

**THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY**

**New Coherentism**

**in the Face of Global Scepticism**

**BY**

**Kathryn Whittle**

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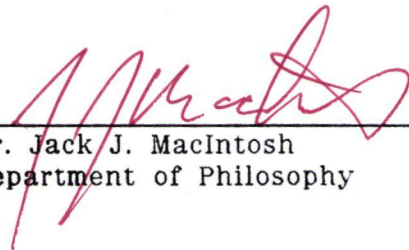
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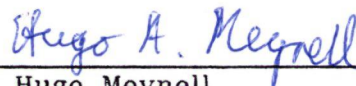
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Chairman, Dr. John A. Baker  
Department of Philosophy



Dr. Jack J. MacIntosh  
Department of Philosophy



Dr. Hugo Meynell  
Department of Religious Studies

Date 

## ABSTRACT

I will first discuss the general nature of epistemology and suggest that its motivation arises with the presence of the sceptic. I take the purpose of an epistemology to be showing whether knowledge is possible. I then state some different theses of global scepticism, and some of the famous arguments used to support those theses. I look at three different approaches that try to defeat global scepticism and discuss the ways in which two of them might be seen as inadequate. I delay discussion of the second approach until Chapter 2, where I begin my discussion of Davidson's coherence theory. I take his theory to be an example of approach two. I lay out three major objections against such neo-coherence theories, and after giving a critical analysis of Davidson's own theory, I examine the force of those objections against Davidson's theory.

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## DEDICATION

For my Mother, my Father, and my Grandfather Whittle.

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## INTRODUCTION

It is a funny thing that scepticism still remains somewhat "scandalous" to philosophy when, over its relatively long history, it has been the subject of so much pooh-poohing. Indeed, there is something in the tone of that now famous remark made by Kant which gives one the impression the sceptic is viewed by philosophers as more of a nuisance than an advocate of any serious threat, a thinker who poses something of a mere inconvenience that somebody should deal with, if only they would. After all, we haven't been going about claiming to know for the last few thousand years without a moderate amount of success, and the sceptic, viewed as a thorn in the side, apparently doesn't stop that practice, even though for some, he might make it an embarrassing one.

It is clear, in light of philosophical literature, that few philosophers adopt the sceptic's views when given the opportunity to choose a different epistemological position, but whichever tone is used by philosophers when discussing the sceptic, one cannot deny the significant role he plays in the development of epistemological theories; whether he is dismissed, applauded, or ridiculed, the sceptic always receives some mention. If he truly is just a nuisance, this is odd. In fact, it seems rather strange so much time and effort has been expended attempting to defeat the sceptic's arguments when it would clearly have been much easier to accept them. Even if their tone belies it, why do particular thinkers see the defeat of scepticism as such an important goal? What value do these thinkers be-



lieve there to be in possessing knowledge? I think the answer to what motivates the epistemologist in attempting to succeed at such a task is perhaps best answered by the anthropologists and the psychoanalysts of the world; however, the fact that epistemologists are so inclined is significant to the project at hand, especially with reference to the sceptic's role in the fulfillment of that task.

The sceptic's significant role is his ability to push the theorist around, often to the extent that the theorist's view is overthrown and replaced by one radically different. All this done in the hope that the new view will help in the desired defeat of scepticism, and with that achieved the possession of knowledge becomes possible. Philosophical works which trace the development of epistemologies provide telling evidence. Epistemologies are subjected to sceptical arguments; they fail the test, and are then replaced. Contrary to some of the tones that accompany talk of the sceptic, is the evidence suggesting scepticism does play a substantially important role in the development of the structure and content of current epistemologies.

In outline I will argue as follows. If certain forms of scepticism are responsible for ruling out the possibility of knowledge, then epistemologies that ignore scepticism, fail at their genuine task. Given this, I choose to examine Davidson's "neo-coherence" theory. I do so because he does take the sceptic seriously. He faces the sceptic's challenge, or at least he tries and his attempt to do so might be considered a novel one. Prior to scrutiny, it might even be viewed as successful; I will argue it is not successful.

My inquiry will proceed as follows. First, I state what I take to be the purpose of an epistemology. Then I consider various forms of global scepticism and some of the approaches used to defeat those forms of global scepticism. I suggest that Davidson's approach is an example of what I will call approach two. I then proceed to give a back-drop against which Davidson's theory can be viewed and which includes objections Davidson must face in light of the neo-coherence theory he espouses. I describe Davidson's theory in detail and examine criticisms that can be made of his theory, some which arise out of internal tensions and others which arise out of the objections stated in the back-drop. I conclude, for various reasons, that Davidson's theory does not satisfy the purpose of an epistemology.

## CHAPTER ONE

### I. GENERAL REMARKS ON THE NATURE OF EPISTEMOLOGY

Philosophy is a strange discipline; it goes to the heart of mankind's curiosity. Without questions there would be no need for answers. In the beginning, philosophy was a discipline that sought to distinguish important questions from unimportant ones and then find their answers. It is difficult to say whether philosophy succeeded in choosing the important questions; there seems to be no standard for choosing other than one centered around human beings themselves. However, mankind's curiosity is less than pure; it is not based on the precept "understanding for understanding's sake." Human beings want to understand the answers to questions because the understanding will help to serve some purpose or have some use. In other words, the motivation for asking certain questions does not merely spring from curiosity, but also, from the belief that once understanding has been secured, certain desired purposes or ends can be achieved.

Is knowledge possible? This was a question raised by early philosophers and as evidenced in the history of philosophy, one that continues to be asked and answered. Given the above claim that the motivation to ask a question deemed an important one does not spring from curiosity alone, there must be some purpose to be achieved in finding an acceptable answer to this question. The purpose to be achieved is to have knowledge and of course all the

useful things that can be done with it. In the true spirit of optimism, it is perhaps assumed that the answer will ultimately be "yes, knowledge is possible and here is some." Philosophers have embarked on the quest to find the answer to whether knowledge is possible, secretly assuming it is possible and confident they will be able to show how it is possible.

Would this question about knowledge have arisen unless there was a worry about the possibility there may not be any knowledge? But where did this worry come from? It is quite evident that the worry is motivated by the sceptic and his ponderings. In fact, it would be safe to say that epistemologies were developed, for the most part, in response to scepticism -- epistemologies being theories that either attempt to address the question of whether knowledge is possible and/or attempt to show how knowledge is possible.

In summary, the primary purpose of epistemology is: 1) to decide whether knowledge is possible and/or 2) depending on the answer to (1), maybe show how it is possible. The fact that there is a purpose to be achieved at all is due to the presence of the sceptic and the worries he voices. He motivates the question: Is knowledge possible? and it is from this point that any answers need to be given. Those answers usually take the form of an epistemology as described above. The desired result of achieving the purpose of an epistemology is that there really be knowledge because this, to say the least, is a useful thing for human beings to possess. Again, the question of why human beings want to have knowledge goes back to the idea that they are not purely curious. They want to have

knowledge because they believe they will benefit from it; it is useful to them.

It should be noted, however, that this secretly wished for end may not be achievable. Perhaps the answer to whether knowledge is possible is that it is not possible. If this were the case the purpose of epistemology would no longer have the desired results; the epistemology would not be useful, at least not in the way it was intended to be useful. Although maybe it would acquire the new role of articulating what is to be done now that it is "known" that no knowledge is possible.

## II. THE SCEPTIC'S CHALLENGE

There are two major kinds of scepticism. First, there is local scepticism, which questions our ability to know a certain class of things. This form of scepticism can be illustrated by various traditional problems found in philosophy. For instance, the problem of induction leads to a form of local scepticism that questions the possibility, in one case, of knowing future things and events. Other forms of local scepticism question the possibility of knowing the existence of the external world or the existence of other minds. As noted, these forms of local scepticism attempt to restrict the body of knowledge by excluding a particular class of things which may have been previously assumed knowable. The local sceptic achieves this end by presenting what appear to be convincing and well-formed arguments.

Although one would not deny that local scepticism plays a role in the development and evolution of epistemologies, in terms of actually motivating a theory that would answer the question 'is knowledge possible'? global scepticism must take the honours.

Global scepticism questions the possibility of there being any knowledge whatever. Global scepticism has two parts: a thesis and one or more arguments in support of that thesis. First, I will state some of the different theses of global scepticism, and then some of the famous arguments used to support those theses. Any form of global scepticism, I will assume, consists of one or other of the following theses, together with one or more of the following arguments to that thesis.

#### A) Different Theses or Conclusions of Global Scepticism

- 1) the thesis that no empirical knowledge (or justified true belief) is possible.
- 2) more radically, the thesis that no knowledge (or justified true belief) of any kind, empirical or a priori, contingent or necessary, is possible.
- 3) most radically, the thesis that no reasoning of any kind is possible.

#### B) Different Arguments In Support of (A)

- 1) the evil demon argument
- 2) the brain in the vat argument
- 3) the possibility of error argument

Although there are numerous ways of formulating global scepticism, I will be interested in discussing only some. Each different formulation of global scepticism presents different challenges; some

formulations seem to be stronger than others and for this reason, care must be taken not to lump all forms together. I will now endeavour to provide a brief account of some of the various combinations of arguments and theses, most of which are typical and well-rehearsed. I will call these different combinations "forms" of global scepticism.

The classic evil demon scenario seems like a good place to begin. What did Descartes intend us to doubt? The quick and obvious answer seems to be "everything". Imagine an evil demon who deceives us about everything we believe to be true, including the proposition " $2+3=5$ ". It is the latter part of this sentence which goes a long way in distinguishing the evil demon nightmare from a position that merely puts into doubt empirical things, a position that might, for instance, take to heart the problem of induction. (Ultimately, whether there is a significant difference between two such positions remains to be seen.) It would appear that Descartes had a reason for adding the phrase "could even deceive me about the truth of ' $2+3=5$ '." Obviously he saw a difference between the nature of this kind of proposition and others. In fact the word "even" suggests that this proposition is somehow less doubtable than others; perhaps in modern parlance Descartes would have said it was a necessary proposition.

Leaving aside interpretational quibbles, it would appear that Descartes wished us to imagine the possibility that all things could be doubted, including things like logical and mathematical truths. Since these truths are known through deductive reasoning, the evil

demon could even deceive us about deductive reasoning. One reason for accepting this is Descartes' use of "intuitive cognition" in reference to the undoubtable status of the cogito. For Descartes, the cogito was not known to be true by deductive reasoning, but rather, intuitive cognition, a faculty that directly apprehends truth without discursive procedures. (If doubting deductive reasoning is something that is implied by this evil demon argument, then the argument can be seen to support the third thesis or conclusion of global scepticism, namely, that reasoning is impossible. This would be in addition to the second thesis of global scepticism, which we will see, \*below, the argument seems clearly to support.)

Before describing one version of Descartes' evil demon argument, there are a few things to be noted. First, the notion of knowledge employed by Descartes was one that excluded all doubt. His project was to find truths that were indubitable. His method was to take account of all possible error and rule it out. For Descartes, a knowledge claim was one known to be true with certainty.

One reading of Descartes' argument is as follows: it is possible there exists an evil demon who may deceive us about any particular proposition believed true. Given this, each time a proposition's truth is entertained it can be doubted. Therefore, each individual knowledge claim can be doubted.

The features of this argument worth noting are 1) not all knowledge is doubted all at once and 2) unusual as it is, "propositions believed true" include logical and mathematical truths, like ' $2+3=5$ ' and ' $\sim(P \ \& \ \sim P)$ '. On this reading of Descartes, all



knowledge is doubtable, and as suggested, perhaps reasoning itself. (Of course this excludes truths known through intuitive cognition.) This form of scepticism is perhaps most properly called "global"

In conclusion, this evil demon argument supports the second thesis of global scepticism listed above. The evil genius argument, as outlined here, supports the thesis of global scepticism which says no knowledge of any kind is possible, whether it be contingent or necessary. (Also, as mentioned, it might support the third thesis as well, but this is a less clear conclusion.)

The next argument offered in support of a global sceptic's thesis is the brain in the vat argument. This argument also starts by imagining a hypothetical situation. Imagine you are a brain in a vat that is hooked up to a computer and that computer stimulates your brain in such a way that it causes you to hold the beliefs you now have. There is nothing in your present experience which would allow you to distinguish between being a brain in a vat and not being a brain in a vat. Your experience in either case will be the same. Therefore, you cannot know you are not a brain in a vat. But is there anything else you might know?

One thing which seems essential to accepting the rest of the argument is that you know the logical inference "if p, then q". This is because, in order to show that you do not know other things besides that you are not brain in a vat, you must understand the "closure principle". "This principle asserts that if a knows that p

and that  $p$  implies  $q$ ,  $a$  also knows that  $q$ ."<sup>1</sup> The general idea of this principle, as it is seen against the brain in the vat possibility, is that if you know some class of things which if you know they are true, exclude the possibility that you are a brain in a vat, then you know you are not a brain in a vat. For example, if I know that I am driving my car, I know that I am not a brain in a vat. By modus tollens, if I don't know that I am not a brain in a vat, (as shown above), then I don't know that I am driving. This works for each proposition, such that if you knew that proposition were true, you would know you were not a brain in a vat, but notice that not all propositions have this characteristic. So, knowing necessary or a priori propositions would not rule out the possibility of being a brain in a vat. For example, knowing the truth of " $2+3=5$ " does not also imply knowing you are not a brain in a vat, (at least on some accounts). So, the closure principle in conjunction with the brain in the vat argument does not work on these type of propositions because  $a$  does not know that  $p$  implies  $q$ .

The brain in the vat argument is an argument which would support the first thesis of global scepticism, i.e., no empirical knowledge is possible, but it is difficult to see, since you would have to know particular logical truths and how they work, how it could support either of the remaining two.

The third and last argument towards a global sceptic's thesis which I shall discuss is the possibility of error argument. This argu-

<sup>1</sup>Jonathan Dancy, *An Introduction to Contemporary Epistemology*, p. 10.

ment relies on the "principle of universalizability". The general idea of this argument is that since in the past you have made mistakes in claiming to know something, you might be making mistakes in claiming to know now, if the situations in which you claim to know are similar.<sup>2</sup> I shall illustrate with two different cases. First, imagine you know, on the basis of some usual evidence, that your computer isn't going to work the next time you try to use it. However, as it turns out, you are mistaken in your claim. This can happen when making judgements about the future because even the best kind of evidence in support of some claim in the future can not guarantee the truth of the claim; inductive inferences are, at best, only probable. The next time such evidence appears, you make the same judgement again, because the principle of universalizability says that in the absence of any available difference in evidence, we must make the same judgement again. The problem is that since you were mistaken in your claim before about the same thing on the same evidence, how can you assume that you know now, when there is no difference between the two times of claiming to know?

This illustration only shows we can doubt things that we were once wrong in claiming to know where there is no difference between the cases of knowing. There is another class of things that this argument can show we can doubt as well -- the class of things that any imaginary case might have us doubt. The imaginary cases such as the evil demon or brain in a vat situations are examples of cases in which we might claim to know some things and they turn

<sup>2</sup>Dancy, p. 12.

out to be false. Since there are no discernible differences between either of these scenarios and our present situation, how can we claim to know in our present situation?

The possibility of error argument augmented with the imaginary cases of the evil demon or brain in a vat, seems to support at least the first thesis of global scepticism, i.e., that no empirical knowledge is possible. If it is accepted that the evil demon argument supports the second thesis of global scepticism, then it, in conjunction with the possibility of error argument would also support that thesis that no knowledge, whether it be contingent or necessary, is possible. I think that maybe the argument from the possibility of error might also support the third thesis. If you made mistakes in reasoning in the past, then you might be doing it again, if the circumstances have not changed from one occurrence of mistaken reasoning to the next, how do you now know you are not making a mistake in your reasoning?

In relation to the preceding discussion about the nature of epistemology, global scepticism plays an important role. It defines the primary motivation of epistemology and this is significant when trying to determine whether an epistemology can be viewed as successful or not. If the primary purpose of an epistemology is to decide whether or not knowledge is possible, and this is done with intent to show that knowledge is possible so that the useful end of having knowledge is achieved, the initial step in judging an epistemology as successful must be to see whether it shows knowledge is possible.

The question is: how can we investigate whether knowledge is possible? In order to see the answer to this question one cannot fail to look back to its motivation -- the aim of defeating the global sceptic. Since the impetus for the question lies in the global sceptic's worries, an epistemology, if it is to be judged successful, must address those worries. The next question is: what is the best way to try to do this?

### III. RESPONSES TO THE GLOBAL SCEPTIC'S CHALLENGE

I will now describe three approaches to the question of the truth of global scepticism. Each of these approaches are very different. The first and third approaches in different ways deny that there is a question to be answered. In the first approach the question of whether knowledge is possible is removed by arguing that the very thesis of global scepticism is unintelligible or incoherent in some way. Whether or not global scepticism is intelligible, the third approach denies that the thesis of global scepticism has been supported with a sound argument. The second and third approaches allow (maybe) that global scepticism is an intelligible position. The second approach takes seriously the questions raised by the sceptic's arguments but tries to argue that whilst perhaps the sceptic's position is intelligible, it is nevertheless false. The third approach denies that one has good reason to take global scepticism seriously, for it argues that no adequate argument has as yet been given in support of any of the global sceptic's theses.

### (A) THE FIRST APPROACH

The first approach attempts to meet the sceptic head-on by arguing that one or more of the global sceptic's theses is flawed in one or other of the following ways:

1) it is for some reason internally incoherent or unintelligible. This kind of attack of the global sceptic's thesis says something like, "if your conclusion is true, then it is also impossible for us to understand it, or it is also false."

2) when combined with one or other of the assumptions needed in one or other of the arguments for that form of global scepticism, it yields an incoherent or unintelligible concatenation. This kind of attack says something like, "if your conclusion is true, then the devices, (maybe logical), that you have used to arrive at your conclusion are faulty, therefore, your conclusion need not be accepted."

3) it makes the enterprise of generating arguments for any conclusion (including itself) incoherent. This kind of attack is an attack on the second and third theses of global scepticism mentioned above. The example of this kind of attack which I will now describe, although it might be seen as an example applying to all three attacks, is really best suited to this, the third attack. Speaking generally it says that in the very act of voicing his position, the sceptic undermines it. This is because in order to speak to his listeners in an intelligible manner, he must use their language. If the sceptic uses the language, then he also uses the syntax of the language. If he uses the syntax of the language then he also buys into the logic of the language. He accepts the logical system which his own possibility admits is doubtful. He pulls the rug out from underneath himself. If he tries to escape this criticism, then he will have to admit he cannot express his concern in a manner that is understandable to human language users, in which case, it certainly would not be a concern for the epistemologist.

I will explore some of the different attacks that are subsumed under the first approach later in this chapter. Although I believe that so far no attempts to rebut global scepticism along the above

lines are successful, I cannot show this is general. I can, however, suggest the different forms of global scepticism that do not seem to fall victim to such attacks, although such a discussion cannot be viewed as conclusive either way.

### (B) THE SECOND APPROACH

The second approach differs from the first approach and third approaches more so than they differ from each other. The second approach does not try to show that there is something wrong with the theses of global scepticism as does the first approach, and it does not try to show that something is wrong with the argument for such theses, as does the approach which I will call the third approach. Very generally, the second approach tries to show that there is knowledge or that there is at least one genuine knowledge claim. The way this is attempted is by first, establishing an epistemology and second, by showing that given that epistemology some belief is known, or by showing that given that epistemology knowledge is possible. So, in more detail, the second approach develops as follows:

- 1) First, one provides an epistemology. An epistemology consists of the following parts.
  - a) A definition of knowledge, e.g., the justified true belief analysis of knowledge or the conditional theory of knowledge
  - b) A theory of truth, e.g., a correspondence or coherence theory.
  - c) A theory of justification, e.g., a coherence or foundationalist theory.
  - d) (Maybe) an ontological theory

2) Second, either:

a) one demonstrates that on this epistemology a belief of such and such a kind is after all known. This involves giving reasons for imagining that the theory of justification in place is defensible -- it does not admit the global sceptic. I think that Descartes' cogito argument is a good example of this. He wants us to believe, given his epistemology, his "method of doubt", that there is at least one thing he can know.

or b) one generates an argument that on this epistemology knowledge is in fact possible -- one kind of such an argument would be a transcendental argument for the existence of knowledge -- the transcendental argument includes the epistemology as a part. The best example of this is found in Kant's transcendental deduction argument. A transcendental argument is one which assumes something is the case and then looks for conditions that must obtain for the thing to be the case.

To illustrate more clearly, I will now give a very brief account of Kant's argument. Kant uses this style of argument to show empirical knowledge is possible. He directs his argument against Hume's problem of induction. He begins by claiming that Hume was mistaken in dividing knowledge into only two categories, that of relations of ideas and matters of fact. Kant argued there was a further category, that of the synthetic a priori. He claimed that mathematical propositions were synthetic and yet known a priori. He later argues that the law of cause and effect properly belongs in this category as well and therefore, it is known to be true independent of experience. Once he is able to conclude this he is able to dissolve Hume's problem of induction.

In order to show empirical knowledge is possible, Kant assumes there is a priori knowledge. For Kant, a priori propositions are known to be true independently of experience. This could mean they



are known through intuition or reason, but not in light of empirical evidence. In the Transcendental Deduction, Kant assumes experience is possible and then he looks for the conditions that would have to obtain in order that experience be possible. He discovers, through his a priori argument, that there are two main conditions which must obtain to allow experience be possible. First, any possible experience for us must be ordered in time and second, any possible external experience for us must be ordered in time and take place in space. Our experience must obey cause and effect. This is a synthetic proposition which Kant has demonstrated is known a priori. Since cause and effect can be known without appeal to empirical evidence, contrary to Hume's argument, the justification of the law of cause and effect need not be question begging and therefore, the problem of induction no longer exists.

One thing which should be noticed before moving on to the third approach is that this second approach, even if it is itself unflawed, is incomplete. The end result of successful arguments found under approach two, like the transcendental argument mentioned above, show that knowledge is possible, but the argument does not explain where the argument for global scepticism goes wrong. It does not, in other words, diagnose the erroneousness of global scepticism; it only shows that global scepticism cannot be right. A complete answer to the global sceptic on the second approach must be supplemented with a further argument which shows where the global sceptic's argument goes wrong, something like the argument found in approach three to follow.

## (C) THE THIRD APPROACH

On the third approach, it is argued that one or other of the arguments for one or all of the global theses is unsound. This argument says that the premises of the global sceptic's argument are improbable or false, or that the conclusion does not follow from the premises. An illustration of one form of this third approach argument can be found in Malcolm's "The Verification Argument".<sup>3</sup> The general idea of this argument is that even if it were true that it is logically possible there exists an evil demon or that we are brains in vats, it does not follow from the bare logical possibility of these, that there is evidence enough to warrant doubt about whether there is an evil demon or we are brains in vats. What is at issue in such an argument is the extent to which the premises are likely or probable.

An instance of another kind of argument under approach three tries to show that the conclusion, the thesis of the argument, does not follow from the premises. An example of this kind of argument takes the following form. If the global sceptic's argument says if we are deceived about some of our beliefs, then it is possible to be deceived about all our beliefs, it is an instance of faulty generalization. This can be demonstrated by looking at an argument with the same form, but with an obviously false conclusion. If some paintings are forgeries, then it is possible that all paintings are forgeries.

<sup>3</sup>In: Norman Malcolm, *Knowledge and Certainty*.

To summarize the preceding discussion, I have mentioned three different conclusions or theses of global scepticism and three different famous arguments used to support those theses. I have also stated what I take to be the major responses to the different forms of global scepticism created by combining one or more of the arguments with one or more of the theses. These responses I called "approaches". What will be of interest in the remaining section of this chapter is a brief examination of the first and third approaches. I leave discussion of the second approach for the chapter to follow. It is this approach which I am most interested in and the approach used by Davidson in his "Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge".

#### IV. DISCUSSION OF FIRST APPROACH

As you will recall, under the first approach three different kinds of arguments were suggested as possible arguments against various forms of global scepticism. These three different arguments are what I called "head-on" arguments, head-on because they attack the theses or conclusions of global scepticism by claiming that their conclusions are unintelligible or incoherent in some way. As stated, although I cannot show in a general way that these three different arguments under approach one, fail at their task, I can show that they appear to be set up against what I will call a weak global sceptical thesis, and so seem to fail against some other stronger global sceptical theses, ones which I have already mentioned. To illustrate, let me propose a form of global scepticism that has a weak thesis. For the sake of convenience I will use the evil demon argument as the argument in support of that thesis.

## WEAK GLOBAL SCEPTICAL THESIS:

It is logically possible there exist an evil genius who deceives us about the truth of all propositions all at once. Therefore, it is possible all propositions are false at the same time.

The first argument under approach one of attacking the global sceptic is damaging to this form of global scepticism. The global sceptic here concludes it is possible all propositions are false all at the same time. This leads to the further conclusion that this particular conclusion itself is false. What is generated is a straightforward self-referential paradox. If the proposition in question is true, then it must, given what it says about all propositions, be false. If the global sceptic wishes to include logical propositions in the category of all propositions which are false then the second argument of approach one can be made. Since the global sceptic uses the idea of logical possibility he accepts a feature of a logical system, a system which his own conclusion claims is full of false propositions. Both of these criticisms seem like legitimate ones against this version of the global sceptic's argument.

The third argument in approach one is only damaging to this version of the evil genius argument if the global sceptic intends to include logical propositions in his category of propositions that can be false. Since he concludes it is possible all propositions, including logical ones, are false at the same time, he puts into jeopardy the meaningfulness of his conclusion. If all the syntactical rules governing language use are false, then how would it be possible to make sense of the propositions he now presents? Again, this seems

like a justifiable criticism of this form of the global sceptic's argument.

To understand how these three different ways of attacking the global sceptic fail to be good attacks against the first and stronger forms of global sceptic's argument it is necessary to recall its special features.

The strong version of the global sceptic's argument does not fall victim to the charge that it uses a logical device which the position itself claims is an unreliable one. Also, it does not generate a paradox. Unlike the weak form of the global sceptic's argument, the strong form does not conclude it is possible all propositions are false. It concludes individual knowledge claims are doubtful. This makes a tremendous difference to its strength against certain criticisms.

The key to understanding this is to look back to what the evil genius does. He may deceive us about the truth of propositions and he may not. He may deceive us about any individual proposition but not all propositions together. This implies that at any given time a proposition believed true could be false. At any given time a proposition believed true could be doubted. Notice the global sceptic here does not say is doubted, just that it could be doubted. Since the global sceptic does not demand there be a possibility that all propositions be false all at once, he cannot be criticized on the grounds that his conclusion, if true, shows it is false. If the contents of his conclusion are applied to the conclusion itself, the worst that can happen is that his conclusion can be doubted, not

proved false. This is not a very big concern for the global sceptic. He would happily admit his conclusion is doubtful. His conclusion does not have any special status.

For similar reasons, the strong form of the global sceptic's argument does not cave in to the third argument in approach one either. As you will recall, that attack claims that once the global sceptic begins to talk he is committed to accepting the validity of the logic of language but since only individual propositions believed true can be doubted, the global sceptic here is not throwing into doubt the entire logic of language all at once. He can talk in an intelligible manner even if there could be some logical errors in what he says. For example, there are many arguments that make logical errors and yet are still intelligible.

Although I have not shown that the first approach responses to scepticism fail, I believe I have shown that some of the arguments found in approach one are not successful against what I have called the strong form of global scepticism, i.e., one that has as its conclusion no knowledge is possible because each belief as entertained can be doubted. Approach one, since it seems unable to rule out all forms of global scepticism is dissatisfying. I leave it as an open ended question as to whether any band-aids might help in fixing it up.

## V. DISCUSSION OF THIRD APPROACH

The next task is to examine one kind of argument found in approach three and see if it fares any better than the arguments in

approach one. One such argument concluded that to assert a possibility alone was not enough; what is needed to make a conclusion forceful and significant is evidence and/or reasons to support the likelihood of the possibility. What needs to be examined is whether the global sceptic can provide evidence and if so is it good enough kind of evidence to make the global sceptic's conclusion be a concern for the epistemologist. This is a very difficult decision to make and perhaps there is no way to conclusively decide the matter. In the following discussion the crucial elements that may help in trying to make such a decision will be examined. Those elements appear to include 1) how important the issue at stake is perceived to be, 2) how it is usually decided whether evidence or reasons in support of a conclusion is good evidence and 3) given a possibility has some probability of occurring, under what circumstances can such possibilities be ignored.

If you try to imagine all the things that are logically possible you will certainly find a great many of them are not supported by reasons and/or evidence. For example, it is logically possible that all humans will someday turn green, but there is no reason or evidence to support the belief this logical possibility is likely to occur. There are millions of things which are logically possible, but not all logical possibilities have evidence and/or reasons to support a belief in their likelihood. This is the key to understanding the force of the attack of global scepticism in approach three.

Such an attack makes use of the idea that any belief which it would be justifiable to hold, must have some reasons and/or evidence

to support it, i.e., if a person were rational in holding some belief that person would have some evidence and/or reason in support of it. This is part of what it means to justify a belief. The point being made in approach three is that the setting out of a logical possibility by itself, under any circumstances, is not enough to persuade, convince and/or justify a person in holding a belief about the likelihood of the logical possibility in question. The argument made in approach three need not specifically direct itself against global sceptic's arguments which make use of a logical possibility. It implies, more generally, that any argument which puts forward a mere logical possibility, is going to be unsound. This argument to defeat global scepticism just says that the global sceptic's argument is of a form which is flawed.

I think it is important to stress that this argument under approach three is one which accepts "rules of evidence" or reason, i.e., it assumes as a basic principle that for any rational person to hold a belief, that person must have evidence or reasons for doing so. The other assumption implied by this argument is that a logical possibility by itself is not a reason or a form of evidence that would count in favour of believing its likelihood.

I think there is a question that this third approach argument works against particular forms of global scepticism. I will now endeavour to uncover the cracks of such an argument.

As stated, a great deal of the force behind the third approach argument we are now considering comes from accepting a canon of rationality. But one thing to be noted is that under differing cir-



cumstances, different rules of evidence come into play. If we imagine a court of law for example, the rules of evidence are distinct from say the rules of evidence governing a family dispute. There is no set level of stringency or rigour to all cases where evidence and/or reasons play a part in justifying a person to hold some belief; different levels of stringency or rigour or completeness are established depending on the matter being decided, depending on the kind of belief we are wondering whether or not to adopt.

In the case of the person accused of mass murder, the courts rule that circumstantial evidence is not enough to convict someone of a crime. In a family dispute circumstantial evidence may be viewed as sufficient to meet out a just punishment. Perhaps part of this difference comes from the perception of what is at stake, and how important the consequences of making a mistake in judgement are viewed. If we make a mistaken judgement in the case of the person accused of mass murder, an innocent person might hang, or innocent peoples lives may be endangered. If an error in judgement is made in the case of a family dispute, then perhaps Johnny or Suzy won't get their pudding for dessert when they were really entitled to get it. In the grand scheme of things the latter of these two consequences is less important and for that reason the kind of evidence required to come to what can be thought of as a reasonable course of action is less exhaustive.

So we notice that if the belief we are wondering whether or not to adopt is considered inconsequential or unimportant, the kind of evidence or the set of reasons brought to bear in support of

holding such a belief is in a parallel way less rigorous. If we don't care so much about the consequences of a belief, (that is, if it turns out we were wrong no great peril will ensue), then we are not going to spend vast amounts of time and energy digging up evidence to support that belief. On the other hand, if the belief in question is of great consequence, then we are much more likely to spend the time checking and digging and re-checking our evidence. This does not mean, however, that the beliefs that are held with less evidence or reasons in support of them are just as likely as those with more evidence or reasons. We are entitled to say that we are more justified in holding those beliefs with more evidentiary support than we would be in holding beliefs with less.

Surely the epistemologist is committed to thinking that the consequences of being mistaken about having knowledge are important. Since what is at stake for the epistemologist is this important issue, he will demand a rigorous and stringent kind of evidence before coming to any decision about the possibility of knowledge. So when the global sceptic presents him with the logical possibility of the evil demon or the brain in the vat, it would be the practice to provide that kind of evidence in support of either of those two logical possibilities. But the global sceptic does not have that kind of evidence and this will lead the epistemologist directly to the argument in the third approach response to defeating global scepticism. The epistemologist will conclude that because the global sceptic has only offered a logical possibility, without any evidence or reasons to support the likelihood of that possibility, he, the epistemologist,

would be irrational to believe that that possibility supports a conclusion or thesis of a global sceptic's argument.

As I suggested, I think that there are cracks in this response to the global sceptic; to explain this I will need to use an illustration.

Imagine a person who considers buying insurance either for himself, his home or car. He would not consider this purchase reasonable if there was not a possibility that any of these things come to harm. And yet he does not know that tomorrow his house will burn down or even that it ever will. There is no direct evidence connecting the possibility his house will burn down and the actuality of his house burning down. But do we consider his purchasing insurance unreasonable? Surely not. There is other evidence to support this person's belief that it is possible for his house to burn down. In view of that evidence, it is not unreasonable for him to imagine the possibility his house will burn down, even though there is no direct and conclusive evidence to support the conclusion that his house actually will burn down. These things he wants to insure are things that are important enough to him that the evidence supporting the possibility they may come to harm is sufficient for him to take some action to protect against the actuality.

What I will do now is suggest another scenario that is different from the above scenario. It is different because the "evidence" brought out in support of the following possibilities is not based on past instances of such possibilities occurring. These possibilities describe first-time and/or one-time events.

To take this above case one step further requires some alterations. Imagine a person who owns a museum full of priceless art, jewels and artifacts. This person is obsessed with the safety of these treasures. He imagines all the possible ways they might come to be harmed and sets about to ensure none of these possibilities turn into actualities. He buys the maximum insurance he can to protect his museum and its contents from all forms of man made and natural disasters. He installs the most advanced security system available. He builds a moat around the museum and hires a platoon of armed guards for added security. He builds the museum with fire resistant materials and installs a very expensive sprinkler system in case a fire should start. All visitors to the museum are strip searched and x-rayed upon entering and exiting the grounds to ensure nothing is stolen and no weapons are brought in. Each treasure within the museum is encased in a highly durable material that is lightning resistant as well as water and fire resistant. This person spends all his time guarding his museum from possible events that might lead its contents to be destroyed or damaged.

There are some people who would claim that the museum owner is being unreasonable. The likelihood of his museum being robbed, for instance, is minimal given he has installed a highly reliable security system; he is definitely going overboard by building a moat and hiring a platoon of armed guards. But the museum owner is simply imagining possible things that might harm the treasures in his museum, possible things that have a chance of actually happening. It is not improbable that a very clever burglar could disarm his security system. In this event his armed guards and moat are added

protection. There is nothing grossly unreasonable about that especially when the treasures in his museum are so important to him. It is because they are so important to him that he does not wish to take any unnecessary risks. He does not wish to take any risks that he need not take. It is worth it to him to guard against these possibilities.

Given the above two scenarios, I think that differences can be pointed to that distinguish them in an important way with reference to the argument made against global scepticism in approach three. The evidence the home insurer has that his house will burn down is neither direct nor conclusive; it just suggests it is possible his house will burn down. And yet we still believe he is being reasonable in his purchase of insurance. This is because, based on some notion of probability, we can say that there is, for example, a one in thousand chance his house will burn down. Considering the importance of the house to the insurer, a one in thousand chance would probably be enough of a chance that we would consider his action reasonable.

Turning to the museum owner, we find that he also has no direct or conclusive evidence any harm will come to his museum, and yet, some will say, his actions are not reasonable. What reasons might there be for this decision? As noted above, it might have something to do with the probability of the harmful events occurring.

The possibilities against which he was guarding his museum seemed so unlikely. Why is this believed? Perhaps because the events that he imagined happening were not events that had oc-

curred before. Maybe no other museum had a burglar sabotage its highly reliable security system. Maybe no purported visitors to a museum had ever smuggled in weapons and then held its contents up for ransom. Just because these events have not occurred with regularity or perhaps not at all, does not mean they are not likely to occur. It just means they are the kinds of events whose probability cannot be determined in the same way the probability of burning houses or crashing cars are determined.

Given a simplistic reading, the probability of a house burning down is determined by the ratio of houses that burn against the number of houses that don't, where that number is large enough to produce a reliable statistic. What happens in a case where the event is a first time and perhaps one time event? If the probability of zero of the event occurring can be ruled out, then the event must have some probability of happening. (If something is logically possible, it must have a probability of greater than zero.) The problem is it is very difficult to come to some reliable decision about what the probability really is. What was the probability man would land on the moon and return safely? What is the probability our sun will explode? What was the probability the first exploded atom bomb would destroy earth? Each of these events is a first time event and in the case of our sun exploding, as in the case of the first atomic bomb exploding, a one time event.

The probability of these events happening is not determined in the same way as the probability of a house burning down. There is no sample to examine, there are no past events whose frequencies

can be determined. Either we cannot decide what their probability is or we attempt to provide a close estimation on the basis of like-events happening. In the case of our sun exploding, probability might be estimated on the basis of the evidence we have regarding the destruction of other stars. In the case of events that have a uniqueness to them, it is hard to picture how this same technique might be used. For instance, in the first century, what like-event could be used to estimate the probability that man would land on the moon?

The possibilities of an evil demon's existence or being a brain in a vat describe one time and first time kinds of possibilities. For this reason I do not think that the "normal" kinds of evidence are available to support the likelihood of such possibilities, e.g., some statistical base of evidence. Because these possibilities describe one time and first time events, it is very difficult to imagine how we could determine their meaningful probability.

My suggestion would be that the museum owner and those global sceptics who make use of a logical possibility by itself, describe similar situations because the logical possibilities they consider have an undecidable probability. If you can't say there is a one in ten, or one in a thousand, or one in a million chance of something occurring, then how can you assess if it is reasonable to assert the likelihood of the event? On what grounds can the third approach argument say a mere logical possibility is not evidence in its own favour considering the nature, (one time and first time event), of the possibility?

The global sceptic has presented the epistemologist with a possibility and the epistemologist has requested evidence to support the likelihood of the possibility being an actuality. Unfortunately, because of the nature of the possibility, there is no direct evidence or even probabilistic evidence, other than that which can be gained from the interpretation of other actualities resembling the possibility in question. That all this is true is not the fault of the global sceptic. Since whether knowledge is possible is what is at stake for the epistemologist and he thinks this is an important issue, can he justifiably ignore the possibility the global sceptic presents?

I leave this question open, but I see it as pointing to the crack in the third approach argument against particular forms of global scepticism. The kind of logical possibilities described by the evil demon and brain in a vat stories are ones whose probabilities are difficult, if not impossible, to determine, but that this is the case, certainly does not mean they are not likely; it just means we cannot determine their likelihood.

## VI. SUMMARY

The summary of the preceding discussion goes as follows. First, I suggested the purpose of an epistemology was given by looking to the motivations giving rise to it. These motivations arise from the concerns of the sceptic, particularly, the global sceptic. One question that springs from global scepticism is whether knowledge is possible. Various different theses of global scepticism and the different arguments toward such theses were described. I then presented what



I thought to be the three major responses to the various combinations of global sceptical theses and arguments and examined two of those responses or approaches, as I called them, and their effectiveness against such forms of global scepticism. I left examination of the second approach until the chapter to follow because it seemed to have a more of a fighting chance than the other two. The specific instance of the second approach I wish to discuss now is one which uses a transcendental style of argument. A good example of this is reflected in Davidson's "Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge".

## CHAPTER TWO

### I. A BACK-DROP TO DAVIDSON'S COHERENCE THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE

Before I begin specific discussion of Davidson's coherence theory of knowledge, I believe it would be helpful to present a back-drop against which Davidson's theory can be viewed. The kind of back-drop I have in mind is a cursory survey of the structure and development of different epistemologies, and the crucial problems those epistemologies encountered. These problems are directly and indirectly relevant to Davidson and his project. Some problems are directly relevant because they are problems he himself must face and others are indirectly relevant because they are problems which led to a perceived demise of particular epistemologies, motivating the development of other epistemologies, such as the one Davidson now espouses.

What will be of interest here is to see the problems Davidson must answer, problems that are directly damaging to his project, and also, to see the problems that Davidson is trying to be careful to avoid in his own theory of knowledge, problems he feels have led to the inadequacy of other epistemologies different than his own.

As a reminder, an adequate epistemology will include the following parts: 1) a definition of knowledge, e.g., the justified true belief analysis or the conditional theory of knowledge, 2) a theory of truth, e.g., correspondence of coherence, 3) a theory of justification, e.g., foundationalism or coherentism, and 4) perhaps an onto-

logical theory, e.g., realism, internal-realism or anti-realism. The parts of an epistemology we are most interested in here in this cursory survey are the different theories of truth and justification.

(A) THEORIES OF JUSTIFICATION: FOUNDATIONALISM VERSUS COHERENTISM

In "The Structure of Empirical Knowledge", Bonjour states what he takes to be the central thesis of foundationalist justification.

[It] is a twofold thesis: a) that some empirical beliefs possess a measure of epistemic justification which is somehow immediate or intrinsic to them, at least in the sense of not being dependent, inferentially or otherwise, on the epistemic justification of other empirical beliefs; and b) that it is these "basic beliefs," as they are sometimes called, which are the ultimate source of justification for all empirical knowledge.<sup>1</sup>

The problem for foundationalism, as Davidson himself suggests, is how we are to accept that there are such "basic beliefs". The most famous anti-foundationalist argument is as follows:

- 1) Suppose that there are basic empirical beliefs, that is, empirical beliefs (a) which are epistemically justified, and (b) whose justification does not depend on that of any further empirical beliefs.
- 2) For a belief to be epistemically justified requires that there be a reason why it is likely to be true.
- 3) For a belief to be epistemically justified for a particular person requires that this person be himself in cognitive possession of such a reason.
- 4) The only way to be in cognitive possession of such a reason is to believe with justification the premises from which it follows that the belief is likely to be true.

<sup>1</sup>Laurence Bonjour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*, p. 17.

5) The premise of such a justifying argument for an empirical belief cannot be entirely a priori; at least one such premise must be empirical.

Therefore, the justification of a supposed basic empirical belief must depend on the justification of at least one other empirical belief, contradicting (1); it follows that there can be no basic empirical beliefs.<sup>2</sup>

Attempts have been made by foundationalists to secure their position from this kind of argument by denying either premise (3) or premise (4). It does not suit our interests here to examine whether they are successful, all we need recognize is that the theory of justification which is foundationalist has a large problem. Some might perceive this problem as great enough that they would be deterred from trying to save a foundationalist theory of justification and/or perceive the positions which do try to save foundationalism as failed. Either way it might send some out looking for greener pastures.

Another theory of justification which it might seem fruitful to pursue is the coherence theory of justification. However, if your reason for pursuing a coherence theory of justification is that you see the problems for a foundational theory of justification as insurmountable, then any problems confronting the coherence theory of justification you must imagine in some way are surmountable. Of course, you may have reasons to adopt a coherence theory of justification independent from any considerations of failed foundationalist theories of justification. I merely want to point out the possibility that someone might turn to coherence theories of justification on the

<sup>2</sup>Bonjour, p. 32.

ground that foundational theories of justification have failed. This would seem to be the very thing that some advocates of coherence have done, notably, Davidson himself.

#### (B) COHERENCE AND ITS OBJECTIONS

The definition of "coherent" I will use is the one Dancy believes is most defensible. He states that a coherent set is one which is consistent and mutually explanatory. So a set is coherent to the extent that the members are mutually explanatory and consistent.<sup>3</sup> Before discussing the problems that a coherence theory seems to face, I will distinguish a coherence theory of truth from a coherence theory of justification. A coherence theory of truth is one which says that "a proposition is true iff it is a member of a coherent set."<sup>4</sup> A coherence theory of justification is one which says that "a belief is justified to the extent to which the belief-set of which it is a member is coherent."<sup>5</sup> More fully stated, "if a's belief-set is more coherent with the belief that p as a member than without it or with any alternative, a is (or would be) justified in believing that p."<sup>6</sup> (I recognize these definitions may be considered simplistic, but for our purposes here they will suffice.)

One thing we notice is that coherence is a property possessed (or not) by sets of propositions and not by individual propositions, whereas truth is a property possessed by individual propositions.

<sup>3</sup>Jonathan Dancy, *An Introduction to Contemporary Epistemology*, p. 112.

<sup>4</sup>Dancy, p. 112.

<sup>5</sup>Dancy, p. 116.

<sup>6</sup>Dancy, p. 116.

Notice also that many coherentists make use of the notion of degrees of coherence, each set can have a different degree of consistency and mutual explanation. Further, justification is person, time and evidence relative. One person might be justified in holding a belief that *p* while another person, with different evidence might not. However, unlike justification, truth is not thought by most to be person, time and evidence relative -- there is just one truth.

What emerges out of noticing all these different aspects of coherentism, is that any one advocating a coherence theory of truth or a coherence theory of justification will run into some forceful objections. It is to these I now turn my attention.

For sake of clarity and convenience I will slot the problems of coherence theories of truth and justification into the three main standard objections against coherence theories that Bonjour discusses. These three standard objections are: 1) the alternative coherent systems objection, 2) the input objection and 3) the problem of truth. One thing to keep in mind while reviewing these objections is that we will be interested in seeing later how they will bear on Davidson's form of coherence.

#### OBJECTION I

The alternative coherent systems objection of Bonjour can be nicely augmented with Dancy's explanation of the same problem; he calls it the "plurality objection". I think this will make it a little clearer just how the problem is relevant to both coherence theories of truth and coherence theories of justification.

Any advocate of a coherence theory of truth will notice the plurality objection as a standard objection. The objection gets its beginning by noticing that there will be different sets of belief each of which are coherent. (Remember that justification is person, time and evidence relative.) However, one other thing to notice is that there is only one truth, at least most would agree. The problem is that there is nothing contained in the notion of coherence that would allow one to make a principled choice between two coherent but competing sets. The reason the sets are competing is that only one can win the "prize of truth". So the problem is that we have "plurality" of sets and no way to decide which, if any, attaches to the truth.<sup>7</sup>

Bonjour sets this same argument against coherence theories of justification. He does so by recognizing that any theory of coherence justification, given it is a part of an epistemology, will also include a theory of truth, so unless the notion of truth is a subjective one, the same objection applies as stated above. There will be no means by which to make a nonarbitrary choice between competing but different coherent sets.<sup>8</sup>

## OBJECTION II

The input objection as Bonjour calls it, might also be called "how-the-coherent-system-of-beliefs-gets-attached-to-the-world" problem. As Bonjour points out, there is nothing contained in the coherence theory of justification that demands there be input from

<sup>7</sup>Dancy, p. 113.

<sup>8</sup>Bonjour, p. 107.

the world. Since coherence is a matter of internal relations between members of a set it is a mystery as to how any of those members, except by sheer coincidence, will ultimately have anything to do with the world, i.e., describe the world. This objection is most forceful against those coherence theories of justification which adopt a realist ontology, such as Bonjour himself and Davidson. "How can a system of beliefs be justified in a sense which carries with it likelihood of truth, while at the same time being entirely isolated from reality, however that be understood, which it purports to describe?"<sup>9</sup>

### OBJECTION III

The problem of truth is perhaps the most important objection Bonjour raises against coherence theories of justification. This is because it seems the most difficult to solve and also, because it seems the most cogent of the three different objections regarding Davidson and his project. At the core of this objection is the question: what is the link between truth and justification? Before examining the problem of truth in detail, there are some essential remarks to make.

Bonjour points out, and I think rightly so, that justification is a means to truth. The distinguishing characteristic of epistemic justification, from other forms of justification is its ability to uncover truth. If we had some kind of divine insight, God-given intuition, all our beliefs would be true and we would have no need of justification. We do not, most would agree, have the luxury of such a cognitive device and so we turn to epistemic justification. We want

<sup>9</sup>Bonjour, p. 108.



our beliefs to be true because we want a correct description of the world; this would be a very useful thing for us to have. Our justification, we hope, is truth conducive.

If epistemic justification were not truth conducive, ... if finding epistemically justified beliefs did not substantially increase the likelihood of finding true ones, then epistemic justification would be irrelevant to our main cognitive goal and of dubious worth. It is only if we have some reason for thinking that epistemic justification constitutes a path to truth that we as cognitive beings have any motive for preferring epistemically justified beliefs to epistemically unjustified ones. Epistemic justification is therefore in the final analysis only an instrumental value, not an intrinsic one.<sup>10</sup>

Bonjour suggests that unless one has good reason for believing that the form of justification used is truth conducive, they are epistemically irresponsible.

The problem of truth, as set up against coherence theories in general, takes two paths. The first path can be seen to be directed against coherence theories of truth that adopt an idealist metaphysics. The general idea is that if it is assumed that justification is truth-conducive, then a coherence theory of justification seems to naturally lead us to a coherence form of truth. "Surely our theory ought somehow to show why justification is worth having, why justified beliefs ought to be sought and adopted, and unjustified ones discarded. An obvious way of showing this is to show how or that justified beliefs are more likely to be true. If we take coherence as criterion both of truth and of justification, we have a good chance

<sup>10</sup>Bonjour, p. 8.

of being able to do this."<sup>11</sup> So the coherence theorist who is an idealist tries to solve the problem of truth by making truth and justification identical. What it means to say something is true is just to say it passes the test of justification.<sup>12</sup>

Bonjour claims that this form of coherence theory does not deal with the basic problem at issue. Even if arguments against this kind of truth and metaphysics are discounted, such theories still fail to provide an argument that would attach their form of justification to their form of truth, because that argument must be an argument which shows, on independent grounds, why one should accept the concept of truth employed.

If -- as seems to be the case both historically and dialectically with respect to the specific concepts of truth under discussion here -- the only rationale for the chosen concept of truth is an appeal to the related standard of justification, then the proposed metajustification loses its force entirely. It is clearly circular to argue both (1) that a certain standard of epistemic justification is correct because it is conducive to finding truth, conceived in a certain way, and (2) that the conception of truth is question is correct because only such a conception can connect up in this way with the original standard of justification.<sup>13</sup>

So, a coherence theory of truth that adopts a coherence theory of justification is in no better position than any combination of truth and justification that does not provide an argument separate and independent from the form of justification for why the justification is truth-conducive.

<sup>11</sup>Dancy, p. 117.

<sup>12</sup>Bonjour, p. 109.

<sup>13</sup>Bonjour, p. 110.

What can be said about those coherence theories of justification that adopt a correspondence theory of truth? People advocating this kind of position include Ewing, Rescher, Lehrer, Bonjour and notably, Davidson.<sup>14</sup> The same problem which faces the coherence theorists as noted above is evident in these cases too; they must provide an argument for adopting a concept of truth which is motivated independently from the form of justification.

From an intuitive point of view it seems somewhat of a mystery how, given all we have are internal relations of a specified sort between the members of a coherent set, we are to imagine that those members have a correspondence relationship with things external to the set, namely, the world.<sup>15</sup> As Bonjour remarks, if no argument or metajustification is thought needed for the truth-conduciveness of a theory of justification, then any arbitrarily chosen theory of justification would do just as nicely as any other in being truth-conducive.<sup>16</sup>

For example, I might create a form of justification that involved rhyming criteria. First, imagine truth is defined in terms of correspondence. Now imagine that a statement is justified as true in terms of its rhyming relationship with other already made statements. Why should I now believe that a statement is correspondently true when it passes the test of rhyming? Granted, rhyming is not the kind of thing ever cited as truth conducive, and consistency and

<sup>14</sup>Dancy, p. 117.

<sup>15</sup>Dancy, p. 117.

<sup>16</sup>Bonjour, p. 110.

inferability are, but they are only to the extent that they are accepted features attributable to a rational approach. Given our canons of reason, inferability and consistency are important features that help us in developing our explanations and theories. These features alone, however, are not sufficient to establish "truths". No one could reasonably assert that a set of things being consistent necessarily means the members of the set are true. In the same way, no one would could reasonably assert that a conclusion properly inferred from premises was correspondently true, without knowing if the premises were correspondently true.

Why does a coherence theory of justification strike some thinkers as obviously not silly in terms of being truth-conducive in the correspondent sense, and rhyming does? It seems clear that a convincing reason or set of reasons needs to be provided to show that coherence justification will yield correspondence truth. This reason or set of reasons must be given separately and independently of that coherence justification. This is the problem of truth that must be faced by all coherence theories of justification.

## II. CONSEQUENCES OF THE BACK DROP

Now we are in a position to see how these different problems are pertinent or not in reference to Davidson's theory of coherence. As we have seen the problem for foundationalism is one that gets its teeth from the assumption that there will be something basic to appeal to in our justification, those basic components, whether they be beliefs, sensations, or observation sentences, are given an initial

credibility or warrant, separately from other beliefs to be justified. The problem is to see how they can be given this status when no form of justification is conferred upon them. This is an oversimplification of the problem and does not consider some of the ways that foundationalist view might be saved, however, it is a problem that leads Davidson to adopt a coherence theory of justification.

Another things to consider is whether Davidson faces any of the three objections laid out in the back-drop section. What we will see is that Davidson advocates a coherence theory of justification, a correspondence theory of truth, and a non-relativized, non-internal form of realism. In considering the nature of the three objections we will see that it clearly looks as if he must answer all three of the objections. (Notice that Bonjour who also advocates a position that includes these basic parts, sets these objections against his own theory.) The task before us is to see whether Davidson has dealt with any or all of the objections.

This task will be made easier if the details of Davidson's theory are spelled out. Once I have presented the explanation of his position, I can then discuss what I take to be problems for Davidson, in light of these three objections he must consider. It is left open at this stage whether Davidson can meet these objections, although, one point in his favour is that he seems to at least address them.

### III. DAVIDSON

Davidson's discussion can be divided into three main parts. First, he states the conditions he believes are necessary for any

adequate theory of justification. Second, he provides arguments against any theory of justification which uses anything other than beliefs as a source of justification. Third, he presents a two step argument for his version of coherentism, making use of a theory of interpretation and a theory regarding the nature of belief. The end result of this form of coherentism, he hopes, will provide a rebuttal to global scepticism.

#### (A) CONDITIONS OF AN ADEQUATE THEORY OF JUSTIFICATION

Davidson's position can be characterized as follows. He asserts a correspondence theory of the nature of truth and a realist ontology. His theory of justification is coherentist. He believes if he can show that beliefs are generally true, then he stops global scepticism. If he has succeeded in his goal it is indeed no small feat. However, I think what will be discovered to follow is that his intentions, even if admirable, are left unrealized.

For Davidson any adequate theory of justification of belief will demand these conditions be satisfied, namely, 1) that the theory of justification must fit with the correspondence theory of truth and 2) it must be consistent with a non-relativized, non-internal form of realism. He states:

1. Truth is correspondence with the way things are.
2. If a coherence theory of truth is acceptable it must be consistent with a correspondence theory.
3. A theory of knowledge that allows we can know the truth must be a non-relativized, non-internal form of realism.

Therefore, if a coherence theory of knowledge is acceptable it must be consistent with such a form of realism.<sup>17</sup>

Davidson argues that this consistency can be achieved when, in virtue of being coherently justified, a belief is then considered correspondently true. He suggests that even a "mild coherence" theory such as his own "must give the sceptic a reason for supposing coherent beliefs are true",<sup>18</sup> because "coherence ... cannot guarantee that what is believed is so".<sup>19</sup> Davidson defines a coherence theory of justification as follows: "nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief."<sup>20</sup> Given his non-relativized, non-internal form of realism, coupled with his theory of knowledge, it is incumbent on Davidson to show how knowledge of a mind-independent reality is possible, when, according to him, the only justification of beliefs available to us is one which tests for a coherent relationship between our beliefs. The crucial idea here is how coherently justified beliefs can be said to be correspondently true.

#### (B) ARGUMENTS AGAINST OTHER THEORIES OF JUSTIFICATION

Davidson embarks on a brief dismissal of anti-coherentist theories of justification. All of the theories he looks at are those which "attempt to ground belief in one way or another on the testi-

<sup>17</sup>Donald Davidson, "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge", p. 425.

<sup>18</sup>Davidson, p. 426.

<sup>19</sup>Davidson, p. 424.

<sup>20</sup>Davidson, p. 426.

mony of the senses."<sup>21</sup> Davidson claims it is natural for us to want to introduce sensations into a theory of justification because they are, after all, what connect our beliefs to the world. If it is knowledge of the world we want then there must be a source by which we come to have information of it. (Keep in mind this assumes there is a world about which we can have knowledge.) However, using sensations as a source of justification, Davidson claims, leaves the door open to the sceptic.

He first dismisses a foundationalist theory of justification that uses, as Bonjour calls it, "the doctrine of the given". Bonjour defines the main idea of this doctrine as follows:

basic empirical beliefs are justified, not by appeal to further beliefs or merely external facts but rather by appeal to states of 'immediate experience' or 'direct apprehension' or 'intuition' -- states which can confer justification without themselves requiring justification."<sup>22</sup>

Davidson points out two problems with such a view. "First, if the basic beliefs do not exceed in content the corresponding sensation they cannot support any inference to an objective world; and second there are no such beliefs."<sup>23</sup>

Next Davidson argues against theories of justification that use sensations to justify beliefs, even when the beliefs go beyond what is given in the sensation. Sensations, he states, do not justify belief even if they do cause them, because "beliefs exceed in content the

<sup>21</sup>Davidson, p. 427.

<sup>22</sup>Bonjour, p. 59.

<sup>23</sup>Davidson, p. 427.



corresponding sensation", and therefore, "do not support an inference to an objective world".<sup>24</sup> "Even if sensations justify belief in sensation they don't justify belief in external events and objects".<sup>25</sup> What is noticed here is that Davidson admits the relationship between sensations and beliefs is causal, but denies that this causal relationship entails any kind of justification. He states:

Introducing intermediate steps or entities into the causal chain, like sensations or observations, serves only to make the epistemological problem more obvious. For if the intermediaries are merely causes, they don't justify the beliefs they cause, while if they deliver information, they may be lying. The moral is obvious. Since we can't swear intermediaries to truthfulness, we should allow no intermediaries between our beliefs and their objects in the world. Of course there are causal intermediaries. What we must guard against are epistemic intermediaries.<sup>26</sup>

Lastly, Davidson suggests that there are forms of foundationalism which use theories of meaning as part of their epistemologies but, unlike coherentism, will try to give a privileged status to certain sentences. He speaks of Quine and Dummett as candidates for this category. He claims they introduce intermediaries in the structure of justification; there is something between belief and the objects of belief. Davidson, following his previous line of argument, claims this will not do. "For clearly a person's sensory stimulations could be just as they are and yet the world outside be very different."<sup>27</sup> And so, Davidson will give up the idea that meaning and

<sup>24</sup>Davidson, p. 427.

<sup>25</sup>Davidson, p. 428.

<sup>26</sup>Davidson, p. 429.

<sup>27</sup>Davidson, p. 430.

knowledge are grounded on something that counts as an ultimate source of evidence.<sup>28</sup>

However, this leaves Davidson in a tight spot. He won't make use of any empirical foundations for meaning and knowledge and he still thinks the coherentist must provide an answer to the sceptic regarding why he should believe his beliefs are true, an answer he doesn't believe has yet been given. Clearly since he sees no way to save the foundationalist of the varieties mentioned, and he thinks these are the only varieties worth taking note of, he must have in mind the task of saving the coherentist.

He realizes that a coherence theory of justification, although it might not have the same problems as the anti-coherence theories, still has problems of its own. The problem arises because coherence is a dealer in beliefs. "Of course some beliefs are false... coherence ... cannot guarantee that what is believed is so. All... [it] can maintain is that most beliefs in a coherent total set... are true." But "how can coherence alone supply grounds for belief?". And "why couldn't all my beliefs hang together and yet be comprehensively false about the actual world?". "The best we can do to justify one belief is appeal to other beliefs. But then the outcome would seem to be that we must accept philosophical scepticism".<sup>29</sup>

Davidson believes that this outcome is not inevitable. He says:

What is needed to answer the skeptic is to show that someone with a (more or less) coherent set of beliefs

<sup>28</sup>Davidson, p. 431.

<sup>29</sup>Davidson, p. 426.

has a reason to suppose his beliefs are not mistaken in the main. What we have shown is that it is absurd to look for a justifying ground for the totality of beliefs, something outside this totality which we can use to test or compare with our beliefs. The answer to our problem must then be to find a reason for supposing most of our beliefs are true that is not a form of evidence.<sup>30</sup>

(C) DAVIDSON'S ARGUMENTS FOR A COHERENCE THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE

Davidson now presents a two part argument designed to show we do have a reason for supposing most of our beliefs are true.

First I urge that a correct understanding of the speech, beliefs, ... and other propositional attitudes of a person leads to the conclusion that most of a person's beliefs must be true, and so there is a legitimate presumption that any one of them, if it coheres with the most of the rest, is true.<sup>31</sup>

Second, he claims that if the nature of belief is understood then there is a "presumption in favour of the overall truthfulness of anyone's belief, including our own."<sup>32</sup>

To a large extent, Davidson rides on the coat tails of Quine. He sets up his two part argument by adopting a theory of interpretation and a principle of charity much like that of Quine's. The goal of his argument, as you will recall, was to provide someone with reason, that is not a form of evidence, for believing most of his beliefs are true. He thinks he can do this by answering the questions: 1) what is it to interpret a language?, and 2) what is the nature of belief? The connection between these two questions lies in David-

<sup>30</sup>Davidson, p. 431.

<sup>31</sup>Davidson, p. 431.

<sup>32</sup>Davidson, p. 431.

son's view that meaning (or interpretation) and belief are interdependent.

One thing to notice about the structure of Davidson's argument is that it closely resembles a transcendental argument. What he is about to attempt to do is give us a reason, that is not a form of evidence, for believing our beliefs, in the main, are true. First, he connects theories of knowledge with theories of meaning. "If knowing the meaning of a sentence ... involves, or is, knowing how it could be recognized as true, then the theory of meaning raises the same question we have been struggling with, for giving the meaning of a sentence will demand that we specify what would justify asserting it."<sup>33</sup>

For Davidson then, a theory of meaning (or interpretation) has the same important feature as a theory of knowledge, i.e., they both will specify the conditions under which a belief can be said to be justified. So Davidson will give his theory of knowledge by giving his theory of meaning (or interpretation).

The way his argument becomes a transcendental one is that he asks what conditions must be satisfied if we are able to know the meanings of others utterances? What conditions must be satisfied if we communicate? If we can know the meanings of others' utterances, if we can communicate, then it must be that those specified conditions are satisfied.

<sup>33</sup>Davidson, p. 429.

Returning to the idea that meaning and belief are interdependent, sense can now be made of why, if Davidson can answer the two questions stated above about interpreting a language and recognizing the nature of belief, he thinks he can ferret out a reason for us to suppose our beliefs, in the main, are true. As stated, he thinks that belief and meaning are interdependent. The meaning of a sentence depends partly on "external circumstances", and partly on its relationship with other sentences. In order to sort out the nature of meaning and belief he takes "prompted assent as basic", i.e., the causal relationship between assenting to a sentence and the cause of such assent. "This is a fair place to start the project of identifying beliefs and meanings, since a speaker's assent to a sentence depends both on what he means by the sentence and on what he believes about the world."<sup>34</sup>

If a speaker wishes to be understood "he cannot systematically deceive his would-be interpreters" about the fact that he holds his sentence to be true. Davidson suggests that the problem for the radical interpreter is that he is unable to know the cause of a speaker's assent to a sentence because he does not know the meaning or belief attached to it. The way we understand a sentence is by knowing the causes that make a speaker assent to the sentence, remembering that those causes can be external circumstances or other beliefs. Since the radical interpreter knows neither of these causes, he must rely on a principle of charity, in which he, the interpreter, can "read some of his own standards of truth into the

<sup>34</sup>Davidson, p. 432.

pattern of sentences held true by the speaker."<sup>35</sup> The interpreter will recognize conditions under which the speaker is caused to assent to a sentence and will "take those to be truth conditions".

Davidson now claims that if his theory of interpretation is correct, then "most of the sentences a speaker holds to be true are true, at least in the opinion of the interpreter".<sup>36</sup>

Once understanding has been secured we are able, often, to learn what a person believes quite independently of what caused him to believe it. This may lead to the crucial, indeed fatal, conclusion that we can in general fix what someone means independently of what caused the belief. But if I am right we can't in general first identify beliefs and meanings and then ask what caused them. The causality plays an indispensable role in determining the content of what we say and believe.<sup>37</sup>

Davidson entertains the possibility that both interpreters and speakers might hold all false beliefs. In this situation both would be able to understand one another and yet they would both be incorrect, on a global level, about the world. Davidson argues that if his theory of interpretation is accepted, this is an impossible situation. He demonstrates this with use of what he calls the "omniscient interpreter". Imagine, he says, two people who think they understand each other and so count most of each other's beliefs as true. Imagine now a third interpreter, the omniscient one, who understands both speakers. If Davidson's theory of interpretation is correct, there is no chance that the omniscient interpreter would find both people hold all false beliefs. The omniscient interpreter cannot both

<sup>35</sup>Davidson, p. 433.

<sup>36</sup>Davidson, p. 434.

<sup>37</sup>Davidson, p. 435.

understand the two speakers and think their beliefs are false, for in order that the omniscient understand both speakers, he must count most of each of their beliefs as true.

With this possibility out of the way, Davidson now presents the reason he can give to a person so that they can believe that most of their own beliefs are true. "In order to doubt or wonder about the provenance of his beliefs an agent must know what belief is. This brings with it the concept of objective truth, for the notion of a belief is the notion of a state that may or may not jibe with reality."<sup>38</sup> So if a person wonders whether his own beliefs are mostly true he will recognize they are because "beliefs are by nature generally true."<sup>39</sup> And so Davidson concludes, not all beliefs can be false and therefore we are saved from a standard form of global scepticism.

In summary, Davidson presents an argument for his version of a coherence theory of knowledge by giving us a theory of meaning (or interpretation) coupled with an understanding of the nature of belief. If we can understand the utterances of speakers, then we must assume the beliefs of the speakers to be mostly correspondently true. In our own case, because of the nature of belief we assume our own beliefs are correspondently true. The connection between meaning and belief is that they depend on each other. The way we understand the utterance of another is by knowing the causes that make a speaker assent to the sentence. The causes are twofold: 1)

<sup>38</sup>Davidson, p. 437.

<sup>39</sup>Davidson, p. 437.

the external circumstances and 2) its relationship with other sentences. If these are the necessary conditions of interpretation, then in order to interpret or understand the meaning of a speaker's sentence, an interpreter must assume, at least some of the time, there are external circumstances causing the speaker to assent to his sentence, more generally, the interpreter must assume there is an external world! So if an interpreter assumes speakers beliefs are mostly true, he assumes they are true in a correspondence sense, i.e., there is some external circumstance which his belief has as its object. "We must ... take the objects of a belief to be the causes of that belief. ... Communication begins where causes converge: your utterance means what mine does if belief in its truth is systematically caused by the same events and objects."<sup>40</sup>

If, in general, the objects of a belief are the causes of that belief, then there is a presumption that the nature of belief has some relationship with external events and objects. According to Davidson that relationship is one of correspondence. To imagine beliefs are true is just to imagine their content is fixed by the external events and objects that cause them. This is something that must be assumed if any interpretation can go on between speakers and interpreters, because knowing the meaning of an utterance partly depends on recognizing the external circumstances that cause a speaker to assent to the sentence. Since each interpreter knows this is the case for others he must recognize it for himself as well.

<sup>40</sup>Davidson, p. 436.



Once he understands that belief in its nature is veridical he can know, in his own case, his beliefs are generally true.

(D) REMARKS ON THE SUCCESS OF DAVIDSON'S COHERENCE  
THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE

I think it would be safe to assume that Davidson thinks his theory is successful. The more difficult question is what exactly Davidson himself thinks he has shown. This difficulty comes from the brevity and unclarity of his account, and possibly from his, at times, cavalier expression. I will do my best to interpret Davidson as close to his word as possible all the while recognizing that it is possible to read different goals into his pronouncements. In such cases I will endeavour to be charitable and read the conclusions that it would be most reasonable for Davidson to make.

I think Davidson's position is well caught by a quotation in the early part of his paper:

My slogan is: correspondence without confrontation. Given a correct epistemology, we can be realists in all departments. We can accept objective truth conditions as the key to meaning, a realist view of truth, and we can insist that knowledge is of an objective world independent of our thought or language.<sup>41</sup>

Following this generalized statement Davidson makes of his theory, I will now state some generalizations of my own regarding Davidson's theory. I do this partly to remind the reader of the structure and general content of Davidson's theory before going on to criticize it, and partly to point out the relevant and major

<sup>41</sup>Davidson, p. 423.

premises of his argument which will play a substantial role in the criticisms to follow. The next few paragraphs will serve to flag some of the main ideas that Davidson uses and to note that those ideas may be problematic.

One thing that can be noted at this stage is Davidson's insistence that truth be meant as correspondence. And yet he is not advocating any form of internal or relativized realism. We can assume from this that he really means "knowledge of an objective world independent of our thought or language". So, for Davidson any belief properly justified by coherence will correspond with a mind-independent reality. Further, since on Davidson's account, most beliefs in a set of coherent beliefs will be correspondently true, we can infer what this mind independent world will be like, within some limits. Specifically, we can infer that the mind independent world will be like some large subset of the set of our coherent beliefs, though, of course, we do not know which subset it will be like.

Davidson himself sees the main problem with this kind of position. It is a problem about the connection between coherence justification and a correspondence theory of the nature of truth. This is the problem which was described as Objection Three in the backdrop section and there it was referred to as the problem of truth. Davidson sees this problem of truth and frames a question out of it: how do we convince the sceptic that once his beliefs are coherently justified they can be said to be correspondently true? In other words, how do we solve Objection Three -- the problem of truth?

Davidson believes he has done this by first, showing that any form of confrontation with the world will invite scepticism. Any use of intermediaries, like sensations or observation sentences, as a justificatory device between the world and our beliefs opens a gap that the sceptic can easily step into. So on his view any justification of belief that uses something other than belief will introduce those intermediaries. There can be no privileged status to any beliefs or any sentences because they act as intermediaries as well.

The second step in solving the problem of truth is found in Davidson's theory of interpretation. Davidson believes that embedded in his theory of interpretation are conditions of interpretation that demand interpreters and speakers assume a correspondent relationship between their beliefs and the world. I will now attempt to explain in more detail the nature of this supposed connection between Davidson's theory of interpretation and coherently justified beliefs seen as correspondently true beliefs.

Davidson has provided a transcendental argument regarding the possibility of interpretation. He sets up what he takes to be the necessary conditions under which one person can understand another person's sentences. If interpretation, as he sets it up, does occur, then one necessary condition of interpretation which is satisfied is that most of the speaker's beliefs are correspondently true. But as we can see there is no reason in this to be convinced that once our beliefs are justified by coherence, they are, in fact, correspondently true. For, as Davidson himself admits, coherence won't by itself guarantee what is believed is so; it is hard to imagine, he says,

how coherence will let us have knowledge of an objective mind-independent world.

However, Davidson claims that there is another condition of interpretation that must also be satisfied. It is with this further condition that Davidson believes he gives the sceptic a reason to think his beliefs are correspondently true, if coherently justified. It is with this condition that he believes he solves the problem of truth -- Objection Three. This condition can be described as follows. The way we understand the utterance of another is by knowing the causes that make a speaker assent to a sentence and these causes are both the external circumstances and the relationship the sentence has with other sentences, (both logical and grammatical). These causes are in the "public domain". Of course what this assumes is that each interpreter believes there is an external world and since interpretation depends on believing that the objects of a belief are the causes of that belief, there is also an assumption on the part of any interpreter, that the objective world not only causes our beliefs but fixes their content. By "fixing their content", I think Davidson means, having a definite and specified relationship with the mind-independent world, that relationship he calls "correspondence".

Davidson's solution to the problem of truth is found in the condition of interpretation which says the world causes and fixes the content of our beliefs.

## CRITICAL REMARKS

I think there are three main criticisms to be made about Davidson's theory. My first worry is whether Davidson can assume the existence of the external world or whether all he can be entitled to assume is that we believe there is an external world. My second worry is whether Davidson can assume the objects of the external world cause our beliefs to have a "fixed content" that in some definite and specified way correspond to their objects. My third worry is what Davidson really has in mind when he says his argument for a coherence theory of knowledge provides a person with a "reason to believe his beliefs are true that is not a form of evidence." I will now proceed to discuss these three different worries or problems in turn.

## PROBLEM ONE

As stated, Davidson will not allow intermediaries, intermediaries like sensations and observation sentences. Introducing these will, he thinks, invite scepticism. The difficult task before him is to be able to get the world into the circle of beliefs without introducing intermediaries. He does this by claiming there is a causal relationship between the world and our beliefs. "Sensations cause some beliefs and in this sense are the basis or ground of those beliefs. But a causal explanation of a belief does not show how or why the belief is justified."<sup>42</sup>

<sup>42</sup>Davidson, p. 428.

So Davidson will assert a causal relationship between some of our beliefs and the world. However, he believes this is unproblematic as long as that relationship is not one that also involves justification of those beliefs. (Of course, the justification is left to the test of coherence). One thing that must be assumed by Davidson if he asserts a causal relationship is that the external world does, in fact, exist.

It is very odd that Davidson (of all people) assumes as a premise of his theory of interpretation that the external world does in fact exist. This is because he declares quite explicitly, in the beginning of his discussion, that he does not wish to make the same mistakes that others have made while trying to find a way of coming to have knowledge of an objective reality. He does not, he says, want to ground the source of justification in anything that lies outside the scope of beliefs. He there dismissed other theories of justification which do this precisely because "we do not yet see how they (the intermediaries) justify belief in external events and objects."<sup>43</sup> So it would seem that Davidson believes there must be a justification for our belief in the external world. Part of the problem of using intermediaries as justification for our knowledge of the objective and external world is that we cannot assume such a world exists! It seems clear that Davidson does assume this and it is difficult to see how this cannot be question begging.

However, maybe there is a way out for Davidson. Maybe he could say he knows the external world exists because that belief he

<sup>43</sup>Davidson, p. 428.

has coheres with most of the rest he has. The problem with this suggestion is that, as Davidson has already suggested, there is no way, on his theory of knowledge, that any individual true belief can constitute a knowledge claim because although the majority of a believer's beliefs are to some extent justified to him, some may not be justified enough, or in the right way to constitute knowledge.<sup>44</sup> So indeed some of them may be false.

So the belief that Davidson has about the external world, because Davidson believes it is true, does not make it a fact, does not make it a belief with the epistemological status adequate to play the role it is supposed to play in Davidson's anti-sceptical argument.

And here's the dilemma. Since Davidson cannot use a source of justification that lies outside the scope of beliefs, any premise in his argument that can be seen as something lying outside the scope of beliefs, will commit him to the very mistake he believes others make. So, is his premise, "the external world exists", a belief or a fact? Obviously he cannot want it to be a fact and yet it is difficult to see how his argument can work unless it is viewed this way. (An unjustified or false belief would not have to be accepted.)

The reason for thinking his argument can only work if he does take this to be a fact has to do with the transcendental nature of his argument and the idea he is committed to a non-internal, non-relativized form of realism. When Davidson believes the premise "the

<sup>44</sup>Davidson, p. 438.

external world exists", is true, he believes it corresponds with an objective reality. And he does not believe this is the case just for himself, his friends, or his family; he believes it is the case in reality, objectively -- as a fact. This is what we have to assume if we accept his theory of the nature of truth and his metaphysic. But if we use this fact to justify our beliefs, are we not going to a source of justification outside the scope of our beliefs?

The quick response to this question by Davidson would be that we do not use this fact to JUSTIFY our beliefs, we use it as part of a larger reason to believe our beliefs are true. My response to this reply would be to remind Davidson of his claim that his reason for a person to believe their beliefs are true CANNOT BE A FORM OF EVIDENCE. I take it that "evidence", given the context in which Davidson uses the term, is something that will lie outside the scope of belief, and that a reason is just a particular form of belief. I also take it that Davidson's concern with using "evidence" is that it is seen as an intermediary, a source of justification that is outside the scope of beliefs, a source of justification that he believes invites scepticism.

So it would seem then that this "fact" as a crucial part of the reason for a person to believe their beliefs are true is exactly a form of evidence that Davidson disallows; it invites scepticism. On Davidson's account this just will not do.

It might be worth commenting at this point, that this "fact" of the external world is not a "fact" Davidson needs for just himself -- it is not a fact which only one person justifying his own beliefs



about the world needs. This is interesting because it suggests that this belief has a very special status. In order that Davidson's theory of interpretation work, this true belief about the objective world must be held by everyone who interprets and understands his own beliefs. This fact would give the belief a very special status. For this belief must have some priority in a persons belief set, given he must believe it first to understand his other beliefs. In other words, the belief that there is an external world is a funny sort of belief, in that our other beliefs, in some sense, must be coherent with that belief if they are to be true. Now it is not clear what we should make of this belief, but this idea regarding it looks suspiciously like some kind of view which gives a privileged status to some belief or subset of beliefs and it is a kind of view which Davidson originally dismissed.

#### PROBLEM TWO

Even if we allow Davidson to assume there is an external world there is still my second worry to consider. I mentioned earlier that I wondered whether Davidson could assume that the causes of a belief could fix their content. I will begin my discussion of this problem by quoting Davidson.

What stands in the way of global scepticism of the senses, is, in my view, the fact that we must in the plainest and methodologically most basic cases, take the objects of a belief to be the causes of that belief.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>45</sup>Davidson, p. 436.

His idea is that there be a direct, one-way, causal interaction between the world and our beliefs.

But is it only one-way and causal? We can see whether there is more to this gap between objects and their beliefs by making a distinction between the causes of a belief and the content of a belief. Davidson says that external events and objects cause some of our beliefs, but he says as well that external events and objects also "fix the content" of some of our beliefs. This causal relationship between the world and our beliefs does not justify that our beliefs correspond to the world, if any do, because that justification comes from the application of the test of coherence. Leaving aside the question of justification for the time being, the interesting thing to note is that the causal relationship between our beliefs and the world "fixes the content" of a belief.

One concern I have about Davidson's assumption that the world causes and fixes the contents of some of our beliefs has to do with the nature of the causal relationship between our beliefs and their objects. We might well want to admit that there is a causal relationship but do we have to, and should we, assume that the causal relationship is in just one direction -- the objects to us. It would appear that Davidson imagines, in some cases, that we are neutral receptacles into which the world pours and fixes content. Surely, this is just not true. There may be a causal relationship between our beliefs and their objects but we are not neutral receptacles. Even in the "most basic cases" our other beliefs will shape and structure what we believe the world is giving us. Perhaps the

world does cause us to have beliefs but the world by itself cannot fix the content of our beliefs; we also have a role to play and so, I would suggest that the causal relationship is not one way at all, at least in terms of "fixing content".

In order to show this more clearly I will rely on some other theories. I think it will suffice for making this point to point out two ways in which we are not neutral receptacles. There is a view which says that many of our beliefs effect other beliefs we come to acquire. This idea can be found in a view about "theory-laden observation". This view says that some beliefs we acquire are shaped by the theories of the day, particularly, scientific theories.

An example of this can be found in Hanson's discussion of theory-laden observation. He uses as one example the different beliefs formed by Tycho and Kepler about the relationship between the Sun and the Earth, where both beliefs are based on the same observations. Both Tycho and Kepler observe the rising and setting of the Sun, and yet each of them come to a different belief. Tycho believed the Sun revolved around the Earth, while Kepler believed the Earth revolved around the sun.<sup>46</sup> On Hanson's account, this is because the other beliefs held by each of them are crucially different, and it is the differences in their belief sets which make them acquire a different belief on the basis of the same observation.

This is but one of many examples that could be cited regarding the view that we are not neutral receptacles. Some beliefs we

<sup>46</sup>Frederick Suppes, ed., *The Structure of Scientific Theories*, p. 153.

have, which are often culture and time relative, can serve as "shapers" for other beliefs we might acquire. Without belabouring the point, the general idea behind such a view is that no observation is completely neutral. Beliefs formed by culture, historical settings, information bases, including scientific theories, are beliefs that factor into and that influence the outcome of the content of belief that is being acquired.<sup>47</sup>

The next point to make regarding our neutrality has to do with things other than beliefs which might shape a belief we are about to acquire. Sometimes our attitudes and desires play a role in what we believe. A person might interpret certain facts in such a way that they are consistent with his wants and needs. Another source of distortion or bias we humans have in coming to hold particular beliefs comes from the mechanisms we use to observe the world; such mechanisms include our sensory apparatuses. Bats' radar, dolphins' "X-ray" vision, our eyesight are all different ways of seeing the world. These differences must surely effect the content of the beliefs acquired.

If any of these views regarding humans' non-neutrality hold water, then it seems clear that humans do play a substantial role in forming the content of beliefs acquired. The relationship between the world and our beliefs may be causal but it is not one-way. As we are now about to see, this has dire consequences for Davidson's view that the world can fix the content of our beliefs. Davidson says:

<sup>47</sup>Q. v. Martin Hollis and Steven Lukes, eds., *Rationality and Relativism*.

"We must take the objects of our beliefs to be the causes of that belief." I think this is a problem. Imagine a case in which the objects of our beliefs are quite different in content to the objects which cause them. We might well imagine that the content of our beliefs are fixed by external events and objects, and yet the actual external events and objects causing us to have the fixed content to our beliefs are not the actual objects of our belief. The beliefs' causes are certainly external to us, we need not deny this, but there is no correspondence between the content of our belief that *p* and the fact "*p*".

I draw your attention to one class of beliefs in which this seems to be true. All our "common sense naive realist" beliefs about the world being filled with medium sized solid objects is a class of beliefs which apparently shows there is a big difference between the external events and objects and our beliefs about them. In "Appearance and Reality", Russell discusses just such a problem.<sup>48</sup> This is just one famous example of a discussion that deals with the apparent gap between our beliefs about the world and the world itself. The general idea behind this problem is that modern physics tells us a different story regarding the nature of some events and objects than do our own sensory mechanisms. The nature of colours and shapes and solidity of objects, so says the physicist, is not found in the content of our naive realist beliefs.

This has interesting consequences for Davidson's theory. He talks as if all he needs to get his theory of knowledge to work is to

<sup>48</sup>In Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*.

assume a causal relationship between beliefs and the world that will not act to justify the beliefs in any way. But notice what happens to his theory of knowledge when the world can only cause beliefs and not fix their content. One could possess a coherent set of beliefs, some of which were caused by the world, and yet the content of some of those beliefs would not have a correspondence relationship with the world because their content is not fixed by the world.

There seems to be something very strange about all this. Apparently, the correspondent relationship between justified beliefs and the "way things are" can only be determined by the test of coherence because any other test would invite scepticism. One of the things that seems to be embedded in that causal relationship however, is the idea that the objects of a belief are the things which cause them, and this seems to imply, without argument, that those causes also fix their content. If we distinguish between the cause of a belief that P and the content of the belief that P, we notice that Davidson thinks either that the first determines the second or that they are both the same. Either way he seems to be incorrect.

The consequence of the world not being able to fix the content of belief is that there is no guarantee the content of the belief will correspond to the world in the way we imagine Davidson would specify. Although Davidson claims that the test of correspondence will be coherence, and not the causal relationship between the world and beliefs, it seems that causal relationship has to do more work for Davidson than he will admit or than he recognizes. Further, if correspondence is not embedded in that causal relationship, then it

is really a mystery why we must believe that once beliefs have passed the test of coherence they are correspondently true. (Remember all we must belief if we are to interpret is that our bellefs are sometimes caused by the world.)

### PROBLEM THREE

My third and last worry serves to tie together some of previous criticisms. This third worry has to do with Davidson's claim that he will provide a person with a reason to believe his beliefs are true that is not a form of evidence.

The reason that Davidson provides for a person to believe his beliefs are true, rests on accepting his two part argument regarding interpretation. The structure of his argument is as follows: if the theory of interpretation is true, then our beliefs are true. However, if the theory of interpretation is true, given Davidson's notion of truth, it is correspondently true, i.e., there are events and objects in the external and objective world to which his theory corresponds. If the theory of interpretation is true, then, given the above conditional, so too is the statement that our beliefs are true. But if both these parts to his argument are correspondently true, then they are objective, real, facts. If they are facts then they are forms of evidence in precisely the way Davidson cannot allow them to be -- they are a source for a reason that is a form of evidence.

Is this "reason" that Davidson provides a good "reason"? For Davidson, in this context, a good reason is one that has other beliefs in support of it and not other evidence -- facts. In the case

of his theory of interpretation it is essential to his argument that this theory be true, and not just for himself, his family and friends, it must be objectively true. Since this is the case, his good reason looks pretty bad; a good reason can only have other beliefs in support of it and Davidson's reason has evidence in support of it, facts to support it. Davidson has reached outside the scope of beliefs to the "fact" of interpretation and claims we can use this fact as a reason to believe our beliefs are true. However, that reason is a form of justification that has its ground outside the scope of beliefs.

#### (E) IMPLICATIONS IN LIGHT OF BACK-DROP AND GLOBAL SCEPTICISM

The next to final step in the analysis of Davidson's theory is to go back to the three objections presented in the earlier back-drop section and see if Davidson has managed to answer the questions each of them contained. The final step is to see whether his theory, as an approach to response to global scepticism, can be viewed as successful, that is, whether Davidson shown that knowledge is possible against the various forms of global scepticism.

#### OBJECTIONS ONE, TWO AND THREE

Since objection one and two really only get attention in Davidson's answer to objection three, I will summarize his responses to objection one and two only cursorily. Objection one framed a question regarding the different but competing coherent sets that would arise with a coherence theory of justification and an objective theory about the nature of truth. The problem, as stated there, was that there would be different cohering sets competing for one notion



of truth. The question was how could you choose in a non-arbitrary way which of the different cohering sets was the true one?

Davidson's answer to this question lies in his theory of interpretation. He assumes that there will be a fairly substantial overlap between the different cohering sets because the world will have caused and fixed the content of beliefs across sets. However, this does not really give a basis for choice between sets, since there will still be a vast number of different beliefs to be found in each. In fact, if we look at what Davidson does say about whether we will know our beliefs are true, we notice that he cannot tell us which majority of the members of the belief sets are true. All he can tell us is that most of our beliefs are true, not which of them are true. So, on his view, no decision can be made about which of the competing sets are true. His answer to objection one is weak.

Objection two presented a problem regarding input from the world. How is the circle of beliefs ever to get attached to the world they are about? Davidson's answer here is straightforward. He says that some of our beliefs are caused by the world and in virtue of being caused by the world they are about the world. One thing we can say about this is that earlier in the criticisms of Davidson's theory it was suggested that by assuming a causal relationship between the world and our beliefs it does not follow without argument that our beliefs would be about the world. Again, Davidson's response to objection two seems weak.

Objection three is perhaps the most important objection. This objection was called the problem of truth and it stated that an ar-

gument, independent of the form of justification used in an epistemology, must be given to link that form of justification to the theory of truth that the epistemology adopts. The connection between truth and justification must be non-ad-hoc. Right away it can be observed that Davidson does try to meet this objection with his transcendental argument regarding interpretation. His argument for why coherence justification will uncover correspondent truth is made independently from that form of justification. So far, so good.

However, on closer scrutiny of his theory of interpretation some problems arise. One condition of interpretation was that the objects of a belief cause and fix the content of that belief. This is the crucial part of his argument that attempts to connect correspondent truth to coherence justification. Unfortunately, it does not work. As suggested in the critical remarks, Davidson simply assumes that a belief caused by the world will correspond to the world and since there are many reasons not to accept this, it is incumbent on Davidson to provide an argument in support of this premise. Davidson's response to objection three seems also to fail.

#### GLOBAL SCEPTICISM

Now for the final step in the analysis of Davidson's coherence theory. Does his theory show that knowledge is possible? By the time Davidson ends his paper, he admits that on his theory, no particular knowledge claim could be asserted. This was because no individual belief could be known to be properly justified. It is difficult to see how this disclaimer about the possibility of asserting particular knowledge claims bears on the question of whether knowledge in

general in possible. I suppose that Davidson's argument can be seen as a true example of approach two where transcendental arguments are used as a response to global scepticism. Although he does not present us with an actual piece of knowledge, his argument is at least intended to prove that knowledge is possible. In light of the criticisms brought out against his transcendental argument, I contend that he fails in this task.

Two further points are worth stating. First, even if his intentions were to defeat global scepticism using the response under approach two, he directs his argument against a particular form of global scepticism. To show this I quote him: "The general presumption in favour of the truth of belief serves to rescue us from a standard form of skepticism by showing why it is impossible for *all our beliefs to be false together*."<sup>49</sup> From this I think it can be concluded that Davidson does not really intend to defeat all forms of scepticism. He is primarily interested in saving empirical knowledge. This was the first thesis of global scepticism mentioned in chapter one. The other two theses are left untouched. Further, in light of the quotation cited, it seems apparent that he directs his efforts against the weak form of global scepticism stated in chapter one. All he would rescue us from is a form of global scepticism which asserts all our beliefs are false together. As I mentioned, there appear to be much stronger forms of global scepticism.

The second point I would like to make involves reminding the reader that approach two was said to be incomplete. This was be-

<sup>49</sup>Davidson, p. 438 (Emphasis mine).

cause it did not give an argument for where the global sceptic went wrong. Clearly, even if Davidson had succeeded with his arguments, his position would still have been incomplete. No where does he diagnose the erroneousness of global scepticism.

## CONCLUSION

One thing that becomes clear after all of this, is the enormity of the task of showing whether knowledge is possible let alone the further enormous task of how it is possible. Considering the different forms of global scepticism which can arise, it is a wonder that anyone is an epistemologist. In order that an epistemology serve its purpose, that is show whether and perhaps how knowledge is possible, it must address all forms of global scepticism. This might mean using different combinations of the three different approaches to defeating global scepticism. As we have seen, approach two must use one other of the approaches to be considered complete. Perhaps the strongest attack of global scepticism will be one that uses all three approaches, in different sequence and against different forms of global scepticism. As you can see I remain optimistic, but perhaps I do so only with a leap of faith.

Some lessons of this whole discussion, lessons I believe need to be learned, are first, that epistemologists must take seriously the arguments of the global sceptic and second, they must recognize the different forms of global scepticism and the implications those different forms have to the epistemology they might want to develop. Above all I think the epistemologist should remember why he has a job to do in the first place. I think he should always look to the motivation of epistemology -- the defeat of global scepticism. And yes, even after two hundred years, a broad rendering of Kant's

remark still rings true. It is indeed somewhat scandalous to the enterprise of philosophy that scepticism still remains undefeated.

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