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Triangulation between externalism and internalism*

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The disputes between externalism and internalism in philosophy of mind, on the one hand, and epistemology, on the other, do not seem at least *prima facie* to be deeply intertwined.¹ I believe that this is not really the case, however, and that the theory of triangulation—developed by Donald Davidson in the last two decades of his life—is a clear example of how considerations about the nature of mental content, justification, and knowledge may be interdependent.

In this paper I shall analyze Davidson’s “triangular” externalism about mental content in relation both to his coherence theory of justification (which may be regarded as a kind of epistemic internalism), and to his attempt to offer an answer to the skeptic. First of all, I shall consider the thesis that content externalism cannot be compatible with epistemic internalism, and argue against it that there is no tension between triangular externalism and Davidson’s internalism of justification. Secondly, I shall not only demonstrate that triangular externalism supports Davidson’s thesis that belief is in its nature veridical, but also claim that such a result is probably not enough to offer a satisfactory argument against the skeptic about the external world.

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¹ For an exhaustive survey on the relations between the two disputes see Goldberg 2007.

On Davidson's Coherence Theory of Justification

It is well known that Davidson strongly denies foundationalism and defends a coherence theory of epistemic justification according to which «empirical knowledge has no epistemological foundation, and needs none» (Davidson 2001b: xiv). More precisely, he points out that «what distinguishes a coherence theory is simply the claim that nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief. Its partisan rejects as unintelligible the request for a ground or source of justification of another ilk», (Davidson 1983: 141). In particular, he thinks that perceptions play no epistemic role (1983: 141-146). Since perceptions obviously *cause* some of our beliefs (namely empirical beliefs)² in a certain sense they may be viewed as the “basis” or “ground” of those same beliefs. We should not, however, confuse a mere causal dependence with an epistemic one: the point is that perceptions cannot be considered as the *justifying* ground of any belief at all. Only other beliefs of the subject may justify one of her beliefs, including the empirical ones.³

According to a coherence theory of justification, generally speaking, a belief that *p* is justified when it coheres with a vast array of other beliefs.⁴ As Davidson puts it, «there is a presumption in favor of the truth of a belief that coheres with a significant mass of beliefs. Every belief in a coherent total set of beliefs is justified in the light of this presumption» (1983: 138-139). He also adds however that such a claim is not enough to guarantee genuine justification. In fact, if the belief that *p* coheres with a significant group of false beliefs, we could not say that it is a justified belief. Hence, a more plausible coherence theory of justification should specify that the belief that *p* is justified when it coheres with a vast array of *true* (or at least *largely true*) beliefs. Since coherence alone cannot guarantee that the overall set of a subject's beliefs is true or even largely true, however, it seems that coherence alone cannot provide any justification for a belief.

The above considerations may easily yield to a certain kind of philosophical skepticism. If we wish to defend—as Davidson actually does—a weak form of realism (thinking that the external reality is logically independent from what a person believes about it) and the idea

² More precisely, empirical beliefs are those contingent beliefs directly caused by sensory or perceptual experience. As we shall see, they play a pivotal role in the definition of Davidson's content externalism, because they “anchor” thought to the world (Davidson 1988: 43-45).

³ Davidson argues against the existence of “epistemic intermediaries” in several papers (see for instance his 1982a, 1983, 1988, 1991); unfortunately, in the present paper it is not possible to discuss this issue further.

⁴ According to Davidson «coherence is nothing but consistency» (1990a: 155). Such a characterization is noticeably problematic for a coherence theory of justification, but I will not discuss this difficulty here. Actually, Davidson's emphasis on coherence is just a way of denying foundationalism and stressing the idea that «all that counts as evidence or justification for a belief must come from the same totality of belief to which it belongs» (1983: 153).

that beliefs are objective (namely, that they are true or false independent of the existence of the belief or the believer—see for instance Davidson 1999a: 129), then it would always make sense to wonder whether a coherent given set of beliefs is true. It seems that the possibility that the whole set may be comprehensively false about the actual world—even though it is coherent and held to be true by the subject—is still open to question.⁵ If these considerations are right, however, then without a reason to believe that a coherent set of beliefs cannot be totally false coherence cannot even provide justification. In short, the outcome would seem to be that we must accept the idea that we do not have any genuine knowledge of the external world.⁶

A possible way to avoid this skeptical conclusion without withdrawing a coherence theory of justification would be to insure that a coherent set of beliefs must be true or at least largely true, despite the fact that *each* particular belief, being objective, could be singularly false (even when it coheres with other beliefs). The problem, as Davidson puts it, is that «the partisan of a coherence theory can't allow assurance to come from outside the system of beliefs, while nothing inside can produce support except as it can be shown to rest, finally or at once, on something independently trustworthy» (1983: 140). According to him, then, «what is needed to answer the skeptic is to show that someone with a (more or less) coherent set of beliefs has a reason to suppose his beliefs are not mistaken in the main», a reason «that is not a form of evidence» (1983: 145). More precisely, such a reason may be found by reflecting on the very nature of our beliefs about the external world and on the way their contents are determined. It is precisely content externalism that should give us a reason to believe that our cohering beliefs must be largely true.

On Davidson's Triangular Externalism about Mental Content

To put it generally, in philosophy of mind externalism about mental content is the thesis according to which the content of (some) propositional attitudes constitutively depends, at least in part, on objects and events in the outside world. Unfortunately, it is not possible to describe and discuss Davidson's externalism exhaustively —“triangular” externalism, as I shall call it

⁵ Prima facie, this conclusion seems to work also in a Davidsonian framework, where there are no epistemic barriers between knowledge of the external world, our own mental states, and the mental states of others.

⁶ If coherence is not able to provide justification, we may in fact have a substantial number of coherent true beliefs that, nevertheless, do not amount to knowledge.

from now on—but for the aim of this paper, sketching some of its pivotal features will still be sufficient.⁷

First of all, it should be noted that triangular externalism is quite different from “orthodox” externalisms, such as those defended by Hilary Putnam (1975) or Tyler Burge (1979, 1986). It is certainly a form of causal (or perceptual) externalism to the extent that the contents of (some) propositional attitudes constitutively depend, at least in part, on objects and events in the outside world, or rather on what has “typically” caused them, that is, on the *causal history* of the subject’s relations with those objects and events.⁸

Triangular externalism, however, is not merely causal (or perceptual), but can be considered as an attempt to combine both causal (or perceptual) and social externalism. According to Davidson, in fact, the mere history of causal relations between the subject and the outside world is not at all sufficient to determine the content of her propositional attitudes. A third ingredient, the “second person” (as Davidson labels it), is also necessary, and represents the social element that he wants to introduce in his own kind of externalism. More precisely, mental content also depends on the fact that there are other creatures (at least one) whose perceptual apparatus, concept-forming abilities and other biological dispositions are innately sufficiently similar to those of the subject to enable “triangulation” on the background of a shared public world. It is important to stress that within Davidson’s externalism—unlike Burge’s—the term “social” peculiarly refers to an intersubjective space and not to a community of speakers who are bound by a common language and conventional shared norms, practices or rules (see for instance Davidson 1986, 1994). In any case, the role of the second creature is precisely the social element that Davidson is looking for and it constitutes one of the distinctive marks of triangular externalism: «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 1990b: 200).

Moreover, according to Davidson externalism is “global”, that is, it involves (directly or indirectly) the whole thought and not only some special beliefs concerning natural kinds or indexicals. Since he actually believes that a subject’s mental contents are holistically inter-

⁷ For further discussion on triangular externalism, see for instance Amoretti 2007, 2008a, 2008b; Amoretti and Vassallo 2008; Fennell 2000; Føllesdal 1999; Glüer 2001, 2006; Lepore and Ludwig 2005; Pagin 2001; Ramberg 2001; Verheggen 1997, 2007.

⁸ In this sense, triangular externalism may be better seen as a form of diachronic, rather than synchronic, externalism: «There must be a distinction between the role the actual presence of water plays when it causes me to think this is water, and the role the history of my relations to water play in making a false thought that I am seeing water nevertheless a thought about water. Clearly it is the latter thesis that is essential to externalism» (Davidson 1990b: 199-200). See also Amoretti 2008b; Lepore and Ludwig 2005.

connected, it is possible to affirm that *all* of our mental states depend, at least indirectly, on external objects and events. Given holism, triangular externalism should also be considered as just a *weak* kind of externalism. In fact, even though mental content depends on the history of causal interactions between the subject and the outside world on the background of an intersubjective framework, this dependence is not its only component, given that holistic factors are equally crucial. In other words, the content of a belief is also determined by its inferential relations with a vast and coherent array of other propositional attitudes. As a result, we may say that there are two basic elements in Davidson's notion of mental content: a referential element (introduced by the subject's causal history) and an inferential one (introduced by some holistic constraints). The former connects content to the external world, whereas the latter connects a single belief to other beliefs entertained by the subject (Amoretti 2007).

Epistemic Internalism vs. Content Externalism: Some Insights

Before examining whether the combination of Davidson's coherence theory of justification and triangular externalism represents a good strategy to «tell the skeptic to get lost» (Davidson 1990a: 157), we should first make sure that these theories fit well together.⁹ One primary step, then, would be to determine whether Davidson's coherentism may be regarded as a kind of epistemic internalism or as a kind of epistemic externalism.¹⁰ Although there are many different varieties of epistemic internalism about justification, one of its most prominent tenets is the idea that the justification for a belief that *p* is completely determined by some elements “internal” to the subject's mind.¹¹ According to this general idea, Davidson's coherence theory—whose central rationale is that justification consists in having a reason in the form of an-

⁹ When talking about epistemic internalism/externalism I will only refer to justification. A different matter is whether Davidson may be considered as an epistemic internalist/externalist about knowledge. On the one hand, since he believes that holding a true belief is not enough for knowledge, he cannot be considered as an externalist about knowledge. On the other, because he regards truth as a necessary condition for knowledge, and also endorses a moderate kind of realism (according to which truth is objective and independent of both our actual beliefs and justification), then it is easy to conclude that he cannot accept a strong internalism about knowledge. If, however, we understand epistemic internalism about knowledge in a weaker sense, as the thesis that knowledge is at least in part determined by some elements “internal” to the subject's mind, then Davidson's coherentism may well be considered as a form of epistemic internalism about knowledge.

¹⁰ Of course coherentism and foundationalism are traditionally regarded as paradigmatic internalist theories; nevertheless it is still possible, at least in principle, to conceive them as externalist.

¹¹ Another way of stating this idea is through the notion of supervenience: whether a subject is justified in believing that *p* supervenes on some elements internal to the subject's mind.

other belief¹²—may well be considered as a kind of internalism about justification. Let us examine it.

If we understand the dichotomy between epistemic internalism and epistemic externalism as a dichotomy about the *nature* of what can actually justify a subject's belief that *p* and we identify the "internal" with the "mental", then Davidson's coherence theory of justification may be easily identified as a form of epistemic internalism. Let us call "mentalism" the thesis that justification is completely determined by one's own mental states or, to put it another way, that one's own mental states completely determine the justificatory status of one's particular belief that *p*. Since Davidson thinks that justification must be completely determined by one's own beliefs, and beliefs are obviously a special kind of mental state, then he should also accept epistemic internalism as mentalism.

If the basic tenet of epistemic internalism is merely that justification is completely determined by one's own mental states, then it is clearly compatible with triangular externalism (and with content externalism in general), because beliefs are definitely still mental states, however their content is determined. As Earl Conee points out, if internalism «is the thesis that for epistemic purposes the 'internal' is the mental», then «since content externalism expands the factors that fix the mental, content externalism expands the supervenience base for justification according to mentalism» (2007: 51).

The most usual way of understanding the dichotomy between internalism and externalism in epistemology, however, is to characterize it in terms of "accessibility" or "special access", taking these two notions to refer to what is accessible by reflection alone or a priori, without inference from observation of one's behavior, speech or environment (Audi 2010; Bernecker and Dretske 2000). Let us call "accessibilism" the thesis that justification is completely determined by some elements to which the subject has special cognitive access or, to put it another way, that some reflexively accessible elements completely determine the justificatory status of one's particular belief that *p*. Generally speaking, a coherence theory of justification may be easily construed as a form of accessibilism. In fact, a coherentist maintains that justification is a matter of inferential relations among beliefs; and beliefs are commonly considered as something to which the subject (at least potentially) has special cognitive ac-

¹² A subject is justified in believing that *p* when she has good reasons for believing that *p*, and—according to Davidson—the reasons for believing that *p* may be only some other beliefs cohering with *p*. That is to say, one's own beliefs completely determine the justificatory status of one's belief that *p*.

cess, namely something which the subject may allegedly know or be aware of via mere reflection, without recourse to any evidence or observation.

Davidson has never explicitly described his coherence theory of justification in terms of accessibility or special access, nor overtly talked about a priori in relation to one's access to one's own beliefs. Nevertheless, it should be recognized that he still believes there is a manifest asymmetry between self-knowledge and other kinds of knowledge (i.e. knowledge of the external world and other minds), as first person access to one's own mental states is not a kind of access one may have to the external world and to the mind of others. If we understand the notion of special access to be the notion of what is accessible "from the armchair", without inference from observation of one's behavior, speech or environment, then we may say that Davidson thinks one potentially has special cognitive access to one's own beliefs. In his own words: «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» (1987: 15), and again «People generally know without recourse to inference from evidence, and so in a way that others do not, what they themselves think, want, and intend» (1988: 48).

Against the thesis that Davidson's coherence theory of justification may be construed as a form of accessibilism it may be objected that beliefs are something that the subject may not actually be aware of. This is certainly true, but it should also be recognized that in normal cases the subject could become aware of her own beliefs by reflection alone, by simply turning her attention to them. Some exceptions are unconscious or repressed beliefs, to which the subject does not have special cognitive access, not being able to know or become aware of them by reflection alone. In order to establish whether or not Davidson's coherentism may be seen as a kind of accessibilism, then, we should determine if some non-reflexively accessible beliefs (such as unconscious or repressed beliefs) could be one's reasons for believing that *p*. Since a reason should be something that a subject is able to exhibit, however, I think that Davidson would not accept this possibility. A non-reflexively accessible belief (such as an unconscious or repressed belief) may be the *cause* for believing that *p*, but it does not represent a *reason* for believing it.¹³ If it is true, then the reasons for believing that *p* may be only some (actual or dispositional) reflexively accessible beliefs that cohere with *p*. Then justification is completely determined by reflexively accessible beliefs or, more precisely, in logical relations

¹³ See, for instance, the following passage: «Mental phenomena may cause other mental phenomena without being reasons for them, then, and still keep their character as mental, provided cause and effect are adequately segregated» (Davidson 1982b: 181).

among those reflexively accessible beliefs, and whether or not one's belief that p coheres with some other beliefs is also reflexively accessible by the subject. Since accessibilism holds that justification is completely determined by reflexively accessible elements and both non-repressed beliefs as well as logical relations among them are reflexively accessible by the subject, Davidson's coherentism may be seen as a form of accessibilism.

The alleged incompatibility between accessibility internalism and triangular externalism depends on the widespread opinion that content externalism undermines a subject's ability to know the content of her own beliefs by reflection alone, without inference from observation of her own behavior, speech or environment.¹⁴ The objection may be summarized as follows: according to externalism, content is determined, at least in part, by external factors which, being external, may be inaccessible by the subject; if this is so, the subject may also ignore the content of her own beliefs and be mistaken about what she herself believes. This can be shown by means of a slow switch example. Let us suppose we live on Earth and believe that water is wet. If we were switched to Twin Earth, then we would come to believe that twater is wet (since on Twin Earth there is no water, but twater), without being able to know that by reflection alone. In fact, we would not be able to distinguish between water-beliefs and twater-beliefs by reflection alone, without making some empirical investigations. This implies that given externalism one lacks special access to (some) mental contents and thus to (some of) the factors which determine the justificatory status of (some of) one's beliefs. Accordingly, accessibilism is false.

A general reply, also endorsed by Davidson, is that what determines the content of a first-order thought—whatever it is—also determines the content of the corresponding second-order thought, leaving no room for error. Moreover, it is worth recalling that according to triangular externalism the subject's causal history is what actually determines content (together with holistic constraints). Hence, if I had always lived on Earth, I would have never interacted with water, I would not have any twater-belief (not even after the slow switch), and so there would be nothing to compare my water-beliefs with: «What I see before me I believe to be water; I am in no danger of thinking it is twater, since I do not know what twater is. If I am on Earth, I also believe I think I am seeing water, and in this I am right. If I were without my knowledge transferred to [Twin Earth] I would believe twater was water—a mistake. In both cases I would know what I believed» (Davidson 1989: 61).¹⁵

¹⁴ For a rich survey on this issue see for instance Brown 2004; Ludlow and Martin 1998; Nuccetelli 2003; Wright *et al.* 1998.

¹⁵ On this point see also Amoretti 2008a.

Finally, there is a stronger kind of epistemic internalism about justification that needs to be examined—especially because it is the one that, according to many scholars, best exemplifies our deep intuitions about internalism. The idea is that to be justified in believing that p , a subject must have special access to her own justificatory status. Again, the notion of special access should be taken to refer to what is accessible by reflection alone or a priori, without inference from observation of one’s behavior, speech or environment.¹⁶ Following what I said in § 1, it seems that Davidson endorses this kind of epistemic internalism as well. In fact, he maintains that coherence alone cannot provide justification for the belief that p (it is not enough that a subject happens to have many true beliefs cohering with p). In order to be justified in believing that p , the subject must be aware by reflection alone not only that p coheres with many other coherent beliefs, but also that cohering beliefs cannot be totally false. I will extensively discuss this kind of epistemic internalism in the next sections,¹⁷ but from now on let us label it as epistemic “internalism” tout court and its denial as epistemic “externalism”.

Davidson’s Anti-Skeptical Argument: Does It Really Work?

According to Davidson, in order to convince the skeptic that a (more or less) coherent set of beliefs must be largely true, we should show her that someone with such a set of beliefs has a *reason* to consider that their beliefs are not totally false. Without such a reason, one would not be justified in believing that p , even if the belief that p is actually coherent with a large set of other beliefs. Since this reason, for a coherentist, cannot be a form of evidence, we need an epistemological proof, namely a deductively valid argument whose premises are true and known by us.¹⁸

Let us suppose that one of our premises, P , is true. If we consider the traditional definition of knowledge as a justified true belief, in order to know that P , we also need to believe that P and to have a justification to believe that P . As we have just seen, the justification can-

¹⁶ Of course, the notion of special access should not be considered as referring to direct or infallible knowledge, since coming to know one’s own justificatory status certainly requires reasoning.

¹⁷ One may object that this kind of epistemic internalism is not compatible with content externalism, as long as content externalism implies that a subject with two occurring beliefs p_1 and p_2 may not be able to establish by reflection alone whether p_1 and p_2 have the same (or a different) content or not. I have extensively argued elsewhere that triangular externalism does not have this implication (see Amoretti 2007).

¹⁸ Of course, we do not need to prove each single premise, because we would be committed to an infinite regress: let us suppose that we find a proof for a premise; then we should find a proof for the proof we have just found and so on ad infinitum. If the skeptic is going to insist on that, skepticism is obviously inevitable, but we must admit that her request cannot be accepted, since human beings are finite beings (Vassallo 2003).

not be a piece of empirical evidence, since in Davidson's view there is no non-doxastic form of evidence (our sensations do not justify but simply cause our beliefs).¹⁹

Thus, the justification for the premises of our deductively valid argument must consist in other beliefs, which would simply enlarge the set of our cohering beliefs. It seems, however, that in order to satisfy the skeptic our justification cannot consist in empirical beliefs directly caused by perception and thus, in a sense, "based" on perception. Our justification should be something like an a priori reasoning on the nature of thought and language. According to Davidson, in fact, a subject has only to *reflect* (i.e. to reason from the armchair) on what a belief is and how it is acquired and determined to appreciate that most of one's basic beliefs about the external world are actually true. As he explicitly puts it, «we can dismiss a priori the chance of massive error» (1975: 169).

Davidson's anti-skeptical argument (A) can be summarized as follows:

(P1) If triangular externalism is true, then our cohering beliefs cannot be totally false;

(P2) Triangular externalism is true;

(C) Then, our cohering beliefs cannot be totally false.

The above reasoning is clearly a deductively valid argument of the form "If p then q ", " p ", then " q ", that is a *Modus Ponens*. But to have an epistemological proof against the skeptic, the subject must also know its two premises: it is at the least necessary that the subject believes them, they are true, and the subject has a justification for believing them.

Let us analyze (P1). According to Davidson's triangular externalism, what really matters for the content determination of our basic beliefs about the external world is the history of the actual interactions between the subject and the outside world in the space of triangulation. Hence, if triangular externalism is true, then in the most basic cases our propositional attitudes derive their content from the external causes which have typically caused them, namely from the subject's causal history (the natural history of what is in her head). That is to say that in the most basic cases the content of our beliefs depends on those objects and events that have typically caused those same beliefs. Moreover, we have seen how beliefs are connected in a holistic framework from the very beginning: acquiring beliefs means acquiring a cohering set of beliefs. This implies however that our cohering sets of beliefs are by their nature veridical (they are about what has actually caused them) and that we cannot be systematically de-

¹⁹ Appealing to empirical evidence to argue against a radical skeptic would simply beg the question.

ceived as in the skeptical hypothesis. Therefore, if we have any belief at all, then triangular externalism guarantees that our cohering beliefs cannot be totally false, i.e. that the external world is more or less as we think it is.

(P1) seems to be not only true but also justifiable by mere reflection, because it is directly implied by triangular externalism that our cohering beliefs cannot be totally false. As Davidson puts it, «If you accept the steps that lead to my version of externalism, then you cannot, I think, be a skeptic about the existence of an external world much like the one we all believe we share, nor about the existence of other people with minds like ours» (1999b: 194). If we reflect on triangular externalism and on the very nature of beliefs, from the simple fact that we have thoughts and other propositional attitudes we can infer by mere reflection that there is an external world, which is more or less as we think it is, and there are also other rational creatures sufficiently similar to us. Given externalism, it is a condition of thought and language that we are not brains in a vat.²⁰ We can say, then, that (P1) is justified by an a priori reasoning about the very theory of triangulation.

Let us see now if we also know (P2), namely that triangular externalism is true. We have seen that, in order to have an epistemological proof, the premises of Davidson's argument must be justified by mere reflection, without the support of any empirical belief. Let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that triangular externalism is true and that the subject believes it is. What is her justification for believing that triangular externalism is true? The problem is whether triangular externalism can be established by mere reflection or not. In other words, we need to determine whether Davidson's externalism may be derived exclusively by philosophical arguments (i.e. from the armchair), without appealing to any evidence.

First of all, it should be noted that Davidson rejects any thought experiment and wishes to derive triangular externalism exclusively from what happens to be 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 1990b: 197), and again «the considerations in favor of [...] [triangular externalism] seem to depend in part not on purely *a priori* considerations but rather on a view of the way people are» (Davidson 1999b: 194). Since, on this account, triangular externalism seems to depend on

²⁰ In fact, the general picture of mind presented by Davidson connects subjective knowledge (knowledge of our own mental states), objective knowledge (of the external world), and intersubjective knowledge (of others' mental states): none of these three kinds of knowledge can actually stand alone, nor be reduced to the others (Davidson 1991).

empirical considerations, a skeptic would probably think that the argument simply begs the question and thus is flawed. However, there is also a sense in which triangular externalism may depend exclusively on philosophical arguments, that is, a priori and not empirically.

The view that a history of encounters with some of the things we speak about and have beliefs about is necessary if we are to refer to and form attitudes towards those objects is at the heart of the sort of externalism I embrace. On this view, aspects of our interactions with others and the world are partially constitutive of that we mean and think. There can not be said to be proof of this claim. Its plausibility depends on a conviction which can seem either empirical or *a priori*; a conviction that this is a fact about what sort of creatures we are. Empirical if you think it just happens to be true of us that this is how we come to be able to speak and think about the world; *a priori* if you think, as I tend to, that this is part of what we mean when we talk of thinking and speaking. After all, the notions of speaking and thinking are ours (Davidson 2001a: 293-294).

If Davidson's idea is plausible, then (P2) may be justifiable a priori by merely reasoning from the armchair. Hence, the skeptic cannot simply say that the argument (A) begs the question, but she should provide herself with a different account of the nature of thought and language, an account that would be more realistic and convincing than triangular externalism. To put it another way, the burden of the proof is now on the skeptic. Meanwhile, (A) can be considered a good epistemological proof to exhibit against her argument.

I doubt that triangular externalism could be derived solely a priori, but even putting aside this difficulty there is still another problem clearly stated by Ernest Sosa (2003). Since the efficacy of our epistemological proof depends on the capacity to derive triangular externalism merely a priori, only a few individuals would be able to do that, and the majority of people would not have any reason to believe that their cohering beliefs must be largely true. Thus, they would also lack any reason to suppose that a belief cohering with a vast array of other beliefs is *prima facie* justified, there being a presumption in favor of its truth. The conclusion is that those people—not being capable of deriving triangular externalism a priori—would not be able to have any special access to their justificatory status, and thus they could at best have a set of true beliefs but no genuine knowledge of the external world, as the skeptic actually maintains.

Even if some people lack epistemological proof to dismiss the radical skeptic and have no reason to presume that a belief cohering with a vast array of other beliefs is *prima facie*

justified, there may be another way to resist the conclusion that those people cannot have any genuine knowledge of the external world. In fact it has been argued that if triangular externalism actually implies that our beliefs cannot be generally wrong, then such a result can still be considered as a justification *conceived as external* or, better, it «is not a *reason*, inasmuch as it is a source of justification that epistemically favors even those who have no *belief* in any Davidsonian theory about how our beliefs and sayings acquire content. Nor need one have any reason at all for beliefs that are nonetheless justified» (Sosa 2003: 178).

To put it another way, if triangular externalism is true, then there is a source of justification conceived as external, in the sense that a subject may be unable to gain special access to her own justificatory status, being nevertheless justified in holding a particular belief. Since triangular externalism—following (P1)—guarantees that one’s cohering beliefs must be largely true, then one may be justified in holding a belief that coheres with a vast array of other beliefs of hers, even if one is unable to tell whether she is justified or not, since this would require reflective access to Davidson’s argument (A).

It seems that Davidson himself has changed his mind, arguing for just such an externalist account of justification:

The right thing to say is rather this: we are justified in taking our perceptual beliefs to be true, even when they are not and so when they are true, they constitute knowledge (this is what I meant by saying our perceptual beliefs are veridical). But since our only reasons for holding them true are the support they get from further perceptual beliefs and general coherence with how we think things are, *the underlying source of justification is not itself a reason* (Davidson 1999c: 208).

Following this reasoning, if triangular externalism is true and has the anti-skeptical consequences sketched above, then it epistemically favors even those people who are not able to understand it reflectively, namely those people who do not have any reason to suppose their beliefs are not mistaken in the main and thus do not have any special access to their justificatory status. Hence, the skeptic would be wrong in claiming that we do not have any genuine knowledge of the world simply because we lack such a reason. Coherence may secure our knowledge that *p* just because triangular externalism independently grants that cohering beliefs cannot be completely wrong. Of course, this conclusion may be maintained only if one renounces to defend epistemic internalism in its stronger version, the one that best exemplifies our deep intuitions about epistemic internalism itself.

A Weaker Result?

We have seen that according to triangular externalism the content of our beliefs is determined by the causal history of the subject, i.e. by those causal interactions that have typically tied up the subject with the external relevant cause of her beliefs within an intersubjective space. We have also pointed out that Davidson is right in holding that triangular externalism rules out radical skeptical scenarios, like Descartes's deceiving God or the possibility of a permanent brain envatment, such as the one described by Putnam's famous thought experiment (1981). Ruling out those skeptical hypotheses, therefore, we see that triangular externalism may provide an argument against the skeptic and thus a justification—at least conceived as external—to guarantee our knowledge of the outside world. There are still other skeptical scenarios, however, which seem to be perfectly coherent with triangular externalism and Davidson's account of thought and language.

Let us imagine the following situation. Emily was born and lived on Earth for a long time, triangulating external objects and events with other rational creatures like herself. Then, Emily acquired lots of beliefs that, according to triangular externalism, must be largely true about Earth. At a certain point in her life, however, Emily's brain is envatted by a mad scientist. Now, Emily still has beliefs about Earth, but they are largely false about her actual vat world. Such a skeptical situation is perfectly compatible with triangular externalism (Nagel 1999). To put it another way, the skeptic may argue that triangular externalism is not able to rule out the possibility of a Recent Envatment (RE), an envatment carried out after an otherwise normal life made up of causal systematic interactions with external objects and events within an intersubjective social framework, such as the one required by Davidson's theory of triangulation. In a RE situation Emily had triangulated external objects and events with other creatures like herself, she acquired beliefs about the outside world and, for a certain period, her beliefs were largely true about Earth. Now (after a RE), however, her cohering beliefs are totally false about Earth. An externalist like Davidson can obviously reply that sooner or later new and different causal relations with the vat world will be established. Thus, such a deception cannot last forever.

Yet the skeptic has still another move. Again, let us assume that Emily was born and lived on Earth for a long time, triangulating external objects and events with other rational creatures like herself. Then Emily acquired lots of beliefs that, according to triangular externalism, must be largely true about Earth. At a certain point in her life, however, Emily's brain

starts to be envatted and unenvatted by a mad scientist, and each envatment is not long enough to allow Emily to establish new causal relations with her vat world and to become aware of her actual situation. Now, Emily still has beliefs about Earth, but they may be largely false if her actual world happens to be the vat. This skeptical situation is also compatible with triangular externalism, which is not able to rule out the possibility of an Enduring Envatment (EE), a series of envatments and unenvatments carried out after an otherwise normal life and such that each envatment is not long enough to allow the subject to establish new causal relations with the vat world.

Thus, the most we can infer from triangular externalism is that our cohering beliefs *cannot always have been* totally false, or that our cohering beliefs *are very probably not* totally false. Triangular externalism, however, does not imply the stronger thesis that our cohering beliefs *can never be* totally false (Amoretti 2008a).

Even granting that triangular externalism may be justifiable a priori (which in my opinion is still very dubious), is this weaker consequence enough to repel the skeptic? If we assume the skeptic's own epistemic standards, Davidson's anti-skeptical argument is probably just a blank shot, because it is not able to provide the skeptic with a strong and compelling reason to accept the idea that a coherent set of beliefs held true by the subject *must be* largely true about the world.

We may still wonder however whether the above conclusions are still sufficient to guarantee that we have a justification—at least conceived as external, since the subject may not be able to have reflective access to her own justificatory status—for our empirical beliefs, and thus genuine knowledge about the external world.

I believe that the answer, again, depends on the epistemic standards we wish to adopt. A skeptic would presumably tend to embrace absolute standards of knowledge. In this case, saying that triangular externalism implies that our cohering beliefs *are very probably* largely true would not be sufficient to guarantee that we have a justification, not even conceived as external, for our empirical beliefs, and thus genuine knowledge about the external world. If, however, we think (as I am inclined to) that in this case ordinary standards of knowledge would be enough, then we would have a justification for our empirical beliefs that—even if it is conceived as external, because the subject may not be able to have reflective access to her own justificatory status—may still guarantee that a belief cohering with a vast array of other beliefs is *prima facie* justified, having in fact a presumption in favor of its truth. Again, this con-

clusion may be asserted only if one renounces to defend epistemic internalism in its stronger version, the one that best represents our deep intuitions about epistemic internalism itself.

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