

Gadamer and Davidson on Language and Thought

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ABSTRACT:

Recently philosophers interested in bridging the gap between continental and analytic philosophy have looked to connecting Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics with Donald Davidson's philosophy of language. Both seem to share a number of positions, and each was familiar with the other's writings. In this essay, I look at Davidson's criticisms of Gadamer's hermeneutics—in particular Gadamer's view that dialogue always depends on a shared language and, when successful, produces a new common language to understand a topic. I argue that Davidson's objections miss the way Gadamer is using conversation (*Gespräch*) as a technical term. Working out the difference between what Davidson and Gadamer mean reveals a deeper divide between their views of the relation between language and thought.

About Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method* Donald Davidson has said, "I greatly admire his work and see quite evident resemblances" (Glüer, 158). Trying to bring together analytic and continental philosophy by bringing into dialogue Gadamer and Davidson makes sense given their shared commitments to holism, to the dependence of the mind on language, to the philosophical importance of interpretation, to the denial of incommensurable conceptual schemes, to a strict distinction between linguistic and nonlinguistic animals, and, as Bjørn Ramberg puts it, to "the idea that possessing the concept of truth, having knowledge of the world, and being able to understand a language, are linked" (Ramberg, "Illuminating Language," 217).¹ Both were familiar with each other's works and, indeed, there is already a significant and growing literature on the relation between the two thinkers. That said, we must be careful not to rush to assimilation. The best work comparing the two philosophers will clarify why dialogue

¹ See also the last chapter of Ramberg's book *Donald Davidson's Philosophy of Language*. Robert Dostal, in his essay "In Gadamer's Neighborhood" presents four points of overlap between Gadamer and Davidson: the essentially linguistic character of understanding, the essentially interpretive character of understanding, the principle of charity, and the denial of the scheme/content distinction.

between Davidson's and Gadamer's views is difficult as much as it will explain why such dialogue could be productive. Here I will look at the significance of Davidson's criticism of Gadamer's hermeneutics; the point will be to show that what appear as superficial differences actually mask deep philosophical disagreements. What might look like a difference in emphasis or a difference of focus in their accounts of communication turns out to reflect a more intractable difference about how language functions to connect thoughts up to the world. By focusing on Davidson's criticisms of Gadamer, I will have to put aside many of Davidson's most important and influential claims, even ones that are logically connected to the ones I will discuss. I will likewise bracket Gadamer's influential theories of tradition, art, and the humanities, as well as his important interpretations of Plato, Hegel, and Heidegger.

Davidson's knowledge of Gadamer dates back to his dissertation on the *Philebus*, for which he read parts of Gadamer's *Plato's Dialectical Ethics*. It was to discuss their differing interpretations of the *Philebus* that Davidson was invited to contribute to the *Library of Living Philosophers* volume on Gadamer. Davidson concludes his essay with these general thoughts about Gadamer's hermeneutics. (I will quote it at length since it will be the focus of the remainder of this essay.)

“Language has its true being only in conversation, in the exercise of understanding between people.” This saying of Gadamer's goes far beyond the linguist's insistence on the primacy of spoken over written words, for it implies that it is only in the context of discussion that language comes to have a content, to be language. (This is a view often attributed to Wittgenstein.) But Gadamer has a much more basic claim, that thought itself depends on language: “All understanding is interpretation, and all interpretation takes place in the medium of language which would allow the object to come into words.” “Language is not just one of man's possessions in the world, but on it depends the fact that man has a world at all.” Putting these themes together, we must conclude that it is only in interpersonal communication that there can be thought, a grasping of the fact of an objective, that is, a shared world. Not only is it the case that the aim of conversation is “shared understanding”; we must also acknowledge that without sharing there is no understanding.

The reason for this is, in my opinion, that there is no other way to answer Wittgenstein's question, in what consists the difference between thinking one is following a rule, and actually following it. I interpret this as asking how words can have an objective reference, how sentences can have a truth value independent of the individual. Our thoughts and words carry us out into the world; this is why we can have true and false beliefs and say what is false as well as what is true. This connection with the world can be established only by shared reactions to a shared environment. "Speech, in its primordial form, is part of a shared having to do with something," as Gadamer puts it. He goes on:

Language, in which something comes to be language, is not a possession of one or the other of the interlocutors. Every conversation presupposes a common language, or, it creates a common language. Something is placed in the center, as the Greeks said, which the partners to the dialogue both share, and concerning which they can exchange ideas with one another. Hence agreement concerning the object, which it is the purpose of the conversation to bring about, necessarily means that a common language must first be worked out in the conversation. This is not an external matter of simply adjusting our tools, nor is it even right to say that the partners adapt themselves to one another but, rather, in the successful conversation they both come under the influence of the truth of the object and are thus bound to one another in a new community. To reach an understanding with one's partner in a dialogue is...a transformation into a communion, in which we do not remain what we were.

I am in agreement with almost all of this. Where I differ (and this may merely show I have not fully understood Gadamer) is that I would not say a conversation presupposes a common language, nor even that it requires one. Understanding, to my mind, is always a matter not only of interpretation but of translation, since we can never assume we mean the same thing by our words that our partners in discussion mean. What is created in dialogue is not a common language but understanding; each partner comes to understand the other. And it also seems wrong to me to say agreement concerning an object demands that a common language first be worked out. I would say: it is only in the presence of shared objects that understanding can come about. Coming to an agreement about an object and coming to understand each other's speech are not independent moments but part of the same interpersonal process of triangulating the world. (Davidson, "Gadamer and Plato's *Philebus*," 274–75)²

² Davidson's long quotation is from page 341 of Gadamer's *Truth and Method*. The edition he draws from is a discredited translation that was substantially revised in later versions. Here is the moderately revised translation of the paragraph:

Our first point is that the language in which something comes to speak is not a possession at the disposal of one or the other of the interlocutors. Every conversation presupposes a common language, or better, creates a common language. Something is placed in the center, as the Greeks say, which the partners in dialogue both share, and concerning which they can

Davidson says he is of a piece with Gadamer on the idea that thought requires language, that language is essentially intersubjective and communicative, and that in virtue of this intersubjective character of language, language brings us into the world, though perhaps it would be more accurate to say it brings us into the world in a distinctive way. Their differences turn, according to Davidson, on the idea that dialogue neither requires a shared language to get it going nor requires sharing a language to generate an agreement.

Davidson's argument is straightforward. He points out that we are able to communicate with someone even when we are not using the same language. In virtue of our shared relation to the world we come to accurately interpret what the other person is trying to tell us. Cases of malapropism work the same way. We can understand what a person means even if the person is using words in a way utterly unfamiliar to us. In Gadamer, Davidson detects traces of a debate between him and Michael Dummett on the necessity of a shared language for communication. One of Davidson's replies to Dummett, which he sees as equally applicable to Gadamer, makes the connection clear.

I saw (and see) clear reasons to doubt that language, if language is taken to imply shared ways of speaking, is essential. ... What is the source of these doubts? Well, starting at the

exchange ideas with one another. Hence reaching an understanding on the subject matter of a conversation necessarily means that a common language must first be worked out in the conversation. This is not an external matter of simply adjusting our tools; nor is it even right to say that the partners adapt themselves to one another but, rather, in a successful conversation they both come under the influence of the truth of the object and are thus bound to one another in a new community. To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one's own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were (Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 371).

In "Davidson's Reading of Gadamer: Triangulation, Conversation, and the Analytic-Continental Divide" Lee Braver argues that Davidson's criticisms amount to a misinterpretation of Gadamer. I agree, though I am more interested in how the misunderstanding might reveal deeper differences than Davidson realized.

small end, there is the simple fact that almost no two people share all words. Even during a conversation, each is apt to use words the other did not know before the conversation began, and so cannot belong to a practice the speakers shared in detail; here I think particularly of names and of words new to the vocabulary of one or the other speaker. Then there are malapropisms which are nevertheless understood, slips of the tongue, and all the 'errors,' as we think of them, that we would not normally commit ourselves (perhaps), but that as hearers we take in our stride. . . . We have no trouble following the conversation of the child who says "He wented to the store" and who generally forms the past tense according to a rule which is not part of 'the language.' Actual cases grow rarer as they grow more extreme, but more extreme cases certainly exist. People who speak dialects of what we call the same language may not at first be able to make anything of what the other says; after they learn to understand each other, each may continue to speak in his own way, just as I have learned to answer letters in German, Spanish, and French in English. Someone with a unique and serious speech defect may be understood by those around him. Now to make a leap. There seems to me to be no reason, in theory at least, why speakers who understand each other ever need to speak, or to have spoken, as anyone else speaks, much less as each other speaks. (Davidson, "The Social Aspect of Language," 115)

While Gadamer claims that communication requires a shared language, Davidson points out that we often can communicate with people with whom we do not share a language. Of course communication might be easier if everyone shared the same language, but "in theory at least," we do not need to use words in the same way to convey information to another person. Indeed it is probably best if we don't presume that we are using words the same way others do when we engage in conversation. Gadamer thinks a successful conversation is one where people agree upon the best way to speak about a subject matter. We can easily picture how that might unfold: the participants provide back and forth suggestions for articulating the matter at hand, giving reasons for suggesting one way of talking over another and introducing new terms until a consensus is reached. What then does Davidson think happens in communication, especially in cases where a shared way of speaking cannot be presumed?

Davidson describes this process in his essay "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs." We enter the conversation with a preliminary idea of what the speaker's words will mean, drawing

on contextual information (the age of the speaker, his or her ethnicity, the setting in which the exchange is taking place, and so on)—Davidson calls this the listener’s “prior theory.” The speaker also has an idea about how he or she needs to use words in order to convey the intended information to the listener. This is the speaker’s prior theory and it is an anticipation of the prior theory of the listener. As the speaker speaks, the listener may have to adjust his or her prior theory in order to understand the speaker; likewise the speaker may have to change the way he or she speaks to try to get the listener to adapt the theory the theory that will convey the information. Understanding occurs when the listener’s revised theory corresponds with the intended theory of the speaker—Davidson calls these successful theories “passing theories.” So when the passing theories coincide, information has been shared. Simply put, the listener has understood the words as the speaker intended them to be understood. For example, the speaker wants the listener to apply the theory that the sentence “It’s coming down” means it is raining; the listener understands when he or she acquires the theory that “It’s coming down” means it is raining. Neither of the prior theories are the same in this process, and neither the prior nor the passing theories are languages, per se, thus the communication takes place without relying on a shared language.

We could call Davidson an instrumentalist about language—we use language as a tool to communicate with others—as long as we distinguish him from instrumentalists such as John Locke by stressing that, for Davidson, we need language to have thoughts at all and the successful use of language does not rely on adhering to linguistic conventions. “So far as the point of language is concerned, our only *obligation*, if that is the word, is to speak in such a way as to accomplish our purpose by being understood as we expect and intend. It is an accident, though a likely one, if this requires that we speak as others in our community do” (Davidson,

“The Social Aspect of Language,” 118). We pick whatever words will enable us to communicate best our ideas. Success in communicating our ideas justifies the words chosen to do so, and nothing else does. As long as the person arrives at the meaning that is intended through the expression, even if the expression doesn’t actually mean what is intended, communication is successful. As Davidson says to Gadamer, “I would not say a conversation presupposes a common language, nor even that it requires one”—his point seems obvious, and we should wonder how Gadamer could have thought otherwise.

The first thing to keep in mind is that in the section of text Davidson quotes, Gadamer is talking about dialogue, *Gespräch*, as a technical term that is much narrower than what Davidson means by communication.³ None of Davidson’s examples of communication—“it’s raining,” “snow is white,” “a nice arrangement of epithets”—fall under what Gadamer calls dialogue. All that is needed for communication, for Davidson, is a transfer of information from one person to another. Dialogue, for Gadamer, is the collaborative act of seeking articulate understanding of a subject matter. Dialogue is an essentially joint activity—both participants understand they are working together to put something into words. It belongs to the category of activities Gadamer calls play. Play is distinctive in that: (1) the participants understand that the rules of the game constitute the play and so constrain their actions to conform to the rules, and (2) the outcome of the playing is not predetermined. Play need not be competitive—certainly some forms of dialogue are competitive, arguments are the obvious example. Dialogue can be a collaborative joint activity so long as the outcome of the play is irreducible to an explanation in terms of the

³ “World,” as used by Gadamer in the sentence Davidson quotes, “Language is not just one of man’s possessions in the world, but on it depends the fact that man has a world at all,” is also a technical term for Gadamer and is contrasted with “environment”—the lived context of non-linguistic creatures. See David Vessey’s “Davidson, Gadamer, Incommensurability, and the Third Dogma of Empiricism” for a more detailed discussion of the significance of these terms for bringing together Gadamer and Davidson.

individual acts of either of the players. That is what is meant by the claim that dialogue, as play, is an essentially social activity and it explains part of what Gadamer means by saying that dialogue includes a “transformation into communion.”

Gadamer also stresses that dialogue always includes three elements, the two interlocutors and the subject matter about which they are trying to understand. (“Something is placed in the center, as the Greeks said, which the partners to the dialogue both share, and concerning which they can exchange ideas with one another.”) The dialogue is successful, famously, if the interlocutors achieve a “fusion of horizons,” by which Gadamer means, if not an agreement, a shared awareness of how their differences nonetheless improve their understanding of the subject.⁴ Gadamer takes for granted that since he is speaking of dialogue he is speaking about participants who share a language. Gadamer makes this clear in the passages Davidson quotes when he writes that “speech, in its primordial form, is part of a shared having to do with something” and claims that the essential form of speech is dialogue (“Language has its true being only in conversation [*Gespräch* = dialogue].”) A fusion of horizons would differ from Davidson’s coincidence of passing theories in at least two ways: first, the fusion of horizons does not occur through grasping the intended meaning of the speaker, but through both interlocutors, together, grasping the words that best bring the subject matter to intelligibility; second, the fusion of horizons always generates new insights about our previously hidden prejudices.

In Gadamer’s response to an essay by David Hoy comparing his and Davidson’s views, he expresses the concern that he and Davidson are talking about different phenomena. Hoy

⁴ Jeff Malpas, who has done more than anyone to bring Davidson and Gadamer into conversation, argues that Davidson’s philosophy could benefit from Gadamerian terminology, such as horizon and play. See his *Donald Davidson and the Mirror of Meaning* as well as his essay “Gadamer, Davidson, and the Ground of Understanding.” This latter essay is a response to some brief comments about Gadamer and Davidson made by Rudiger Bubner in “On the Ground of Understanding.”

argues that one main difference between them is that Gadamer focuses on interpreting texts, while Davidson focuses on interpreting utterances.⁵ Gadamer replies.

I have certain reservations concerning further elaboration of the investigation of the relations between Davidson's efforts and my own. There we can entirely disregard the supposed difference between utterances and text. . . . The problem lies rather in the fact that it still sounds as if conversation, and the structure of conversation in areas dealing with understanding, primarily only referred to the attainment of correct knowledge. But what is fundamentally at issue is not primarily science and epistemology but . . . the 'ontology' of life communicating itself through language. (Gadamer, "Reply to David Hoy," 129)

Gadamer's focus is not simply on conveying information across linguistic boundaries, but on the way that people articulate a shared world through dialogue. It seems then that Davidson has misread Gadamer by missing the specialized way Gadamer uses the term *Gespräch*. It does not refer to any transfer of information, about which Davidson is right to say that would not require a shared language, but to thinking together about what words best express a subject matter. Such an activity does require a shared language and would, ideally, be resolved when they come to an agreement about the best way to speak about something. This also is why, for Gadamer, dialogue is necessarily transformative, while communication, for Davidson, is not. Linda Martín Alcoff has highlighted just this difference between their positions.⁶

Perhaps we should just conclude that Gadamer is focusing on a subset of the phenomenon that Davidson speaks of. There is the general meaning of communication—the exchange of information—and a specific case when this comes about, Gadamerian dialogue. Because of the distinctive features of Gadamerian dialogue, it has implications about the way conversation actualizes community, and of course Davidson is right to note that such implications do not exist in all cases of communication. Shouldn't we conclude that Davidson and Gadamer are speaking

⁵ In David Hoy, "Post-Cartesian Interpretation: Hans-Georg Gadamer and Donald Davidson."

⁶ See "Gadamer's Feminist Epistemology."

past one another because, unbeknownst to Davidson, Gadamer is focused on a special case of communication?

I think the answer is no; dialogue as Gadamer understands it, is not just a specific way that communication might take place. The clue lies in Gadamer's insistence that dialogue is community building in relation to the subject matter of the dialogue. Gadamer does not stress that dialogue is community building in virtue of the communication—perhaps in virtue of the shared, mutual recognition between the interlocutors, or the respect and openness shown to one another—but in virtue of the shared relationship to the subject matter of the dialogue. The important point here is that for Gadamer dialogue is not primarily about the relation between the two interlocutors, but about the relation between the interlocutors together and the subject matter. Dialogue is not, for Gadamer, a kind of communication, but a shared, linguistic relation to the world. Dialogue is a kind of thinking together about the world. Dialogue is not a special case of communication, but a special case of linguistic thinking. Thinking, according to Gadamer, is nothing more than the activity of finding the right word to disclose the subject matter. Dialogue would be the joint disclosure of a subject matter through language.

It is a common and understandable mistake in Gadamer interpretation to think that he holds that “Language has its true being only in conversation” because language is essentially communicative. But that is not the reason. Gadamer thinks that language's essence lies in its role in thinking, not in its role in communicating. Language makes thinking possible because it is only in virtue of language that the world appears to us as something to be subject to thought. Davidson similarly says that language “is a mode of perception...the organ of propositional perception” (“Seeing Through Language,” 135). It is because thinking together (with another

person, with a text, with a work of art, with a tradition) is the “true essence” of thinking that, for Gadamer, dialogue is the “true essence” of language.

Even given what Davidson says about language as a faculty of perception, the fact that Gadamer thinks that dialogue, as a joint disclosure of something through language, is the fullest actualization of language reveals a deep disagreement between Gadamer and Davidson. I mentioned above that Davidson said he agreed with Gadamer in that thought requires language, that language is essentially intersubjective and communicative, and that in virtue of this intersubjective character of language, language brings us into the world. These agreements are superficial, however, as each philosopher means something different by each. This will become clear when we see how Davidson and Gadamer think language is essential for thought—we will also clarify why dialogue is not a special case of Davidson’s communication.

Davidson’s argument for the essential role of language in thought takes the following route. Thoughts have a truth value—they can be true or false—and (except on rare occasions) their truth value is independent of us. This objectivity is part and parcel of what it is to entertain a thought. We can be wrong or be surprised only because the world operates independently from us. This means that thought requires an awareness of an external world existing independently from us. The content of our thought is determined by our causal relationship to that world, but what in the world is the appropriate cause? Any number of states could be the semantically relevant cause, and thus the meaning, of our belief. If we see others interacting with objects in a similar way, and we can communicate with them, then we can triangulate the cause of our beliefs and establish their empirical content (above all, whether our belief is about the way things are, or only about the way things seem to us).⁷ To engage in this high-level of triangulation we must

⁷ The triangulation described here as a necessary condition for determining the content of our

recognize ourselves as having beliefs and others as having beliefs, and Davidson argues that we can only see others or ourselves as having beliefs if we have the concept of a belief. The concept of belief is not something we could have unless we had language, so therefore language is necessary for thought and for determining the contents of our thoughts.

According to Davidson only creatures with language are creatures with thoughts. But this is not the same as saying, as Gadamer does, that thought is linguistic. Davidson writes that

The view that thought—belief, desire, intention, and the like—requires language is controversial, but certainly not new. The version of the thesis which I want to promote needs to be distinguished from various related versions. I don't, for example, believe that thinking can be reduced to linguistic activity. ... Nor do I see any reason to maintain that what we can't say we can't think. My thesis is not, then, that each thought depends for its existence on the existence of a sentence that expresses that thought. My thesis is rather that a creature cannot have a thought unless it has language. In order to be a thinking, rational creature, the creature must be able to express many thoughts, and above all, be able to interpret the speech and thoughts of others. (Davidson, "Rational Animals," 100)

We would not have any thoughts if we did not have language, but the thoughts themselves need

thoughts is another version of Davidson's account of prior and passing theories. But triangulation is more fundamental than what occurs between speakers; it is a condition of any thought or language.

The basic triangle is Oedipodean: two creatures each associating stimuli focused on some object or event or feature of the shared environment with stimuli produced by the reactions of the other to that same object, event, or feature of the environment. This is a causal complex often observed in the case of animals: think of two lionesses zeroing in on a prey while keeping each other in sight or two male baboons circling the same female very much aware of the tactics of the other. I call this triangulation: the nearest common cause of the reactions of the first two creatures locates the object of their interest. I hold that this arrangement is a necessary condition for developing thought and language. Ostensive learning depends on triangulation, and ostensive learning is crucial to the existence of objective thought and language; this is the line of thinking that persuades me that triangulation is a necessary condition of thought and language. (Davidson, "Responses to Barry Stroud, John McDowell, and Tyler Burge," 694).

The pre-linguistic activity of triangulation relies on communication, in Davidson's sense of a transfer of information so we can see why it would be so important for Davidson to stress that an exchange of information, linguistic or otherwise, does not rely upon two creatures sharing a language. Since the object of causation, and therefore the meaning of the thought, is determined only through triangulation, it would be a mistake to ascribe to Davidson the view that the world stands as it is independent of our interacting with it.

not be linguistic. This view is different from Gadamer's view that thinking is just the activity of deploying language.

Gadamer mentions his take on the relation between thought and language just before Davidson's quote from Gadamer begins, "It is not that the understanding [of a subject matter] is subsequently put into words; rather, the way understanding occurs—whether in the case of a text or a dialogue with another person who raises an issue with us—is the coming-into-language of the thing itself" (Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 371).⁸ We do not first have the belief about something and then search for the best words to convey that thought to ourselves and others; but finding the words to express something is the process of acquiring a belief. All our beliefs are essentially linguistic. The same is true of distinctively human experience—it is essentially linked to language.⁹ Gadamer expresses this most succinctly by arguing, "Language is by no means simply an instrument, a tool." He continues,

For it is in the nature of the tool that we master its use, which is to say we take it in hand and lay it aside when it has done its service. That is not the same as when we take the words of a language, lying ready in the mouth, and with their use let them sink back into the general store of words over which we dispose. Such an analogy is false because we never find ourselves as consciousness over against the world and, as it were, grasp after a tool of understanding in a wordless condition. Rather, in all our knowledge of ourselves and in all knowledge of the world, we are always already encompassed by the language that is our own. We grow up, and we become acquainted with men and in the last analysis with ourselves when we learn to speak. Learning to speak does not mean learning to use a pre-existent tool for designating a world already somehow familiar to us; it means acquiring a familiarity and acquaintance with the world itself and how it confronts us. (Gadamer, "Man and Language," 62–3)

⁸ Brice Wachterhauser emphasizes this linguistic idealist aspect of Gadamer's philosophy as a significant contrast to Davidson's thought in "Getting it Right: Relativism, Realism, and Truth."

⁹ "Experience is not wordless to begin with, subsequently becoming an object of reflection by being named, by being subsumed under the universality of the word. Rather, experience of itself seeks and finds words that express it. We seek the right word—i.e., the word that really belongs to the thing—so that in it the thing comes into language" (Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 417).

If this is true, then coming up with a new way of expressing something to someone is coming up with a new way of understanding that thing and revising our beliefs about that thing. If language and thought are as closely connected as Gadamer suggests, then it is clear that every dialogue will bring about a conceptual transformation.

Language is not merely a tool for our use—this is one aspect of Gadamer’s claim that language “is not a possession.” Another aspect is that the meanings of a language are never solely up to us. Languages are shared. Languages are the primary way that traditions are passed down. So all attempts to articulate something, which, again, are all attempts at understanding, are attempts to establish oneself in a community of speakers and in a tradition of ways of making the world intelligible.¹⁰ Dialogue, as a collaborative attempt to come to an articulate understanding of a subject matter, is an exercise in thinking together. Our words do not just transform our beliefs, they make the world present to us in new ways. Gadamer says that “To speak means to speak *to* someone. The word should be the right word. That, however, does not mean simply that it represents the intended object for me, but rather, that it places it before the eyes of the other person to whom I speak” (Gadamer, “Man and Language,” 65). The thing discussed “comes to be in language”—it comes to be in its nature as an object of thought.

Davidson argues that language does not mediate between thoughts and the world because thoughts are causally connected to the world; Gadamer thinks language does not mediate between thoughts and the world because thoughts are thoroughly linguistic. Language for Davidson is a tool for communication, necessary for having any thoughts at all since communicative relations to others is necessary for having thoughts at all. Language for Gadamer functions for communication because language is disclosive of the world in the same ways eyes

¹⁰ John McDowell stresses this connection in Gadamer between language and tradition in his essay “Gadamer and Davidson on Understanding and Relativism.”

or opposable thumbs are disclosive of the world. Davidson expresses a similar view—“there is a valid analogy between having eyes and ears, and having language: all three are organs with which we come into direct contact with our environment. They are not intermediaries, screens, media, or windows” (“Seeing Through Language,” 131). Gadamer argues that unlike eyes and ears, language is an essentially shared and sharable organ through which we make shared contact with our shared world.

At the end, then, we can see why Davidson is concerned about Gadamer’s claim that dialogue requires a shared language: Davidson needs to defend the philosophical significance of the exchange of information in triangulation. But Gadamer’s account of dialogue is more than an instance of sharing information. It is always a collaborative activity of coming to a shared, articulate understanding of a subject matter.¹¹ It only occurs where there is extensive shared language. It might appear, then, that Davidson is simply thinking about communication writ large—the intended transfer of a belief from one person to another—while Gadamer is focused on a narrower activity. In fact, their disagreements run deeper than perhaps Davidson himself recognizes. For Davidson thinking need not be linguistic; communication need not rely upon a shared language; and human perception need not be informed by language. For Gadamer since human perception and thought are not just dependent on language for their function, but are actualizations of language, dialogue as the shared attempts to arrive at an articulate understanding of the world plays a role unlike anything found in Davidson’s philosophy.

¹¹ Martin Heidegger made this point in his 1925 summer semester lecture course at Marburg University (published as *History of the Concept of Time*): “The understanding of communication is the participation in what is manifest. . . . It is not a matter of transporting information and experiences from the interior of one subject to the interior of the other one. It is rather a matter of being-with-one-another becoming manifest in the world, specifically by way of the discovered world, which itself becomes manifest in speaking with one another” (263).

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