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Triangulation and Ethics: Accord or Discord?

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Foreword

I am very happy for the opportunity to honor Bjørn Ramberg to whom I am deeply indebted for our many years of inspiring friendship, collaboration, and conversation, and for the encouragement and stimulus provided by his texts.

The gist of this essay is an attempt to understand whether Donald Davidson's triangulation thesis—the main purpose of which is epistemological—is wide enough to comprise an understanding of ethics. The question is pressing, since Davidson seemed to hold that ethics is a fundamental issue in philosophy,¹ although his writings rarely, if ever, concern ethics. However, he discusses themes *related* to ethics, such as Plato's late philosophy in his book about Plato's dialogue *Philebus* (Davidson 1990), his discussions of self-deception and weakness of the will, and his concern with the philosophy of Baruch de Spinoza, which connects also with Kantian and Hegelian themes (Davidson 1999). Some essays deal more explicitly with meta-ethical themes, such as "Expressing evaluations" (1984), "The interpersonal comparison of values" (1986) and "The objectivity of values" (1994).

Triangulation

Let me first briefly recapture the essence of the triangulation thesis. In its primitive form, it says that only creatures that correlate their responses

¹ Cf. Pascal Engel, 2017

to a shared observation of an object in their world, are able to locate and individuate the object. In its more sophisticated form, it says that only someone who interacts linguistically with other persons and the world they share, correlating their responses to the same feature of the environment, can have language and objective thought.² Davidson developed this conception into a dynamic understanding of language and linguistic communication, which has been central in his work over the last twenty years of his life. In this essay, I take a particular interest in his late philosophy, after he broke with a representationalist worldview, emancipating also from the limitations of analytic philosophy.³

This is also the background for Davidson's radical and controversial essay "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs" (1986), where he discards the traditional philosophical notion of what a language is. He remarks that when we deal with other people, we are constantly interpreting their behavior, revising our interpretations in light of our attempts to make sense of it, and attributing beliefs to them. We must give up the idea of understanding language as an entity, with a defined, shared structure language-users acquire and apply to cases. Linguistic meaning is what a speaker produces here and now. The radical interpreter must dynamically construe what a speaker is doing, rather than untangling a fixed structure that the speaker possesses. She must continually modify her truth-theories, according to circumstance and context, which Davidson describes as employing an on-going dynamic between "prior" and "passing" theories.⁴ More recently, Peter Ludlow has argued that we commonly *modulate* the meaning of words and sentences in all kinds of conversations. We tend to build what Ludlow calls "micro-languages" on the fly, where we openly debate how we should modulate the meaning of our words and sentences.⁵ Accordingly, a theory of truth-theoretical semantics for natural languages "can never be more than an idealized static model."⁶

² Cf. Davidson, 1997, 128. Thus, also animals and babies are able to triangulate (cf. the study of babies in Tomasello, 2009). Some animals cooperate intentionally to catch prey, e.g. orcas and African wild dogs.

³ A forerunner to the concept of triangulation was the concept of *charity*, applied as an essential constraint on the construal of meaning by radical interpretation. Originally, Davidson called the principle of charity a principle of rational accommodation, which meant that an interpreter should opt for maximizing agreement between her and the speaker.

⁴ Davidson, 1986/2005, 101, ff.

⁵ Ludlow 2014. For an overview of the development of the philosophy of language in modern times, see Michael Losonsky 2006.

⁶ Ramberg, 2015, 13. A related dynamism in the understanding of language and linguistic understanding can be traced back at least to Wittgenstein's late philosophy, in particular *Philosophical Investigations* (PI).

The question persists though: is there room for ethics in a *dynamic* triangulation figure, even if there are few traces of ethics in Davidson's writings? Robert H. Myers and Claudine Verheggen 2016 appear to think so when they argue that for Davidson, the constraints on interpretation—that our beliefs are by and large true and about an objective reality—entail that there are also objective standards to which our desires and evaluative judgments are answerable,⁷ although there is a measure of indeterminacy in our communication about them.⁸

An ontological and social-dynamic figure

Following this question, an appropriate reference to begin with is Jeff Malpas 2011.⁹ He argues convincingly for the idea that the triangulation figure is ontological, which has bearing on the question whether ethics may be encompassed by it.

The three ideas that lie at the heart of triangulation, both in topographic surveying and in philosophical employment are, according to Malpas, *process*, *relationality* and *surface*¹⁰, which designate a process of ongoing interaction between speakers, and between speakers and the world. This dynamic process is constitutive of the content of the speakers' communication—what in the world they are speaking about—and so, according to Malpas, it is only through the relational interaction between speakers and world, that speakers come to be speakers, and behavior comes to be action. These features of triangulation constitute it as not only an epistemological, but an ontological thesis; "it concerns the very *being* of content".¹¹

Malpas underlines the transcendental character of triangulation by drawing connections to Kant and particularly Hegel: "there can be no

⁷ Cf. Ch. 6 in Myers and Verheggen, 2016 and Davidson's articles from the early eighties on his unified theory of meaning and action, which were generalized to embrace desires and values. (Davidson, 1984 and 1995.)

⁸ Cf. also Lillehammer, 2007, and Carol Rovane on relativism, e.g., Rovane, 2004.

⁹ Amoretti and Preyer, 2011, 257–79.

¹⁰ Malpas, 2011, 259–60.

¹¹ Malpas, 2011, 263. He affirms that triangulation therefore does not merely operate *upon* content, it is what *establishes* content. This claim is contested, though, e.g., Dostal, 2011. Malpas counters the criticism by referring to Davidson's commitment to what Malpas acknowledges as a set of ontological claims, "about, for instance, the nature of mind, meaning, belief and knowledge", and further that Davidson's project has a *transcendental* character, which is a mode of ontological inquiry, transforming "the conception of what ontology might be" (Malpas, 268, n10).

doubt that Hegel's conception of the inter-related character of self, other and world, has not only exerted a powerful effect on the history of modern philosophical thought, but that it is also an account which, in certain key aspects, can be seen to be mirrored in Davidsonian triangulation."¹²

Thus, we may conclude that Malpas—one of the foremost Davidson-interpreters—recommends that we conceive of triangulation as a transcendental condition for what content is for sapient creatures, as expressed in their linguistic communication. It is not only an epistemological bedrock for what we may have knowledge about; it is an ontological bedrock in the sense that without it the idea of content would be senseless.

This makes the question of ethics even more pertinent: does the ontological status of triangulation allow us to include an understanding of ethics in the triangulative landscape? There is nothing in Davidson's arguments of the fundamental role of triangulation that concerns whether there is a role also for ethics as part of it. But there is neither anything there that denies that there is such a role. His thoughts are concentrated on the epistemic consequences of triangulation. There is no speculation about ethics in Malpas' account either.

Let me then turn to the essay Bjørn Ramberg and I wrote about triangulation in the same volume as Malpas. Here we looked at how we could understand the triangulation thesis if we viewed it from the perspective of Robert B. Brandom's inferentialism.¹³

Our perspective was to locate what we called a *Radical Davidson* in the triangulative crossing lines between such a position, Brandomian inferentialism, and a conservative rendering of Davidson. This connects with the emphasis on construing the conceptual as a dynamic interaction.¹⁴ Our thought was that we simply cannot capture how creatures communicate successfully, relying on their environment in doing so, through merely delineating a causal pattern in non-intentional terms.

Thus, Bjørn and I moved our attention to the *social* aspect of triangulation, which is present from the beginning of our lives. When Davidson says that a child not yet into thought and speech, could not know by itself what in the environment it was responding to, it should not be taken as pertaining to the causal stream of stimuli hitting its senses, but as a claim to the effect that the child will not pay attention to a table or a chair in its vicinity, as long as they do not play any role in the child's

¹² Malpas, *op. cit.* 273.

¹³ Fergestad and Ramberg, 2011.

¹⁴ Cf. Fergestad and Ramberg, 2011, 223.

social world. The child has to *learn*—through learning to speak—what to respond to, and how to respond. And our responses as sapient creatures to environmental stimuli, once we *have* learnt to speak, for example classifying something as an object, must, according to Brandom, be stated and assessed in the space of reasons, i.e., in linguistic, inferential, discursive practice, as a *commitment* that can serve as and be in need of reasons.¹⁵ Someone's response to an external impression becomes conceptual content only when it is given the normative authority that the inferential discourse confers on it.

This view, we found, chimes better with Davidson's triangulation *examples* than it does with his general account. But Davidson underlines more clearly than Brandom that the socio-dynamic learning practices of triangulation are corporeal and not merely discursive, i.e., they include corporeal items, such as tables, soaps, etc. in the world of a child who is learning to convert the *sounds* 'table,' 'soap,' etc. into the *words* 'table,' 'soap,' etc.¹⁶ This takes us to the essence of Brandom's conception, namely that for this transition to happen, i.e., for sounds to become words and for actions to become right or wrong for a child, it must incarnate, as it were, the fundamental *normative* character of intentionality.¹⁷ And then, when the child gradually takes on the capability of acting normatively it has become *committed*, both to reason, typically the proprieties of discourse, and to acting morally right, not forgetting, though, that it is only up to the learning child itself to *undertake* the commitments to those normative proprieties it has learnt to acknowledge.¹⁸

Thus, through triangulating Conservative Davidson with Brandom to uncover Radical Davidson, we are taught to acknowledge the fundamental *normative* character of triangulation. It is not surprising. Even Conservative Davidson underlines that "the concepts we use to explain and de-

¹⁵ Cf. Brandom, 1994, 430.

¹⁶ Brandom too acknowledges that our "reliable differential responsive dispositions" to sensory impressions embody "corporeal" or "lumpy" items," as the result of causal processes by means of which impressions of these "items" are fed through our senses and into our linguistic, inferential processes, in the form of what he calls "non-inferential reports". E.g. Brandom, 1994, 332–33.

¹⁷ Fergestad and Ramberg, 2011, pp. 245–46. Davidson claims that once we are into intentionality we are not able to retrace the transition from non-intentionality to intentionality, where the base line of triangulation is strengthened to the point where it "becomes as thick as language" Cf. Davidson, 1999, 731.

¹⁸ The distinction between *acknowledging* a commitment and *undertaking* the commitment is essential to Brandom, while Davidson does not seem to pay attention to it.

scribe thought, speech, and action, are *irreducibly normative*.¹⁹ And since he included “concepts we use to explain and describe *action*” we should assume that their “irreducibly normative character” also applies to ethical concepts, since action and behavior are just what ethical concepts are about.

To bring more substance to this assumption, let us ask what we experience and what we think when we (as interlocutors) observe an action about which we correspond in judging it to be immoral. First, our reaction to the immoral action is *spontaneous*. It is not like we first observe the action and then, when reflecting on it, add an evaluative characterization to what we have already observed. The action is already constituted for us as ‘action’. The evaluative character is an integral, inseparable part of our first reaction. The action is immediately and spontaneously constituted for us as an *immoral* action.

How have we learnt that? It is obviously part of what we learn when a parent or teacher *sanctions* our responses to actions when we are children. To be trained into a culture means, not least, to be trained to take such reactions to heart and learn from them. The sanctioning does not distinguish between the action as a neutral, psychological event on the one hand, and its moral or immoral character on the other; we *immediately* praise the child for reacting rightly, e.g., condemning a father who beats his child. Or—we “punish” the child for reacting wrongly, e.g., for accepting the beating, say, by alleging that the child “deserved the beating.”

Such kinds of sanctioning initiate us into the conceptual world and culture we belong to, as the moral beings we become. Thus, the initiation is not merely about how the world becomes an epistemologically conceptual world to us; it also becomes a *morally* conceptual world to us, a world in which we are trained to gradually become autonomous creatures who are able to separate a good deed from an evil one, a good thought from an evil one or good behavior from evil behavior.²⁰ And in cases such as abortion, immigration, euthanasia, or calibration of judicial punishment of young criminals, we are trained to spontaneously acknowledge that the thought, idea or deed in question exposes a moral *dilemma*, although

¹⁹ Davidson, 1999a, 460. Davidson’s insistence about this claim is approved by most commentators, e.g., Kriegel, 2010, 185: “One of the most enduring elements of Davidson’s legacy is the idea that intentionality is inherently normative.”

²⁰ “Autonomous” is the key word here. It is our Kantian heritage that our distinguishing mark, as rational, sapient creatures of a civilized society, is that we are trained to make *autonomous* judgments and decisions.

it is a challenge to reach an agreement on what a good solution to the dilemma is.

The conclusion is that the *normative* aspects of the training and initiating process are just as fundamental as the epistemological ones. Learning to act and speak morally implies that we acquire the capacity and commitment to *judge* actions and behaviors on a normative scale; our own actions as well as actions performed by others.

Triangulation and ethics

However, there are still important moments to be clarified, and that introduces the second part of this essay.

First, when someone has been initiated into the culture of her community, she has, as indicated earlier, learnt to make assessments and judge deeds and thoughts as good or evil, and to use words, sentences, and concepts correctly about the act or the thought in ways that correlate with other interlocutors. This might be conceived of as indicating that our use of moral-conceptual rules is guided by social-linguistic conventions. However, conventionalism does not explain how word meaning is constituted.²¹ Rather, we must understand our use of words and terms in light of the dynamism of linguistic practices, and not as guided by fixed linguistic structures such as conventionalism. We constantly modulate and moderate our use of words and our language games, in accord with Davidson in “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs” as well as Ludlow in *Living Words*.²²

Next, what does it do to the triangulating interlocutors when the object, i.e., “the world” they triangulate with, is another intentional being, a person, who performed her action for a reason and is able to tell that reason in language. For the conceptual understanding to form properly, her response must be *integrated* into the interlocutors’ discourse about the action.

²¹ I do not engage in the Davidson–Dummett debate here regarding whether knowledge of linguistic conventions is essential to interpretive success. The Dummettian idea is that prior knowledge of conventions of linguistic usage plays a significant role in communication. We know something about the conventions with which our words are used, and Dummett alleges that this prior knowledge plays a significant practical role in interpreting them. In the face of this commonplace wisdom, Davidson insisted that such knowledge is neither necessary nor sufficient for communication, cf. Donald Davidson, 1984a and 1994 (e.g., p. 3), Michael Dummett, 1986, Bjørn Ramberg, 1988, and Lepore and Ludwig, 2007.

²² Davidson, 1986/2005, Ludlow, 2014.

There are many situations where this is not the case. We may face creatures that apparently act intentionally but are still beyond reach for mutual understanding. If we observe a male lion that has become the dominating male in a herd of lions and then kills the cubs of the former dominant male, we human beings may react morally to it and agree that it is dreadful. But we also know that the lion's world and life form is so different from ours that the idea of conferring our moral reaction on to the lion is absurd. We cannot know what it is to understand the lion's intentions, wherefore we replace them with our own beliefs and emotions, which might well be the result of triangulative exercises with other humans observing and communicating about why the lion acts like it does.²³ This is obvious when it comes to understanding lions and other animals that appear to act intentionally. But could a similar situation occur in encounters with other human beings? As already mentioned, it seems that Davidson accepts that possibility, i.e., that we—human beings of contemporary Western civilizations—may fail in attempts to understand human beings from “alien” cultures simply because their life forms are too different from ours.²⁴

Triangulating with a child might occupy a middle position here, in the sense that when we train a child by sanctioning its utterances, we teach it to acquire *our* conceptual world. Once the child has got it, it loses its

²³ Cf. the famous quote from Wittgenstein's *PI*, section 2 p. 190 ; “If a lion could talk, we could not understand him.” We might say the same about other animals whose behavior appears intentional, such as when a pack of orcas cooperate to “wave-wash” a seal away from a large ice floe on which it has taken refuge. The act is obviously intentional, but we still have no access to what the orcas think and communicate to coordinate their effort. Any kind of explanation we would like to give would be an explanation from *our* point of view.

²⁴ Cf. Daniel L. Everett, 2009, where he attempts to show that the language of the Piraha people in the Amazon jungle in Brazil is so different from the language he, an American missionary and his American family spoke, that it could not be translated directly. This led him to argue that Noam Chomsky's theory of a universal grammar could not be correct, an allegation that has been much contested, not least by Chomsky himself.

Cf. also the so-called Sapir-Whorf hypothesis—also known as the Theory of Linguistic Relativity—which states that “the grammatical and verbal structure of our language [...] determines how we perceive the world and thus our thoughts” (quote: simplypsychology.org). The hypothesis was originally not presented as a hypothesis at all by its presumed originators, Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf, and it is still contested. Sapir and Whorf found that the Hopi language had few nouns for describing things, but many verbs and words that describe movement. To them, this was as an indication of a limited presence of objects in the Hopi life world, while they thought there must be far more cases of movement. Source: Thomas Hylland Eriksen, 2024, p. 180.

access to how it experienced the world before the transition. The child has become one of us.

In our essay, Bjørn and I conceived Radical Davidson's triangulation figure as a social-dynamic figure established to say something about how the world becomes *our* world through basic forms of responsive, communicative behaviors—speech acts—between speakers who correlate their responses to their perceptions of the world. But it changes the game, as indicated, if the “feature” or “object” one responds to, is the actions of another intentional creature, i.e., a human being. Then, we cannot treat the situation as a “normal” triangulative situation, where two (or more) interlocutors triangulate with a non-living “object,” since the “object” understands her behavior and actions in a way she can express linguistically. What she says may differ from what the observing interlocutors think that they see. They need to pay attention, not least because she says it from a 1st person perspective. And they simply cannot ignore her utterances in their own mutual interpretation and communication about how she behaves and acts because what she says is more important. If they neglect doing this, they risk fending off an understanding that was not included in their own interpretation of the observed person's actions, and which might have changed their conceptual understanding of those actions.

The next moment I will consider is more fundamental: since triangulation initiates us into the world as a conceptual world, epistemologically and morally, and is basically about concept constitution, do we need moral and ethical *concepts* and *words* to be able to talk about or judge moral actions, behaviors, thoughts or ways of living? Must a moral discourse contain moral predicates or terms, for us to be able to identify it as moral?

Here, it is relevant to refer to a controversy in contemporary philosophy, particularly among interpreters of Wittgenstein. Sabina Lovibond (1983) argues that ethics needs linguistic categories that are recognizably moral, and that reflect an interest in the presence and distribution of the properties those predicates denote. Cora Diamond (1996) on the contrary argues that what makes a stretch of discourse moral is not the presence of moral predicates or terms within it; it is a matter of *use*.²⁵ She refers to stories we recognize as deeply moral, but which apply no moral predicates or concepts, such as Laura Ingall Wilders' *The Long Winter*, Primo Levi's *If This is a Man*, John Prebble's *The Highland Clearances*, and Leo Tolstoy's *Hadji Murat*. These stories, Diamond argues, organize a

²⁵ Diamond, 1996, 243–44

way of thinking and attending to particular situations and decisions that display a moral orientation to life: “Anything made of the resources of ordinary language may be brought in such a relation to our lives and actions and understanding of the world that we might speak of the thinking involved in that connection as “moral”. There is no limit to be set.” If a sentence or a word has a moral character, it arises not through its content but from its use on particular occasions.²⁶ Philosophers supporting this view claim that we need to “expand our inventory of forms of moral thought”,²⁷ and that we cannot “demarcate the legitimate subject-matter of moral philosophy by identifying certain obviously moral concepts or words, examining the ways in which they are used.”²⁸ In other words, discourses can be about morality regardless of which words and terms they apply.

In this Wittgensteinian perspective, ethics has no subject matter of its own body of truths.²⁹ Stephen Mulhall invokes Charles L. Stevenson, Stanley Cavell, and Alastair MacIntyre in claiming that there can be no such thing as meta-ethics. There is simply “no way to characterize the subject matter of moral philosophy that will not itself give expression to one’s own ethical interests and concerns.” We cannot coherently think of moral philosophy “as an ethically neutral enterprise [...] so characteristic of analytic moral philosophy in the first half of the twentieth century (and beyond).”³⁰ On this background, we should not think of moral philosophy as a separate sector of human existence or of philosophy, on the model of philosophy of language or philosophy of the mind.

The foregoing reflections have brought this essay’s theme—on whether Davidson’s triangulation figure allows an account of ethics—from a narrow priority on Davidson’s philosophy to a wider field in which philosophers like Cora Diamond, John McDowell, Stephen Mulhall, Edward Harcourt, and Alice Crary occupy central roles—with Wittgenstein looming in the background. Rather than considering ethics and moral philosophy as one branch of philosophy in parallel with others, we must think of it

²⁶ Diamond, *op. cit.* 248

²⁷ Alice Crary, 2007, 1. Edward Harcourt, 2019 takes an analogous position: “Long stretches of ordinary speech can be ethically inflected—can manifest the operation of an ethical sensibility—without containing *any* specialized vocabulary, thick or thin ...” Harcourt, 2019, 50, author’s italics.

²⁸ Harcourt *ibid.* See also Stephen Mulhall, 2002, 304.

²⁹ Cf. Diamond, 2000, 153

³⁰ Mulhall, 2002, 303

in line with how Wittgenstein conceived of it, as a *pervasive* dimension of life rather than a distinguishable region of it.

How does it now relate to Davidson and the question of whether triangulation can be seen as a universal figure also covering ethics? On the one hand, triangulation is universal in the sense that any human experience, knowledge or moral attitude is unthinkable without some form of experiential evidence and the discourses we sapient creatures have about it. Thought without experience is deceptive like a chimera; all our training and initiation into our culture and our world as children, and thus all we can know or have attitudes towards, results from encounters with the world, be it as some neutral object or as other creatures.³¹ On the other hand, the universality of triangulation as such may blind us to the enormous differences and versatility in actual language use, which is why Davidson's triangulation *examples* appear to be closer to accommodating that versatility than does his general account.

Wittgenstein admitted that even he, in the *Tractatus*, had not taken the consequence of the versatility and dynamism of language. He developed a critical stance to most traditional philosophy, for its attempts to say something *about* language *within* language and not appreciate that the "meta-concepts" of philosophical theory are ordinary words, regardless of how lofty they might appear. It is simply a misapplication of ordinary words when they are used to state philosophical positions, as if they are somehow at a higher, metaphysical level than other words. There are, on Wittgenstein's view, no principles, theories, or rules which have a "higher" status than other linguistic expressions, or which constitute some "foundational requirements" we should meet if we want to utter a true sentence, or to express true knowledge, or to justify what right or good action is. Of course, there are principles and rules in our languages, but their linguistic *roles* are not a question of requirements that our linguistic performances should meet from *outside* language. Their roles in our language games depend on how the games unfold and which interests we play out when playing them.³²

³¹ This shows another deep connection between Davidson and Kant, in the sense that it brings to light why Kant's three main works are titled *critiques*, respectively of pure reason, of practical reason, and of judgment. In all of these he wanted to show how reason is limited by our encounters with the world, as long as reason's purpose is to deal with and understand the world.

³² Cf. Cora Diamond's Wittgensteinian critique of metaphysics in the second Introduction to her *The Realistic Spirit*, as "the laying down of a requirement", even in cases where the

Wittgenstein questioned the prevalent idea that there must be something common to all that is denoted by a concept, for example the concept of 'games.' Instead, he argues that if one looks at all the cases of use, "you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that"³³ Instead of constructing philosophical theories, Wittgenstein time and again encouraged us to *look and see*. He affirms that the result of examining words with a many-faceted use is that "we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail,"³⁴ and he can think of no better expression to characterize their connections than "family resemblances", thus introducing a notion as important and wide-reaching as that of "language games." These and related concepts are not intended as theoretical concepts, on which Wittgenstein might have tried to build a semantic theory. Rather, we should see them as attempts to elucidate our language *use*, to help us see the enormous variation in how we use words and concepts, which is why he wants us to look at the use of a word when we want to understand its meaning. What is difficult then is to recognize that what lies before us *is* the ground, instead of pursuing the "illusory image of a greater depth [...] Our disease", he says, "is one of wanting to explain,"³⁵

When it comes to ethics, Stephen Mulhall and John McDowell endorse this perspective. Mulhall: "[...] any commitment to the need of moral theorizing would lead us to impose consistency and uniformity in the landscape of our moral lives, [while] the Wittgensteinian expectation is rather that a careful description of our lives with moral words would [...] reveal a multiplicity or variety of moral grammars, and [...] this variety needs no justification or alteration."³⁶ McDowell: "If one attempted to reduce one's conception of what virtue requires to a set of rules, then, however subtle and thoughtful one was in drawing up the code, cases would inevitably turn up in which a mechanical application of the code would strike one as wrong—and not necessarily because one had changed one's mind. Rather, one's mind on the matter was not susceptible of capture in any universal formula."³⁷

requirement is internal to the character of language as language, such as in the *Tractatus*. Diamond, 1991, 19–20.

³³ Wittgenstein, PI, §66, author's italics.

³⁴ Wittgenstein, PI, *ibid*.

³⁵ Wittgenstein, Remarks on the Foundation of Mathematics, §VI.31.

³⁶ Stephen Mulhall, 2002, 295.

³⁷ John McDowell, 1998, 57–8.

The use of moral terms and concepts is so varied and manifold that we cannot identify anything that is common, say, to all the ways we use terms like ‘care’ or ‘justice’, which is why Wittgenstein suggests the idea of “family resemblances” as an alternative to the idea that there must be an identifiable common feature in all the ways we use those terms. Within ethics, so-called “thin” concepts,³⁸ such as good, bad, permissible or obligatory, come with a huge variety of uses, and are therefore typical family resemblance concepts.

In a Davidsonian perspective, triangulation is required for understanding how we come to learn the correct use of a word or term, but although its purpose is not to tell or explain *what* correct use is, a fissure appears to open here, between the idea that triangulation gradually teaches us *the* correct use of a word, on the one hand, and the huge *variety* of correct ways of using family resemblance words, on the other. Triangulation shows that we learn the use of words by corresponding with others in how we use them, once we agree on what in the world we are using a word about. But when the word can be used to speak of a host of different things, as in family resemblance words, is it still compatible with the triangulation figure? Will the figure hold when the same word is applicable to many diverse experiential cases?

I will answer these questions by addressing three further issues:

1. The triangulation figure is about concept constitution: two or more interlocutors correlate their responses to whatever object they perceive at the crossing lines of the triangle, and the correlation primarily involves a discourse between the interlocutors *about* what they perceive. Through that discourse they normally reinforce the constitution of the concept that describes the perceived object. Or, in a few instances they may invent a new, relevant concept.³⁹ But when the *same* term is used for a *manifold* of objects, events, actions, processes, etc. of great variety, such as the concept of ‘games’, which Wittgenstein uses as example in the PI⁴⁰ or the ethical concepts of ‘justice’ or ‘care’, can we still rely on the triangulative figure to explain all these uses? Is it possible that we may triangulate all the pertinent “objects” with just one and the same term? Yes, that might be possible, but if so, it strongly augments the Brandomian, social-dynamic perspective Bjørn and I applied to trian-

³⁸ Cf. Bernard Williams, 1985.

³⁹ For example, in cases of new scientific discoveries, such as the concepts of quasars, black holes, dark matter or dark energy.

⁴⁰ Wittgenstein, PI § 66 ff.

gulation in the aforementioned essay. Because then, triangulation as a causal chain loses all significance. Learning the multiplicity and variety of uses that one broad, single term exhibits when one is a child—thinking of the relations between all those uses as family resemblances instead of one common feature—requires long-term training and careful sanctioning. Thus, we are entitled to assert that triangulation as it was originally conceived of by Davidson, is not completely wrong as a model of such training and learning, but neither may it be the optimal approach to understanding how the multiple and varied meaning of words and terms is constituted.

2. Ethics constitutes an even more difficult issue. For if we stick to Cora Diamond, Stephen Mulhall, Edward Harcourt, Alice Crary, and others who, based on Wittgenstein, show that the description of a moral action or a stretch of ethical reasoning does not need ethical words and concepts, we must ask, how do we then identify and describe the “object” we triangulate, say, a selfish action, a kind gesture, an evil thought, or an altruistic effort? What does it mean to correlate our responses to an action, a thought, an event, or else when there is no corresponding word or term to be applied that fixes the aboutness of the relation? Again, this does not mean that triangulation is superfluous. The stories and examples of moral content without moral terms, exemplified in Cora Diamond’s reference to certain literary works, all demonstrate that the moral content emerges from human beings’ encounters with the world, be it as a harsh winter or as a loved person you want to reach out to. So, there *is* a triangular relation here, but there is no particular word or term identifying the “object” of the encounter, so that the triangulating interlocutors appear not to be able to talk *about* it. Apparently. For we are in no way short of linguistic means in such situations. It is just that we do not need specific moral terms to speak of moral content; we are fully able to discuss it by using other words.⁴¹
3. We might come across situations in which the interlocutors and the person(s) they triangulate with are unable to correlate their responses

⁴¹ This does not mean, of course, that there *exist* no words or terms or concepts for whatever moral issue that has called upon our attention. The argument is that we do not *need* any particular moral word or term to identify and speak of whatever moral content we engage in. Edward Harcourt argues that it will often make the situation easier if we know a term that is dedicated to describing the moral issue at stake (Harcourt, 2019, 51 ff.). It just isn’t necessary.

into one shared response, not because their life worlds are too different, as with the Piraha people referred to earlier, but because their moral outlook is too wide apart. Cora Diamond addresses this issue in her essay “Truth in Ethics”, where she discusses a disagreement between David Wiggins and Bernard Williams in which they use the difference between the pro- and anti-slavery movements as example:⁴² “The pro-slavery and the anti-slavery people have very different systems of moral ideas, and to understand what is involved in their disagreement about slavery, it is not enough to see the heterogeneity of moral vocabulary—you have to see how their systems of moral ideas as a whole work against each other, despite sharing—in some sense sharing—such crucial notions as that of justice. They both *want* the concept of justice; they both take there to be something that is thinking well about justice in relation to slavery; they both want to make plain how they, as opposed to the people they disagree with, are thinking rightly about the justice of slavery”⁴³. This leads to Diamond emphasizing that what we see here is not just disagreement where we acknowledge that the person with whom we disagree is a *thinking* person, which implies that we do understand her standpoint, although we do not agree. The dispute is not about arguments for versus arguments against slavery; it is an incompatible difference between the moral points of view at stake, where the one part does not acknowledge and respect the otherness of the other—her equal claim to be taken seriously as someone who is attempting to say something meaningful. The moral points of view between the pro- and the anti-slavery people are fundamentally *irreconcilable*.⁴⁴

On the background of these three moments, must we concede that triangulation is not well suited to encompass ethics, since it, as a general, metaphysical figure, appears neither to be fitted to elucidate the huge variety of language use about ethical issues and dilemmas, nor the irreconcilability between conflicting moral viewpoints? Or should we rather say that triangulation as an ontological figure only requires that there must be an experiential basis for *any* use of language, pertaining to what we can know about the world, or to how we should live, behave, and act in it?

⁴² David Wiggins, 1995 and Bernard Williams, 1995.

⁴³ Diamond, 2019, 163. Cf. also Diamond, 1991a, 291–308.

⁴⁴ It is tempting to allude to the current polarization between Democrats and Republicans in us politics and the polarization in other nations, although it none of them are linked to the content of this essay.

Conclusion 1

Obviously, triangulation is a figure that reminds us that our intentionality—our ability to learn to speak and thus being initiated into the world as conceptual—depends both on us being able to discourse with other language users and doing it by sharing our interaction with the world outside the mind of each one of us. So, as a general figure, triangulation has a purpose. But its generality is not well suited to grasp the great variety and multiplicity of language *use*, where one and the same word or term may have so many uses that we are not able to grapple with them in one effort. Neither is it well suited to explain why we may have irreconcilable viewpoints about the *same* encounter with the world, especially regarding normative issues, such as a moral action, a moral life, and moral thoughts, or about politics at national and international levels, or for that matter about the value of unspoilt nature.

A conclusion is thus that Wittgenstein, although he, as Davidson, did not write much about ethics, has demonstrated, with help from his interpreters, that *general*, theoretical accounts about language use, be they semantic or grammatic—and the triangulation thesis is a general thesis—lose out when confronted with linguistic practice when we look closely at the vastly multiple ways in which we use it.

Allow me a final caveat, in which I close the circle from Bjørn's and my 2011-essay and draw another parallel to Brandom, who, in an essay from 2019, "Some Strands of Wittgenstein's Normative Pragmatism and Some Strands of his Semantic Nihilism",⁴⁵ discusses Wittgenstein's reluctance to accept general theories about semantics and language use. Against, Brandom argues that we need in philosophy theoretical accounts of language use *in addition* to Wittgenstein's stern pragmatism.

The later Wittgenstein's conviction that we should give up the notion of meaning in favor of that of use, implies, according to Brandom, that it is unclear whether Wittgenstein regards semantics as a legitimate enterprise at all. Wittgenstein's reason is that everything philosophers need to understand discursive intentionality is available directly at the level of pragmatics, without the need to drill down theoretically to discern a deeper semantic level of explanation. Semantic theorizing will simply not improve our understanding of discursive practices. And like Quine, Wittgenstein thinks that we should give up the concept of meaning as an object of scientific theorizing about the use of linguistic expressions.

⁴⁵ Disputatio 8, no. 9, 2019, 1–29.

In Brandom's view, this amounts to a through-going semantic nihilism. He admits that he has long been skeptical about Wittgenstein's semantic skepticism, and has criticized him for not offering a systematic theory of the core work-day practices of using sentences and terms in asserting and referring, accounts of which he has offered in *Making It Explicit* and *Between Saying and Doing*, by developing rationalist, pragmatist semantic theories that he sees as falling under the Wittgenstein-inspired rubric of "use theories of meaning",⁴⁶ although distinguished from the more classical pragmatism he associates with Wittgenstein.

In the rest of the essay Brandom carefully and sympathetically assesses Wittgenstein's reasons for rejecting semantic theorizing. Rather than renouncing them, Brandom accepts that Wittgenstein's reasons are imperative, although they do not rule out, as Brandom sees it, the need for theoretical accounts. He endorses Wittgenstein's claim that we need not try to look beyond the way linguistic expressions are used and therefore can avoid the urge, common to many philosophers, to penetrate the linguistic surface in the belief that we can dig down to "an essence that is hidden from us."⁴⁷

Brandom accepts that the notion of "family resemblances", which advises that the kinds into which linguistic practices and the vocabularies caught up in them are functionally sorted—in boxes labelled 'game', 'description', 'assertion', 'observation' and so on—does not admit specification in terms of underlying principles specifiable in other vocabularies. Semantics can proceed only by theoretically privileging some *non*-privileged aspects of the use of a vocabulary, generating philosophical puzzlement about the intelligibility of the rest. On this conception, says Brandom, the classical project of semantic theory is a disease that rests on a fundamental misunderstanding that can be alleviated only by replacing concern with meaning by concern with use. He acknowledges that there is real force to this diagnosis and accentuates the malleable character of linguistic practice—correspondent with Davidson in "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs"—the plasticity of which signifies that any established pattern of usage is regularly built on and transformed by novel contingencies arising from their usage, a necessary feature of the practices in which they are implicit.

⁴⁶ Cf. Brandom, 1994 and Brandom, 2008.

⁴⁷ Wittgenstein PI, § 92, Brandom, 2019, 13. In the same context, Brandom refers to other PI paragraphs: § 90, § 109, § 120, and § 594.

Still, Brandom presents two reasons for not completely agreeing with Wittgenstein: the first being that there is a need to try to regiment a normative theoretical vocabulary for a general characterization of the use of linguistic expressions. The second is to use inference rather than representation as the principal semantic meta-concept.⁴⁸ He suggests that his own version of pragmatics can be combined with Wittgenstein's, and he wants to give "systematic theoretical shape to [...] such broad categories of the use of linguistic expressions as asserting, inferring, describing, and referring". He thinks that "the perennial possibility of the eruption of new species need not disrupt the understanding we get of these activities by looking to core cases and providing local commentaries on those general models".⁴⁹

Conclusion 2

Brandom's motivating hope and goal of taking a different theoretical path in *Between Saying and Doing*, is that the combination of a systematic deontic normative pragmatic theory, an inferentialist semantic theory, and an expressivist account of logical, semantic and intentional, modal, and normative vocabularies provides a much more flexible and capacious tool for making sense of the norms that implicitly govern our multifarious linguistic practices than the theories of its pioneering representationalist forebears. Thus, the conclusion Brandom draws from Wittgenstein's considerations and reminders is not that we need no philosophical theories about our discursive practice, but that we need more of them.

And the conclusion I want to draw, as the final remark of this essay, is that Davidson's theory of triangulation, although not capable of elucidating the full span of our multifarious linguistic practices, especially the span of our ethical language games, still is a theory that makes metalinguistic sense, as a theoretical expression of the fact that linguistic practice without encounters with the external world *outside* language, is senseless.

⁴⁸ Cf. Brandom, 2019, 24–25.

⁴⁹ Brandom op. cit. 22.

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