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ACTION AND ONTOLOGY

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One way of honoring Wilfrid Sellars is to produce a paper that is indebted to his teaching and example. I think this paper does the job pretty well. When I wrote it, I was not thinking of Sellars' philosophy; I was thinking about the sort of ontology that is appropriate to a philosophical theory of human behavior and how such an ontology might be defended. Yet as I reflected on my completed first draft with this colloquium in mind, I realized that I had produced a document in which Sellars' influence is clearly discernible. I do not discuss his views on the subject of action and ontology, but I develop themes that are reminiscent of them and I introduce some variations that I hope he will approve of.

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of so called action theory is its subject matter. This subject matter is generally said to be (or to concern) actions, but different philosophers conceive of actions in radically different ways. For some philosophers, actions are abstract entities — states of affairs, propositions, sets, or even ordered pairs of some kind.[1] For others, actions are distinctively concrete entities located in space and time.[2] Another group of philosophers, among whom I include myself, have even denied that actions are required for a reasonable action theory, insisting that agents or actors will suffice as the theory's sole objects.[3] Although Sellars has not expressed his view of a reasonable action theory in these terms, I believe that he is clearly on my side here: our differences are mainly verbal.[4]

This controversy about the subject of an action theory is difficult to resolve because the aim or point of such a theory is fairly obscure — not explicitly identified and certainly not shared by all action theorists — and because different theorists often employ different methods or research strategies. This obscurity of aim and variety of method in action theory raises the possibility that strikingly different action

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theories may not actually be competitors. My aim here is not to resolve the controversy I have mentioned but to comment on the subject matter that I regard as appropriate to a philosophical theory of human behavior, to say something about the method or approach that I favor, and thereby to defend the sort of theory that I have expounded in the past.

To set the stage for my discussion, I want to begin with some remarks about the idea of an agent theory, which is the sort of "action theory" that I have defended. As I mentioned earlier, the objects of such a theory are agents or actors — specifically, human beings who "do things" intentionally, accidentally, by mistake, and so on. According to an agent theory, although agents clearly exist and may truly be described as acting in this or that way, it is philosophically misleading to say that their actions or deeds also exist. When one describes a person as doing or having done something, one uses an action predicate, but such predicates characterize a subject without thereby introducing some further entity, some "action," to which, strictly speaking, the subject is somehow related. This point about the ontological implications of predicates is an old story by now, so I'll say no more about it.

To many people, an agent theory seems extravagantly implausible. A philosophical critic of my view once claimed that it "befuddled" him,[5] and an undergraduate once told me that he didn't see how I could possibly believe the doctrine that I expounded in my book on action. This sort of reaction, though perfectly understandable, depends on a serious misunderstanding. I, or any other defender of an agent theory, would not insist that a common-sense assertion of "There are actions" or "Actions obviously occur" *must* be counted as false. Loosely and ordinarily speaking, such an assertion is perfectly all right. It is only in a philosophical discussion of what must be acknowledged to exist "without qualification" or in a fundamental sense that such an assertion is, for an agent theorist, false or objectionable.

The distinction I have mentioned here — between what can truly be said to exist strictly, fundamentally, or without qualification and what can truly said to exist or to occur in a derivative, perhaps (as Butler put it) "loose and popular" sense — is standard in metaphysics. The practice of drawing it can, in fact, be traced back to Aristotle. In one of

the treatises from which the name "metaphysics" is derived, Aristotle observed that things may be said to "be" in different senses, some more fundamental than others.[6] To see the point of his observation, consider a pile of stones, a gaggle of geese, or a pair of twins. Such things exist, but they are not something over and above the more elementary things making them up. If individual stones exist and are related together in an appropriate pilish way, we can say that there is a pile of stones, but the being of the pile is derivative rather than fundamental: it consists, one might say, in the being (or existence) of the stones that, by virtue of their relations to one another, justify the "loose and popular" assertion that such a thing exists, is real, and belongs to the world. From a metaphysical point of view, it is only fundamental objects that can be said to exist "strictly and without qualification."

The pile, gaggle, and pair I have just mentioned are particularly simple examples of derivative objects; a more interesting example is an entity like General Motors. Obviously, there are such entities, such things, ,but they are not fundamental realities. Roughly speaking, a corporation can be said to exist just when a certain legal action has been performed (less roughly: when someone has behaved in a certain way) and when another legal action has not been performed. The first sort of action might be called an act of "forming" the corporation; it amounts to someone drawing up and filing certain legal documents. The second sort of action is that of dissolving a corporation: this too consists in filing legal documents. If a corporation has been formed but not dissolved, we can truly say that it exists — but we should not suppose that its existence adds an irreducible element to the substance of the world. When we say that it exists, we are speaking loosely and popularly; our assertion is true only "with qualification."

The distinction between fundamental and derivative existence is metaphysically important for a number of reasons, one of which is that it helps us to understand the sense, or senses, in which things belong to the world. This understanding can be facilitated by the three concepts Kant introduced for the purpose in his *Inaugural Dissertation*: matter, form, and totality.[7] According to Kant, the matter of a world consists of the fundamental objects belonging to it, and its form is the manner in which the fundamental objects are ultimately interrelated. The concept of totality enters the picture because a world is a totality of objects

interrelated in an appropriate world-forming way. Using these concepts, we can say that fundamental objects belong to the world in the primary sense of collectively making it up: they do so by virtue of being interrelated in a basic world-forming way. Nonfundamental objects belong to a world only derivatively: they exist only in a manner of speaking, for the assertion that they exist is true just when certain fundamental objects have special features in addition to those required by their basic ontological "form." Thus, a pile of stones or (to take Leibniz's favorite example) a herd of cattle belongs to the world only in the sense that individual stones or individual cattle belong to the world and are very closely related, spatially and temporally, to others objects of their kind. Similarly, corporations belong to the world only in the sense that human beings belong to it and have developed appropriate legal institutions or conventions — these being forms of behavior on which there is a certain kind of agreement.

Philosophers holding what are known as substance ontologies contend that the fundamental objects of our world are continuants — and nothing but continuants. A continuant is a thing like a man, a marble, or a tree: something that, as Aristotle said, persists in time and can undergo change. Philosophers holding an agent theory often accept such an ontology. If fundamental objects are only continuants, then changes, events, and therefore actions are not fundamental objects; their existence is derivative at best. Thus, while we can say, given this view, that changes, events, and actions occur, we must be understood as speaking loosely and popularly and as meaning that some *thing or person*, some continuant, changes or acts. Leibniz held a view of this kind.[8] His fundamental realities were monads, and although they undergo change, their changes are not themselves objects of a fundamental kind. Ontologically speaking, the predicate ". . . changes" is used to characterize monads, to describe them; it is not used to introduce a further category of irreducible objects.

In my recent book on metaphysics I argued that a substance ontology not only makes sense but involves no internal logical, or conceptual, difficulties; it is in no way "incoherent."[9] In addition, I argued that in terms of such an ontology one can make sense of what Kant regarded as the "form" of a world of things — namely, space, time, and causation. I shall not describe or attempt to summarize my

argumentation here. I shall simply observe that, if my argumentation was sound, it follows that there is nothing "incoherent" or a priori objectionable with the sort of agent theory I have defended. This outcome does not, of course, nail down the conclusion that my sort of theory is correct or, all things considered, acceptable. In fact, it is not at all clear that such a theory can be considered correct, at all. In view of this unclarity, I want to proceed with some brief remarks pertinent to the question, "On the basis of what aim, and by the use of what method or strategy, is a certain ontology — in particular, one appropriate to a philosophical theory of intelligent behavior — reasonably defended?"

In current Anglo-American "analytical" philosophy ontological views appear to be defended by reference to four principal aims. The most familiar recalls the analytical strategies of the 1960's, the aim being (roughly) to resolve philosophical problems by analyzing "concepts" or the use of language. Such analyses were thought by many to demonstrate a priori what is possible or impossible, analytically true or analytically false, about some subject matter.[10] Another, more recent aim (pursued most conspicuously by Chisholm and his students) recalls Spinoza's *Ethics*: axioms and definitions are constructed, defended by reference to one's "intuitions," and then used to derive derivative principles that flesh out a metaphysical theory.[11] The third aim is to provide a particular sort of "semantics" for English and other natural languages. The relation of this last aim to action theory is particularly striking in the work of Donald Davidson.[12] The relevant semantics is avowedly truth-conditional; and in specifying the truth conditions for action sentences and accounting for their logical consequences, one uncovers one's commitment to an appropriate ontology. The last principal aim is directed to something like the categorial commitments of total science. I say "categorial commitments" because those who have the aim (and I am thinking particularly of Quine) are more concerned with a commitment to objects of a basic category than with a commitment to the various things falling into that category — with physical objects rather than, say, desks or mountains.[13] I speak of total science because of such remarks (by Quine) as "philosophers seek a comprehensive system of the world" and "it is within science itself, and not in some prior philosophy, that reality is to be identified and described."[14]

Since a preferred aim is the best of its alternatives, the preferred aim

in ontology should be identified by a critical scrutiny of the ontological aims current today (among other things, of course). As far as so called action theory is concerned, I believe that there are very serious drawbacks to all four of the ontological aims I have just mentioned and that some alternative is needed. Aims of the first sort — to the extent that they are purely analytical, dealing with "concepts" or meanings that already exist — are as dubious as a preexisting analytic-synthetic distinction. If existing meanings or concepts are significantly indeterminate in their content, then determinate (definite and clear) ontological principles cannot be derived from them (though such principles might, and this is a different approach, be "constructed" with existing usage in mind). The second sort of aim — according to which the identity and nature of the world's fundamental objects are to be identified by purely intuitive and nonexperimental considerations — is, I believe, grossly anachronistic, but I shall say more about it in what follows. The third aim, the one associated with a semantics for natural language, is more plausible than the first two, but it founders on the facts (i) that no actual language or idiolect is sufficiently determinate and inflexible to justify a particular ontology and (b) that the sort of things identifiable as truth conditions (or satisfaction conditions) are virtually irrelevant to metaphysical concerns.[15] The final aim is excellent, I believe, as a philosophical ideal, but it is not appropriate for the limited and commonsensical domain of so called action theory.

The off-hand remarks I have just made are not sufficient, obviously, to demonstrate flaws in the aims I have described. In fact, I have described these aims in very rough-and-ready terms — and therefore very inadequately. I have succeeded, however, in calling attention to important alternatives that I reject as appropriate for so called action theory; and the effect of this is to put the alternative I accept in perspective. As I identify it and try to make it plausible, I shall, in passing, offer remarks that support my rejection of the standard alternatives.

When I expressed a preference, in my *Reason and Action*, for an agent theory over a theory postulating irreducible actions, I emphasized that agent theories avoid familiar problems about the identity conditions of actions.[16] Quine, in commenting on Davidson's action theory, has recently posed an important problem for the individuation of

events, one that makes it highly desirable to dispense with events as irreducible entities.[17] Since a consideration of Quine's comments on this matter provide an excellent means of appreciating the point (or general aim) of the sort of ontology I favor for action theory, I want to turn to them without further ado.

As a criterion of identity for events as he conceives of them, Davidson proposed the principle that events are identical just when they have the same causes and effects.[18] Quine objected that although this principle does truly identify a condition that holds when, and only when, specified events are identical, the principle is useless as a principle of individuation because causes and effects (at least as Davidson understands them) are in turn individuated as distinct events. Davidson's proposed principle thus involves an unacceptable circularity in individuation. Quine underlines the importance of his point with an analogy concerning sets. If one proposed to individuate individuals (nonsets) by the principle that a = b just when a belongs to every set b belongs to and vice versa, one would be deterred by the fact that sets are individuated by their elements: they are distinct just when they differ in membership — the latter determined, ultimately, by differences in individuals. Davidson immediately accepted the point of the analogy and the soundness of Quine's criticism.

Though Quine is worried about the individuation of events as Davidson views them, he is willing to accept events as what I have called derivative objects. Thinking that Davidson's proposal to deal with adverbial modification by quantifying over events is a good one, Quine says that Davidson's proposal may be retained if we conceive of events along the line Kim has suggested, namely, as ordered couples — specifically, couples consisting of times and sets.[19] (Quine substitutes a set for Kim's event type, which is a property.) Since couples can be understood as sets, "⟨a, b⟩" being short for "((a), (a, b))," accepting events as Quine here proposes does not involve a commitment to anything more than sets and individuals, items that are minimal ontological commitments as far as Quine is concerned.[20]

The question arises, however: "What individuals is Quine prepared to allow?" In the essay to which I have just referred Quine claims that physical objects have a decisive advantage over events as Davidson understands them because physical objects can be individuated by

reference to spatio-temporal position. In fact, he thinks of a physical object in the broad sense as "the material content of any portion of space-time, however small, large, irregular, or discontinuous."[21] But how are space-time regions individuated? Quine doesn't say; but if, as a general matter, entities of category X are to be individuated by entities of another category Y, we are in trouble, for our metaphysical task of individuating entities could never then be completed. The upshot, to parody the later Wittgenstein, would seem to be "Individuation must come to an end somewhere." But where? Must we suppose that some entities are intrinsically individuated and don't require individuation by us?

In spite of his suspicion about properties, Quine's ontology is similar to Russell's in admitting just two basic categories of entity: where Russell accepted individuals and properties (or "particulars and universals," as he called them) Quine accepts individuals and classes.[22] Russell's individuals were restricted to events, however, and he did not allow points and instants, space and time, or even spatio-temporal regions, as irreducible individuals.[23] Thus, he could not individuate all physical things by reference to spatio-temporal regions; according to him, the latter were logical constructions understandable only in relation to (or constructable from) physical events. In spite of this, he had a very instructive means of coping with the idea that individuation must come to an end somewhere. I want, therefore, to say a little more about it.

For reasons that (alas) do not stand up to criticism, Russell thought that the most primitive objects of our attention are temporally extended sensory occurrences, which he called "events."[24] We are immediately aware of such things, he thought, and we are aware of them as temporally overlapping one another — beginning and ending while other things persist. Thus, we might hear a sharp bang against the background of a more persistent whistle. From this sort of experience, we naturally form the idea of temporal overlapping, and on the basis of this primitive idea and the choice of a standard periodicity (or clock), we can construct temporal intervals, instants, and, more generally, time.[25] Since the occurrences we experience are also spatially extended in three directions, we can construct spatial points and regions.[26] To take account of relativity physics, we can also eventually construct the

space-time continuum, this continuum being significantly different from the space and time of ordinary life.[27]

Russell's conception of our primitive objects of awareness may be rejected without rejecting his idea that space and time (points and intervals, spatiotemporal regions) can be viewed as constructions and that we conceive of a spatiotemporal world of objects as a system of entities "radiating" out from us spatially and temporally. In fact, we can agree with Quine that:

> Entification begins at arm's length; the points of condensation in the primordial conceptual scheme are things glimpsed, not glimpses. . . . Linguistically, and hence conceptually, the things in sharpest focus are the things that are public enough to be talked of publicly, common and conspicuous enough to be talked of often, and near enough to sense to be quickly identified and learned by name; it is to these that words apply first and foremost.[28]

Given an awareness of things glimpsed before our very noses, we can individuate them in a primitive way by sight and touch: anything that does not visibly and palpably coincide with them is distinct from them. Noting further that some things move and alter *while* (before, after) other things move or alter, we can easily adapt Russell's strategies to a world of objects (= continuants) and construct instants and points, space and time.[29] We thus have the "spatiotemporal" regions in which we can individuate objects generally. Doing this is wholly compatible with regarding points, intervals, space, and time as derivative entities to which we are not "ontologically committed."

This little solution to the problematic question of how individuation can come to an end without unindividuated individuators introduces a substance ontology of the classical kind that I mentioned earlier. Its attractiveness as a metaphysical theory springs from its ability to resolve theoretical problems in a plausible way. Apart from providing a reasonable solution to the problem about individuation, it makes basic structural sense of a world of distinguishable objects undergoing change and interacting with us. It does this by forming a determinate conception of the ultimate objects of the world (Kant's "matter") and showing us how those objects are ultimately distinguished and related (Kant's "form"). In accomplishing these objectives it does not introduce exotic or ill-understood objects, and it accords with current convictions (epistemological, psychological, linguistic) that entification begins at

arm's length, that the things in sharpest focus, conceptually, are middle-sized public objects, and so on. In accomplishing so much without introducing special problems, it merits high marks as a metaphysical theory.

It is important to realize that the objectives achieved here are quite different from those associated with the current ontological aims that I mentioned earlier. In the first place, a conception of the world is *constructed* here — not extracted "by analysis" from existing concepts (of time, space, and the like) or uses of language. Secondly, no attempt is made to derive anything from a priori intuitions — and no claim is made that our world necessarily conforms to the construction. Thirdly, semantical considerations hardly enter the picture, and there is no presumption that the ontology accords with (in Quine's words) some "fensed ontology" implicit in "natural language," the principal subject of empirical semantics. Finally, no attempt is made to incorporate the results of contemporary natural science — either cognitive science or physics. It therefore falls short of the metaphysical aim concerned with the categorial commitments of total science. It may or may not be compatible with the last aim; I will return to this matter a little later.

The point I want to make now is that so called action theory is easily and naturally accommodated in a substance ontology as a more detailed investigation in general terms of part of a world of spatio-temporal objects. The more restricted aim is to understand, at least among other things, how intelligent beings fit into such a world. This is accomplished particularly well, I believe, by a theory of agents, for agents (by virtue of their physical bodies) being to a world of substances as primary objects. Their so called actions are events — derivative objects that, in simple cases, can be said ("with qualification") to occur *where* the relevant agents or perhaps patient (thing acted on) is and *when* the agent acts or, perhaps, the patient[*] suffers. Complex actions such as the onset of wars by invasion are doubly derivative, at least, consisting of innumerable lower-order acts that are, ultimately, adjectival to primary objects, that is, people and things. Of course, we also want to understand, as part of so called action theory, how agents differ from inanimate objects and how they function intelligently and deliberately. This last aim involves the development of a plausible conception of human psychology (of belief, desire, and purposes, at least) and its relation to a theory of agents.[30]

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Although a substance ontology has, for the reasons I have given, many theoretical advantages, it applies best to a common-sense world and cannot provide, by mere augmentation, the ideal ontology that I have attributed to Quine. The space and time that we can "construct" from the surfaces and behavior of observable objects are not, for one thing, the space-time of contemporary microphysics, which many physicists believe to be a fundamental reality rather than a mere construction. In fact, according to one current theory, dubbed "twister" theory, the entities currently regarded as particles do not occupy but are themselves "twisted pieces" of space-time.[31] Such entities are, moreover, very badly individuated, for it is not, in principle, a determinate matter whether, say, a given proton emits a pion and reabsorbs it or disappears from the world, giving up its energy to make a pion and another proton.[32] Related to this is the fact that, according to the indeterminacy equations, micro-entities and the ever-changing physical systems to which they belong simply do not have (nor do they constitute) an absolutely determinate position in space-time.[33] Thus, nothing in this world can be individuated in quite the way Quine officially supposes.

It is worth adding that the common-sense objects we say we perceive can evidently fit into the quantum world only as "mere appearances." Not only does nothing in this world (however complex) actually possess such occurrent features as color, naively conceived; nothing in it actually possesses the occurrent geometrical features (the shapes and surfaces) of common-sense objects. This last point is supported by the fact that the aggregates of particles corresponding to common-sense objects are mostly empty space, the proportion of space to matter in a single atom being far greater than philosophers seem to realize: some graphic comparisons are the Albert memorial to a grain of sand, or a "big town" to an orange.[34] Since nothing in the quantum world actually exemplifies the observable features of common-sense objects, a metaphysical picture of the world adequate to total science (to everything we know) must find a place for the relevant "appearances" among exotic entities that (to top it off) seem to be observer dependent in a strange way.[35] Since we don't really know just how sensory "appearances" fit into the quantum reality corresponding to a visible brain, and since the two interpretations of quantum theory that appear to be serious rivals today — the so called Copenhagen and the Many-worlds interpretations

— are both extremely bizarre and uncommonsensical,[36] it is clear that a metaphysical picture of the world adequate to current natural science (physical science and psychology) is not only very different from the one I have described, but has yet to be constructed.

Early in the paper I remarked that the ontological aim of Quine's ideal ontology is not, in my view, appropriate for the limited and commonsensical domain of so called action theory. The objects appropriate to that domain are, in the first instance, human beings, and the task of a so called action theory is to understand their place in a world of things and persons and also to understand how or by what means they act. I contend that an agent theory satisfies this aim in a particularly felicitous way. We seek a "comprehensive system" (Quine's words) of our common-sense "world of things and persons"; we diverge from Quine in not wishing to square this world with the latest results of micro-physics.[37] Strictly speaking, of course, what we are not squaring with the latest results of micro-physics is not a world but the image of a world; it is what Sellars has called the "Manifest Image."[38]

One important issue emerges here that has to be faced. If a metaphysical picture of a world of objects is, as it stands, incompatible with current physical science — if it misrepresents the world that physics discloses — then, "trivially" I should say, it is probably false of the real world. This consequence always disturbs some philosophers, especially those who object to "scientism," but unless we can show that there is a way of ascertaining the nature of the world that is more accurate and reliable than the scientific method of, roughly, observation and experimental inference, we have an exceedingly poor basis for rejecting any well-attested scientific view or preferring some incompatible alternative. I concede that the rival interpretations of quantum mechanics currently available are so bizarre that I, for one, yearn to join van Fraassen in interpreting the theory along instrumentalist lines.[39] But interpreting the quantum theory this way will not restore credibility to a common-sense picture, which is adequate, at best, to mere appearances. The effect of an instrumentalist interpretation is, I believe, an ultimately skeptical view of the world, one that refuses to correct the old metaphysical view or to provide an alternative. I cannot reconcile myself to such a skeptical position, but I cannot provide an ideal metaphysical view either — one that is adequate both to current physics and to the place of appearance (or "mind") in the scheme of things.

If a purely common-sense picture of the world is not factually correct, what is the point of discussing it? Why bother with the "world of objects" I mentioned earlier? The answer is that it makes sense (in the way I mentioned) of a certain way of talking and thinking about the world. This way of talking and thinking is presupposed when we talk and think about people doing this or that intelligently, purposefully, and with delight or regret. The subject of so called action theory is bound up with this way of looking at the world. As philosophers, we want to introduce some clarity into this way of talking and thinking. Since we do not operate with determinate concepts, the task of introducing the relevant clarity is not purely analytic; it is partly constructive or, better, rationally reconstructive. As far as action theory is concerned, we are rationally reconstructing the basic structure of a common-sense conceptual scheme. It may involve representations of the world that we know, on scientific grounds, to be faulty (representations of objects as actually and occurrently pink and cubical rather than regions of largely dematerialized space merely appearing that way) but it is practically indispensable to us and of fundamental importance to our civilization. As such, it is certainly deserving of philosophical clarification.

My claim here — that in rationally reconstructing common-sense thought about a world of intelligent agents we are dealing with a conceptual scheme that is, to a degree, factually defective — is far out of line with the views of perhaps the most influential contributor to action theory, Donald Davidson. Contrary to what I have been saying, Davidson has recently insisted that the very idea of a conceptual scheme is faulty or "incoherent" and that "most of our beliefs" must be accepted as true.[40] Since most of our beliefs — at least, most beliefs of most people — are what I have been calling "common-sense" beliefs, he would have to reject my claim even if he could be reconciled to the idea of a conceptual scheme. It is worth commenting briefly on how one might respond to Davidson's arguments.

As I have urged elsewhere, Davidson's case against conceptual schemes is not compelling.[41] Its key weakness is his supposition that if there were alternative (or different) conceptual schemes, they would be associated with mutually untranslatable languages or idiolects. This supposition is very implausible, however; and it is certainly not true of a conceptual scheme as I conceive of it. According to my account, a conceptual scheme is identifiable by a construction, one associated with

a pattern of beliefs rather than with a whole natural language or idiolect. Since I have elaborated and defended my view of a conceptual scheme in another place (and also discussed Davidson's critical arguments in detail) I shall move on to the second source of objection — namely, the claim that most of our beliefs must be accepted as true.

It is difficult to offer a fair, detailed criticism of the case Davidson makes for this last claim because it consists, in large part, in a deduction from his theory of interpretation. The deduction goes something like this. According to Davidson's theory of interpretation, one can interpret others' speech only on the assumption that most of their beliefs are true: "Charity is forced on us [Davidson says]; if we want to understand others, we must count them right on most matters."[42] Given Davidson's theory, therefore, we must count people right on most matters (for we certainly want to understand them). It is, furthermore, "meaningless to suggest [he says] that we might fall into massive error by endorsing" this sort of charity, which includes the idea that we have a "general agreement" on beliefs. "Until we have successfully established a systematic correlation of sentences held true with sentences held true, there are no mistakes to make."[43]

The difficulty in criticizing this argument is that one should ideally either attack Davidson's theory of interpretation or show that his theory does not have the consequences for most of our beliefs that he says it has. Both tasks are daunting since his theory is extremely complicated and impossible to summarize in this kind of essay.[44] On the other hand, it seems to me that the basic part of his theory bearing on the truth of our beliefs is very plausible, easy to summarize, but, reasonably interpreted, does not actually have the consequence he says it has. I shall try to support this limited claim here.

As I understand it, the pertinent line of thought in Davidson's theory can be represented as follows: On any reasonable view of radical interpretation, interpreters must ascertain the circumstances in which the utterances they want to interpret are produced. On any account of meaning, there is some systematic connection between word and object, symbol and symbolized. When, therefore, we attempt, as interpreters, to ascertain the circumstances in which utterances are produced, we assume that the speakers' words are, in general, appropriate to those circumstances. But for a declarative, sentential utterance to be so

appropriate is, generally speaking, to be true. Since our conception of such circumstances is determined by our beliefs about them, any correlation we ascertain between a speaker's words and circumstances will involve a correlation between those words and, indirectly, our words — and, since we are dealing with other human beings, between their beliefs and, indirectly, our beliefs. Also, since our words or beliefs provide our means of identifying the relevant circumstances, our presumption is that our words and, therefore, their words are, generally speaking or for the most part, true.

This general picture of a basic part of interpretation is, as I intimated, very compelling, but it does not require that the relevant beliefs be, even for the most part, actually true — just reasonable or plausible in the circumstances, and given a certain point of view. This reasonableness or plausibility is consistent with the falsity I have attributed to a common-sense view of the world. Let me explain.

If we are interpreting the speech of people whose technology does not require a knowledge of higher mathematics, chemistry, physics, and the like, it is ludicrous to suppose that their beliefs about their circumstances must agree with our scientific beliefs about those circumstances. A comparable agreement between their beliefs and our common-sense, nontechnical beliefs (or a subset thereof) is a good deal more plausible, and we can use these latter beliefs for interpretation: we can specify the relevant circumstances by reference to them, and then interpret their words (at least in the first instance) by reference to those circumstances as thus specified. If, however, we are prepared to acknowledge that our common-sense beliefs are, strictly speaking, defective and, therefore, false in certain respects, we can say the same for the beliefs of those we interpret.

An objection that might be raised at this point is suggested by another remark of Davidson's — namely, that we "improve the clarity and bite" of assumed differences of scheme or opinion by enlarging (among other things) the basis of shared opinion.[45] The objection I have in mind can be developed as follows. The obvious way of showing that a common-sense assertion — say, that something S is P — is false is to show that the entity denoted by its subject does not have the feature ascribed by the predicate. To show this, we have to be able to single out the object in question — to attend to the thing the speaker had in mind.

To do so successfully, we and the speaker have to agree on what the subject is — and this requires agreement on many (perhaps most) things about it. If such an assertion is a representative common-sense assertion, it follows that the agreement required to show falsity is too great to allow a general criticism of common-sense beliefs. Particular common-sense beliefs may be rejected by technical discoveries, but common-sense beliefs cannot generally be rejected, or shown to be false, by such discoveries.

The objection fails because it is focused too stubbornly on one simple means of proving an assertion to be false. There is, obviously, a more general means of accomplishing this aim, *modus tollens*; and the falsity I have attributed to common-sense assertions can be shown by means of it. Assertions about common-sense objects are true only if, strictly speaking, those objects have *occurrent* sensible qualities such as color and determinate physical shape. According to current micro-physical knowledge, nothing has such qualities. Strictly speaking, therefore, such assertions are false, even though their falsity cannot be established at the common-sense level. If we restrict ourself to purely common-sense considerations, we have no basis for casting doubt on them. (It goes without saying, of course, that we can protect them against criticism by reinterpretation — for example, by interpreting them as "purely about appearances" or as merely ascribing dispositions to exotic micro-systems that resist description in common-sense terms.)

If my claims in the last few paragraphs are sound, we can reasonably speak of a common-sense conceptual scheme and add that the assertions characteristic of common sense are, strictly speaking, false (on the basis of theoretical considerations) but vitally useful for the purposes of everyday life. If, moreover, an appropriate ontology for so called action theory is, as I have argued, to be achieved by the construction of a common-sense conceptual scheme (or world picture) then it turns out that there is an important sense in which such an ontology cannot be said to be right or wrong. The most that can be said is that such an ontology is more or less illuminating — more or less satisfactory in offering a general, unified picture of a common-sense world and accommodating ordinary experience. Developing such a picture conforms to Strawson's task of descriptive metaphysics in not contemplating the effect of "revisionary" principles that must be taken into

account in what I have called an "ideal"ontology.[46] It strays from his task in not aiming at purely descriptive results. Instead of describing the scheme we actually employ in thinking about intelligent human beings acting purposefully, an action theorist should systematically reconstruct such a scheme. I would not contend that there is only one way to proceed.[47]

NOTES

[1] See, respectively, Roderick Chisholm, *Person and Object* (LaSalle, Ill., Open Court, 1976); Wilfrid Sellars, 'Action and Events', *Noûs* VII (1973), pp. 179—202; Jaegwon Kim, 'Events and Property Exemplification', in M. Brand and D. Walton, eds., *Action Theory* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1976); and Willard V. O. Quine, 'Events and Reification', in Ernest LaPore, ed., *Actions and Events* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), p. 167.

[2] Donald Davidson, 'Agency', in Robert Binkley et al., eds., *Agent, Action, and Reason* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1971), pp. 3—25.

[3] Bruce Aune, *Reason and Action* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1977), Ch. 1.

[4] Although Wilfrid Sellars has spoken of actions as 'propositions', he regards them as merely nominal objects, or constructions; thus he is really an agent theorist, too. See his 'Actions and Events'.

[5] Irving Thalberg, 'A World Without Events', in Bruce Vermazen and Merrill Hintikka, eds., *Essays on Davidson: Action and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), p. 152.

[6] Aristotle, *Metaphysics, Gamma*, 1003b. I discuss Aristotle's approach to existence (or a reconstructed version of it) in my book, *Metaphysics* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1985), Ch. 1.

[7] Immanuel Kant, *Innaugural Dissertation and Other Writings on Space*, trans. John Handyside (London, 1929), pp. 38—42.

[8] See Benson Mates, *The Philosophy of Leibniz* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), Ch. 2: 'The System in Outline'.

[9] See *Metaphysics*, Ch. 6.

[10] See David Pears, *Motivated Irrationality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), pp. 1f.

[11] See Chisholm, *Person and Object, passim*.

[12] Davidson, 'The Method of Truth in Metaphysics', in Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984) pp. 199—214.

[13] W. V. O. Quine, 'Events and Reification', pp. 1667f.

[14] Quine, 'Things and Their Place in Theories', in Quine, *Theories and Things* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U. P., 1981), pp. 9, 21.

[15] This holds most obviously, I believe, for semantical theories whose truth or satisfaction conditions for a formula F are specified by another formula that, in whole or part, is a translation of F. For such a theory, a truth condition for 'There are numbers' provides no indication whether numbers are constructions, fundamental realities, or what. On this see my 'Conceptual Relativism', in James Tomberlin, ed., *Philosophical Perspectives*, vol. 1 (Atascadero, Calif.: Ridgeview, 1987), pp. 269—288. For other sorts of semantical theories, a truth condition is identified partly on the basis of a metaphysical theory or conviction and does not support the latter. This is true where, e.g., 'John exemplifies wisdom' is given as the truth condition for 'John is wise'.

This is as good a place as any to insert a few words on Davidson's influential claim that we have to accept actions (or events) to account for the entailments and, therefore, the logical form of sentences containing adverbial modifiers. In the first place, not all

intuitively valid immediate entailments are formally valid and depend on logical form. This is true not only of the entailment 'a is on b; so b is under a' but also, I should say, of 'Lacking an umbrella, she hit him with a shoe; so she lacked an umbrella' and the entailments featuring adverbs that Davidson has discussed. We can often provide a 'regimentation' of vernacular statements that *imposes* a certain logical form on them and allows us to validate the desired implications in a purely formal way, but we should not assume that a certain logical form is intrinsic to vernacular statements and commits us a certain ontology. In the second place, as I shall explain in the text below, one can actually adopt Davidson's approach to adverbial modification without accepting events or actions as irreducible realities. One may, as Quine has suggested, think of events as special ordered couples, which reduce to sets, or one may think of events as mere convenient fictions, like the 'classes' an Aristotelian may speak of when employing Venn diagrams.

[16] See *Reason and Action*, Ch. 1.
[17] Quine, 'Events and Reification', pp. 165ff.
[18] Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 179.
[19] Quine, 'Events and Reification', pp. 167—171.
[20] Quine, 'Things and Their Place in Theories', p. 21.
[21] Quine, 'Events and Reification', p. 167.
[22] Russell, *Problems of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1912), Ch. 9.
[23] Russell, *Human Knowledge: Its Scope and Limits* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1948), pp. 285—309.
[24] *Ibid.*, p. 287.
[25] *Ibid.*, pp. 284—294.
[26] *Ibid.*, pp. 295—309.
[27] *Ibid.*, pp. 305—309.
[28] Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge, Mass., M.I.T. Press, 1960), p. 1.
[29] See my *Metaphysics*, Ch. 6.
[30] My latest views on this are expressed in 'Other Minds After Twenty Years', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, Vol. X (1986), pp. 559—574, and 'Formal Logic and Practical Reasoning', *Theory and Decision* **20** (1986), pp. 301—320.
[31] See Jeremy Cherfas, *In Search of Schrodinger's Cat: Quantum Physics and Reality* (New York: Bantam Books, 1984), p. 260.
[32] *Ibid.*, p. 198.
[33] *Ibid.*, p. 157.
[34] The nucleus of an atom is typically 10^{-13} cm across embedded in an electron cloud typically 10^{-8} cm across. See Cherfas, p. 31, and J. Andrade e Silva and G. Lochak, *Quanta*, trans. by George Weidenfeld (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969), p. 83. Both these books are exceptionally clear and stimulating.
[35] See Cherfas, pp. 155 to 254, for an exemplary discussion of the quantum theory, its paradoxical implications, and the exciting recent experimental verifications of Bell's inequality.
[36] See Cherfas, p. 235.
[37] Wilfrid Sellars originally suggested this approach in 'Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man', in Sellars, *Science, Perception, and Reality* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), pp. 1—40.
[38] *Ibid.*
[39] See Bas C. van Fraassen, *The Scientific Image* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), Ch. 3.
[40] Davidson, 'The Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme', in Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, pp. 183—198.
[41] Aune, 'Conceptual Relativism'.
[42] Davidson, 'The Very Idea . . .', p. 197.

[43] *Ibid.*
[44] I have discussed some of the complications of his theory in *Metaphysics*, pp. 137—157.
[45] Davidson, 'The Very Idea . . .', p. 197.
[46] See P. F. Strawson, *Individuals* (London: Methuen, 1959), pp. 9—12.
[47] I want to thank Gareth Matthews, Michael Jubien, and Donald Morrison for their comments on an earlier version of this paper.

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