

## **I Interpret You: Davidson and Buber**

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According to the so-called constitutive outlook on linguistic communication, meaning does not exist prior to communicative interaction but is, rather, constituted through such interaction. (1) Typically, notions from the social sphere are appealed to in order to account for the constitution of meaning: Philosophers and linguists of diverse orientations and backgrounds maintain that concepts such as social convention and shared culture are required for a constructivist perspective on meaning and communication.

American philosopher Donald Davidson diverges from this way of thinking. According to his view of communication and meaning, intersubjective contact between speakers is both necessary and sufficient for linguistic meaning and mental content to arise, and this in a way that does not presuppose social convention. From early on in his career he maintains that those who explain communication in terms of convention have things upside down: communicative interaction is more fundamental, and convention-governed social structure comes later.

Although Davidson's voice is distinctive, his intersubjectivist (as opposed to socially oriented) outlook on communicative (and, more broadly, human) interaction is by no means unique. There are other philosophers and communication theorists who share with him this middle ground between individualistic and social views of man, and it is arguably of value to relate and compare their ideas. One such philosopher, who is seldom associated with Davidson, is Martin Buber. Like Davidson's circle that encompasses interpreter and interpreted, Buber's I-you relation arises intersubjectively, it does not lean on social structure, and it is essential for our humanity. Clearly there are great differences between Davidson and Buber, but charting both these differences and the affinities between them will be shown here to be of interest and value for those who take seriously the intersubjectivist stance that they share. Following this trajectory, in the first section of this paper we review Davidson's general outlook on linguistic communication, and we discuss in more detail Davidson's intersubjectivist, nonconventional

approach to language and thought. Then, in the second section of the paper we begin pursuing a comparison of Davidson's system of ideas and some themes that can be found in Buber, and we show how the philosophy of each of these thinkers can help enrich and develop the philosophy of the other.

*Davidson's View of Linguistic Communication.* Donald Davidson was born in 1917 and died in 2003. His unified yet variegated philosophy is concerned, among other things, with action, rationality, mind, and knowledge, but at the core of his thought is his outlook on language. Davidson's thinking in this domain was greatly influenced by the philosophy of W. V. O. Quine--in particular, by Quine's intersubjectivist, communication-oriented outlook on linguistic meaning, as first presented in his *Word and Object*. (2) Quine construes language in behavioristic terms, as a system of dispositions the function of which is communication. Therefore what our utterances mean, he says, must be exhausted by what is available to linguistic communicators when they face each other and interact--any other assignment of meaning to speech would outstrip its communicative function. In order better to delineate what is publicly available in linguistic interaction Quine suggests that we consider a simple scenario he calls "radical translation": A linguist meeting a complete alien in the jungle and trying to break into his language, and this without help of any of the crutches that are often used to achieve such a feat, such as dictionaries, shared culture, or bilingual intermediaries. The linguist has at his disposal only what he can observe, that is, the linguistic behavioral patterns of his interlocutor and the way these are related to the alien's other actions and to the environment. Davidson concurs with the intersubjectivist core of Quine's conception of language. However, the way he construes human communication is distinct from Quine's in several important respects, and hence his conceptualization of the thought experiment presented above differs from Quine's as well. Davidson calls his own version of this scenario "radical interpretation." (3) One important difference between Davidson's construal of linguistic communication and Quine's has to do with the way they account for the connection between language and world. Davidson maintains it is a mistake of Quine's to describe me as translating your language into mine when I try to understand you. Instead, understanding someone's speech should be thought of as being able to associate his utterances with the surrounding world, which is surely what he is practically interested in. Such an association between the other's language and the world must surely be carried out

using my own language, but its goal is not a match between languages, as the term translation suggests. How should we conceptualize the required interpretive association between language and world? Not through mentalist notions of representation, says Davidson--these are not publicly available in linguistic interaction and therefore cannot constitute meaning. Instead, he appeals to the notion of truth--relying, in part, on Alfred Tarski's formal treatment of the notion -- and argues that I can be said to understand the literal meaning of your utterances if I am able systematically to assign truthconditions to your sentences. (4)

The constructivist aspect of Davidson's view should be noted here. In his view it is not that radical interpretation captures the meaning that is already there in a given speaker's utterances prior to interpretation. Rather, interpretation helps establish the truth-functional connection between the speaker's utterances and the world, in the way outlined above, and hence communicative interaction is constitutive for such meaning to arise. (5)

A second key feature of Davidson's notion of radical interpretation is the role it allocates to propositional thought. Although he construes linguistic meaning as arising from intersubjective interpretative interaction, as we saw above, Davidson is no behaviorist and relegates a central role in his philosophy to mental states--in particular, to propositional states, such as beliefs and desires. However, he rejects the view that mental content exists independently of linguistic interaction and is merely given expression through language--this view is inconsistent with his constitutive view of communication, as presented above. Instead, Davidson holds that mental content and linguistic meaning are essentially interdependent, and that interpretation -- that is, communicative interaction -- helps constitute both. Thus when I break into your language in interpretation I assign not only meaning to your utterances, but also content to your beliefs and desires that are interconnected with your speech. For example, when I take you to hold true a sentence with certain meaning I assign you the belief in the content that it expresses, as we typically believe what we hold true. And, as noted in the previous paragraph with respect to linguistic meaning, this assignment of content is constitutive: You could not have had the mental states you have without being communicatively engaged with other people.

A third trajectory in which Davidson goes beyond Quine, which will only be mentioned here, is the connection he makes between the interpretation of language and the rationalization of action. According to his view, both are part of a unified interpretational structure, through which meaning is assigned to linguistic utterances, content is ascribed to mental states, and actions are rationalized--that is, related to the beliefs and desires that give rise to them, both as reasons and as causes. (6)

Radical interpretation, as outlined above, is at the core of Davidson's philosophy. Throughout his philosophical development he has elaborated and refined this notion, and derived from it a variety of philosophical positions and consequences regarding a series of central problems in the philosophy of language, of mind, and beyond. Here we turn to trace one of the consequences of Davidson's basic tenets regarding the foundations of language--the marginal role that he allocates to convention in his account of linguistic communication. Social conventions govern and regulate patently all domains of human life: Implicitly acknowledged norms or explicitly stated rules are to be found in every context, pertaining to all aspects of our existence. As such, they have been the subject of extensive philosophical discussion. Among the various distinctions that are made in the context of this discussion is the important one between constitutive and regulative rules. (The differences between rules and conventions will not concern us here – our discussion applies to both.) Constitutive rules that govern a certain practice are essential for this practice--without the conventions that define it, said practice would not exist. A typical example here are games like chess--the rules of chess define the practice of playing the game. Regulative conventions, on the other hand, govern an activity that can be identified even before these conventions are applied to it – conventions of this kind merely regulate such an activity rather than constitute it. One example of rules of this type are traffic rules: Surely the practice of motorized transportation can be made sense of even prior to the rules that are meant to facilitate it (and are not always obeyed). Another example, given by Davidson, is the practice of eating: In all cultures this practice is governed by innumerable laws and conventions, and yet it has a core that can be articulated independently of its social regulation. (7) And what about linguistic conventions? Surely language use is replete with conventions, but are they of the constitutive or the regulative kind? Several philosophers who account for meaning in intersubjective terms appeal to the notion of convention as a

key concept in their account – they view convention as constitutive for linguistic meaning. Thus, at least according to some interpretations, Wittgenstein subscribes to this outlook in his remarks on language games, which (like games such as chess) are constituted through conventional rules. (8) Dummett and Searle contend that the very basic illocutionary acts of making an assertion and issuing an order, for example, need to rely on convention in order to be performed: Without an appropriate convention such acts would not be taken by their audiences to have the required properties. (9) Similarly, Brandom conceives of linguistic meaning as being constituted by a conventional system of social commitments and entitlements (which, in turn, are constantly transformed through linguistic interaction). (10) Davidson's view of language, on the other hand, is different. Probably contrary to conventional wisdom, he maintains that linguistic conventions are regulative, not constitutive: They do indeed help facilitate linguistic communication, but such communication does not require them. In other words, from Davidson's perspective speech is more like eating than playing chess! His grounds for holding this view are closely related to radical interpretation, as elaborated above. Such interpretation does not rely on any shared conventions – not by speaker and interpreter, nor by either of them and a linguistic community they belong to. All that is required for radical interpretation is that one individual make use of his language (as a system of communicative behaviors, holistically interpreted by others) in order to keep track of what the other says, believes, and wants. In order for this interaction to succeed, the interpreter and interpreted must have a lot in common (see discussion of the principle of charity below), but they do not have to share a language in the sense of a convention-governed system. Surely it cannot be denied that linguistic conventions are of value-- it is due to their existence within linguistic communities that we can typically have a very good idea how to interpret the next person we encounter in the street, and this without making any significant interpretative effort. However, as we saw above Davidson sees this as a convenience that is not necessary for linguistic communication to take place, and, what is more, he claims that in actuality we share conventions to a much lesser degree than what is usually believed. (11) Each of us, he says, speaks his own distinctive idiolect, which is by itself much less stable and constant than we think, and hence every linguistic encounter involves a substantial contextual calibration--and creation--of expectations that are not governed by conventions. Such situations of meaning-negotiation are the rule rather than the exception, Davidson says: Contextual

understanding is the core of linguistic communication rather than a problematic procedure we must fall back on when conventions fail. As he says, "philosophers who make convention a necessary element in language have the matter backwards. The truth is rather that language is a condition for having conventions." (12) In order both to illustrate and support this position of Davidson's with respect to language, it may be of value to draw a comparison between linguistic communication and another phenomenon--the exertion of violence. Violence is typically manifested in the relations among subjects, although surely there are cases of self-harm, as there are cases of communication with self. Also, it is clearly the case that since the dawn of history violence is socially and conventionally managed and governed, through innumerable norms, conventions, and laws. However--and this point is key--is this to say that violence, as a form of interaction between individuals, is constituted by the conventions that are associated with it, in presumably all human societies? The answer to this question is arguably negative. Violence does not need social structure in order to exist – it is regulated by such structure but is not constituted by it. Violence appears among humans and other animals in the space of intersubjectivity, as a basic component of this space that does not rely in a necessary way on convention. Of course, some manifestations of violence are dependent on convention and social structure, but clearly some are not. For example, some manifestations of intentional causing of bodily pain that can be observed in humans and all across the animal kingdom can arguably be characterized as violence without such characterization relying on social context.

It is a consequence of Davidson's position, then, that there is affinity between linguistic communication (and communication in general, for that matter) and violence. Both phenomena arise intersubjectively, in a way that does not presuppose structured, convention-based sociability but rather underlies such sociability. Of course, the close interconnections between violence and speech have been the subject matter of endless studies. In particular, it is common knowledge that some forms of speech consist in violence – verbal violence – and some acts of violence are vehicles of communication. But Davidson's standpoint helps us appreciate the underpinnings of these much elaborated connections by placing both phenomena close to each other, at the nexus of human interaction. This continuity between speech and violence adds another dimension, or twist, to von Clausewitz's famous dictum that "war is the

continuation of policy by other means": The affinity between war and policy, as socially elaborate manifestations of violence and speech, can be seen to mirror the affinity between these phenomena at the intersubjective level. A similar case could be made for other forms of interaction, such as care, attraction, play, display, and sexuality. In all of these social practices, an intersubjective sphere of action underlies a subsequently developed superstructure of social conventions. In the natural law tradition, the sense of justice is also seen as in this way rooted in non-conventional, organic realities. We have thus presented in this section Davidson's intersubjective outlook on linguistic communication and illustrated this outlook by making an analogy between communication and other manifestations of intersubjectivity. In the next section of the paper we compare the Davidsonian conception of communicative interaction with another perspective on the interaction between subjects.

*Buber's I-You Relation and Radical Interpretation.* Martin Buber (1878-1965) was a multifaceted intellectual. He was a writer, a researcher of literature and religion, an educator, a political activist, and a philosopher. Buber's best-known philosophical text is *I and Thou*, which he himself viewed as the cornerstone of his philosophical work--in particular, of his dialogical outlook on human interaction. (13) In the second part of this paper we present some of Buber's key ideas in *I and Thou*, and we show their basic affinity to some of the themes in Davidson's philosophy, as discussed above. In particular, we acknowledge the great differences between the two thinkers but argue that notwithstanding these differences, their joint consideration is of value. As is well known, Buber begins his treatise with the claim that human being stand in two basic types of relations to the world and what is in it: I-it and I-you. (14) The relation I-it obtains between the human being and objects of various kinds--inanimate objects, persons (when we treat them as objects), and even abstract objects, such as ideas. This relation involves categorization, conceptualization, manipulation, and estrangement, and the way it is described by Buber bears some similarity to other (mainly negative) visions of the way persons approach their environment and fellow living creatures in modern society--visions offered, for example, by feminist and anti-capitalist critics of Western culture. It is important to point out that Buber holds the I-it relation to be a necessary part of human life: "And in all the seriousness of truth, hear this: without It man cannot live. But he who lives with It alone is not a man." (15) Without it, life could not be what it is. Yet it is

also the case that this relationship fails to do justice to the full reality of what it means for anything, not just human beings, to be.

Buber's I-you relation is wholly different in character, although its exact nature is a matter of controversy. It is a relation of acknowledgment, affinity, and intimacy that may obtain between people, but also between man and nature (as a whole, or parts thereof, such as a cat or a tree), as well as between man and God. I-you is not a feeling we have toward the other, nor an interest that we have in one of his or her aspects, but rather a direct connection that involves the other as a whole and as this particular existing reality present here and now. The basic term Buber uses for this relation is that of the "encounter," and the basic spatial metaphor that of "over-against": in the encounter with someone who is over-against me, I meet and encounter this being in his, her, or its uniqueness and wholeness. (16) Such an encounter is constitutive for the formation of an I. The I emerges from the I-you encounter that the child and primitive man have with their surroundings, a fact that allows the development of the instrumental I-it approach of experience and use as well. Also, to some degree the I-you relation must be reciprocal, although it does not have to be symmetric. And although it is essential for our humanity, the existence of I-you relations cannot be taken for granted: They may quickly evolve into I-it relations and in fact will do so inevitably, but the emergence of the I-you relation is always possible. The I-it relation is the relation of instrumentality and partiality, which pervades all aspects of life and which, in a play on the German word *fahren* (to fare or to drive) he associates with experience (*Er-fahrung*), as moving across the appearance of things. The distinction between I-you, an internal relation, and I-it, an external relation, is thus captured by the distinction between *Begegnung* (encounter) and *Erfahrung* (experience), used in the precise sense that excludes that we speak of an encounter as an experience:

It is said that man experiences his world. What does that mean? Man travels over the surface of things and experiences them. He extracts knowledge about their constitution from them: he wins an experience from them. He experiences what belongs to the things. But the world is not presented to man by experiences alone. These present him only with a world composed of It and He and She and It again. (17)



For Buber, writing in a religious context, it is only the relation to the divine that is always of the I-you nature, or else it is not there. This means for Buber that speaking "about" God is impossible if it is not also at the same time a speaking with God; here lies the basis for Buber's Judaic critique of the idea of philosophical theology, which Levinas later made into the foundation of his critique of metaphysics as solely concerned with the I-it perspective on being. When God responds to Moses's question for his name (Ex. 3:14, "I am that I am"), we encounter the fullness of divine being and at the same time realize that outside the context of this concrete speech act, the dialogic address, such an encounter is impossible and talk of God remains abstract. The name of God cannot be abstracted from the I-you relation. The use that was made of this verse to ground the distinction between essence and existence and affirm the identity of these in God (his essence [what-ness] is his existence [that-ness]) fails to grasp the fundamental fact about God, that he is never "it" and we are never "it" for him. It must be noted, however, that the familiar distinction between essence and existence does capture part of the difference between the I-it and I-you relations, since the I-it relation always involves a limited or partial perspective on the other (and therefore also on the

I, who is also limited in this type of relationship), whereas the I-you relation is a relation to the whole of the other's individual existence. In classical (Thomist) metaphysics, essence is a limitation of the act of existence, with only God participating wholly and fully in the act of existence, so in an unlimited way. To the extent to which the being of finite entities is always limited, the I-you relation will also always be finite, and where it exists, it does so because the absolute or divine you "stands behind it." Hence it would be possible to develop Buber's ideas in the direction of pantheism.

As already noted above, much of Buber's later thought developed from this early work. In particular, his elaborate discussion of the notion of dialogue stems from his dual picture of the way man is related to the world. In numerous essays he describes different forms of dialogue, he diagnoses the obstacles due to which true dialogue is difficult to achieve in modern society, and he explicates what such true dialogue involves, by his lights--for example, a holistic, full consideration of the other and an openness to bidirectional influence and change. (18) Also, Buber applies his notion of dialogue in such diverse arenas as the philosophy of education, on the one hand, and political theory and practice, on the other.

(Buber spent the later part of his life in Jerusalem and continuously promoted dialogue and reconciliation between Jews and Arabs.) It is this notion of dialogue, of which Buber's discussion of the I-you relation was a forerunner, that attracts most of the attention of communication scholars to his work. (19) We believe that even this very brief outline of Buber's thought--in particular, the role played by the I-you relation in it--is sufficient for a key affinity between Davidson and Buber to emerge. Both philosophers view intersubjective connection with the other as constitutive for personhood. In Davidson such connection is interpretation, which is both necessary and sufficient for linguistic meaning and mental content. In Buber the I-you relation underlies the formation of full human subjectivity. Thus both philosophers belong to the intersubjectivist camp, as characterized above. That is, both hold that the individual is not self-sufficient with respect to his human character, and yet neither construes social structure as necessary for the formation of such character. Rather, both think of the local, direct connection between one creature and another as giving rise to subjectivity. What is more, it seems as if both assign to language a key role in this constitutive interaction: In Davidson linguistic interpretation is central for the constitution of propositional thought, and in Buber the metaphysically fundamental I-you relation is first presented as being couched in language: "The attitude of man is twofold, in accordance with the twofold nature of the primary words which he speaks"; and "When a primary word is spoken the speaker enters the word and takes his stand in it." (20) Also: "When Thou is spoken, the speaker has no thing; he has indeed nothing. But he takes his stand in relation." (21)

Having noted this basic affinity between Davidson and Buber, we should straightforwardly acknowledge the deep and numerous differences between them. For one thing, their backgrounds are almost completely foreign to each other: Davidson's thought is embedded in twentieth-century analytic philosophy, while Buber's writing is rooted in Continental philosophy as well as Jewish thought and religion. The styles of their writing are radically different as well: Davidson is argumentative and systematic, according to the conventions of the analytic tradition, while Buber is often described as more poetic and less rigorous. These more general differences come into play when we compare the basic intersubjective relations that play respective key roles in Davidson's and Buber's philosophies. Davidson's radical interpretation is described in intellectualized, rational terms: It is a systematic

attempt to assign meaning and content to another person's speech and mental states, on the basis of intersubjectively available data. The formal, rational aspects of the enterprise could have motivated Buber, if he ever had a chance to consider radical interpretation, to characterize it as an I-it relation--it is an attempt to locate the other within a broader, shared environment and thereby explain him and account for his behavior; the question that appears to motivate Davidson is clearly an instrumental one: how to make sense of the other's utterances in the context of shared practice, utterances that are presented as facts encountered in a world of facts. As noted above, for Buber the I-you relation is entirely different. It is supposed to reach the other and connect to him in a way that goes beyond what is observable--to be a relation that cannot be reduced or analyzed and has to be understood on its own terms. Buber is sometimes described as characterizing this relation in mystic terms, because the reference to the dimension of the absolute is constitutive for the I-you relation, an orientation that is clearly alien to Davidson. (22) Furthermore, what was depicted above as a common reliance on language in the account of intersubjectivity turns out, under scrutiny, to be another locus of disagreement between Buber and Davidson. Buber allows I-you relations between human and non-human entities, and thus when he describes such relations as dialogical, couched in words, he seems to have in mind a broad conception of language, which goes beyond the tangible linguistic expression that Davidson considers. It seems that Buber is thinking of linguistic expression as itself the limited form (the it-manifestation) of a more basic notion of language or speech, which is the dimension of the concrete encounter between being and being itself. Just as Davidson holds we "have the matter backward" when we claim language needs conventions, so Buber holds we have the matter backward if we assume that the dimension of the concrete encounter ("standing in the basic word") needs linguistic expression.

Once these significant differences between the two philosophers are acknowledged it may seem that, notwithstanding the fact that they occupy a common general area in logical space, they are too far apart to merit joint consideration. However, we argue this is not the case, and in the remainder of this paper we suggest several ways in which each philosopher's thought might benefit from being considered jointly with that of the other.

One such trajectory has to do with the nature of language. For Buber, language in the literal sense is not necessary for some form of the I-you relation to obtain. Moreover, Buber holds that in some cases language consists in an obstacle for the formation of such a relation, due to its socially constructed nature: The rigid, socially induced structure of language is the very tool with which we look at the world around us through the I-it prism, and hence it does not serve well for the intimate, local I-you connection.

However, this view of language presupposes the very tenet that Davidson rejects. As we saw in section 1 above, Davidson repudiates the idea that linguistic communication is essentially conventional--in fact, he even downplays the role of convention in actual, extant use of language. Instead, Davidson maintains that linguistic communication is a matter of local, direct give-and-take between interpreter and interpreted, which takes into account the context of their interaction and their idiosyncrasies as creatures with distinctive behaviors, beliefs, and desires. We suggest that if this Davidsonian outlook is accepted, then language can accommodate in a much more natural way the positive role allocated to it by Buber (that is, a vehicle for establishing an I-you connection) and be freed from some of the detrimental baggage that Buber thinks it carries. Indeed, we can see both thinkers as pointing our attention to an aspect of how we relate to each other and the world that is part of language, perhaps in a sense even the root of language, but that has nothing to do with the dimension of code or representation. This is the space of the free encounter, which is not the same as a causally determined nexus of events, as in a natural process or social task, but rather a moment in which two meet and something can happen. This is the dimension of temporality. Buber explicitly speaks of the encounter as the sphere of the present, and the I-it relation as belonging to the past, when things have become (so experience is always of the past): "True beings are lived in the present, the life of objects is in the past." (23) Temporality is more basic to language than the dimension of code. The codified aspect of the encounter, in the form of linguistic convention, is really a matter of historical consolidation (pastness) that is handed on as always already existing at each encounter, each singular new occasion of communication, where the structure might, and often indeed does, change, under the requirements or opportunities present in the occasion. The dimension of the encounter, and hence the "speaking of the basic word" (Buber) or "radical

interpretation" (Davidson) is temporally associated with the future, with anticipation. The limits of my language are thus, for Buber and Davidson, not the limits of my world; or, rather, the communicative act is always at least a possible moving beyond the limits of linguistic conventions because it is never entirely dependent on them. (24)

Another way in which Buber's outlook may benefit from its association with Davidson's is the following. Due to the weight put by Buber on dialogue his position is naturally associated with other dialogical conceptions of communication, according to which in dialogue we overcome various kinds of barriers and get direct access to each other's mentality or inner self. As forcefully argued by Peters, this conception of communication is highly problematic for various reasons. (25) However, the problems of this transfer-oriented view of communication do not affect Buber because, in fact, his construal of dialogue (at least as derived from his I and Thou) is distinct from the dialogical theories mentioned above. Buber's dialogue is rooted in the I-you relation, which is a type of connection to the other, not a privileged epistemic access to the other. It relies not on more information but on a different ethical outlook on what is already present. This version of dialogue coheres with Davidson's interpretivist approach to linguistic communication. Davidson too does not think that communication consists in privileged access to the other's already existing mentality. Rather, it is a stance that both allows and requires one to consider the other in a special way--as a candidate for radical interpretation and thus as this particular someone, freely encountered. Thus Davidson's interpretational process, if it goes both ways, may readily be described as dialogue, but it is not a dialogue of the unrealistic kind considered in the previous paragraph, involving perfect mutual epistemic access. Instead, it may be called "interpretational dialogue," which is arguably more in the spirit of Buber and thus may be of use in elucidating (at least one thread in) his thought.

This very notion--of interpretational dialogue--may also be of use in stressing an aspect of Davidson's view that is arguably played down in some of his writings. Davidson very often talks of radical interpretation as a unidirectional process: One person is the interpreter and another interpreted. However, as elaborated by Davidson himself, this is clearly not the case--not in actuality, and not in principle. (26) Rather, for the context-sensitive, localized aspects of interpretation to be manifested it is

required that both parties to the process be both interpreters and subject to interpretation; otherwise the required give-and-take cannot materialize. Thus Davidson too offers us, in fact, dialogical interpretation--a process that goes back and forth, like the one depicted by Buber.

Finally, we turn to the ethical aspects of dialogue and interpretation. For Buber, responding and responsibility cannot be isolated from each other. (27) The dialogical relation is intrinsically an ethical relation, and the ethical relation of recognition requires, vice versa, dialogue insofar as it is grounded in the present act of speaking the basic word I-you--outside that relation we perhaps have moralism, but no ethical relation. Davidson ignores patently all such aspects and describes the process of radical interpretation as being independent of any ethical commitments. This fact is most perspicuous when we consider Davidson's appeal to the notion of charity. (28) Davidson is famous for the key role this notion plays in his work, but this role is devoid of any ethical content. For Davidson, interpretational charity is a precondition for successful interpretation, and it requires from an interpreter to ascribe to the person in front of him beliefs that are mostly true (by the interpreter's lights, of course), inferential logicity, and practical rationality (again, by the interpreter's judgments). Without such charity there would be no end to possible interpretations, which, in turn, would make linguistic communication impossible and incoherent. But does charity in this sense give rise to an ethical dimension of radical interpretation, that is, some kind of ethical commitment, or acknowledgment? The answer to this question, which is never considered by Davidson, seems to be negative. Indeed, some have argued that, in fact, this very principle is ethically problematic, as it incorporates an imperialistic presupposition that the person I am interpreting must be very similar to me in order to have meaningful language and thought at all. (29)

A concrete context where Davidson gives clear expression to his view that interpretation in general (rather than the principle of charity in particular) is ethically neutral is when he considers nonspeaking animals. (30) Admittedly, he says, such animals cannot be subject to radical interpretation, and hence, according to his philosophy, they do not have propositional thoughts and desires. However, contrary to what some may suggest this does not imply that we do not have ethical commitments toward them. If anything, their mute susceptibility to pain may give rise to ethical demands from us that are no weaker in force than any others. Notwithstanding these (mostly implicitly held) views of Davidson, the joint

consideration of his philosophy and Buber's suggests the following, radically different approach: To engage in interpretative dialogue with someone, to ascribe to him beliefs and desires, must involve an ethical stance. To interpret something is to treat it as someone, as a candidate for communication, coordination, and cohabitation in a shared environment, and therefore the decision to engage in interpretation has an ethical aspect--it is a decision to include someone in the circle of those who not only have propositional beliefs, desires, and language but also ethical standing that needs to be reckoned with. The moment something becomes a candidate for radical interpretation instead of prediction or manipulation, my attitude toward it becomes one of considering this being as having a particular existence. I approach it, as Buber says, not as an instance of a general kind, but as this being. The interpretational stance is not limited to a scientistically oriented

endeavor of trying to find order in a certain creature's behavior but also involves some aspects of the I-you relation that Buber talks about.

Note that we are not concerned here with the interpretation and calibration of ethical evaluations--in particular, with the question whether Davidsonian charity requires that we ascribe to the other evaluative judgments that are similar to ours. Rather, we are asking here about the very act of interpretation: Does it entail any ethical commitments toward its target? In the spirit of Buber (as well as others, such as Levinas (31)) our answer is positive: The acknowledgment of someone's mentality arguably entails ethical consequences. Davidson's philosophy is not concerned with these consequences, but there do not seem to exist any tenets of Davidson's that are inconsistent with their existence. (Surely Davidson's above-mentioned claim that we may have ethical commitments toward creatures whom we cannot interpret is consistent with the view that whomever we can interpret is entitled to our ethical consideration.) But also, in the other direction, it now seems plausible that the very existence of an ethical commitment entails the necessity of an act of interpretation, a relation that is open-ended, never finished. If indeed Davidson's picture can be augmented this way by virtue of its juxtaposition to Buber's thought, and vice versa, this will be a significant vindication of the comparison made here between the two and of their individual philosophical positions.

Notes

- (1) James Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (New York: Routledge, 1989); Robert Craig, "Communication Theory as a Field," *Communication Theory* 9 (1999): 119-61.
- (2) Willard Van Orman Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1960).
- (3) Donald Davidson, "Radical Interpretation," in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 125-39.
- (4) Davidson, "Truth and Meaning," in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, 17-36. The concept of truth is thus relegated to a basic explanatory role in Davidson's philosophy. Someone's holding true a certain sentence in a given situation is supposed to be often enough intersubjectively accessible--for example, when someone assertively utters a sentence--and hence data couched in terms of truth can serve as a legitimate basis for interpretation.
- (5) Davidson's position is consistent with there being some kind of internal perspective of the speaker toward his words, but such perspective is not part of (literal) linguistic meaning, which must be intersubjectively available.
- (6) A distinctive aspect of Davidson's philosophy of action is that indeed he views reasons as causes.
- (7) Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, 265.
- (8) Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (New York: McMillan, 1953).
- (9) Michael Dummett, "Truth," in *Truth and Other Enigmas* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), 1-24; Jonathan Searle, *Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).
- (10) Robert Brandom, *Making It Explicit* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), and *Articulating Reasons* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000).
- (11) Donald Davidson, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," in *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, ed. Ernest Lepore (London: Blackwell, 1986), 433-46.



(12) Davidson, *Inquiries*, 280. Note that this is consistent with there being parts, or kinds of linguistic interaction that are conventionally constituted. Thus, for example, it could be argued that such higher-level discursive practices as philosophizing are governed by conventions that are not merely regulative.

(13) Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Robert Gregor-Smith (New York: Scribners, 1970). Originally published in German as *Ich und Du* (1922).

(14) This claim is couched in linguistic terms: Buber says that "I-you" and "I-it" are two basic words. We consider the significance of this formulation below. It is perhaps useful to point out that the translation of *Ich und Du* as *I and Thou* is accurate insofar as the more intimate form of the second person singular pronoun *Du* corresponds to *thou*, which originally was also the informal or intimate form, in contrast to the originally more formal *you*. Hence the use of *Du* and *thou* to address God in prayer (as is also the case, for example, in French: *tu*), a factor that plays a role especially in part 3 of *I and Thou*. However, as the religious context is less our concern here, and as usage has more or less inverted the distinction, with *thou* now being considered an archaic form, we use *you* in the compound "I-you."

(15) Buber, *I and Thou*, 34. We note that the English translator chose to translate the German gender-neutral noun *Mensch* (human being) as "man."

(16) The word "encounter" refers to the spatiality of the over-against relation (counter), just as in the German Buber uses the words *Begegnung* and *Gegenüber*, which both have *gegen* (counter, against), in them. Martin Buber, *Ich und Du* (Gerlingen: Lambert Schneider Verlag, 1997), 18.

(17) Buber, *I and Thou*, 4.

(18) Martin Buber, *The Knowledge of Man*, ed. Maurice Friedman (New York: Harper & Row, 1965).

(19) Rob Anderson and Kenneth Cissna, "Martin Buber: Bearing Witness to an Experience," in *Philosophical Profiles in the Theory of Communication*, ed. Jason Hannan (New York: Peter Lang, 2012), 127-58.

(20) Buber, *I and Thou*, 1-2.

(21) *Ibid.*, 4.

(22) Communication theorists, as well as education scholars and political theorists, have often made use of Buber's thought without putting too much emphasis on the theological context.

(23) Buber, *I and Thou*, 13.

(24) As "language" now stands for a universal and reciprocal aspect of the relation between beings, or least between beings and the human being reciprocally, there is, in a very different sense from Wittgenstein's, a kind of overlapping of world and language. But this leads us into the wild of speculation.

(25) John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999).

(26) Davidson, "A Nice Derangement."

(27) Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, trans. Robert Gregor-Smith (London: Routledge, 2002), 18.

(28) Davidson, "Radical Interpretation."

(29) Susan Hurley, "Intelligibility, Imperialism and Conceptual Scheme," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 17 (1992): 89-108; Victor Krebs, "Principle of Charity or Hubris?" *Revista de Filosofia* 60 (2008): 61-90; Robert Wachbroit, "Theories of Rationality and Principles of Charity," *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 38 (1987): 35-47.

(30) Donald Davidson, "Rational Animals," in *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 95-105; 96.

(31) Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1991).