

## REVIEW ESSAYS

## PREDICATION AND TRUTH

*Truth and Predication.* DONALD DAVIDSON. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005. x, 180 p. Cloth \$29.95.

Donald Davidson had nearly completed this book when he died unexpectedly at age 86. The book had been accepted for publication. He had received comments from Charles Parsons, Jim Higginbotham, and the present reviewer. After Davidson's death, his widow Marcia Cavell, helped by colleagues, made conservative changes based on notes or marginalia that Davidson had written. Where the intent of such notes was not completely clear, she entered them in bracketed footnotes. Although there is some reference to Parsons's remarks in such footnotes, it appears that Davidson had not made significant revisions in response to any of the reviewers' comments. Cavell judges that he would have made more revisions. So it is impossible to know what a completed book would have looked like. Still, the book reads like a work conceived as complete.

The book centers on the role of truth, more particularly Tarskian truth theory, in understanding language, thought, and communication. It thus brings together issues that Davidson made prominent in philosophy over the last forty years. The book divides into two parts. The first is a slight revision of Davidson's Dewey lectures, "The Structure and Content of Truth," delivered in 1989.<sup>1</sup> The second, entirely new, centers on what Davidson calls "the problem of predication." Since Davidson sees this problem as solvable only in the context of a theory of truth, the two parts make a whole.

Davidson opens chapter 1 by arguing against two types of views regarding the relation between Tarski's truth theory and philosophical issues about truth. He argues against deflationary or redundancy positions that claim that Tarski's T-sentences ("'Snow is white' is true if and only if snow is white") capture all there is to the notion of truth. He argues against positions that hold that Tarski's theory is irrelevant to philosophical issues because its T-sentences provide stipulative definitions of truth.

<sup>1</sup>Published as Davidson, "The Structure and Content of Truth," this JOURNAL, LXXXVII, 6 (June 1990): 279–328.

Against the deflationary positions he cites quantifications over truths, which the T-sentences do not capture; and he cites the fact that Tarski's theory presupposes a nontrivial translation between object language and meta-language, which the T-sentences presuppose. Against claims that Tarski's theory is irrelevant because it provides stipulative definitions, Davidson agrees with Tarski that the theory does not define the concept of truth, but captures the extensional core of an antecedently understood notion, as applied to specified languages. The fact that truth has features beyond its extensional aspects (such as the fact, cited by Michael Dummett, that truth constitutes a type of success for belief and assertion) does not impugn the interest of Tarski's theory. Davidson's claims here are familiar. I believe them to be broadly right.

Davidson uses these criticisms to motivate his construal of the truth predicate as expressing an undefined theoretical notion. He takes the notion to be useful in empirical semantical theories about language. Aspects of truth that Tarski's formal extensionalist theory does not make use of are relevant for understanding its place in semantical theories of individuals' speech and linguistic competence. Here too Davidson's claims seem plausible. They are borne out by the development of empirical semantics.

In chapter 2, Davidson maintains that semantical predicates are primitives. He argues against epistemic theories of truth and against what he calls correspondence theories. His resistance to the view that truth is to be explained in terms of our abilities to find out whether something is true, or in terms of justified assertability, is natural and, I think, correct (33–34, 47). The views that he calls correspondence views are equally implausible. Davidson counts them unintelligible. On Davidson's rendering, a correspondence theory, particularly in the form of a realist view, takes truth to be "entirely independent of our beliefs" (33–34). Davidson understands correspondence views also to require that sentences or propositions have distinctive types of referents, such as facts or states of affairs (39–42, 126–27).

To be entirely independent of our beliefs, on Davidson's construal, truth would have to attach to truth bearers and falsity bearers that have natures that are independent of any of our beliefs or activities. Thus meaning and propositions, true or false, would have to be what they are independently of human thought and activity. Frege held such a position. Russell did for a time. Few other modern philosophers can be cited. Although I do not see that the view is unintelligible, it is an extreme, implausible view, at least in general form. The beliefs and activities of individuals play a role in determining the nature of most representational thought content, and most or all

meaning and reference in language. On the other hand, I see no necessary relation between the view that Davidson rejects and correspondence theories, or even realism, as they are usually understood.

Davidson somewhat obscures matters in his formulations. He writes, "... I was still under the influence of the idea that there is something important in the realist conception of truth—the idea that truth, and therefore reality, are (except for special cases) independent of what anyone believes or can know" (41). He refers to realism as "the doctrine that the real and true are independent of our beliefs..." (42). Normally, realism centers not on the nature of truth bearers, which do plausibly depend on the thoughts and beliefs of individuals, but on truth makers. A normal claim is that in many standard cases, what make truths true are individuals, properties, or what not, that do not depend for their existence or nature on our beliefs. Davidson's reasons for rejecting realism and correspondence conceptions do not squarely confront this idea. Much of the discussion has a coy, nonstraightforward feel to it.

Davidson's construal of correspondence views as requiring distinctive types of referents for sentences also seems to me a very narrow one. This construal is certainly not assumed by all who appeal to correspondence as illuminating truth. Davidson's objection to correspondence views on this construal is that "there is nothing interesting or instructive to which true sentences correspond" (39, 126–27). Davidson supports this objection only by appeal to the Frege-Church-Gödel slingshot argument (40, 127–30). This argument purports to show that if sentences denote anything, all true sentences denote the same thing. One of the assumptions of the argument is that logically equivalent sentences correspond to (denote) the same entity. Russell would certainly have rejected this assumption. I believe that any philosopher who wants to maintain that true sentences correspond to relatively fine-grained entities, like structured propositions, facts, or states of affairs, would reject it. I have no special brief for such views, but I find Davidson's discussion of them rather too brisk, and ultimately question begging.

Tarski regarded his theory as a correspondence theory. At one time Davidson agreed, maintaining that Tarski's reliance on satisfaction in systematizing truth amounts to an appeal to correspondence. Davidson criticizes his former position. He holds that it is contrived to see sentences as corresponding to sequences of objects that satisfy sentences. And he invokes the slingshot argument (39n, 155–56). I do not find these criticisms forceful.

There is much to be said for Davidson's old way of regarding correspondence. One can explicate correspondence as a combination of reference and truth-of. A simple subject-predicate sentence cor-

responds to the way things are just inasmuch as its terms refer to things of which its predicates are true. The idea can be adapted to fit more complex sentences. One need not invoke distinctive entities—*ways things are*—for *sentences* to correspond to. One need not invoke a semantical *relation* beyond reference and being true of. Reference and being-true-of are relations between expressions within a sentence and a further subject matter. Sentences correspond to truth makers through those relations. I see no harm in believing in distinctive entities like facts or states of affairs, or semantical relations between sentences and such entities. But a relatively robust conception of correspondence does not depend on such a belief.

I do think that it would be overblown to tout appeals to correspondence as “theories,” unless one simply has Tarski-type theories in mind. The defensible point in an appeal to correspondence is to insist that genuine relations between truth bearers, or their parts, and subject matters, figure in the determination of truth. Such insistence is usually coupled with rejecting reductions of truth to verification, coherence, warranted assertability, redundancy, or other matters that serve to avoid giving language-subject-matter relations a role in understanding truth.

Davidson would have rejected the relaxed correspondence approach that I just suggested for a reason other than those he explicitly gives. He would have thought that such an approach would give explanatory roles to reference and being-true-of that they cannot bear. He believed that these notions are exhaustively explainable in terms of truth. I would have been interested to see more of Davidson’s thinking on this issue. He provides only a very brief rationale. I shall return to the matter near the end of this review.

In chapter 3, Davidson claims that the main aspect of the concept of truth that is left out by Tarski’s extensional theory is its role as part of a framework for empirical semantical theories of individuals’ utterances and linguistic competencies. He holds that an applied truth theory describes a complex ability (50). He maintains that a theory of the truth conditions of sentences should be embedded in a theory of beliefs and preferences. He sketches a rational reconstruction of how one could arrive at a theory of meaning and belief on the basis of knowledge of degrees to which sentences are held true—refining ideas of Frank Ramsey, Richard Jeffrey, and of course W.V. Quine (67–75). Davidson’s sketch is very compressed. But the outlines of his view of relations between truth, belief, preference, and meaning are familiar. I think that taken very broadly, Davidson’s sketch of the shape of empirical semantical theory is plausible and right. It is one of his best contributions to philosophy.

There are, however, three aspects of Davidson's vision here that I regard as mistaken or seriously blurred. One is his very unclear account of whether, when, or in what way a theory of truth is internalized in ordinary speakers and hearers. On one hand, he takes the theory to describe a complex ability (50) and to provide "the only way to specify the infinity of things the interpreter knows about the speaker ..." (52). On the other hand, he writes that the sense in which speaker and interpreter have internalized a theory "comes to no more than the fact that the speaker is able to speak as if he believed the interpreter would interpret him in the way the theory describes, and the fact that the interpreter is prepared to interpret him in this way" (53). This "as if" talk leaves some doubt about whether Davidson thought that Tarskian truth theories are psychologically real in ordinary communication. Davidson's remark that language users need not have "explicit knowledge" of the theory hardly helps. The question is whether, if ordinary speakers and hearers are to speak and comprehend what is said, they must have semantical concepts, concepts of utterances, unconscious beliefs in the principles, and unconscious use of the structural inferences, of semantical theories. I think that despite the "as if" talk, other things that Davidson holds commit him to such a view. But he does not clarify or defend his position.

I think that such a commitment would be mistaken. Accounting for the development of linguistic use and comprehension in children, or even in adults, appears not to require taking *semantical* theories to be tacitly realized in the individuals' psychologies.<sup>2</sup> Attributing such tacit theories seems to hyper-intellectualize linguistic competence. As far as anyone has shown, very young children can speak and understand speech without being capable of *thinking* semantically. They need not have intentions about how their own speech is to be interpreted by others—the sorts of Gricean intentions that Davidson thinks are necessary for linguistic meaning (51–54). We know that most children communicate by age 14–18 months. It is at best controversial whether they have concepts of belief, intention, and so on, before age three or four years. A semantical theory is a conceptualized theory about semantical relations between representation and world. It describes the way sentences that in fact set truth conditions relate, through their parts, to truth makers. Its conceptualized semantical standpoint need not model the structure or process of individual understanding. Seemingly, individuals can use sentences and their logical forms in

<sup>2</sup> Cf. my "Comprehension and Interpretation," in Lewis Hahn, ed., *The Philosophy of Donald Davidson* (Chicago, Open Court, 1999), pp. 229–50.

propositional inferences without having semantical meta-concepts for understanding such uses. The connections to the world could lie in nonsemantical, empirical concepts, and in unconceptualized psychological connections between perceptions of others' utterances and perceptions of coincident matters in the environment. Mastery of compositionality need not be framed in semantical, meta-conceptual terms either.

A second feature of Davidson's vision that I do not accept is his confining the application of semantical theory to idiolects and to what speakers fully understand. I think that communal languages and dialects show enough stability for linguistic theory to apply to them, allowing of course for numerous individual variations. Moreover, even linguistic usage in an idiolect falls into patterns, and carries meanings, that the individual may only incompletely understand.

Davidson provides ill-informed and cavalier objections to such a view. He refers to those "who are pleased to hold that the meanings of words are magically independent of the speaker's intentions—for example, that they depend on how the majority or the best-informed, or the best-born, of the community in which the speaker lives speak, or perhaps how they would speak if they took enough care" (50). Davidson attributes this view to me and to Saul Kripke's Wittgenstein. My view, at any rate, does not hold that meanings are independent of speaker intentions. Speakers' intentions often place those speakers under standards and make them beholden to social and other mechanisms for determining reference, and thereby meaning, which they incompletely understand. I have discussed these issues elsewhere, and will not press them here.<sup>3</sup>

A third aspect of Davidson's vision that I do not accept is his account of the role of speaker-interpreter-world triangulation in the development of meaning and objectivity. Davidson holds that the "ultimate source of both objectivity and communication is the triangle that, by relating speaker, interpreter, and the world, determines the contents of thought and speech" (74–75). He fully intends to maintain that before linguistic communication occurs, there is no representation or intentionality. I believe that this view is incompatible with what is known about perceptual reference in a wide variety

<sup>3</sup> Cf. my "Individualism and the Mental," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, iv (1979): 73–121, reprinted in *Foundations of Mind, Philosophical Essays, Volume II* (New York: Oxford, 2007) with Postscript, pp. 100–81; "Wherein Is Language Social?," in Alexander George ed., *Reflections on Chomsky* (New York: Blackwell, 1989), pp. 275–90, and "Social Anti-Individualism, Objective Reference," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, LXVII (2003): 682–90; both reprinted in *Foundations of Mind*, pp. 275–90 and 307–15.

of animals, and about propositional inference and thought in pre-linguistic children and a narrower variety of animals.<sup>4</sup>

All three of these aspects of Davidson's position are familiar from his other writings. I believe that he nowhere defends them in depth. In any case, he does not advance discussion of them in this book. He is concerned to sketch his view in a brief, picturesque way. As indicated, I think the larger position important and plausible. It is the product of insightful work, issuing from a perspective on the subject that was reflectively developed over the long term.

I turn now to the previously unpublished parts of the book. Davidson states "the problem of predication" in various ways. He calls it the problem of explaining the semantic role of predicates (2), the problem of explaining the nature of predication (76–77), the dual problem of explaining how particulars are related to their properties and how subjects are related to predicates (77, 83). The problem is "closely related," in Davidson's view, to that of explaining the "unity of a proposition" or the unity of a judgment (4, 77). He holds that although an account that provides a solution has long existed, "no one has noticed that this account solves the problem" (77). The solution is supposed to fall directly out of Tarski's theory of truth.

Davidson provides a sketchy, but interesting, historical overview of the problem. He gives special attention to Plato, Aristotle, Russell, P.F. Strawson, Quine, Wilfrid Sellars, Frege, and Tarski. The brief discussions of these figures do not purport to rest on careful historical investigation. Davidson's treatment is nonetheless often deft and insightful. His discussion of Plato shows, I think, a grip on the theory of Forms that bears fruit from his early work in ancient philosophy. His remarks on Russell, Quine, Sellars, and Tarski are also penetrating.

Davidson discusses ways in which various figures tried to formulate the problem, ways in which some fell into regress, and ways in which others avoided regress but still failed to find a solution. Near the end of the book, Davidson lists four desiderata for a solution (155–59).

The first is that predication should be connected to truth:

If we can show that our account of the role of predicates is part of an explanation of the fact that sentences containing a given predicate are true or false, then we have incorporated our account of predicates into an explanation of the most obvious sense in which sentences are unified,

<sup>4</sup> Cf. "Social Anti-Individualism, Objective Reference"; and see "Perceptual Entitlement," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, LXVII (2003): 503–48. I will discuss these issues at much greater length in a forthcoming book, *Origins of Objectivity*.

and so we can understand how, by using a sentence, we can make assertions and perform other speech acts (155).

I believe that this grounding of predication and propositional unity at least partly in truth constitutes an important insight. The insight derives from Frege, as Davidson acknowledges. I shall return to the matter of the primacy of truth among semantical concepts.

Second, any attempt to provide *full* explication of the semantics of predicates by associating them with single entities of any kind (whether properties, universals, Forms, or what not) is doomed (156). The main idea is that in explaining a simple predication like 'Theaetetus sits' *simply* by postulating a semantical relation between the predicate and some repeatable entity (Sitting), one has done nothing to connect the predicate to the subject or to connect the repeatable entity to the named entity. Propositional unity is not explained merely by invoking a semantical relation to a property and a semantical relation to an individual. In effect, Frege makes this point decisively; and Davidson articulates it effectively throughout the book.

Third, a solution must distinguish between the issue whether properties and other abstract entities exist and the issue whether predicates bear a semantical relation to such entities. Davidson seems to accept that such entities exist. He denies that predicates bear any semantical relation to them (158). I believe that Davidson is right to distinguish the issues, but wrong in his position on the latter one. I shall return to this matter.

Fourth, a solution must deal with quantificational structure. As Davidson notes, Frege and Tarski advance the discussion in this respect well beyond their predecessors (158–59).

Davidson claims that Tarski's semantical method meets these desiderata and provides a solution to the problem of predication. Tarski's essential innovation, in Davidson's view, is to invoke the idea that predicates are *true of* the entities named by constants or quantified through variables. Davidson explains Tarski's introduction of sequences of objects. The introduction enables the notion of satisfaction (roughly, the converse of truth-of) to deal with an arbitrary number of predicate argument places. Davidson characterizes the circumstances under which a given sequence assigns entities to the variables as those circumstances which, if those variables were the names of those entities, would yield a true sentence. Such sequences are said to *satisfy* the sentence, whether the sentence is open or closed (159; cf. 36). Here, in contrast to Tarski (30, 31), Davidson explains satisfaction in terms of would-be truth (159–61; cf. 36, 55n).

Davidson takes himself to have explained predication in terms of truth (161). He admits that the explanation is not fully general,



since truth is explained only for one language at a time. He claims, however, that Tarski provided a method for specifying the semantical role of any given predicate. Davidson believes that nothing more can reasonably be asked of a theory of predication: "What more can we demand? I think the history of the subject has demonstrated that more would be less" (161).

The solution that Davidson offers is a less-is-more solution. His solution avoids taking predicates to connect particulars with universals. He thinks that better understanding derives from this and other sorts of avoidance. I think that the conclusion of the book would have been strengthened if Davidson had discussed his conception of his solution. A summary of wherein the solution does and does not connect to the issues that historically swirled around predication would have made the book's conclusion seem less abrupt.

A discussion of how the solution relates to historical understandings of predication would also have made clearer exactly how Davidson sees his own role in the solution that he advocates. He claims that no one had noticed that the Frege-Tarski results solved the problem. He represents himself as a match-maker between solution and problem.

Recall that Davidson characterizes the problem of predication as that of explaining the semantical role of predicates (2). It has long been known that the Frege-Tarski results provide a core explanation of the semantics of predication. Framed this way, Davidson's claim that no one had noticed the relevance of the Frege-Tarski results to the problem of predication is mistaken.

Davidson certainly contributes a thought provoking account of the history of the problem. He is right to emphasize that semantical theory, centered on truth, is a good framework within which to reason about traditional ontological aspects of the problem. Does Davidson himself contribute anything new to understanding predication?

I think that Davidson sees his main contribution as lying in the challenge, "What more can we demand?" (161). He believes that associating predication with the ontology of properties, universals, Forms, or the like, is a mistake. He believes that many philosophers fell into regresses because they tried to explain the unity effected by predication in terms of an ontology of universals and particulars, or properties and individuals. Davidson rejects such solutions. I think that he believes his contribution to lie in framing problem and solution in such a way as to show that issues that traditionally were thought to be part of the problem are best separated from it altogether. I am doubtful. I devote the rest of this review to some of my doubts.

Much of Davidson's historical discussion centers on the regress that Plato worried about in his "third-man" problem. In fact, Davidson

writes, "The difficulty of avoiding one infinite regress or another might almost be said to be *the* problem of predication ..." (79). It is well known that Frege's approach to predication provides material to undercut regresses that are variants of Plato's third-man problem. Davidson recognizes the relevance of Frege's contribution. The interesting issues lie, I think, in the details regarding particular regresses.

Davidson's discussions, though suggestive, are hampered by sloppy formulations that obscure premises that lead to regresses. I will provide only a sampling of these discussions.

The issue to be borne in mind is to what extent a regress derives from metaphysical, semantical, or syntactic commitments. All discussions of the problem rightly take for granted that sentences (or thoughts) are not mere sequences of singular terms—mere lists. Davidson attributes to Plato the salutary claim that every [declarative] sentence has a verb [a predicative part, at least in its logical form]. This purely syntactic point can be taken as a given in any reasonable account of the semantics and metaphysics associated with sentences.

Let us look at Davidson's first discussion of the regress problem:

Consider the discussion of how the forms are related to each other. The question is how to think of sentences like 'Motion is not Rest'. This does not deny existence to either Motion or Rest, but it does tell us that the two forms, both of which exist, are not identical; to refute Parmenides, Plato here distinguishes between the 'is' of existence and the 'is' of identity (*Sophist* 255B,C) .... Plato speaks of the forms as blending, connecting, or mixing with one another. In the case of Rest and Motion, they fail to blend. The difficulty is to reconcile these declarations with the claim that every sentence must have a verb. Clearly the words 'Motion' and 'Rest' *name or refer to* forms, so if the sentence 'Motion is not Rest' has a verb, it must be 'is' or 'is not' (or 'blends with' or 'does not blend with'). Plato takes Sameness and Difference to be forms, but then fails to recognize that if these forms are what is *meant* by the 'is' and 'is not' in sentences that speak of the forms blending or failing to blend, then a sentence like 'Motion is not Rest' *names* three forms ('Motion Difference Rest?'), and there is no verb.

If Identity and Difference are not verbs but *names of forms*, then the same must hold of 'sits' and 'flies'; they should be 'Sits' and 'Flies'. Both 'Theaetetus sits' and 'Motion is not Rest' lack a verb. How could Plato have failed to notice this?... Of course, 'Motion is not x' and 'x is not Rest' are one-place predicates. However, this observation is of no help as long as one holds that predicates *refer to* forms. But we have been told that every sentence must contain a verb (82–83, my italics).

If one adds a verb, the cycle starts over again: Motion is related to Rest by Difference.

In this passage, Davidson shifts, without comment, from “name or refer to” to “meant” and then back again.<sup>5</sup> In the passage, he also writes of Sameness and Difference as being taken by Plato to be forms. Then one sentence later, without comment, he writes of Identity and Difference as names of forms.

The issues of *exactly* what semantical relation verbs or predicates bear to a subject matter, and the relative contributions of language and subject matter to predication are the central issues in understanding both predication and the regress problem. It does not serve reflection to engage in careless formulations that bear on just these issues.

This particular formulation of a regress argument can be rendered valid if and only if what it is for ‘is not’ to *mean* a Form is to be *fully explained* by what it is for ‘Difference’ to *name* the same Form. Or more precisely, the regress gets started if and only if:

‘is not’ means Difference

is either notionally equivalent to, or means the same as, or is interchangeable with, or is to be *fully explained* by

‘Difference’ names Difference.

Bringing out these assumptions helps isolate what must be rejected to avoid the regress. The regress gets started if the syntactic and semantical roles of a predicate are assimilated to those of a singular term. It is absolutely essential to any solution that this assimilation be rejected.

Inconstancy in the use of terms for semantical relations that predicates bear to entities runs through the book (86, 92, 113, 119, 134, 136, 139, 145, 158). Davidson writes as if it does not matter whether we think of predicates or verbs as naming, referring to, standing for, relating to, introducing, signifying, designating, corresponding to, adverting to...single entities like properties, relations, universals, Forms, or the like. These are all terms that Davidson uses.

Davidson has a motive for being off-hand. He thinks that no such semantical relation helps in any way to solve the problem of predication or the regress problem (85, 112, 139, 146, 156–58). That is, he thinks that taking predicates to bear *any* semantical relation to a single entity like a property, relation, universal, Form, or the like makes no contribution at all to solving these problems. In fact, he takes it to be a necessary part of a solution to *reject* the idea that a

<sup>5</sup> Davidson does write later of *apparent* contradictions and of getting clear about the problem (83). But the formulations in the quoted passage seem to me to be needlessly unclear and inconstant.

predicate bears *any* semantical relation to a single entity like a property, relation, universal, Form, or the like (85, 158). I believe that Davidson positions here are mistaken.

At issue in what follows is a distinction between two types of positions. One is that postulating a semantical relation between predicates and properties, relations, universals, Forms, or the like, does not *in itself* solve the problem of predication. The other is that any such postulation does not *in any way* help in a solution, or even more strongly, that any such postulation should be rejected as a part of any solution.

Davidson gives good reasons for the first position. Just postulating a semantical relation between singular terms and single entities and a further semantical relation between predicates and single entities, like properties, does nothing in itself to explain how the semantical relation associated with the predicate connects to the semantical relation associated with the singular term to form a unity—a sentence that can be true or false (for example, 86, 92–94, 159).<sup>6</sup>

I think that Davidson gives no good reason for the latter views. He gives no good reason to deny that predicates bear a semantical relation to properties, relations, or the like. Imprecise and shifting formulations tend to camouflage the differences between the two types of views.

Here is Davidson's second discussion of the regress problem:

There is no objection to taking properties and relations as entities about which we want to think and say things, unless, of course, there are no such entities. I shall not cast doubt on their existence: the question of whether they exist will play no part in what follows. The more basic question is whether positing the existence of properties and relations *helps us understand* the structure and nature of judgments like the judgment that Theaetetus sits or that Motion is different from Rest. Let us take one more look. Theaetetus sits. Theaetetus, we agree, is an entity, a person. He is sitting. The property of Sitting is another entity, this time a universal that can be instantiated by many particular entities. In the present case, Theaetetus is one of those entities. In other words, *we explain what it is to be the case* that Theaetetus sits by saying that Theaetetus instantiates the property of Sitting. The fact itself doesn't, then, *consist*

<sup>6</sup> I think that Davidson articulates well the point that no semantical relation between predicates and a single entity can exhaust the semantical role of predicates. This point is less ambitious than his primary thesis (that it is a mistake to invoke any such relation in predication at all). The less ambitious thesis is, I think, well known. Davidson does a service, however, in insisting on it: Being true of a variety of individual entities is an ineliminable element in the semantics of predication. Being capable of effecting, in sentences, an application or attribution that when successful yields a true sentence, or thought, is a central aspect of a predicate's semantical role.

merely of the two entities, Theaetetus and the property of Sitting. It is a fact because those two entities stand in a certain relation to each other, the relation of Instantiation .... Now we see that a fact we can describe in just two words apparently involves three entities. But can 'Theaetetus sits' consist of just the three entities, Theaetetus, Sitting, and Instantiation? Surely not. The fact requires as well that these three entities stand in a certain relation to one another: Theaetetus and Sitting, in that order, bear the relation of Instantiation to one another. To explain this fact we need to mention this *fourth* entity, which, unlike Instantiation, is a three-place relation. We are clearly off on an infinite regress (84–85; all italics are mine, except the last).

Davidson begins here by writing that the basic question is whether positing properties *helps us understand* the structure and nature of judgments. Then six short sentences later he shifts to writing about our *explaining what it is to be the case*. The explanation of what it is to be the case is an explanation of a *fact*, not a judgment. A few sentences later, Davidson writes of the quoted sentence 'Theaetetus sits' as *consisting* of the individual, the property, and the relation. One sentence later he shifts back to writing of what the fact "requires."

Quite apart from the error of writing of sentences as consisting of individuals, properties, and relations, there remain two important slides in this discussion. One is between writing about judgments or sentences and writing about facts. The other is between writing of postulating properties and relations to *help* us understand something and writing of explaining what something *is* or what it *consists in*.

Suppose that there are properties and relations. Given this supposition, it is not obvious that there is anything wrong with assuming that there are a lot of them. In addition to the individual Theaetetus and the property Sitting, let us suppose that there is a relation of instantiation between the property and the individual, and a relation in turn among that relation, the property, and the individual; and so on to infinity. Such an infinity is profusion, not circularity or regress. Circularity and regress are properties of explanations—of certain representational structures—not of ordinary facts or subject matters.

Davidson shifts from discussing judgments to discussing facts and what it is to be the case, then to discussing sentences, then back to discussing facts. He conjures the infinity with respect to the facts and then pins the regress on the structure or nature of judgments or sentences. In understanding the regress, it is crucial to distinguish between what the judgment or sentence is doing—what its semantics is—and what is the case in the world. Davidson blurs these distinctions.

Similarly, Davidson is very lax in his remarks about explanation. His regress argument is supposed to target the idea that positing

properties *helps explain* the nature of judgment. But the argument uses a premise about *explaining what something consists in*. This is a difference between holding that a semantical relation between predicates and properties/relations contributes *something* to a solution and holding that it constitutes the *whole* solution.

Suppose that one holds that in the judgment that Theaetetus sits, there is a predication of the property Sitting of Theaetetus. Postulating a semantical relation between the predicate 'sits' and the property Sitting helps us understand, let us suppose, the semantical structure and nature of the judgment. It is not the full story about the predication. The semantical relation between predicate and property is only an aspect of predication. Let us say that the predicate *indicates* (or predicatively denotes) the property or relation. Beyond indication, predication also constitutively involves a capacity for *application* or *attribution* of the property to the individual. Thus predication involves both indication and application of what is indicated to something further.

It would be a mistake to claim that the judgment consists in a predication of a further relation (Instantiation) between individual and property. The judgment does not predicate the relation of instantiation to the individual and the property. Perhaps, necessarily, Theaetetus sits if and only if Theaetetus instantiates the property Sitting. But a judgment that Theaetetus sits is *a different judgment, involving a different predication*, from a judgment that Theaetetus instantiates the property Sitting. A semantical explanation of the latter judgment can legitimately be different from a semantical explanation of the former.

A semantical explanation is not an exhaustive definitional or explanatory substitute, or a revelation of what a judgment "consists in." The paradoxes teach us that much. The point is, I think, intuitively clear even before reflecting on the paradoxes. Semantical explanations help us understand the semantical structure of judgments and sentences. They are not definitional substitutes or exhaustive explanatory replacements for what they help us understand.

So far Davidson's account gives no reason to deny a semantical relation (I have called it *indication* or predicative denotation) between predicates, on one hand, and properties or relations, on the other. The relation is not name-like. No name can enter into the very same relation. Indication essentially involves a potential for predication. Predication essentially involves (at least purported) application or attribution as well as (at least purported) indication (cf. note 16). Finally, a predication of the property Sitting is not the same as, nor can it be exhaustively and definitionally explained by, a predication of the relation Instantiation between the property Sitting and an individual. We can learn these things from regress arguments.

Davidson continues the passage just quoted by trying to simplify the regress argument:

The problem is easier to state in semantical terms .... The sentence 'Theaetetus sits' has a word that refers to, or names, Theaetetus, and a word whose function *is somehow explained* by mentioning the property (or form or universal) of Sitting. But the sentence *says* that Theaetetus *has* this property. If the semantics of the sentence were *exhausted* by referring to the two entities Theaetetus and the property of Sitting, it would be just a string of names; we would ask where the verb was. The verb, we understand, *expresses* the relation of instantiation. Our policy, however, is to *explain verbs by somehow relating them* to properties and relations. But this cannot be the end of the matter, since we now have three entities, a person, a property, and a relation, but no verb. When we supply the appropriate verb, we will be forced to the next step, and so on (85–86, my italics, except for the italics on "has").

There are two errors in this argument. One is the claim that 'Theaetetus sits' *says* that Theaetetus has the property of Sitting. The original sentence does not say that Theaetetus has the property Sitting. If it did, the sentence would predicate the relation Having of the two named entities, Theaetetus and Sitting. The sentence does not do that. In fact, we may suppose, it only predicates the property Sitting of Theaetetus. If Theaetetus sits, Theaetetus has the property Sitting. But the predications in the two sentences (or judgments) are different. The syntactical and semantical structures of the sentences are different.<sup>7</sup> Claiming that 'Theaetetus sits' says that Theaetetus instantiates or has the property Sitting amounts to assimilating 'sits' to a singular term and then looking elsewhere for a verb. Assimilating the semantic role of a predicate to that of a singular term is the cardinal error in falling into regress. Davidson does not mark this claim separately as the cardinal error, because he thinks that the fundamental error lies further upstream. He thinks that the root mistake lies in taking the sentence's predicate to "mention" the property Sitting. He does not seem to realize that assimilating the semantical role of a predicate to that of a singular term (in fact, the cardinal error) does not follow from the assumption that predicates bear a semantical relation to properties like Sitting.

The second error in this simplified regress argument is the move from the idea (a) that an explanation of predication "*mentions*" (bears some semantical relation to) a property to the idea (b) that the verb *expresses* the *relation* between the property and the individual to which

<sup>7</sup> Davidson makes the same mistake on p. 147.

it is attributed. Davidson seems to sanction this error. It is a *non-sequitur*. This second error is closely related to the first. It matters *exactly* what the semantical relation is between an element of a sentence or judgment and an element in the world. If predicates are to be semantically related to properties (if they are to indicate properties), they must also attribute the properties. They do *not* predicate, or express *in the same semantical relation*, a further relation between the properties and entities that they attribute the properties to (cf. note 17).

Davidson accuses many thinkers of falling into Platonic third-man regresses, or failing to confront the problem of predication at all. I find his discussions of Hume, Bradley, Russell, Quine, and Sellars better than those of Kant,<sup>8</sup> Strawson,<sup>9</sup> or Frege. However, most of the discussions, even those that are penetrating, move too quickly to provide solid grounding for substantive claims.

Since I think that Frege made the deepest contribution to understanding predication, I will discuss Davidson's engagement with him. Davidson recognizes Frege's contribution to be pivotal. He highlights these contributions as well as weaknesses in Frege's positions.

Frege sharply distinguishes the grammatical positions of predicates and singular terms. He associates the grammatical distinction with a difference in semantical role. He holds that singular expressions denote objects. He thinks that predicates denote functions. When a (first-level) predicate is embedded in a sentence and the singular-

<sup>8</sup> Davidson writes that Kant said little that was relevant to the problem of predication (99). I think that this claim is mistaken. Kant has a serious and extensive theory of the unity of judgment. Some indication of it occurs at *Critique of Pure Reason*, B140–42. Stripped of its connection to idealism, I think that Kant's account comprises major contributions in its associating predication with judgment, and its connecting predication to a system, to objectivity, and to truth—roughly, “objective validity.” For Kant, the system is the unity of apperception. I leave open here whether this is the right system to relate truth to. Frege made do with a system of inferential connections without insisting that the system must involve self-consciousness. In some of these respects, Frege's breakthroughs go back to Kant. Of course, Kant did not exploit them remotely as deeply as Frege did.

<sup>9</sup> Regarding Strawson, Davidson writes, “It is interesting that someone who made it ‘central’ to his life's work to explain ‘singular reference together with predication’ should, so far as I know, have paid no serious attention to what I am calling the problem of predication” (113). I think that Davidson's sarcastic criticism of Strawson for ignoring the problem of predication involves serious misrepresentation. For example, he attributes to Strawson the view that the “entire semantic function” of ‘pretty’ in ‘Sally is pretty’ is to designate a general or universal entity (113). Davidson quotes nothing from Strawson to support this attribution. I have not been able to find anything in Strawson's article “Singular Terms and Predication” in P.F. Strawson, *Logico-Linguistic Papers* (London, UK: Methuen, 1971), to which Davidson refers, to support it. Although I think that Strawson does not provide a clear, strong account of these matters, his discussion of grouping seems to me to count against Davidson's attribution.



term positions in the predicate are filled by singular terms instead of quantifiable variables, the singular terms denote arguments or inputs for the functions. Given an input, the functions yield truth or falsity as values, or output. The importance of this account is multiform.

First, it provides a sharp distinction between both grammatical and semantical roles for singular terms and predicates. Predicates cannot operate, syntactically or semantically, as names or singular terms. Singular terms cannot operate, syntactically or semantically, as predicates. Although Frege calls the semantical relations that singular terms and predicates enter into “denotation” (*Bedeutung*), the relations are different, as his logical grammar makes clear. Let us call the first relation *singular-denotation* and the second *predicative-denotation*. The semantics of predication is ineliminably that of predicative application or attribution. For Frege, predicative application is application of a function. Predicative application occurs when predicates are embedded in a sentence. When a predicate is joined with a term, the predicate’s predicatively-denoted function is given an argument or input to which the function is represented as applied. The application yields a value or output. An essential aspect of the semantical role of predicates is their potential for predicative application or attribution. I think it best to see Frege’s contribution as transcending the particular type of entity, a function, that he took predicates to apply when they are joined with terms. One could give up Frege’s invocation of functions as predicative denotations of predicates, and regard predicates as applying properties, relations, universals, or themselves, to something else. In doing so successfully, they are true of the something else, and they characterize it.

Second, the account sets both singular-denotation and predicative-denotation in essential relation to the truth or falsity of sentences or thoughts. Frege points out that the concern with language-world and thought-world relations is inseparable from our concern with truth value.

Third, Frege provides a model for understanding predicative application that illuminates the grammatical unity of sentences and thoughts in terms of a semantical unification. Modeling predication on functional application indicates how the truth value of a whole sentence, or thought, functionally depends on and only on the denotations applied by the predicates and the denotations of the singular terms (granted the particular order and form of those applications).

Fourth, Frege extends the account to quantification in a smooth and systematic way.

Davidson praises the second and third contributions thus: “Of all the efforts to account for the role of predicates that we have reviewed,

Frege's is the only one that, by its treatment of predicates, clearly makes sentences semantic units. Of the attempts we have considered, Frege alone has assigned a semantic role to predicates which promises to explain how sentences are connected to truth values" (133–34). Davidson also gives Frege credit, though I think less fully, for his deep fourth contribution (147, 158–59).

Davidson does not accept Frege's view that predicates literally denote functions from entities to truth-values. He thinks, and I agree, that truth values are not plausibly regarded as objects. It should be said that Frege's view is still invoked in logic and linguistics for its elegance and convenience.

Although it is natural and probably correct to deny that sentences denote truth values as objects, I think that such denial is not of *deep* conceptual importance. Davidson thinks otherwise. He follows Dummett in holding that this denial targets a very serious mistake on Frege's part. Davidson endorses Dummett's intemperate characterization of Frege's position as a "gratuitous blunder" (136). Davidson follows Dummett in charging that Frege made the mistake of assimilating sentences to names. I have shown that Dummett's view rests on an elementary misunderstanding of Frege's logical theory.<sup>10</sup> Although Frege holds that sentences and names bear the same denotation-relation to certain objects, he firmly distinguishes names and sentences in other ways, even within his formal theory. For most purposes, it is a minor issue whether sentences bear a semantical relation to truth values, regarded as objects. If one avoids this view, one can retain Frege's insight that the semantics of predicates combines with the semantics of other types of expressions *functionally* to determine the truth or falsity of sentences. Application of a predicate's denotation to a singular term's denotation *uniquely* determines the truth or falsity of a sentence that consists of such a predication. Similarly, for sentences of more complex syntactical types. Frege's insight stands, regardless of whether predicates are taken as literally applying functions, and regardless of whether truth values are taken as objects.

The question is whether in giving up the idea that predicates literally denote functions whose values are truth values, one must give up the idea that they bear a semantical relation to properties, relations, or the like. Davidson believes that one must. I think that he gives no good grounds for his belief.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. my "Frege on Truth," in L. Haaparanta and J. Hintikka, eds., *Frege Synthesized* (Boston: Reidel, 1986), pp. 97–154, section II, reprinted in *Truth, Thought, Reason: Essays on Frege* (New York: Oxford, 2005), cf. pp. 108–15. For a shorter account, see the Introduction to *Truth, Thought, Reason*, pp. 21–23.

To motivate his belief, Davidson discusses a notorious problem for Frege. Frege held that singular terms cannot singularly-denote functions, and functional expressions cannot predicatively-denote objects. Frege realized that this claim entails that ‘the concept *horse*’ cannot singularly-denote a concept. (Concepts for Frege are functions whose values are truth values.) He concluded that the concept *horse* is not a concept. Of course, this conclusion is counterintuitive. I think it mistaken. Eventually Frege rejected, for science, the predicate ‘is a concept’, which he thought could be true only of objects, not concepts.

Davidson’s assessment of these matters differs from mine. Here is Davidson’s account:

One [serious problem] was pointed out by Frege: the entities referred to by predicates cannot be objects, like the entities referred to by singular terms, for if they were, sentences would be strings of names, and the usual problem of how a sentence could constitute a unit would once more emerge. Frege therefore stressed the contrast between the referents of singular terms (‘objects’) and the referents of predicates (‘concepts’ ...) ... Yet here, Frege admits, we face a dilemma, for as soon as we say anything about a concept we convert it into an object (134).

Davidson believes that these difficulties should be jettisoned simply by rejecting the view that predicates bear any semantical relation to concepts, functions, properties, relations, or the like.

It is unclear *exactly* why Frege believed that the entities predicatively-denoted by predicates cannot be singularly-denoted by singular terms. Whatever Frege’s reason, he was mistaken. I will return to this point. First, let us consider Davidson’s reasons, on Frege’s behalf, for holding that entities predicatively-denoted cannot be singularly-denoted.

Davidson asserts that if the entities “referred to” by predicates could be the entities “referred to” by singular terms, sentences would be strings of names. This claim is correct, but it is misleading. It is true that if predicates bore the same semantical relation (reference) to the same types of entities that singular terms do, they would *be* singular terms; and sentences would be lists. Davidson’s reasoning is misleading on two counts. First, Frege did not take predicates to bear the same semantical relation to functions that singular terms bear to their referents. Second, the key to understanding why sentences are not strings of names lies not in distinguishing the entities that names and predicates bear semantical relations to. The key lies in distinguishing the relevant semantical relations themselves. Frege draws this latter distinction, but Davidson’s reasoning assimilates predicate “reference” to singular term “reference.”

For Frege predicates and singular terms bear different semantical relations to their subject matters. Frege seems not to have recognized

clearly that his distinction between these semantical relations does not force him into his mistaken view that singular terms cannot singularly-denote what predicates predicatively-denote. So let me argue the point independently of Frege's full position: There is a difference in the semantical relations that predicates and singular terms bear to the entities that they are semantically related to, *whether or not the entities that they bear semantical relations to are disjoint* (cf. note 12). The semantical relation that predicates enter into is not merely that of being in a semantical relation, predicative denotation, to functions. The semantical relation for predicates also constitutively involves a capacity for predicative application, or attribution. When their argument places are filled by singular terms, predicates also connect functions to arguments. That is, one aspect of the semantical role of predicates is to effect a representational analog of functional application. Singular terms never have this semantical role. Even if they were to singularly-denote functions, singular terms would be unable to represent application of the functions to inputs into the functions. Since this capacity is an aspect of the semantical relation between predicates and functions, singular terms cannot bear the same semantical relation to functions that predicates do, regardless of whether singular terms can bear a semantical relation to functions. Singular terms lack the potential for representing functional application when they are "connected" with singular terms. Connecting one singular term with another produces a list. It does not yield a representation of functional application. Predicative-denotation is different in this respect. So singular-denotation and predicative-denotation must be distinguished. And this distinction does not entail that singular terms cannot singularly-denote what predicates predicatively-denote.

Frege distinguishes the two relations. By writing of the two semantical relations indiscriminately as a "reference" relation, on the mere supposition that both relations relate expressions to single entities, Davidson conflates the two relations in a way that Frege does not.<sup>11</sup>

Suppose, against Frege, that singular terms can singularly-denote functions. It does not follow that sentences become mere lists. The difference between predication and singular reference can be pre-

<sup>11</sup>For more on these matters, see Montgomery Furth, "Two Types of Denotation" in *Studies in Logical Theory*, American Philosophical Quarterly Monograph Series 2 (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1968). As I shall explain, I believe that although Frege distinguished the two types of denotation, he failed to realize that this distinction obviated any need to require that singular terms could not bear *their* semantical relation to the same entities that predicates bear their different semantical relation to (namely, to functions).

served. To distinguish sentences from lists, one must maintain a difference in semantical role between singular terms and predicates, and one must maintain that a capacity for application be counted part of the semantical role of predicates. Frege thought of this role literally as function-application. I think it better not to hold that predicates literally predicatively-denote functions. The applicational aspect of the semantical role of predicates is better regarded as attribution (of properties or relations) that *functionally determines* the truth or falsity of sentences or thoughts. One need not take truth values as objects. Whether the difference between singular terms and predicates lies in *entities* that singular terms and predicates are semantically related to is not crucial. What is crucial is that there be a difference in the semantical relations, and that the semantical relation for predicates include a potential for application or attribution.<sup>12</sup> So the reason that Davidson gives for agreeing with Frege that any entities that predicates are semantically related to cannot be referred to by singular terms is not a good one. His talk of “conversion” of functions into objects is unsupported metaphor.

Davidson is right to maintain that a relation between predicates and entities such as properties, relations, functions, universals, and so on, cannot exhaust the semantical role of predicates. If it did, one could not explain the unity of sentences or thoughts. One would leave out predicative application—attribution. But Davidson’s reasoning depends on the idea that predicate “reference” exhausts the semantical role of predicates. Frege did not hold this view. The view does not follow from the mere claim that predicates bear some semantical relation to single entities such as properties, relations, or functions. I have called this relation “indication” or “predicative denotation.”

Davidson gives no good reasons to support Frege’s claim that singular terms cannot singularly-denote what predicates predicatively-denote (namely, functions). Frege’s claim was mistaken. I believe that Davidson’s reasoning shows that he did not sufficiently appreciate the importance of the first of Frege’s contributions to understanding predication that I listed above. Frege’s sharp distinction between the semantical roles of predicates and singular terms and his semantical association of predication with functional application blocks regress. The distinction allows predicates to bear a semantical relation to

<sup>12</sup> I do think that certain entities are not suited to being predicated. For example, physical individuals are not. I think that sets are not. Aristotle’s view that there are certain metaphysical limitations on what can be a predicable seems to me to be correct. But I believe that *any* entity can in principle be singularly-denoted or named. Predication and singular reference do not yield a disjoint metaphysical division of the world.

single entities (such as functions or properties) other than individuals of which the predicates are true.<sup>13</sup>

I believe that Frege himself did not fully appreciate the importance of his contribution. He thought that a difference in the semantical relations that predicates and singular terms bear to their subject matters has to correspond to a strict division in the subject matters that they could be related to. In fact, the sharp distinction between semantical relations, one of which constitutively involves a potential for predicative application, is sufficient to account for the semantical distinctiveness of predication, without invoking a metaphysical divide between entities that predicates and singular terms can be semantically related to. This is what Frege seems not to have realized.

Whatever Frege's reasons for holding that singular terms cannot singularly-denote any function that a predicate predicatively-denotes, they were mistaken. Church showed in his calculus of lambda conversion that there is no incoherence in taking functional expressions, including predicates, that contain open argument places to bear a semantical relation to the same entities that nonfunctional expressions, which lack open argument places, bear a (different) semantical relation to.<sup>14</sup> It does not follow from holding that predicates predicatively-denote properties, relations, or functions, that there is anything wrong with allowing singular terms to singularly-denote the same entities. What is critical is that the functional expressions also have the role of representing application of those entities to other entities, when the functional expressions are grammatically joined with singular terms in sentences or thoughts. To avoid trouble in a Fregean theory, it is enough that one distinguish the semantical relations and maintain certain grammatical type differences.

A primary theme in my discussion has been that Davidson thinks that a successful account must hold that predicates bear no semantical relation to single entities like properties, relations, universals,

<sup>13</sup>Frege himself was not open to such a view. I will discuss his mistake further on in the text below. Frege sometimes characterizes an object as anything that is not a function, and says that an expression that denotes an object is a name or singular term. Cf. Gottlob Frege, *Kleine Schriften*, I. Angellelli, ed. (Hildesheim, Germany: Georg Olms, 1967), p. 134, p. 18 in the original; *Die Grundlagen der Arithmetik*, translated as *The Foundations of Arithmetic*, J.L. Austin, trans. (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1980), pp. x, 77n, 72). Even regarded as definitions, these characterizations are, I think, mistaken. Frege shows that he has an independent grip on both the grammatical category of name or singular term and on the notion of an object. I discuss these matters in some depth in "Frege on Truth," in *Truth, Thought, Reason*, pp. 101ff. There I also discuss Frege's mistaken doctrine that singular terms cannot singularly-denote functions.

<sup>14</sup>Alonzo Church, *The Calculi of Lambda-Conversion* (Princeton: University Press, 1941). For further discussion see my *Truth, Thought, Reason*, pp. 20–21.

Forms, or functions (82, 84–86, 93–95, 97, 112, 114, 134–35, 139, 143, 145–46, 156, 158, 161). Some of his arguments depend on careless formulation (82, 84–86, 143, 145–46). Some depend on not distinguishing clearly between showing that any such semantical relation cannot *exhaust* the semantical role of predicates (they must be capable of functional application or attribution) and arguments that such a semantical relation *cannot figure at all* in predication (114, 156, 158). None of the arguments is sound.

I want now to remark on Davidson's positive position, laying aside his arguments for it. Davidson sensibly does not question the existence of properties or relations. Such entities are very commonly referred to and quantified over in scientific explanations. Nominalist or extensionalist rejection of their existence seems to me to be a pointless and unscientific position. In this respect, Davidson differs from Quine and Sellars. His ontological liberalism always seemed to me to be a modern and enlightened aspect of his philosophical work. However, he agrees with Quine and Sellars in rejecting the idea that such entities figure in the semantics of predication. Davidson thinks that the only way to bear a semantical relation to them is through singular reference, or quantification into the position of singular reference.<sup>15</sup>

I believe that this position is very unattractive. If properties are admitted to exist, it is completely implausible to claim that predicates bear *no* systematic semantical relation to them—including no relation that bears systematically on the truth of sentences containing such predicates. A sufficient condition for a semantical relation to be associated with a subsentential linguistic expression is roughly that there be a systematic relation between the expression and an entity in a subject matter, a relation that affects the truth value of sentences containing the expression, that is induced by the use of the expression,

<sup>15</sup> As Parsons remarks in a footnote that Cavell includes (146n5), Davidson does accept a semantical relation between predicates and *certain* "single entities"—sets. He does not confine himself strictly to the semantical relation of being true of. Davidson's view here is a concession to Tarski's method of explaining satisfaction as a relation between predicates and sequences of objects. It should be said that Davidson firmly and correctly rejects the idea that the semantical relation of predicates to sets or sequences exhausts their semantical role (157–58). As Parsons notes, however, it is unclear how Davidson might defend his allowance of a semantical relation between predicates and sets, given his arguments that a semantical relation between predicates and "single entities" like properties, relations, and Forms, are a source of regress. All that Davidson says in favor of preferring sets to properties is that their individuation conditions are clearer than properties (119)—a familiar, and I think unpersuasive, point from Quine—and that sets and not properties are appealed to in Tarski's truth theory. Neither point seems relevant to showing that regress looms with properties but not with sets.

and that is in principle understandable by understanding the language.<sup>16</sup> The combination of ideas (a) that there is a property *Sitting* and (b) that the verb 'sits' bears *no* systematic semantical relation to that property when 'sits' is used in sentences is, I think, on its face completely implausible.

The combination would amount to denying that there is a systematic relation, understandable by understanding the language, between 'sits' and *Sitting*. For if '*Sitting*' names a property, and 'sits' is conceptually and systematically related to '*Sitting*', then 'sits' cannot avoid bearing some *semantical* relation to the property. The relation differs from that of singular reference. But it is a systematic, linguistically understandable relation that is induced by the normal use of the language and that bears on the truth value of containing sentences. Understanding this relation need not go through understanding the relation between 'sits' and '*Sitting*'. An individual could have failed to learn the gerund construction, and used only 'sit'. The idea that the individual's word 'sit' does not bear a systematic semantical relation to the property *Sitting*, granted that the property exists, is, I think, untenable.

Of course, 'sits' bears systematic relations, constitutively associated with its use, to other entities too. It bears systematic relations to the

<sup>16</sup> This rough sufficient condition is too narrow to function as a necessary and sufficient condition. It leaves out not only semantical relations for thoughts. It also leaves out semantical relations between linguistic expressions and meanings, concepts, senses that are ways of representing a subject matter, rather than constituting a (first-level) subject matter. The rough sufficient condition will suffice for present purposes.

I should say here that a full account of predication must include an account of the representational content of predication (the mode of predication), not simply an account of what is predicated through predicative denotation and of predicative application or attribution. Davidson's account centers entirely on the subject-matter aspects of predication. I believe that one needs a notion of concept, or predicative representational content, to account for the way predications are thought. The existence of nonlinguistic thought is only one of several obstacles to resting content with the predicates themselves. Systematic explanation calls for abstraction that comprises representational content in addition to linguistic items and what they represent. I mention two familiar reasons for understanding the semantics of predication in this two-level way. There are different ways of thinking of any given property or relation in predications of that property or relation. Such differences emerge in psychological and psycholinguistic explanations. Further, in some cases, there is no property or relation that is attributed or applied; yet there can remain a predicative thought. I leave open the relation between concepts and linguistic meanings. I believe that certain aspects of meaning, over and above reference, should be distinguished from what individuals think with (namely, their concepts) in carrying out predications in thought. But this is a complex issue that would take us far afield. Since Davidson focuses on the simplest issues regarding the relation between predication and truth, I believe that his omission of discussion of further aspects of predication does not seriously harm his project. Davidson has a more Quinean view of these matters than I do, but these differences between his view and mine are not forced to the surface by the issues Davidson discusses in this book.



individuals that sit, to the set of individuals that sit, to a concept, or way of thinking, that one learns when one learns such words as 'sits' and 'sitzt'. And so on. Understanding predication and how language works in relation to the world, and acknowledging the existence of these entities, requires recognizing that there are systematic semantical relations between 'sit' and whatever among these entities exist. (I think that all of them, including properties and relations, do.) Some may be less central to a particular style of explanation than others. But ontological liberalism seems to me to require liberalism regarding semantical relations that words bear to the world.<sup>17</sup>

What is important for present purposes is not whether properties and relations exist. The key point is that no dire difficulty in understanding *predication* arises if one assumes that predicates bear a semantical relation to them.

Sometimes Davidson claims that properties are not *needed* for semantical explanation (112, 139, 158). Tarski's truth theory does not appeal to them. The fact that Tarski truth theory makes do with sets and not properties does not show that a semantical theory that invokes properties is of no explanatory worth. Appeal to a semantical relation between predicates and properties cannot *suffice* to explain predication. But it is natural and so far undefeated to think that predicates attribute properties to entities denoted by singular terms.

<sup>17</sup> It should be noted that this sort of semantical liberalism will allow not only a semantical relation between 'sits' and Sitting, but also a different semantical relation between 'sits' and Instantiation of Sitting, and perhaps a further semantical relation between 'sits' and Instantiation of Instantiation of Sitting; and so on. If there is a profusion of relations in the subject matter, there is nothing wrong with there being a profusion of semantical relations to elements of the profusion that can be understood by understanding the language. To see that no regress is involved, it is important to note the following facts: All such semantical relations are different semantical relations. 'Sits' only *predicates* Sitting, not all of the other entities. Predication with 'Sits' is a priori associable with those other entities. But it is not to be explained in terms of them. Rather, the reverse is true. By understanding predication, and accepting the ontology, one is in a position to understand each of the infinitely many further semantical relations. The statements of these further semantical relations are entailments of the statement containing the simple predication. But these statements have different propositional contents; and understanding them is not necessary for understanding the original predication (except insofar as understanding entailments always deepens understanding). Competence to understand the whole infinity can be generated from understanding what is involved in the semantics of the original predication, and accepting the ontology. One need not understand the infinity to understand the particular predication. In fact, I think one can understand the particular predication itself without invoking any semantical notions, including the notion *predication*, at all. What semantical notions help us understand are semantical relations. I think that it is clear that the semantical relations governing predication are more basic in explaining the semantical workings of language and thought than the further semantical relations involving instantiations.

One of Davidson's insights, articulated in the first half of the book, is that Tarski's theory provides a *limited* account of truth. The theory bears only on *extensional* aspects of truth. It does not illuminate connections to belief, preference, and meaning that Davidson rightly believes are part of applications of the theory. Insofar as truth is essential to understanding predication, Tarski's theory must also be seen as a limited theory of predication. In being a purely extensionalist theory of truth, the theory yields only an extensionalist theory of predication. It omits aspects of predication that constitutively relate to belief, preference, meaning, and even to singular reference (to properties and relations), in common-sense and scientific theorizing. So the argument that Tarski's theory does not appeal to properties, relations, or the like in its account of predication does not support a denial that a full account of predication should invoke semantical relations to such entities.

Full understanding of predication cannot rest with the semantics of predication in *sentences* in any case. Since some thought is language-independent, a theory must explain the role of predication in thought. The concerns of Kant and Russell to understand the mind's role in unifying judgments and propositions are relevant to full understanding. Davidson has little to say about mental agency in predication. This omission is perhaps partly the product of his belief that thought does not precede language and is not in any way independent of it. Even if that belief were true, however, the structural issues that Davidson concentrates upon do not exhaust the subject. The role of mental agency in predication would remain worthy of discussion.

I want now to return to a matter that I raised earlier. I wrote that Davidson would have been dissatisfied with explicating correspondence in terms of reference and being-true-of. He believes that reference and being-true-of are not semantical relations with *any* independent explanatory force. Davidson purports to explain predication and satisfaction (hence being true of) *fully* in terms of truth (159, 161, 163). He also tries to explain singular reference fully in terms of truth (159–61, 36, 55n). For him, there is only one semantical primitive, the concept of truth. The semantical notions for singular reference and predication are derivative. This view contrasts with the view that truth, predication, and reference are reciprocally inter-dependent primitive notions; and that in different respects each illuminates the others.<sup>18,19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Davidson's view also contrasts with the view that truth is fully explainable in terms of reference and/or being true of. In contrast to the view that maintains that the semantical notions are reciprocally related, I do not take this sort of view seriously.

<sup>19</sup> Davidson's actual explanation of satisfaction (159), in terms of the truth of would-be sentences that result from substituting names for variables, fails to confront well-

Davidson gives only an unelaborated reason for characterizing reference and being-true-of as, in effect, whatever relations suffice to enable a truth theory to deduce the intuitively correct T-sentences. He holds that the only testable implications of a truth theory are the T-sentences. Since the T-sentences do not contain the notions of reference or being true of, he claims that any way of characterizing reference and satisfaction that “yields confirmable T-sentences is as good as another” (55n). He thinks that we have no other grip on these other semantical notions than as *some* semantical relations between the parts of sentences and a subject matter that are necessary to derive the T-sentences. It is only the T-sentences that we understand and can confirm in empirical semantical theories. So the semantical relations between parts of sentences and subject matter are to be explained as whatever relations make the T-sentences come out true.

This argument seems to rely on a mistaken view of scientific theories. The idea that we explain theoretical relations as whatever make our tests come out right, and that the only constraint on a theory is that it derive testable consequences, is, I think, clearly unacceptable.

A more interesting mistake underlies the argument. The argument is symptomatic of a tendency in the philosophy of language to ignore the way empirical linguistic reference and linguistic predication are grounded in perception.<sup>20</sup> We have an independent source for understanding both of these notions through their connection to singular and attributive elements in pre-linguistic perception. Thus I believe that these semantical notions cannot be exhaustively explained in terms of their contribution to the derivation of T-sentences. We often assess the reference of a name or demonstrative construction in terms of what we know about *what* an individual perceives. And we assess the attribution of many predicates in terms of what we know about *how* an individual perceives what he perceives—how he perceives particulars *as being*.

Of course, singular and predicative elements in sentences or thoughts that rely on perception are inextricably associated with propositional beliefs and propositional inferences. In seeking to understand such

known problems about nondenumerable subject matters. I think that Davidson's explanation does not provide an adequate account of sentences involving quantification over nondenumerable subject matters.

<sup>20</sup> Examples of this sort of thinking also occur in W.V. Quine, “Ontological Relativity” in *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (New York: Columbia, 1969), pp. 26–68; Hilary Putnam, “Models and Reality” (1978) in *Realism and Reason, Philosophical Papers*, Volume III (New York: Cambridge, 1983), pp. 1–25; Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History* (New York: Cambridge, 1981), chapter 2. I find all of these ways of thinking quite wayward.

elements, we necessarily integrate our understanding of them into a structure of propositional inference and belief. Belief and propositional inference are necessarily understood in terms of truth conditions. Truth is involved in the constitutive representational function of belief and inference. Reference and predication have their point largely in their relation to truth. So the notions of singular reference and predication in sentences and thoughts must be understood in relation to the notion of truth. So these notions are not independent of the notion of truth. This was Frege's second insight.

On the other hand, our notion of truth is partly explicated in terms of notions of reference and predication, which constitutively involves the notion of being true of. These notions are constrained by applications of our notion of perception (which helps ground the basic sort of belief, *de re* belief). The notion of perception is independent of any notion of propositional truth.<sup>21</sup> So our notion of propositional truth cannot exhaustively explain our notions of reference and predication. Reference and predication help explain how truth is related to truth makers.

Our understanding of predication is enriched not only by what we know about perception. It is enriched by all that we know about properties and relations. We understand predication in connection to those aspects of a subject matter that go beyond the minimum needed to engage in extensional derivations of theorems of a Tarskian truth theory. The three semantical notions are primitive. Truth bears *reciprocal* constitutive relations to singular reference and predication.

Davidson's book offers many insights. It also has serious defects. Exposition and argumentation, particularly in the second half of the book, leave much to be desired. Although the work is stimulating in its discussion of predication and historical treatments of it, and clearly the product of substantial philosophical talent, I believe that it makes no significant new contribution to the understanding of predication. On the other hand, Davidson *has* made significant contributions to the understanding of truth. Utilizing the formal and empirical work of Frege and the formal work of Tarski, Davidson framed a broad and lasting account of the form of *empirical* semantical theory

<sup>21</sup> Perception is constitutively associated with conditions for veridicality. But accuracy in perception is not propositional truth. There is substantial evidence that animals that lack propositional attitudes, such as bees, have visual perceptual systems, capable of perceiving and perceptually attributing physical entities such as sizes, shapes, colors, distances, and so on. There is substantial evidence that these same animals lack any propositional attitudes. Moreover, propositional structure is not necessary for explaining the structural organization of perceptual representational content. So perception bears no constitutive relation to any states that are evaluable for propositional truth.

before any one else did so. He also provided examples of empirical theory application that helped get empirical semantics started.<sup>22</sup> The first half of this book sets his account in the context of others' thought about truth. In this context, it continues to look strong. Sad, that there will be no more work from this creative source.

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. for example, Davidson's "The Logical Form of Action Sentences" (1967), reprinted in *Essays on Actions and Events* (New York: Oxford, 1981), pp. 105–22.