

Tension within Triangulation

Nathaniel Goldberg

Washington and Lee University

Abstract

Philosophers disagree about how meaning connects with history. Donald Davidson, who helped deepen our understanding of meaning, even disagreed with himself. As Ernest Lepore and Kirk Ludwig note, Davidson's account of radical interpretation treats meaning as ahistorical; his Swampman thought experiment treats it as historical. Here I show that while Lepore and Ludwig are right that Davidson's views are in tension, they are wrong about its extent. Unbeknownst to them, Davidson's account of radical interpretation and Swampman thought experiment both rely—in *different* ways—on the *same* model of triangulation. I revise one of those ways to resolve the tension within Davidson's views. I close by detailing what role history should play in Davidson's views overall.

Is meaning in any interesting sense connected with history? Some philosophers, like Gottlob Frege, Bertrand Russell, J. L. Austin, H. P. Grice, W. V. Quine, and John Searle, are committed to a generally negative response. On none of their views need the historical use of a term, whether by the speaker or by whomever first uttered the term in its current context, be considered when evaluating its meaning.¹ Other philosophers, however, like Hilary Putnam, Saul Kripke, Ruth Millikan, and Fred Dretske, have responded affirmatively. Each of them insists that the meaning of at least some terms depends in one way or another on historical use.

Strangely enough, one major philosopher of language is committed to *both* responses: Donald Davidson. Ernest Lepore

Nathaniel Goldberg, PhD, is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia. He works in epistemology, the history of modern philosophy, and the philosophy of language. Goldberg has published in European Journal of Philosophy, Kant-Studien, Ratio, The Southern Journal of Philosophy, and elsewhere.

and Kirk Ludwig have drawn attention to this by noting the following. On the one hand, Davidson maintains that his hypothetical “radical” interpreter can determine an utterance’s meaning by considering the external circumstances under which it is uttered and constructing a charitable, Tarski-style truth theory based on it and other utterances. Historical facts about the speaker and her environment are unimportant. On the other hand, Davidson introduces his thought-experimental Swampman, who shares all of Davidson’s own linguistic dispositions but who has had no past causal interactions with objects, to maintain that such interactions are necessary for utterances to be meaningful. According to Lepore and Ludwig, Davidson’s views are in tension because, by Davidson’s own lights, Swampman’s utterances would be radically interpretable and so would be meaningful. But this contradicts the point of the thought experiment. Lepore and Ludwig explain:

[T]here seems to be a tension between the intuitions that Davidson has about this thought experiment and his view that the procedures of the radical interpreter are the fundamental standpoint from which to consider questions of thought and meaning. The Swampman certainly has all it takes to be radically interpreted (if any of us does). Why should it matter how long he has been around [as Davidson thinks it does]? (2007, 338)

Davidson’s ahistorical and historical treatments of meaning seem at odds.²

While Lepore and Ludwig are right that Davidson’s views are in tension, the tension is both broader and deeper than they realize. The tension is *broader* because it concerns more than merely radical interpretation and Swampman. Davidson’s model of triangulation, central to the last two decades of his writing, itself treats meaning as historical. Even if we reject Swampman, as Lepore and Ludwig seem to recommend, Davidson’s historicism remains. The tension is *deeper* because that very same model of triangulation also expands upon Davidson’s account of radical interpretation. The tension is not merely between radical interpretation and Swampman, therefore. It lies within Davidson’s uses of triangulation itself.³ In fact insofar as Davidson’s account of radical interpretation grounds many of his other views—including arguments against conceptual relativism and skepticism, and for his unified theory of meaning, thought, and action⁴—the tension within triangulation reverberates broadly and deeply within Davidson’s views as a whole. Davidson’s inconsistent stance toward triangulation would imperil his entire philosophical enterprise.

My goal in this paper is to identify the tension within triangulation in its entirety and then to resolve it as best as possible. In section 1 I discuss radical interpretation and

Swampman to see where precisely Lepore and Ludwig think the tension lies. In section 2 I establish that the tension within Davidson's views is both broader and deeper than Lepore and Ludwig realize. In section 3 I formalize the tension. This allows me in section 4 to resolve it. In section 5 I detail what role history should play in Davidson's treatment of meaning overall.

1. Radical Interpretation and Swampman

Since Lepore and Ludwig locate the tension within Davidson's views as occurring between his account of radical interpretation and Swampman thought experiment, let us consider each in turn. Davidson first mentions radical interpretation when proposing a truth-theoretic account of meaning (2001c, essay 2). According to Davidson, a Tarski-style truth theory for a natural language counts as a theory of meaning for, and so interprets, that language. Further, to construct such a theory an interpreter systematically correlates utterances of the speaker whom she is interpreting with conditions under which each utterance is true.⁵ The systematic correlation, generated by Alfred Tarski's (1944) own recursive method modified for use with a natural language, is meant to ensure that individual terms in each utterance make similar semantic contributions regardless of the utterance in which they occur. In so doing Davidson hopes to make good on his earlier (2001c, essay 1) claim that sentential meaning must be compositional.⁶

Realizing that for any such truth theory to be truly interpretive its construction must be empirically constrained, Davidson later (2001c, essay 9) offers his account of radical interpretation proper to elucidate such constraints. The central empirical constraint is the principle of charity. Davidson's early formulations of the principle have the radical interpreter "maximize" (2001c, 27) or "optimize" (137) agreement between herself and the speaker, given the speaker's empirical surroundings. Davidson eventually (2002, *passim*) modifies the principle to require that in basic cases the interpreter identifies the content of a speaker's utterances and beliefs with the objects and events that cause them. In so doing the principle of charity instructs the interpreter to take the speaker's basic utterances to be made in response to her environment. The objects and events that elicit those basic utterances would in turn provide truth conditions for them, and the interpreter would construct truth conditions for the rest of the speaker's utterances systematically given these.⁷ Hence, successful interpretation abides by the formal constraints imposed by a Tarski-style truth theory and empirical constraints imposed by the principle of charity.⁸ Finally, the interpretation that Davidson has in mind is "radical" because the interpreter constructs a charitable truth theory by relying exclusively on observable behavior of the speaker given

observable circumstances in the world. She has no prior insight into the speaker's language, and so none into the speaker's linguistic history either.⁹

The radical interpreter has a special place in Davidson's project. Lepore and Ludwig observe that on his view the position of the radical interpreter is "the fundamental standpoint from which to consider questions of thought and meaning" (2007, 338) because the radical interpreter can in principle determine all the semantic facts of a situation. Davidson himself provides ample evidence that Lepore and Ludwig are correct:

1. "All understanding of the speech of another involves radical interpretation." (2001c, 125)
2. "As a matter of principle, then, meaning, and by its connection with meaning, belief also, are open to public determination" (2002, 147–48), and so public determination by the radical interpreter.
3. "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." (2002, 148)
4. "The point of the 'epistemic position' of the radical interpreter is ... that it arguably provides sufficient evidence for interpretation." (1994, 121)
5. "Meaning is entirely determined by observable behavior, even readily observable behavior" (2005a, 56); meaning would thus have to be determinable by the radical interpreter. He continues: "That meanings are decipherable is not a matter of luck; public availability"—and so availability to the radical interpreter—"is a constitutive aspect of language."

This not only reveals that the position of the radical interpreter is, for Davidson, fundamental. It also underscores that radical interpretation treats meaning as an ahistorical phenomenon. An utterance is meaningful whenever and only whenever a radical interpreter could determine that it is meaningful given the speaker's utterances at the time of interpretation and the conditions that prompt them. Considering the speaker's past interactions with her environment, past linguistic practices, or any similarly historical facts about the speaker is unnecessary for determining the meaning of her terms.

Problems arise when Davidson later introduces Swampman:

Suppose lightning strikes a dead tree in a swamp; I am standing nearby. My body is reduced to its elements, while entirely by coincidence (and out of different molecules) the tree is turned into

my physical replica. My replica, Swampman, moves exactly as I did; according to its nature it departs the swamp, encounters and seems to recognize my friends, and appears to return their greetings in English. It moves into my house and seems to write articles on radical interpretation. No one can tell the difference.

But there *is* a difference.... [Swampman] can't mean what I do by the word "house," for example, since the sound "house" Swampman makes was not learned in a context that would give it the right meaning—or any meaning at all. Indeed, I don't see how my replica can be said to mean anything by the sounds it makes, nor to have any thoughts. (2002, 19, his emphasis)

Because Swampman has had no past causal interaction of any sort, Davidson is saying, its utterances are meaningless. Conversely, Davidson's own utterances are meaningful because he *has* had past interactions with his environment. Davidson means house by "house" because he learned "house" in a context that would give it the right meaning, namely, in the context of seeing a house. Absent any such history, Swampman "can't mean" what Davidson does.¹⁰ Swampman's utterances mean nothing at all. History is now partly constitutive of meaning.

Unfortunately, as Lepore and Ludwig observe, if no one can tell the difference between Swampman and Davidson, then no *radical interpreter* can tell the difference either. After all Swampman's observable behavior in observable circumstances precisely matches what Davidson's would be. Now the radical interpreter, basing her interpretation on such behavior in such circumstances, would determine that Davidson's own utterances are meaningful, which would be enough (on Davidson's earlier view) to establish that his utterances are meaningful. But then Swampman's would be too, and therein lies the problem. Because radical interpretation is blind to causal history, whether one has such history, as Davidson does, or lacks it, as Swampman does, is irrelevant as far as the radical interpreter is concerned. Hence, while the Swampman thought experiment treats meaning as historical insofar it makes meaning depend on past causal interactions, radical interpretation treats meaning as ahistorical insofar as it makes it depend on causal interactions simultaneous with interpretation itself. According to Davidson's thought experiment, Swampman's utterances are *meaningless*; according to his account of radical interpretation, they are *meaningful*. Davidson cannot have it both ways.

2. Broadening and Deepening the Tension

As I explained above, the tension between radical interpretation and Swampman is both broader and deeper than Lepore and Ludwig realize. To see this we must examine Davidson's model of triangulation. Triangulation occurs when two (or more)

creatures with shared similarity spaces respond in a coordinated manner to the same part of the world.¹¹ On Davidson's view, creatures with shared similarity spaces are disposed to group objects in roughly the same way based on the qualitative similarities of those objects. Thus two monkeys respond to the snake in their presence by calling to one another. The object of their responses is the snake, rather than the snake's effects on their senses, because the snake is the joint cause of those responses. My brother and I respond to the cufflinks in the showcase by talking to one another about how we should buy them for our father. The (public) cufflinks, rather than each of our individual (private) experiences of the cufflinks, is the object of our responses, for the cufflinks are their common cause. In each case the object of each triangulator's response is the object that stands at the intersection of the causal lines connecting co-triangulators to the world. And in each case co-triangulators find roughly the same things salient in roughly the same ways.

Davidson (2001a) claims that triangulation is essential to what he calls "learning" and "interpretive situations."¹² The tension within Davidson's views is *broader* than Lepore and Ludwig realize because it extends from radical interpretation not only to Swampman but also to triangulation as it is used in learning situations generally. To see this we need to grasp the way in which Davidson thinks triangulation contributes to learning. For Davidson a sample learning situation would proceed something like this. The teacher gauges the attention of her learner. When the teacher thinks that the learner is looking at a house, she utters "house" and ostends to the house, repeating utterances and ostensions as needed. The learner watches the house and his teacher both. He correlates utterances of "house" with those ostensions, trying with his teacher to triangulate the utterance's referent. By means of this triangulation the learner learns the word "house."

Learning situations are important on Davidson's view not merely because when two persons are in them triangulation allows one to *teach* the other words such as "house." As Davidson explains: "it is also this triangle that determines the *contents* of the learner's words" (2002, 203, my emphasis). "House" *means* house in the learner's language because he triangulated a house with his teacher when his teacher uttered "house."¹³ To be sure, Davidson does not maintain that every meaningful term was learned in a learning situation. "[F]or someone to think or say that the cat is on the mat," he explains, "there must be a causal history of that person that traces back, directly *or* indirectly, to the triangular experiences" (2001a, 293, my emphasis). The causal history would be direct insofar as the learner learned any of these terms via triangulation in a learning situation. The causal history would be indirect insofar as she learned any of

them by *appealing* to terms that she learned via triangulation in a learning situation. Nonetheless, on Davidson's view, for any term to be meaningful some terms had to have been learned in learning situations: "[A]ll thought and language must have a foundation in such direct historical connections" (2002, 29), a foundation upon which the semantic content of thought and language *in toto* is built. Meaning overall depends on history.¹⁴

Surprisingly neither Lepore and Ludwig, nor Davidson himself, connect Swampman with triangulation's historical use in learning situations. The connection, however, is clear. Davidson's argument that Swampman's utterances are meaningless amounts to the claim that, because Swampman never triangulated objects in the relevant learning situations, its utterances lack semantic content. "[T]he sound 'house' Swampman makes was not *learned* in a context that would give it the right meaning—or any meaning at all" (2002, 19, my emphasis). Swampman never learned "house" directly from someone who uttered house in the presence of a house, nor did it learn "house" indirectly from other triangulations. Swampman never learned it in *any* manner. Its utterances lack any "foundation" (29) upon which semantic content can be built, since Swampman had no triangular experiences whatsoever. Yet as we saw above, its utterances would still be radically interpretable. Hence, radical interpretation ignores historical facts about what was or was not learned. Conversely, learning situations—by means of triangulation—constitute those facts. The tension between radical interpretation and Swampman therefore broadens to concern radical interpretation and the essential role played by triangulation in learning situations generally.

The tension between radical interpretation and Swampman is *deeper* than Lepore and Ludwig realize because it ultimately concerns two functions of triangulation itself. This is because triangulation is essential not only to learning situations but also to interpretive situations. The problem is acute since Davidson (2001a, 294) is explicit that interpretive situations involve the radical interpreter.

From the beginning (2001c, essay 9) Davidson described the radical interpreter as interpreting a speaker given the speaker's environment. We saw that in section 1. Triangulation fleshes out interpretive situations in two ways. First, it emphasizes that radical interpretation is potentially interactive. To interpret a speaker's language the interpreter must be able to triangulate objects *with* the speaker. Armed with the idea that in basic cases the content of the speaker's utterances and beliefs are the objects and events that cause them, the interpreter not only listens to but can also attempt to communicate with the speaker. She would do so by triangulating objects with him. The joint causes of any potential responses would provide the content of the speaker's basic utterances—their presence would provide the

relevant truth conditions of those utterances—and the interpreter could make sense of complex utterances given them.¹⁵

Second, triangulation brings to light that radical interpretation is in principle reciprocal. Interpreter and speaker are each responding to the world and potentially to one another. In fact, for Davidson, each can in principle interpret the other. The speaker–interpreter distinction ultimately dissolves, leaving two speakers who can triangulate each other’s utterances against their shared environment.¹⁶

Thus the tension within Davidson’s views is deeper than Lepore and Ludwig realize because triangulation *both* establishes historical facts in learning situations *and* underwrites the possibility of establishing ahistorical facts in interpretive situations. And as Davidson unwittingly illustrates with Swampman, facts established in the former can be inconsistent with those established in the latter. The same utterance can be both meaningless and meaningful simultaneously.

Finally (and I alluded to this at the outset), radical interpretation is itself integral to many of Davidson’s other views, making the tension within Davidson’s work broader and deeper still. These other views of Davidson’s cluster into three groups. The first group concerns what he (2001c, essay 13) says about the dualism of conceptual scheme and empirical content—that there is an epistemically significant distinction between the human and worldly contribution to beliefs. The crucial premise in Davidson’s argument against this dualism relies on the principle of charity, which is essential to radical interpretation. He writes: “Given the underlying methodology of interpretation, we could not be in a position to judge that others had concepts or beliefs radically different from our own” (2001c, 197). Without the possibility of recognizing radically different conceptual schemes, Davidson concludes, the very idea of a conceptual scheme becomes incoherent. The attendant notion of conceptual relativism, according to which beliefs are true *relative* to a scheme, itself is then unworkable. Moreover, Davidson contends, without the idea that empirical content can in tandem with a conceptual scheme play a causal yet justificatory role in belief formation, “it is not clear that there is anything distinctive left to call empiricism” (189). Regardless of whether his reasoning is valid, Davidson uses radical interpretation to argue against scheme–content dualism, conceptual relativism, and empiricism itself.¹⁷ Since the ahistorical role of triangulation is integral to radical interpretation, that role is implicated in all these views too.

The second group of views relying on radical interpretation concerns Davidson’s arguments against skepticism about the veracity of our beliefs (2002, essay 10) and about the existence of other minds and an external world (2002, essay 14). In the former Davidson reminds us that the radical interpreter’s prin-

principle of charity requires (as he later puts it) that in basic cases the interpreter identifies the content of a speaker's utterances and beliefs with the objects and events that prompt them. He then urges: "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" (2002, 148). Hence in basic cases a speaker's beliefs are true of the world.¹⁸ When Davidson argues against other-mind and external-world skepticism, he starts with the premise that some of one's own utterances are meaningful. He then deduces that there must be some interpreter (another mind) who can find them meaningful, and that in basic cases what one's utterances mean will be determined by the external circumstances (in the world) that prompt one to utter them. Hence for one to think or utter anything meaningful at all, which *ex hypothesi* one does, there must be another mind and an external world.¹⁹ Whether or not these arguments work, absent radical interpretation and the ahistorical role played by triangulation in it, these antiskeptical conclusions would be blocked.

The third and final group of views to which radical interpretation is integral concerns action theory. Davidson links radical interpretation to his larger project of providing a unified theory of meaning, thought, and action itself (2004, essays 8, 10). By appealing to basic principles of decision theory the radical interpreter is to assign degrees of belief and value to agents. According to Davidson, the radical interpreter can then construe agents' behavior as intentional and so amenable to standards of rationality. By constructing a charitable truth theory that same interpreter can continue to construe agents' utterances as meaningful. Though largely programmatic, Davidson's attempt to fold these semantic, epistemic, and practical concerns into a single project is one of the most promising applications of radical interpretation. The ahistorical use of triangulation that radical interpretation involves would then be implicated in his unified theory too.²⁰

Given the connection between radical interpretation and triangulation, therefore, I conclude that any tension within triangulation jeopardizes all these other views. Though they are unaware of it, the tension that Lepore and Ludwig identify between radical interpretation and Swampman is symptomatic of a much larger problem.

3. Formalizing the Tension

Now that we have seen how the tension within Davidson's views is broader and deeper than Lepore and Ludwig realize, let us formalize that tension here so that in the next section we can resolve it. Davidson's discussion of triangulation in the context of learning situations commits him to this:

- (i) For any speaker *S* with any utterance *U*, *U* is meaningful iff *S* has been in the relevant learning situations.²¹

A speaker's *having been* in the relevant learning situations highlights the fundamentally historical use to which triangulation is being put. On Davidson's view of learning, a speaker's utterances are meaningful *if* she has been in the relevant learning situations, because learning situations determine semantic content via triangulation. In some cases the content will be determined directly; think of the learner and his utterance "house." In others the content will be determined indirectly by virtue of its connection to utterances like "house."²² Moreover, the conditional goes in the other direction also. A speaker's utterances are meaningful *only if* she has been in the relevant learning situations, because only these situations determine such content (directly or indirectly). Davidson makes the latter point when he talks about Swampman. Davidson maintains that because Swampman did not learn what any of its utterances mean, none is meaningful.²³

Davidson's discussion of triangulation in the context of interpretive situations commits him to something weaker. He does not claim that a speaker's utterances are meaningful if and only if she is being interpreted. According to him, recall, meaning needs to be *open* to public determination and so decipherable by the radical interpreter; it need not be publicly determined or deciphered. Similarly, what a fully informed interpreter *could* learn about what a speaker means is all there is to learn, but the interpreter need not *actually* learn it for the speaker to mean anything. Actual triangulation need never occur. Davidson's discussion of triangulation in the context of interpretive situations commits him to this:

- (ii) For any speaker *S* with any utterance *U*, *U* is meaningful iff *S* is capable of being in the relevant interpretive situations.

This time a speaker's *being capable* of being in the relevant interpretive situations highlights the fundamentally ahistorical use to which triangulation is being put. *Whenever* and *only whenever* a speaker is capable of being in an interpretive situation, so that an interpreter can in basic cases triangulate her utterances and interpret complex ones given them, are those utterances meaningful. Regardless of whether interpretation could happen in the past, present, or future, only facts accessible to the radical interpreter at *that* time—facts contemporaneous with any potential radical interpretation itself—are required to determine an utterance's meaning. Historical facts are not required. Now, on Davidson's view of interpretation, a speaker's utterances are meaningful *if* she is capable of being in

the relevant interpretive situations, because if the radical interpreter can via triangulation determine that an utterance is meaningful, then it is meaningful. What a fully informed interpreter could learn about what a speaker means is all there is to learn. Likewise a speaker's utterances are meaningful *only if* she is capable of being in the relevant interpretive situations, because only if the radical interpreter can via triangulation determine that an utterance is meaningful is it meaningful. The position of the radical interpreter is fundamental. If something is meaningful, then it has to be radically interpretable, and triangulation would play an essential role in any such interpretation.

For (i) and (ii) to be in tension, there must be some speaker *S* with utterances *U* that satisfies one but not the other. Davidson *can* allow whatever satisfies (i) to satisfy (ii). On his view, there is no reason why if a speaker learned the meaning of "house" in a learning situation then her "house" could not be interpreted in an interpretive situation. Though Davidson claims that the radical interpreter has nothing to go on but observable behavior of the speaker given observable circumstances of her environment, he can allow that the speaker will exhibit her behavior given those circumstances *because* of past learning. The speaker would, for instance, be disposed in an interpretive situation to utter "house" in the presence of a house if in a learning situation she *learned* to utter "house" in the presence of a house. Davidson can allow the results of learning situations to bleed forward.

Tension instead arises in the opposite direction. Davidson *cannot* allow whatever satisfies (ii) to satisfy (i). His thought experiment makes that clear. Swampman and its utterances satisfy (ii). Despite Davidson's own idea of what the thought experiment shows, Swampman's utterances are radically interpretable. By (ii) they are therefore meaningful. Nonetheless Swampman and its utterances do *not* satisfy (i). None of its utterances was learned, directly or indirectly. According to (i), they are therefore meaningless. Even if Davidson can allow the results of learning situations to bleed forward, he cannot allow the results of interpretive situations to bleed back.

Hence Davidson can allow everything that satisfies (i) to satisfy (ii) but *not* vice versa. This failure of asymmetry between (i) and (ii) is the ultimate source of the tension within Davidson's views. In the next section I suggest one way of resolving the tension. To motivate my suggestion I start by rejecting two ways *not* to resolve it.

4. Resolving the Tension

The first way not to resolve the tension within Davidson's views is the way that Lepore and Ludwig themselves reject:

It would not be inconsistent to add to the a priori requirements on agency a requirement that an agent have been in causal interaction in the past with enough things to ground his thought about things in general. In this case, the interpreter would just impose this historical requirement on the grounding of an interpretation theory on top of everything else. (2007, 338)

The problem with this, as Lepore and Ludwig rightly note, is that “[i]t looks as if this additional requirement, on Davidson’s view, should emerge from reflection on what must be so for success in radical interpretation. But it does not” (2007, 338). Nor could it. The radical interpreter is “radical” precisely because she has no insight into the speaker’s language, and so none into prior causal connections between her utterances and the world. Whatever requirements are added to agency would be invisible to the radical interpreter. Though Lepore and Ludwig do not put the point this way, the problem with the proposal is that it leaves (i) and (ii) both untouched. Tinkering with the notion of agency does nothing to reconcile Davidson’s historical and ahistorical uses of triangulation.

The second way not resolve the tension—the way in which Lepore and Ludwig themselves suggest resolving it—fares no better. It is to treat the Swampman thought experiment as a *non sequitur* for Davidson (Lepore and Ludwig 2007, 337) or as something that he should otherwise not take too seriously (339, n. 260). The reason why this fares no better than the first is that, as we have seen, Swampman illustrates Davidson’s general view concerning the role of triangulation in learning situations. According to Davidson’s historical use of triangulation, one’s never *having been* in a learning situation entails that one’s utterances cannot *be* meaningful. That is as true for Swampman as it is for the rest of us. Indeed, though Lepore and Ludwig fail to realize it, and Davidson never makes it explicit, the moral of the Swampman thought experiment is the moral that Davidson draws about triangulation and learning situations generally. The Swampman thought experiment is *non sequitur*. It is not the isolated thought experiment that Lepore and Ludwig make it out to be. Davidson must take Swampman as seriously as he takes the historical use of triangulation in learning situations itself. With or without Swampman the tension between his historicism in (i) and ahistoricism in (ii) remains. And triangulation remains implicated in both.

The only way to resolve the tension within Davidson’s views is therefore to revise or reject his account of triangulation encapsulated in (i) or (ii). What should Davidson do? Lepore and Ludwig are right that Davidson treats the position of the radical interpreter as fundamental. As I explained in section 2, Davidson attempts to draw far-reaching consequences by presupposing it. In fact Lepore and Ludwig themselves spend the final third of

their book (2007, part III) examining the connection between radical interpretation and Davidson's various epistemic and metaphysical views. Conversely, Davidson's insistence on the historical nature of meaning as grounded in particular learning situations comes relatively late in his career. Nor is the position of the language learner privileged in Davidson's views overall. Though Davidson does integrate learning into his discussion of triangulation, triangulation's ahistorical role in interpretive situations is more in line with the bulk of his views than is its historical role in learning situations. All this provides reasons internal to Davidson's project either to reject (*i*) outright or to revise (*i*) in such a way as to make it consistent with (*ii*).

There is a reason external to Davidson's project, which Lepore and Ludwig do not consider, to focus on (*i*) also. Meaning is by its very nature connected to interpersonal communication. Meaningful utterances are the vehicle by which members of a community coordinate their behavior with one another. They are the means *by which* members of a community collectively respond to their environment. In fact language itself developed to allow members of communities to act together toward common goals. And, generally speaking, interpersonal communication proceeds by concerned parties interpreting one another and responding in turn. The connection between meaning and communication, and therefore interpretation, is conceptually basic. To be sure, communication ordinarily *presupposes* language learning. Communities teach their neophytes what expressions in their language mean so that these neophytes can interpret, and be interpreted by, other community members. But this presupposition is not logically necessary. By introducing the logical possibility of a being like Swampman, Davidson inadvertently makes us choose whether meaning *must* be connected to language learning or interpretation. We should choose the latter. Swampman means by its words what Davidson himself would, because Swampman and we would be able to coordinate our behavior via those words as easily as Davidson and we could. This is the essential role of meaningfulness, and as the Swampman thought experiment ironically illustrates language learning need not be part of it. Meaning and learning are separable. Meaning and communication, which requires mutual interpretation, are not. Hence we should revise or reject (*i*) not only to minimize reverberations elsewhere in Davidson's thought, but also to respect the essential connection between meaning and communication itself.²⁴

Now that we know to focus on (*i*), how should we proceed? I see no reason to reject (*i*) outright. While Davidson cannot maintain the constitutive connection between meaning and history that (*i*) establishes, there is no reason why he must surrender the intuition behind that connection altogether. Moreover, as charitable readers of Davidson it behooves us to

pursue the less drastic approach to reconciling his views generally. Rather than reject (i), therefore, in what follows I shall suggest a way of revising (i) to make it consistent with (ii).

To see what I have in mind consider the exact problem that Davidson's Swampman thought experiment faces. Though it aims to show that Swampman's utterances are meaningless, from the perspective of the radical interpreter Davidson and Swampman are indistinguishable. Now consider Davidson and Swampman in turn. Davidson does not utter "house" out of cosmic coincidence. He is disposed to utter "house" in the presence of a house because in a learning situation he learned "house" by triangulating a house. Swampman, conversely, does utter "house" out of cosmic coincidence. It is disposed to utter "house" in the presence of a house because, *ex hypothesi*, Swampman's behavior is identical to Davidson's. Triangulation played no role in its learning "house," since Swampman never learned that or any other word. Hence Davidson has been in the relevant learning situation and acts as if he has been in it, while Swampman has not been in the relevant situation but *merely* acts as if it was in it. Davidson's requirement from (i) that meaning be connected to *actual* learning turns out to be too strong to fit (ii)'s treatment of Swampman's utterances. And (ii) is what it must fit.

Here is how we might make it do so. Irrespective of the presence or absence of historical facts about meaning, the radical interpreter can appeal to ahistorical facts about Davidson and Swampman alike to interpret each one's "house." She can appeal to the ahistorical fact about whether Davidson or Swampman, *while* being interpreted, acts as if *prior* to being interpreted he or it has been in the relevant learning situation. The ahistorical fact that Davidson now acts as if he has been in a learning situation was caused by the historical fact that Davidson has been in a learning situation. Conversely the ahistorical fact that Swampman now acts as if it has been in a learning situation was not caused by any correlative historical fact, because Swampman has not been in any learning situation. Thus ahistorical facts can, but need not, be caused by historical ones.

Moreover, when and only when a speaker acts as if she has been in the relevant learning situations are her utterances radically interpretable in the first place, for then and only then will the speaker display behavior that the radical interpreter can use to construct a charitable truth theory. Why is that? Language learning consists precisely in learning how to use terms in two ways. First, they are to be used systematically. If a term plays one role in one sentence, then it must be able to play a similar role in another lest it not have the same meaning—and so the use of the term was not truly learned. Now systematic use of terms is just what is required to construct a truth theory for the language in which the term figures. Second, in basic cases terms are to be used in ways that reflect what is happening

in the speaker's environment. Language is not used in a vacuum; empirical goings-on have some influence on what speakers say. And precisely this empirical responsiveness is captured by the interpreter's using the principle of charity to construct her truth theory. Hence a speaker's *acting as if* she has been in the relevant learning situations ensures that she make utterances that are systematic and in basic cases environmentally responsive. This in turn guarantees that the radical interpreter can systematically and charitably correlate her utterances with conditions under which they are true. Swampman's utterances as well as Davidson's own are radically interpretable *because* Swampman and Davidson each act as if they learned what those utterances mean.

One way to revise (i) so that it is consistent with (ii) is therefore to require not that the speaker has been, but that she *acts as if* she has been, in the relevant learning situations:

- (i') For any speaker *S* with any utterance *U*, *U* is meaningful iff *S acts as if S* has been in the relevant learning situations.

A speaker's *acting as if* she has been in the relevant learning situations highlights that triangulation is to be used ahistorically. *Whenever* and *only whenever* a speaker acts as if she has been in the relevant learning situations are her utterances are meaningful, because *whenever* and *only whenever* she acts as if she has been in the relevant learning situations are those utterances radically interpretable. On this revised view, a speaker's utterances are meaningful *if* she acts as if she has been in the relevant learning situations, because the radical interpreter can then interpret those utterances. The speaker's observable behavior given observable circumstances would allow the radical interpreter to construct a charitable truth theory for her language by triangulating basic utterances and interpreting complex ones based on them. Davidson and Swampman alike act as if they have been in the relevant learning situations, because they are disposed to make particular utterances in particular contexts that in the relevant interpretive situations would be found meaningful. Similarly a speaker's utterances are meaningful *only if* she has been in the relevant learning situations, because only then can the radical interpreter interpret those utterances. Only then would the speaker's behavior and the circumstances that elicit it allow the radical interpreter to construct a charitable truth theory and appeal to triangulation at all. If Davidson or Swampman ceased uttering any of his or its terms in ways consistent with having learned what those terms mean, those utterances would be neither systematic nor environmentally responsive. The radical interpreter would be unable to construct a charitable truth theory from them.

Now (*i'*) and (*ii*) are both consistent with the ahistorical use of triangulation employed in radical interpretation. (*ii*) is consistent with it, because interpretative situations rely on the radical interpreter's employing triangulation *while* interpreting a speaker's utterances. (*i'*) is consistent with it, because a speaker who makes utterances as if she has been in the relevant learning situations makes utterances that are radically interpretable. And radical interpretability, as we just heard, relies on an ahistorical use of triangulation. Further, because all and only speakers who act as if they have been in the relevant learning situations are radically interpretable in interpretive situations, satisfying (*i'*) would satisfy (*ii*) *and* vice versa. Swampman's utterances would be meaningful according to (*i'*) and (*ii*) both, as would Davidson's own. There would be no failed asymmetry. The tension within triangulation resolves.

Moreover, while (*i'*) and (*ii*) are extensionally equivalent—all and only speakers *S* with utterances *U* that satisfy either satisfy the other—they are also mutually informative. What it takes for utterances to be radically interpretable is their having been uttered as if they were learned. What it takes for utterances to be uttered as if they were learned is their being radically interpretable. And Davidson's ahistorical use of triangulation is integral to both. By being too quick to dismiss Swampman, Lepore and Ludwig fail to appreciate not only that the fundamental tension within Davidson's views concerns triangulation, but also that those views can be made consistent by recognizing that utterances are radically interpretable just in case their utterers act as if those utterances were learned. My resolution to the tension within triangulation therefore enriches our understanding of how on Davidson's view language learning and radical interpretation should interrelate.

Finally, because any utterances that are meaningful according to (*i'*) would be meaningful according to (*ii*), my resolution allows Davidson to continue privileging the position of the radical interpreter. Davidson's multifarious arguments that invoke that position therefore remain intact. If the arguments worked before, then they work now—if not, not. Plus we have respected the essential connection between meaning and communication.

5. The Role of History

Rather than dismissing the Swampman thought experiment, as Lepore and Ludwig counseled, we have revised (*i*), which the thought experiment presupposes. Davidson's and Swampman's utterances are meaningful *both* because each is capable of being in the relevant interpretive situations (*ii*) *and* because each acts as if each has been in the relevant learning situations (*i'*). Both require that utterances be systematic and in basic cases environ-

mentally responsive. Successful interpretation presupposes that a speaker's utterances have those properties. Successful learning teaches a speaker to make utterances with those properties; the speaker's acting as if she learned what those utterances mean would result in her acting in the same way. *(ii)* is satisfied whenever and only whenever *(i')* would be.

Given all this, what role does that leave history in Davidson's views? For starters, neither *(i')* nor *(ii)* treats semantic facts about what words mean as constituted by historical facts about what their speakers learned those words to mean. Beings without causal histories can speak meaningfully. And beings with causal histories who do speak meaningfully do so in virtue of acting as if they have causal histories (regardless of whether they have them) and in virtue of their utterances being radically interpretable (regardless of whether they learned what their utterances mean). Put differently, *(i')* is a way of cashing out behaviorally, and so in a way amenable to radical interpretation, something that typically has its roots in history. As such it recognizes the significance of history for the project of interpretation while providing a way of moving beyond it. A speaker's acting as if she learned what her utterances mean allows the radical interpreter to employ triangulation in its ahistorical use to determine what those utterances mean. Being explicit about the connection between meaning and radical interpretability, as *(ii)* is, does much the same. Either way triangulation remains an ahistorical tool.

Nonetheless, though history is not constitutive of meaning, historical considerations are not divorced from Davidson's treatment of meaning altogether. As we saw in section 3, Davidson can maintain that past uses of triangulation teach language learners to utter their terms in particular ways, which could *cause* them to utter those terms as if they were learned and so in ways that are themselves radically interpretable. Davidson can allow a purely causal connection between meaning and history some of the time. Davidson's having learned that "house" means house causes him to utter "house" as if he learned that "house" means house, thereby satisfying *(i')*. Davidson's having learned that "house" means house also causes him to utter "house" in a way that the radical interpreter can determine that it means house, thereby satisfying *(ii)*. Historical facts can *cause* ahistorical facts, such as whether a speaker *acts as if* she has been in the relevant learning situations, and whether her utterances *are* radically interpretable. Only these ahistorical facts captured by *(i')* and *(ii)*, however, would be *constitutive* of semantic facts about what her utterances mean.

The role that history would play in Davidson's revised view, then, amounts to this. A speaker's having triangulated objects in the relevant learning situations would be *sufficient* for her utterances to be meaningful *only if* that historical use of

triangulation causes her to act as if she learned what those utterances mean. Davidson's historical use of triangulation could play this causal role in certain circumstances. A speaker's having triangulated objects in the relevant learning situations would *not*, however, be *necessary* for her utterances to be meaningful. Some speakers, like Swampman, have never been in any learning situation, yet because they act as if they have been in them they make meaningful utterances regardless. History's causal role would be limited. It would only occasionally apply.

In short Davidson can allow history to play a constitutive role in his account of meaning none of the time. He can allow history to play a causal role in his account of meaning some of the time. He cannot, however, allow history to play a causal role in his account of meaning all of the time. Hence, though I have placed Davidson on the ahistorical side of the meaning debate, I have nonetheless allowed him to peek over to the historical side from time to time.²⁵

Notes

¹ In the case of Quine I should say its "stimulus-meaning."

² As I explain in section 1, the radical interpreter first appears in Davidson 2001c, essay 2, and is formally introduced in Davidson 2001c, essay 9. Swampman appears in Davidson 2002, essay 2. Lepore and Ludwig (2007, 337–42) state the criticism. What I am calling "historical" and "ahistorical" Lepore and Ludwig call "diachronic" and "synchronic" (336). As they put it, the Swampman thought experiment treats meaning diachronically while radical interpretation treats it synchronically. I prefer my terminology because radical interpretation and language learning are both processes, and processes are themselves diachronic.

³ Lepore and Ludwig's own discussion of triangulation (2007, 404–12) is disconnected from what they say about Swampman and is silent on the ways in which triangulation is implicated in both Davidson's historical and ahistorical treatments of meaning.

⁴ See section 2.

⁵ See Davidson 2001c, essay 8, for Davidson's handling of utterances that are not statements.

⁶ See Fodor and Lepore 1992, 63–64.

⁷ For Davidson's early formulations of the principle of charity, see Goldberg 2004b. For this later formulation see Lepore and Ludwig 2007, 185–92.

⁸ "We want a theory that satisfies the formal constraints on a theory of truth, and that maximizes agreement" (Davidson 2001c, 136), where this would be agreement given the speaker's environment.

⁹ For recent discussion of Davidson's truth-theoretic semantics and an account of radical interpretation see Glock 2003, chs. 5 and 6, respectively, and Lepore and Ludwig 2007, parts I and II, respectively. Davidson also maintains that there can in principle be more than one charitable, Tarski-style truth theory for any language, and so more than one meaning for any of its utterances. This is his indeterminacy of interpretation thesis. For simplicity I bracket discussion of the

thesis here, though see note 13.

¹⁰ Of course Davidson cannot require that Swampman must have learned *all* its terms via past interaction for *any* of them to be meaningful. See section 2.

¹¹ Davidson 2002, essay 7, introduces triangulation. My discussion draws principally from Davidson 2001a; 2001b; 2002, essays 3, 8, 12–14; 2005b, essay 9.

¹² Davidson also claims that it is essential to what he calls the “primitive situation.” I hope to consider all three situations elsewhere.

¹³ For “house” to *mean* house is not for it to mean *only* house. Presumably, on Davidson’s view, radical interpretation can still allow utterances to have more than one meaning. (See note 9.)

¹⁴ See also Davidson (2001a, 293; 2002, 18, 29, 44, 117–22, 151, 202, 212–14). On Davidson’s view, though learning situations allow speakers to learn the meaning of individual terms, he himself claims that individual terms for ostensible objects can function as sentences (2002, 43, 86, 117, 20, 212). Moreover, as his Swampman thought experiment makes clear, learners ultimately learn how to combine terms into longer sentences.

¹⁵ See Davidson 2002, 149.

¹⁶ See Davidson 2002, 121, and Ramberg 2001, 230.

¹⁷ I discuss Davidson’s arguments against scheme–content dualism at length elsewhere (Goldberg 2004a).

¹⁸ I discuss this argument more fully elsewhere (Goldberg 2003).

¹⁹ While this argument has elements of historicism in it—Davidson at times (2002, 203, 212) makes language learning central to it—he also claims (same pages) that appealing to *actual* communication (which, for Davidson, presupposes interpretation) is required to respond to the skeptic. (See Pagin 2001 and Verheggen 1997.)

²⁰ For discussion of Davidson’s unified theory (*sans* discussion of triangulation) see Lepore and Ludwig 2007, ch. 16.

²¹ I am unsure at precisely what moment, on Davidson’s view, *U* becomes meaningful. If it becomes meaningful *while* being learned, then (*i*) should read: “For any speaker *S* with any utterance *U*, *U* is meaningful iff *S* is *or* has been in the relevant learning situations.” A term would then be meaningful at any time just in case its speaker at that *or* some prior time has been in the relevant learning situations. Either way meaning remains sensitive to history, and learning remains essential to meaningfulness. For simplicity I shall leave (*i*) as stated above.

²² The closest that Davidson gives to an example of this indirect use occurs when, as we saw in section 2, he maintains that “[f]or someone to think or say that the cat is on the mat there must be a causal history of that person that traces back, directly or indirectly, to the triangular experiences” (2001a, 293). Presumably he would allow that the content of “mat” can be determined indirectly via appealing to other words whose content was determined directly via triangulation, perhaps words such as “floor,” “covering,” etc.

²³ Davidson does say that “Swampman simply needs time to acquire a causal history that would make sense of the claim that he is speaking” (2002, 19, n. 3). But that is just to say that Swampman needs time to *learn* what its utterances mean. Admittedly most of the time speakers would assume that Swampman knows what its utterances mean, and so would not teach him what they mean in a learning

situation. Nonetheless there would still be occasions on which Swampman is introduced in a learning situation to new terms. Swampman could be in a museum, watching a play, or having commodities pointed out to him at a market. Swampman might not be in as many of these triangular learning situations as a child would be, but like adult speakers such as ourselves it would be in some. Since a language learner need not learn *every* term via triangulation, Swampman not need to learn every term in that way either.

²⁴ Nor does everyone else share Davidson's (2002, essay 2) view that Swampman's utterances are meaningless in the first place. Though Dretske (1996, 1999), Fodor (1994, 117), Millikan (1984, 1996), and Putnam (1981, 1998) share it, the first two do so only grudgingly. Neither Antony (1996), Guirguis (2004), nor Levine (1996) shares the view at all. Nor do Lepore and Ludwig, who are right that "most people without a philosophical theory to defend will readily suppose that Swampman does mean by his [*sic*] words, on the whole, what we mean by them" (2007, 339). Above I offered one source of this supposition: Swampman means by its words what we do, because Swampman and we can coordinate our behavior via those words.

²⁵ Thanks go to Matthew Burstein, Mark LeBar, James Petrik, Matthew Rellihan, Deborah Smith, Ásta Sveinsdóttir, and several anonymous reviewers. (Errors as always remain with me.)

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