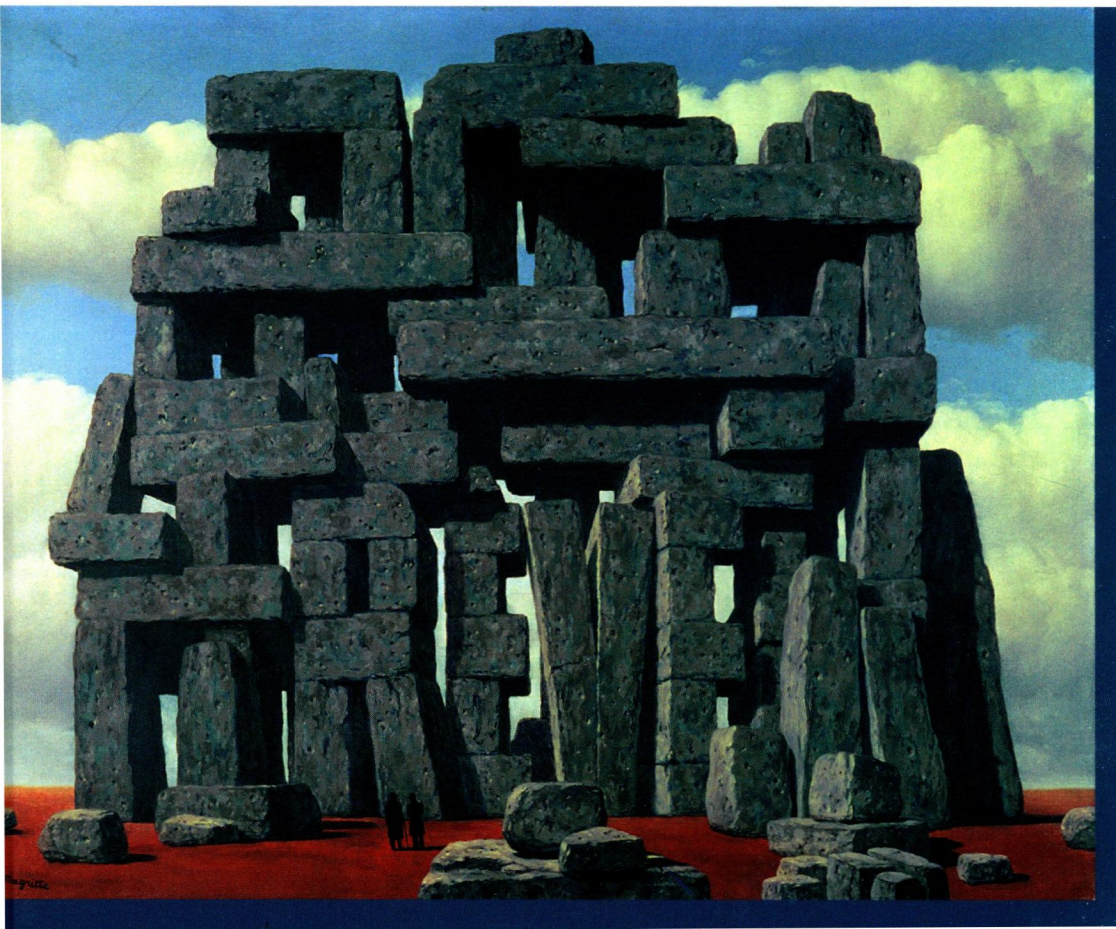
Wittgenstein and Davidson on Language, Thought, and Action

Edited by Claudine Verheggen



Wittgenstein and Davidson are two of the most influential and controversial figures of twentieth-century philosophy. However, whereas Wittgenstein is often regarded as a deflationary philosopher, Davidson is considered to be a theory builder and systematic philosopher par excellence. Consequently, little work has been devoted to comparing their philosophies with each other. In this volume of new essays, leading scholars show that in fact there is much that the two share. By focusing on the similarities between Wittgenstein and Davidson, their essays present compelling defences of their views and develop more coherent and convincing approaches than either philosopher was able to propose on his own. The essays show how philosophically fruitful and constructive reflection on Wittgenstein and Davidson continues to be, and how relevant the writings of both philosophers are to current debates in philosophy of mind, language, and action.

Contributors: Jason Bridges, William Child, Hans-Johann Glock, Kathrin Glüer, Paul Horwich, Robert H. Myers, Barry Stroud, Tim Thornton, Claudine Verheggen, Åsa Wikforss, José L. Zalabardo

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Claudine Verheggen

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In memory of Sue Larson

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I dedicate this book to the memory of Sue Larson, who first made me realize, through the numerous conversations I had with her in the 1990s, how much Wittgenstein and Davidson had in common, and who thus was the first inspiration for this book.

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Introduction

Claudine Verheggen

> I'm not interested in constructing a building so much as in having a perspicuous view of the foundations of possible buildings. (Wittgenstein 1980, 7)

> Maybe those long hours I spent years ago admiring and puzzling over the *Investigations* were not spent in vain. (Davidson 1999, 286)

Ludwig Wittgenstein and Donald Davidson are two of the most formidable figures of twentieth century philosophy, equally influential, equally controversial. It would be hard to overstate the importance and the extent of the influence they have had and continue to have on contemporary philosophers working in a great many areas of philosophy. Yet, they are typically taken to be engaged in two radically different ways of doing philosophy. On the one hand, Wittgenstein is widely understood to be a deflationary philosopher, who recommends that philosophical problems be dissolved rather than solved, and thus that no constructive philosophical thesis be advanced. Davidson, on the other hand, is widely acknowledged to be a theory builder, a systematic philosopher par excellence, whose views about the nature of language and thought are intended to have consequences for most areas of philosophy. Given these alleged differences, it is perhaps no wonder that, though the writings of each philosopher have generated volumes of commentaries, some of which compare them to other leading philosophers, there has so far been no book comparing Wittgenstein and Davidson.

The purpose of this volume is to demonstrate that this is a serious lacuna, resulting, at least in part, from a serious misreading of both philosophers. There is in fact much that Wittgenstein and Davidson share (as Davidson himself was increasingly recognizing in the last fifteen years of his life) and much to be learnt from investigating them side by side. In one way or another, the chapters in this volume address these commonalities or "family resemblances", as it is tempting to call them. Some of the chapters aim at establishing these resemblances, thereby reinforcing particular claims being advanced by both philosophers. Some of the chapters use the arguments of one philosopher to improve on the views of the other. All aim either at presenting more compelling defences of the views of one or the other, or both, of these philosophers, or at developing

more coherent and convincing versions of their views than either philosopher put forward on his own. Thus the volume is not primarily exegetical, though the authors have also taken great care to get the texts right. Rather, the volume demonstrates how philosophically fruitful and constructive reflection on Wittgenstein and Davidson continues to be, and how relevant the writings of both philosophers are to current debates.

Not only do family resemblances between Wittgenstein and Davidson get established and elaborated upon by most authors in the volume, some family resemblances are also to be found among the authors themselves. In addition, interestingly, certain family resemblances between Wittgenstein and Davidson asserted by some authors are denied by others. The volume thus reveals, as Wittgenstein would have put it, "a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: similarities in the large and in the small" (Wittgenstein 1953, §66). In what follows, I shall draw an outline of the most significant of these similarities, describing thereby the structure and main themes of the book.

It starts where Davidson started, with his causal theory of action introduced in 1963. Interest in this theory has recently been revived along with interest in one of the works Davidson was reacting to, viz., *Intention*, by the famously Wittgensteinian Elizabeth Anscombe. Two worries that have always plagued Davidson's theory concern the problem of deviant causal chains and the problem of weakness of the will. Robert Myers argues that these worries can to a large extent be overcome once the theory is outfitted with a more thoroughly holistic account of pro-attitudes, instead of the standard Humean account usually attributed to Davidson. The problems of deviant causal chains and weakness of the will can then be seen as problems of detail, as Davidson always suggested, and the differences between Anscombe's version of the non-causal theory and Davidson's version of the causal theory can be seen as significantly reduced, as Davidson always intended.

The chapters that come next address one or the other facet of Wittgenstein's and Davidson's discussion of natural language and its relation to thought and to reality. A primary interest in these topics was shared by the two philosophers throughout their lives. This focus was true of both the early Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* and the later Wittgenstein of *Philosophical Investigations*. And it was true of both Davidson's early views on radical interpretation, the interpretation from scratch of a person's language and thoughts, and his later views on triangulation, the idea of two creatures responding simultaneously to each other and to the world they share. The family resemblances emphasized by all authors are between the later Wittgenstein and Davidson. But different authors focus on different periods of Davidson's work. What they all recognize is that Wittgenstein and Davidson both see an important connection between the way we use our

words and what we mean by them, but they exploit this connection in importantly different, though overlapping, ways.

Paul Horwich is in fact reticent to attribute to Davidson a use-theory of meaning, for he thinks that Davidson would take it to be incompatible with his truth-theoretic view of meaning, in particular, his truth-conditional account of compositionality. But he also thinks that Davidson is wrong to insist on this truth-conditional account – a superior, deflationary account is in sight, which is compatible with a Wittgensteinian use-theory of meaning. Moreover, it would be easy for Davidson to adopt the deflationary account, since his own account of interpretation possesses all the seeds of a use-theory of meaning. Indeed, Horwich sees an important parallel between Davidson's idea that interpretation is guided by the principle of charity, and thus based on agreement between interpreter and interpretee, and Wittgenstein's idea that interpretation is guided by use, and thus based on the shared practice of accepting sentences. This "transformation" of Davidson into Wittgenstein would have him abandon his non-deflationist theory of truth and embrace an explanation of truth in terms of meaning, rather than the other way around, as Davidson himself would have it. But is such a transformation necessary?

Some philosophers think not. One of these is Åsa Wikforss, who argues that a truth-conditional theory of meaning is perfectly compatible with a meta-semantic theory that puts communication, and therefore use, at its centre. Thus, according to her, the view of a use-theorist like Wittgenstein is perfectly compatible with the view of a formal semantics theorist like Davidson. Indeed Davidson defends both views. The key is to recognize that the truth-theory is supposed to be the answer to the question what one could know that would enable one to interpret another person's words, which is different from the meta-semantic question how one could know it, to which radical interpretation is the answer. It is at this foundational, meta-semantic level that Wittgenstein and Davidson have much in common. Wikforss argues that Davidson's principle of meaning determination, the principle of charity, is similar to Wittgenstein's, since both recommend that facts about use be mapped onto meanings and semantic correctness conditions, and thus both emphasize the need for agreement in beliefs and judgments for there to be communication. As she says, "the device of the radical interpreter is meant precisely to illustrate how use determines meaning" – on this much she and Horwich agree. The discussion of meaning determination brings out, according to Wikforss, another similarity between Wittgenstein and Davidson. Contra many commentators, she maintains that Wittgenstein did not believe that meaning is determined by conventions, just as Davidson did not. However, Wikforss ends up remarking, Wittgenstein and Davidson's insistence that meaning is determined by use entails that meanings cannot be "perfectly objective".

This is also the conclusion reached by Kathrin Glüer, who finds in Davidson's writings an answer to Wittgenstein's rule-following paradox,

a paradox which seems to pose a serious threat to the idea that linguistic expressions can ever be meaningful. Glüer argues that it is thinking of meaning as use, or as determined by use, that leads Wittgenstein to the paradox, for, she asks, if meaning is use, how could meaning determine "a potential infinity of objectively correct applications?" She then considers the account of meaning determination Davidson offers in his writings on radical interpretation as a possible answer to Wittgenstein's paradox. Radical interpretation is based on a premise shared by Wittgenstein and Davidson, viz., that language is essentially public. Thus, according to the account of radical interpretation, meanings are determined in two steps: first by detecting the interpretee's attitudes of holding true uninterpreted sentences in given circumstances, and then by having these attitudes determine meanings via the principle of charity. The interpreter, as Glüer emphasizes, plays an essential role in determining meaning, and thus only what speakers are "sensitive" to is eligible to be meant. The problem of objectivity seems therefore to remain with us. Does it, however?

Claudine Verheggen's paper might well be read as suggesting that it does not, not because Davidson succeeds in solving it but, rather, because, following Wittgenstein, he succeeds in dissolving it. Verheggen, too, tackles Wittgenstein's rule-following paradox and argues that the considerations that lead him to the paradox are similar to the considerations that lead Davidson to develop his account of triangulation and thus the claim that one's possession of language and thoughts requires one to interact linguistically with others and the world around them. She further argues that, with Wittgenstein's help, Davidson is in a position to vindicate the premise that language is essentially public, which in turn solidifies Davidson's approach to meaning and his account of meaning determination. Key to the argument is the claim that, according both to Wittgenstein and to Davidson, when reflecting on the connection between meaning and use, we should not conceive of use in non-semantic terms, but we should think of it as the meaningful use of words by people engaged in communication. Thus Verheggen argues that Wittgenstein and Davidson are both fierce non-reductionists, though she also believes that their non-reductionism is compatible with non-quietism.

Though he does not use the word 'non-reductionism', Barry Stroud argues that this is the fundamental idea shared by Wittgenstein and Davidson. Stroud stresses the importance they both bestow on ostension in learning language and for the words learnt to mean what they do. He also stresses the claim that for neither of them is ostension sufficient for language learning. What is needed, in addition, is mastery of the grammatical structure of language. This is a mastery that can be described, following Davidson, by a truth-conditional theory of meaning, which, according to Stroud, finds its equivalent in Wittgenstein's talk of a speaker's grasp of the "place in language, in grammar" that is assigned to different kinds of word. Thus Stroud, too, sees no conflict between a truth-conditional theory of meaning