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The Indefinability of Truth and Interpretation in Heidegger and Davidson

Richard Matthews

Heidegger famously diminishes the significance of everyday theories of truth like the correspondence theory, disparaging these as a matter of ‘mere’ correctness.¹ They are among the starting points that lead to ‘the true’ but are not themselves genuine or authentic. For Heidegger, once we reflect on their inadequacies and recognize their function in everyday practice, they have no further role to play in philosophical reflection. Indeed, once we reach this point, reliance upon the everyday senses of truth becomes a barrier to reflection. We dispense with truth as correctness just as we throw away the Wittgensteinian ladder once we have reached a pertinent height. Although he also rejects the correspondence theory of truth (or at least one of its particular variations), Donald Davidson develops a theory of interpretation that suggests some reasons why the ordinary senses of truth should not be so mistreated: responsible theories of interpretation should treat the everyday senses of truth more seriously. I do not mean to suggest thereby that all important hermeneutic questions are satisfied. On the contrary, the point is that some version of the theory of truth embodied in Tarski’s convention T is a necessary but insufficient condition of interpretation. In the following I intend to argue that the necessity of convention T as a condition of interpretation means that correctness is essential both in philosophy and elsewhere. This is due to the fact that we cannot clearly distinguish the authentic from the inauthentic, since

¹ Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” in *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1977), 289.

correctness is a condition of understanding, and because it functions as a crucial constraint on false and arbitrary interpretation.

Echoes of Heidegger

In a late essay entitled “The Folly of Trying to Define Truth,” Davidson argues that truth is a bedrock concept without which we would have no further concepts at all.² As such, truth is indefinable. It cannot be eliminated in favour of some more basic concept because the sentential connectives may be defined and eliminated in terms of a single primitive. Truth is not a species within some higher genus. Nor, as some analytic philosophers, such as Hartry Field hold, can semantic and metaphysical issues be reduced to and eliminated in favour of a physicalist explanation: every such reduction will inevitably raise questions about the adequacy—and hence of the truth—of the putative foundation and will thus smuggle truth back in. The similarities to Heidegger’s discussion of the three prejudices preventing a re-awakening of reflection on the meaning of the question of Being are obvious:³ every attempt at an answer to the question of the meaning of Being already presupposes that we somehow understand it. We can reach to no more fundamental level to try to understand what ‘is’ means. In Davidson’s language, Being is primitive.

Davidson also emphasizes that the indefinability of truth does not destroy the possibility of saying anything intelligible about the subject matter. Here, he is further from Heidegger, yet the remark is still interestingly similar to the hypothesis that the indefinability of Being may mean only that we have not found the right manner of access to the issue. Finally, like Heidegger, Davidson relies heavily on a pre-analytic notion of truth that is intuitively self-evident, if not logically rigorous.⁴

The differences begin with Davidson’s rejection of the idea that the indefinability of truth means that it is in any way ‘mysterious, ambiguous, or untrustworthy.’⁵ Whereas Heidegger takes the simultaneous inexplicability and

² Donald Davidson, “The Folly of Trying to Define Truth,” in *The Nature of Truth: Classic and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Micheal Lynch (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2001) [henceforth FT], 624.

³ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1962), 22–23.

⁴ Donald Davidson, “Reality without Reference,” in idem, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 223.

⁵ Davidson, “The Folly of Trying to Define Truth,” 625.

obviousness of the question concerning the meaning of Being as the most fundamental philosophical enigma, Davidson takes a different line. There is much explanatory work to be done to elucidate the concept of truth, even if truth is indefinable and no particular theory of truth is exhaustive. Understanding the pre-theoretical concept of truth is utterly indispensable for interpretation and communication. While Heidegger sees communication as part of the everyday life of humanity and not in itself philosophical, except in the sense that the ordinary is the starting point and initial clue for genuine reflection: it points toward a hidden matter than requires interpretation, Davidson's position is that interpretation is impossible without a theory of truth rooted in our ordinary intuitions. Hence, there is no hiving off of the philosophical from the ordinary in Davidson and no claim of a strong distinction between authenticity and everydayness. Philosophical reflection and the everyday are intimately and necessarily intertwined. Consequently, unlike Heidegger, Frege, or Tarski, Davidson does not seek to judge, transform, or transcend the adequacy of the everyday understanding of truth, but rather attempts to understand it.

Davidson's Theory of Truth

I am not here providing a full account of Davidson's theory of interpretation. Rather, I am focussing on the issue of truth as a necessary condition. According to Davidson, a crucial and unavoidable assumption in the study of language is that languages are structured. Unless there are discernible patterns in the movements, sounds, marks and tactile elements that an interpreter seeks to understand, there would be nothing to interpret. Without the assumption of structure, there would be no reason for anyone to try to learn the sense of the words and sentences that emerge. A theory of truth has quite a specific role in interpretation: it should help us to discern linguistic structures and ontological commitments. A theory of truth is thus a necessary condition for the translation of both familiar and unfamiliar languages as well as our everyday interactions with interlocutors in our speech community. We may begin in a situation in which we understand nothing of the sounds or marks that we wish to interpret, and then have to find some way to come to understand them. Or we might have the more common situation of trying to understand a friend, a speaker with a different accent or dialect, or somebody who speaks a foreign but well understood language. But, for reasons that I will introduce shortly, in each case we need a theory of truth to facilitate translation, interpretation, and understanding.

In the case of speakers within our own language community, we already share a great deal in terms of existing norms and a shared environment. But we absolutely need a criterion of correctness in order to be able to communicate with each other. Davidson's modification of Tarski's Convention T is a fundamental condition of communication within a given language.⁶ It is even more essential, however, when we are talking about learning another language, the attempt to understand ancient languages, or the still-more-difficult task of interpreting a dead language. We cannot try to understand that language at all except on the assumption that a substantial part of that language involves predication.

For Davidson, the clearest and intuitively correct formulation of a theory of truth—if not yet logically structured or sufficiently relativized—is Aristotle's famous definition from the *Metaphysics*: “To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, or of what is not that it is not, is true.”⁷ This is essential for the interpretation of the speech and texts of others and, indeed, for communication and understanding in general.⁸ If we cannot predicate truly and falsely, we would be unable to understand each other at all. Consider what it would mean for a language to wholly lack the resources to assert or to deny; such a language would be incapable of predicating anything at all. It would also have no logical structure whatsoever, because predication presupposes that one can do so in simple or complex ways. But the formulation of complex attributions requires truth functional connectives, quantifiers, identity, or any other logical apparatus. In the absence of assertion and denial (truth as correctness, as Heidegger describes it), communication would be impossible.

It is well-known that Davidson takes Alfred Tarski's Convention T as the appropriate logical formulation of Aristotle: some sentence *s* is true in a given language *L* if and only if *p*; ‘Socrates is wise’ is true in English if—and only if—Socrates is wise. Since Davidson's project is to understand natural languages rather than to develop formal languages free of their messiness and paradoxicality, he modifies Convention T. The formula is relativized to a speaker, to the time of utterance, and to the circumstances in which the utterance is made.

There are ontological consequences to this relativization: the adoption of such a theory of truth commits Davidson to the existence of speakers, events, a language community, and a surrounding environment, all of which are part of a

⁶ Or a variant sufficiently similar that captures and improves upon the insights.

⁷ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Γ, 7, 1011b, 25–27.

⁸ Davidson, “The Folly of Trying to Define Truth,” 637.

discernible public space. This means that interpretation, whatever its subject matter and whatever further issues also require consideration, must take such classes and entities into consideration. We must have access to a shared environment that is causally regular; there have to be language users that can attribute linguistic intentions to one another. Understanding and interpretation will require the generation of T sentences that pair off our interlocutor's sentences with our own in terms of the events occurring in such a public environment. As necessary as these are, they are nonetheless insufficient because an adequate interpretation of many texts and utterances will require us to develop at least a minimal understanding of the historical world of the speaker.

Truth, Error and Interpretation

Davidson takes the relativized Tarskian truth schema as an essential condition of both translation and interpretation. A crucial constraint here is that languages have to be learnable. Whether I am a child first trying to learn my own language, or whether I am trying to figure out a difficult dialect of English or trying to understand any utterance or piece of writing at all, I always begin with little or no knowledge of the object-language. In order to learn it, the linguistic structure must be sufficiently simple that I can master a small number of the rules and a tiny segment of the vocabulary. One problem that faces each language user is that she must be able to understand any of the infinity of sentences another speaker might utter. There is no limit to the number of ways in which sentences can be iterated, provided that the basic recursion rules for the construction of English sentences are not violated. For the language to be learnable there needs to be a finite vocabulary and a finite grammar in which we can embed nouns in sentences. Provided that we can master those basic construction rules along with the vocabulary, we will be in a position to correctly interpret the sentences of some interlocutor.

Languages are structured according to recursive rules along with a finite vocabulary. As such, the language is necessarily publicly available to any interpreter, it is at least possible for any language user to learn the language. Consider the alternative—that a language might somehow be completely unlearnable, that it might have rules that are unavailable in principle to an interpreter. Here, Wittgenstein's attacks on the possibility of a logically private language are pertinent: we would be unable to distinguish between the belief that we were following a linguistic rule and actually following it. The condition of following rules, linguistic or otherwise, is their publicity. With respect to

Davidson's work, imagine that in attempting to understand some set of sounds, marks, or tactile surface features, we consistently failed to recover any discernible structure from the sounds. Consider the possibility that no matter how many years we spent trying to study the set of sounds or marks, no translation or interpretation ever emerged. Why, at that point, would we think that we were dealing with a language at all? A point will emerge where we no longer have any reason to believe that we are dealing with a language at all. As an example think of the SETI project's attempts to find evidence of intelligent alien life: the project only makes sense on the assumption that there are decodable communications that can be clearly distinguished from the massive amounts of noise in the universe. But to be able to distinguish between noise and language, we have to invoke the notion of structure. The identification of such linguistic structure, in turn, requires a conception of truth suitably relativized along the Aristotelian and Tarskian line.

This does not mean that we will understand another speaker or writer correctly in any given case. Davidson constantly stresses that errors in interpretation are possible, but only against the background of a massive amount of shared, trivial, correct interpretations.⁹ Particular misinterpretation is possible—global misinterpretation is not. The point is reminiscent of Wittgenstein in *On Certainty*: error is only possible against a background of shared bedrock assumptions about the world. Most of these are trivial and not even worth mentioning in the normal run of things. But there must be a mass of such public beliefs before we can intelligibly make sense of error.¹⁰

Davidson's analysis focuses mainly on the interpretation of present speakers, but it is easily extendable to the analysis of historical documents as well; the translation of the Rosetta stone is a particularly interesting example. The primary evidence available to Champollion was the puzzling marks on the stone, along with a section each of ancient Greek and Demotic Egyptian text. Here there is no present interlocutor and no obviously shared environment. In order to interpret the stone, the interlocutor, audience, and the environment in which the text was written had to be reconstructed. Without knowledge of all of those things, there could have been no translation. Nonetheless, prior to this reconstruction Champollion still operated with the requisite assumptions that the hieroglyphs are rationally ordered; that they have a recoverable semantic structure, and therefore that they have sentences themselves describable in Egyptian, French or English. It is also essential that Champollion knew ancient

⁹ Donald Davidson, "Radical Interpretation," in idem, *Inquiries into Truth*, 137.

¹⁰ Donald Davidson "Thought and Talk," in *ibid.*, 157.

Greek, Latin, French, English, Demotic Egyptian, and Coptic. He therefore had a wide range of semantic reference points as aids in the translation and interpretation of the stone.

If we are dealing with the Rosetta stone or any other text for which there is often little or no background information the translational and interpretational challenges are considerable. We may have no idea of the author or of the historical context in which that text was written, but we must assume that it is a text. Otherwise, we would not try to translate it. The assumption that it is a text requires a further assumption: that it has a recoverable linguistic structure. In the absence of this assumption, it would be pointless to pair off the sentences of demotic Egyptian and French, and thereby translate the stone into English. The assumption of linguistic structure in turn presupposes that at least some of the sentences in the document are assertions and, hence, describable by Convention T.

In translating the stone, argues Davidson, we try initially to find simple translations of assertoric sentences on the stone. But successful translation cannot be done on the basis of our knowledge of linguistics and logic alone. Recovering these sentences simultaneously requires the deployment of our knowledge of the history, archaeology, religion and other sources of the period. What radical interpretation does is provide one tool for the recovery of speech or text. But to fully interpret the documents, the interpretation of linguistic structure has to be fitted into a much larger background structure of beliefs about the period and its history. These will inevitably draw us beyond semantics and into a host of different disciplines and philosophical considerations.

This last point suggests that Davidson's account of truth is deliberately limited. He explicitly denies that the account of metaphysics and truth he is offering constitutes the sole method for pursuing metaphysics; here, he is avowedly pluralist.¹¹ The account is particularly devoted to understanding the possibilities of communication and thereby is concerned with the interpretation of assertoric sentences. He makes no claim about the status of truth in works of art or music, but neither does he rule out such discussion. The analysis of truth is devoted to a specific but crucial sense of truth—that concerned with assertoric sentences. Although Davidson personally locates himself in the tradition of philosophy as therapy, nothing prevents more expansive metaphysical speculation

¹¹ Donald Davidson, "The Method of Truth in Metaphysics," in idem, *Inquiries into Truth* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 199.

provided that we do not elide the sense of truth embodied in Convention T and treat it as philosophically irrelevant.

Although relativized convention T is indispensable to translation and interpretation, it is expressly compatible with the idea that there is a plurality of legitimate translations of some sentence of a given language. Davidson accepts Quine's thesis about the indeterminacy of translation. Quine maintains that there is no fact to determine which of the many possible translations of a sentence is correct. Just as there is no way to identify the correct references of the singular terms and predicates of a language, so there is no way to isolate the analytic meanings of nouns of a given language and correlate them one to one with the relevant analytic meanings of the subject-language. Following Quine, Davidson rejects the distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions. This, in turn, requires abandoning the view that nouns have essential meanings. Consequently, the construction of a translation or interpretation has nothing to do with the attempt to capture the analytic meanings of words or sentences. The inscrutability of reference means that nothing makes sentences true and, therefore, we cannot treat sense experiences or other empirical analogues as candidates for the real meanings of words and sentences.¹² Since words and sentences have no essential meaning, there is nothing to correlate. Instead, in translation and interpretation, we are pairing relativized T sentences of the object-language with similarly relativized T sentences of the subject-language, and this can be done in a host of different ways, many of which are legitimate.

To move the discussion into the more familiar Heideggerian territory of the translation of ancient Greek texts, I want to suggest some of the implications that this might have for the translation of Heraclitus or Parmenides, and for general questions of the translation of Greek, German, or any other language.

First, for all the apparent quirkiness of many of Heidegger's translations, these are entirely compatible with the Davidsonian account of interpretation. The primary constraint is solely that there be appropriate etymological evidence. The translation of *aletheia* as 'unconcealment' rather than 'truth' is probably unobjectionable here. The fact that the word commonly gets translated as 'truth' is not significant because there is considerable arbitrariness of the choice of the translation term once we have abandoned the notions of analytic and synthetic concepts. As long as an appropriate T sentence can be constructed giving the truth conditions for the translation in the way that Heidegger chooses, the objection

¹² Donald Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," in idem, *Inquiries into Truth*, 194.

that it fails to accord to existing linguistic practice is nothing more than a historical objection and not a principled reason to reject the translation. Furthermore, metaphysical speculation based on this interpretation is not ruled out either, even if it might not be to Davidson's particular taste.

Nonetheless, in Davidson's work there are important and useful constraints on interpretation that are either not addressed or completely absent in Heidegger. If Davidson's account of truth is right, then we cannot give any words, translations, or interpretations a specific metaphysical privilege. We cannot justifiably state that unconcealment is the 'real' or 'authentic' meaning of the Greek word *aletheia*. To do this is to invoke some variant on the notion of an analytic concept, even if the variant has few of its standard Kantian or positivist echoes. We also cannot take the view that there are meanings of words of a language that are in principle inaccessible to the public, or to members of alternative language communities. The condition that languages have to be learnable means that they must be publicly available, not just to members of the given language community, but also to anyone else who seeks to understand the language. In consequence, we cannot privilege Greek or German as Heidegger did. If we cannot privilege particular translations of words and sentences in a given language, then we cannot privilege the language either. Just as there is no single true method of metaphysics, so is there no appropriate and privileged language of metaphysics or Being.

Pre-theoretical Senses of Truth

I am not, of course, suggesting that Heidegger thinks that we should abandon predication or correctness. The everyday senses of language are indeed necessary. Likewise they offer important clues for the genuine philosophical problems. Indeed, the analyses of the prejudices that prevent genuine access to the question of the meaning of Being are prejudices arising from the structure of everyday predication. If we did not have such sentences, we would be incapable of philosophical reflection at all. Everyday sentences provide the puzzles that lead us to authentic reflection. As such, for Heidegger, the inauthentic is, in its own way, essential—but it is not of intrinsic philosophical significance.

I want to conclude by suggesting reasons for treating the ordinary senses of truth as philosophically indispensable. They are not just inauthentic and unreflective clues, but also have important philosophical roles to play. The following remarks suggest some reasons why ascribing correctness—whether in

the natural sciences, the social sciences, and mathematical logic—is itself philosophically significant.

The idea that we can draw a hard and fast distinction between the everyday and the authentic—such that they are clearly distinguishable—is not obviously true. Davidson makes an interesting remark in this regard in *The Method of Truth in Metaphysics*: “What appear to be singular terms sometimes melt into something less ontic in implication when their logical relations with other sentences are studied; while the requirements of theory may suggest that a sentence plays the role which can be explained only by treating it as having a quantificational structure not apparent on the surface.”¹³ Although Davidson is not thinking in terms of the Heideggerian categories of everydayness, the point can still be articulated in the following way: there is no clear way to say that something is everyday or not, philosophical, or not, and thereby no way to restrict some epistemic, ethical, or other phenomenon solely to the class of the everyday or ontic. It also means that the ordinary behaviour and practices of human beings are crucial sources of insight and critical reflection. Their philosophical significance is intrinsic and does not require reference to authentic reflection or anything else.

Heidegger agrees that ordinary experience and behaviour are the starting point for philosophical analysis, but when he thinks, he leaves the ordinary behind in favour of authentic reflection on the mysterious. Now, if I am right to suggest that the distinction is intrinsically murky, then what counts as philosophical cannot be delineated *a priori* and the everyday cannot be treated only as merely a hint or philosophical starting point that philosophical reflection then leaves behind; nor can we treat public language simply as an instance of mass thinking in opposition to the genuine thought of the solitary poet or philosopher. Most importantly, we are not entitled to treat logic and mathematics, and in particular the applied instances of these disciplines, *merely* as instances of calculative reason. Here, I do not reject the importance of the analysis of calculative reason, but of the particular way in which it is conceived such that deduction and induction are seen as essentially calculative and manipulative and therefore non-philosophical.

A further problem is that the denigration of correctness may lead to the stating of the false. Arguably, Heidegger’s claims about the ‘real’ or ‘authentic’ meanings of Greek words (or German words, for that matter) are in fact false. They never did have that meaning, nor do they have it now except in the context

¹³ Davidson, “The Method of Truth in Metaphysics,” 211.

of a current structure of interpretation. It is doubtful that any speaker of ancient Greek, including Heraclitus, Parmenides, Plato, and Aristotle, would have recognized the particular interpretations that Heidegger places on the publicly available meanings of key terms such as *aletheia*. This does not prohibit his readings of the words but it is a reason to avoid the claim that interpretations constitute the genuine meanings of the pertinent Greek terms.

To finish, if we take the ordinary senses of truth as minimal and indispensable, this does not rule out reflection on emergence or anything else. They are neither merely correct nor simply to be understood as instances of calculative reason. If this is correct, and if correctness is philosophically necessary, then speculative poetic and philosophical interpretations cannot occupy the position of philosophical privilege. Minimal truth schemas like Davidson's relativization of Tarski have an important role to play in hermeneutics—they help us to avoid making false interpretations even if they offer no help, by themselves, in settling competing interpretations. Given the specific relativizing features advocated by Davidson, they will encourage philosophical interdisciplinarity. We thereby take into account history, linguistics, anthropology, and, in principle, any other available disciplines as sources of possible insight for philosophical interpretation. We also avoid the kind of philosophical isolationism that increasingly characterized Heidegger's post-*Being and Time* work. The philosopher does not stand aside from her world. She does not meditate on the unconcealment of Being, but rather engages with other intellectual disciplines and the politics of the ordinary world around her.