

The World of Truth: On Merleau-Ponty and Davidson's Holistic Arguments

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Abstract

In this paper, I will argue that a comparison between Merleau-Ponty and Davidson gives us a great chance to further advance the dialogue between the Continental and the Analytic traditions. Although the differences between these two authors were widely discussed in scholarly literature, their similarities remain overlooked in many important ways. The main goal of this article is to demonstrate an important symmetry between Merleau-Ponty's notion of openness and Davidson's notion of truth by revealing the similarity in their motivations that is given despite the obvious differences in the conceptual tools that they employ and their basic methodological principles. In particular, I will argue that 1) the openness to the world performs (although partly) the same function as the truth performs for Davidson: as contentless fulcrums that tie together different elements), which enable *merging* of different causal stimuli. 2) there is an important similarity between Merleau-Ponty's disregard for any kind of rigid distinction between the *a priori* and the *a posteriori* elements of experience and Davidson's critique of the dualism of scheme and content. Both the *a priori* and the *a posteriori* require their counterpart without being reduced to it; 3) at the same time, both authors are defending the essential historicity of our understanding and consequently denouncing "a view from nowhere" encrypted in the philosophical tradition.

Keywords: Merleau-Ponty, Davidson, openness, truth, post-transcendental philosophy

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Introduction

Over the last four decades, there have been a number of works aimed at finding points of convergence among philosophers belonging to what was once seen as rival camps of Continental and Analytic Philosophy. While the original reapproachment was attempted by Austro-German philosophy represented by such figures as K. Mulligan, B. Smith, J. Benoist and others, the attempts to overcome the divide become a common point due to the long-lasting influence of the works of such authors as W. Sellars, R. Rorty, S. Cavell, R. Brandom, J. McDowell, R. Geuss and others. In this paper, I will concentrate on one of the most important and productive meeting places, which, has arguably been the encounter between phenomenology and hermeneutics on the one side, and what was broadly described as analytic pragmatism on the other.

Interpreters such as Rorty, Dreyfus, Okrent and Haugeland have tried to explore from different angles how Heidegger can be related and compared to the broad range of analytic philosophers from Searle to Davidson, as well as what commonalities and distinguishing features can be spotted. In the same way, authors such as Ramberg and Malpas have concentrated on further explication of the common ground between Davidson's and Gadamer's notions of truth and understanding. As I see it, the main contribution of this enterprise does not consist of showing that somebody is right or wrong – although we have plenty of opinions regarding this aspect – but of putting philosophers that seemed to have nothing to do with each other in a common logical space where different positions might be viewed as answers or alternatives to others, thus putting an end to isolation often corruptive to the very idea of philosophy. This means that the crucial interpretative task here is not simply to establish agreement nor disagreement, but to disclose the possibility of fruitful disagreement, which is a possibility dependent upon a shared horizon that must be revealed. In this sense, specification of a disagreement would at the same time mean a maximization of agreement, a thought that, as we are about to see, is common to both philosophical traditions.

In this sense, a more recent trend in such approximation, namely, a comparison between Merleau-Ponty's writings and Davidson's, appears to be promising. To give a couple of examples, Taylor has argued that a comparison between Davidson's and Merleau-Ponty's work indicates that, contrary to his best intentions, Davidson has failed to escape the representationalist paradigm. Although both philosophers support strongly the idea of "unmediated touch" with the world, Davidson's view that "there is no way to get outside our beliefs and our language so as to find some test other than coherence" indicates the presence of representationalist remnants in Davidson's approach and finds no analogue in Merleau-Ponty (Taylor 2004, 27-30). Taylor also claims that Davidson's holism is a "holism of verification," i.e. a holism consisting of a system of propositions kept together by logical ties, which is in an important way different from Merleau-Ponty's practical holism that includes also professional and cultural skills as well as bodily normativity (Taylor 2004, 30-32). Similarly, Wrathall has argued that Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on *motives* does not fit Davidson's division between causal stimuli and rational norms but adds a third domain to these two distinctions (Wrathall 2005). (C. Sachs raised a similar claim only with regard to Sellars's and McDowell's approaches (Sachs 2014)). What is missing here, however, is an attempt to extend their common ground. While in the case of Heidegger's and Gadamer's approaches, points of convergence (developed by Wrathall (1999), Okrent (2017), Haugeland (2013), Ramberg 2015 to name a few) were as interesting as points of divergence, Merleau-Ponty's comparison to the analytic tradition remains mostly negative in spirit.¹ While not arguing against the conclusions of the aforementioned scholars, in this article I intend to pursue the opposite aim, showing in what senses Merleau-Ponty might be seen as similar to Davidson. I will argue that we can find a much closer connection between Merleau-Ponty and Davidson than is currently recognized, which might help to further accentuate the already established differences and provide a ground for a more fruitful discussion promoting an inter-traditional dialogue.

Two remarks should be made before I start. First, while interpreting Davidson in the first section, I will mostly recap Ramberg's incisive reading. The second, more important remark concerns the scope of my analysis of Merleau-Ponty. Since the aim of this paper is to demonstrate the similarities assuming that dissimilarities have already been established (at least partly), I will propose a very selective analysis of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*. Namely, I will concentrate on his account of openness to the detriment of his account of bodily intentionality and temporality, which obviously finds no analogue in Davidson. Although this may strike as a too significant interpretative gambit, I'm hoping that by the end of the paper this move will pay off.

1. Truth

Davidson describes his own program as defending the philosophical importance of Tarski's semantical concept of truth (Davidson 1984, 24). Tarski's project, as is well known, consists of an attempt to define the truth-predicate through constructing truth-conditions of every sentence of a given language. This project, which is ultimately an attempt to describe the nature of truth without objectifying it as a property that somehow *makes* sentences true, boils down to a formula known as T-sentence. A T-sentence is a biconditional that takes the following form: 'S' is true in L if, and only if, *p*. Here, 'S' stands for a sentence in the object language ('L') and '*p*' stands for a sentence in the metalanguage that is meant to *translate* the sentence 'S.' A typical example of a T-sentence is a sentence "snow is white is true iff 'snow is white,'" which is meant to emphasize a formal and semantic character of truth: it claims nothing but an extension of a truth-value from one sentence into another. This approach is, obviously, quite limited. With his semantical concept of truth, Tarski was aiming for the analysis of formalized languages, i.e. languages that necessarily presuppose a metalanguage, with the help of which the formal languages are constructed. The success of such an enterprise is dependent upon triviality of the formalized language – as Tarski himself notes, we must know what it is for a sentence of an object language to have the same meaning as a sentence in a

metalanguage in order to perform the translation (Davidson 1984a: xiv). And the latter is possible only insofar as we have “a pre-theoretical grasp on truth” which itself remains unexplained by the Tarskian theory.

Davidson’s reception of the Tarskian theory is based on an attempt to overcome its limited applicability and render it empirically significant. Since Tarskian theory was meant to encompass a purely formal extension of language, we must already be capable of seeing the T-sentences as trivially true. But instead of understanding truth based on the assumed sameness of meaning, we could also try to understand meaning based on truth. So he writes,

“the definition works by giving necessary and sufficient conditions for the truth of every sentence, and to give truth conditions is a way of giving the meaning of a sentence. To know the semantic concept of truth for a language is to know what it is for a sentence—any sentence—to be true, and this amounts, in one good sense we can give to the phrase, to understanding the language” (Davidson 1984, 24)

Davidson approaches the Tarskian model and de-formalizes it in a two-stepped sequence: first, he returns to the fact that the claim “P is true” is dependent upon knowing the meaning of P. If we want to approach not only formalized parts of language but language as such, we need to stop assuming that meaning is simply given. Second, we should try to explain the meaning of P based on the conditions under which P is true. The first step problematizes meaning and the second reinstates its intimate relation with truth. This does not refute but inverts the Tarskian flow of explanation: it is not the translation that explains truth but the opposite (Davidson 1973a, 321). Such a move extends Tarski’s approach; as Ramberg points out “we are...conceding a point on which Davidson trades: truth and meaning are not independently definable.” (Ramberg 1991, 58)

At first sight, this seems like a profoundly counter-intuitive strategy. To outline a recursive account of truth for a formalized segment of language seems a transparent task, as it presupposes non-recursive and non-analysable concepts of truth in the natural language. An attempt to propose a recursive truth-theory for a natural language, however, appears to be hopelessly circular, rendering T-sentences such as “snow is

white iff grass is green” equitable with any other empirical sentence. Davidson has indeed argued that, in constructing a theory of meaning, what we need is to go beyond a T-theory for a language assuming a prior grasp on truth. But what does it mean? If we do not resort to any truth-makers, what content does this prior grasp have? We indeed cannot give a definition of truth – such an attempt would fall back into the vocabulary of “truth-makers.” What we can do, however, is achieve an understanding of *how we have the concept of truth*, which is a different question from “what is true?” While asking the former, we are not seeking for truth or some truthful facts, but rather for “the necessary condition of our possession of the concept of truth.” (Davidson 2010, 303) In this sense, although the T-theory does not explain truth and does not make anything truthful, it still gives us a guiding thread into the problem of truth (Davidson 1990, 299).

This point is best illustrated by Davidson’s account of radical interpretation. As is well known, the idea of radical interpretation boils down to the following thought-experiment: a field linguist find himself confronted with a society speaking in a language that he has no insight into. The only available course of action for him is to start interpreting the speech of the members of this society by constructing T-sentences trying to reveal the truth-value of the raised claims. What does the word *gavagai* mean? Seeing that it was pronounced under the occasion of a rabbit running through woods, our T-sentence might look like “*gavagai* is true iff there is a rabbit running through the woods.” But how can we know that the term *gavagai* referred to the rabbit and not to prey, as such? Maybe this word has no relation to hunting whatsoever and we have just received an offer to walk through the woods. It is also possible that *gavagai* might even mean something unrelated to the current state of affair – it might concern memories or plans for the future. We arrive at a problem, in such a way. Since we cannot resort to truth-makers of any sort (e.g. the relation of correspondence between the claim and the state of affairs), we are stuck in the situation where one T-sentence is just as good as any other. So, just like “*gavagai* is true iff there is a rabbit running through the woods”, the sentence “grass is green if

snow is white” represents a perfectly good case of a T-sentence. A singularly constructed T-sentence does not guarantee that its left side will have anything to do with the right one *empirically*.

In reality, that is not a problem. Because Davidson is not trying to answer the question of whether ‘x’ is truthful or not, but answering the question of what is the necessary condition of being truthful, T-sentence functions as a *tool* for grasping the truth. And since it is merely a tool that synchronizes truth-values of different sentences, the problem with sentences like “snow is white iff grass is green” is a problem of the *use* of T-sentences, not a problem of T-sentence theory as such. The important thing to understand here is a holistic implication of Davidson’s approach to truth: T-sentences enable us to approach the whole language, meaning that, the right side of the biconditional can and should be linked to further T-sentences. This is why the left side can be a proper interpretation of the right: by pairing with the left side sentence, the right side sentence gets introduced into a *constellation* of further sentences where its correctness stops being a trivial matter. An interpretation, therefore, necessarily presupposes an assumption that the *most part* of interpretee’s beliefs are truthful, i.e. that they can be systematically conjugated through T-sentences representing a (mostly) coherent whole. The process of interpretation consists of “maximizing [this] coherence,” (Rorty 1990, 136) that is to say, of linking interpretee’s claims to as many further claims as possible and situating them in a linguistic network.

While doing this, the linguist is forced to rely on the resources provided by his own language and the stock of coherent T-sentences that he already has at his disposal. For example, when the linguist is trying to interpret the word *gavagai*, he has to put into play an already known term “rabbit” hoping that its truth-conditions would systematically match the truth-condition of the word “rabbit.” If this attempt fails – if some other term is used when a rabbit is present – he would have to rework the interpretation in such a way that this expression would have a coherent use. Interpreter’s language, in such a way, represents an entrance point for a truth theory of the interpretee’s language; the point here is to elaborate such

truth-conditions that would conjugate interpreter's language and the unknown expression (for example, the interpreter could assume that *gavagai* consists of two words – *gava gai* – meaning a black rabbit). The process of interpretation postulates a sort of optimal point where the interpretee's and interpreter's languages are placed on the same footing through being encompassed by truth. Interpretee and interpreter arrive at a shared background because maximizing coherence necessarily means "maximizing agreement." (Foellessdal 1973, 298).

Therefore, the principle of charity that describes the assumption that the most part of interpretee's beliefs is true, "is not an option but a condition of having a workable theory." (Davidson 1974, 19) Davidsonian approach to T-sentences presupposes this "*holistic constraint*" (Ramberg 1991, 60, emphasis mine) embodied in the principle of charity, which explains the interconnection between meaning and truth. A mistake, disagreement, or falsehood is essentially a derivative phenomenon. In order to get to the meaning of a sentence, we must assume that it is linked through truth-sentences to lots and lots of other sentences and this assumption is what makes a possible mistake in the first place: some T-sentences might turn out to be disruptive for the conjugation of further T-sentences. Mistakes are something that, if accepted, prevents us from "maximizing coherence" and reaching understanding; they are wrong not because they have a T-sentence structure, but because they disrupt more general coherence of the given language. Mistakes, therefore, presuppose coherence (as T-structured sentences) and, at the same, time disrupt it (as wider coherence of T-structured sentences), which is what makes them null and void. Far from undermining the rule, they only confirm T-structured nature of meaning. So, Davidson writes, "Until we have successfully established a systematic correlation of sentences held true with sentences held true, there are no mistakes to make. Charity is forced on us; - whether we like it or not, if we want to understand others, we must count them right in most matters." (Davidson 1974, 19)

J. Ramberg gives us an illuminating guiding thread into the process of radical interpretation by stressing what radical interpretation is *not*. Namely, Ramberg claims that our field

linguist is *not* simply matching the sentences from his own language and the sentence in the interpretee's language. For this would presuppose that "a natural language is a given [consisting] of ready-made sentences, of fixed extensions for sentences to have." This idea wouldn't widen Tarski's conception, it would just transpose it into the natural language, thus resulting an untenable relativism: it would appear that my language is something that ultimately determines truth and falsity of every other language, a sort of claim Davidson surely won't like to be affiliated with. This is an easy mistake to make. Such interpreters as Wallace and Vermazen misleadingly believe that "we give the truth-conditions of a sentence and the meaning of a sentence in two separate operations: our linguist can first describe the 'enviroming conditions' that produce her subject's assent to a particular sentence, and then go on to see if she has a sentence in her own language that matches those conditions." But given that she will have no such sentence in her own language, how, asks Ramberg, "would she describe the enviroming conditions?" (Ramberg 1991, 67) The fact that we need to fix the extension (i.e. 'enviroming conditions') of the interpretee's sentence in order to get a grip on its meaning does not mean that our capacity of understanding simply consists of possessing a fixed number of sentences in our mind. There is no limit to what can be said exactly, because such a fixation amounts not to the finding of a ready-made meaning that is kept in storage of our mother tongue, but to the *production* of the truth conditions, and this is something we can do *because* we have a pre-theoretical grasp on truth.

That is why Ramberg is saying that "what the radical interpreter is doing is precisely constructing new sentences in her own language to match the extensions given by the sentences of the speakers she is interpreting." (Ramberg 1991, 67). Instead of simply matching the interpretee's claim with one of the interpreters own, she *generates* a T-sentence: she equates *gavagai* on the left side and our own claim regarding a running rabbit on the right. "The radical interpreter is dynamically construing what a speaker is continuously doing, rather than decoding some thing, some fixed structure, that the speaker has or possesses and gives sequential expression to." (Ramberg

2015, 221) Having generated a T-sentence, the radical interpreter approaches the interpretee's behaviour to see how well does her interpretation (i.e. the newly generated T-sentence) sits with linguistic behaviour as such, i.e. how well does it combine with other T-sentences that interpretee pronounces. Thus, Rorty speaks about going "around the hermeneutic circle long enough to come up with T-sentences which maximize the truth of the native's beliefs." (Rorty 1990, 137) To construct a T-sentence, as we have seen, means to attempt to link one sentence to another assuming that their truth value is translatable, which presupposes precisely the ability to generate a language rather than to use already generated resources. "The idealized radical interpreter targets, with her truth-theory, not a language that the speaker has come to possess, but the language that a speaker is producing at the moment – an *idiolect*. Furthermore, this target, this idiolect, is not a fixed object but something undergoing constant change. As an interpreter of linguistic behaviour, then, the radical interpreter is engaged in an ongoing process of perpetual modification of truth-theories." (Ramberg 2015, 221, emphasis mine) The conclusion, summed up aptly by Ramberg is that "we are only coincidentally speakers of languages." (Ramberg 1991, 123) As a totality of interconnected T-sentences, language becomes possible only on the foundation of truth, i.e. on our capacity to generate T-sentences and link them together, maximizing agreement among them; "truth is not relativized to the language." That is why Bennet's criticism that "explaining true in terms of the language I know" (Bennett 1985, 626) is fundamentally misguided: I do explain true in terms of the language I know, but only because this very language is something that is enabled *through* being true; a historically existent language is sedimentation of our ability to generate T-sentences. So, there is no such problem as a problem of translation – neither total nor partial. When engaging with an unknown language, our use of language is no different from the everyday use; it is just manifested more clearly.

We can finally see, therefore, the reason why the notion of truth is so crucial: it enables the very possibility of pairing different sentences, thus, making it likely to invert the

Tarskian model. In light of this, we can make a better sense of Davidson’s enigmatic suggestion that truth is “beautifully transparent” and primitive (Davidson 1986, 307): *it is quite literally transparent*, meaning in the bare sense that it has no content of its own. That is why the nature of Davidsonian truth is most identifiable in example sentences such as “snow is white if ‘snow is white:’” in this case, we can see the minimalistic nature of truth that consists only of pairing. Its only function is to be a *fulcrum* that conjugates any possible content, introducing, thus, the very possibility of meaningfulness. There is nothing more to say about it: it is not a property, it has no content, and it does not make anything true. Only a belief can be placed on the other side of a T-conditional, thus, demonstrating the truthfulness or falsity. But any kind of belief along with its potential truthfulness or falsity is possible only because of our ability to orient at truth. Davidson, thus, “denies that the general concept of truth is reducible to any other concept or amenable to redefinition in other terms” (Davidson 1986, 308) and, at the same time, views it as the reason why we have concepts in the first place. By making such a move, Davidson leaves the traditional ground of scepticism, conceptual schemes or any sort of “mediational epistemology” (contrary to what is often claimed).

2. Openness

How can we explain the act of perception? One way of making sense of it is to claim that an act of perception is a certain mental state that is *caused* by a corresponding “objective” stimulus from the world. The inadequacies of such a picture quickly become obvious. Take, for example, the Müller-Lyer illusion. Two lines of the same lengths appear to be of different lengths nonetheless. How is this possible? If our perception is explained by the causal influence of objective things, every perception must be susceptible to such influence. But the illusion convincingly demonstrates to us that this is not the case. Our perception, therefore, appears to be organized by its own logic irreducible to the causal stimulation. Furthermore, consider the following passage,

Suppose we construct, by the use of optics and geometry, that bit of the world which can at any moment throw its image on our retina. Everything outside its perimeter, since it does not reflect upon any sensitive area, no more affects our vision than does light falling on our closed eyes. We ought, then, to perceive a segment of the world precisely delimited, surrounded by a zone of blackness, packed full of qualities with no interval between them, held together by definite relationships of size similar to those lying on the retina. The fact is that experience offers nothing like this, and we shall never, using the world as our starting-point, understand what a field of vision is.

A close inspection reveals that contours of a perceived figure are not, strictly speaking, limits (as it would be if our perception were caused by objective stimuli) but *horizons*: a perceived thing is situated in an organized perceptual field where our gaze can be diverted from one thing to another without any disparities. There appears to be a special and inherent coherence within this field, which remains irreproachable for atomic stimuli that “corresponds to nothing” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 4) in it. A resort to psychological means – associations or memory – only further emphasizes the problem: the very possibility of associations and memory is itself dependent on the coherency of perception. Associations or memories presuppose the inherent link between two perceptions; they must be somehow motivated by the present perception, which is what needs to be explained in the first place. There must be something like an organizational principle that cannot be deduced from the de-humanized causal source.

At the same time, Merleau-Ponty does not want to subscribe to something he calls “intellectualism,” the antipode of empiricism, which “thrives on [its] refutation” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 37). Intellectualism recognizes that organization of our experience cannot be left unexplained, so it identifies the meaningful organization of perception with the constitutive activity of a subject (or a language, for what it matters). Such a substitution of an absolutely passive recipient with an absolutely active constituting subject, however, only inverts the problem without giving us a plausible solution. Intellectualism places the subject in a God-like position suggesting to “put the world of the exact back into its cradle of consciousness, and ask how the very idea of the world or of exact truth is possible, and look for its first appearance in consciousness” (Merleau-Ponty

1962, 36). As a result, the subject, which is viewed as this universal power that bestows meaning on things, becomes completely detached from the world. No “intra-worldly” event can really happen to him, since his constitutive activity always precedes and outruns his being-in-the-world. But this can mean that intellectualism is placed in a position no better than the empiricism problem when it comes to the Müller-Lyer illusion. Why do the equal lines appear unequal? Intellectualism can only “reduce the phenomenon to a mistake” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 41). But by blaming the flawed constitution, we only conceal the problem since what we need to know is exactly why the constitutive act turns out to be flawed. Those two lines *resist* the subject’s constitution, even if he seeks to bring the perception into the conformity with what he knows about the perception. It is imperative to explain this stubbornness of the mistake. In such a way, neither intellectualism can explain to us a self-standing life of perception and spontaneous rules of organization of our experience in general.

As Merleau-Ponty has demonstrated, the failure of intellectualism turns out to be tied closely to that of empiricism. Despite appearing as radically opposed, those two approaches, in fact, represent two sides of the same coin. If empiricism suffers from the complete lack of meaningful organization of our experience, intellectualism faces the equally urgent lack of “contingency” of such an organization. The first appears as “too poor” and the second as “too rich;” what is similar in both these attempts, is that instead of investigating “the basic operation which infuses meaning (*sens*) into the sensible,” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 39) they opt for its retrospective reconstruction – either through atomic empirical sensations or intellectual acts of judgement. Merleau-Ponty, on the contrary, does not want to reconstruct this coherence and meaningful organization of experience, he wants to investigate it, descriptively avoiding grounding of the coherence of our experience in an external to it phenomenon – whether it be judgments or objective stimuli. In a manner not vastly different from Davidson’s (as we are about to see), Merleau-Ponty stresses the openness to the world as a crucial element of organization of our experience, an element that itself is by no means external to our perception. Before we

proceed, I, again, want to stress that the following account of Merleau-Ponty is consciously partial. I try, as much as possible, to stay away from the crucial parts of Merleau-Ponty's account of openness such as, for example, its embodied and temporal aspects. This selectivity is not an oversight, but an attempt to emphasize the move in Merleau-Ponty's approach that can be paralleled by a similar one in Davidson's.

First, let's take a closer look at Merleau-Ponty's notion of the perceptual field. As Gestaltists have demonstrated, even the most basic perception of a figure necessarily involves an implicit perception of a background where the figure is located. But if the figure is given to us thematically, the background is present in a different way: it does not contain any specific things or counters. Merleau-Ponty describes the perception of background as "indeterminate vision" or "a vision of something or other:" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 6) the figure is continued by the background, while not being thematically present. The background is nothing but an expression of the fact that perception organizes a "field..., which can be 'surveyed.'" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 34) experience can't be entirely sealed by its object but necessarily contains a promise of something more. The fundamental claim that Merleau-Ponty is raising consists of saying that this indeterminate vision somehow "*motivates*" the figure, sustaining its very identity. (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 35) To give a quick example, the subject of my perception – a table – is given to me as a table only insofar as fine cutlery, chairs, my room are present in my perception indeterminately. Even though the "actual," causally observable content of my thematic perception is a bunch of sensory stimuli, I am still confident about the table being grey, solid and square, and this confidence does not stem from my memory or my rationally constructed expectations, but from the perception itself. If all these elements were absolutely absent from my perception, it would fall apart. Being deprived of its relation to other things, a table would indeed appear as a mere sensory stimulus, saying almost nothing of itself. I will no longer be sure what its colour is, how many legs it has, whether it is solid or not. The lack of indeterminate presence, therefore, will have an immediate impact upon the determinate one. So, only insofar as a thematic

perception is inherently linked to non-thematic perceptions (i.e. insofar as it is placed in the field, thus receiving its contextual meaning) is the recognition possible at all. The coherence of a perceptual field, in such a way, is not explained externally but by this mutual link among different experiences, which functions as a precondition of experience as such. Perceptual field organizes experiences through converging them into the same space where they become interconnected to each other.

What more can be said about such interconnection? Consider Merleau-Ponty's analysis of illusion:

Seeing, some distance away in the margin of my visual field, a large moving shadow, I look in that direction and the phantasm shrinks and takes up its due place; it was simply a fly near my eye. *I was conscious of seeing a shadow and now I am conscious of having seen nothing more than a fly.* (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 347)

A thematic perception reorganizes the perceptual field: it isn't a different act of interpretation of the sensory data, it is my *seeing itself* that is changed. This is possible because experience is necessarily characterized by openness: it always has the possibility to "infiltrate into the world into its entirety" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 384). Such openness, says Merleau-Ponty, is a constant prospect of "harmonization" of different experiences based on a fundamental conviction that "the concordance so far experienced would hold for a more detailed observation" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 346). At the core of the very possibility of experience, in such a way, lies "confidence in the world" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 347): it is the same whole (i.e. the world) that settles all possible experience. That is why fluctuations of my *cogito* are compensated: the two glitching acts – a shadow and then a fly – are smoothed out after being integrated by trust in the world, by the incorrigible belief that it is the same world, the same perceptual field that accommodates new phenomena in concordance with others. The manifold of singular experiences are unified by the holistic movement towards the world; as parts of the whole, experiences inherently presuppose a confirmation and continuation in further experiences. Illusion, in such a way, is "crossed out" and regarded as "null and void" because it finds no secure foothold in other perceptions (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 347). Taken in itself,

such openness can be neither true nor wrong; it is not a scientific hypothesis that can be raised and consequently withdrawn. In a manner similar to Davidson, Merleau-Ponty views openness to the world as a *precondition* of any experience at all: “the opening on to our *de facto* world,” he claims, “is recognized as the beginning of knowledge” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 256) This means that the very possibility of an illusion is conceivable only on the background of taken-for-granted reality (this is a point that to a certain extent both Davidson and Merleau-Ponty share, and was briefly mentioned by Evans (Evans 2008, 186); “there is the absolute certainty of the world in general, but not of any one thing in particular” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 347). Since illusion is penetrated by the same holistic movement to the world, it only confirms our pretheoretical confidence in the world; “always being open upon a horizon of possible verifications, [illusion] does not cut me off from truth” (347) By putting our faith in the world, in such a way, we enable both truths and mistakes. Whereas the former constitutes the constant background of our dealings with the world, the latter is nothing but an occasional abnormality, an exception that proves the rule.

For Merleau-Ponty, openness to the world means nothing else but making “objects at present out of reach count notwithstanding...” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 135) Several perceptions of a fire, for example, are harmonized among each other becoming “indeterminately present” – *operative*, even if they are not actually present at the moment. Starting from a certain point, its brightness and orange shimmering *mean* warmth: the thematic perception of the former is enriched through the indeterminate presence of the latter. Through openness, the sensible qualities attain their depth: as parts of indivisible situations and bearers of vital significance, they have an ability to guide us in the world. Single sensations “become integrated into a total experience in which they are ultimately indiscernible” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 253). This is what Merleau-Ponty means when he speaks of a deeper function than mechanical summation of seeing and touching, which allows us “to catch up with the truth of my thinking beyond its appearances” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 347). Openness

to the world discloses to us the very possibility of merging instead of mere summation: it, too, functions as the fulcrum that *conjugates* causally unrelated episodes. Because of the fundamental openness toward the world, pre-reflective belief in its constancy and teleology, different experiences can “meet” and interpenetrate, which creates the chance for absent things to affect the meaning of the present.

The openness is neither deducible from things nor from the constitutive activity of a subject. The fact that every experience must be placed in a perceptual field and somehow linked to other experiences is neither a real feature of the world nor a result of application of the purely mental, or a conceptual category of a subject to the world. Openness is a “transparency of a spectacle” (*la clarté du spectacle*) that necessarily takes place on the background of the “darkness” (*l’obscurité*) of a particular position in the world. While this darkness, which arguably represents the greatest point of Merleau-Ponty’s interest and which also functions as a major point of departure between Davidson and Merleau-Ponty, lies mostly outside the scope of this paper, the openness is not. Taken by itself, it does not say anything other than “if seen from a particular position, all experiences must be harmonizable.” The transparency of openness that has no content of its own, and consists only of the postulation of this necessary harmonization, becomes all experiences in the world, a “horizon of horizons.” It, in such a way, discloses a prospective of content while not imposing anything on the world and refraining from building the barriers between things and the world – it simply lets the world speak of itself as itself from a particular perspective. This means that openness and the belief in the world are not transcendental presuppositions – not in the common sense of the world, at least – but post-transcendental: they give up on the very idea of a subject or some conceptual scheme that introduces rules of organization of experience out of itself.

While it is not possible to give full attention to this aspect, such a move does result in some similarities to Davidson’s conclusions. Consider, for example, Merleau-Ponty’s treatment of *a priori/a posteriori* distinction,

“Heat enters experience as a kind of vibration of the thing: with colour on the other hand it is as if the thing is thrust outside itself, and it is *a priori* necessary that an extremely hot object should redden, for it is its excess of vibration which causes it to blaze forth” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 372).

The paradoxical claim “a hot object should redden is an *a priori* necessity” is a direct result of Merleau-Ponty’s unwillingness to detach the subject from the world and the world from the subject: openness can only be openness of the world and the world cannot announce itself other than through being open. *A priori* and *a posteriori* are two poles, which occur only on the basis of this openness to the world; therefore, they can be distinguished only nominally and neither of them can claim to be an ultimate source of our experience. The conjugation between these two empirical things – heat and redness – *is a priori*; being transparent and simple, openness nonetheless cannot be deduced from things themselves. But without the world, without the possibility of being conjugated, the conjugation itself is rendered meaningless and inconceivable. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, “once distinction between the *a priori* and the empirical, between form and content, have been done away with, the spaces peculiar to the senses become concrete ‘moments’ of a comprehensive configuration...” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 257) That is why there can be no talk about some *a priori* construction that can *make* something meaningful – on the contrary, there can be any such constructions *because* they are meaningful, *because* they disclose the world.

This also means that our experience is radically positional, which makes it impossible to escape our own historicity and thrownness in the world. The post-transcendental condition of experience that does not impose anything on anything but simply conglutinates and opens up, cannot serve as a fundamental starting point *exactly because it is not itself a point, having no content of its own*. Therefore, there is no such point that would get us outside of our experience, allowing us to find the secure foundation of our knowledge, and then build a correspondingly secure metaphysical system like Kant has attempted to do. Experience always takes place on the background of the situatedness in the

world, which makes this situation something that must be accounted for. I cannot launch a new sequence of experiences; new experiences must be harmonized with the past, which makes our own empirical history and factual position in the world a key factor of our understanding, and of the organization of our experience. So, taken by itself, openness does not tell us whether something is true or false. What it does, however, is give us a possibility of something being true or false: the historicity of my position in the world is compensated by openness to the same world, which guarantees that all positions are in principle harmonizable and that every illusion eventually will turn out to be “null and void.” As Merleau-Ponty puts it, “the system of experience is not arrayed before me as if I were God, it is lived by me from a certain point of view; I am not the spectator, I am involved, and it is my involvement in a point of view which makes possible both the finiteness of my perception and its opening out upon the complete world as a horizon of every perception.” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 354).

3. Holism

Following what has been said, I believe that it is more than possible to establish the structural similarity between Davidson and Merleau-Ponty along three lines of inquiry.

1) The most substantial one concerns the post-transcendental character of their corresponding emphasis on openness and truth. For Davidson truth is not a property that ‘makes’ something true: it is not empiricist sensations or inner structure of our minds or conceptual schemes that ‘organize’ experience. Truth cannot be objectivized into something that can have any sort of content: it is simply what makes it possible for me to form a T-sentence, to establish an equivalence between a proposition and its conditions of truth – between right and left side of a T-sentence; it is “beautifully transparent” exactly because it by no means can be described as something ‘in itself,’ as a property of some sort. Similarly, for Merleau-Ponty what gives me the access to a thing is neither an atomistic sensation that I have, nor intellectual act of synthesis, but a more general openness of my experience to other experiences, which is together gripped by the movement

toward the world. A sensation, even at the most basic, abstract level, can never be given. Again, we can see that such openness is not something that can have any kind of content; the only thing it tells us is that everything we see and feel is potentially harmonizable. In such a way, openness to the world performs (although partly) the same function truth performs for Davidson: as contentless fulcrums that tie together different elements (whether it be propositions or more generally conceived experience), they enable *merging* of different causal stimuli. The term "circular causality" (Merleau-Ponty 1983, 15) introduced by Merleau-Ponty in *The Structure of Behaviour* can thus be well applied to Davidson's approach as well: meaningful organization of experience is a matter of conjugation of different causes and interacting with constellations of causes rather than with this or that particular cause; at the same time, such organization is nothing more but such a conjugation

Both employ a sort of "holistic constraint" to balance out this assumption. Neither of them wants to claim that truth or principle of organization of our experience can be found in the world as an entity of a particular sort (whether it be causes of our experience, subjective *a priori* or conceptual schemes), but are trying to do the explanatory work, which traditionally was performed by these truth-makers, by resorting to the part-to-whole structure. *Holism here functions as a driving force of their arguments*: neither truth nor openness can explain us by itself what is true and what is false or what is real and what illusory; what they can do is to unleash the holistic self-organization of experience/propositions that would separate the wheat from the chaff by itself. Because a proposition is *inherently* linked to other propositions and because an experience *inherently* accounts for other experiences, the possibility of a mistake/illusion is explained. Merleau-Ponty's accommodation of illusion, therefore, is parallel to Davidson's treatment of mistake: both become possible on the background of incorrigible belief in the world or equally incorrigible principle of charity. Mistakes/illusions are inherently inconsistent: they are guided by the same principle of charity/by the same belief in the world, therefore, inherently presupposing the possibility of their own redemption. A massive mistake/an

illusionary world makes sense only on the background of an even more extensive correctness/even more extensive reality.

In this sense, the slogan “correspondence without confrontation” (which was criticized by Rorty) seems to be nothing but an attempt to express this sameness of the world and the propositional directedness at it (an attempt that that of course draws upon the rather limited conceptual resources): all T-sentences are convertible, all languages are translatable because every sentence and every language are possible insofar they are gripped by the movement toward the same whole – the world, which is taken by traditional philosophy as a *locus* of correspondence. I think that Davidson employs this term not only to answer to a sceptic, as Rorty suggested, but also to express the conviction that any new disclosure or any new invention would only disclose more of the world. In this light, it can be said that some people and some cultures know *more* about the world than others; the former’s holistic web of propositions is more extensive and more encompassing than that of the latter’s. For sure, the attempt to describe this *encompassing nature* of our knowledge with a term like “correspondence” indicates that Davidson’s philosophical vocabulary is still entrenched in representationalist’s paradigm, but *the aim* of its use – i.e. what Davidson is trying to emphasize *by* employing it – seems to be as representationalist as Merleau-Ponty’s rhetoric of the world.

2) From this follows the similarity between Merleau-Ponty’s tendency to disregard any kind of rigid distinction between *a priori* and *a posteriori* elements of experience and Davidson’s critique of dualism between scheme and content. The moment we start with Davidsonian truth or with the “openness to our factual world” is the moment when distinctions between organizing and organized elements become at best derivative, if not useless. Both *a priori* and *a posteriori* require their counterpart without being reduced to it. This is obvious from the postulated transparency and simplicity of Davidson’s account of truth: without the world and without actually establishing truth equivalence between different propositions it is not conceivable as such. At the same time, it is also obvious that if not for truth, if not for this possibility of

conjugation, nothing can be meaningfully said at all. The same can be said about Merleau-Ponty's notion of openness: neither *a priori* openness is conceivable without the world actually deploying some *a posteriori* that is capable of being open, nor anything *a posteriori* is thinkable without being conglutinated by *aprioristic* openness.

In this sense, Merleau-Ponty's treatment of language in chapter 6 of *Phenomenology of Perception* conforms in an important way to Davidson's (and especially to Ramberg's reading of Davidson according to which "we are only coincidentally speakers of a language.") Both Merleau-Ponty and Davidson are claiming that particular languages do not amount to mere processing and naming of objective stimuli; neither do they believe that "constituted speech" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 214) or conceptual schemes *create* the possibility of every possible meaning. So, Merleau-Ponty writes, "we must therefore recognize as an ultimate fact this open and indefinite power of giving significance—that is, both of apprehending and conveying a meaning—by which man transcends himself towards a new form of behaviour, or towards other people, or towards his own thought, through his body and his speech." Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on body aside, Davidson would recognize the "indefinite power of giving significance" (in his words, our ability to orient towards truth and construct T-sentences) as a source of language not as its product. Particularly, historically given languages are the realization and sedimentation of our openness to the world/our orientation at truth, this is a claim that uproots the very problem of relativism.

3) At the same time, both are defending the essential historicity of our understanding and consequently denouncing "a view from nowhere" encrypted in the philosophical tradition. This is expressed in Merleau-Ponty's insistence that our openness to the world, this guarantee of potential harmonization of all experiences, necessarily implies the positional character of experience. Experience is possible only in the form of a constant re-integration or harmonization of old with new experience. There cannot be a meaningful experience that would somehow get outside from its past and launch a new sequence of harmonizable experiences; it must necessarily

harmonized with already existent experience and, thus, it must be necessarily placed in a proper historical perspective. At the very heart of human existence, Merleau-Ponty reveals something like openness's inhesion (fr. *inhérence*) to a point a view, the indivisibility between universality and harmonizable nature of experience of the world, and the very need to harmonize it from a particular perspective.

A similar but more truncated point can be found in Davidson, according to whom there is no way we can interpret an unknown expression in isolation, based exclusively on itself. To interpret means to maximize the agreement between my beliefs and what an interpretee believes to be the case. This means that there is no way of understanding, other than starting from my own language and what I believe to be the case, and then going back and forth in the hermeneutical circle trying to overcome mistakes and misinterpretation until the behaviour of an interpretee would appear as meaningful and, thus, mostly true. So, radical convertibility of languages combines with the fact that convertibility's starting point is always my language, which indeed defines the interpreter's task as "explaining true in the language I know." There is, therefore, a similar to Merleau-Ponty's ambivalence, which wants to preserve both the universality and the historicity of understanding. That is why, I think, Taylor's criticism of Davidson's famous "we cannot get outside our beliefs" is mostly unfair. From the current standpoint, this is nothing but an attempt to say that the place "outside our skin and beliefs" is a place where no understanding is possible, which is a view that allies perfectly with Merleau-Ponty as well.

4. Conclusion

As we have seen, the idea that maximizing disagreement is at the same time maximizing agreement is integral both to Merleau-Ponty's and Davidson's approaches: a disagreement, which is nothing but an incoherence, can be specified and properly investigated only through outlining a shared background in light of which the divergence become intelligible. If we are to believe them, the present article gives us a chance of making a better sense of their differences by showing that

these differences rest upon, in many ways, similar background. The core element of their consensus is the attempt to overcome any sort of grounding of our experience in a further phenomenon, an attempt that arises out of different contexts of Continental and Analytical philosophy, but that is very similar in spirit. They can both be seen as reacting upon certain presuppositions anchored in both philosophical traditions, and they both try to overcome it, although being equipped with different conceptual tools. Davidson's attack on dogmas of empiricism and Merleau-Ponty's charge on empiricism and intellectualism is essentially a synchronic movement that tries to put an end at attempts to find a secure ground of our understanding, a foundation that would be explanatory prior to it – whether it be objective stimuli, reality, the subject or conceptual schemes. The differences between them, in such a way, turns out to be not that radical after all; namely, they are differences in means rather than a difference in ends. Given that this structural similarity of aims is established, we can resolve the derivative difference of means in a much more peaceful way. If they are both seen as going the same direction, the negotiations of the means of such a movement becomes somehow a technical debate, just like the very idea of division between Continental and Analytic thought.

NOTES

¹ One exception I can think of is a paper by O. Švec (Švec 2019) that investigates how Merleau-Ponty's and Brandom's accounts of action can complement each other.

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