

# DAVIDSON AND QUINE'S EMPIRICISM

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## 1. Introduction

Donald Davidson rejects empiricism. That is, he does not deny that 'all knowledge stems from the senses,' if this simply means that the senses have a crucial *causal* role in our acquisition of knowledge. Rather, the target of his criticism is a specific semantical view. This is the view that meaning is essentially tied to sensory impressions or some similar form of subjective evidence; a view he thinks has remained central in Quine's modern version of empiricism, due to the role it assigns to stimulation of sensory receptors. Davidson suggests that this view is questionable since it allows for a radical kind of skepticism.

However, Davidson is not only skeptical towards the view that sensory stimulation provides the basis for *meaning*. He has also raised some doubts about the idea that such phenomena provide the basis for *knowledge*. For example, he rejects the idea that the acceptance of an observation sentence could somehow be justified by the stimulations that normally cause it. This in turn leads him to doubt the thesis that observation sentences have a privileged epistemological status; a thesis that is central to all forms of empiricism, Quine's included.<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this paper is to examine and comment upon Davidson's criticism. I shall defend Davidson's claim that the view that ties meaning to some private form of evidence yields skepticism, and try to explain why Davidson's

own view is not open to a similar challenge. I shall also discuss whether Davidson has provided any reasons for being skeptical about the thesis that observation sentences have a privileged epistemological role. I shall argue that a moderate version of this thesis survives Davidson's attack, and indeed obtains support from his views on meaning and interpretation. In particular, I shall argue that Quine's version of the thesis that observation sentences have a privileged role is untouched by Davidson's criticism.

## 2. The Proximal View and Skepticism

The semantical view that provides the target of Davidson's criticism is, of course, 'the proximal view;' a doctrine that is contrasted with his own—'distal'—view. Davidson has urged that both these views could be discerned in Quine's writings, but that the proximal view has been predominant (at least in Quine's earlier writings).<sup>2</sup> That claim may perhaps be doubted. However, since the significance of Davidson's criticism goes beyond this exegetical issue, I shall not pursue it.<sup>3</sup>

The proximal and the distal views differ as to which role is assigned to sensory stimulation. According to the proximal view, the meanings of a speaker's sentences are *determined* by such stimulation (in a sense to be indicated below). However, notice that sensory stimulation is supposed to *directly* determine only the meanings of observation sentences.<sup>4</sup> The meanings of further sentences are rather determined by how they are conditioned on observation sentences.<sup>5</sup> Notice also that Davidson does not take the proximal view to imply that observation sentences are in some sense 'about' stimulation or sensory receptors.

In order to bring out how the proximal view yields skepticism, Davidson takes the perspective of an interpreter. Let us say, with Quine, that the stimulation a speaker undergoes on a given occasion is the (temporally ordered) set of all those of his sensory receptors that are triggered on that occasion,<sup>6</sup> and that the stimulus meaning of a given observation sentence for a given speaker is the ordered pair of the set of all stimulations that would prompt him to accept the sentence and the set of all stimulations that would rather prompt dissent.<sup>7</sup> Now, Quine has suggested that a field linguist should translate observation sentences ‘by significant approximation of stimulus meanings,’ and that he assembles evidence for translating the native’s sentence ‘Gavagai’ with his own sentence ‘Rabbit’ by seeing ‘that the native will assent to “Gavagai?” under just those stimulations under which we, if asked, would assent to “Rabbit“.’<sup>8</sup> In accordance with these suggestions, Davidson takes the proximal view to imply that an interpreter, in trying to uncover the meanings of a speaker’s observation sentences, should settle for a translation manual such that, for each of the speaker’s observation sentences, the manual assigns a sentence of his own with (approximately) the same stimulus meaning.

Now, the point Davidson argues is that the strategy just sketched allows the linguist to attribute massive error. For it implies that he can correctly interpret a speaker’s observation sentences (and thus also the speaker’s further sentences) by assigning meanings to them such that they are, in many cases, *false* when the speaker accepts them (by the linguist’s lights). This suffices, in Davidson’s view, to show that skepticism looms, since it may legitimately prompt the linguist to doubt about his *own* beliefs. The reason is that ‘once he notices how globally

mistaken others are, and why, it is hard to think why he would not wonder whether *he* had it right.<sup>9</sup> This is the sense in which the proximal view yields skepticism

But *why* is the proximal view supposed to allow an interpreter to attribute massive error? The point of departure of Davidson's argument for this claim is the assumption that external objects and events may trigger different patterns of receptors in different persons. This allows us to imagine the following scenario. Suppose (1) that a speaker is prompted to accept his sentence 'Gavagai' by the same patterns of stimulation as those that prompt an interpreter to accept his sentence 'Rabbit.' Suppose also (2) that the speaker accepts 'Gavagai' in the presence of warthogs, while the interpreter accepts 'Rabbit' in the presence of rabbits. Given (1), the proximal view implies that the interpreter should translate 'Gavagai' with 'Rabbit.' However, given (2), this means, in effect, that an interpreter could correctly translate a speaker's observation sentence with a sentence of his own such that the speaker is regularly disposed to *reject* his sentence on the occasions on which the speaker *accepts* his sentence. In other words, the proximal view seems to imply that an interpreter could correctly interpret a speaker's observation sentence by assigning a meaning to this sentence such that the speaker systematically accepts it on occasions on which it is false (by the interpreter's lights).<sup>10</sup>

Now, this argument raises several worries. One obvious worry is how to make sense of (1)--that a speaker is prompted to accept his sentence 'Gavagai' by *the same* patterns of stimulation as those that prompt an interpreter to accept his sentence 'Rabbit.' In view of the obvious fact that people do not share receptors,

this might be difficult. Of course, we might try to account for (1) by assuming an approximate *homology* of receptors, as Quine indeed did at one point.<sup>11</sup> But in more recent writings, Quine does not wish to rely on that assumption. Indeed, Quine thinks that it is doubtful if such homologies really exist, and cites Darwin in support of this skepticism.<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, as for intersubjective likeness of stimulation, he says that ‘we can simply do without it.’<sup>13</sup> Hence, in so far as the proximal view relies on such a notion, it cannot be attributed to Quine.

Does this mean that Davidson has been flogging a dead horse? It does not. For Davidson’s point could be made also if we look away from the problematic intersubjective case, and focus instead on an *intrasubjective* one.

As I indicated above, the proximal view implies that the meaning of a speaker’s observation sentence is determined by its stimulus meaning. Thus, the proximal view might plausibly be taken to imply that if the stimulus meaning of a speaker’s observation sentence is unchanged over a period of time, so is its meaning. Now, suppose that an interpreter notices that (1\*) a speaker’s observation sentence S had the same stimulus meaning before and after a time *t*, although (2\*) the speaker before *t* was disposed to reject S in the kind of circumstances in which he, after *t*, is disposed to accept S, and vice versa. For instance, we may imagine that he has undergone some eye disease, so that light reflected by certain (say, red) objects after *t* trigger the same of his receptors that used to be triggered by other (say, green) objects, or, more speculatively, that he was placed in a vat at *t* by some playful scientists. This is not a *likely* case, of course, but it does not seem impossible in a relevant sense.

In any case, given (1\*), the proximal view implies that if S was correctly translated by one of the interpreter's sentences before *t*, this sentence represents the meaning of S also after *t*. However, given (2\*), for any of the sentences that the interpreter before *t* might have been disposed to translate S with, the following seems to hold: Either the interpreter is disposed to reject this sentence in the kind of circumstances in which the speaker *after t* accepts S. Or the interpreter is disposed to reject this sentence in the kind of circumstances in which the speaker *did, before t*, accept S. Thus, on the assumption that any of these sentences correctly translated S before *t*, the interpreter is led to conclude *either* that the speaker *was* (before *t*) disposed to accept S when it was false, or that the speaker *is* (after *t*) disposed to accept S when it is false. So he is led to conclude that it is possible for a speaker to systematically accept one of his observation sentences on occasions on which the sentence is false.<sup>14</sup>

Notice that the point of this reasoning is not that it is in itself implausible to hold that the speaker in the above example systematically is in error about the sentence after *t*. Maybe that conclusion is justified by the fact that the speaker has undergone an eye disease (a fact that might provide a reasonable explanation of the errors). The aim is rather to illustrate how the proximal view may allow an interpreter to attribute massive error at the observational level, independently of whether we can make sense of talk of intersubjective likeness of stimulation.

Notice also that the crucial assumption in this argument is the doubtless claim that the same stimulations could be produced by different external circumstances. Or as Davidson puts it: '[C]learly a person's sensory stimulations could be just as they are and yet the world outside very different.'<sup>15</sup> This is why the stimulus

meaning of a sentence could remain the same even if the speaker becomes disposed to accept it in different external circumstances. Moreover, since the same holds for *any* kind of sensory evidence, *any* view that assigns a similar semantical role to such evidence, or indeed to *any* kind of epistemic intermediary between our beliefs and the world, could be shown to yield skepticism by a similar argument.

I will briefly consider two objections to Davidson's argument, and recapitulate Davidson's responses to them. The first objection appeals to Quine's *naturalism*. Davidson thinks that the proximal view yields that we may have legitimate doubts about the truth of our observational beliefs, and thus also about the *theoretical* beliefs that we may be disposed to infer from them, even if our theory squares perfectly well with our observational beliefs. This might seem to make him committed to some kind of 'first philosophy,' that is, to the view that there is a higher tribunal than science for determining truth and falsity.

In my view, this objection is not convincing. Davidson's point is that, on the proximal view, we could, in some cases, correctly translate a speaker's observation sentences with sentences of our own even if we systematically reject those sentences when the speaker accepts his sentences. Obviously, since not *both* the beliefs we thus attribute to the speaker *and* those of our own beliefs that conflict with these, can be true, either we or the speaker holds mostly false observational beliefs. This is the simple insight that may shake our confidence about our own beliefs, at least, I presume, if we have no independent reason for thinking that the speaker's cognitive equipment is somehow inferior to ours. However, none of the considerations to which Davidson appeals in support of the claim that the

proximal view could have this implication seems to *conflict* with any scientific result. Thus, he seems not committed to the notion of a supra-scientific tribunal.

Another response is to appeal to Quine's claim that truth is 'immanent,' where this (partly) is supposed to mean that the only way in which our theory of the world may be wrong is that it will turn out to conflict with our (future) observational beliefs.<sup>16</sup> However, even if this suggestion might save the proximal view from skepticism, it invites, as Davidson argues, a further charge of relativism.

The reason is that even if we accept this view, the proximal view does still not rule out that we can correctly attribute observational beliefs to a speaker, and therefore also theoretical beliefs, that we think are substantially false.<sup>17</sup> Thus, we may end up with the implausible consequence that while a sentence of the speaker is true *for him*, since it squares with all his observations, an interpreter may correctly translate this sentence with a sentence of his own that is false *for the interpreter*, since the belief that it is false squares equally well with his observations. As Davidson has put it: 'This is relativity of truth not of the familiar [...] kind that relativizes the truth of sentences to a language, but a further and independent relativization to *individuals*.'<sup>18</sup> And such a relativism is surely not a more plausible implication than skepticism, especially since it emerges not only at the theoretical level, but also at the *observational* level.

### 3. The Distal View and the Problem of Error

The view of meaning that Davidson offers as a superior alternative to the proximal view is the distal view. Davidson characterizes this view as follows:

As a radical interpreter I correlate verbal responses of a speaker with changes in the environment. Inferring a causal relation, I then translate those verbal responses with a sentence of my own that the same changes in the environment cause me to accept or reject. This is the distal theory at its simplest [...].<sup>19</sup>

Similar views are expressed by Davidson in many other places. For instance, he insists that an interpreter should interpret ‘sentences held true [...] according to the events and objects in the outside world that cause the sentence to be held true,’<sup>20</sup> and moreover that

when the interpreter finds a sentence of the speaker the speaker assents to regularly under conditions he recognizes, he takes those conditions to be the truth conditions of the speaker’s sentence.<sup>21</sup>

So, as any reader of Davidson’s writings notices, the distal view is nothing but an application of Davidson’s well known Principle of Charity. Indeed, the Principle of Charity and the distal view do not represent different strands in Davidson’s philosophy. They are both manifestations of the same fundamentally externalist view on meaning.

In formulating the distal view, Davidson speaks of the situations, ‘external circumstances,’ conditions, and so forth, that cause us to hold sentences true.<sup>22</sup> This leaves him open to the criticism that it is difficult to see how such entities can be individuated. However, for present purposes, we may simply formulate the relevant implication of the distal view in terms of *occasions*, where an occasion is

simply a time and a place. Thus, the distal view implies that we interpret someone's observation sentences correctly only if we assign meanings to his observation sentences such that they are, generally, true (by our lights) on the occasions on which he accepts them. This is the central implication of the distal view in the present context.

Notice that Davidson does not, of course, fail to recognize the crucial *causal* role of sensory stimulation. On the distal view, the meaning of a speaker's observation sentence is determined by the occasions on which he is disposed to accept and reject it. However, since the speaker undergoes certain stimulations on some occasions and other stimulations on other occasions, the stimulus meaning of a sentence for a given speaker determines causally on which occasions he accepts and rejects it. Thus, on the distal view, its stimulus meaning causally determines its meaning for the speaker.

But it does not conceptually determine the meaning of the sentence. For assume that a change in its stimulus meaning would *not* prompt the speaker to accept/reject the sentence on other occasions. Then its meaning could still remain the same, on the distal view. However, it would *not* remain the same if the speaker *were* to accept and reject the sentence on other occasions, even if its stimulus meaning were unchanged (at least unless the changes are insignificant and could be explained in terms of some cognitive shortcoming on the part of the speaker). This is why the fact that our stimulations could be 'what they are and the world very different' is, on the distal view, simply irrelevant to the question of whether our *beliefs* could be what they are 'and the world very different.' Simplifying

somewhat, on the distal view, if the world were different, so would the contents of our beliefs.

Some writers have argued that Davidson at best has shown that an interpreter must attribute beliefs that he *thinks* are true, not that they *are* in fact true, and that he, therefore, has not provided a response to skepticism. In my view, this objection misses the point. The point is that, on the distal view, we could never, no matter how much our epistemic perspective were to improve, expect to discover that a speaker holds beliefs most of which are false. Thus, if we insist that the speaker's beliefs may still *be* false, we seem committed to the assumption that a speaker's beliefs can be generally false even if this could never, even in principle, be discovered. In my view, this assumption is not plausible. In *this* context, the charge of a commitment to a 'first philosophy' seems more appropriate.

However, I will not pursue this discussion. Instead, I shall consider another objection to Davidson's distal view. This is the objection that Davidson's argument, if sound, proves too much, namely that a speaker's observation sentences are *always* true on the occasions on which he accepts them. The reason is that the distal view might seem to imply that it could *never* be reasonable for an interpreter to attribute observational beliefs to the speaker that he thinks are false. This may in turn seem objectionable, since observational mistakes are surely possible.<sup>23</sup>

It seems to me that this objection fails to acknowledge the *holistic* element in Davidson's view on interpretation. According to Davidson, knowledge of the meanings of a speaker's sentences can be captured by a theory of interpretation for that person. This is a finitely axiomatized theory that specifies truth conditions for

each of the sentences of the speaker's language. In view of the complexity of human behavior, no simple theory is likely to assign truth conditions to the speaker's observation sentences such that they are *never* false (by the interpreter's lights) when the speaker accepts them. Thus, since some degree of simplicity is necessary in order for a theory to be viable, an interpreter must attribute error. This is how Davidson's views admits of, or indeed *explains*, the possibility of observational mistakes.<sup>24</sup>

#### 4. The Status of Observation Sentences

Let us turn to the thesis that observation sentences have a privileged epistemological role. Davidson's main reason for doubting this thesis seems to be that he thinks that it relies on the view that the acceptance of an observation sentence could be justified by the stimulation that prompted it:

In my view, erasing the line between the analytic and synthetic saved philosophy of language as a serious subject by showing how it could be pursued without what there cannot be: determinate meanings. I now suggest also giving up the distinction between observation sentences and the rest. For the distinction between sentences belief in whose truth is justified by sensations and sentences belief in whose truth is justified only by appeal to other sentences held true is as anathema [...] as the distinction between beliefs justified by sensations and beliefs justified only by appeal to further beliefs. (Davidson 1986: 313)

His reason for rejecting the view that the acceptance of an observation sentence could be justified by the stimulation that prompted it in turn is that he finds it difficult to see what there *is* about the relation between the stimulation and the belief that makes the former justify the latter. He acknowledges, of course, that there is a *causal* relation. But, according to Davidson, ‘a causal explanation of a belief does not show how or why it is justified.’<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, there cannot be a logical relation, since stimulations ‘are not beliefs or other propositional attitudes.’<sup>26</sup> Davidson concludes that ‘nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief,’<sup>27</sup> a view he accordingly thinks is difficult to reconcile with the thesis of the privileged status of observation sentences.

However, whether this view *does* conflict with the thesis of the privileged role of observation sentences depends on what we take that thesis to consist in. Let us assume that it at least involves the following two claims:

- (A) A person’s observational beliefs could be justified even if they obtain no support from the rest of his beliefs.
- (B) Other of a person’s beliefs are justified only to the extent that they do obtain support from his observational beliefs.

Does (A) conflict with the view that nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief? Well, if we assume that a person’s belief is justified only if he has some reason for it, then these views do conflict. But nothing in Davidson’s position commits him to this assumption. Indeed, Davidson might even be said to have provided a kind of *justification* of the claim that observational

beliefs can be justified in the absence of supporting beliefs. As I noted earlier, Davidson's views on interpretation do not rule out the possibility of observational mistakes, but they do—he argues—imply that they are rare. This means that each observational belief has a presumption in favor of its truth, which in turn might suffice to show that each of an individual's observational beliefs is justified, even if it obtains no support from the rest of his beliefs, at least unless it *conflicts* with the rest of his beliefs.

But it seems to me that (A) does not set empiricism apart from other epistemological views. What sets empiricism apart is rather (B). And (B) might seem less easy to reconcile with Davidson's position.

In assessing (B), it obviously becomes very important which beliefs we *count* as observational. To delimit these beliefs in a plausible way (that is, in a way such that the beliefs that come out as observational both carry a certain degree of certainty *and* can plausibly be held to provide the evidential basis for the rest of the individual's beliefs) might be difficult. For instance, *Quine's* views on the notion of observability seem inadequate here.

Quine employs really two notions of observability. He offers one definition of observability for a single speaker, and another of observability for a group. According to the definition of observability for a single speaker, in order for a sentence to be observational for a speaker, it is sufficient that he is disposed to assent to it (or dissent) immediately on the spot, when certain of his receptors are triggered. For example, Quine has recently said that 'what qualifies sentences [...] as observational, for a given individual, is just his readiness to assent outright on the strength of appropriate neural intake.'<sup>28</sup> Thus, sentences such as 'It's

raining,' 'That's a rabbit,' are likely to qualify as observational for many individuals.

Now, a problem in the present context is that the same probably holds for sentences such as 'He's a millionaire.' The obvious reason is that many individuals firmly *believe* that some men are millionaires while others are not, so that the appearance of any such man would command an immediate verdict. However, the belief that somebody is a millionaire does clearly not seem to be in *less* need of supporting evidence in order to be justified than many beliefs that are *not* observational given the present definition. So, Quine's definition of observability for a single speaker does not by itself delimit a set of beliefs that may plausibly be held to be privileged in the indicated sense.

In order to exclude sentences such as 'He's a millionaire,' however, Quine usually imposes a further, intersubjective condition. Thus, Quine is sometimes inclined to count as a person's observation sentences only those that are observational for the whole speech community to which he belongs,<sup>29</sup> where this condition is met by a sentence only if it would, on any occasion, command the same verdict from all members of the community.<sup>30</sup>

In this way, we exclude sentences such as 'He's a millionaire' and 'He's a bachelor' but also, less plausibly in the present context, sentences such as 'There's mama' and 'I feel a nibble.' For these sentences do not satisfy the intersubjective condition for the whole speech community, or indeed for *any* substantial group. However, a person's belief that he feels a nibble seems clearly not to be in *more* need of supporting evidence in order to be justified than, say, his belief that some item is a rabbit. In other words, both Quine's notions of observability are

inadequate here. Neither of them substantiates the thesis that observational beliefs may be justified even if they obtain no support from other beliefs, while other beliefs are justified only if they obtain support from observational beliefs.<sup>31</sup>

In any case, independently of how a person's observational beliefs should be delimited more precisely, there is a general reason for thinking that Davidson's position is difficult to reconcile with the view that some subset of an individual's beliefs can provide the basis for the rest in the indicated sense.

I have argued that Davidson's views provide some justification for the claim that a person's observational beliefs may be justified even if they obtain no support from the rest of his beliefs, since they imply that each of his observational beliefs has a presumption in favor of its truth. However, it might be held that in so far as Davidson's views on interpretation lend itself to a defense of this claim, they provide a similar justification for thinking that the same holds for *all* beliefs. For the claim that a person's observational beliefs can be justified even if they obtain no support from the rest derives from the view that we determine the meanings of observation sentences by interpreting them charitably. And this strategy applies, according to Davidson, not only to the speaker's observation sentences, but to *all* of his sentences ('across the board').<sup>32</sup> Accordingly, Davidson says that 'there is no belief without a presumption in its favor.'<sup>33</sup>

However, there might be a difference in *degree* as to the presumption of truth that pertains to a given type of belief, at least in so far as it derives from the interpreter's duty to interpret a speaker's sentences charitably. Thus, Davidson often says that the Principle of Charity should *primarily* or *directly* be applied to sentences the speaker accepts depending on directly observable goings-on in his

environment – i.e., what we normally count as observation sentences – and only *indirectly* to further sentences.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, Davidson has sometimes indicated that it is less plausible to attribute error at the observational than at the theoretical level:

Some disagreements are more destructive of understanding than others, and a sophisticated theory must naturally take this into account. Disagreements about theoretical matters may (in some cases) be more tolerable than disagreement about what is more evident; disagreement about how things look or appear is less tolerable than disagreement about how they are [...].<sup>35</sup>

This goes some way of meeting the claims made by empiricists. For it seems to indicate that in so far as Davidson's views on meaning do imply that our beliefs have a presumption in favor of their truth, they imply that observational beliefs have a stronger presumption than others. This in turn indicates that it would be wise for a person, in general, to let his theoretical rather than observational beliefs yield in case of conflict, which squares with the kind of priority empiricists attribute to observational beliefs. However, this advice is based on a difference in *degree*, and it might obviously be doubted if it is enough to justify (B). In other words, the justification for assigning a greater degree of confidence to our observational beliefs is going to be highly defeasible. This is possibly why Davidson says that even if beliefs that are directly caused by sensory experience 'often provide good reasons for further beliefs,' this 'does not set such beliefs apart in principle or award them epistemological priority.'<sup>36</sup>

## 6. Naturalized Epistemology

So, although it is possible to reconcile Davidson's position with a moderate version of the thesis that observation sentences have a privileged epistemological status, it does seem to conflict with this thesis if it is interpreted rather strictly. Does this mean that it conflicts also with *Quine's* version of this view? It seems not. Indeed, none of the claims that Quine makes on behalf of the epistemological status of observation sentences seems incompatible with Davidson's critical remarks.

That Quine *does* assign a special role to observation sentences is, of course, clear. Thus, Quine speaks of observation sentences as the 'checkpoints of science.'<sup>37</sup> In support of assigning this role to observation sentences, Quine cites primarily two considerations. First, observation sentences are (holophrastically construed) those of our sentences that are most closely connected with sensory stimulation. However, they are also (analytically construed) logically related to the rest of our theory of the world. Therefore, they may be seen as crucial links between our triggerings and our theory, and thus as relevant to the project by which Quine wants to replace traditional epistemology: To investigate how we arrive at our theory of the world merely from the triggering of our sensory receptors.<sup>38</sup> However, although the fact that observation sentences are closely linked to neural intake is what makes them relevant in this context, there seems to be no need to assume that such intake can somehow *justify* acceptance of observation sentences.

Second, observation sentences command, on any occasion, the same verdict from all competent speakers of the language.<sup>39</sup> This is, according to Quine, why the responsiveness of scientific theory to observation sentences explains why science

is objective, or at least intersubjective, since the fact that such sentences command agreement means that the responsiveness of science to observation sentences ensures that there is a common ground on which scientists could meet when they disagree about theory.<sup>40</sup> However, the claim that observation sentences have this function does not rest on some assumption to the effect that the acceptance of observation sentences could be justified by stimulation, or indeed by *anything*.

But notice that my point is not just that Quine does not make any *normative* claims about observation sentences. For instance, Quine would surely say that observation sentences are the checkpoints of science not only in the sense that scientists *do* assess theories on the basis of their conformity to such sentences, but also in the sense that they should assign this role to them.<sup>41</sup> Thus, Quine often suggests that a person should, normally, hold on to his verdict to an observation sentence rather than his theoretical beliefs in case of a conflict.

However, as I indicated above, it seems to me that this claim could also, to some extent, be reconciled with Davidson's position. For although his views on meaning and interpretation might be taken to imply that *each* of a speaker's beliefs has a presumption in favor of its truth, they seem to indicate that the presumption that pertains to observational beliefs are *stronger* than that which pertains to other beliefs, and thus that, generally, our theoretical rather than observational beliefs should be given up in case of conflict. This squares nicely, it seems to me, with Quine's version of the thesis of the privileged status of observation sentences, especially since Quine has stressed that such sentences are, in spite of their special role, revisable.<sup>42</sup>

## 7. Conclusion

In sum, then, I have tried to provide some support for Davidson's claim that the view that ties meaning to stimulation, or to any kind of subjective evidence, yields skepticism, and explain why his own view is not open to this objection. In my opinion, by bringing out these implications for skepticism of these different approaches to meaning, Davidson has made an important contribution, regardless of whether the proximal view could at any point be attributed to Quine.

I have also argued that Davidson's views allow him to accept many of the claims that empiricists tend to make about the epistemological status of observational beliefs, and, in particular, that nothing that Davidson has said is incompatible with Quine's views about the epistemological role of such sentences. So, in so far as these claims still comprise a distinctly empiricist position, Davidson's remark that we, by dropping the view on meaning that provides the main target of his criticism, are 'relinquishing what remains of empiricism after the two dogmas have been surrendered' appears premature (although the surviving empiricism might be somewhat watered down).<sup>43</sup>

Moreover, this means that, in so far as Quine has given up the proximal view, or perhaps never even accepted it, the disagreement between Davidson and Quine appears less substantial than one might first think. This might not be surprising, in view of the deep kinship between Quine's and Davidson's philosophical outlooks. However, it has been challenged.<sup>44</sup> Anyway, the mere fact that the conclusion is unsurprising will not discourage me, at least to the extent that it is correct.<sup>45</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Davidson develops this criticism in several papers, but see especially 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge,' in *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, ed. E. LePore (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 307-319, and 'Meaning, Truth and Evidence,' in *Perspectives on Quine*, eds. R.B. Barrett and R.F. Gibson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 68-79.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., 'Meaning, Truth and Evidence,' and 'On Quine's Philosophy,' *Theoria* 60 (1994), 184-92

<sup>3</sup> In fact, Quine has recently indicated that he accepts Davidson's distal view: '[M]y position in semantics is as distal as his' ('In Praise of Observation Sentences,' *Journal of Philosophy* 90 (1993): 114. But this might merely mean that he thinks that observation sentences 'treat of' the distal world, rather than of stimulations or sense data, which is, of course, a point on which he has insisted for a long time (see, e.g., *The Roots of Reference* (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1973), 38).

<sup>4</sup> How the notion of an observation sentence is to be defined more precisely has little bearing on the argument in this and the next section. It suffices to say that a speaker's observation sentences are such that he is prompted to accept them when confronted with some patterns of sensory stimulation, and prompted to reject them when confronted with others. Typical examples are 'That's red,' 'It's raining,' and so forth. Quine's views on the notion of observationality, and their relation to the view that observation sentences have a privileged epistemological role will be considered in section 4.

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge,' 313.

<sup>6</sup> See *Pursuit of Truth* 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 2, and *From Stimulus to Science* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 17

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., *Word and Object* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1960), 32, and *Pursuit of Truth*, 3.

<sup>8</sup> *Word and Object*, 30 and 40.

<sup>9</sup> 'Meaning, Truth and Evidence,' 74.

<sup>10</sup> For this reasoning, see 'Meaning, Truth and Evidence,' 74.

<sup>11</sup> See *Roots of Reference*, 23.

<sup>12</sup> See Quine 1999.

<sup>13</sup> *Pursuit of Truth*, 42.

<sup>14</sup> This and other implications of the view that if the stimulus meaning of a speaker's observation sentence is unchanged over a period of time, so is its meaning, as well as some problematic implications of the converse claim (the claim that the meaning of an observation sentence is changed whenever its stimulus meaning changes), are examined in my paper 'Stimulus Meaning Debunked,'

*Erkenntnis* 49 (1998): 371-85.

<sup>15</sup> 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge,' 313.

<sup>16</sup> See, e.g., 'Reply to Nozick,' in *The Philosophy of W.V. Quine*, eds. L.E. Hahn and A. Shilpp (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1986), 364-367.

<sup>17</sup> I assume, with Davidson, that to ascribe a meaning to a sentence held true by a speaker is to attribute a belief to this speaker.

<sup>18</sup> 'Meaning, Truth and Evidence,' 75.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>20</sup> 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge,' 317.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 316.

<sup>22</sup> See, e.g., 'Epistemology Externalized,' *Dialectica* 45 (1990): 195, and 'The Folly of Trying to Define Truth,' *Journal of Philosophy* 93 (1996): 275.

<sup>23</sup> For this objection, see, e.g., J. Fodor and E. LePore, *Holism. A Shoppers Guide* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 160f and L. Bergström, 'Davidson's Objections to Quine's Empiricism,' in *this volume*.

<sup>24</sup> Thus, Davidson insists that '[n]o simple theory can put a speaker and interpreter in perfect agreement, and so a workable theory must from time to time assume error on the part of one or the other' (*Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984), 169). See also my paper 'Crispin Wright on Moral Disagreement,' *Philosophical Quarterly* 48 (1998): 359-65, where I discuss this further.

<sup>25</sup> 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge,' 311.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 310.

<sup>28</sup> 'In Praise of Observation Sentences,' p. 108. Notice that all observation sentences, are, according to Quine, *occasion* sentences, where an occasion sentence is a sentence such that the speaker is disposed to accept it on some occasions and reject it on others, depending on how he is stimulated. See *Word and Object*, 35f, and *Theories and Things* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), 3.

<sup>29</sup> See, e.g., *Roots of Reference*, 41, *Ontological Relativity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 88, and *Pursuit of Truth*, 6.

<sup>30</sup> *Pursuit of Truth*, 43.

<sup>31</sup> For further discussion of Quine's definitions of observationality, see my 'Quine on Ethics,' *Theoria* 64 (1998), 84-98.

<sup>32</sup> *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, xvii.

<sup>33</sup> 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge,' 319.

<sup>34</sup> See, e.g., *ibid.*, 318. See also 'The Myth of the Subjective,' in *Relativism: Interpretation and Confrontation*, ed. M. Krausz (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 164, and 'Three Varieties of Knowledge,' in *A.J. Ayer; Memorial Essays*, ed. Griffiths (Royal Institute of Philosophy (suppl. 30), 1991),

160.

<sup>35</sup> *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, 169.

<sup>36</sup> ‘Three Varieties of Knowledge,’ 165.

<sup>37</sup> See, e.g., Quine 1996: 163, and Quine 1995: 44. He has also said that observation sentences are ‘the vehicle of evidence of the external world’ (‘In Praise of Observation Sentences,’ 108), and that it is through the responsiveness to observation sentences that science is something more than ‘solely a quest for internal coherence’ (*Theories and Things*, 39).

<sup>38</sup> See, e.g., *Ontological Relativity*, 69-90.

<sup>39</sup> Obviously, I now assume that a sentence is an observation sentence in the relevant sense only if it is observational for the whole speech community.

<sup>40</sup> See, e.g., *Word and Object*, 44, and *Roots of Reference*, 37.

<sup>41</sup> This latter claim is related to Quine’s view that the test (and sometimes aim) of science lies in prediction of patterns of sensory stimulation, since observation sentences, given their close causal links to stimulation, may be looked upon as the ‘means of verbalizing’ such predictions (*Pursuit of Truth*, 4). However, notice that Quine does not seem to regard *this* claim in turn (i.e., the claim that the test of science lies in prediction of stimulation) as normative, but merely as ‘defining a particular language game’ (*ibid.*, 20).

<sup>42</sup> Thus, Quine acknowledges that there may be extreme cases where a verdict to an observation sentence might have to be dismissed (*after* the event of stimulation) if it conflicts with ‘a theory that has overwhelming support from other quarters’ (*Roots of Reference*, 41)). See also *Theories and Things*, 71.

<sup>43</sup> ‘Meaning, Truth and Evidence,’ 68.

<sup>44</sup> See, e.g., Bergström.

<sup>45</sup> I thank Lars Bergström, Peter Pagin and Mike Ridge for valuable comments.

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