10 Davidson and the new sceptical problem

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Introduction

In his more recent work Donald Davidson has attempted to address some traditional epistemological issues. We could see Davidson as interested in the question, 'How is knowledge possible?' Davidson's question, however, is not quite the traditional one. That was, rather, 'How is knowledge of the world possible?' The difference is that Davidson acknowledges from the very start that there are varieties of knowledge, and that one cannot understand how any one variety is possible unless one understands how all are. The three varieties of knowledge that Davidson identifies are these (1) knowledge of our own minds; (2) knowledge of the world; and (3) knowledge of other minds.

Davidson approaches things in a somewhat idiosyncratic manner. He points out that, although all three varieties of knowledge are concerned with the same reality, each differs in its mode of access to that reality. Given these different modes of knowing, it should be deeply puzzling why we take it that it is the same reality that is known in each way. This puzzle gives rise to the question, 'Why do we take it that it is the same reality that is known about in such different ways?' We can see this as a new way of approaching an old problem. This one question now takes the place of the several distinct sceptical questions that have traditionally dogged philosophers, in particular: 'Given the relative certainty a subject has with respect to her own mind, how is it that she can be said to know about the world of bodies?'; or 'Given the subject's observations of the behaviour of another, how can she come to have knowledge of the mind of another?' This new question makes no presuppositions about the relative superiority of one kind of knowledge over another, nor does it address itself to each variety of knowledge separately. The new question challenges our assumption that, when we know, it is the same reality that is known about in several different ways.

The application of this question is particularly clear in the case of our knowledge of our own and other minds. Here philosophers have long appreciated the differences between the first- and the third-person attributions of psychological states. It is generally the case that we are aware of our own mental states without reference to our bodies. And it is also the case that there is an asymmetry between our awareness of our own mental states and our knowledge of another's mental states. There is some dispute over whether it is correct to refer to awareness of our own mental states as knowledge, but Davidson is quite clearly content to do this. For him, the asymmetry here is between the mode of access the subject has to his own mental states (direct or immediate), and the access he has to the mental states of another (indirect or in some way with reference to the other's behaviour). And the sharp asymmetry here leads the sceptic to ask, 'Why do we take it that we are referring to the very same type of state in our own case and in the case of the other?' Another form this sceptical question can take is this, 'How can we defend our assumption that our psychological predicates are unambiguous?'

The new question which Davidson puts forward has its ancestry in the traditional questions put forward by the sceptic. The ancestry of the question, in the case of other minds, is as follows. We begin where Descartes begins, with certainty about the contents of our own mind; we then attempt to explain how it is that we come by knowledge of another's mind. Some philosophers then point out that this approach has at its core a solipsistic metaphysics. It is pointed out that our mental concepts are such as to apply in one way to ourselves and in quite another to others. In other words, these philosophers point out that the real question is not, 'How do I know that another has a mind?'; but rather, 'What is my concept of mind?' There is, then, a shift away from epistemological and towards conceptual issues. Davidson believes that, while it is correct to insist on this shift, the shift itself is insufficient to quiet the sceptic. The sceptic will simply press on and ask how we know that our mental predicates are not ambiguous. Davidson believes that it is incumbent upon philosophers who take this way with the sceptic to explain why it is that our mental concepts have the asymmetry that they have. Only an answer here can finally silence the sceptic. And to answer this question would be to answer the question why we take it that we know about the same reality in such different ways. Despite its ancestry in traditional sceptical questions, we could refer to this as a new sceptical question.

The new sceptical problem may also arise even if one is careful to avoid the Cartesian starting point. Many, post-Wittgensteinian, philosophers hold that reference to behaviour is essential to our use of mental predicates. The new sceptic will point out that this is false to first-person ascription of mental states; we do not appeal to behaviour in the attribution of mental states to ourselves. We are back again with the problem of the asymmetry which exists in our ascription of mental states to ourselves and to others. And once we recognise this asymmetry, the sceptic will ask how we know that it is the same (type of) state that is being ascribed in both kinds of case.

As Davidson writes in one place, 'The Wittgensteinian style answer may solve the problem about other minds, but it creates a corresponding problem about our knowledge of our own minds' (Davidson 1987a/Cassam 1994, p.
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45. Davidson holds that the way to silence this sceptic is to offer an explanation of this asymmetry.

According to Davidson, this new sceptic is one whose questions have been overlooked by certain philosophers. One philosopher whom Davidson accuses of overlooking this sceptic is P. F. Strawson. Davidson writes, ‘Strawson may have correctly described the asymmetry between first and other person ascriptions of mental predicates, he has done nothing to explain it’ (Davidson 1984c, p. 106). As we have seen, the sceptic may demand an explanation of why we take it that these mental predicates are unambiguous. Davidson concludes that Strawson has failed to address the very source of our scepticism about other minds.

In this paper I shall argue that Davidson has here been unfair to Strawson. Contrary to Strawson, it could be argued that Strawson has addressed the very source of our scepticism about other minds. Where Davidson pursues an explanation of the asymmetry inherent in our mental concepts, Strawson might talk of a more detailed description of our concepts here. At the end of the day, their projects are complementary. Or so I shall argue.

It is important to emphasise that it is not the asymmetry per se that is the problem. That there is an asymmetry here is an essential feature of the phenomenon. Davidson’s point is that the asymmetry, in combination with the unambiguous nature of the words used to express mental concepts, needs explanation. We need an account of this asymmetry that makes it clear why we continue to say it is the same concept being applied under such different circumstances. From now on I shall refer to this as the ‘asymmetry problem’ and shall mean by this the problem of the unexplained or unaccounted for asymmetry.

It is my aim in this paper to try to understand Davidson’s way with the asymmetry problem. In order to do this, I want to look at Strawson’s approach in the light of Strawson’s work in this area. It is my hope that by placing the work of these two philosophers side by side, so to speak, a certain insight will become available concerning the Davidsonian project. Also, I shall suggest that the differences between the work of Davidson and Strawson are not as great as Davidson presents them to be. In particular, I shall offer some reasons for seeing the new sceptic described by Davidson as just the same old sceptic with which philosophers have been long familiar.

Strawson and the asymmetry problem

Strawson made recognition of the asymmetry between first- and third-person uses of psychological predicates the cornerstone of his work on persons. Despite the familiarity of Strawson’s work I shall quote at some length from Part i, Chapter 3 of Individuals because we find there an extremely clear description of the asymmetry which is thought to cause such problems.

It is a necessary condition of one’s ascribing states of consciousness, experiences, to oneself, in the way that one does, that one should also ascribe them, or be prepared to ascribe them, to others who are not oneself. This means not less than it says. It means, for example, that the ascribing phrases are used in just the same sense when the subject is another as when the subject is oneself. Of course the thought that this is so gives no trouble to the non-philosopher: the thought, for example, that ‘I am in pain’ means the same whether one says ‘I am in pain’ or ‘He is in pain’. The dictionaries do not give two sets of meanings for every expression which describes a state of consciousness: a first-person meaning and a second-person meaning. But to the philosopher this thought has given trouble. How could the sense be the same when the method of verification was so different in the two cases – or rather, when there was a method of verification in the one case (the case of others) and not, properly speaking, in the other case (the case of oneself).

(Strawson 1974, p. 99)

Strawson has here not only identified the asymmetry between first- and third-person uses of psychological predicates, but has also noted the unambiguous use of these predicates. Having made these observations about our use of psychological predicates, Strawson goes on to ask, ‘If it is a condition of the self-ascription of psychological predicates that one can be able to ascribe them to others, how is it that we are to understand the ascription of these predicates to others?’ It is in answer to this question that Strawson points out that if we take it that what we are ascribing to another is some sort of Cartesian ego, then we will not be in a position to make this ascription. Strawson suggests that the way out of this dilemma is to accept the primitiveness of the concept of a person, and to accept also that this concept is logically prior to that of an individual consciousness.

What I mean by the concept of a person is the concept of a type of entity such that both predicates ascribing states of consciousness and predicates ascribing corporeal characteristics, a physical situation etc. are equally applicable to a single individual of that single type.

(Strawson 1974, pp. 101–2)

Accepting the primitiveness of the concept of a person does make it possible for us to ascribe psychological predicates to another, because we have accepted that a person has, as well as states of consciousness, corporeal characteristics. In other words, the ascription of psychological predicates to another requires that we identify the other as a person, and we do that by noting the other’s behaviour. The upshot of this line of thought is that a sceptical problem about other minds does not – cannot – arise. Strawson’s way with the sceptic is to show him the error of his ways. What Strawson
show is that the sceptic (in this case the sceptic about other minds) implicitly denies the structure of our language. He claims to be using our words for depression, or pain, or fear but, at the end of the day, he cannot be. For to use our words is to accept that these are words that apply in one way to others and in another way to oneself. So the sceptic cannot simultaneously accept this and raise a problem about others. But this is what the sceptic does, or claims to do. It is Strawson's belief that the sceptic need not be answered; the sceptic needs to be shown the way in which his scepticism presupposes the existence of a conceptual scheme which denies his problem.

This gives a more profound characterization of the sceptic's position. He pretends to accept a conceptual scheme, but at the same time quietly rejects one of the conditions of its employment. Thus his doubts are unreal, not simply because they are logically insoluble doubts, but because they amount to the rejection of the whole conceptual scheme within which alone such doubts make sense. (Strawson 1974, p. 35)

Even if the sceptic were to concede this point, he might not retreat defeated. It is at this point that the new sceptical question can be raised. Assuming that our conceptual scheme is as Strawson claims it to be, we appear to have solved an apparent problem about other minds at the expense of getting things wrong in our own case. For what the sceptic has conceded is that the ascription of psychological predicates to another is necessarily dependent upon the observation of the other's behaviour, but now the sceptic points out that this is utterly untrue to the facts of self-ascription. How can we reconcile the facts of first-person ascription of psychological predicates with those of the third? This is, in effect, the new sceptical question introduced above.

Strawson is as alive to the new sceptical question as he is to the old one. His response to the new sceptical problem is to point out that, once again, the sceptic has refused to acknowledge the 'unique logical character of the predicates concerned' (ibid., p. 108). His point is that the logical character of psychological predicates is that they have both first- and third-person uses: in the third-person case their use is associated with behaviour while this is not the case in their first-person use. About the use of psychological predicates he writes:

To learn their use is to learn both aspects of their use. In order to have this type of concept, one must be both a self-ascriber and an other-ascriber of such predicates, and must see every other as a self-ascriber. . . . If there were no concepts answering to the characterization I have just given, we should indeed have no philosophical problem about the soul; but equally we should not have our concept of a person. (Strawson 1974, p. 108)

Strawson's way with the sceptic is the way of the descriptive metaphysician who is 'content to describe the structure of our thought about the world' (ibid., p. 39). In the face of the sceptic, Strawson sets out the structure of our thought and our language. In connection with our use of psychological predicates what he points out is that there is an inherent asymmetry in our use of these predicates. However, Davidson considers this passage from Individuals and concludes that Strawson has not addressed himself to the source of scepticism about other minds. On the face of it, Davidson seems simply to have missed the point of Strawson's way with the sceptic. Davidson will reply that Strawson has managed to ward off the old sceptic, but he has nothing to say to the new one. The new sceptic may acknowledge the asymmetry in our use of psychological predicates, but will insist that, without some explanation of this asymmetry, we are left with the question as to why we say we have one concept here instead of two. In other words, the new sceptic may simply say that descriptive metaphysics is not enough.

In response to this new sceptic, Strawson may point out that descriptive metaphysics is all we can have. Furthermore, he might point out that the new sceptic is not, despite his protestations to the contrary, really acknowledging our conceptual scheme. The new sceptic claims to accept the asymmetry in our use of psychological predicates, but insists that such an asymmetry points to an amiguity in our concepts. But isn't this the sceptic once again attempting to deny our conceptual scheme? And isn't this precisely what the sceptic is always trying to do? In connection with the sceptic Strawson writes:

We may, if we choose, see the sceptic as offering for contemplation the sketch of an alternative scheme, and this is to see him as a revisionary metaphysician with whom we do not wish to quarrel, but whom we do not need to follow. (Strawson 1974, pp. 35-6)

In support of this description of our conceptual scheme Strawson cites (1) the fact that dictionaries do not give two sets of meaning for every expression which describes a mental state; and (2) the fact that we do not have two different learning processes, one associated with self-ascription and another with other-ascription of mental states. The new sceptic, just like the old one, is simply refusing to acknowledge our conceptual scheme, refusing to acknowledge the way our language works.

It may still be thought that Davidson, and the new sceptic, have a point here. It may be that descriptive metaphysics is not sufficient to repel the sceptic. Perhaps what we need to do that job is not just a description, but an explanation, of our practices. It is, after all, an explanation that Davidson claims is missing, from Strawson's work. So perhaps the difference between Davidson and Strawson is simply this: that the former does not, while the
latter does, take it that descriptive metaphysics is sufficient to silence the sceptic – old or new. I shall be returning to this question in the final part of this chapter. For now I want to observe that, despite the emphasis on description over explanation, Strawson does not deny that we can say more – describe further the conceptual scheme with which we operate.

Towards the end of Chapter 3 of Individuals we find Strawson attempting to reach a little further. The bulk of his work up to that point is aimed at helping us (and the sceptic) to see that, in order to accommodate the asymmetrical character of our psychological predicates, we must accept the logical primitiveness of our concept of a person. Having done this, Strawson then asks how it is possible that we ascribe the very same thing to ourselves, not on the basis of observation, that we ascribe to others, on the basis of observation. In effect this is the question, ‘How is the concept of a person possible?’ Strawson writes: ‘we may still want to ask what it is in the natural facts that makes it intelligible that we should have this concept’ (ibid., p. 111). With this question I take it that Strawson is attempting to extend the description we have thus far given of our practices. He is attempting to extend the description in a way which will help us to understand further the nature of this asymmetry that we find in our concepts. In effect, Strawson is attempting to reply to the new sceptic: a deeper understanding of our concepts should help us to show the new sceptic why we say that psychological concepts are unambiguous. Now Strawson offers only the ‘beginnings of fragments of an answer’ to the question he poses (ibid.), but it is a beginning that I believe that Davidson overlooks.

Strawson first draws attention to the class of predicates which, while they imply intention, do not indicate any very precise experience of sensation. Furthermore, predicates of this class indicate a range of bodily movements. Examples include ‘going for a walk’, ‘playing ball’ and ‘writing a letter’. What is instructive about this sub-class of psychological predicates is that, although it is true that one does not need to observe one’s own behaviour to ascribe it to oneself while one does need to observe the other’s behaviour in order to ascribe it to another, one nonetheless feels a minimum reluctance to concede that what is described in these two different ways is the same’ (ibid.). In other words, although these predicates do exhibit an asymmetry, the pull in the two directions is so to speak, less great. This is because of the ‘marked dominance of a fairly definite pattern of bodily movement in what these predicates ascribe’ (ibid.). Such predicates show us a little of the common territory occupied by both uses of our predicates. ‘My writing a letter’ and ‘your writing a letter’ both necessarily involve the movement of our bodies. I see your movements as actions, I interpret them in terms of intentions; I see your writing a letter as a token of the type of bodily movement which in my case I know to be the writing of a letter without the observation of the movement of my body. I see (I understand) your actions, and I know my actions. Strawson summarises his brief remarks thus:

What I am suggesting is that it is easier to understand how we can see each other, and ourselves, as persons, if we think first of the fact that we act, and act on each other, and act in accordance with a common human nature.

(Strawson 1974, p. 112).

This forms part of the natural facts, the recognition of which is meant to help us get some way with the question, ‘How is the concept of a person possible?’ Understanding this is what helps us to understand the concept of a person which operates in our conceptual scheme. Strawson’s remarks here suggest that what we observe is that there is seamless flow from my actions in the world, actions towards another and the recognition of the actions of another. Where the Cartesian goes wrong is in thinking that this seamless flow can be broken up into separate moments. Where the behaviourist goes wrong is in thinking that he can omit part of the flow. What Strawson has pointed out is that, if you try to break up this flow, the moments you are left with are unintelligible. They are unintelligible because they no longer have any place in our conceptual scheme. When we understand our conceptual scheme in this way, what we find is that there is no room for a sceptical question either about the mind of another or about our own mind. The reason is that, on this picture of things, there is no logical gap for the sceptic to exploit between the subject and her world and, hence, between the behaviour and the mind of another. That it is this gap that the sceptic about other minds is exploiting is nicely captured by Davidson when he writes, ‘If there is a logical or epistemic barrier between the mind and nature, it not only prevents us from seeing out, it also blocks a view from the outside in’ (Davidson 1991a, p. 154). To paraphrase Davidson, we could say, following Strawson, that if there is no logical or epistemic gap between the subject and her world, it relieves us of a problem of seeing out; it also relieves us of a block in our view from the outside in.

Strawson and Davidson are each, in their own way, concerned to deny the existence of any barrier which the sceptic can exploit. And each wants to do this while at the same time fully acknowledging the asymmetry which exists in our use of psychological predicates. Furthermore, both of these philosophers are well aware of the temptation to overbalance in the direction of behaviourism in the attempt to correct the mistakes of the Cartesian solipsist. It is acknowledgement of these facts that Davidson thinks leads to what I have been calling the new sceptical problem. What we need, according to Davidson, is an explanation of the facts that will satisfy this sceptic. Faced with these facts, Strawson writes that we need is a ‘reconciliation’ between these two uses of psychological predicates, and it is Strawson’s belief that reconciliation is achieved once we recognise the true character of our concepts here, the true structure of our language (Strawson 1974, p. 107). The solipsist and the behaviourist each neglect in their own way an aspect of our use of psychological predicates.
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Where Strawson looks for a reconciliation, Davidson looks for an explanation. On this I shall say more below. For now it is sufficient to note that both Davidson and Strawson see the problem in much the same way. Both are primarily concerned with the sceptic, and in particular with the sceptic about other minds. Both acknowledge the asymmetry between the first- and third-person uses of psychological predicates, and both understand the way in which the sceptic can exploit this asymmetry. Yet despite the similarities in the work of Strawson and Davidson, we find that Davidson holds that Strawson has offered no solution to the new sceptical problem. Why this is so is something I shall discuss further later. First I shall outline Davidson’s proposal for explaining the asymmetry in our first- and third-person use of psychological predicates.

Davidson and the asymmetry problem

As we saw above, Davidson holds that what we need to silence the new sceptic is an explanation of the asymmetry in our use of psychological predicates. This explanation must be designed to make it clear why, despite this asymmetry, we hold that we are ascribing the same states to ourselves as to others. One interesting thing to note about Davidson’s project is his unself-conscious talk about kinds of knowledge. Davidson takes it as axiomatic, one could say, that we know certain things, about ourselves, about the world, and other people. His concern is to say how this knowledge is possible. This is a traditional philosophical concern, but Davidson’s approach is not the traditional one. One thing that is distinctive of the traditional approach is that it addresses the problem of each kind of knowledge separately. Thus, we find, for example, some philosophers are largely concerned with the question how our knowledge of the external world is possible, while others appear more concerned with the question of our knowledge of other minds.

What marks out Davidson’s work here is that he sets out to solve the problem of all three kinds of knowledge at once. The important thing, according to Davidson, is that we understand that knowledge of others and of the world is possible because all three kinds of knowledge work together. We cannot solve the problem of knowledge if we aim to solve for each kind of knowledge individually.

Looking at the problem as a whole Davidson makes the following observation: ‘Of course all three varieties of knowledge are concerned with aspects of the same reality; where they differ is in the mode of access to reality’ (Davidson 1991a, p. 155). The different ways in which we come to know about the world are these: (1) I know my own mind without appeal to investigation or appeal to evidence; (2) I know the world around me through the mediation of my senses; and (3) I know what is going on in the mind of another by noting his or her behaviour. What we need, according to Davidson, is a ‘general picture’ of knowledge. Without such a picture we should be deeply puzzled that we hold it is the same world that is known in such different ways. The question he raises is how we can have knowledge of this single reality. In the case of minds, it is this question that leads to the asymmetry problem.

At the heart of Davidson’s response to this question is a belief that these different kinds of knowledge must hang together. Furthermore, we must accept that it is not possible to reduce one kind of knowledge to any other. Attempts either to separate problems of knowledge, or reduce one kind to another, leave us, in the end, with the sceptic: ‘Scepticism in various of its guises is our grudging tribute to the apparent impossibility of unifying the three kinds of knowledge’ (ibid., p. 154).

Having firmly rejected the independence of each kind of knowledge, Davidson sets out to explain how they must hang together. He represents our knowledge as a triangle, with each angle essentially dependent upon the other two as in Figure 10.1.

While still insisting that no one kind of knowledge is reducible to any other kind, Davidson does allow that the line that connects one’s own mind with other minds forms what he calls a ‘base line’ in this triangle. He holds that what establishes this base line is communication between persons. Understanding this base line is fundamental to understanding how all knowledge is possible.

It is tempting at this point to question whether, in his acceptance of a base line, Davidson is truly avoiding a reduction of one kind of knowledge to another. The worry is increased when one finds Davidson writing in one place that knowledge of other minds is ‘conceptually basic’. Davidson presumably does not mean by ‘conceptually basic’ a concept to which one can reduce other concepts, for the reduction of one sort of knowledge to any other sort is something which he explicitly rejects. The point is surely that,
McDowell here appears to be reading Davidson as saying that subjectivity has conceptual priority over objectivity, something McDowell believes is mistaken. I believe that a correct understanding of what Davidson calls the 'base line' will reveal that McDowell has indeed misunderstood Davidson here. A base line is simply a starting point; no conceptual priority need be implied. To indicate this, let me outline how the base line is established and how its establishment yields all three varieties of knowledge.

The line which runs from knowledge of my mind to knowledge of another's mind presupposes belief – my belief and another's belief. Davidson holds that to have a belief, a creature must do more than discriminate among different aspects of the world. To have a belief, a creature must grasp the difference between true and false belief, that is a creature must have the concept of objective truth. It is at this point that Davidson calls on Wittgenstein's work on the imposibility of a private language. Davidson writes, 'The source of the concept of objective truth is interpersonal communication. Thought depends on communication' (Davidson 1991a, p. 157).

Davidson adopts the idea that thought depends upon communication and develops it. He gives the following account of how communication proceeds: in communication one speaker understands the words and sentences of another; that is, in communication we find ourselves in the position of interpreters of the words and sentences of another. As interpreters we are faced with the following problem: what a person means is in part a function of their beliefs. Yet we have just been told that what persons believe is a function of what their words and sentences mean. Our dilemma is how to break into this circle of belief and meaning. The key to solving this dilemma, suggests Davidson, is to find those sentences which the speaker holds true and then apply a principle of charity. This principle can be seen to be composed of two distinguishable principles: that of coherence and that of correspondence. The principle of coherence encourages the interpreter to discover/attribute a certain degree of logical consistency to his subject; the principle of correspondence encourages the interpreter to find his subject rational and largely correct in his beliefs about the world.
What seems basic in this an observer (or teacher) finds (or instills) a regularity in the verbal behaviour of the informant (or learner) which he can correlate with events and objects in the environment. This much...is a necessary condition for attributing thoughts and meanings to the person observed. For until the triangle is complete connecting two creatures, and each creature with common features of the world, there can be no answer to the question whether a creature, in discriminating between stimuli, is discriminating between stimuli at the sensory surfaces or somewhere further out, or further in. Without this sharing of reactions to common stimuli, thought and speech would have no particular content – that is no content at all....We may think of it as a form of triangulation: each of two people is reacting differently to sensory stimulation streaming in from a certain direction. If we project the incoming lines outward, their intersection is the common cause. If the two people now note each other's reactions (in the case of language, verbal reactions), each can correlate these observed reactions with his or her stimuli from the world. The common cause can now determine the contents of an utterance and a thought. The triangle which gives content to thought and speech is complete. (Davidson 1991a, pp. 159–60)

So the world does constrain what we can say about it, but our knowledge of the world is necessarily conditioned by our knowledge of other minds. As Davidson writes: 'A community of minds is the basis of knowledge, it provides the measure of all things' (ibid., p. 164). We are back with an intersubjective standard, we are back with interpretation. When we give up the dualism of schema and world, we do not give up the world; rather, according to Davidson, we 're-establish unmediated touch with the familiar objects whose antics make our sentences and opinions true or false' (Davidson 1974a/1984a, p. 198). The base line is now firmly connected to the third angle in the triangle of knowledge. When one turns one's back on the dualism of scheme and content, one finds that the world that makes our sentences true is the upshot of communication between persons. Whichever way one turns the triangle that represents our knowledge, we find that we can only make sense of one angle (kind of knowledge) by reference to the other angles (kinds of knowledge). So, while we find that our knowledge of the world depends on the communication between persons, we also find that the communication between persons depends on our recognition that we occupy a shared world. Furthermore, it is not possible to speak of the prepositional contents of our minds until we acknowledge our mind's interaction, in communication, with another mind. We come full circle, or rather, Davidson has shown how each of the three angles of the triangle depends essentially on the other two angles. Furthermore, Davidson has given an account of our knowledge of the world which explains why we can be assured that our view of the world is 'in its plainest features, largely correct':

The reason is that the stimuli that cause our most basic verbal responses also determine what those verbal responses mean, and the content of the beliefs that accompany them. The nature of correct interpretation guarantees both that a large number of our simplest beliefs are true, and that the nature of these beliefs is known to others. Of course many beliefs are given content by their relations to further beliefs, or are caused by misleading sensations; any particular belief or set of beliefs about the world around us may be false. What cannot be the case is that our general picture of the world and our place in it is mistaken, for it is this picture which informs the rest of our beliefs, whether they be true or false, and makes them intelligible. (Davidson 1991a, p. 160)

So the final result of Davidson's work is that global -- or Cartesian -- scepticism is not possible. But the label 'Cartesian scepticism' is, as is well known, misleading. Descartes himself was not a sceptic. According to Descartes, knowledge is possible, its possibility rests on the existence of a non-deceiving God. One could represent Descartes' account of knowledge as a triangle with knowledge of God in the place of knowledge of other minds. Contrast the Cartesian and the Davidsonian representations of knowledge we could say that, where Descartes relies on God to guarantee our beliefs about the world, Davidson relies on other speakers. What reliance on other speakers brings with it is a chain of knowledge that proceeds through speakers and out to the work. It is not to be that for all his interest in mind, Descartes was virtually silent on the subject of other minds. However, for Davidson other minds are the key to all knowledge.

Where Descartes relies on God to ensure the veridicality of our beliefs, Davidson relies on the nature of belief itself. The nature of belief is such that we can be assured, not only that the world exists, but that most of what we believe about it is true. And it is the nature of belief that makes interpretation possible. What reflection on our concept of belief leads us to understand is that knowledge of one's own mind and of the world is essentially dependent upon knowledge of other minds. The triangle of knowledge is complete, but only if we understand the way one angle depends on the other two.

It should now be clear why I think that McDowell is mistaken to say that Davidson builds the concept of objectivity out of a 'self-standing' concept of subjectivity. The line of communication between subjects is the starting point of all knowledge for Davidson, but this does not commit him to saying that the subjects involved in communication are 'self-standing' as subjects in independence of the world. To say this would be to miss out the way in which these two angles of the triangle which represent knowledge of
own and other minds depend upon the third angle which represents our knowledge of the world.  

Once we recognise how our three kinds of knowledge fit together, the observed asymmetry between first- and third-person attributions of mental states and events is no longer a problem. Despite the fact that we know about our minds in a way different from the way we know about the minds of others, we can be assured that what we know in these different ways is the same because what we know is intersubjectively given. 'The thoughts we form and entertain are located conceptually in the world we inhabit, and know we inhabit, with others' (Davidson 1991a, p. 165). We may have different modes of access, but the reality we have access to is a single reality for all.

Davidson and Strawson

By showing how our three varieties of knowledge fit together, Davidson takes it that he has explained the asymmetry which exists between first- and third-person attributions of mental predicates. Without such an explanation, Davidson believes that we are still prey to the sceptic who may ask why we think that a predicate which is applied sometimes on the basis of observation and sometimes not is unambiguous. And it is Davidson's contention that Strawson, whom he sees as having done nothing to explain the asymmetry (although a great deal to describe it), has not yet managed to banish the sceptic.

As I have said, I think Davidson is uncharitable to Strawson. Furthermore, by his insistence that only further explanation will finally silence the sceptic, Davidson appears to be rejecting Strawson's method of descriptive metaphysics. He appears to be saying that merely describing our concepts and showing how they work is insufficient to silence the sceptic who can continue to press his scepticism. We need, according to Davidson, to dig deeper.

But I am not sure that this is the right way to see what Davidson is doing. He is not so much digging deeper as casting his net wider. It seems to me that Davidson is very much the descriptive metaphysician. What Davidson does is describe the nature of belief. The description shows us that belief is such as, ultimately, to take in other persons and the world. According to Davidson what examination of the nature of belief shows is, in sum, the following: to have a belief requires having the concept of objective truth and to have the concept of objective truth requires that one is in communication with others. Davidson then describes how communication proceeds. What we learn here is that it is through communication with others that our thoughts come to have their content. What Davidson has done is describe the concept of belief in such a way as to show us that knowledge of another mind is conceptually central to all our knowledge. We now understand better how various of our concepts interrelate and we understand the relative importance of some of them. And this strikes me as an exercise in descriptive metaphysics.

And just as with Strawson's excursion into descriptive metaphysics, Davidson's is such that it leaves no room for the sceptic. But there is a notable difference in the way these two philosophers react to the sceptic. Davidson insists that only further explanations can finally silence the sceptic, where Strawson writes of our need to find a reconciliation of the facts of first-person ascription with those of the third person. Strawson offers a description of the way our concepts work, and tries to get the sceptic to see that he cannot both accept this description and persevere with his scepticism. He does not, to my knowledge, write of giving explanations which will silence the sceptic. It is not so much that the business of giving explanations is in conflict with that of descriptive metaphysics, but rather that giving an explanation plays into the sceptic's hands.

Roughly speaking, one can discern in the work of philosophers two different attitudes towards the sceptic. On the one hand, there is the way of Descartes who listens patiently to the sceptic's arguments and then sets out to show him where he goes wrong. One could say that Descartes sets about giving an explanation of how knowledge is possible, which is intended to silence the sceptic. On the other hand, there are those philosophers - Strawson is among their number - who insist that, in the very question the sceptic asks, something is amiss. Their attitude is not one of engagement with the sceptic, but of pre-empting his question.  

If we ask which of these two ways Davidson takes with the sceptic, the reply is not at all clear. With his emphasis on explanation, it is tempting to see him on the side of Descartes. The temptation is reinforced when we read the following:

How about...[the] admonition to stop trying to answer the sceptic, and tell him to get lost? A short response would be that the sceptic has been told this again and again over the millennia and never seems to listen, like the philosopher he is, to want an argument. (Davidson 1983a/1990, p. 136)

Despite the fact that it looks as if Davidson is here setting himself on the side of those who attempt to engage with the sceptic, we also find him writing just a few lines later:

I did not set out to 'refute' the sceptic, but to give a sketch of what I think to be a correct account of the foundations of linguistic communication and its implications for truth, belief and knowledge. If one grants the correctness of this account, one can tell the sceptic to get lost. (Davidson 1983a/1990, p. 136)

If we alter the concepts under discussion, what we now have is a way with the sceptic reminiscent of Strawson. Apparently Davidson does not draw a firm line between engaging with the sceptic and pre-empting him. But I am not sure it is necessary to blur this line. I want to suggest a way of
placing Davidson more firmly on the side of Strawson and his way with the sceptic.

One way to place Davidson more firmly on the side of those whose aim is to pre-empt the sceptic is to drop all talk of explanation from his account of knowledge. If we do this, we could say that Davidson may be right to point out that Strawson has not described enough — rather than that he has not explained enough — completely to cut off the sceptic about other minds. That sceptic may very well be in a position to ask why we take our mental predicates to be unambiguous, although I do wonder whether one can't simply point out that the use to which we put these predicates already signals the absence of ambiguity. Nevertheless, the more we can say which might help to silence the sceptic the better. And if we turn our backs on the enterprise of explanation, what we can say will be by way of a further description of how our concepts work and are interrelated. This, it seems to me, is precisely what Davidson does. The concepts which interest Davidson are those of truth, knowledge and belief. He holds that a correct understanding of the nature of belief will reveal to us an understanding of both truth and knowledge. If Davidson is right about the way our concepts work here, there is no room for the sceptic’s questions concerning the asymmetry in our use of mental predicates.  

In the concluding paragraph of Individuals, Strawson writes,

> It is difficult to see how such beliefs [beliefs which we all hold and of which Strawson attempts in his book to give a 'rational account'] could be argued for except by showing their consonance with the conceptual scheme which we operate, by showing how they reflect the structure of that scheme.  

(Strawson 1974, p. 247)

I now want to show that Davidson’s project here is complementary to Strawson’s own attempts in Individuals to describe things further. What may obscure what I see as an overlap between the work of Davidson and Strawson is that Davidson is concerned with the nature of our concept of belief, while Strawson is concerned with our concept of a person. The asymmetry that Davidson is concerned about is what Strawson describes as built into our concept of a person.

Now Strawson does ask, as we have seen above, how the concept of a person is possible. It is at this point that Strawson is attempting to widen the net of his description. And it is in doing this that I see Strawson as reaching in the direction of what Davidson (erroneously in my opinion) calls an explanation. And he poses this further question in an interesting way. Strawson asks: “What is it in the natural facts that makes it intelligible that we should have this concept?”

Remember, that the concept that Strawson is looking to make more intelligible is that of a person. I want to suggest that we can see the overlap in the work of Strawson and Davidson if we ask a similar question with respect to Davidson’s favoured concept that of belief. We might ask, “What makes the concept of belief possible?” And following Strawson we could rephrase this question thus, “What is it in the natural facts that makes it intelligible that we should have this concept of belief?” Now I think that the direction Strawson set us in is to find the answer to his question could usefully be used to help us find an answer to the question I have posed on behalf of Davidson. Let me recall Strawson’s suggested beginning for an answer here:

> What I am suggesting is that it is easier to understand how we can see each other, and ourselves, as persons, if we think first of the fact that we act, and act on each other, and act in accordance with a common human nature.  

(Strawson 1974, p. 112)

The key to understanding how this observation of Strawson’s can help us further to understand our concept of belief is this: our actions — linguistics and otherwise — are what form the subject matter of interpretation. Or, to put it another way: when we interpret, what we interpret is the behaviour (actions) of subjects. Interpretation, remember, is at the heart of our concept of belief, and, hence, at the heart of all our knowledge. So if we want further to understand our concept of belief, if we ask what makes it intelligible that we should have the concept that we have, we could say we have the concept of belief that we have because we are creatures who ‘act in the world, and act on each other, and act in accordance with a common human nature’.

If this is acceptable, then what we find is that our concepts of persons and of belief link up via our concept of action. This is not surprising, perhaps, but it may prove illuminating when stated in this way. (We are of course here working with a very tight-knit bunch of concepts.) There is much to be said about our concept of action, but that is a story for another day. One thing we can say now is that, as action is meant to help us further to understand our concept of a person, whatever else we say about action we can see that this is a concept that involves bodies as well as minds. The activity of a subject is engaged in the world and with other persons. And this is precisely Davidson’s point. It is because we are subjects among other subjects who act in the world that all knowledge is possible.

Notes
1 In particular, Davidson 1991a.
2 For an explanation of why not, see Strawson 1974, p. 402.
3 For the purposes of this discussion I do not want to look too closely at Strawson’s idea that ‘the behaviour-criteria one goes on are not just signs of the presence of what is meant by the P-predicate, but are criteria of a logically adequate kind for the ascription of the P-predicate’ (Strawson 1974, p. 106). For now it is sufficient to accept the reference to behaviour here.
4 Recall Davidson: "The sceptic will reply that though Strawson may have correctly described the asymmetry between first and third-person ascriptions of mental predicates, he has done nothing to explain it" (Davidson 1984c, p. 109).

5 I do not mean to suggest that, in asking for further explanation, Davidson is to be taken to be a revisionary metaphysician. My point is, rather, that by insisting on further explanation, Davidson is playing into the hands of the sceptic. For more on this, see below.

6 Davidson writes: "I know, for the most part, what I think, want, and intend, and what my sensations are. In addition, I know a great deal about the world around me. I also sometimes know what goes on in people's minds" (Davidson 1991a, p. 153).

7 This phrase occurs in the summarising paragraph which appears at the start of Davidson's paper (Davidson 1990s/1991, p. 111). It may be that, in order to avoid misunderstanding here, Davidson would do well to refer to the base line as conceptually central rather than as conceptually basic.

8 In Davidson 1983, Davidson links the dualism of scheme and content with another - the dualism of the subjective and the objective. For a careful discussion of the interrelation between these two dualisms, see Child 1994.

9 Descartes' interest in mind was almost exclusively an interest in his own mind. That this creates a problem about other minds is not something Descartes appears to have appreciated. For a discussion of this, see Avramides 1996.

10 Indeed, it is an interesting question where, in McDowell's view of things, our knowledge of other minds comes in.

11 Another philosopher who takes this way with the sceptic is McDowell. McDowell writes: "The aim here is not to answer sceptical questions, but to begin to see how it might be intellectually respectable to ignore them, to treat them as unreal in the way that common sense has always wanted to" (McDowell 1994, p. 13).

12 The alternative to giving the sceptic an explanation need not be dogmatic assertion. By giving the description he does of our concepts Davidson is making it clearer why there is no room for scepticism. But showing why there is no room for scepticism is not the same thing as giving an explanation to the sceptic that will silence him.

13 I would like to thank A.W. Moore and P. Snowdon for their helpful comments on this chapter.

REPLY TO ANITA AVRAMIDES

Donald Davidson

Anita Avramides is generous both to me and to Peter Strawson, and she thinks I would have done well to have been fairer to Strawson myself. I agree. She has persuaded me that Strawson said more to 'explain' the asymmetry between the mode of access people have to their own mental states and their mode of access to the mental states of others than I had appreciated.

Since Avramides says quite a lot about philosophical methodology, let me say something about my own attitude. In judging the work of others, I am more interested in style, imagination and originality than in method. In general I dislike discussions of 'philosophical method', particularly

dogmatic views about 'how philosophy should be done'. My ears prick up when someone tells me I am operating in a Kantian, Wittgensteinian, Hegelian... way, but I would never consciously try to emulate any of these worthies. I have not set out to be a descriptive or a revisionary metaphysician, though I guess my tendencies are descriptive. (But do I really think a philosopher could change our conceptual scheme, given that I am sceptical about the very idea of a conceptual scheme?) It seems to me, as it apparently does to Avramides, that, in practice, at least in the present context, there is no significant difference between description and explanation.

I have never set out to answer, refute or show empty those scepticisms which question our knowledge of the external world or of other minds; I think that any philosophical view that invites such scepticism must be wrong (though not necessarily uninteresting). It has therefore come as something of a surprise to me to discover that if I am right in my theorising about how our beliefs and utterances come to have the contents they do, scepticism cannot get started. However, I do not for a moment think this is the only right or possible way to treat scepticism; I am being autobiographical rather than methodological.

One does not have to be a sceptic to be puzzled by what seem to be aspects of our thought. I have long been puzzled by the question as to what it is about human behaviour, verbal and otherwise, that makes it possible for us to figure out (as we surely do) what others think and mean, want and intend. As my ideas about this developed, I began to wonder (among a lot of other things) how the three sorts of knowledge we have (of the contents of our own minds, the contents of the minds of others and the nature of the natural world) fitted together. 'Three Varieties of Knowledge' (1991a) tries to answer this question. I do not, as Avramides does, see this piece as primarily an attempt to answer one or another form of scepticism, but of course I don't mind if it is taken in that spirit.

Now to address the central question Avramides raises, concerning the asymmetry between first-and third-person attributions of attitude. Avramides sees that it is not enough to disarm the sceptic to say that 'our conceptual scheme' employs the concept of a person as an entity with both mental and physical states ('to whom both sorts of predicate apply'), or to insist (correctly) that many predicates just do have the property that they can be self and other ascribed. For the sceptic can simply question whether these concepts (assuming they have these characteristics) have any application. Plenty of predicates are intelligible (are part of our 'conceptual scheme') and have no application (there are no centaurs, witches, griffins, etc.). Now Avramides says that Strawson, like me, wants more of an account ('towards the end of Chapter 3 of Individuals'). Having accepted the asymmetrical character of psychological predicates, Strawson 'asks how it is possible that we ascribe the very same thing to ourselves, not on the basis of observation, that we ascribe to others, on the basis of observation'. This is just the question I addressed in 'First Person Authority' (1984c), and it sounds to me like