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Commonsense Realism and Triangulation

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Abstract Realism about the external world enjoys little philosophical support these days. I rectify this predicament by taking a relatively pragmatist line of thought to defend commonsense realism; I support commonsense realism through an interpretation and application of Donald Davidson's notion of triangulation, the triangle composed of two communicators coordinating and correcting their responses with a shared causal stimulus. This argument is important because it has a crucial advantage over the often used abductive argument for realism. My argument avoids unwarranted conclusions, whereas the abductive argument is "inflationary" because it reaches beyond the limits of evidence for its realist conclusion. To illustrate the problems of the abductive argument and motivate my Davidsonian approach, I take a brief look at the abductive argument for realism in Frederick Will's work.

Keywords Realism · Triangulation · Davidson · Truth · Objectivity · Constructivism

Introduction

Realism about the external world enjoys little philosophical support these days. This is odd considering how many of us hold it to be commonsense. Frankly, external world realism has never enjoyed much philosophical support. Idealism, phenomenalism, instrumentalism, and social constructivism have all, at times, challenged realism, but the specter of skepticism is persistently ready to contest the legitimacy of a realist worldview. If we cannot be assured of correct or reliable epistemic access to an external world, why suppose there is (or is not) such a world? We should rather remain indifferent to those metaphysical speculations, or so says the skeptic.

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In this paper I take a relatively pragmatist line of thought to defend *commonsense realism* against the skeptic; I take a close look at Donald Davidson's notion of triangulation to support commonsense realism. A popular line of thought from the neo-pragmatist camp and those loosely associated with that camp is to ignore the skeptic because the skeptic either holds wrong presuppositions (e.g., representationalism—Cf. Rorty 1979; Rouse 1996), misunderstands the source of our knowledge (e.g., non-naturalistic interpretations—Cf. Quine 1969, 1981), or mistakes the nature of our practices (e.g., failure to see the prerequisites of experience or communication). However, instead of ignoring the skeptic here, I give the skeptic her due and formulate an argument for commonsense realism rather than presuppose that it is the case.

I defend commonsense realism in both its metaphysical (CR_M) and epistemic (CR_E) theses:

(CR_M) Objects, properties, and relations exist independently from the beliefs we have about these things and the languages and concepts we use to describe them.

(CR_E) We are able to have epistemic access to these objects, properties, and relations.

These are minimalist theses because they do not claim much about the kinds of objects, properties, and relations that exist independent of us—only that they are of the kind that exist independent of us and can be known. In other words, the content of reality is not predetermined by CR_M and CR_E.

These theses are also quiet on the conception of truth they entail, though some may disagree. Some may find that commonsense realism is close enough to "Metaphysical Realism" to warrant Hilary Putnam's critique.[1] As Putnam describes, Metaphysical Realism is the view that objects, properties, and relations exist independently from our beliefs *and* that these objects, relations, and properties would exist in the categories and kinds we find them no matter if humans existed or not. Putnam's trouble with this kind of realism is that it cannot help but employ a correspondence theory of truth and that correspondence theory is nonsense given that we cannot extract our concepts from what we consider rationally acceptable to believe is of and in the world; objects, properties, and relations are not independent of us (Putnam 1981, 134). This leads him to reject Metaphysical Realism.[2] But this is a hasty judgment on *commonsense* realism since it is not clear that this kind of realism must utilize correspondence theory. Since CR_M and CR_E neither provide predetermined answers to how objects, properties, and relations exist independently from the beliefs we have about them nor how we have epistemic access to the external world, we cannot determine what the nature of truth is from CR_M and CR_E, whether correspondence or otherwise. CR_M and CR_E only state that true beliefs about these objects, properties, and relations are within our reach; they do not state what makes our beliefs true, if anything *makes* them true. Therefore, the work I do

[1] Putnam coins "Metaphysical Realism" in Putnam (1977).

[2] He endorses a post-Kantian "internal" realism in Putnam (1981), but due to the representationalism embedded within internal realism, he now settles on a Jamesian direct realism (Putnam 1995).

here is to explain what general notion of truth (and objectivity) fits well and is defensible with CR_M and CR_E.

Before I outline the structure of my argument, I recognize that some believe that addressing ontological and epistemic theses in tandem unnecessarily complicates the issue of commonsense realism. Those like Michael Devitt believe that commonsense realism is strictly an ontological thesis and that the epistemic issue is a separate matter (Devitt 1991). In effect, the realist should assent to CR_M and ignore CR_E (unless separate considerations motivate CR_E). But this gives an awkward result that we should avoid. If we assent to CR_M and ignore CR_E, we would believe that there is an external world consisting of independently existing objects, yet we would be ignorant, *as realists*, of whether we can *know* if those objects exist. Speaking strictly, Devitt's realist would not be interested in evidence or explanations that would convince her that there is an external world, but she would still believe that there is one. I call this an awkward result because it separates the realist's belief in an external world from the realist's beliefs about epistemic access to that world; this undercuts the main reason why one would come to a realist position in the first place. It is because of one's daily experiences—causal interactions, experiences of object permanence, the stability of properties and relations, and possibilities of discovering new things about objects—that realism is an initially attractive and plausible position. Our beliefs about these experiences are beliefs about epistemic access, and they cannot be extricated from our reasoning about ontology. Without epistemic access, there would be no reason to talk about realism. Thus, I argue that CR_E is a justified part of commonsense realism.

My thesis is that commonsense realism is well supported by a Davidsonian understanding of interpersonal epistemic contexts. I give an argument for realism through an interpretation and application of Davidson's notion of triangulation, the triangle composed of two communicators coordinating and correcting their responses with a shared causal stimulus.[3] This argument is important because it has a crucial advantage over the often used abductive argument for realism. My argument avoids unwarranted conclusions, whereas the abductive argument is "inflationary" because it reaches beyond the limits of evidence for its conclusion.[4] I infer no more than what can be learned from the triangulated context, so I will not make any inferences to the best explanation.

To illustrate the problems of the abductive argument and motivate my Davidsonian approach, I take a brief look at the abductive argument for realism in

[3] I might have used Robert Brandom's work in Brandom (1994) to frame my argument; indeed, Davidson and Brandom's work are rather close on the issues of interpersonal (or *I-Thou*, as Brandom likes to say) interpretive relations and perceptual externalism, the issues that matter most to my argument. But where Davidson gives perceptual externalism a center place in his epistemology by making it integral to interpersonal communication, Brandom focuses on his inferential semantics and he includes perceptual externalism primarily as a means to fend off linguistic idealism. For Brandom, the external world acts only to constrain our inferences and commitments. Because I find that Davidson captures the significance of externalism within interpersonal communication better than Brandom, I use only Davidson's work.

[4] I distinguish my argument for realism from "deflationary" realism in that I find some metaphysical conclusions warranted whereas deflationary realists do not. I say more about this later against Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Spinosa's analysis that Davidson's work yields only deflationary realism (Dreyfus and Spinosa 1999).

Frederick Will's work and show how he is guilty of an inflationist metaphysics and epistemology. Because of his inflationism, Will is unable to explain how we can know the external world. As an alternate strategy for realism, my argument avoids these inflationisms and gives a more plausible rationale for realism through social interaction.[5] One of the distinctive traits of my argument is that the realist standpoint is fundamentally a function of social enterprise.

Frederick Will Against Bizarre Fictions

There have been relatively few arguments for commonsense realism that have had much impact. Still, a common argument is "realism by default." Since there are no other games in town, an advocate may say, since there are no better worked out alternatives, realism remains the best choice, and it is certainly the best choice if we wish to preserve our concept of truth as a fixed notion. But I would hope that we want a better reason to believe in a realist position than that it is little above the fray of its competitors because of appeal. Idealists, phenomenalists, instrumentalists, and many social constructivists do not find appealing one or all of the notions of truth, falsity, and real existence, so appeal alone does not warrant realism. For this reason, realism by default has not gained much of a foothold.

The argument that has fared much better than "realism by default" is the argument from abduction. One philosopher who has made the abductive argument his own is Frederick Will.

In his 1969 APA presidential address, "Thought and Things," Will insists on the necessary interrelation between our concepts and the world, a robust commonsense realism (Will 1997c).[6] Much of Will's work is a reaction against Cartesian abstraction and a resurgent pragmatist plea to make concrete human practice the focus of philosophic inquiry. Not surprisingly, his approach to realism is through ordinary language analysis. Like John Austin, Frederick Waismann, Wittgenstein, and Leibniz, the issue Will takes up is the "open texture" of concepts, the phenomenon that our perceptual experience outstrips our concepts, descriptions, and identifications.[7] Will argues for the "essential incompleteness" of concepts, as Waismann calls it, that provokes questions about what we are supposed to say if outrageous circumstances present themselves to us. For example, what should we say when a house starts crying whenever a door is slammed? What should we say if a tree verbally expresses concern if a child falls while climbing its limbs? These scenarios certainly escape our concepts of 'house' and 'tree'. We could similarly consider Waismann's cat that grows gigantic or Austin's goldfinch that explodes, but the point

[5] I do not claim that my argument is the only plausible argument for commonsense realism, only that it does avoid inflation. Other plausible arguments for commonsense realism would have to do the same.

[6] See also Will (1997b, d).

[7] In the same vein, Nicholas Rescher recently remarks that the best argument for realism is our ignorance of the world rather than any knowledge we have of it. He writes, "What is perhaps the most effective impetus to realism lies in the limitations of human intellect, pivoting on the circumstances that we realize full well that our putative knowledge does *not* do full justice to the real truth of what reality is actually like" (Rescher 2005, 5).

is that when such occurrences happen—what Leibniz calls "bizarre fictions"—we do not seek ways to make concepts fit these odd happenings; we simply do not know what to say. As Austin says, "Words literally fail us" (Austin 1990, 361). The issue is not that concepts may need revising in the future because of their open-ended nature, but that such a separation occurs between words and the world in these bizarre fictions that we are stuck speechless. Will's abductive argument then goes like this: since the world has so remarkably few of these instances, this must say something about the nature of our successful linguistic practices and the world. The success our words and concepts have in our everyday practices must be because the world is not populated by these bizarre fictions and, thus, they must depend on the things in the world. There is no other way to explain linguistic success and this success cannot merely be a miraculous instance. Will writes, "Thinking is an activity which we engage in not only in the world of things, but by means of things in the world, supported and sustained by them" (Will 1997c, 14). And, consequently, we are only able to speak of the open texture of concepts because our thought is dependent on stable things out in the world. The stability of things breeds stability in thought and allows for our conceptual textures to be formed.

Therefore, Will ascribes to commonsense realism because the world remains independent of us, yet we know we have epistemic access to the world as evidenced by our words. Kenneth Westphal summarizes Will: "Our cognitive predicament is not one of establishing a link between our thoughts and their supposed objects, it is instead one of exploiting the links our thinking does and must have with things in order to discriminate the genuine characteristics of things" (Westphal 1998, 37). This is supposed to be a profound reversal of the Cartesian tradition. But inquirers may ask of Will how much of our concepts are due to thought and how much are due to things. Like William James, Will finds the question hard to answer much less hard to ask (Will 1997a, 97). They are for him inseparably fused. We simply cannot think without things.

Abduction and Inflationism

Will's abductive argument for realism, however, has trouble avoiding the problem of unwarranted conclusions. He assumes metaphysical conclusions that go beyond the evidence and employs an inflationary epistemology that fails to explain how we can know the external world.

In *The Scientific Image*, Bas van Fraassen deals a heavy blow to the abductive argument for scientific realism (Van Fraassen 1980). I briefly recap van Fraassen's argument to apply it in a slightly modified way to Will's use of abduction for commonsense realism.

The scientific realist claims that the increased instrumental reliability of methods and laws (e.g., modeling observable phenomena and predicting observable behavior) is evidence for the approximate (and not necessarily convergent) *truth* of successive theories. The reality of theoretical unobservables best explains empirical success; truth explains reliability. Among others, this is Richard Boyd's abductive argument for scientific realism (Boyd 1989, 1982).[8] In fact, without the existence of such

[8] See also Putnam (1975–6) and McMullin (1984).

entities, Boyd argues that the success of science is simply a miracle. Without scientific realism, we could neither say that successive theories are about the same things nor give an explanation for the success of science.

Van Fraassen does not deny that many theories enjoy instrumental success, and that this is something that can be (and even should be) explained, but he questions the realist's abductive conclusions. The "abductive" realist makes conclusions far beyond the limits of empirical evidence. For van Fraassen, we should rather stay true to the evidence and claim more meagerly that the success of theories is due to greater *empirical adequacy* and nothing more; this is the heart of his "constructive empiricism" (Van Fraassen 1980, 2001). The only reason we consider a particular theory over its rivals is that it turns out to be more reliable and better able to predict future behavior, and that this is all we need for explanation. The scientific realist wants to believe that there is a determinate reality that explains why there is greater empirical adequacy, but for van Fraassen the justification is just not there. There is no reason to suppose a realist explanation when empirical adequacy is good enough. Arthur Fine agrees, "If the phenomena to be explained are not realist-laden, then to every good realist explanation there corresponds a better instrumentalist one" (Fine 1986, 154). Unless the scientific realist risks circularity by appealing to illegitimate realist presuppositions, there are always less substantive, instrumental avenues for a sufficient explanation than appeal to realism via abduction. To deny this is either to confuse truth with reliability or to ignore warranted skeptical concerns. Even in explanations we give of past successful theories on which we build our current theories, we should not theorize a core structure that tracks a world that we progressively know, but only a structure that continually latches onto the causal features of a world that we can never know. Empirical adequacy says nothing of what the "real" world is like. Thus, Boyd's argument for scientific realism fails.

If we change the criterion of explanation, we can use van Fraassen's criticism of scientific realism against Will's abductive argument for commonsense realism. Since Will is already basing his argument upon observable phenomena that we normally experience, we cannot argue that empirical adequacy is a better explanation than realism for the success of our ordinary concepts. Certainly empirical adequacy and realism about observables are commensurate positions; even van Fraassen holds onto some kind of commonsense realism (Van Fraassen 2001, 157–160; 1980, 202). But if we shift our attention to *practical* adequacy instead of empirical adequacy as an alternate criterion of explanation, van Fraassen's general argumentative strategy works effectively against Will. Although Will appeals to realism as the best explanation for why our linguistic practices are generally successful, there is a less substantive, instrumentalist explanation available: the success of our concepts about objects and properties (even the success of our experiences) is measured by their practical use for us. There is no need to look for an explanation beyond the positive work our concepts and experiences do for the uses we give them. Any explanation that does go beyond practical adequacy is then unsupported by the evidence. This criticism should ring familiar to classical pragmatists, for it is their argument against speculative metaphysics (James 1991).

Van Fraassen labels scientific realism gained by abduction an "inflationary" metaphysic because it aims for ontological explanation beyond empirical adequacy (Van Fraassen 1980, 73). I have shown that Will's argument for commonsense

realism is guilty of the same kind of inflationism in terms of practical adequacy. In addition, Will is guilty of an inflationary epistemology because he never adequately explains how we have epistemic access to the external world.

To preface and see more clearly how Will's epistemology is inflationary, consider the coherence and correspondence theories of truth the realist could use to explain epistemic access to the external world. Historically, realists have avoided a coherence theory of truth because that would seem to land them too close to idealism or constructivism. If we must use our concepts to get to the truth of the real world, how can we be sure that we do not contaminate (or wholly constitute in thought) the existence and properties of objects with our concepts? For instance, to distance realism from constructivism, Boyd emphasizes that though we may be caused to adopt certain theories by various factors (e.g., reason, society, interests), the theories themselves do not constitute the causal properties or existence of real things in the world (Boyd 1989, 21–24). Boyd denies any conceptual connection between what is true and what we believe to be true. However, conceptual contamination should be a benign worry for the realist. In the post-positivist era, we should be aware that any kind of epistemic access will involve our theories and concepts; this is the lesson we learned from Quine. There are no magical, theory-free sense data to serve as an epistemic foundation (Quine 1951). Concepts do not contaminate. They are rather the necessary means to any understanding, even for the realist. What the commonsense realist should really worry about if she maintains the CR_M thesis *and* wants a coherence theory of truth is how she can know that her beliefs are *about* the external world and that they are *true*. There appears to be no means to break out of our coherent network of beliefs to access the world beyond those beliefs; the coherence theory insulates us. Of course, realists do not answer this worry because coherence theory is not the usual tactic they pursue to explain epistemic access to the external world. If realists try to explain epistemic access, it is typically through the correspondence theory of truth.

Unfortunately, the correspondence theory of truth fares no better than the coherence theory. The usual objection to correspondence theory is that if one accepts Boyd's realist presupposition to sever the conceptual connection between what we believe and what is true, how can we compare our beliefs to what is true to see if we get them right? There is no way to get beyond our concepts to check the correspondence relations between a belief sentence and the relevant piece of independent reality it is meant to correspond to for truth. George Berkeley, Otto Neurath, Carl Hempel, and Richard Rorty have all voiced this concern (Berkeley 1969; Neurath 1932–33; Hempel 1935; Rorty 1979). But Davidson reminds us that there is a deeper problem with correspondence theory (Davidson 2001d, 183). He recalls that C. I. Lewis challenges the correspondence theorist to locate the piece of the world that corresponds with a true sentence (Lewis 1946, 50–55). Presumably, the theorist would point to an object in the world if the sentence was about that object, but Lewis notes that the identification of any object must be indexed to the object's spatial and temporal locations as well. In short, every object must be relativized to its frame of reference, and this frame must be included in locating what the true sentence corresponds to in the world. Since the frame of reference must eventually include the universe as a whole, every act of locating what corresponds with a true sentence amounts to the same location: the whole universe. Yet, for the

correspondence theorist, the consequence is that she fails to locate discrete entities to satisfy the correspondence relation, and so she trivializes the relation. Thus, the correspondence theory fails to explain what in particular makes beliefs true. Considering together these two objections to correspondence theory, either one cannot locate what corresponds with a true belief or one locates too much so that every true belief corresponds with the same thing. Either way, the correspondence theory of truth does not help the realist explain how he conceives of epistemic access.

Will is aware, though, of the problems correspondence theory creates, or rather some of the ancillary notions surrounding it. For instance, explaining the success of a correspondence relation between a sentence and corresponding state of affairs "is not an isomorphism between some, say, linguistic product and some non-linguistic entity, but a correspondence between two linguistic products, a correspondence which, grammar being what it is, could not be otherwise" (Will 1997d, 25). Uttering the state of affair of the-pen-is-on-the-table is grammatically no different than uttering the sentence "the pen is on the table." Will calls these state of affair descriptions linguistic *Doppelgängers*, and they fail to get at the heart of correspondence theory, which is epistemic access to objective reality.

This is not to say that Will jettisons correspondence. In fact, it still takes center stage in his work because for Will a concern about truth *is* a concern about correspondence. His angle is to suggest that when we ask the question, "Correspondence with what?" that we do not get misled into believing that the *what* will be completely known or defined. Much like his notion of the open texture of concepts, Will appeals to the incompleteness in what we know about what corresponds with our sentences. As all of our concepts (e.g., ordinary, scientific, and philosophical) go through countless changes, so too do our conceptions of the world. These changes reflect that we do not know the world determinately. Therefore, in light of this incompleteness, we should liken correspondence to the mapping of a partially known planet. We construct partial representations of the terrain based on our best information, but these maps are always subject to refinement and revision, even in their most basic outlines. Yet, we should not think that the indeterminacy of our maps means that correspondence is a myth. Will writes, "The historical fact is that many incomplete, inadequate, and radically erroneous maps of the early explorers still count properly as maps of the same continent" (Davidson 2001d, 32). Likewise, when we consider ordinary objects, early cultures may conceive of particular observables in different ways than we do, but they are still about the same *things*. How does Will know that our culture and early cultures are referring to and conceiving of the same objects? He appeals back to his ordinary language argument against bizarre fictions. Our thoughts must already incorporate the things our thoughts are about. Otherwise we would not know how to use language; it would be a miracle that our language and the languages of early cultures work.

Will's explication of correspondence, however, skirts the question of whether correspondence is actually achieved or known. He uses a mapping metaphor to introduce incompleteness and indeterminacy into correspondence, but when it comes time to explain how it is that we know we are, in fact, corresponding to some thing, he relies on his abductive inference against bizarre fictions: we know that our concepts correspond to something stable in the world because that is the best

explanation for the success of our concepts. I have already shown that Will's abductive argument is guilty of an inflationary metaphysics and now he wants to use it support his epistemology. But if we cannot say that there *is* an independent reality based on abduction because of the lack of determinate evidence, then we cannot say that we *know* there is an independent reality for the same reason. We cannot know that correspondence is actually achieved because we at least need to be sure that there is something there. Thus, Will's mapping metaphor fails to shed light on explaining the epistemic component of realism; Will is guilty of an inflationary epistemology because he uses his inflationary metaphysics to explain his epistemology. His metaphysics is not adequate to explain the correspondence relation. Thus, Will's abductive argument fails to support commonsense realism.

To review, I show that Will uses abduction to argue for realism and he gets caught in inflationism. Van Fraassen rightly criticizes Boyd's scientific realism with an inflationary metaphysic because realism is not warranted by the evidence as an explanation for the success of science; instrumentalist explanations are enough. The same criticism applies to Will's argument for commonsense realism when we substitute practical adequacy for empirical adequacy. Instrumentalist explanations are sufficient to explain the success of our concepts of ordinary objects. Will is also guilty of an inflationary epistemology because he cannot explain how we can have epistemic access to the external world without simply presupposing it or relying on already illicit inflationist assumptions. Neither the coherence theory nor correspondence theory of truth offer reasonable explanations. Will sees complications with correspondence theory, but even with his alternate application of correspondence, he still does not offer an adequate explanation for epistemic access that does not already rely on his inflationary metaphysics. If there is to be an adequate argument for commonsense realism, I argue that it must avoid inflationism. I now turn to my argument for realism based on Davidson's notion of triangulation that does just that.

Triangulation and Commonsense Realism

In much of his later work, Davidson turned his attention to understanding objectivity, the possibility of error, and what it means to know (self-knowledge, knowledge of other minds, and knowledge of the external world). Central to these discussions is his notion of triangulation, the context of two people communicating in and about a shared causal stimulus, and the concept of truth, which he regards as a primitive concept operative in our actual practices. What I show here is how these two facets in Davidson's work are capable of sustaining a better argument for commonsense realism than the abductive argument. Whereas the abductive strategy looks to realism as the best explanation for our successful experiences and linguistic practices, my Davidsonian approach does away with explanations altogether, except for perhaps explaining why we do (unavoidably) hold onto commonsense realist positions in the first place. This argument for realism is not an inflationary metaphysic; it is rather a naturalized approach to understanding communication that studies what we do and what naturally arises out of what we do. And it is not an inflationary epistemology; our beliefs are not made true by anything. There is nothing to explain epistemologically. Because Davidson's epistemology is a social

externalism that requires at least two people communicating with each other about a shared causal stimulus, my argument suggests that commonsense realism is a social enterprise. My intent here is to apply Davidson's work to the issue of realism and not as a forum to critique Davidson to any sustained extent.

This argument for commonsense realism is a departure from usual interpretations of Davidson. Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Spinosa label Davidson as an antirealist calling his position "deflationary realism." Dreyfus and Spinosa argue that if Davidson is a practical holist, meaning that "we can get no perspective on our practices that does not already include things and no perspective on things that does not already involve our practices," then our true statements about the world refer only to the way we cope in our everyday practices (Dreyfus and Spinosa 1999, 52). They write,

> Since true statements about objects cannot imply *either* the dependence *or* the independence of objects *vis-à-vis* our practices, these statements must be understood as describing objects as they are in the only sense of 'are' that is left, which is the 'are' of ordinary situations. Thus we arrive at a deflationary view that repudiates both robust realism and idealist antirealism (Dreyfus and Spinosa 1999, 52).

Richard Rorty interprets Davidson the same and he also endorses the view (Rorty 1999).

It is not clear whether Davidson would have ever accepted "deflationary realism" of the kind Dreyfus and Spinosa describe. Certainly this kind of realism is quite meager in that one should refrain from ontological pronouncements beyond the context of the practices in which such pronouncements would be made. However, I find that it is too meager for what emerges from within the triangulation context, and this is what I show below. Thus, the Davidsonian argument I develop avoids the deflationism that Dreyfus, Spinosa, and Rorty attribute to Davidson, and it takes into account the social interaction within triangulation for a clearer argument for realism than by sole appeal to Davidson's practical holism.

In his own writing, Davidson eventually rejected realism. In "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge," Davidson once confessed that he was a realist about truth, a confession consistent with his long held view at that time that Tarski's theory of truth is a list of correspondence relations between sentences and states of affairs (Davidson 2001b, 138–140). For example, the Tarskian T-sentence, "Snow is white" is true if and only if snow is white, is one extension of the recursive characterization of truth for the English language. If true, the sentence "Snow is white" corresponds with the event that snow is white, and this is all that that sentence means. Since that time, however, Davidson came to reject all forms of realism for the stated reasons in the previous section that the correspondence theory of truth is unintelligible and for the reason that Putnam rejects metaphysical realism: one cannot separate one's concepts from an understanding of the external world. But while Putnam uses this insight to relativize truth to conventions and conceptual frameworks, Davidson links it to the fact that truth and belief are related (contrary to how a correspondence theorist would have it) because belief is intrinsically veridical, a conclusion that might seem to count against a wholly non-epistemic view of truth and, for Davidson, realism (Putnam 1980, x; Davidson 2001c, 156). That belief is

intrinsically veridical is a strongly contested idea by many because of the way Davidson sometimes argues for it (i.e., the omniscient interpreter argument) and the usual skeptical worries, but I offer a more viable understanding of it as we look at triangulation.[9] Davidson's mistake, however, is thinking that the idea that belief is intrinsically veridical counts against realism. Realism does require that the character of truth be non-epistemic, but the general veridicality of belief does not threaten this requirement as we will see.

Linking together truth and belief gives the appearance that Davidson favors an epistemic reading of truth. There are many epistemic theories of truth one could endorse. Coherence theories, like Neurath's, call a belief (and not just a sentence) true if it coheres with a body of beliefs through proper means of justification. Other epistemic theories of truth like Peirce's that make truth what a community would count as true *at the end of scientific inquiry* with ideal justification conditions or Putnam's that make ideal assertibility conditions *at this moment* the determinants of truth, all make truth isomorphic with justification. But this is not how Davidson conceives of truth (Davidson 2001d, 185–187). Any pure coherence theory of truth, he argues, makes truth something that we could lose, and that is unacceptable. What is true changes in Neurath's coherence theory if different patterns of justificatory relations emerge, and we should expect these relations to change as our epistemic practices change. But we should not expect what we take to be true to change if what we take to be true *is* true; our concept of truth fixes what is true across individuals, communities, cultures, and times. Davidson's problem with Peirce and Putnam is that in these ideal epistemic situations the possibility of error must still be present, countering the conditions of truth Peirce and Putnam define, or the conditions of truth are so high that they cease to be related to human capabilities. There are other epistemic theories, but Davidson is not interested in epistemic theories of truth for the simple reason that any given belief, whether held by an individual or by a community, could be wrong; this is the non-epistemic character of truth Davidson will not give up. To deny it is to "reduce reality to so much less than we believe there is" (Davidson 1990, 298–299). But neither will he give up thinking "that all our best-attested and widely held beliefs may be false" (Davidson 2001d, 189). He cannot absolutely separate truth from belief. Truth is, therefore, neither radically non-epistemic nor radically epistemic for Davidson.

How then should we view the concept of truth? In "Epistemology and Truth," Davidson writes in his concluding remarks, "All attempts to characterize truth that go beyond giving empirical content to a structure of the sort Tarski taught us how to describe are empty, false, or confused" (Davidson 2001d, 190). Tarski gave us T-sentences (e.g., "snow is white" is true if and only if snow is white) and Davidson interprets the set of all T-sentences in a particular language as an empirical theory of truth for that language—a theory created from, yet not isomorphic with, the concept of truth (Davidson 1990, 291–295). Therefore, if we want to learn more about the concept of truth, we should learn more about empirical content. Davidson did not explain at that time how the content of those empirical statements would be determined. That explanation came later in his notion of triangulation, a notion that explains empirical content as well as simultaneously explaining objectivity and how

[9] Arguments against Davidson's omniscient interpreter argument are many, and I agree that the argument is faulty. For a sample, see Vermazen (1983), Foley and Fumerton (1985), and Dalmiya (1990).

we should view the concept of truth in practice. In fact, for Davidson to explain either empirical content, objectivity, or truth is to explain them all; triangulation ties meaning, belief, and truth together. I will add to this list commonsense realism.

I lead into triangulation through Davidson's causal theory of meaning. For any general causal theory of meaning, the meaning of our observation sentences is tied to the causes that prompt those sentences. If I say, "There is a rock in front of me," the meaning of my sentence is determined by the relevant cause that prompts me to utter that sentence. What distinguishes some causal theories from others is what they take as the *relevant* cause, and there are many possibilities it would seem that could count as that cause. There is a causal chain stretching from my sensory firings to causal intermediaries to the object itself, and any of these might be the relevant cause for my belief. Some empiricists take sensory firings as the causally important factor, and like Quine, do so because it fixes locally how every observation sentence is generated (Quine 1960, 32–33). This makes it particularly convenient for a Quinean, naturalized epistemologist to stress cognitive science and behavioral studies to map the epistemic domain. Davidson calls this the *proximal theory of meaning* because it locates relevant causes close to the human body at our sensory receptors (Davidson 2005a). But Davidson finds troublesome how the proximal theorist handles questions of relevancy. What secures sensory stimulations as the correct relevant causes for beliefs? How much of the total cause is relevant for empirical content (Davidson 2005a, 2001g, 129–130)? Unfortunately there are no forthright answers for the proximal theorist to determine what secures relevancy in either case. Aside from Quine's interest to find causes that fit well with science, if we consider the individualistic context of one person observing a rock, no place along the causal continuum between the human body and the rock stands out as the relevant causal impetus for a belief that there is a rock, much less what part of the total cause matters for the content of that belief. There is a fundamental ambiguity in the notion of relevant cause for the proximal theorist, and until the theorist can clarify relevancy, her program will not progress much past mere positing. There is no way to fix empirical content, and thus, no way to secure the truth or falsity of an observation sentence. The proximal theorist is at a dead end.

At this point, Davidson steps in to suggest an alternate approach to determining the relevant cause for empirical content, the *distal theory of meaning*, and he accompanies it with his notion of triangulation. Unfortunately, many take Davidson to be offering here a transcendental argument for the possibility of communication because he describes the conditions of communication (Yalowitz 1999; Carpenter 2002; Bridges 2006). But they are, perhaps, interpreting him too uncharitably. In his essay, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," Davidson argues that conceiving of conceptual schemes radically different than our own does not make sense based on practical grounds. We do not know how to make such a leap in thought when it requires us to go beyond the constraints of thought (Davidson 1984). Davidson is being descriptive about certain practices and their implications for rationality; he is not making a transcendental argument here. Likewise, we should take Davidson's distal theory of meaning to determining empirical content (and ultimately triangulation) to be a matter of fact description of what takes place within interpersonal communication about shared causal stimuli and the implications that ensue. There is no need to talk of transcendental necessity.

To begin thinking about the distal theory or meaning and triangulation, imagine again the situation where I claim, "There is a rock in front of me." There are two key questions: (1) how do I know that my belief is about something external to myself, and (2) how do I know that my belief is true or false? To answer these, I might be tempted to appeal to past situations where I have encountered similar things that I have taken to be rocks. If I find in my comparison between past and present situations suitable similarity, then presumably I could claim to know that my belief that there is a rock in front of me now is true. This, however, begs the question because no matter how many past situations to which the present situation bears similarity, something may be amiss in the present situation that circumvents knowledge. A convincing hallucination and a dream of a rock are the clear examples where all of my past experiences cannot secure ample enough evidence for knowledge. In the case of a dream, I may be justified in believing that there is a rock in front of me based on past experience, but my belief is still false. Likewise, the proximal theorist cannot answer these questions because sensory stimulations may very well be similar in times when there are rocks in front of me and when they are not. Hallucinations would produce the same sensory firings as if there was one in front of me and, yet, there would be no rock.

Therefore, Davidson begins to answer these questions about empirical content and truth by appealing to a distal theory of meaning. Meaning is determined, at least in part, by the perceptual object of our belief, the distal object (e.g., the rock). The object itself is the relevant cause and constitutes the empirical content of our belief.[10] But to avoid counterexamples like hallucinations and dreams—for me to *know* that there is something external to myself that is the cause of my belief—I need something more than my own intentional behavior toward what I take to be the cause. I cannot answer (1) if I am the only perceiver. Therefore, I need another perceiver to exhibit a similar intentional behavior toward the rock who is also in communication with me. In this way, a triangle of communication emerges: a connection between me and the rock, between the other communicator and the rock, and between me and the other communicator.[11] These three intersecting lines isolate a common causal stimulus between the two communicators, in this case, the rock. Such an act of determinacy is made possible because both communicators react in similar ways towards the rock: we both react to the rock, and we both perceive that we both react to the rock. The relevant cause is determined by shared similarity relations and perceptual awareness of the other acting on those relations. Triangulation rectifies the ambiguity of the cause and is capable of determining that my belief of a rock in front of me is of something that is external to me (Davidson 2001g, 129–130). We see here how Davidson's distal theory of meaning and triangulation work hand-in-hand together.

All this goes to explain how we can know that our beliefs are about something not wholly constituted by our thoughts; this means that we cannot accept a radically epistemic theory of truth. We have answered (1), and now we

[10] Davidson shares this point with Tyler Burge's perceptual externalism (Davidson 2001e, 200).

[11] Davidson's notion of triangulation first appears explicitly in Davidson (2001f). Among other essays, triangulation plays central roles in Davidson (2001e, g, h, i).

are in position to answer (2) and see how triangulated interaction generates objectivity. Davidson writes,

> If you and I can each correlate the other's responses with the occurrence of a shared stimulus, however, 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. A grasp of the concept of truth, of the distinction between thinking something is so and its being so, depends on the norm that can be provided only by interpersonal communication (Davidson 2005b, 124).

To disambiguate Davidson's first statement, there is a difference between two communicators correlating the *ostensive* identification of a common cause, which is to answer (1), and two communicators correlating the *conceptual* identification of the cause, which is to answer (2). We know that the common cause falls under the concept of a rock, for example, because we are both communicators who identify the cause *as a rock*. In this way, the act of triangulation between communicators explains how the empirical content of beliefs is fully determined (Davidson 2001a, 12). Triangulation provides the means for both ostensive and conceptual identifications if the two communicators share the same language; here Davidson's distal theory of meaning and triangulation become inseparable. In this first statement, Davidson does not distinguish between the two kinds of triangulated identifications. But to continue with the quote, once the *conceptual* identification of the common cause is established, the ground is set for the determination of conditions that would satisfy what counts and would not count as a rock. And when these conditions are established, so too are the conditions established for the truth and falsity of our beliefs concerning what we take to be rocks. Thus, in times of triangulated agreement, we can be confident that our beliefs are true, and in times of disagreement, error is made possible because of failed expected agreement. Davidson writes, "What introduces the possibility of error is the occasional failure of expectation; the reactions do not correlate" (Davidson 2001g, 129).

To further this analysis, when we disagree, or in other words when someone is in error, extended networks of triangulation with more people can help determine the truth and falsity of our beliefs. The more triangulated agreements we secure, the more assured we can be in the truth of our beliefs. Likewise, the more disagreement I find my belief has with others, the more likely my belief is false. Hence, agreements and disagreements are made possible by the interpersonal norms established through triangulation, and these norms help us distinguish between what our beliefs are about and what is really the case because we are correlating with other communicators and a shared external world.

This is not a consensus model of truth, however, as it might seem because consensus does not intractably determine what is true and what is false. Davidson writes, "the point isn't that consensus defines the concept of truth but that it creates the space for its application" (Davidson 2001g, 129). The triangulation model allows us to apply a fixed notion of truth, that what we determine to be true or false applies to more than just the triangulation context; it applies to everyone regardless of their

context. But, importantly, the triangulated efforts of a few people or even of a whole consenting society does not fix the truth or falsity of any particular belief because we could always find that the veracity of that belief could change. Additional information or future contrary evidence could always mean that a belief we hold as true is more likely false or an idea previously held to be false is more likely true. Consenting society does not fix the truth or falsity of particular beliefs. Therefore, Davidson's conception of truth within triangulation is non-epistemic, though it is not associated with the correspondence theory of truth.

However, the conception of objectivity in this account, or rather the practice of producing objective beliefs in hopes of true belief, is epistemic. If we consider the concept of objectivity outlined above, it is not the logical positivists' God's eye point of view that forbids any "contaminating" influence of our beliefs, concepts, and interests in the determination of truth. Objectivity is rather constituted by socially coordinating our beliefs, employing our concepts, and applying our interests through shared similarity relations. Instead of whittling away human contact from objectivity, the triangulation model *requires* it. In this way, Davidson shares Putnam's goal to give truth a human face, but Davidson preserves the conceptual independence of truth at the same time. *We get to truth through human interaction, yet what is true remains something conceptually independent from us*. Truth remains non-epistemic, while objectivity is epistemic. These facets steer us away from subjectivism (an isolated individual cannot produce justified beliefs) and idealism (our beliefs are determined, at least in part, by the external world).

What we have discussed of triangulation is enough to give an argument for commonsense realism. Again, commonsense realism is the view that objects, properties, and relations exist independently from the beliefs we have about these things and the languages and concepts we use to describe them (CR_M), and we are able to have epistemic access to these objects, properties, and relations (CR_E). In the triangulation model, I have shown that our coordinated beliefs with a shared causal stimulus are about something not wholly constituted by our thoughts. In whichever way we describe and represent these shared stimuli, the fact remains that they still exist independently of us; this is CR_M. And with the epistemic account of objectivity I offer, the avenue of epistemic access is explained as an interpersonal endeavor within triangulation, all the while preserving the non-epistemic character of truth; this is CR_E. In other words, we get to a commonsense realist position not by eschewing human interaction, but by making human interaction a vital part of our account; this is the opposite conclusion of Dreyfus and Spinosa's deflationary realist interpretation of Davidson. Thus, commonsense realism emerges naturally from the context of triangulated communication.

To show contrast with the abductive argument for realism, this argument from triangulation does not employ an inflationary metaphysics or epistemology. Unlike Will's abductive argument that made use of an unsupported leap to metaphysical conclusions and an unexplained avenue of epistemic access to an external world, my argument for commonsense realism is an explanatory description of why we hold a commonsense realist view of the world. Nothing more is needed than to describe what happens in the triangulated context and explain its implications. Triangulated interactions explain both why we believe there is an external world as well as how we come to know it. The argument from triangulation is neither a transcendental

argument for what conditions must be present for our beliefs to be true or successful nor a version of inflationism.

Remember, however, that Davidson was wary of realism because of the intrinsic veridicality of belief. If belief and truth are tied together, does this count against a non-epistemic view of truth, a view that appears to be required by commonsense realism? If we consider how belief is generally veridical within triangulation, we will see rather how it does not disrupt the realist position.

Apart from his discussions of triangulation, Davidson argues that the possibility of disagreement rests on a host of already agreed upon beliefs (Davidson 1984, 196–197). We can only disagree, for example, about whether abortion is murder if we already agree on what is a fetus, what is the concept of murder, what are rights, etc. A foundation of agreement is also needed when particular beliefs are contested within interpersonal triangulation. For instance, it is only when we have already agreed upon beliefs about our environment (e.g., beliefs about the ground, the atmosphere, gravity, our respective locations to each other and the rock, etc) that we can engage in disagreement (or agreement) about the existence and nature of a rock in front of us. Meaningful disagreement about a particular belief requires an already established context of shared agreement, and this holds true even within triangulation.

At first blush, this may seem to address only the general agreement of beliefs and not veridicality. But the general veridicality of beliefs is already implied if we take advantage of what the context of triangulation produces. If triangulation means that we are creating norms of objectivity that tell us when our beliefs of particular things are more likely to be true or false, the foundation of beliefs that were already agreed upon by the two communicators must be true. In other words, the possibility of triangulation already relies upon a shared context of generally true beliefs between the communicators. For instance, I can always disagree about specific beliefs regarding a shared causal stimulus with another person, and I may end up holding a false belief regarding that stimulus. But for that disagreement to take place *about that* stimulus, a disagreement that is an objective determination, I and the other person must be generally right about the host of beliefs surrounding our thinking about the stimulus. Otherwise, the notion of objectivity about particular beliefs in triangulation is meaningless, but we have seen that it is not. Therefore, since the general veridicality of beliefs is already a part of triangulation, a process that naturally lends itself to a realist point of view, Davidson should not find this kind of tie between belief and truth a problem for commonsense realism.

On Constructivism

A critic might say that my resulting conception of commonsense realism is a fancy disguise for the antirealist strain of constructivism, the view that the only reality we can know is that which is represented by human thought. For my view of objectivity, we can only be objective about the world when we are in a triangulated context with another communicator; this means that whatever knowledge is gained from that context is knowledge gained through the application and corroboration of our concepts. The usual sense of commonsense realism, the critic may say, requires that

the world has a causal structure independent of our concepts *and* a way to determine the objectivity of our beliefs also independent of our concepts. Since the conception of objectivity espoused here is not independent of concepts, but rather in need of them, this account begins to look more constructivist than realist.

This charge of constructivism appears to be the implication William Child raises against Davidson if Davidson is taken at his word that what is natural in the world is "natural to us because it *is* natural—to us" and not how Child interprets realism that what is natural should be "natural *tout court*" (Davidson 2001h, 118; Child 2001, 34). Child then relieves Davidson of this perceived problem by arguing that Davidson is really more realist than Davidson thinks. He argues for this by focusing exclusively on the realist's contention that the world has an independent causal structure, an implication that does follow from Davidson, but also by leaving the issue of objectivity by the wayside. Objectivity ceases to be a relevant factor for Child because, he argues, we will never know which classification of natural kinds is objectively correct.

If the general thrust of Child's project is to show the realist side of Davidson, I am in agreement. But Child's conclusion comes at the expense of discarding objectivity altogether when determinate satisfaction conditions became impossible in his analysis. This illuminates his use of the positivists' notion of objectivity and his oversight to see the full potential of the triangulation context to produce objectivity. Child is right that if objectivity must be achieved apart from our concepts, we must discard it; without a God's eye point of view, the fabled absolutely impartial observer, that kind of objectivity is a myth. And if we were to insist on wedding CR_E with CR_M like I argued for earlier, thereby including the positivists' kind of objectivity within commonsense realism on Child's account, commonsense realism also becomes a myth.

However, solutions like Child's that try to hold a realist position without falling into a constructivist notion of objectivity are unnecessary. I have already shown above that through the use and application of our concepts, our beliefs in the triangulated context can be objective. Our beliefs, coordinated and corrected by other communicators with shared causal stimuli, are *about* the external world because those stimuli cannot be products of our own thought, even though we reach that conclusion through our thought. Triangulation embodies the application of a non-epistemic conception of truth (without employing a correspondence theory of truth) through the use of an interpersonally operated model of objectivity. My account of objectivity is constructivist because using our concepts is necessary for us to determine what we take to be true and false, but truth remains a non-epistemic category. Even though I argue for the commonsense realism position through the triangulated *context*, a context that might give one visions of Carnapian frameworks, there is no threat of smuggling in disguised antirealism (Carnap 1950). The antirealist could never claim that the assertions deemed as true internal to the context are true outside of the context. But that is precisely what I argue for: non-epistemic truth *produced* within the triangulated context is not *bound* by that context.

Thus, we should not accept the critic's assumption that realism and constructivism are mutually exclusive positions. Rather they can be commensurate, as I have shown using Davidson's notion of triangulation.

Conclusion

Commonsense realism does have adequate philosophical support. I have shown that the abductive argument is not a fruitful avenue to bear that support because its realist conclusion extends beyond the limits of evidence. Rather, the argument from triangulation is capable of bearing that support. It is an argument based on interpersonal interaction about a shared causal stimulus; the commonsense realist position naturally follows from social enterprise. Within the process of triangulation, the conception of truth is non-epistemic, while objectivity is an epistemic category, dependent on human thought for its application. This particular wedding of truth and objectivity enables us to understand commonsense realism as fused with a constructivist view of objectivity.

As for the skeptic who claims that we should remain indifferent to metaphysical speculations, the argument from triangulation for commonsense realism gives good reason to hold commonsense realism contra the skeptic. Yet, this is not a metaphysical *speculation*, but an explication of the implications of interpersonal interaction. The skeptic's mistake is to assume that all metaphysics, or all realist positions with more substance than deflationary realism, must be speculation. This need not be the case as this paper has shown. The skeptic had not yet considered triangulation.

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