

The Objectivity of the Past

Abstract

The following essay discusses the intractable problem of how to account for the meaning of statements about the past – statements, evidence for whose truth or falsity may long have been lost. Against the background of realism, anti-realism, and two pragmatist suggestions of how to account for the meaning of past-tensed statements, I argue for an alternative view, which may be called a ‘minimal’ or ‘deflationary’ externalism, and which can be attributed to Donald Davidson. While avoiding postulating a full-blown correspondence relation between mind and world, the view maintains that our words stand in an external relation to the world – that our statements about the past are *objective* in depending on the world for their truth or falsity. Thus, side-stepping the metaphysical perils of both realism and anti-realism by denying the idea of a substantial *representational* relation between language and world, the view has at the same time the advantage over its pragmatist competitors of salvaging the objectivity of the past.

I. *Realism, Anti-Realism, and Pragmatism about the Past*

Statements about the past have posed a peculiar problem in philosophy. In the heydays of logical positivism, a strong version of the principle of verification decreed that statements whose truth could not be verified were to be considered meaningless, and while the criterion was primarily intended to root out metaphysical statements – statements about God or being were taken to be prime examples – it similarly affected statements about the past. Historical claims for which evidence were lacking, and thus whose truth or falsity could not be ascertained, it seemed, would equally have to be dismissed as nonsensical on a verificationist theory of meaning. While the unpalatable consequences were unabashedly drawn by Alfred Jules Ayer, arguing, in what is considered the most explicit manifest of logical positivism, that he sees “nothing excessively paradoxical in the view that propositions about the past are rules for the prediction of those “historical” experiences which are commonly said to verify them” (1952: 102), it is, however, a conclusion few today would stomach, and even philosophers sympathetic to verificationist theories of meaning have derided the consequences of applying a strong principle of verification to statements about the past. Thus, having done more than anyone to defend ‘justificationism’, a branch of anti-realism, which he describes as the view that “the meanings of statements of the class in question are given to us ... in terms of the conditions which we recognise as establishing the truth or falsity of statements of that class” (Dummett 1969: 239-240), Michael Dummett willingly concedes that past-tensed statements pose “without doubt the thorniest problem” (1969: 250) for anyone seeking to defend a global version of anti-realism. In fact, so troublesome does he find the idea that, decades later, in

revisiting his earlier article, Dummett describes the view as ‘coherent but repugnant’ (Dummett 2005: 672), as “it involved, in language unacceptable to a proponent of that doctrine, that past events, the memory of and evidence for which had dissipated, were expunged, not merely from our knowledge, but from reality itself: they were no more; they had not happened” (Dummett 2005: 672).

The opposing view, realism about the past, however, fares, Dummett argues, no better. The view, as he characterizes it, that the meaning of a statement is knowledge of truth-conditions – conditions which may be beyond our ability to verify – generates its own problems. As Dummett has consistently pointed out: An unbudging requirement on a theory of meaning understood, as he believes it must be, as a theory of *understanding*, is that the meaning of a term or a statement must be *manifest* in our linguistic behaviour, in our willingness to assent or dissent to a term or statement when prompted. This is a requirement, he argues, that a theory of meaning which takes meaning to be knowledge of potentially verification-transcendent truth-conditions, cannot fulfil. For confronted with a statement whose truth-conditions are beyond our ability to verify, he argues, there is no behaviour that *could* be said to manifest an understanding of the statement. However, on pain of making meaning an entirely private and mysterious affair, this is a requirement a theory of meaning as a theory of understanding cannot circumvent. Thus, while maintaining the dictum that a theory of meaning must explain meaning as an ability to manifest an appropriate *use* of a statement, Dummett, in his most recent contribution to the issue (2004), tries to chart the troubled waters between what he sees as the unintelligibility of a realist theory of meaning and the implausibility of anti-realism about the past.

Realism and anti-realism, however, are not the only ways of accounting for the meaning of statements, and an alternative strand in philosophy seeks to undercut the debate by arguing that we can account for the meaning of our statements in general, and about the past in particular, without getting entangled in a discussion about ontology – without getting caught in a debate about the metaphysics of past-tensed statements. The claim is of course an old pragmatist battle cry transposed to the past-tensed key, a view which has most prominently been defended in the 20th century by Richard Rorty who has long and ardently argued that the realism–anti-realism debate “refers to an issue within the community of representationalists – those philosophers who find it fruitful to think of mind or language as containing

representations of reality” (Rorty 1991: 2): The idea, as he goes on, that at least *some* classes of statements stand in representational relations to non-linguistic items or facts, *making* our statements true. In contrast, Rorty argues, the *anti-representationalist* holds the more radical view “that *no* linguistic items represent *any* non-linguistic items” (Rorty 1991: 2). Thus, as Rorty sees it, the meaning of a statement is not given by our knowledge of verification-transcendent truth-conditions, as the realist claims, nor by knowledge of conditions that we are able to verify or justify, as the anti-realist would say, but to the extent to which it serves the purpose for which it is employed. Statements become, not meaningful or meaningless *tout court* but evaluable as meaningful only to the extent that they allow us to achieve the purpose for which they are – or were – used. “On Rorty’s anti-representationalist view,” as Michael Williams says, “language is better understood as a set of tools rather than as the mirror of nature” (Williams 2009: xvi); a view Robert Brandom has called a “synthesis of historicism and naturalism” (Brandom 2000), and which seeks to *dissolve* rather than answer the problem afflicting both realism and anti-realism about meaning in general, and the meaning of statements about the past in particular.

But can we dismiss representationalism so completely? This paper argues that giving up *any* notion of a representational relation between our statements and the world only takes us straight back to the problem facing the anti-realist about the past – the problem that, as Dummett argues, past events is expunged, not only from our memory but from reality itself; that there is nothing *there* for our statements to be true or false of, and hence, that the meaning of a past-tensed statement is severed from what it is putatively about. But do we really want to say that a statement about some past event has its meaning, not from how it represents the world but from how it allows us, as Rorty claims, to *cope* with the world?¹ The repugnant consequence foisted upon us once we deny the existence of an external representational relation between our words and the world is that we are unable to account for the strong

¹ The view, which plays a central role in Rorty’s thinking, is emphasised by Simon Blackburn who notes for Rorty; “words are tools, and the point of our utterances is not to answer to the Forms or to represent the intrinsic nature of reality, it is to meet our needs. Words are Darwinian adaptations, not for copying but for coping.” (Blackburn). The view is given vent in number of places throughout Rorty’s writings, of which the following is one: “Looking at language in this Darwinian way, as providing tools for coping with objects rather than representations of objects, and as providing different sets of tools for different purposes, obviously makes it hard to be an essentialist. For it becomes hard to take seriously the idea that one description of A can be more ‘objective’ or ‘closer to the intrinsic nature of A’ than another. The relation of tools to what they manipulate is simply a manner of utility for a particular purpose, not of ‘correspondence’” (Rorty 1999: 65).

inclination we have towards saying that our statements, past or present, are *objective* in depending for their truth or falsity on matters independent of us. In draining language of all representational content, Rorty's tool-metaphor seems particularly inept at explaining the meaning of statements about the past, whose past-tense appears expressly to point beyond themselves and to the world, for whose truth or falsity they depends.

Pragmatism is not synonymous with Rorty, however, and Huw Price has developed an alternative pragmatism to that of Rorty's – one that does not slight *any* notion of representation but gives 'one cheer' to representationalism on "a spectrum ranging from complete rejection of representationalism, on the left, to full-blown three-cheers endorsement of representationalism, on the right" (Price 2011: 309). The view is that while language does not stand in an *external* representational relation to the world, nor can linguistic meaning be accounted for solely in terms of Rorty's tool-metaphor, but that the meaning of a statement is explained in terms of its *internal* representational relation to other statements in an individual's belief set. The holistic constraint on meaning however, is, more importantly, subject to a hierarchy of *normative principles* governing communication, of which the truth-predicate is constitutive of communication proper. Price thus upholds a notion of representation, but one that is internal and not external in linking an individual's propositional attitudes in a brandomian fashion of 'giving and asking for reasons' rather than featuring as a relation between his or her propositional attitudes and the world.

The view, which Price alternately calls a 'global pragmatism' or 'global expressivism', remains, in denying the idea of an external representational relation, firmly anti-representationalist. I argue, however, that in giving up the idea of an external representational relation, Price gives away too much and that his pragmatism forces us to give up the idea that our statements are *objective* in depending for their truth and falsity on matters external to us. I believe this is a steep price to pay to avoid the epistemological problems that arise from the idea of a representational relation between language and world, and favour a view, which, without reifying a correspondence relation between mind and world, can make sense of the claim that statements about the past are objective. The view, which may be called a 'minimal' or 'deflationary' externalism, and which can be attributed to Donald Davidson, thus avoids the metaphysical perils of both realism *and* anti-realism, but without giving up the objectivity of our statements about the past – a consequence of views that dismiss

the idea of an external representational relation between thought and talk, and the world. It is the prospect of a non-metaphysical externalism that this paper sets out to explore.

III. Davidson's Deflationary Externalism

At first blush, the likelihood of finding a more substantive notion of representation in Davidson's work does not appear promising. Davidson seems, at times, to have taken a rather dim view of the prospect of a representational relation between language, on the one hand, and the world or reality on the other. In "The Myth of the Subjective", we find him arguing that: "Beliefs are true or false, but they represent nothing. It is good to be rid of representations, and with them the correspondence theory of truth, for it is thinking that there are representations that engenders thoughts of relativism" (Davidson 2001b: 46). The comments have not gone unnoticed, and several commentators have taken his dismissive attitude towards representations as a clear sign that Davidson can and should be properly characterized as an anti-representationalist – "people who believe (as he and I do)", as Rorty says, speaking about Davidson, "that our links with the world are merely causal, rather than representational or justificatory" (Rorty 1999: 577). Moreover, the passage from Davidson is far from unique, and the idea that there can be no such thing as 'fitting' or 'matching' – to adopt Rorty's vocabulary (cf. Rorty 1991) – between language and the world seems to lie behind Davidson's seminal distinction in "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" between uninterpreted content and conceptual schemes – a distinction he has rejected as the 'third dogma' of empiricism. As he says in the introduction to *Inquiries into truth and interpretation*, the essay "scouts the intelligibility of claims that different languages or conceptual schemes 'divide up' or 'cope with' reality in importantly different ways" (Davidson 2001a: xx), which, he continues in the essay itself, is tantamount to abandoning empiricism; "for if we give it up it is not clear that there is anything distinctive left to call empiricism" (Davidson 2001a: 189). The interpretation of Davidson as an anti-representationalist thus seems well founded, drawing support from central tenets of his philosophy.

However, while it seems clear that Davidson does not think that our statements map onto the world *individually*, for reasons first raised by Quine about the inscrutability of reference, it is not obvious that he could be felicitously described as an anti-representationalist alongside Rorty. Referring to the passage from "The

Myth of the Subjective” above, Davidson regrets that the passage may have been taken “to conclude that I think it is a mistake to suppose there is a real world independent of our thoughts and to which our thoughts bear an epistemic relation” (Davidson 2001c: 294-295). Denying that this is entailed by his dismissal of the idea that beliefs represent the world, he now argues that, “I might have said that representation, properly understood, is alright, but not representations” (Davidson 2001c: 295). Thus, while there can be no prospect of mapping sentences individually to the world, as a whole, it seems, our beliefs can nevertheless be said to represent the world. But how are we to understand the innocuous notion of representation that is supposed to follow from Davidson’s holistic account of meaning? How is the invocation of a mind-independent world intended to secure a respectable notion of representation, as distinct from representations?

In the above passage, Davidson argues that while our beliefs do not represent anything – at least not individually – they can nevertheless be said to be true or false. The claim is repeated and elaborated nominally in the opening passage of a later paper, where he argues that:

“Our beliefs are objective, not, of course, in being unprejudiced and formed in the light of all the evidence, but in the sense that they are true or false, and that, with few exceptions, their truth depends on matters independent of us” (Davidson 2001c: 1).

His insistence that a rejection of the notion of representations does not entail that there is no mind-independent world to which our beliefs depend for their truth and falsity seems thus to depend on a notion of *objectivity* distinct from that of *representationality*: while not representational, our beliefs, according to Davidson, are nevertheless objective in, as he says, depending on matters independent of us for their truth or falsity. Thus, it is in the prospect of driving a wedge between representation and objectivity that Davidson finds room for a kind of external relation between language and thought on the one hand, and the world on the other. If successful, however, this constitutes a rather different externalism from that suggested by e.g. Hilary Putnam in “The Meaning of ‘Meaning’” (1975), which seems to suggest that the natural kind term ‘water’ *means* two different things as expressed by Oscar and Twin-Oscar, in spite of playing identical roles in their respective languages considered as a whole. Distinct from the kind of externalist and *atomistic* account of

meaning which takes individuals and kinds to feature directly in and provide the meaning of individual sentences in which they partake, the externalism Davidson accepts is thus *holistic* in maintaining that only as a whole is our statements assessable for truth and falsity, and *deflationary* or *minimal*, in being committed only to a mind-independent world, determining the truth and falsity of our beliefs, rather than to a world of truth-makers to which our statements are said to correspond.

Stephen Neale has written incisively on the latter aspect of the distinction Davidson attempts to draw. What Davidson attempts to undermine, he argues, is not, as Rorty argues, ‘that *no* linguistic item represents *any* non-linguistic item’, but an ontology of facts (cf. also Ramberg 2000). “Its important to see”, Neale argues, “that Davidson is not explicitly claiming that there can be no representation of *objects* or *events*” (Neale 1999: 663). What he means to deny, rather, is only the claim that what makes a belief true is its relation to a fact existing over and above an object or an event. This is not to slight *any* notion of representation, “for it is still open to pursue the idea that a true sentence fits the world without endorsing the (possibly hopeless) idea that it fits a particular fact” (Neale 1999: 663). Once we give up the substantial conception of truth as correspondence to facts and replace it by a conception of truth as deflationary, “the notion of fitting the facts, or of being true to the facts”, as Davidson says, “adds nothing intelligible to the simple concept of being true” (Neale 1999: 661). For while we may continue to speak in terms of facts, Neale quotes Davidson as saying, “the point is better put without mention of facts. The sentence ‘my skin is warm’ [as uttered by me, here, now] is true if and only if my skin is warm [here and now]. Here there is no reference to a fact, a world, an experience, or piece of evidence” (Neale 1999: 661).² *Pace* Rorty, it’s the talk of *facts* that Davidson seeks to undermine, Neale concludes, not that of an objective world to which our statements must be assessed for truth or falsity.

But how much ground have we gained in shifting the discussion from ‘representation’ to ‘objectivity’? Rather than providing a clear answer to the nature of the external relation Davidson perceives to obtain between our statements and the world we inhabit, the question of how to understand that relation seems simply to reassert itself once we substitute the claim that our statements *represent* the world with the claim that our statements are *objective* in depending for their truth or falsity

² Neale quotes Davidson’s “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme”, p. 193, in Davidson (2001a).

on the world. We are still not told how precisely to characterize the nature of the dependence-relation between mind and world, how to characterize the putative objectivity that the world confers on our beliefs. Cultivated in one direction, the notion of objectivity threatens to bloom into full correspondence, while pursued in the other it seems too meager to sustain a relation that is external in anything but spirit. Talk of ‘objectivity’, it seems, threatens to present as much of a stumbling block as talk of ‘representations’ – which is perhaps why Davidson takes the central flaw of prevalent types of externalism to be that they “suffer, from one or another defect or omission, at least as marshalled in response to the demand for an understanding of objectivity” (Davidson 2001c: 2). But, how, then are we to understand the external relation provided by the objectivity of our statements in such a way that it avoids both the Scylla of correspondence and the Charybdis of disquotationalism, where the truth-predicate ends up seeming superfluous?

In “The Problem of Objectivity”, Davidson argues that there are two questions concerning objectivity that, as he says, should be kept apart: an epistemological and a metaphysical. The skeptical or epistemological problem is how we can be said to know that our beliefs are about a world at all, and not some hallucinatory experience; the metaphysical question concerns the origin in the first place of the idea of an objective standard to which our beliefs must answer. As Davidson argues:

“One problem, the one that has dominated the history of philosophy since Descartes, is the problem of knowledge; it asks: how can we justify our beliefs in a world independent of our minds, a world containing other people with thoughts of their own, and endless things besides? The other problem, concealed behind the epistemological problem, and conceptually prior to it is: how did we come by the concept of an objective reality in the first place?” (Davidson 2004: 3)

Thus, while it is an open epistemological question whether a specific statement *S* is true or false, a question which relies on a complex process of interpretation, involving, in his most recent work, also a second agent, the question cannot even arise unless our beliefs are largely true, i.e. unless they collectively and minimally depend for their truth or falsity on the world. As he says, my belief that a mouse just disappeared behind a chair may be false, but it relies on my having a number of other

true beliefs, about chairs, mice etc.³ This relation is a precondition, Davidson argues, for the idea that our beliefs are assessable for truth and falsity, but it does not in itself solve the epistemological question of identifying *which* beliefs are the true ones.

However, the distinction between the metaphysical and epistemological questions, between representation and objectivity on the one hand, and representations and correspondence on the other, which Davidson here emphasizes, does not even come into view for those philosophers who take epistemology and metaphysics, as Rorty says, to ‘go together like ham and eggs’ (Rorty 2000: 376) and who thus see an epistemological question in all attempts to ground an external relation between language and thought on the one hand, and the world on the other. But it is precisely in separating these two questions pertaining to the notion of objectivity that we can conceive of the possibility of a mind-world relation that is metaphysically deflationary, while nevertheless remaining externalist in a substantive sense. For Davidson’s externalism combines the idea of a world to which our beliefs must answer for their truth or falsity, while denying an ontology of facts, and hence, avoids the epistemological part of the problem of how our statements can be said to represent the world.

The combination offers a neat solution to our problems in accounting for the meaning of statements about the past. Davidson’s distinction between the metaphysical and epistemological aspects of objectivity avoids the problems afflicting both representationalist *and* anti-representationalist attempts to account of the meaning of past-tensed statements. Shed of the burden of an ontology of facts, Davidson’s deflationary externalism is not hampered by the problematic idea that the meanings of our statements are given by knowledge of verification-transcendent truth-makers. Nor, however, does it give up the external relation between our statements and the world, and insists instead that our statements about the past are true or false depending on how things stood in the world at the time in question. Separating strictly between the metaphysical and epistemological questions pertaining to a specific statement about the past, *S*, we can say that while it is an interpretative question whether *S* is true, the statement depends, as part of the language in which it

³ As Davidson argues: “Suppose I see a mouse disappear behind a chair. Clearly this belief could be mistaken. But would this belief be wrong if I did not truly believe a mouse was a small, four-footed mammal, or a chair an object made for sitting? Perhaps there may be no saying exactly what other true beliefs I must have to have a particular false belief. But it seem clear that a belief of any kind, true or false, relies for its identification on a background of true beliefs...” (Davidson 2001b: 195).

belongs, for its truth or falsity in a non-trivial manner on past events, thus saving the objectivity of the past.

V. Bibliography.

- Ayer, Alfred Jules. (1952). *Language, Truth and Logic*. US: Dover Publications
- Blackburn, Simon. Review of Rorty, available at:
<http://www.phil.cam.ac.uk/~swb24/reviews/Rorty.htm>
- Brandom, Robert. (2000). "Vocabularies of Pragmatism: Synthesising Pragmatism and Historicism", in (ed.) Robert Brandom, *Rorty and his Critics*. UK: Blackwell Publishing.
- Davidson, Donald. (2004). *Problems of Rationality*. US: Oxford University Press.
- Davidson, Donald. (2001a). *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*. US: Oxford University Press.
- Davidson, Donald. (2001b). *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*. US: Oxford University Press.
- Davidson, Donald. (2001c). "Externalisms", in (eds.) Peter Kotatko, Peter Pagin, and Gabriel Segal, *Interpreting Davidson*. US: CSLI Publications.
- Dummett, Michael. (2005). "The justificationist's response to a realist", in *Mind* (July 2005) 114 (455): 671-688.
- Dummett, Michael. (2004). *Truth and the Past*. US: Columbia University Press
- Dummett, Michael. (1969). "The Reality of the Past", in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, New Series*, Vol. 69 (1968 - 1969), pp. 239-258.
- Neale, Stephen. (1999). "On Representing", in *Library of Living Philosophers: Donald Davidson*, L. E. Hahn (ed.), Illinois: Open Court, pp. 656-669.
- Price, Huw. (2011). *Naturalism without Mirrors*. UK: Oxford University Press.
- Price, Huw. (2003). "Truth as Convenient Friction", in *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 100, No. 4 (Apr., 2003), pp. 167-190.
- Putnam, Hilary. (1975). "The Meaning of 'Meaning'", in *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science* 7:131-193.
- Ramberg, Bjørn. (2000). "Post-Ontological Philosophy of Mind: Rorty versus Davidson", in (ed.) Robert Brandom, *Rorty and his Critics*. UK: Blackwell Publishing.
- Rorty, Richard. (2000). "Response to Bjørn Ramberg", in (ed.) Robert Brandom, *Rorty and his Critics*. UK: Blackwell Publishing.

- Rorty, Richard. (1999). *Philosophy and Social Hope*. UK: Penguin Books.
- Rorty, Richard. (1991). *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers, vol. 1*. UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Rorty, Richard. (1984). "The Historiography of Philosophy: four genres", in (eds.) Richard Rorty, J. B. Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner, *Philosophy in History*, UK: Cambridge University Press
- Williams, Michael. (2009). "Introduction", in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. US: Princeton University Press.