Interpretation and Rationality

Developing Donald Davidson's Ideas in International Political Theory

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Abstract: Although influential in philosophy and relevant to international political theory's (IPT) key concerns, Donald Davidson has not received commensurate attention in IPT. I aim here to commence filling this gap. I explore Davidson's insights which fruitfully challenge established disciplinary views. The notions of rationality, objectivity and truth, and, on the other hand, those of intersubjectivity, language and interpretation are often needlessly separated and constricted by seemingly alternative approaches. Davidson firmly reconnects these notions. He helps rethink the realist, strong post-positivist, but also liberal, 'thin' constructivist and critical (not thoroughly contextualist) approaches. He bridges the normative cosmopolitan–communitarian distinction. Eventually, Davidson laid foundations for a perspective foregrounding possibilities for rational communication and agreement between very different contexts and also for the non-dogmatic, pluralist and dynamic nature of communication itself.

Keywords: communication, Donald Davidson, international political theory, interpretation, post-positivism, rationalism, rationality

'The world of the waking is one and shared, but the sleeping turn aside each into his private world'.

'Let us not concur casually about the most important matters'.

– Heraclitus (Kahn 2001: 31, 33;
the first fragment reported by Plutarch)

Donald Davidson (1917–2003) was ‘one of the most important philosophers of the latter half of the twentieth century’ and at least as significant as Willard V. O. Quine amongst US philosophers (Malpas 2019). However, he has not received commensurate attention in international political theory (IPT).¹ I will argue that Davidson can help IPT firmly (re-)connect the theorisations of language and rationality, and that he shows rational communication between very different contexts to be possible without imposing a dogmatic view of communication itself.

The argument will draw on Davidson’s ideas on (1) general epistemology; (2) radical interpretation (RI) and language; and (3) ethics and cultural difference. These aspects are highly relevant for IPT. First, epistemology has been crucial for disciplinary discussions. While theories of intersubjectivity and critiques of both subjectivity and objectivity have been salient, I will clarify how Davidson tied the three concepts together. Second, I will discuss the putative incommensurability of theories and practices and explain how Davidson considers a key underlying question for international politics, namely, the interpretation between different languages meant as reflecting the differences of meaning between polities. This applies both spatially (between different co-existing identities) and temporally (including to reconciling tradition and rapid change in the contemporary world). Davidson’s RI overcomes incommensurability, but in a non-dogmatic way. He relates the domestic and the international/global. Third, the thrust of IPT itself is largely to better theorise normativity in the international. Davidson’s ideas on ethics and intercultural relations reconcile universality and difference. Taken together, Davidson’s insights can help us rethink realist, strong post-positivist and other approaches, as well as the normative cosmopolitan–communitarian distinction.

Certainly, Davidson’s thought evolved throughout his essays. However, as demonstrated by Robert Myers and Claudine Verheggen (2016), Davidson’s radical interpretation is just an example of ‘triangulation’ (central to his epistemology), which yields an ethical system. Therefore, the aspects which I will consider are mutually coherent. This will enable me to proceed not chronologically, but in a relevant *logical* order: from the broadest epistemological issues to their key implications: RI and the conception of language to ethics and cultural difference (issues requiring an elaboration and defence of Davidson’s views).

We will skip, notably, Davidson's (2002) essays on actions and events. This is, first, because they are mostly consistent with the ideas considered here. Thus, Davidson's analysis of cause there relates the physical and the mental, and I will consider the same relation here, but regarding the above-mentioned concept of triangulation. Yet, second, those essays are of somewhat lesser immediate interest to IPT. They largely address either more general philosophical conundrums (e.g. individuation of events) or highly specialised nuances (e.g. linguistic). Finally, a crucial theme of these works – 'reasons as causes' – has already been noted in IPT (Eriksen 2018; Wendt 2003, 2015). But this has not been complemented by Davidson's larger ideas analysed below. First, I will consider Davidson's reception and relevance. Second, I will clarify the above-mentioned aspects of his philosophy. Third, I will explore the implications for IPT.

Reception and Relevance

Davidson has been widely discussed in philosophy (Habermas 2008; Myers and Verheggen 2016; Searle 2015). I will certainly not tackle all the philosophical controversies, but just relevant ones.² Regarding specifically social issues, Davidson has been debated in philosophy (Dreyfus and Taylor 2015), anthropology (Lukes 2000) and communication studies (Dresner 2011).

In political philosophy and theory, some ways to apply Davidson have also been adumbrated (Gunnell 2020; Haddock 2011). However, John Gunnell's words are symptomatic: 'Davidson was an interesting individual who ... did not receive the general attention of someone such as Rorty' (2020: 96). Gunnell rightly assigns Davidson to thinkers important for theorising politics yet 'seldom well understood' (2020: 7). In International Relations (IR) and IPT, discussions of Davidson are mainly confined to the above-mentioned theme of reasons as causes, and cursory remarks on language (Wendt 2015) and 'weakness of will' (Kratochwil 2018: 576). However, many broader ideas are largely ignored. Gunnell (2020) fails to relate Davidson and IR directly. A rare application of Davidson's radical interpretation to an international issue is Eli Dresner's (2011) suggestion that it may contribute to an

understanding between Israelis and Palestinians. But Dresner's work belongs to communication studies, not IPT.

Certainly, objections may arise that, first, Davidson is not a 'political' philosopher. Second, '[a]lthough Davidson always expressed considerable interest in ethics ... , he said very little about it in print' (Myers and Verheggen 2016: 179). Third, Davidson's ideas of shared rationality, truth and communication may seem inappropriate or naïve specifically for *international* politics. However, such worries are not very consequential. To the reasons of Davidson's relevance given in the introduction, we should add, first, that to designate a philosopher as not 'political' is often to make constricted and uncritical our view of international politics. Its study is contested. It has traditionally drawn on various philosophers. If some mostly epistemological or linguistic insights of, for example, Ludwig Wittgenstein, John L. Austin or Thomas Kuhn have been actively explored there, no principal reason exists to sideline Davidson. The few above-mentioned applications of Davidson to politics show that he *can* be used there. Second, as is demonstrated below, a broadly attractive Davidsonian ethics can be elaborated. Third, pluralism, contingency or hypocrisy associated with international politics call not for less but for *more* work on rationality and communication (Eriksen 2018; Haddock 2011). And a Davidsonian approach takes political realities seriously at that.

Even philosophically, Davidson demonstrated 'a breadth of approach, as well as a unitary and systematic character, that is unusual within twentieth century analytic philosophy'; also, he bridged analytic and continental philosophy (Malpas 2019). Below, we will see that Davidson has not received sufficient attention in IPT probably just because he fits uneasily into established positions.

Analysing Davidson

Epistemology

Davidson (2004c) identifies 'three varieties of knowledge': knowledge of (1) one's own mind; (2) other minds; and (3) the outer world. Each variety depends on the others. To have thoughts, one needs to recognise that one's own beliefs, though seemingly true,

may be mistaken, that is, different from one's idea of 'objective truth'. But that is only provided by 'interpersonal communication'. Besides, the communicating persons must be related to their common world.

Thus, there is *triangulation* between (1) a speaker, (2) another speaker, and (3) the world. The two persons' senses respond to distal stimuli from the external world. But they can be sure of responding to the same stimuli only if they correlate each other's reactions to them (Davidson 2004c). Crucially, mere *physical* interaction between persons is insufficient. They may both, for instance, be pointing at a building, but the specific *aspects* they mean may differ: one may mean the building's material, the other its historical symbolism. Only *linguistic* interaction fixes the aspects of the world people respond to and the contents of their thoughts (Myers and Verheggen 2016). The idea of objective truth is not abandoned by Davidson, but grounded in 'the intersections of points of view' of speakers (2004c: 218). Thus, '[t]he basis of objectivity is intersubjectivity' (Davidson 1994: 50). And the very (subjective) ability to have thoughts depends on the objective and intersubjective (Davidson 2004c).

Eventually, Davidson rejected philosophical realism as well as correspondence and coherence theories of truth (Gunnell 2020) – but what he rejected were rather the *established* varieties of these theories. Davidson did not follow stereotypical realism and mentalism: language represents neither 'an independent world' nor 'private thought' (Gunnell 2020: 96–102). Truth is not 'an object', but 'a concept that is applicable to certain claims in various contexts of language use' (Gunnell 2020: 102). Still, Davidson (2005b) tried to get truth 'rehabilitated' from both old dogmatisms *and* the attacks by Friedrich Nietzsche, John Dewey and Richard Rorty (see also Gunnell 2020).

For Davidson, beliefs are justified only in so far as they cohere with many (not all) other beliefs, and not because of a simplistic correspondence with the world (Davidson 2004a, 2004b; Myers and Verheggen 2016). Yet, Davidson does not leap to declaring 'that reality and truth are constructs of thought' (2004b: 155). So, Davidson did preserve a certain 'correspondence' between beliefs and the world. But, again, it is not usual empiricism. Any literal comparisons of empirical reality with the qualitatively different

realm of beliefs yield not objectivity but scepticism. Conversely, his theory, while stressing coherence as a criterion of truth, also guards against scepticism (Davidson 1973–1974; 2004a; 2004b). There is no conflict between truth about the world and the idea of truth tied to language.

Such epistemology neutralises two opposite worries. Thus, Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor (2015) criticise Davidson for losing an unmediated access to the world. Yet, Dreyfus and Taylor themselves cite Davidson's words that preserved such an access: he 'do[es] not give up the world, but re-establish[es] unmediated touch with the familiar objects' (2015: 109, citing Davidson 1973–1974: 19). Conversely, Gunnell criticises Davidson precisely for this direct access. Gunnell views this as the myth of a 'given' world comprising 'basic objects that can be specified outside any theory' (2020: 102; for similar criticisms, see also Habermas 2008). However, this is not the access Davidson preserved. First, there are no 'given objects'. No shared 'world' automatically 'causes' people, including from different communities, to share any ideas, unless they have interacted linguistically to *take some aspects as their* shared world. Hence, the conceptual factor does play a fundamental role. Second, there are no simple connections between a 'single' object and a 'single' thought. Every meaning *and* every referent must cohere with many others (Davidson's holism) (Myers and Verheggen 2016). Davidson's view turns out, at least, to be no less complex than Jürgen Habermas' (mature) view of truth as accurately referring to or representing an objective world, albeit only a world about which we can speak in language (Bohman and Rehg 2017). Thus, Davidson preserved a rational bearing of the world on our thoughts, but also gave sociality a fundamental role in how our thoughts and the very idea of 'world' are fixed.

Radical Interpretation and Language

Davidson's (1973) concept of radical interpretation envisions a situation where an interpreter initially knows neither the meanings nor beliefs of a speaker but nevertheless can interpret the speaker. Davidson thus abstracted from ordinary situations and showed that, even then, interpretation is possible. Yet, the logic of RI is applicable *everywhere* – to understanding the speakers both of another natural language and of the *same* language, as is noted below. Davidson

eloquently uses terms relevant to international politics: ‘The problem of interpretation is domestic as well as foreign’ (1973: 313).

The interpreter must seek to view the speaker charitably, as possessing a ‘degree of logical consistency’ and ‘responding to the same features of the world that he ... would be responding to under similar circumstances’ (Davidson 2004c: 211). Charity is neither just a strategy to *improve* interpretation, nor primarily an *ethical* requirement (though it is ethically important). Charity is, instead, a *logical* prerequisite without which interpretation cannot succeed. So, RI tries to hold the speaker ‘right, as far as we can tell, as often as possible’ (Davidson 1973: 323) – thus maximising his or her rationality.

RI accommodates Quine’s ‘indeterminacy of translation’: ‘if one way of interpreting a speaker’s utterances was satisfactory, so were many others’ (Davidson 2004a: 145). However, this plurality of interpretations is ‘neither mysterious nor threatening’. To cite Davidson’s (2004c) example, using kilograms or ounces to measure weights does not alter the gist of the result. Besides, unlike Quine’s, Davidson’s theory ‘probably does not leave room for indeterminacy of logical form’ (Davidson 1973: 328, fn 14).

Given RI, Davidson (1973–1974) rejected the *incommensurability* of languages and ‘conceptual schemes’ – for instance, Edward Sapir’s and Benjamin L. Whorf’s linguistic relativism and Kuhn’s and Paul Feyerabend’s epistemological relativism. Certainly, ‘languages that have evolved in distant times or places may differ extensively’ (Davidson 1973–1974: 6). Still, this does not preclude interpretation. Davidson also wrote ironically about Kuhn, who told us ‘what things were like before the [scientific] revolution using – what else? – our post-revolutionary idiom’ (1973–1974: 6). Yet, RI does *not* imply that all of a speaker’s beliefs, desires or preferences are rational or like ours. It only urges us to *try* to see another as intelligible and rational as far as possible. Intelligibility may be adjusted as interpretation proceeds. Error and disagreement are always possible (Davidson 2004a; Myers and Verheggen 2016).

For Davidson, error and disagreement are only intelligible when we already share with the speaker some ‘background’ of other common beliefs ‘against which to accuse ... [the speaker] of error’ (2004a: 153). But mutual understanding itself proceeds dynamically, and each interpreter’s *own* thinking and self-understanding

change and deepen in the process (Davidson 2004c). Anyway, although one must try to interpret others as being as rational as possible, one may clearly find that a relatively *small* number of someone's beliefs is wrong, but that they are very *important*, even politically important.

Certainly, Davidson's ideas above may seem quite abstract. Ordinarily, interpretation does not start from scratch. Davidson did not intend RI as mainly a descriptive theory (Myers and Verheggen 2016). This may raise the worry that RI is 'too powerful', as it does show total incommensurability to be unintelligible, but not how real, partial obstacles to communication get overcome (Dreyfus and Taylor 2015). However, first, a fruitful theory need not be mainly descriptive: Davidson uncovers the *logical foundations* of communication. And this is valuable, as there are authors who, despite recognising elsewhere that absolute incommensurability is impossible, still write about 'non-intertranslatable' terms (Dreyfus and Taylor 2015: 120), or that even a 'rudimentary logical space' may not connect distant cultures or epochs (Gunnell 2020: 100). Second, Davidson *can* guide more empirical research. Dreyfus and Taylor (2015) think that Davidson cannot show concrete differences in meanings between communities with their different holistic 'gestalts'. However, again, for Davidson there can precisely be different meanings because they are not givens: people may triangulate upon the world differently in different communities. Nothing impedes studying how interpersonal communication makes specific aspects meaningful and how meanings get sedimented within a concrete community, and how they change. As noted above, Davidson also stressed holism; but this does not prevent *intercultural* communication, whereby specific aspects of the world become meaningful for representatives from *different* communities as they meet to triangulate upon them.

Davidson's view of what a language consists of is also important. It was decidedly anti-essentialist. He wrote 'that there is no such thing as a language' (2005a: 107): what Davidson criticised was the view of a language as a system of clear, fixed, exhaustive rules learnt and shared before communication and applying automatically. Before communication, people may not possibly have shared such a system; but they still often manage to understand each other as communication proceeds. A speaker may say

numerous malapropisms, but the listener often understands the speaker easily. Language ‘retains an open texture, enabling us to respond in infinite ways in any given situation’ (Haddock 2011: 77). Lacking rigid rules, radical interpretation is needed not only between different languages, but also between speakers of the same language, for even speakers of a single language have to constantly interpret each other (though, perhaps, with less effort). There is no strict domestic–international divide here. Certainly, there are *some* relatively stable standards shared before communication, but Davidson (2005a) just stressed irreducible contextuality and pragmatism in communication, the ability to understand each other, to varying degrees, in a concrete situation. People just need to ‘tend to converge on passing theories’ about mutual interpretation; Davidson almost equated ‘knowing a language’ with ‘knowing our way around in the world generally’ (2005a: 106–107).

Davidson supports the strengths of the popular views stressing social construction and linguistic contextuality, but avoids their pitfalls. Saul Kripke, for instance, showed that no ‘fact’ per se determines meaning, which is something with which Davidson would agree. Yet, Kripke then swung to another extreme: meaning would be determined merely by ‘community’ or ‘utility’. However, this does not show why a community shares the meanings it does. And we would hardly wish majority or utility to become absolute judges of truth (Myers and Verheggen 2016). A general vulnerability of the influential approaches to politics that use Wittgenstein’s language games (Fierke 2002; Gunnell 2020) is that such approaches may end up in relativism and arbitrariness – merely noting the hold on the people of their current linguistic practices or noting that practices just change, with both observations lacking clear reasoning. Davidson provides an alternative. Speakers are connected to the world, but the aspects of the world that determine the meanings of their words are those that they intersubjectively take as such. There is sociality without losing touch with the world. And ‘[m]eaning could be essentially social without being strictly communitarian or conventional’ (Myers and Verheggen 2016: 1). While meanings are often shared, individuals need not *always* speak just as *others* do or as they have done *before* (Myers and Verheggen 2016).

Davidson’s problematisation of language shifts the focus from translation between natural languages to a concern more interesting

for *politics*. Political dissent often results not from putative dissimilarities between, say, English and Arabic, but from the meaning of the same words becoming contested, even in a single natural language. Davidson considered relations between not just natural languages, but between various conceptual schemes as well.

Ethics and Cultural Difference

The above ideas also correspond to an ethics, as Myers and Verheggen (2016) show. Davidson thought that motivation implies having not just a belief, but primarily a goal. However, non-cognitive attitudes are also influenced by beliefs – descriptive *and* normative. Hence, not just being derivatives of pro-attitudes, normative beliefs *themselves* influence motivation. Like descriptive properties of the world, there are real normative properties upon which people triangulate. Like descriptive beliefs, normative ones are largely shared and correct, at least instrumentally (Myers and Verheggen 2016).

Note here Davidson's advantage over Habermas – a philosopher whom he probably appears to resemble closely. Above, I showed that Davidson's view of truth is, at least, as sophisticated as Habermas'. Besides truth, Habermas distinguishes two more basic 'validity claims' in strong communicative action: moral/social rightness and sincerity; also (at least regarding what is relevant for IPT), he adds ethical goodness/authenticity (for an overview and references to Habermas, see Bohman and Rehg 2017). However, although Habermasian morality and ethics partly depend on empirics, morality focusses just on an ideal universal consensus, and ethics focusses mostly on the good of an individual or a group with their particularities. The distinction between morality and ethics is quite vague (Bohman and Rehg 2017). More importantly, a firmer ground for morality and ethics is lacking. Habermas thus may verge on reproducing an old separation between the empirical and normative, whereby the latter risks being mostly reduced to just a consensus or, even ironically, to an unclear communitarian 'good'. For Davidson, instead, there are stronger parallels between descriptive and normative properties, and in both the descriptive and normative spheres, objectivity and intersubjectivity are logically interlinked.

But, again, Davidson allowed for errors. Even instrumentally, pro-attitudes will not fully respond to all normative beliefs one has. There may be strong desires that are not right (Myers and

Verheggen 2016). Sometimes, ‘powerful psychological and social forces’ complicate normative issues, mistakes get ‘entrenched’, and ‘those in positions of power’ aggravate them (Myers and Verheggen 2016: 179–180).

Davidsonian ethics unites *both* ‘agent-neutral’ reasons (e.g. to protect every child) and, on top of them, ‘agent-relative’ reasons (to care in proportion to the ties one has developed with others – e.g. for one’s children). Moreover, this depends on culture: thus, communal or individualist cultures influence how much people care for others. People always have some agent-neutral reasons to act morally. Despite their different and sometimes clashing agent-relative reasons, people possess a second-order reason for mutual respect (Myers and Verheggen 2016). Morality is a human ‘construction’, but not just whatever dominant ‘political realities’ dictate. Yet, political realities are also acknowledged, and nobody acts fully morally. Indeed, Davidson would probably have approved of ‘essentially political virtues’ as ‘central’ also because of his respect for Aristotle (Myers and Verheggen 2016). This ethics thus both respects a universal authority of morality but also differences, real political circumstances *and* moral conundrums.³

A final worry can now be addressed, namely, that Davidson’s stress on mutual interpretability disrespects pluralism, imposing the interpreter’s rationality on the interpreted (Habermas 2008), and enforcing cultural uniformity (Lukes 2000). Dreyfus and Taylor (2015) fear Davidson’s ‘ethnocentrism’ and treating others as mere ‘objects’ of scientific observation. Instead, they advocate a Gadamerian ‘fusion of horizons’: the horizons of communities would be different but dynamic and interconnected by their common ontological touch with the world.

However, given the possibilities of people’s differences and errors explained above, including in morality, this worry about Davidson should have been partly eliminated. Moreover, first, Davidson explicitly recognised ‘the differences in intellectual and imaginative character among minds and cultures . . . on vast tracts of physical and moral opinion’ (2004c: 219). Second, as shown above, Davidson also stressed people’s shared ontological touch with the world. Third, we do begin to interpret another from within our current language (what else?). But, crucially, we need not *end* there, by imposing ‘our’ language on the other. Dreyfus and Taylor (2015)

precisely note that translation can be either into our language *before* communication or ‘the extended language’ arising *in* communication with another. But they suspect Davidson to impose the language existing *before* communication. Yet, actually, a Davidsonian interpreter just cannot impose his or her ‘private’, ‘given’ standard on the interpreted, as both must, to some degree, share ‘an *interpersonal* standard’ (Davidson 2004c: 211, italics added). Thus, ‘[m]eanings cannot be imposed on an individual’s words by others any more than they can be imposed by the world around her’ (Myers and Verheggen 2016: 90). Even scientists cannot impose the ‘single correct’ meanings on speakers (Myers and Verheggen 2016). Meanings are created in the very ‘interaction’ of persons, whereby there is neither a subject–object relation, nor any other ‘primacy’ – there is equality, which is often missed by Davidson’s critics (Myers and Verheggen 2016). The speakers ‘negotiate’ their differences, thus understanding that not only ‘their’ initial perspective exists; for trying to have ‘the only say on the matter’ means having ‘no say at all’ (Myers and Verheggen 2016: 23). A Gadamerian picture would hardly be more dynamic: for Davidson, ‘[t]here are no definite limits to how far dialogue can or will take us’ (2004c: 219).

To summarise, Davidson united the objective, subjective and intersubjective. There is no unproblematic world to which beliefs are simply compared, and no essentialist subject unrelated to the world and other subjects. Communication and sociality are constitutive of subjects and knowledge, which are hence deeply relational. Yet, Davidson also preserved an aspect of truth as a link to a shared world and an idea of rationality. He rejected absolute incommensurability. But communication itself is contextual and dynamic. Ethics and intercultural relations account for both universality and difference.

Implications for IPT

Friedrich Kratochwil noted false choices, widespread in IR, that pit an absolutist notion of ‘truth’ against an ‘anything goes’ attitude (cited in Hamati-Ataya 2011). Social theory generally faces similar bifurcations. There are needless trade-offs between, on the one hand, rationality and objectivity and, on the other hand, interpretation

and language. They have often been compartmentalised into, and narrowed by, seemingly alternative approaches. Then, it is hardly surprising that Davidson has received insufficient attention in IPT. But his challenging ideas become especially fruitful to revise the existing dichotomies. I will demonstrate this by analysing, above all, political *realism* and strong *post-positivist* approaches as the two most symptomatic cases. Furthermore, although some *other* approaches may be closer to Davidson's approach, Davidson still helps rethink them. In normative terms, Davidson turns out to bridge the *cosmopolitan–communitarian* distinction. I will end by comparing his approach with Habermas' cosmopolitanism and thus illustrate Davidson's attractions.

Before proceeding, some caveats are needed. First, the above-mentioned labels cover heterogeneous approaches. Thus, 'realism' as a long-lasting tradition, began centuries before the discipline of IR, and the latter has seen various classical realists, neorealists and neoclassical realists. 'Post-positivism' is also not an unambiguous term; it may be thought to be too broad as too many different scholars have abandoned positivism. I chose the term because it concerns epistemology, to which Davidson primarily speaks. And I mean not just all positions 'after positivism', but those specifically critical of positivism. Without denying all the approaches' internal differences, I will just identify common threads within each. Second, I will not maintain that realism and post-positivism *are* necessarily mutually opposed, only that their (self-)images in the discipline mostly are. They differ indeed, but one thought-provoking conclusion will be that both face the problem of incommensurability, which Davidson precisely overcomes. Also, cosmopolitanism and communitarianism have initiated a closer dialogue, and Davidson helps develop it. Third, my analysis will not cover the whole theoretical landscape or all empirical applications. But I will deliberately highlight salient approaches in theory: given scant attention to Davidson even there, we need first a broad outline of how he might be used. Even if these approaches might seem somewhat outworn, the respective positions are still logically important.

Realism is associated with a sober rationality and objectivity. However, realists largely restrict practical rationality to *instrumentally* efficient means to subjective ends. Certainly, realists highlight actors' substantive goal of security and power. But the more

specific contents of their ‘interest’ remain underexplored from the viewpoint of rationality. Also, realists often restrict the scientific rationality of scholars themselves.

To take canonical examples, instrumentalism was present already in Niccolò Machiavelli, who separated the analysis of means from that of ends, and in Thomas Hobbes (Wolin 2004). Hobbes (2003) saw thoughts as means to satisfy desires; and in almost all political matters, what was to count as reasonable was decided or tolerated by an existing sovereign. Hans Morgenthau (1947) initially criticised a rationalism, scientism and, largely, instrumentalism that prevailed in modern society. Yet, paradoxically, instead of providing a richer view, Morgenthau himself settled on treating reason as just a servant of ‘irrational impulses, interests or emotions’ (1947: 135) defining human ends. And instrumentalism has been widespread amongst many later less philosophically minded realists (Glaser 2010; Waltz 1979). Even neo-classical realists, albeit more attentive to domestic politics than Kenneth Waltz, leave much of national interest not substantively rationally assessed (Ripsman et al. 2016).

Meanwhile, realists pay insufficient attention to philosophical criticisms of instrumentalism and to accounts of rationality that are much richer and more substantive (while also avoiding dogmatism) (e.g. Audi 2002; Horkheimer 2004; Nozick 1993; O’Neill 2003; Putnam 1998). Instrumentalism has also been criticised in political science (Steinberger 2015) and IR (Nicholson 1997).⁴

Regarding language, many realists try to ignore it, and sometimes it is present only implicitly. But for many profound realist thinkers, language does turn out to be important. Again, I understand language here following Davidson. The question is not whether the speakers speak the same natural language, but whether they share politically important meanings. Now, for Thucydides, language was fundamentally tied to political community and stability. Conflicts could be so intensive that ‘the usual evaluative force of words’ was ‘reversed’ to serve clashing views, even within a *single polis* and when people formally continued, of course, to speak the *same* natural language, Greek (Thucydides 2009: 170; see also Kokaz 2001).

Thucydides’ attention to language was continued by Hobbes, at least in his political philosophy (and mathematics). Terence Ball (1985) argued that it was Hobbes, not someone such as Rorty, who

first effected a ‘linguistic turn’ in political theory. Hobbes’ political concern was, again, not mainly with translation between natural languages, but much more with the (imagined) state of nature as largely implying people’s private, conflicting meanings of truth, justice and property (key amongst other things). Conversely, a commonwealth implied shared political meanings inculcated by the sovereign (Hobbes 2003; see Ball 1985; and Wolin 2004). International relations remain in the state of nature not just as nations speak different natural languages, but largely because of the lack of mutually uncontested political meanings. Both Hobbes and Davidson thus thought that meanings are fixed not just by nature, but, inescapably, by human beings; yet, they differed in who fixed them and how. For Davidson, they get fixed through dynamic triangulation between speakers who may well represent different states. For Hobbes, reliable fixation is only enforced by a single sovereign.

Unsurprisingly, classical twentieth-century realists continued the reflection about language. For Morgenthau, Reinhold Niebuhr or Arthur Schlesinger, language was vital for both the cohesion and pluralism of a polity (Tjalve and Williams 2015). Nevertheless, the general problem with realist views remains, again, that political language is largely confined within and relative to separate polities. Accordingly, communication *between* them is underestimated. Those authors who, like Thucydides, mentioned conflicts between political meanings *within* the same polity also were probably too pessimistic about eventual mutual understanding. Note that I do not unjustly reduce realism to superficial materialism, positivism or cynicism. Realism’s common denominator can be its stressing ‘the irresolvable conflicts’ not only of ‘interest’, but also of ‘meaning’ and ‘value’ (Bell 2008). What is problematic is that realists overstate an ‘irresolvable’ nature of those conflicts.

Nicolas Guilhot (2015) argues that, for many classical realists, both different historical periods and different actors have their subjective rationalities and languages that cannot be bridged completely by a common rationality or language. Strikingly, such views chimed with the Cambridge school of intellectual history, which sees Quine’s indeterminacy of translation as supporting ‘the incommensurability of historical time’ (Guilhot 2015: 11). However, as I noted above, Davidson showed that Quine’s indeterminacy does *not* imply essential incommensurability.

Also, some realists, including neo-realists, readily received Kuhn, whose incommensurable paradigms were analogous, again, to political actors' largely incommensurable rationalities. Realism, especially neo-realism, appeared scientific by Kuhnian standards, but just because science itself was conceived as realist power struggles between paradigms. Despite neo-realists' rigorous methods, many of them did not seek positivist reflection of an objective reality, but rather constructed theoretical models, each with, in a sense, its own reality (Guilhot 2016; see also Jackson 2010; and Waltz 1979).

So, realists overstate differences between rationalities, values and languages – those of political actors, epochs or even scientific theories. This can be corrected using Davidson's radical interpretation. Certainly, conflicts of meanings should be taken seriously. But Davidson precisely rejected *unproblematic* communication: interpreting another is an unavoidable *task* everywhere, both between languages and in one language. Interpretation may require a lot of effort. But eventually, it is more often successful than many realists assume.

Consider now strong post-positivist arguments stressing pluralism and difference – for example, the multiple, 'historically and culturally specific language games' (Fierke 2010: 89). This is opposed to realism's alleged 'universality' (2010: 90). However, ironically, following my analysis, post-positivism rather shows some continuities with realism. For if language was important for some prominent realists (even if implicitly), and realists often understand rationality, values and language in relativist terms, so do post-positivists, but just more explicitly and strongly. My analysis supports and extends the arguments of Michael C. Williams (2005), who argued that Hobbes was no positivist and that Morgenthau's epistemology largely corresponded 'surprisingly well' with post-positivism (Williams 2005).

Many post-positivists heavily criticise the ideas of rationality, truth and objectivity, thus constricting their place in IPT still further. But while post-positivists justly denounce simplistic rationalisms, they should not have sweepingly equated rationality with 'timeless' 'universals' or 'general transcendent truths' (Lebow 2014: 158). Rationality, truth and objectivity need not be dogmatic ideological notions. They are, indeed, the very opposite; they are certainly always imperfect yet self-correcting. Davidson's ideas,

while stressing intersubjectivity, social construction, the importance of language, and relationality, at the same time offer a non-dogmatic account of rationality, truth and objectivity.

If another is declared incommensurable with an interpreter, then, however good the latter's intentions, there appear to be no logical reasons why the interpreter would respect the other. For instance, approaches drawing on Emmanuel Levinas hope to respect another as unknowable. Yet, another's alleged inscrutability could arbitrarily degenerate into pernicious othering. This largely happened to Levinas' personal approach that, when faced with a concrete political issue of the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict, slipped from good intentions towards another to a largely uncritical attitude towards Israel's policies (Aradau 2010; Neumann 1999). More balanced post-positivist accounts would still reject 'consensus', associated with 'assimilation', and prefer dialogue, apparently, for dialogue's sake (Neumann 1999).

But to logically hold that cultures are equally valuable, we need at least some ethics applicable to them all (Putnam 1998). A post-positivist reply would probably be that this implies cognitive or ethical violence. Certainly, simplistic rationalism is often a totalising attitude. However, appropriate conceptions of rationality accommodate individual and cultural pluralism, as Davidson and others showed (Audi 2002; Nozick 1993; Putnam 1998). Far from 'assimilation', a Davidsonian interpreter just cannot impose a 'private' standard on the interpreted. Instead, an intersubjective standard develops in communication. Convergence on meanings will always be contextual. Consensus *thus* reached seems desirable.

Davidson obviously opposes any Orientalism (Said 1979) or Occidentalism into which the thesis of an unknowable other might often slip, whether wittingly or not. It is absurd to suggest that rationality is an essentialist Western (or masculine or any similar) 'monopoly', and then exalt or condemn it. Rationality is not about essentialist subjects, but dynamic dialogue and mutual constitution respecting diversity. For example, Randall Collins disproved views of 'Asian' philosophies as 'running on distinctive inner logics' (2002: 379). Collins rejected essentialist approaches to both one's culture and the 'uniqueness' of other cultures: the latter attitude may certainly claim 'laudable humility' towards others, yet 'it remains ethnocentrism, merely at second order and projected into

the distance' (2002: 383). The peculiarities of some languages may present philosophical difficulties, yet they are transcended through thinking itself (Collins 2002).

Dreyfus and Taylor (2015) would counter that different communities cannot share peculiar *complex* concepts 'constituted' only in their *linguistic* practices (e.g. such concepts as 'dialectic' as constituted in the ancient Greek culture). Communities would have their peculiar holistic outlooks. Now, such complex concepts are precisely important for politics. And, granted, 'national interest', 'freedom', 'security', 'justice' or 'harmony' have some culturally specific contents that have emerged in the historical development of concrete communities. Also, they are embedded in holistic webs of other political concepts, webs peculiar for every community. However, Davidsonian interpretation does respect these specificities. And it is always holistic; Davidson's holism covers both meaning and reference, and Dreyfus and Taylor hardly provide an alternative. But holistic world views *are* intelligible, even if understanding them requires long interactions and/or redescriptions of a single word. There is no question of 'getting inside the brains' or acquiring a first-person view of, say, Socrates practising dialectic or a Swiss practising his or her peculiar democratic tradition. The question is about meanings, which precisely get constituted in intersubjective communication. And this constitution occurs also *between* different communities, when shared meanings emerge as they interact. Such interaction is dynamic and contextual. It can, for example, result in views of freedom shared by various communities, which can co-exist with their culturally specific views. Also, Davidson does not reify a community. Meanings need not be communitarian or conventionalist: people within a community often do mean the same things, for instance, by harmony, but need not all or always do that, whence internal heterogeneity and political contestation. Relatedly, widespread associations between rationality and individualism and/or egoism are not necessary. This is evidenced by Davidson's conception of rationality as not an essentialist individual trait but necessarily intersubjective, and his ideas of communication and agent-neutral moral reasons (see Audi 2002).

Turning to history, some post-positivist scholars have been influenced by Cambridge-school-style contextualism (e.g. Richard Devetak's [2014] critical theory). Significantly, Devetak

acknowledges that some *realists* also supported such historical contextualism. However, again, according to Bruce Haddock, if Davidson was right, we should be more sceptical about ‘celebrated discussions of incommensurability in political theory or strong relativist conceptions in history of political thought’ (2011: 77). Certainly, I do not question the very historical difference as an antidote against assuming ‘eternal laws’ of international politics. Davidson just guards against overstating difference. ‘Thinking’ connects historical epochs, and although thinking is always limited, we have no better alternative than still harder thinking (Haddock 2011). Even a *critical* theory, *contra* Devetak, need not overstate differences. Critique needs to somehow relate different contexts. Robert Cox (1981, 2012), one founder of critical IR, certainly rejected positivism and stressed theories’ historical contexts. Yet, he also stressed that critical theory went beyond its initial context, and tried to connect plural civilisations and epochs. Cox even wrote that his critical theory was above all aimed precisely at ‘*overcoming*’ (2012: 26, italics in original) the idea of an impenetrable other. All the connections will, however, be tentative and dynamic – just as in Davidson.

Haddock also rightly notes that the (radical) ‘social constructivist reading’ of the linguistic turn itself is ‘problematic’ (2011: 78). Attempts to broaden the agenda, such as Karin Fierke’s (2002) identification of the early Wittgenstein as another ‘phase’ in the linguistic turn, besides the late Wittgenstein, are insufficient.⁵ Why need we choose between a rigorous logical positivism associated (perhaps not fully accurately) with the early Wittgenstein, and a largely relativist approach inspired by the late Wittgenstein? It seems that more efforts are still needed to overcome ‘[t]he dichotomy: either ahistorical unchanging canons of rationality *or* cultural relativism’ (Putnam 1998: x, italics in original). Davidson offered a promising avenue forward.

Now, while challenging incommensurability in both realism and strong post-positivism, Davidson might be viewed as closer to liberalism, or ‘thinner’ varieties of constructivism, or not thoroughly contextualist (e.g. Coxian) critical theories. True, these approaches might yield results that turn out (in their own ways) to come near Davidson’s. Nevertheless, Davidson is still helpful for rethinking them.

On the ‘rationalist’ side, liberalism largely foregrounds possibilities for communication and convergence. Yet, Davidson substantiates and complements this by a sophisticated analysis of language, thus offering a more nuanced epistemology than positivism. Also, while challenging incommensurability, he avoids the potential liberal extreme of naïve universalism and/or utopianism, as noted below regarding cosmopolitanism. On the other hand, Davidson’s ideas on language, intersubjectivity and relationality speak to ‘thin’ constructivism which does not stress incommensurability. Besides, tentative ties between cultures and epochs were reflected on by Cox. Yet, while Davidson complements ‘rationalism’ with a nuanced account of language, he complements ‘thin’ constructivism or critical theory with that of rationality. Critical theorists need to more often treat rationality beyond merely criticising, for instance, its neo-realist or other stereotypical conceptualisations (Cox 1981). Constructivists also need to go beyond Alexander Wendt, who confined Davidson to a simplistic ‘rationalist model of man’ (with its separation of desires from beliefs) (2003: 116–119), efficient causation giving support to positivism, and just a cursory recognition of Davidson’s social view of language (Wendt 2015). As shown above, Davidson certainly held that beliefs, including normative ones, *do* influence motivation. And he rejected positivism.

In normative terms, it is already largely evident that Davidson bridges the cosmopolitan–communitarian distinction (my analysis of this divide draws on Sutch 2018). This distinction, while, again, not clear-cut, is still hard to avoid logically. Davidson fits surprisingly well in, and provides a firmer ground for, the unfolding dialogue between cosmopolitanism and communitarianism. Thus, both cosmopolitans and communitarians have mostly recognised that justice has both cosmopolitan and communitarian bases, not mutually exclusive, which can be grounded in Davidsonian agent-neutral and agent-relative moral reasons. Cosmopolitans have complemented their universalism by recognising the ethical importance of existing political practices and institutions. As shown above, Davidson acknowledged cultural differences and the ethical care proportional to the ties one has in fact developed with others. What ‘is’ is important for ‘ought’. This gives reasons for respecting not only individuals, but also the existing politics and institutions they support. Communitarians, in their turn, have mostly accepted the

basic equal worth of all humans. This accords with Davidson's radical interpretation and the universal element of his ethics. But communitarians still need to avoid limiting 'ought' to, let alone reifying, what 'is' (i.e. existing practices), or just noting that practices change. Recall here Davidson's ideas that meanings are social but not just communitarian or conventional (hence respect for individual differences and contestation within a community), and that ethics is not just whatever any dominant reality dictates. Intersubjective meanings are dynamic, but preserve invariant agent-neutral moral reasons.

I will certainly not conclude that Davidson is 'the only' philosopher who helps rethink the above dichotomies; he just offers one promising perspective. A prime alternative coming to mind is perhaps, again, Habermas, with his ideas of rational communication and cosmopolitanism, which putatively allow for pluralism. While I cannot fully discuss Habermas here, I will, however, end my argument with his 'hard case' in order to better illustrate Davidson's attractions in IPT *even* when confronted with him. At least, I will show that if Habermas has already occupied an important niche in IPT (Bohman and Rehg 2017; Eriksen 2018; Neumann 1999; Schmid 2018), then Davidson deserves one as well.

Habermas' separation of the normative and empirical criticised above is largely reflected in his views of politics. Stronger communicative action requiring stricter justification of the validity claims corresponds to a putatively reasonable and consensual 'lifeworld'. Weaker communicative or even strategic action corresponds to the 'system', which is largely exemplified by bureaucracies and markets (Bohman and Rehg 2017). The lifeworld becomes subject to 'interpretive and normative' consideration, and the system, to 'functionalist and analytical' consideration (Schmid 2018: 206). The 'conceptual and intersubjective' is, ironically, opposed to an (implicit) positivism (Jonathan Joseph cited in Schmid 2018). There is, thus, a normatively good lifeworld of reasonable communication (where biases of power risk being overlooked), and there is also a system that just 'is'. Both thus are simplified; the 'ought' is largely utopian, and the 'is' is viewed insufficiently critically (Schmid 2018). Besides, recall that Habermasian normativity verges on just a consensus or unclear good. Now, Habermas' cosmopolitanism, albeit professedly realistic and pluralist, risks becoming largely

uncritical and teleological, for ‘reasonable’ political communication would risk just following economic globalisation presented as almost objective. The normative would then just follow what is ongoing (Schmid 2018). The Westphalian system, supposedly putting ‘power over reason’, would be replaced with its opposite (for these criticisms and references to Habermas, see Schmid 2018). Eventually, as Habermasian normativity lacks a firmer ground, it yields arbitrary preferences (e.g. for the European Union). Moreover, Habermas has another, epistemological limitation to defending his own cosmopolitanism coherently. Precisely when criticising Davidson, Habermas assumes that, to mean the same things, speakers must already find themselves embedded in a shared ‘form of life’ (2008: 64). Ironically, this is a swing to communitarianism or conventionalism. And these can barely explain either how these different ‘forms’ emerge and, crucially, how commensurability and cosmopolitan communication are possible between them, if no such global ‘form’ already exists.

Thus, Davidson seems more consistent and less teleological at the same time. He stresses interlinked epistemological and ethical grounds for potentially very wide rational communication between polities, without necessarily underestimating their differences or prophesying certain allegedly ‘more rational’ forms of political organisation.

Conclusion

Davidson’s reception has been too narrow. Contemporary realism’s main explicit focus is not language; when it is analysed, its conceptions, like those of rationality, are often underlain by incommensurability. Incommensurability is further stressed in strong post-positivist approaches; they needlessly constrict or debunk rationality, and, though explicitly highlighting the importance of language, conceive of ‘linguistic turn’ narrowly. Ironically, then, both realism and post-positivism face similar limitations. Liberalism’s engagement with language and ‘thin’ constructivism’s and the Coxian critical theory’s engagement with rationality have also been insufficient.

Davidson helps rethink these approaches. He uncovers inescapable, logical connections between language and rationality. He

overcomes incommensurability in understanding both language and rationality while respecting pluralism. His rejection of incommensurability and problematisation of the notion of a single language relate the domestic and the international/global.

In normative terms, Davidson can support and better ground a developing dialogue between cosmopolitanism and communitarianism. His theories of interpretation, language and ethics have a universal basis, yet take seriously political realities, dynamism and difference between both communities and individuals.

Eventually, Davidson offers a perspective (though not ‘definitive answers’) that would stress rationality, preserving some objectivity and truth, but also intersubjectivity, language and interpretation. This seems highly relevant in an alleged post-truth climate. Davidson gave us both resources for demonstrating that rational communication and agreement between very different spatio-temporal contexts (cultural, generational, theoretical, etc.) are possible, *and* an emphatically non-dogmatic, pluralist and dynamic picture of communication itself.

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Notes

1. I will not needlessly separate IPT and International Relations (IR), the normative and descriptive/explanatory.
2. For example, I do not think that all the contents of thoughts are linguistic, but will not dwell on this. Nevertheless, Davidson does mostly successfully show logical connections between human thought and language.
3. Myers and Verheggen (2016) claim that, for Davidson, morality is not always 'overriding'. But I think that, regardless of whether an actor follows Davidsonian morality in fact, it outlines broadly well-grounded ethical guidance.
4. These references do not imply that Davidson would have supported all of these various views. Hilary Putnam and Davidson differed on points that are not crucial here.
5. Fierke prefers the late Wittgenstein.

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