ON BEING ONTOLOGICALLY UNSERIOUS

KAI NIELSEN

I

THERE are philosophers who even now want to be ontologically serious. We need, they tell us, to see the world rightly and to do this we must work out a fundamental ontology which will display the most basic features that the world must have. This is not a matter of careful experimental investigation linked with adroit and imaginative theory design but a matter, or in some way essentially a matter, of pure rigourous thought. Pure disciplined philosophical reflection will yield the basic categories of the world.

It seems to me that people who think this way have learned nothing from history. It is far too late in the day to think something like this. If, beyond truisms (e.g., things tend to persist through time), many of which may be true, but hardly require philosophy for their rational acceptance, we want to know what the basic features of the world are, we should go to physics and to its allied sciences. That, of course, will not quench the philosophical thirst for certainty. Indeed nothing non–illusory will. What physics tells us now and what physics (if it is still around) will tell us two hundred years from now is very likely to be significantly different.

The whole thrust of our intellectual history since the Enlightenment, including very fundamentally the empiricist and Kantian revolutions in philosophy with what in effect are their continuation in logical positivism and linguistic philosophy, together with the importantly different turnings by the pragmatists and by Quine, Davidson, Wittgenstein, and Habermas, has, in the way it has added up, taught us the inescapability of fallibilism and the impossibility or at least non–necessity of foundationalism. It has also made apparent to us why the steady de–mystification of the world is not an arbitrary shift in the *Weltgeist* and has made it second nature, in those touched by the Enlightenment, to, as Peirce put it, accept the authority of science rather than that of religion or philosophy in fixing belief concerning what is and might become the case. It is much too late in the day to be ontologically serious. Such activities invite (depending on temperament) either a yawn or Kierkegaardian, Derridian, or Rortyian irony.

II

It is not correct to say that this reveals the scientistic attitude: what science cannot tell us humankind cannot know. It does not commit one to scientism for it says nothing about how we come to know how we ought to respond to other people or what sort of life plans to form for ourselves or anything like that.

235

It is not even necessarily about the human sciences (studies) where it is at least arguable that we should go in a much more Habermasian or hermeneutical way. It is rather about how we determine what is the fundamental stuff, the furniture of the universe, if you will, and how we make reasonable judgments about how the world (the non–human world, if you will) works and hangs together.

Scientific cosmology for all I know may be shot through with scientific mythology and may have (if that is not pleonastic) all sorts of bad metaphysical residues in it. Philosophical analysis in the standard debunking ways should clean that Augean stable, thereby helping in a modest underlabourer way science to gain a more adequate cosmology. But philosophy can never replace scientific cosmology, provide a foundationalist underpining for it, or go beyond it showing us, at long last, what the world is really and truly like and (perhaps) *must* be like.

This is indeed a scepticism about certain traditional claims of philosophy—a rejection of going on about ontology—but not at all a general or global scepticism for it is cheerfully confident about the capacities of a developing science to give us a reasonable fallibilistic account of what there is. Fallibilism—an eschewing of the quest for certainty, an unrepentant, nonnostalgia for the Absolute—is not scepticism. Ontological commitments are in fact religious. The old link of philosophy with religion dies hard even with those contemporary atheists who also have a philosophical itch.

<center>III</center>

Some have said that this whole setting aside of ontology is rooted in taking too seriously the curse of Kant. It is, that is, rooted in an unfortunate modern tendency to give priority to epistemology over ontology. Don't ask, some have said, how we can know or warrantedly believe ontological claims about what there is, rather just speculate carefully about what there is, trot out your possible worlds, and worry about validation and epistemological foundations later. What is warrantedly assertable, even ideally so, and what is the case, what is true, need not come to the same thing. The world is determinate—the world is what it is and not another thing—even though we may never be able to know or even make a terribly educated guess at what this determinate structure is. Even global epistemological scepticism does not touch that. That is, or at least should be, a commonplace.

The natural response to this is, or at least should be, not to deny the determinateness of the world (after all what else could it be but determinate) but to respond by saying that an investigation into what there is will, if we do not have some sense of when in our inquiries we are going right or going wrong, gives us nothing (for all we can tell) but the dreams of a spirit seer. To make anything like responsible claims about what the world is like, we need some rough conception at least about how to validate our claims. There is very good reason, some believe, to put something like the Kantian project first even after concerns about a contextually sensitive method of belief acquisition have replaced foundationalist epistemological concerns.

Someone, assenting to this, might go on to remark that while classical foundationalism is out, there is still the possibility of and indeed the need

for a modest foundationalist epistemology, working fully in the spirit of fallibilism, and capable of providing us with the epistemological foundations for constructing an ontology. I am thoroughly sceptical of that but it is clear enough that such an enterprise has its appeal. So I want to turn now to an examination of what is perhaps the most distinguished effort currently available to articulate an epistemology with an appropriate normative force. What is most fundamentally at issue is whether we can gain a set of basic systematically related propositions (sentences, if you will) which will provide us with the grounding and test for all else we can know or reliably believe and which itself is more certain than any of these derivative knowledge claims or warranted beliefs and which in turn would give us the philosophical basis for claims in fundamental ontology about the structure of the world. I am deeply dubious about whether anything like this is even remotely possible. But my aim is to see here whether what is perhaps the best effort at a systematic epistemology going can yield anything like that. (It might, I should add, do the former things without doing the latter.)

IV

The work I have in mind is that of Alvin Goldman as articulated in his *Epistemology and Cognition* and a series of articles.[1] Goldman's work is systematic, thorough and has a masterful grasp of the literature; it is extensive in scope, original and contains a considerable array of careful arguments. In an area where lack of judiciousness and common sense often prevails, Goldman's work is remarkably judicious and level-headed, avoiding philosophical excesses while still containing a distinctive philosophical thrust.

While operating within an overall naturalistic framework, it defends, in contrast with W. V. Quine and Fred Dretske, both a rather traditional normative conception of epistemology and a modest foundationalism, though unlike many traditional conceptions of epistemology Goldman believes that psychology and the social sciences, in the non-foundational parts of epistemology, have an important role to play in conjunction with philosophy. But, unlike Hilary Putnam, Charles Taylor, and Richard Rorty and their Continental counterparts Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Jürgen Habermas, Goldman thinks there is and ought to be such things as theories that articulate the foundations of knowledge. Indeed, on his view, there is something that can rightly be characterised as 'the foundations of knowledge'.

Goldman is, however, a modest foundationalist. In discussing Richard Rorty's views he makes it clear that he is with Rorty in rejecting the claims of a Cartesian epistemology—a species of classical foundationalism—which would claim a sphere of privileged knowledge which forms the basis of all genuine knowledge about the world, man and society (see Goldman 1981). The task of epistemology, so construed, is to give us the foundations of knowledge and justified belief. Goldman, as firmly as Rorty, rejects any such claim to *privileged* knowledge or *certain* knowledge. (Like Rudolf Carnap, and since him

---

[1]See, e.g., Goldman 1967, 1976, 1979, 1981, and 1986 (page references to the latter will be given parenthetically); see also Bruce Fried's useful critical notice of Goldman 1986 (Fried 1988).

a host of others, they clearly see that 'certain knowledge' is not pleonastic, though knowledge does require truth, i.e., you cannot have knowledge of what is not true (Carnap 1949).)

Rorty would have it that when we drop such a quest for certainty we in effect drop epistemology and indeed even philosophy as the dominant modern tradition has come to know it (see Rorty 1979, 1982; Nielsen 1986a, 1986b). It is here that Goldman starts to demur. He is plainly unhappy with coherentist epistemologies and naturalised epistemologies, à la Quine, that reduce epistemology to psychology and deprive it of any critical normative function. He wants (reasonably enough) a foundationalist, normative and critical epistemology which is still fallibilistic. In line with this, he thinks we can, and should, be foundationalists, without being classical foundationalists, Cartesian or otherwise. This means that we will not claim certainty for basic propositions which in turn form the ground for all other legitimate claims to knowledge. He defends rather a modest version of a foundationalism where the basic propositions on which the rest of knowledge is founded are about physical objects not inner states, are not thought to be certain though they are, as basic propositions, epistemically prior to all other propositions. (What this latter claim means is not translucently clear.)

Part I of his *Epistemology and Cognition* is about foundations and constitutes a nuanced defense of a version of modest foundationalism. But *here*, unlike Quine, who rejects any 'First Philosophy', Goldman, who later in his book appeals to cognitive psychology in attempting to identify belief–forming and problem–solving processes, does not appeal to cognitive psychology or any science, cognitive or otherwise, in trying to set out the foundations, fallibilist though they be, of knowledge. That, as with classical foundationalism, is for him a purely philosophical activity. Here he is very traditionalist as if the Quinean revolution had had no effect on him. There seems at least to be implicit in Goldman's view, in a way that would not obtain for a naturalistic coherentist, like Quine or Putnam or for the pragmatists, a claim that there is something distinctive that is *philosophical knowledge* that gives him a touch-stone to truth and to the proper limning of the structure of reality (whatever that means, if anything).[2] What we would have on such a traditionalist view is an epistemology which would give us a neutral a historical basis or matrix for inquiry, which in turn would yield the rational basis for an ontologically serious metaphysics. It would be a metaphysics which would, in the tradition of First Philosophy, tell us what 'ultimate reality' (as if we understood what that meant) really is like. Thus, even with this modest foundationalism, we have a very traditionalist conception of First Philosophy: a metaphysical realism distant from the iconoclasm of Wittgenstein or Rorty.

Goldman believes, like traditional epistemologists, that even global scepticism should be taken seriously. Indeed he sets out to refute it with his modest foundationalism. So for him the problem of epistemic justification

[2]Sidney Hook has trenchantly criticised claims about there being something that can rightly be called a distinctively philosophical knowledge in his 1960b, 209-228. See in this context Rorty's important, though I think in ways importantly mistaken, 1983. The pragmatists powerfully undermine claims to 'First Philosophy' or philosophy as a foundational discipline in a way that Goldman does not take sufficiently to heart. (So frequently in philosophy there is a lapse in historical memory even when it is our recent history.)

('global justification' if you will) looms large and he carefully articulates and defends a reliabilist conception of justification. We want to know what 'has to be true of a belief for it to qualify as justified? What factual standard determines justifiedness?' (23) Beliefs, Goldman argues, which are formed by a reliable process are justified beliefs. We have a reliable process when we have a process that tends to produce a high truth ratio of beliefs (26).

The distinctive philosophical task is to articulate and perspicuously display and clarify this reliabilist account of justification and to compare it with alternative accounts and to assess which accounts have the best claim to being sound accounts. The task of cognitive psychology will be to identify basic belief–forming processes and to show how they work. With this information perspicuously arranged and empirically validated, it will be a purely philosophical task, Goldman has it, to articulate an adequate conception of reliability, state criteria of reliability and to evaluate different processes of belief–formation for their reliability. (It is here, *pace* Quine, where, unlike psychology, epistemology, Goldman would have it, has a normative or directive function (see, e.g., Goldman 1981, 428).)

Goldman, as part of his reliabilist account, runs, following in a broadly Lockean tradition, a causal theory of knowledge. Knowledge, to state such an account crudely, is a distinctive relation between a person and an object. It arises when an object makes an appropriate impression on a person's mind. Foundational propositions are those propositions which, because of the reliability of their causal connections between persons and objects, are those propositions concerning which we are justified in being the most confident. They are propositions which are believed because of the strong impression of an object upon us.

Wilfrid Sellars and Richard Rorty have rejected such an account because, they claim, it confuses causes and reasons. Goldman in turn responds that reasons can also be causes. There are indeed causes which are not reasons and there may be reasons which are not causes. But there are reasons which are also causes and those are the causes appealed in the causal theory of knowledge. In gaining knowledge it is crucial to ascertain the appropriate causal links and that is what a reliabilist account does.

It is also a non–starter against such an account to point out, as Sellars and Rorty do, what (that notwithstanding) is still plainly true, namely that we cannot analyse epistemic facts into nonepistemic facts, say causal facts. Such a crude reductionism indeed cannot be carried out. 'Knowledge' or 'justified' cannot be defined in non–epistemic terms. To think we can is to commit something akin to the naturalistic fallacy. But this truth is still a non–starter for, in a way analogous to the way contemporary ethical naturalists (e.g., J. L. Mackie) have responded to non–naturalists, Goldman, and other modest foundationalists, can reply, as Goldman has, that what we should seek is not a definition of 'justified' but 'a specification of the nonepistemic conditions that make a belief justified—the nonepistemic facts on which epistemic status "supervenes"...' (Goldman 1981, 426). These nonepistemic facts can and indeed should include some causal facts. A belief constitutes knowledge at least partly because of how it is caused and how it is causally sustained.

Goldman, though not without a keen sense of the difficulties facing him and not without a half-belief that such a thing cannot be achieved, seeks to

give what he calls an objectivist account of epistemic justification. Here he faces head on what are no doubt the deepest challenges to the whole epistemological tradition from anti–realists such as Putnam and Goodman, from the pragmatists, and from Wittgensteinians (see, e.g., Goodman 1978; Putnam 1983c, 1987; Rorty 1979, 1982; Taylor 1987). These philosophers, as different as they are, all argue that justification is irreducibly social. It is within our heterogeneous, though not unconnected, social practices that we find whatever epistemic authority there is. Justification consists in giving reasons in accordance with certain norms embedded in social practices within historically determinate communities. (Sometimes these norms are explicit, sometimes they are not.) Epistemic authority is most fundamentally grounded in what society lets us say. Causal interaction with objects cannot by itself confer epistemic authority. That can only be conferred by society. We cannot, the tradition's expectations to the contrary notwithstanding, appeal to any society–independent conception of accuracy of representation of how the mind or how language represents reality.

Goldman believes that this pragmatist–Wittgensteinian turn presents us with a *false dichotomy*. It says in effect 'either knowledge (or justification) is a matter of accuracy of representation, or causal interaction, or it is a matter of social or linguistic practice' (1981, 426). But, Goldman comments, 'these theories aren't really mutually exclusive; both can have elements of truth. It is true, for example, that standards for judging beliefs to be justified, or judging them to pieces of "knowledge", are socially evolved. But what these social standards or linguistic conventions require often involves accuracy of representation, or belief–causation' (1981, 427–428). A belief will count as knowledge only if true. This entails, Goldman claims, that knowledge is partly a matter of accuracy representation though he concedes to the Wittgensteinians that 'its being so is a matter of their being a certain socially evolved concept' (1981, 427).

He also maintains, against the claim that justification is irreducibly social, that socially evolved or not 'our standards of justifiedness specify that a belief is justified only if it is caused by appropriate psychological processes' (1981, 427). *Pace* Wittgenstein and Rorty, justifiedness is 'partly a matter of mental causes' (1981, 427). Suppose, for example, I claim to know that my copy of the *Investigations* is in my office. I know (know a priori?) that if the *Investigations* is in fact in my office and I am justified in believing that it is in my office that I know that it is in my office. And, more to the point here, whether I am so justified is, Goldman claims, independent of what any social authority may think. It is not like my belief that in a baseball game in which I am playing that I have just struck out. Whether that is true does plainly depend on what some social authority thinks and says, namely the umpire. But my belief that the *Investigations* is in my office is not like that. If that belief is true, and I have an appropriately formed belief that it is, then, no matter what my peers think or what society allows, I know that the *Investigations* is in my office. No social authority can gainsay that. Knowledge is not, as we can see from that example, in a whole range of important cases, a matter of what society lets us say. Moreover, we can, Goldman tells us, most certainly 'imagine a possible world in which knowledge exists without

society' (1981, 427). There could be a lone Robinson Crusoe without his man Friday who, as a solitary cogniser, has, all the same, some perceptual knowledge about his environment.

Goldman's response here to the Wittgensteinian sounds, at first blush at least, like the soundest and most unexceptionable of sturdy common sense brushing aside philosophical fantasies and excesses. It is something that the plainest of plain persons, unsullied by philosophy, could not—or so it at least seems—deny.

Let us see if, after all, appearances here are deceiving. Goldman *seems* to come down on the Ayer side of the old debate with Wittgenstein about the possibility of a private language. And, if he does, then there is the problem of how our solitary cogniser could possibly cognise, could have any *developed* understanding at all, unless he is socially formed (say like Crusoe) so that he has in his repertoire a whole battery of speech acts and conventions. In short, he is a person with 'a public language'. Without some 'public language' there would be no possibility for him to invent a 'private language' for his own purposes. Even our perceptual knowledge—acknowledge that, as Putnam shows, is never without some interpretation—is embedded in bits of other things. (Typically it is embedded in a whole linguistic framework.)

However, Goldman's case (his example) is underdescribed and, given what he said about 'being socially evolved' and knowledge, his solitary cogniser, like Crusoe, in the possible world Goldman imagines, could be socially formed with a 'public language' and now be in a world without society. That case so understood is quite unproblematic but it also provides no case at all of a human being having an understanding and beliefs that are not socially grounded. It would be like one of us being dropped on some uninhabited island without means of communication with anyone else. The conceptual trouble comes if we try to imagine someone who is recognisably human who is not a social animal, has never been part of society, who either has no language or has a language (putative language) that is only possible (logically possible) for him to understand. Wittgenstein's case about the impossibility of a private language hinges on whether such a 'possible world' is consistently thinkable and thus really a possible world. It is not, to put it conservatively, so evident that this is a possible world.

Goldman could, however, drop any reference to language and comment that whatever we should say about amoebas and protozoa, it would be arbitrarily *parti pris*, both Wittgenstein and Davidson to the contrary notwithstanding, to deny that dogs and cats and deer and tigers have perceptual knowledge. Yet they certainly do not have a language and they only in some very tenuous sense are socialised. Moreover, a dog at birth could be taken from its mother and fed without any 'socialisation' and that dog (still recognisably a dog) could still come, like any other dog, to have some perceptual knowledge. (At least this is not a wild hypothesis.) It could know how to get around in the environment. The Wittgensteinian reply that if we speak of a dog's knowing here we must be using 'knowing' in a different sense than when we speak of humans knowing is at best question begging, for as far as perceptual knowledge is concerned it is not unreasonable to think that what is involved here with dogs and what is involved with humans is very similar (though surely not identical).

However, it could in turn be responded that the kind of knowledge or justified beliefs that could be shared by dogs and humans is a very limited affair indeed. Most human knowing is a very socialised affair, thoroughly embedded in social practices which in turn are rooted in natural languages with their various conventions, constitutive rules and constitutive norms (see Taylor 1985, 1–57). Here social epistemic authority is inescapable. Even for such mundane things as the claims I shall list below we need a very complicated and distinctive socialisation to even understand them let alone to be able to assess whether they are true or justified. Just consider, to take examples more or less at random, claims about how much stress a bridge can safely take, whether a carburettor is malfunctioning, whether Jack is sad, whether Jane is intelligent, whether inflation is damaging the economy, whether Hondas are fuel efficient, whether religion is socially integrating or whether family bonds are disintegrating in *métier* societies. Just consider what we would have to understand to even understand any of these claims, let along to justify, or come to know, that they are true. There is no having such knowledge or even such understanding without society and without social epistemic authority. The traditional epistemologist's penchant for fastening on rather brute perceptual knowledge obscures this from us and makes us prone to a solitary cogniser model: the subject and the objects which impinge on the subject.

It should also be said that if we limit ourselves to the types of knowledge that (at least putatively) do not require social authority that we would have very thin porridge indeed. We could not have what the epistemologist needs to make his work interesting and significant. It is clear that on a Cartesian or Kantian epistemological foundationalism that the point, or at least the central point, of such a foundationalism is to put philosophers in a position where they could be the 'arbiters of all culture, as the underwriter or debunker of all claims of knowledge by science, morality, art or religion'.[3] But to do this epistemology cannot limit itself to what perceptual knowledge and the like might yield or what a 'proto–language' (if such there be) might yield. Such pieces of knowledge would not give us the grounds for such a critique and assessment of culture. We would rather need something like a set of more robust basic propositions whose truth was more secure than that of any other propositions and from which all propositions in science, morality, art or religion, if they are genuine propositions or at least warranted propositions, can be derived. (Perhaps 'derived' is too strong but then they must in some relatively straightforward sense be based on them.) But such an empiricist programme has failed and a modest foundationalism of the Goldman sort does not even attempt to revive it (cf. Taylor 1985). Moreover, much of the knowledge that would have to be part of those basic propositions, if we were to have them, would have to rest on social epistemic authority. Epistemology is only significant when it holds out the possibility of providing the rational basis for the Cartesian–Lockean–Kantian task of being an arbiter of culture, for being able to challenge any social authority, epistemic or otherwise. Otherwise it just becomes another little specialist's

---

[3]Goldman 1981, 427. Rorty in both his 1979 and 1982 has hammered that point home, a point most contemporary epistemologists with their myopic vision ignore.

inquiry with little interest beyond that domain. But that Archimedean point is just what foundationalist epistemology, modest or classical, cannot yield. (Non–foundationalist epistemology, if that is really epistemology, will not yield it either but for different reasons.) For the requisite reaches of knowledge epistemic authority is irreducibly social and with a clear recognition of this we can say goodbye to epistemology.

It might be responded that this misses Goldman's essential point about a false dichotomy in effect addressing itself to his last point only. Goldman could concede the Wittgensteinian point that standards for judging beliefs to be justified must be socially evolved. There is and can be no place to stand outside some society or other and no way, except as a social animal socialised into some culture or other with its distinctive language and ways of conceptualising things, to have much in the way of any understanding at all or to come to have knowledge or justified beliefs of the requisite range to make a distinctively human understanding possible. Goldman sometimes at least seems prepared to grant something like this and it indeed should be granted. Even if this is accepted, we need now to consider further the important point, essential for his false dichotomy claim, that 'what these social standards or linguistic conventions require often involves accuracy of representation or appropriate processes or belief–causation' (Goldman 1981, 427). Epistemic authority is inescapably social but that very authority itself requires that for a belief to be justified it must be caused by appropriate psychological processes (indeed mental causes). To have knowledge, and thus truth, we must, as that very social authority requires, have accuracy of representation.

The part about accuracy of representation sounds like the sturdiest of common sense that only someone suffering from a philosophical *malaise* could deny. While being at least as anxious as Goldman to stick to the sturdy ground of common sense and to avoid philosophical extravagance I think that things are not at all that simple and that we cannot so vindicate a modest foundationalist epistemology. To best argue for this, meeting Goldman on his own ground, I need to turn from his suggestive but dark sayings in his critique of Rorty to his very important discussion of 'truth and realism' in Chapter 7 of *Epistemology and Cognition*. What are dark sayings above receive a carefully reasoned articulation there in the course of his rejection of the anti-realism of Dummett and Putnam and of his own articulation and defense of metaphysical realism, along with a defense of a demythologised version of the correspondence theory of truth that goes beyond what he takes (tendentiously I believe) to be the inadequacies of a disquotational or Tarskian understanding of truth.[4] (For Goldman there can be no successful defense of metaphysical realism that does not involve a successful defense of a correspondence theory of truth.)

[4]Rorty brings out in a very compelling way how attractive that view is (see, e.g., Rorty 1986). If he is right we have with it gotten rid of a lot more philosophical rubble. Hartry Field, however, while showing the power of disquotational theories (as well as their variety) with exhaustive sophistication and pertinacity of argument, also shows that things, after all, are not quite that straightforward (Field 1986). (The old philosophical lesson.) Anyone interested in truth and the issues of realism and anti-realism and the drive to get beyond what may be, as Rorty and Field believe, a sterile debate should carefully study and take to heart these two essays. It is also interesting to reflect where, if at all, Field's essay might force revisions on Rorty's subtle common sense and give, if it does, The Tradition another inning.

V

I shall begin by setting out the core of his contentions in Chapter 7. Truth is important for Goldman's conception of epistemic justification and a non–epistemic, non–pragmatist, non–disquotational realist conception of truth at that. 'Realism' is, of course, a philosophical term of art (though not *only* a philosophical term of art) and it gets many readings, so Goldman seeks to specify what he means to be claiming in defending metaphysical realism. (That is his term not mine.) He takes his departure, appropriately enough, from Michael Dummett's characterisation of realism. Goldman, to my mind rightly, rejects bivalence as a necessary condition for realism but accepts what Dummett calls verification—transcendence as essential for realism. What is critical for realism, Goldman contends, is the belief, and the correctness of the belief, that when statements of putative fact are true, including statements about the future and subjunctive conditional statements, what makes them true (or false) is independent of our knowledge or of verification (143). This is what is meant by the claim that truth is verification–transcendent. It is essential for, indeed definitive of, metaphysical realism. What the realist is claiming is that 'a statement is true or false independently of our knowledge, or verification, of it (or even our *ability* to verify it)' (143). Truth so understood is not an epistemic matter about what is warrantedly assertable or rationally acceptable. Goldman's central concern with realism is, as he puts it, 'a concern with truth; with what makes a statement, or belief, true, if it is true' (143). This concern, he believes, requires that he develop a realist theory of truth (143). He then immediately points out that his theory of truth, like Tarski's, is interested in 'the "meaning" of truth, not in procedures or marks for telling which propositions are true' (144). Classical coherence theories of truth have conflated these quite different enterprises. 'They run together coherence as a *test* of truth and coherence as a definition of truth' (144). Coherence, suitably understood, has a certain plausibility as a test, or a partial test, for truth but no plausibility at all as a definition of truth. Goldman's theory of truth is concerned exclusively with the definition and elucidation of its meaning and does not concern itself with tests for truth which Goldman treats under the central epistemic topic of a theory of justified belief (144).

In articulating a proper theory of truth, we face, in a way disquotational truth theory does not, in his estimate, the substantial questions that divide realists from anti-realists.[5] And it is these issues that must, Goldman believes, be resolved in favour of the realist if his own defense of epistemology against the Wittgensteinian attack discussed in the previous section is to be sustained. The realist conception of truth Goldman defends is a conception which asserts (put in modal terms) that the very idea of a proposition's being true is the idea of state of affairs such that it could happen (or could have happened) that it be true, even though we are not in a position to verify it (148).

Goldman offers a cogent if not a strikingly original critique of epistemic theories of truth (144–151). His criticisms are fairly standard and fairly

---

[5]Rorty (1986) and Field (1986) would seem, at least, to give the lie to that.

unexceptional and, given the fact that its two major contemporary exponents (Rorty and Putnam) have abandoned it, I shall not discuss it (see, e.g., Rorty 1986; Putnam 1983b, 1987). But it is important to keep firmly in mind that Goldman's alternative realist conception insists on a sharp distinction between a proposition's being true and a proposition's being verified and stresses, as well, that it is the 'latter, but not the former' which 'involves processes by which the truth is detected or apprehended' (149). Indeed, it is by maintaining just this distinction—the distinction between what truth is and how it is known—that we 'can make good sense of certain of our verifying procedures' (149). Realists form a conception of reality that is a conception of something robust. It is something that has objects or properties, invariant under 'multiple modes of detection. The use of multiple procedures, methods or assumptions to get at the same putative object, trait, or regularity is common place in ordinary cognition and in science' (149). In this way in careful inquiry we seek to triangulate in on the objects or relationships under study. We can best make sense of this 'on the assumption that truths, or facts about the object or system under study are sharply distinguished from the processes of verification or detection of them' (149). The point is to use different techniques or methods 'to get at the verification–independent properties of the target object' (150). The underlying realist and common sense assumption is that there are truths about the world to be discovered by verification processes. Is there any good reason at all to think there is anything mistaken or even problematic in this pre–theoretical, pre–philosophical assumption? It seems, at least, to be something which it would be very difficult sensibly to deny. (We might, in a way that exhibits some scepticism concerning Goldman's very problematic, also ask whether it requires a theory of truth, an epistemology, or an ontology for its defense and whether the claims made in any such putative defense would not be less certain than that very claim itself?)

One of the reasons that has led what Goldman regards as the anti–realist camp (Wittgenstein, Goodman, Rorty, and Putnam) to reject both metaphysical realism and the taking of an epistemological turn is a belief that the correspondence theory of truth is incoherent. Goldman well brings out their central criticisms of what he takes to be the strong classical conception of the correspondence theory of truth. He shows how these arguments are well taken such that *such* a correspondence theory must be abandoned and he shows as well the implications of this for foundationalist epistemology. He then, taking to heart these criticisms, seeks to articulate a demythologised and weakened correspondence theory that would be immune to these criticisms and still provide the basis for a foundationalist epistemology. This takes us to the heart of his account and to the core of his defense of a modest foundationalism. If this account, or some modification of it, stands, it is at least plausible to believe that the case against epistemology collapses. So it is of some considerable importance that we carefully inspect Goldman's ideas here and this requires first setting them out. The *Tractarian* version of a correspondence theory of truth, Goldman argues, is a non–starter for the usual reasons. It claims that the world is a totality of facts. A proposition is true just in case it corresponds with a fact. But the world does not consist of fact–like entities, entities of the sort that would exactly correspond to propositions

or sentences. It is at best false to portray the world 'as being prestructured into truthlike entities' (151). (This, of course, in the face of James's derision, assumes that we understand what 'correspondence' could come to here.)

It is also argued by anti–realists and anti–foundationalists alike (*sometimes* they are the same) that the world is not prefabricated in terms of kinds or categories. The claim made by Goodman and Putnam is the familiar Kantian one that objects and kinds do not exist independently of conceptual schemes. 'We', as Putnam puts it, 'cut up the world into objects when we introduce one or another scheme of description' (Putnam 1981, 52–53). There are no Self–Identifying Objects. It is we conceptualisers, conceptualising in our various ways, who sort the world into kinds. The world does not sort itself into kinds. Goldman expresses this familiar Kantian point, at least seemingly so vital in arguing both the case against foundationalism and against epistemology, as follows:

> The point here is essentially a Kantian point, and one also stressed by Nelson Goodman. The creation of categories, kinds, or 'versions' is an activity of the mind or of language. The world itself does not come precategorised, presorted, or pre-sliced. Rather, it is the mind's 'noetic' activity, or the establishment of linguistic convention, that produces categories and categorial systems. When truth is portrayed as correspondence, as thought or language *mirroring* the world, it is implied that the world comes precategorised. But that, says the anti–realist, is a fiction. (152)

One might have expected Goldman to take a Davidsonian turn here and reject the whole Kantian schema/content dichotomy, but he does not and he seems at least to accept that critique of a strong form of the correspondence theory which relies on the belief 'that the world is prestructured into truth-like entities (facts) and that truth consists in language or thought mirroring a precategorised world' (152). Goldman seems at least to think that *such* a realism with *such* a strong correspondence theory of truth is indefensible and he turns instead to what he calls 'weaker variants of correspondence' which he thinks are defensible and are sufficient to yield a realist theory of truth without making a mystery of 'correspondence'. Traditional correspondence theories used the metaphor of mirroring; Goldman provides a new governing metaphor, namely that of being fitting or fittingness. He believes it gives us, with the use of an analogy, the key to a de–mythologised correspondence theory of truth. Goldman introduces his conception as follows:

> The mirror metaphor is only one possible metaphor for correspondence. A different and preferable metaphor for correspondence is *fittingness*: the sense in which clothes fit a body. The chief advantage of this metaphor is its possession of an ingredient analogous to the categorising and statement–creating activity of the cogniser–speaker. At the same time, it captures the basic realist intuition that what makes a proposition, or statement, true is the way the world is. (152)

To bring out the force of his case, he works with his analogy of the sense in which clothes fit a body. Just as there are 'indefinitely many sorts of apparel that might be designed for the human body' so there are 'indefinitely many categories, principles of classification, and propositional forms that might be used to describe the world' (152). The human body indeed has parts

but it is not 'presorted into units that must each be covered by a distinct garment' (152). Custom and sartorial ingenuity decided what parts to cover, what types of garment should cover which parts, whether the garments should be loose fitting or snug and the like. Moreover, for many parts of the body, there is a considerable array of different garment–types used to clothe them. It is people with their interests, preferences, and inventiveness who devise standards for proper fittingness. Here we have a wide variation and there are shifts in style and fashion. 'Styles specify which portions of selected bodily parts should be covered or uncovered and whether the clothing should hug snugly or hang loosely. This is all a matter of style, or convention, which determines the *conditions of fittingness* for a given type of garment' (153). Whatever conditions of fittingness human devising and interest set down for a given type of garment—something that is determined by the creators and designers, and not by the world, and reflects human choice and devising—still, whether a given garment (a token of a type) for a given person fits that person's body is determined by the world (by the way that person's body is). Custom and/or human devising determines *how* it shall fit, or what counts as fitting in such cases, but whether in that particular case that fit obtains is a matter of what a part of the world is actually like, namely what that person's body is like and what that garment is like. Indeed, to repeat, convention determines the *conditions of fittingness* for a given type of garment. However, as Goldman well puts it, 'Once such fittingness conditions are specified...there remains a question of whether a given garment token of that type satisfies these conditions with respect to a particular wearer's body. Whether it fits or does not does *not* depend solely on the fittingness conditions; it depends on the contours of the prospective wearer as well'.(153)

The analogy vis–à–vis a realist theory of truth and Kantian critique is apt. Though forms of mental and linguistic representation are human artifacts, human constructions, not products of the world per se, it remains the case that 'whether any given sentence, thought sign, or proposition is true depends on something extra–human, namely the actual world itself' (153). But which 'things a cogniser–speaker chooses to think or say about the world is not determined by the world itself. That is a matter of noetic activity, lexical resources in the speaker's language and the like' (153). For a sentence or proposition to have any truth–value, it must have associated conditions of truth. But the conditions of truth are no more read off the world or pried off the world than are conditions of fittingness. These are determined by the resources of a given language, the interests, devising and choices of agents in a particular culture and often at a particular time or, at least, epoch. These conditions of truth are set by human convention and devising: a devising that in many cases answers to various human interests. But, Goldman continues, bringing out firmly his realist commitments and reflecting back on his earlier discussion of Rorty, whether or not these conditions of truth, socially *derived* though they are, *are or are not satisfied* is determined by how the world is and not by any human 'world–making'. 'Truth and falsity, then, consists in the world's "answering" or "not answering" to whatever truth–conditions are in question' (153). This specifies without miracle, mystery or authority, a demythologised sense of 'correspondence' for a chastened correspondence

theory of truth in a way that squares with realist intuitions. Moreover, this account does something that good philosophical accounts not infrequently do. It meets intuitions realists properly insist on while at the same time finding a place for the valid points made by anti-realists. In doing this, we get a much better picture of what should be said and believed than with more tunnel-visioned approaches.

In deftly so proceeding, Goldman points out that *which* truth-conditions must be satisfied is not determined by the world. (I would prefer to call it the non-human world because there is nothing else but the world.) Conditions of truth are laid down not by the world (the non-human world) but only by thinkers or speakers: agents acting in the world with certain purposes, interests and conceptions of things. 'This is the sense in which the world is not precategorised, and in which truth does not consist in mirroring of a precategorised world' (153). We have with such a display of the conceptual terrain a way of doing justice to the realist claim that truth and falsity, at least for matters of fact, is determined by how the world is while still doing justice to 'the constructionist themes of Kant, Goodman and Putnam' (153). That is a pleasant, and perfectly coherent way, to have your cake and eat it too.

A considerable part of the motivation for the Goodman-Putnam type constructivism is epistemological or, more precisely, to make a case for an anti-foundationalist, anti-epistemology. We can never, they argue, compare a thought or a statement, or a network of such thoughts or statements, giving us a 'version of the world', with an unconceptualised reality so as to tell whether the world answers to that thought or statement or network of thoughts or statements (154). Moreover, 'comparison of a theory with perceptual experience is not comparison with unconceptualised reality because perceptual experience is itself the product of a sorting, structuring or categorising process of the brain. So all we can ever do cognitively is compare versions to versions' (154).

Relying on his account of fittingness as a replacement for mirroring, Goldman remarks that he can concede that point to the constructivists without it undermining his weakened correspondence account of truth or his realism, for on his own correspondence account no utilisation is made of mirroring or of the strange idea that 'true thoughts must resemble the world' (154). An 'epistemology of getting or determining the truth need not involve comparison' (154).

Perhaps this will do and with it we will have laid the foundations for a realist modest foundationalism. However, there is at least this kind of worry. Suppose someone sloganises as follows: 'There can be no fittingness without at least a "mirroring" that unavoidably involves comparison. We cannot give sense to whether something is fitting or not without making comparisons'. Let us, in trying to see if there is anything in that, go back to the garment analogy. Suppose I am buying a certain sort of hat and I am told (reflecting a sartorial convention) that one of the fitting conditions for that sort of hat is that it not rest on the ears but fit snugly one quarter of an inch above the ears. Perhaps I see a model of a hat so fitting (a wax head with a hat of the requisite type on it) or have a mental image of a hat on my head one quarter

of an inch above my ears. I try on a hat and walk to a mirror and see that (say) it fits a quarter of an inch above my ears or, if I have no mirror, I feel it with my fingers and ascertain that it does fit just a quarter of an inch above my ears or perhaps I just feel the pressure of the hat on my head at the requisite place. Perhaps (if I am a pedantic sort) I will measure it even carrying out certain elementary operations. But the point is that fitting here does involve comparisons. Now take the thought or the sentence, 'There is a tree before me'. I cannot, as the constructivists show, compare thought or sentence with an unconceptualised reality. It is not like looking at the hat on the wax head and then looking in the mirror at the hat on my head. But how, then, can we determine fit without comparison? Goldman puts something like this difficulty (if that is what it is) himself when he says: suppose it is asked if the realist's world is unconceptualised (as he agrees it is) how can it be grasped or encountered in a manner that determines fittingness? How can, or can, we determine fittingness here? Is it not, after all, the case that on Goldman's account we can never grasp or encounter the world so as to determine whether some thought or sentence of our fits it? His realist theory, the claim goes, so understands the world that it turns it into a noumenal object: a something that cannot be known or correctly described, a very vast something–I–know–not–what.

Goldman, of course, resists this. Since his response is vital for his defense of realist foundationalism let me quote his response in full.

> Perception is a causal transaction from the world to the perceiver, so perception does involve an encounter with the world (at least in nonhallucinatory cases). To be sure, the event at the terminus of the transaction does not *resemble* the event at the starting point. The terminus of perception is a perceptual representation, which involves figure–ground organisation and other sorts of grouping and structuring. The initiating event does not have these properties. Still, the transaction as a whole does constitute an encounter with something unconceptualised. We are not cut off from the world as long as this sort of encounter takes place.
>
> But is this sort of encounter sufficient for knowledge or other forms of epistemic access? As far as I can see, realism about truth does not preclude such knowledge. Suppose that the (unconceptualised) world is such that the proposition 'There is a tree before me' fits it, that is, is true. And suppose that the perceptual process is a reliable one, both locally and globally. Then, according to my account of knowledge, I may indeed *know* that there is a tree before me. The world that I learn *about* is an unconceptualised world. But *what* I learn about this world is that some conceptualisation (of mine) fits it. *How* I learn this is by a process that begins with the unconceptualised world but terminates in a conceptualisation.
>
> Does this (realist) theory make the world into a noumenal object, an object that cannot be known or correctly described? Not at all. On the proposed version of realism we can know of the world that particular representations fit it. So the world is not a noumenal object. (154)

VI

Goldman's account is impressive. Does it, at least in essentials, stand and, if it does, does the case against epistemology collapse? I think much of it stands and should simply be incorporated into good, clean intellectual work but I also think central elements of his thought, and indeed elements which are crucial for his case against those who would reject epistemology and with it foundationalism, need careful querying and it is to that that I shall first turn. Indeed, it is my belief that in some very essential respects Goldman's case does not stand.

At the very end of his discussion of metaphysical realism, Goldman, almost as if it were an aside, brings up a criticism of metaphysical realism by Hilary Putnam, turning on indeterminacy of reference. But—or so I shall argue—Putnam's critique here cuts to the heart of the matter. Goldman must deflect it if he is to make his case for metaphysical realism (155). I shall argue that Goldman has not adequately responded to it and that Putnam's arguments both undermine metaphysical realism and scuttle in a very fundamental way epistemological foundationalism.

Putnam in criticising the correspondence theory of truth points out that there are too many correspondences. Correspondence is, if it comes to anything, Putnam claims, a word–world relationship. But, given indeterminacy of reference, there just are too many word–world relationships. There are in situation after situation too many candidates for the reference relation. While there may be one satisfaction relation under which a given sentence turns out not to be true, there will be other equally plausible satisfaction relations under which it turns out not to be true. Interpretation is inescapable here, 'for any word–world relation purporting to be the "intended" truth relation, there are other, equally good candidates. Since no unique word–world relation can be identified with truth, the correspondence notion of truth is untenable' (155). Reference relations are always indeterminate and this, according to Putnam, has key implications for truth.

Goldman, strangely it seems to me, denies that this is so. Putnam's problem, he tells us, if it really is serious, is a problem about interpretation or the establishment of truth–conditions and not about truth (155). Goldman rightly points out:

> Questions of truth cannot arise until there is a suitable bearer of truth–value with an established set of truth–conditions about which it can be queried which truth–value it has. Sentences or thought events construed as meaningless marks or nerve impulses are not bearers of truth–values. Only when a sentence or thought event is interpreted—when it has suitable semantic properties (including reference of singular terms and sense or reference of general terms)—is it even a candidate for being true or false. (155)

Putnam presses us to ask how words and thought-signs get their meaning and reference. How, that is, do truth-conditions get attached to thought signs? Goldman throws up his hands at this problem but claims that, however it is resolved, it is not a problem for him 'for unless and until sentences and thought signs are conceded to have interpretations, or truth–conditions, the

question of truth cannot arise' (156). While not denying the truth of what he
has just said I continue to have trouble with its relevance to the problem at
hand. As we have seen Goldman cogently arguing, when such an assignment is
made, when such an interpretation is given, we can have definiteness (under
that interpretation) of reference and (under that interpretation) accuracy of
representation and we can determinately ascertain in many circumstances
what (under a certain interpretation) truth–value a particular employment of
a given sentence has. We can, ascertain, that is, whether it is true that there
is a poisonous snake in my berry patch. 'Given truth–conditions for a sentence,
or thought, what makes it true or false is surely the way the world is, or
whether it fits the world' (156).

It seems to me that this response to Putnam will not do at all, and that,
when we think it through, it is a great let down to realist hopes. Such an
account cannot meet the realist's pretheoretical intuitions. Intuitions which, if
abandoned, would be tantamount to abandoning realism. What the
metaphysical realist wants is for the world *quite unequivocally* to determine
what is true and what is false. As Goldman puts it himself, it is the realist's
expectations that it is objects and properties in the world which determine,
whether propositions are true, quite independently of what cognisers or
interpreters, if any there are, think or what conceptual schemes (if any) are
extant and accepted. This being so, the realist's intuition goes, it is just true or
false that at a given time and place there is a poisonous snake in Nielsen's
berry patch quite apart from whether Nielsen or anyone else is around to
assert or deny it or to place a certain interpretation on the utterance of the
sentence, 'There is a poisonous snake in Nielsen's berry patch'. The realist
expectation is that if the proposition that there is a poisonous snake in
Nielsen's berry patch fits with a certain segment of the world, then it is true
and we need not be concerned how some cognisers interpret it or what
conceptual schemes are accepted.

Putnam's analysis of indeterminacy of reference shows this realist belief
to be a myth. What counts as 'poisonous', 'snake', 'berry patch', 'being in the
berry patch' all admit of different readings. There is no determining what is
the correct reading independently of societal conventions or determinate uses
of terms in certain language games built into the linguistic practices of a given
society or a family of societies. In that way society determines what we can
say, think and believe and what has the most fundamental epistemic
authority.

We cannot say *sans phrase*, and make it stick, that there is a poisonous
snake in Nielsen's berry patch. What we can say is that, given a certain
interpretation of the sentence expressing that proposition, a certain
specification of truth–conditions, *and* a certain condition of a part of the
world, that (if all these conditions hold) it is true. But under other
interpretations it is false and under still other interpretations it is
indeterminate. There is no, it just being the case, independently of the holding
of some conceptual framework, that there is a poisonous snake in Nielsen's
berry patch. And since this is perfectly generalisable the common sensical
sounding claim of metaphysical realism has been undermined.

Perhaps a richer set of examples will help drive home this point.
Consider the standard South African racial classification system. As South

African road and city maps (at least of the 1976 vintage) will tell you, there are whites ('Europeans'), Blacks, Coloureds, and Asians and they make up the major racial groupings of South Africa, and there are supposedly a determinate number of such peoples in the various townships. Now let me concoct the following not utterly unrealistic dialogue. Suppose I am walking down the main street of Stellenbosch with an Afrikaner and we pass two chaps chatting in front of the drugstore. I say to the Afrikaner after we have passed, 'They were Blacks, weren't they?' He replies, 'No, they were Coloureds'. I respond, 'They looked like Blacks to me. They were very dark.' He says, 'No, they were Coloureds. They were speaking Afrikaans and they had straight noses.' I ask, 'Can't some Blacks speak Afrikaans like native speakers?' He allows that a few can and that some Blacks have straight noses. I then allege there is no racial difference between Blacks and Coloureds but only an ethnic one connected with certain cultural traits and certain distinctive historical circumstances. He says, 'No, there are distinct racial groupings, answered to by Whites, Blacks, Coloureds, and Asians'. We both agree that there are borderline cases where nothing would settle, except the vicious arbitrariness of the racial reclassification board, what race a given person was, but the Afrikaner also alleges that over populations and with respect to clear paradigmatic cases there are in the world such different races and that the two chaps we passed in front of the drugstore were plainly Coloureds. (He, of course, could be right about the first while being wrong about the second.) He can associate certain conditions with 'being Coloured' that will vindicate his claim that they are Coloureds, but there is nothing in the world which will force an acceptance of that reading on me or alternatively force an acceptance of my denial that there are (culture and convention apart) Coloureds on him. All we can say is that, given the acceptance of a certain conceptual framework and when certain conditions obtain, the sentence, 'Those chaps were Coloureds', is true. But the conditions by themselves are not enough to settle the truth claim here, the conceptual framework must also be accepted, but there is nothing in the world that just forces that or any other conceptual framework on us. (That is not to say, however, that decisionism is king and that there are no considerations of a pragmatic sort that may reasonably incline us to one framework rather than another. Moreover, there is a further twist here counting against anything like incommensurability that will be brought out in my discussion of Donald Davidson in the next section. But acceptance of that will force us to be much more holistic than Goldman allows or any foundationalism can allow.)

VII

Such views as expressed in the previous section about the indeterminancy of reference have sometimes given rise to forms of relativism or of idealism that should be looked at with a not inconsiderable amount of scepticism. Given Putnam–type arguments about word–world connections, some have thought, though not Putnam himself, that we should conclude that truth is relative to a scheme of thought. People, and particularly different peoples, have various visions and versions of the world. Indeed the world, on such accounts, is such a noumenal object that perhaps we have (if that makes sense) just versions *sans*

phrase. But this plainly is an implicit *reductio*. That there are sticks, stones and bits of earth around is not something that is mind dependent or depends for its being the case on the adoption of a conceptual scheme or framework or the like. These realities are not a matter of our devising, though just how we classify them is. (One can see here the slippery slope to the noumenal world.) That there are, will be or could be, cognisers capable of conceptualising and cognising such phenomena has no bearing on its being true that there are sticks, stones and bits of earth around. (They are just there to be discovered.) It is plainly more reasonable to believe this than to believe *a n y* philosophical claim that would deny it. If a philosophical claim (to adapt G. E. Moore) is incompatible with its truth, then the philosophical claim should be rejected or at least revised until it is compatible with its truth. Whatever we may want to say about metaphysical realism this common sense realism is perfectly firm and quite unproblematic.[6]

While these Moore–like moves rid us of idealism and global scepticism, they will not suffice to rid us of more local scepticisms or of all forms of relativism. (It may very well *not* be desirable to be rid of all such scepticisms or relativisms. Religious scepticism is only the most obvious case.) If we do not accept something like Goldman's modest foundationalism are we caught in a form of relativism? I do not think it is obvious that we are. Here we can perhaps take a page or two from Donald Davidson (see, e.g., Davidson 1973, 1986a, 1986b). Perhaps we can soundly reject relativism (at least in its non–benign forms) without being foundationalists. Davidson famously has denied that it even makes sense to speak of alternative realities each with its own truths untranslatable into another way of thinking. The literal meaning of sentences is given by their truth–conditions. To know the truth–conditions of a sentence, an utterance, thought or thought–event is to know the conditions under which it would be true or false. The sentence, 'The eraser is on the table', is true if and only if the eraser is on the table. But in doing this we do not compare the sentence with the eraser being on the table. Rather Davidson, like Quine, is much more holistic. Our sentences are part of a web of sentences whose truth–conditions depend on one another.

How does this bear on the rejection of the claim that truth is relative to a scheme of thought and to the claim that there are others who have a different version of the world with alien concepts that have no place in our lives but which are still no worse for all of that but which, being untranslatable into our scheme of things, are incommensurable with our views?

Davidson responds that there is no good reason for accepting claims of incommensurability. We come to understand the language of others, including people from very different cultures, with very different languages, in basically the same way we come to understand our own language, namely by systematically coming to understand the truth–conditions of the sentences in the language. To understand the language of another is to follow a systematic method for generating the truth–conditions of declarative sentences. If I am a field linguist and I profess to understand the language of another society, in gaining such an understanding I match their sentences with our truth–conditions. I understand the German sentence 'Schnee ist weiss' if I know it is

---

[6]Cf. Moore 1959, 32–59; 127–150; 227–251. Of Moore's many commentators, Arthur E. Murphy has best brought out the general import of Moore's work here. See Murphy 1942.

true if and only if snow is white. What I am doing here, acting as a field linguist, is to propose in our language a theory of truth for their language by proposing a systematic set of hypotheses, of which this hypothesis is simply one, concerning what the truth–conditions of various sentences in their language are.

That sounds commonsensical and straightforward enough, but how can we be confident, if, say, the people we are studying are Azande or Doubuans, that they do not have a wholly alien scheme of thought from our own? Davidson asserts, again famously and at least initially surprisingly, that we cannot attribute a wholly alien scheme of thought to an articulate people. (Part of the problem is over what the logical status of 'cannot' is here. Some—hardly using a principle of charity—give it a reading which makes Davidson's claim implausible. I shall give it one which makes it plausible.)[7]

This claim of Davidson's is a remarkable claim in any event and indeed if true a very important one. Is it just a sophisticated form of foot stamping on Davidson's part? And, if not, what are his arguments here and are they sound? Or can sound arguments be teased out of the core of what he says? For starters, though important starters, as different as people are in various culturally specific ways, it is perfectly evident that there is at a certain level of abstraction a common human nature (see Geras 1983). All peoples have beliefs and desires and have a language which they use. Given all this—things which are evident as evident can be—we are perfectly justified in attributing to other people in other tribes a massive number of mundane beliefs and concerns which run together with ours. They (that is all statistically normal people in all societies), like us, see the rain coming and hear the wind and feel the rain on them. They too believe they need water to drink, food to eat, that they require upon occasion rest, need upon occasion to defecate, that they will have young and that the young for a time need to be cared for to survive (even the Ik believed that), that there is such a thing as its getting dark and its getting light and on and on. We can so list beliefs (commonplace beliefs) in massive numbers and in an indefinitely extended number of ways. That these beliefs are true, that these things are so, is as plain as anything can be. If we know anything at all we know these things and that we do not know anything at all is vastly less evident than that we know these things. (Here we have Moore again.) Moreover, we not only know that all people have these beliefs we know these beliefs are true or (if that is too strong) at least we know it is more reasonable to believe that they are true than to believe any philosophical theory or account or any other kind of theory that would deny that we can know these things to be true or (if that is also too strong) that would deny that we are justified in believing them to be true. (Here G. E. Moore—though some say he was only copying Locke—made, or at least should have made, a permanent difference to philosophy. If we take Moore seriously—think carefully through what he says and then take it to heart—we cannot go on doing things in the old way (see Moore 1959, Murphy 1942). We will either stop doing philosophy altogether, something Wittgenstein would approve of, or philosophy will be radically transformed.)

[7]This is also done by Ian Hacking; see Hacking 1978, 1984, and 1985.

If we do not assume such Davidsonian things about other tribes with radically different languages (as well as tribes nearer to home, including our own) we could not even understand what it is for them to have a language for us to try to interpret or understand, for if we did not make such assumptions we could not match their utterances with our truth–conditions. Thus, if I walk up to a high mountain stream with a person from an alien culture whose language I do not understand and I see him put his foot in the stream and then, as he quickly pulls it out, I hear him utter a set of sounds I can reasonably conclude (though surely not with any great confidence) that he is saying in making those noises something like, 'The water is cold'. He may, of course, not be; he might have been saying instead 'I don't like its feel', 'It feels funny', 'It tingles', 'Shit!' or any of a rather limited range of things. In the light of other things he utters and other things he does I could correct my original hypothesis (if I am systematic and persistent enough) until I can be reasonably confident that I have a correct translation. (Remember fallibilism is the name of the game.) Our sentences, as I have remarked, following Davidson and Quine, are part of a web of sentences whose truth–conditions depend one on another. The identifying of truth–conditions doesn't simply go one by one. But my initial hypothesis about what he would be saying in such a circumstance is very likely right, and we can correct it or refine it by utilising the coherentist method of reflective equilibrium. (This could very well include abandoning my original hypothesis for another one.)

It is, of course, logically possible that his utterance could have meant, 'God speaks to me', or even something more plainly nonsensical such as, 'Water speaks harshly', or any of a considerable number of odd things (sensible or otherwise). (We see here, once again, of what little interest mere logical possibilities are. This should chasten us about the demands for proof.)

However, if the field linguist gives such an exotic reading to all or even most of his informant's utterances, given our common situation in the world, common human nature (having beliefs, desires, intentions, needs and interests), we have the best of reasons for thinking the field linguist has mistranslated at least most of the utterances. (Natives sometimes say exotic things but then sometimes so do we as well, e.g., talk of God, but these are very much the exception.) It makes no sense to attribute a wholly alien scheme of thought to an articulate people. If we tried to we could not even identify it as 'a scheme of thought' or as 'a language'. We can have no understanding of it (if such it be) such that we could say coherently that it is alien, if all the utterances or even the great mass of the utterances, were 'translated' in ways that made no sense to us or did not run together with a not inconsiderable portion of the great mass of our commonplace beliefs. (Perhaps that is overstated but then a more moderate replacement will do. We should not look for an algorithm here.)

To have an understanding between different cultures we must have such bridgehead beliefs and they must be reasonably extensive (see Lukes 1967, 1973; Hollis 1967a, 1967b, 1973; Nielsen 1974, 1976). And (their theories to the contrary notwithstanding), as a matter of fact, as even Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf believed, there is cross–cultural understanding and there are, at least as a matter of fact, no untranslatable languages.

What makes us go wrong here and fly in the face of common sense and our actual human and anthropological practices of cross–cultural understanding is adherence to a deeply beguiling and deeply culturally embedded (at least in intellectual circles) basically Kantian conception, a conception that has its hold on both Goldman and Putnam, as well as on Goodman, namely what Davidson calls the dogma of scheme and reality (Davidson 1973). It, as part of an ancient philosophical tradition, sets mind, thoughts, thought–events, words, utterances, cognisers and reactors (somehow magically) apart from the world—as if they were not part of the world—and then worries about how to get them with their conceptual schemes back together again with the world. Again the tides of metaphysics are running high. The picture that is beguiling us, a picture Davidson thinks is incoherent, is that there is a given reality and then there are various human schemes for perspicuously presenting (displaying) this reality by carving it up or categorising it in different ways. What tempts us to think it makes sense to go in this way— that indeed we must go in this way—is a comparison with literal (actual) maps with their different ways of mapping the earth. We have stereographic maps and Mercator maps, etc. These projections do give us contrasting ways of mapping the earth. But here there is nothing untoward for we simply have different methods for mapping an *independently identifiable earth*. But in the wide ranging Kantian picture of scheme and reality (scheme and content) there is, as the account stresses, no way of identifying independently 'the reality'. There is no possibility of standing outside one or another of these conceptual schemes and identifying the reality we are talking about. Unlike maps these conceptual schemes are utterly ubiquitous. We are, the narrative has it, in a kind of linguacentric predicament. This is not at all the case with the literal mapping of the earth. We have independent access to both the map and earth but this is not and cannot be the case with scheme and reality. Once this is seen and firmly taken to heart we should recognise that there is nothing to the scheme and reality conception and the picture should no longer entrap us. (Here we need Wittgensteinian therapy, not a new metaphysics.)

Freed from this beguiling picture, we simply work, in the way I have described with our own language, with the languages of other cultures by ascertaining as best we can the truth–conditions of their sentences in a systematic way, taking those sentences as a part of a web of sentences whose truth–conditions depend on one another. We make hypotheses in our language about sentences in the alien language. We do not try to get below the level of truth–conditions for the sentences to how individual words refer. Reference *may* be inscrutable. The problem posed by Putnam about the relativity or at least the indeterminateness of reference that made a problem for Goldman's foundationalism is not a problem here. For we do not have with such a Davidsonian approach a building block method where we are trying to show how, for individual sentences, some of which are supposed to express basic propositions, they, that is the basic ones, correspond to the world—the world just being something which contains fact–like entities there like trees to be discovered. The kind of objectivity we achieve is not in this foundationalist way or of a foundationalist sort but as a way of seeing how the sentences of a

natural language hang together as part of a web of belief and whose truth–
conditions are in a parallel way mutually dependent. In understanding
someone from an alien culture or another person from our own culture or even in
understanding ourselves, we arrange, by our own lights, the only lights, as
Hacking well puts it, we can have, the beliefs, desires and utterances of
others (from our own tribe or from another) into as coherent a bundle as we can
get.[8]

When it is another language or an alien belief–system that is in question,
we have good reason to believe we have correctly interpreted it when we
have got the sentences, desires and beliefs into a coherent set. Where it is our
own belief or our own belief–system we are justified in believing the belief or
belief–system to be true to the extent that we have shown it is maximally
coherent. (Justification is clearly something that admits of degrees.) We are
not in so speaking saying truth is coherence or is what is maximally coherent.
'The eraser is on the table' is true if and only if the eraser is on the table,
'The pencil is yellow' is true if and only if the pencil is yellow, and so on.
(This is one of the virtues of the disquotational theory.) But to so regard
things need not come to believing that truth is a property of any kind and it
need not assume *any analysis of truth at all.* It could very well take 'truth' as a
primitive. But we *are* saying that it is coherence and perhaps something else
as well, say experience embedded in a web of belief, that *justifies* an ascription
of truth to a belief, utterance, thought or sentence. But we need not try to state
or search for any set of foundational beliefs or basic propositions which must
be true in a correspondence sense (weak or otherwise) and on which all other
beliefs must be based if they are to be justified beliefs (cf. Rorty 1986).

VIII

Such Davidsonian moves may very well block *global* scepticism without
appeal to foundationalist epistemology or perhaps to any epistemology at
all, but it will not block, or evidently block, more *local* scepticisms or *local*
relativisms. Let me explain. Someone might say that over such mundane,
utterly commonplace, bridgehead beliefs that it is true that we must assume,
if cross–cultural communication is to be possible, such cross–cultural general
agreement. But we cannot reasonably assume such consensus over scientific
beliefs, political beliefs, some moral beliefs, beliefs about religion, and a host
of really crucial beliefs. (This would apply as well to the random sample of
beliefs mentioned in § iv.)

Now certainly it is no difficulty for Davidson's account if there is
divergence, *intra*culturally and sometimes *inter*culturally, as well, in the more
exotic beliefs or if, *if* indeed there is, non–translatability of some of the
theoretical concepts of some societies such as the concepts mass or fields of
force extant in the scientific community of our society. Davidson does not say
all beliefs are unproblematic, only the great mass of commonplace beliefs and
then not all of them. Azande belief in witchcraft and North American belief
in God are, to understate it, pretty strange and pretty problematic, and they

[8]See Hacking 1984. For a perspicuous depiction of the varieties of objectivity, see Nagel 1980.
The work of John Rawls and Norman Daniels extensively operates with this conception of
objectivity. How we are not, all the same, trapped in an ethnocentrism here is brilliantly
portrayed by Charles Taylor in his 1985, 116–133.

are only some of the more obvious examples of a plethora of strange beliefs that circulate in the various tribes of the world (including, of course, our own). We should beware (to understate it) of principles of charity here which seek an interpretation of 'Matter is infinite evil and mind is infinite goodness' (to paraphrase Mary Baker Eddy) or even of (to use something presently in wider currency) 'God created the heavens and the earth' or 'History has an end', which makes such sentences come out true. We may, between foreign beliefs and our own, rightly assume that in commonplace matters they come out pretty much the same as ours or so close to being the same as to make no difference and that these beliefs are generally true but about a host of speculative and ideological matters there is, as Hacking puts it, 'difference a plenty' (1975, 148).

As we have seen, it was the hope of traditional epistemology that once we come to have a good foundationalist epistemology we would then have a rational way of working out such claims using the foundational epistemological measure as a yardstick to decide which are justified claims and which are not. Goldman's modest foundationalism, as we have seen, will not help us out here and it is not so evident that the coherentism that Davidson gives us will either, though I am anything but confident that it was ever meant to do that. It may be, as Davidson believes, that in every natural language we can find structures of first order logic that we can use in proofs of Tarskian T–sentences so that every language (everything that is to be counted as a language?) will have an underlying logic identical to our own Hacking 1975, 154). But, even so, do we have a translation manual that will get us and others to the more *recherché* beliefs in our language or any language so that we could assess whether they are sensible or nonsensical or (once that is settled) true or false? We can perhaps develop a theory here as a *horizontal* extension of a first–order theory of truth. This extended theory will perhaps have sufficient structure to give us rulings on the more *recherché* beliefs or at least some of them. A Davidsonian hope (though I do not know if it is Davidson's himself) is that, given the immense agreement about mundane matters that actually obtains (that is agreement about what is true and false here), once there is translatability of simple sentences in which this agreement obtains, 'then the recursive generation of truth–conditions for more complex sentences will enforce such a uniform method of translation that the spectres of incommensurability and indeterminacy will vanish in the dawn of a thoroughly worked out theory of truth' (Hacking 1975, 156). This is an interesting and not implausible speculative (though empirically disciplined) possibility but it is hardly Luddite to be sceptical of such a grand holism given the multiplicity and complexity of social practices and their related language–games and the at least seemingly very different styles of reasoning that go with them (see Hacking 1982, 1985). In such situations it appears at least to be the case that we have rather more localised social epistemic authorities, though appearances here *may* be deceiving. I think the burden of proof (something which is *sometimes* very difficult to establish) is on the Davidsonian to carry out such a program at least in a rather more filled–in outline. However, it would do nothing, even if successfully articulated, to show that epistemology is a viable enterprise or that there is any point in

engaging in metaphysical inquiry unless one wants to (rather eccentrically) count such a holistic, but still an empirically grounded, account of what can be said as an epistemology or a metaphysics. But then we have used these terms so broadly that they come to lack utility and a tie with The Tradition. When Carnap, Schlick, Neurath, Hägerström, and Ayer set out to eliminate metaphysics, they did not set out to eliminate that or anything like that.[9] That instead could be, and to my mind should be, a theoretical part of a systematic, empirically constrained critical theory of society.[10]

---

[9]Of course, if Davidson is proceeding purely a priori, then it is a metaphysical enterprise and a vulnerable one. But a Davidsonian account need not take such a high a priori road as it has not in my (possibly) scaled down formulation of it. But it is *thereby* also not metaphysical. Rorty remarks, significantly I think, '...the positivists were absolutely right in thinking it imperative to extirpate metaphysics, when "metaphysics" means the attempt to give knowledge of what science cannot know' (1979, 384). (And this, note, from an opponent of scientism and from someone who regards logical positivism as, philosophically speaking, a reactionary movement.) Metaphysics (when it has a determinate sense that links it with The Tradition) wants to give us a priori knowledge of 'ultimate reality' or the underlying structure of the world or the basic 'categories of being'. But there is no such knowledge to be had and probably the very conception of gaining such knowledge is incoherent. The sad thing is that so very late in the day there are still philosophers around who want to be ontologically serious and do what, if it can be done at all, can only be done by science. Philosophers ought to either close up shop or turn to other things. (I have suggested some other things in the articles referred to in the next note.)

[10]I have tried to say something of how this should go in my 1986c, 1987a, and 1987b.