

In: M.C. Amoretti e N. Vassallo (eds.), Knowledge, Language, and Interpretation. On the Philosophy of Donald Davidson (pp. 203-224). Frankfurt: Ontos Verlag.

## DRAFT – PLEASE DO NOT CITE

### Davidson, Self-knowledge, and Skepticism<sup>\*</sup>

M. Cristina Amoretti

University of Genoa, Dept. of Philosophy,  
Via Balbi 4, 16126 Genoa, Italy  
cristina.amoretti@unige.it

Externalism concerning the contents of mental states, generally, is the thesis that the contents of at least some of our propositional attitudes depend partly on objects and events external to the subject who entertains them. In other words, externalists maintain that at least some of our mental contents do not merely supervene upon the internal physical states and intrinsic properties of individuals.

Many critics, however, have argued that, while externalism could seem a fascinating and attractive theory, it must be rejected because it brings with it some counterintuitive epistemological consequences. In particular, “incompatibilists” argue that externalism leads to skepticism about privileged self-knowledge. Moreover, following (McKinsey 1991), they also claim that when we try to deny this conclusion, we are then forced into a *reductio*: the combination of externalism and privileged self-knowledge would actually imply the controversial acceptance of some empirical propositions about the external world purely on a priori grounds (Reductio Argument).

In this paper I shall not consider the *achievement problem*—that is the challenge of determining if externalism and privileged self-knowledge can really be compatible—but I will confine myself to the *consequence problem*.<sup>1</sup> More specifically, in §1, I will attempt to characterize Davidson’s externalism and, in §2, the notion of self-knowledge

---

<sup>\*</sup> I wish to thank Mario De Caro for reading and commenting a draft of this paper.

<sup>1</sup> This terminology—achievement vs. consequence problem—was introduced by (Davies 1998). In fact, even after the achievement problem has been solved, the consequence problem can raise further objections against compatibilism.

that he wishes to defend. Then, in §3, I will try to ascertain whether Davidson's kind of externalism is able to reply to the objection raised by the Reductio Argument. Finally, in §4, I shall outline some consequences of the above results for the anti-skeptical argument that Davidson hopes to derive from his own theory.

### **1. Davidson's triangular externalism**

In my opinion, the real argument that Davidson exploits to establish his own externalism derives from the theory of triangulation.<sup>2</sup> "Triangular externalism" (as I shall call it from now on) is quite different from other traditional kinds of externalism, like those proposed by Putnam or Burge, since it can be considered as an attempt to combine both causal and social externalism. It is a form of causal externalism to the extent that the content of (some<sup>3</sup>) propositional attitudes depends, *at least in part*, on objects and events in the external world.

Actually, referring to triangulation, it is very important to underline that dependence on external factors (or rather dependence on the causal history of the subject) is only partial. The mere connection between the subject and the world, in fact, is not at all sufficient to determine the objective content of her propositional attitudes. Thus a third element, the interpreter, is also necessary.

According to Davidson, one single creature is not able to find out which is the right external cause that constitutes the objective content of her mental states, since there must be at least another creature whose perceptual reactions and concept-forming abilities are innately substantially similar to those of the subject, so that she can pick out the right cause, which is actually the external common cause. On this basis—as the objective content is necessary to forming any propositional attitude, and such objective content can be determined only by the mutual interaction of (at least) two creatures sharing similar responses to a common external environment as well as similar responsiveness to the sharing of those very responses—it is clear that the presence of

---

<sup>2</sup> The notion of "triangulation" was introduced for the first time in (Davidson 1982). While the theory of triangulation has become a central notion in his whole philosophy, it is particularly crucial to characterize Davidson's kind of externalism concerning the contents of mental states. Unfortunately, triangulation is somewhat difficult to interpret and not all critics will agree with my own understanding.

<sup>3</sup> Since Davidson thinks that one person's mental contents are holistically interconnected, it is possible to affirm that, at least indirectly, *all* of our mental states depend on objects and events of the external world.

the interpreter is necessary for thought. The role of the second subject is precisely the social element that Davidson introduces in his account of meaning and mental content.

I would introduce the social factor in a way that connects it directly with perceptual externalism, thus locating the role of society within the causal nexus that includes the interplay between persons and the rest of nature (Davidson 1990: 201).

The situation, however, is slightly more complicated. The presence of a second subject and the actual intersection of at least two causal chains leading to similar shared responses are necessary, but not sufficient, to finding out the common “relevant cause” and thus to determining objective content. In fact, we need to be aware of the objectivity of content and thus of the very possibility of error (which alone can explain the normative character of our judgments). In order to do this, it is not sufficient that two or more creatures simply interact, but it is also necessary that they actually communicate with each other. To put it another way, triangulation and language cooperate not only to fix the cause of our beliefs and to determine their objective content, but also to provide us with the concept of objectivity and that of error.

The identification of the objects of thought rests, then, on a social basis. Without one creature to observe another, the triangulation that locates the relevant objects in a public space could not take place. [...] [T]he presence of two or more creatures interacting with each other and with a common environment is at best a necessary condition for such a concept. Only communication can provide the concept, for to have the concept of objectivity, the concept of objects and events that occupy a shared world, of objects and events whose properties and existence is independent of our thought, requires that we are aware of the fact that we share thoughts and a world with others (Davidson 1990: 202).

Over and above this, external causes—or rather, a subject’s own causal history—only partially individuate the content of her beliefs, as internal coherence is also required. In other words, since the content of one single belief necessarily depends on the contents of other beliefs, there are some holistic inferential constraints that must be considered both for individuating and attributing mental content. When a subject learns new words and concepts, in fact, she does not do so in an atomistic way. Conversely, she immediately connects meanings, concepts, beliefs and other propositional attitudes in a holistic framework created by those real interactions which, in an intersubjective

linguistic environment, have tied in her mental states with external objects and events, other subjects and other thoughts. Hence, content is also determined by its inferential relations with a vast and coherent array of other beliefs, desires and so on.

In a nutshell, the theory of triangulation certainly leads to a form of externalism concerning mental content. However, triangular externalism is *weak*. In fact, even though content depends on external objects and events, this dependence is not the only component, since social and holistic factors are equally fundamental. That is to say, there are two basic elements in Davidson's notion of content: a referential element (introduced by the history of actual interactions with external factors) and an inferential one (introduced by holistic constraints). The former connects content to the external world, while the latter connects a single belief to other beliefs entertained by the subject.

## **2. Davidson's self-knowledge**

Before analyzing the Reductio Argument, we shall determine which kind of self-knowledge Davidson wishes to defend. Of course, when we talk about "a priori" knowledge, we are not referring to "innate" knowledge. Experience *does* play a fundamental role in the acquisition of privileged or a priori knowledge, but no further empirical evidence is required to justify such knowledge. Self-knowledge, therefore, can be obtained without investigating the world further and, moreover, with special authority too.<sup>4</sup>

Discussing self-knowledge, Davidson never talks about a priority or privileged access explicitly, but he still believes there is an evident asymmetry between the first person and the third person points of view.<sup>5</sup> First person access is not in fact a kind of access one may have to the mind of another subject. For example:

It is seldom the case that I need or appeal to evidence or observation in order to find out what I believe; normally I know what I think before I speak or act (Davidson 1987: 15).

---

<sup>4</sup> First person authority is the thesis according to which there is a strong presumption that second order beliefs are predominantly true.

<sup>5</sup> The asymmetry is not substantial, because Davidson does not believe that subjective knowledge is more basic or fundamental compared to objective and intersubjective knowledge. Nevertheless, he does think that this asymmetry exists and it is perfectly compatible with his own externalism.

[P]eople generally know without recourse to inference from evidence, and so in a way that others do not, what they themselves think, want, and intend (Davidson 1988: 48).

While I can only know someone else's beliefs and other propositional attitudes from what she says and how she behaves (i.e. from empirical investigation), I may know my own beliefs and other propositional attitudes in a way that is not based on any evidence or observation. As Davidson points out, these basic claims do not imply that self-knowledge is infallible, or complete (involving all the subject's propositional attitudes), or even incorrigible. Thus, this picture is compatible with occasional failures of self-knowledge (such as self-deception and wishful thinking). Nevertheless, even if we do not characterise first person access as infallible and incorrigible, it still remains a priori in a weaker sense: more specifically, a priori simply means "obtained independently of empirical investigation" or "from the armchair".

What is the source of such knowledge? Self-knowledge cannot be based on inference (since it is immediate precisely in the sense of non-inferential), but it cannot be based on inward looking either, because according to Davidson we must reject any representationalist theory of mind where self-knowledge is imagined as an inner eye looking at shadowy figures acting in a strange theatre inside the mind. Given all this, perhaps self-knowledge cannot be considered as an authentic cognitive achievement.

Many critics often distinguish between two notions of a priority, namely strong and weak a priori. In the first case, the justification does not rest on any empirical assumption and it is not open to challenge on a posteriori grounds; in the second case, the justification does not rest on any empirical assumption either, but it is actually open to challenge on a posteriori grounds. It seems clear to me that Davidson's own interpretation of self-knowledge implies the notion of weak a priori.

At any rate, so as to remain within the scope of this article, it is sufficient to recognize that Davidson is committed to accepting privileged access, since he acknowledges that, although empirical evidence is required (or even necessary) to form beliefs about the world (and beliefs in general), a subject can know that she has that belief without further empirical investigation or from the armchair. More precisely, she can acquire

this kind of knowledge non-inferentially and non-empirically (i.e. a priori in McKinsey's terms<sup>6</sup>).

### 3. Reductio Argument

The Reductio Argument was introduced by (McKinsey 1991)<sup>7</sup> and it immediately generated great debate. The simplest formulation of the argument runs as follows:<sup>8</sup>

(P1) *S* can know a priori that she believes that water is wet;

(P2) *S* can know a priori that if she believes that water is wet, then her environment contains water;

(C) *S* can know a priori that her environment contains water.

(P1) is just a direct consequence of the assumption of privileged self-knowledge according to which a subject can acquire knowledge of her own beliefs merely on a priori grounds (non-inferentially and non-empirically). According to incompatibilists, (P2) is taken to be an upshot of externalism. If externalism is true, then *S* can know that having certain beliefs necessarily entails particular conditions on her environment, namely that her environment contains water. Moreover, externalism—and thus the above relation—is knowable a priori, because it is established from the armchair by mental experiments or other philosophical arguments, which do not need any further empirical investigation. The consequence (C), however, is quite unlikely since the possibility of knowing an empirical truth like “the environment contains water” on a priori grounds seems to many extremely implausible and even absurd. If we agree with this conclusion, then the argument effectively represents a *reductio* of the joint hypothesis of externalism and privileged self-knowledge.

---

<sup>6</sup> “[T]he idea is that we can in principle find out about these states in ourselves ‘just by thinking’, without launching an empirical investigation or making any assumptions about the external physical world. I will call knowledge obtained independently of empirical investigation a priori knowledge. And I will call the principle that it is possible to have a priori knowledge of one’s own neutral cognitive attitude states, the Principle of Privileged Access, or just ‘privileged access’ for short” (McKinsey 1991: 175).

<sup>7</sup> See also (McKinsey 1997, 2002, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> See (Boghossian 1997), (Brewer 2000), (Brown 1995, 1999, 2003, 2004), (Brueckner 1992, 2000, 2002, 2003, 2004a), (Davies 1998, 2000, 2003), (Ebbs 2003), (Falvey 2000), (McLaughlin 2003), (McLaughlin & Tye 1998), (Noonan 2000), (Noordhof 2004), (Nuccetelli 1999), (Raffman 1998), (Wright 2000, 2003).

There are several possible ways to try to dismiss the Reductio Argument.<sup>9</sup> At the outset, Davidson might challenge the first premise, saying that a subject cannot know his own beliefs and other propositional attitudes completely a priori. Indeed—following triangular externalism—privileged self-knowledge actually depends on previous empirical investigation. Though this line of reasoning may apparently seem plausible, I agree with (Davies 2000) and other critics that it is not the right move to make. We have already seen that although experience plays a pivotal role in the acquisition of self-knowledge, the distinctive feature of such knowledge is that it does not require any further empirical investigation to get a justification. In other words, it is uncontroversial that the subject already knows that her environment contains water on empirical grounds; yet the contentious issue is supposing that, *in addition*, she can also know this on a priori grounds, i.e. without further evidence or observation. Moreover, if Davidson contested this premise, he would simply beg the question denying the mere possibility of privileged self-knowledge (or, alternatively, he would come back to the achievement problem since the Reductio Argument simply considers what consequences would follow from a compatibilist approach).

In point of fact, I feel that the best way to demonstrate that Davidson's theory is immune to the objection raised through this very argument is to attack (P2), showing that this second premise is not implied by triangular externalism. There are two strategies to obtaining such a result. The simpler one consists in demonstrating that triangular externalism cannot be known a priori; alternatively, we can accept that triangular externalism can be known a priori, but deny that such externalism actually leads to the kind of entailment between someone's beliefs and the external world required by the argument.

---

<sup>9</sup> It is beyond the scope of this paper to analyze all possible replies to the argument. Briefly, the main strategies are: (1) denying (P1) arguing that the premise cannot be known completely on a priori grounds—see for instance (Brewer 2000) and the critique presented in (Brueckner 2004a); (2) denying (P2) arguing that the premise cannot be known on a priori grounds or, alternatively, that its a priori knowledge does not imply what is explicitly stated in the premise itself or any equivalent conditionals—see for instance (Brown 2004), (Brueckner 1992), (McLaughlin & Tye 1998); admitting that both (P1) and (P2) are correct, but denying the transmission of warrant to the conclusion—see (Davies 2000) and (Wright 2000) (and, for a further discussion, (Beebe 2001), (Brown 2003, 2004), (Brueckner 2004b), (Davies 2003), (McKinsey 2003), (McLaughlin 2003), (Pritchard 2002), (Warfield 2004), (Wright 2003)); accepting the whole argument, but denying the implausibility of its conclusion—see (Sawyer 1998) and (Warfield 1998).

First of all, could triangular externalism be established merely on a priori grounds? In other words, we need to determine whether Davidson's externalism can be derived exclusively from philosophical arguments (that is from the armchair<sup>10</sup>). As I see it, the answer is probably *no*. Davidson's approach, in fact, is explicitly different from all traditional methods of introducing and justifying perceptual and social externalism. (Putnam 1975), for instance, found his own causal externalism on the famous Twin Earth thought experiment. In this case—since a thought experiment does not require any empirical investigation—it is quite obvious that such an externalism can be known a priori.<sup>11</sup> On the contrary, Davidson clearly denies the necessity for any thought experiment and—as I showed in the first section—bases his triangular externalism exclusively on the *actual practice* of communication between two or more speakers.

I have a general distrust of thought experiment that pretends to reveal what we would say under conditions that in fact never arise. My version of externalism depends on what I think to be our actual practice (Davidson 1990: 199).

If what Davidson says is correct, then his triangular externalism—and consequently (P2)—cannot be known merely on a priori grounds: in order to define its characteristics, we need to carry out an empirical investigation of the actual communicative practices of human beings. Nevertheless, we may still ignore Davidson's explicit words and intentions and assume that his own triangular externalism can *also* be known purely on a priori grounds<sup>12</sup> (that is to say by means of philosophical arguments or just by reflecting on the nature of mental content), and hence suppose that to that extent incompatibilists are right. Now, we are faced with the following question: does triangular externalism involve the precise kind of entailment between somebody's beliefs and the external world, which is necessary to make the Reductio Argument properly work?

---

<sup>10</sup> The ambiguity of the concept of a priori is worth stressing (Nuccetelli 1999): in the first premise it indicates non-inferential knowledge, while in this second premise it is exactly a case of inferential knowledge. Nevertheless, we can skip over this objection by identifying a more general notion of a priori, which encapsulates all non-empirical knowledge (both inferential and non-inferential). See also (Miller 1997) and the reply by (Brueckner 2000).

<sup>11</sup> A similar thing can be said about Burge's social externalism (Burge 1979, 1982).

<sup>12</sup> According to (McLaughlin 2003), just strong a priority makes the argument run, while Davidson does not think that his triangular externalism is knowable strongly a priori. Hence, if McLaughlin and Davidson's claims were both right, there would be no reason to look for a further reply to the Reductio Argument.

I explained that incompatibilists justify (P2) saying that it is a direct outcome of externalism. In other words, they maintain that if we can know externalism on a priori grounds, then we must know on a priori grounds that the proposition that *S* believes that water is wet necessarily depends on the fact that her environment really does contain water. To see if triangular externalism is able to dismiss that objection, we should answer the following question: what does a subject, who knows triangular externalism merely on a priori grounds, *truly* know on a priori grounds?

Knowing triangular externalism a priori means knowing the argument from triangulation a priori. Let us imagine that all the following premises (which have been discussed in the first section) are knowable from the armchair:

- Objective content is necessary for there to be any propositional attitude.
- Finding out the relevant cause is necessary (but not sufficient) in determining objective content.
- At least two creatures sufficiently similar to triangulate on the background of a mutual external world (made of material macroscopic objects) are necessary to finding out the relevant cause.
- The process of triangulation guarantees that the external world is more or less as I think it is, i.e. if I have a certain set of beliefs, then that set is largely true.

This is why we can infer that if we have any propositional attitude, then there is an external world—more or less as we think it is—containing objects, and at least another creature like us. Given all this, I maintain that a priori knowledge of triangular externalism does not allow the inference stated in (P2). More precisely, though the belief that water is wet is *partly*<sup>13</sup> individuated by some environmental condition like the actual presence of water, mere knowledge of the argument for triangular externalism (which is now supposed to be a priori) does not enable a subject who believes that water is wet to know a priori that if she believes that water is wet then her environment contains water.

---

<sup>13</sup> We should remember that the causal element is only one part of the content, because holistic constraints play an equally important role.

Davidson characterizes his externalism in a counterfactual way: if the world had been different, then our mental states would have been different. In his own words:

What I propose is a modest form of externalism. If our past—the causal process that gave our words and thoughts the content they have—had been different, those contents would have been different, even if our present state happens to be what it would have been had that past been different (Davidson 1999: 165).

For our present purpose we can rephrase the above thesis as follows: if the subject had triangulated twin-water instead of water, then she would have entertained twin-water-beliefs and lacked water-beliefs. Consequently, a critic may be tempted to argue that counterfactual dependence leads precisely to the kind of implication needed by the Reductio Argument: if the subject has a water-belief (for example the belief that water is wet), then her environment contains water. Such a conclusion is indeed false.

First of all, we must remember that Davidson thinks that the contents of one's propositional attitudes are partly determined by one's causal history, that is the history of real causal interactions between the subject and the outside environment during her whole life.<sup>14</sup> Now, let us imagine that a subject has water-beliefs because, living on Earth, she had acquired the concept of "water" by triangulating water with other subjects. Then, at a certain point in her life, she unwittingly becomes a victim of a switch: she does not know, but she is moved to Twin Earth, which is apparently identical to our Earth, but instead of water there is another substance, twin-water. Since she has never interacted with twin-water, she still has water thoughts (due to her history of causal interactions with water): she thinks that water is wet, but her actual environment does not contain water.<sup>15</sup> Even though the subject cannot infer the conclusion that her environment currently contains water, Davidson's externalism is, alas, still committed to the following problematic disjunction: her environment contains *or* has contained water.

---

<sup>14</sup> See (Davidson 1987). More precisely: "[P]eople who are in all relevant physical respects similar (or 'identical' in the necktie sense) can differ in what they mean or think. [...] But of course there is something different about them, even in the physical world; their causal histories are different" (Davidson 1987: 33).

<sup>15</sup> Maybe, we can also admit that, after a while, she will acquire twin-water thoughts since her causal history has changed.

However, we should consider that Davidson does not think that all of our mental contents directly depend on external factors, although the external element influences the whole thought due to the holistic relations among our propositional attitudes:

Not that all words and sentences are this directly conditioned to what they are about [...] The claim is that all thought and language must have a foundation in such direct historical connections (Davidson 1987: 29).

Hence, in order to infer the existence of water from her water-thoughts, the subject should also know that water is one of those concepts which actually “hook” language and mind to the world. But that further knowledge, not surprisingly, cannot be conceivable merely on a priori grounds.

Nevertheless, (Brown 2004) correctly points out that there is another way out for incompatibilists:

Perhaps a subject could use anti-individualism to gain a priori knowledge of conditional principles of the form: if a subject is in a certain psychological condition and certain other conditions hold, then her environment must be some particular way. If the subject could know a priori that she meets the antecedent of one of these conditionals, then perhaps she could use it to gain a priori knowledge of some specific connection between her thoughts and the environment (Brown 2004: 274).

Two different steps are necessary to check if this strategy could really be effective. More precisely, we need to determine which conditional principles can be established by triangular externalism, and whether a subject can know a priori the antecedents of those conditional principles. According to triangular externalism, contents are individuated partly by the history of causal interactions between the subject and the external objects of her environment in the process of triangulation, but also partly by their holistic relations with other contents. Let us suppose that a subject has a belief about an external object, for example the belief that water is wet. How may she have acquired such a belief? She may have systematically interacted with water in the process of triangulation, or her water-belief may be holistically connected to other beliefs that she had acquired by systematically interacting with external objects in the process of triangulation. However, since a water-belief is a belief about an external object, if *S* has a water-belief someone else must have systematically interacted with

water in the process of triangulation. Hence we can propose the a priori knowledge of the following conditional principle<sup>16</sup>:

(T) If *S* believes that water is wet, and *S* has systematically interacted with water in the context of triangulation, *or* someone else has systematically interacted with water in the context of triangulation, then *S*'s environment contains water.

Since we are supposing that a subject could have a priori knowledge of the argument from triangulation, she could also have a priori knowledge of the above principle (that we inferred from that very argument). Hence, if she could have a priori knowledge of its antecedent, then she could use it to gain a priori knowledge about some contingent particular facts of her environment, more specifically that her environment contains water. Again, such knowledge would represent a *reductio* of compatibilism. The argument would run as follows:

(P1) *S* can know a priori that she believes that water is wet;

(P2\*) *S* can know a priori triangular externalism;

(P2') *S* can know a priori that if she believes that water is wet, and she has systematically interacted with water in the process of triangulation, *or* someone else has systematically interacted with water in the process of triangulation, then her environment contains water;

(C) *S* can know a priori that her environment contains water.

(P2') is the conditional principle that we can infer by our a priori knowledge of triangular externalism (P2\*), and as a consequence it is knowable a priori, too. However, the conclusion (C) does not follow from the above argument because the antecedent of (P2') evidently is not knowable merely on a priori grounds. In fact, the argument lacks a further premise:

---

<sup>16</sup> Limited to those objects that can effectively be triangulated.

(P3) *S* can know a priori that she has systematically interacted with water in the process of triangulation, *or* someone else has systematically interacted with water in the process of triangulation.

But the subject cannot know a priori that she or anyone else has actually interacted with water in the process of triangulation. On the contrary, further empirical investigation is obviously required to know that water or any other empirical object has actually been triangulated with by (at least) another creature sharing a mutual environment with the subject. If the above reasoning is correct, once more the Reductio Argument cannot imply the undesired conclusion (C).

Nevertheless, incompatibilists have one more last move: they could argue that triangular externalism yields the conclusion that the whole thought—directly or indirectly—depends on contingent and empirical relations with the external world. And, following this reasoning, they could also say that this very inference is knowable a priori. More precisely, let us suppose that a subject has a belief of some kind. If she knows a priori triangular externalism, then she also knows a priori the following implication: if someone has some propositional attitudes, then there must be at least another creature sufficiently similar to triangulate with her on the background of a mutual external world which is more or less as she thinks it is. Then the argument will run as follows:

(P1\*) *S* can know a priori that she believes that *p*;

(P2\*) *S* can know a priori triangular externalism;

(P2') *S* can know a priori that if she believes that *p*, then there must be at least another creature sufficiently similar to triangulate with her on the background of a mutual external world which is more or less as she thinks it is;

(C) *S* can know a priori that there must be at least another creature sufficiently similar to triangulate with her on the background of a mutual external world which is more or less as she thinks it is.

In the reasoning above, all premises can easily be known from the armchair and thus the Reductio Argument runs. At this very point, however, the argument has radically changed its original structure, and now it is unclear to me if it still constitutes a reductio.

In fact, such a new formulation no longer has its initial strength, and thus the argument loses any pretence at dismissing the compatibility of externalism and privileged self-knowledge. As we have already seen, according to triangular externalism the link between our own minds and the external world is an intrinsic and basic feature of our very capacity to have beliefs and other propositional attitudes. It is straightforward that if we admit the a priori knowledge of triangular externalism, we also admit the a priori knowledge of its fundamental characteristics, namely that the external world and other creatures are necessary to having any thought at all. And, as a corollary, we must agree that our general picture of the world cannot be radically different from how the external world really is.

Accepting this formulation of the argument, it is not possible to infer knowledge about particular empirical objects of the outside world merely on a priori grounds. But what about the more general conclusion we have just analyzed? Is it still unlikely? If we reflect on the latter interpretation of the Reductio Argument, perhaps we might transform the objection into a reasonable argument in favour of externalism: if externalism and privileged self-knowledge can truly stand together, then a tough anti-skeptical argument could be advanced. In other words, we might agree with (Peacocke 1996):

[The above argument] does not seem to me an objection, but rather to point positively to a promising line for developing contemporary forms of transcendental arguments (Peacocke 1996: 297).

#### **4. The anti-skeptical argument revisited**

In this final section I shall attempt to outline some consequences of the above results for the argument against skepticism that Davidson hopes to derive from his own kind of externalism.

[I]t does seem to me that *if* you accept perceptual externalism, there *is* an easy argument against global skepticism of the senses of the sort that Descartes, Hume, Russell and endless others have thought requires an answer. [...] If anything is systematically causing certain experiences (or verbal responses), that is what the thoughts and utterances are about. This rules out systematic error. If nothing is systematically causing the experiences, there is no content to be mistaken about [...] Any one who accepts perceptual externalism knows he cannot be systematically deceived about whether there are such things as cows, people, water, stars and chewing gum. Knowing why this is the

case, he must recognize situations in which he is justified in believing he is seeing water or a cow. In those cases where he is right, he knows he is seeing water or a cow (Davidson 1990: 200-201).

Davidson wants to find an argument against the global skepticism of the senses, namely against the thesis that we are not justified in believing that there is an external world, nor that our image of the world is largely correct. He claims that his theory can do the job: if we know the argument for triangular externalism, then we must recognize that we are justified (by that very argument) in believing what we actually believe and thus, when those beliefs are true, they also count as knowledge.

In order to summarize Davidson's anti-skeptical argument, let us suppose that it is possible to know a priori the following premises:

(P1) Triangular externalism is true.

(P2) If a subject *S* has a certain set of beliefs, then there is an external world, more or less as *S* thinks it is, and there are also other rational creatures.

(P3) *S* has a certain set of beliefs.

(C) There is an external world, more or less as *S* thinks it is, and there are also other rational creatures.

Now, the argument clearly runs, hence we should verify if its premises are actually true and justifiable from the armchair, that is if they count as a priori knowledge. (P1) is the assumption of triangular externalism; (P2) is just a consequence of (P1); and (P3) is the thesis of privileged self-knowledge (that no traditional skeptic about the external world would set aside). In the earlier section I explicitly accepted the a priori knowledge of (P1) just for argument's sake, but now I want to consider *how* triangular externalism may be known a priori.

Of course, a priori may stand for non-empirically, but certainly it cannot mean non-inferentially, since the knowledge of triangular externalism is not as "direct" and "immediate" as the knowledge of our own mental states. Hence, a priori knowledge of triangular externalism must depend on philosophical reflection: thinking and reflecting about the nature of mental content, one may formulate the theory of triangulation. Moreover, she may take it to be a good a priori justification to think that content

necessarily depends on relations with external empirical objects and other rational creatures, which are more or less as she thinks they are. To put it another way, “The agent has only to reflect on what a belief is, to appreciate that most of his basic beliefs are true” (Davidson 1983: 153).

It should be stressed that Davidson is not exploiting any empirical investigation, even though further evidence could dismiss the a priori justification in favour of triangular externalism.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, mere philosophical reflection could generate other arguments able to explain the nature of mental content, and those arguments could easily constitute evidence against his theory, or at least they could be incompatible alternatives to it. How can a choice be made between two different accounts of mental content merely on a priori grounds? For these reasons, evidence against triangular externalism could derive both from further empirical investigation and from different a priori arguments. Now, exploiting the terminology used by (Pryor 2004), there may be the following three possibilities:

- If I have strong evidence against triangular externalism, then triangular externalism must be rejected along with its anti-skeptical argument;
- If I just believe or suspect that there could be such evidence against triangular externalism, that very possibility does not undermine the justification for triangular externalism, but it can actually undermine my rational commitment to believing (P1) and then prevent me from believing the conclusion of the argument;
- If I do not recognize such evidence against triangular externalism, then I am justified in believing that triangular externalism is true and, since the anti-skeptical argument is valid, I am also justified in denying global skepticism about the external world.

Hence, the anti-skeptical argument has only conditional validity: if triangular externalism happens to be true, then from the mere fact that we have thoughts and other propositional attitudes we can infer that there is an external world (more or less as we think it is) and there are also other rational creatures sufficiently similar to us. In fact,

---

<sup>17</sup> It is worth stressing that Davidson denies that his own externalism could be known strongly a priori. For example, the process of triangulation plainly necessitates that the two triangulating creatures respond in a similar way to similar stimuli that both of them perceive as similar. The effective similarity in their responses, however, cannot be judged on a priori grounds. Hence further empirical investigation could dismiss triangular externalism.

the general picture of knowledge presented by Davidson connects together subjective knowledge, objective knowledge, and intersubjective knowledge: none of these kinds of knowledge can actually stand alone, nor be reduced to the others. Therefore, if I have subjective knowledge, then I also have knowledge of the external world and of other minds. In particular, I can know that there is an external world, more or less as I think it is, and there are also other rational creatures like me. This conclusion may sound amazing. However, the argument can dismiss only “genuine” skeptical scenarios, namely those which admit the following possibility: I would be in a psychological state indistinguishable from my present psychological state even if the external world has not existed at all or if it has always been completely different from how I think it is. In other words, Davidson’s argument applies only to global radical skepticisms like Descartes’s deceiving God or the permanent envatment. On the contrary, a temporary dream or hallucination cannot be ruled out: triangular externalism does not assure us as to anything in our particular empirical knowledge. Of course, there can be no doubt that it is not a serious problem, but another scenario may be much worse.

Now, let us imagine a subject who was born and has always lived on Earth, has systematically triangulated external objects with other rational creatures, and thus has thoughts and beliefs that are largely true of Earth. Then, at a certain instant, her brain is detached from her body and immediately envatted. Following triangular externalism and the argument above, since her causal history is still intact, she has no reason to doubt the truth of her current thoughts and beliefs. In fact, Davidson’s argument does not rule out the possibility of a recent envatment, that is of an envatment carried out after an otherwise normal life made of causal systematic interactions with empirical objects and other rational creatures in the context of triangulation. Although Davidson may add that, in such a scenario, our deception cannot last long, I feel it significantly weakens his anti-skeptical argument.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper I have tried, on the one hand, to ascertain whether Davidson’s triangular externalism may be able to dismiss the objection raised by the Reductio Argument and, on the other, to test the anti-skeptical power of his very externalism. More precisely, I argued that the best way to demonstrate that Davidson’s theory is immune to the

objection raised through the Reductio Argument is to attack its second premise, showing that it cannot be inferred from triangular externalism. I proposed two different reasons for this assumption: (i) triangular externalism cannot be known a priori; (ii) even if we concede the a priori knowledge of triangular externalism, such externalism does not imply the kind of entailment between someone's beliefs and the external world necessary to make the argument run properly. Finally, I outlined some consequences of the above results for Davidson's anti-skeptical argument. My conclusion is that, even if triangular externalism is compatible with privileged self-knowledge, it is not an authentic answer to the skeptic about the external world.

## References

- Beebe H. (2001), "Transfer of Warrant, Begging the Question and Semantic Externalism", *The Philosophical Quarterly* 51, 356-372.
- Boghossian P. (1997), "What the Externalist Can Know a Priori", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 97, 161-175.
- Brewer B. (2000), "Externalism and a Priori Knowledge of Empirical Facts", in (Boghossian and Peacocke 2000), 415-433.
- Brown J. (1995), "The Incompatibility of Anti-Individualism and Privileged Access", *Analysis* 55, 149-156.
- Brown J. (1999), "Boghossian on Externalism and Privileged Access", *Analysis* 59 (1), 52-59.
- Brown J. (2003), "The Reductio Argument and Transmission of Warrant", in (Nuccetelli 2003), 117-130.
- Brown J. (2004), "Wright on Transmission Failure", *Analysis* 64 (1), 57-67.
- Brueckner A. (1992), "What an Anti-Individualist Knows a Priori", *Analysis* 52, 111-118.
- Brueckner A. (2000), "Externalism and the a Prioricity of Self-Knowledge", *Analysis* 60 (1), 132-136.
- Brueckner A. (2002), "Anti-Individualism and Analyticity", *Analysis* 62 (1), 87-91.
- Brueckner A. (2003), "Two Transcendental Arguments Concerning Self-Knowledge", in: (Nuccetelli 2003), 185-200.
- Brueckner A. (2004a), "Brewer on the McKinsey Argument", *Analysis* 64 (1), 41-43.

- Brueckner A. (2004b), "Strategies for Refuting Closure for Knowledge", *Analysis* 64 (4), 333-335.
- Burge T. (1979), "Individualism and the Mental", *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 4, 73-122.
- Burge, T. (1982), "Other Bodies", in (Woodfield 1982), 97-121.
- Davidson D. (1982), "Rational Animals", reprinted in (Davidson 2001), 95-106.
- Davidson D. (1983), "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge", reprinted in (Davidson 2001), 137-153.
- Davidson D. (1987), "Knowing One's Own Mind", reprinted in (Davidson 2001), 15-38.
- Davidson D. (1988), "The Myth of Subjective", reprinted in (Davidson 2001), 39-52.
- Davidson D. (1990), "Epistemology Externalised", reprinted in (Davidson 2001), 193-204.
- Davidson, D. (1999), "Reply to Stroud", in (Hahn 1999).
- Davies M. (1998), "Externalism, Architecturalism, and Epistemic Warrant", in (Wright et. al. 1998), 321-362.
- Davies M. (2000), "Externalism and Armchair Knowledge", in (Boghossian and Peacocke 2000), 384-414.
- Davies M. (2003), "The Problem of Armchair Knowledge", in (Nuccetelli 2003), 23-56.
- Ebbs G. (2003), "A Puzzle About Doubt", in (Nuccetelli 2003), 143-168.
- Falvey K. (2000), "The Compatibility of Anti-Individualism and Privileged Access", *Analysis* 60, 137-142.
- McKinsey M. (1991), "Anti-Individualism and Privileged Access", reprinted in (Ludlow & Martin 1998).
- McKinsey M. (1997), "Accepting the Consequences of Anti-Individualism", *Analysis* 54, 124-128.
- McKinsey M. (2002), "Forms of Externalism and Privileged Access", *Philosophical Perspectives* 16, 199-224.
- McKinsey M. (2003), "Transmission of Warrant and Closure of Apriority", in (Nuccetelli 2003), 97-116.
- McLaughlin, B. (2003), "McKinsey's Challenge, Warrant Transmission and Skepticism", in (Nuccetelli 2003).

- McLaughlin, B. and Tye, M. (1998), "Externalism, Twin-Earth, and Self-Knowledge", in (Wright et. al. 1998), 285-320.
- Miller R. (1997), "Externalist Self-Knowledge and the Scope of the a Priori", *Analysis* 57, 67-75.
- Noonan H.W. (2000), "McKinsey-Brown Survives", *Analysis* 60 (4), 353-356.
- Noordhof P. (2004), "Outsmarting the McKinsey-Brown Argument", *Analysis* 64 (1), 48-56.
- Nuccetelli S. (1999), "What an Anti-Individualist Cannot Know a Priori", *Analysis* 59 (1), 48-51.
- Peacocke C. (1996), "Our Entitlement to Self-Knowledge: Entitlement, Self-Knowledge, and Conceptual Redeployment", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 96, 117-158.
- Pritchard D. (2002), "McKinsey Paradoxes, Radical Scepticism, and the Transmission of Knowledge across Known Entailments", *Synthese* 130, 279-302.
- Pryor J. (2004), "What's Wrong with Moore's Argument?" reprinted in (Sosa and Villanueva 2004).
- Putnam H. (1975), "The Meaning of 'Meaning'", in: K. Gunderson (ed.), *Language, Mind and Knowledge*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.
- Raffman D. (1998), "First-Person Authority and the Internal Reality of Beliefs", in (Wright et. al. 1998), 363-370.
- Sawyer S. (1998), "Privileged Access to the World", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 76, 523-533.
- Warfield T.A. (1998), "A Priori Knowledge of the World: Knowing the World by Knowing Our Minds", *Philosophical Studies* 92, 127-147.
- Warfield T.A. (2004), "When Epistemic Closure Does and Does Not Fail: A Lesson from the History of epistemology", *Analysis* 64 (1), 35-41.
- Wright C. (2000), "Cogency and Question-Begging: Some Reflections on McKinsey's Paradox, and Putnam's Proof", *Philosophical Issues* 10, 140-163.
- Wright C. (2003), "Some Reflections on the Acquisition of Warrant by Inference", in (Nuccetelli 2003), 57-78.