory here. The rule-following paradox appears to show that, so long as we conceive of intentionality as merely causal, *no* explanation of normativity is possible, no matter which "realm" we try to construct it in. And with the shift to the cautious version of triangulation, the paradox remains unresolved.[14] The rule-following paradox, in other words, makes the very point that McDowell's critique hinges on: that a causal view of intentionality is incompatible with Doxastic Normativity. But after abandoning the bold theory of triangulation, Davidson has no response to this charge.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, McDowell argues that the critical claim he raises against Davidson is the same point that Wittgenstein himself intended to make with the rule-following paradox. McDowell argues that any attempt to find in Wittgenstein a "solution" to the paradox – be it the "sceptical" solu-

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[14] We may note that this gives us reason to doubt the *truth* of the cautious account, not just its effectiveness in responding to McDowell. According to the original, bold theory, the reason for supposing that triangulation was necessary for thought was that "there is no other way to answer Wittgenstein's question, in what consists the difference between following a rule, and actually following it" (2005, 274), and the cautious theory does not include any new arguments to this effect. But if triangulation is not a sufficient condition for thought, then it does *not* answer Wittgenstein's question. (In fact, as I argued above, it does not even move us closer to an answer; it only helps "explain" second-order discriminations, not normative concepts.) What reason, then, do we have to suppose that triangulation is even a necessary condition for thought? I find no answer to this question in Davidson's work.

tion Kripke (1982) endorses, or the "straight" solution offered by Davidson's bold theory of triangulation – misses the point of Wittgenstein's reflections. The real lesson Wittgenstein is urging, rather, is that we ought to reject the thesis that generates the paradox in the first place: the idea that intentional mental states "just stand there like a sign-post" – that is, that such states do not stand in a relationship to the external world that is *intrinsically* normative, but acquire their normative features only upon being interpreted (McDowell 1998, 264). This, as we have seen, is exactly what Davidson's causal account of intentionality entails. The state one is in when one believes that p, when considered simply on its own, is merely a disposition to respond differentially to certain stimuli, and the notions of error and accord to not apply to it. On McDowell's reading, Wittgenstein's aim in articulating the rule-following paradox is to reveal that this "sign-post" picture of the contents of conscious-ness leads to absurd conclusions and thus ought to be rejected. Davidson, then, is right to follow Wittgenstein in recognizing that an isolated creature who is only causally related to its surroundings cannot have thoughts, but the conclusion Davidson draws from this is neither Wittgensteinian, nor correct. The problem with the creature is not that he is isolated, but that he is only causally related to his surroundings.

Conclusion

Davidson never argues for the thesis that the mind-world relationship is merely causal. He simply asserts that it is "obvious" that this is the case, and moves on to drawing out its coherentist implications.[15] Somewhat ironically, perhaps, I want to close by suggesting that the real "reason" for Davidson's adherence to this view of intentionality is not a justifier, but only a cause: the influence of Quine. To be sure, Davidson took a number of important steps beyond Quine's dogmatic naturalism, many of them intended to rehabilitate the strong sense of objectivity that is embodied in Doxastic Normativity. Nevertheless, for all of his re-working of the Quinean picture, Davidson never questioned the basic idea that thinking is, at bottom, a matter of respond-ing to stimuli. McDowell's contention is that Davidson cannot have it both ways: he cannot have the kind of objectivity and normativity he wants while leaving this vestige of Quinean naturalism intact. The fact that triangulation fails to reconcile these two strands of Davidson's thinking, of course, does not mean that no reconciliation is possible. But the deep-seated reasons *why* tri-angulation fails suggest that the prospects are quite dim. The force McDow-

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[15] Ernie Lepore and Kirk Ludwig (2005, chap. 22) also identify this as a fundamental, undefended assumption of Davidson's thought, though they discuss it in slightly different terms.

ell's critique thus reaches beyond Davidson. It poses a significant challenge to any attempt to understand mental content in causal terms.[16]

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