1-2006

The Problem of Comparing Different Cultural or Theoretical Frameworks: Davidson, Rorty, and the Nature of Truth

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Word count: 8,053

Abstract

In comparing very different cultural or theoretical standpoints, the nature of truth itself becomes a problem. If the standpoints have different conceptions of truth, a comparative approach that respects both involves the contradiction of conflicting legitimate claims to truth. But if we reject this contradiction, we eliminate the possibility that standpoints can have legitimately different conceptions of truth. And with that we reject the sense of a genuine comparison in this respect, rather than a reading of one framework in the light of the other. Davidson and Rorty have mounted especially powerful arguments against the very sense of this kind of contradiction between frameworks, and so against the sense of a comparative approach in this respect. Through a detailed discussion of their work, this paper argues that the contradictory conception of truth is the right one. It also argues that this contradiction is manageable. As a result, a properly comparative framework is both possible and necessary, even where the nature of truth itself is concerned. In particular, this conception makes room for ideas of truth as both absolute and relative, and also (contradictorily but with due respect for many of the cultural and theoretical frameworks available for comparison) for non-contradictory conceptions of truth.

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I shall discuss a problem with the concept of truth that arises in comparing different cultural or theoretical frameworks. This is obviously an issue for the kinds of cross-cultural comparison on which a great deal of work in the study of religion depends. It is, perhaps less obviously, however, also a crucial problem for the conflicts between theoretical perspectives that are endemic to the field of religious studies itself (for example [[]]). In this second connection, I offer the following discussion as a step in recognizing the kinds of profound and systematic mutual misunderstanding and miscommunication that naturally characterize such conflicts. I also hope to make clear that, if genuine debate is to take place at all in these contexts, given this radical kind of misunderstanding and miscommunication, we also have to recognize the need for a very different kind of dialogue from those that are current, and very different strategies of approaching understanding and mutual assessment.[i]

For the sake of simplicity of presentation, I shall focus primarily on different cultural frameworks in what follows, but the same arguments apply equally to debate between theoretical frameworks.

In comparing very different standpoints, whether cultural, subcultural, individual, or theoretical, the nature of truth itself becomes a problem. If, for example, we see the standpoints as genuinely but legitimately different with respect to the truth, we have the problem of conceiving how conflicting views can both be true. If they can, then within one of the standpoints, what the other takes as truth is equally legitimately taken as false, as the opposite of truth. In that case, are we dealing with truth at all any more? Further, in comparing them, we

occupy a more general framework that includes all the relevant views. That is, that framework consists in taking both (or more) conflicting views into account simultaneously, so that in our single comparison-making standpoint we are regarding one and the same thing as simultaneously both true and false.

If, on the other hand, we reject this contradiction within truth, we have to assume that standpoints cannot be legitimately different with respect to the truth. This view has been very powerfully argued by, for example, Donald Davidson. But this seems to eliminate the sense of a comparative perspective altogether, at least when it comes to conceptions of truth. Our view of the nature of truth in general, then, of whether truth can legitimately be construed in conflicting ways and so involve contradictions, or whether truth is ultimately universal, determines how we understand the nature of differences between standpoints, and so whether a properly comparative approach is ultimately appropriate or, instead, distorts the realities of inter-cultural and inter-perspectival understanding.

Richard Rorty has very subtly argued a third view of truth, largely on the basis of Davidson's work. This view is that there is no need for or point in talking about truth at all. Consequently there are no logical obstacles to comparison between conflicting standpoints: there is no worthwhile conception of truth at all, and so no conflict of conceptions of truth to trouble us. Comparison can then proceed as far as we have the energy and practical conditions for it. On the other hand, it is also a consequence of this view there is no ultimate justification, no ultimate foundations, for anything. As a result this view excludes in advance the legitimacy of all the many standpoints that do find the concepts of truth and ultimate foundations meaningful. This view too, then, seems troubling for the possibility of a genuinely comparative approach.

In contrast with these views, I want to show that it is in fact both possible and necessary to have a properly pluralist conception of standpoints, one that therefore allows and requires a properly comparative approach. That is, I want to defend a conception in which standpoints can have conflicting conceptions of truth without also, because these conceptions contradict each other, ultimately eliminating their sense altogether. In fact, I want to show that the contradictions involved in the ways in which truth is relative, and only those contradictions, justify the idea that there are ways in which the same truth excludes contradiction: that is, ways in which it is universal or absolute.

I shall argue, then, that truth is contradictory, but in ways that give rise to non-contradictory sense and knowledge. More specifically, I shall argue that we sometimes can and must think of truth as both absolute and relative in the same respects, and also sometimes as just universally the one, sometimes as just universally the other. I shall approach this argument through a discussion of Davidson's and Rorty's work. I shall try to show how their own, cogent arguments lead, though entirely despite themselves, to the pluralist, proper comparison-requiring conclusions for which I argue. More precisely, I shall try to show that their arguments are productively self-canceling (that is, that they undermine their own sense), both in ways that they themselves insist on, and in a further way that leads to a properly comparative view.

Since absolute truth involves given or natural essences of things, and relative truth involves the construction of truths by the perspectives through which they are known, this discussion will also apply to the ideas of truth, often taken up in radical political and subcultural theory,[ii] as given essences (essentialism) and as historically constructed (constructionism).

Comparing Cultural Frameworks

1. Ethnocentrism and Anti-Relativism

Rorty argues that we cannot be anything but ethnocentric. That is, we can only take as true what appears true to "us." As he puts it, we "have to start from where we are"; we cannot escape from our historical circumstances.[iii] He argues, however, that this claim does not mean that truth is relative. In fact, he argues that it means the reverse. To say that ethnocentrism implies that truth is relative, is to say that there are positions other than ours to whose truths we can compare our own, so that our truths are relative to theirs. But, as Rorty points out, we cannot meaningfully talk at all about positions so radically other than ours that their most basic ideas about truth conflict with ours. Anything we say about such positions is inescapably bound to the basic ideas of truth in our position. That is, we cannot meaningfully compare our truths with fully incompatible ones, because the comparison itself is already limited to our ideas of truth. The idea that our truths are relative consequently does not make any sense from the start (25f., 38, 215-216).

It also follows from this line of thought that we cannot meaningfully talk about a world of objects independent of our culture's beliefs, to which our beliefs could be relative. Any reference we make to objects is already made in the form of a belief (12, 50f.). That is, anything we can say about such objects, including that they are independent of our beliefs, which is itself a belief, is inescapably bound to the meanings and ideas available to us with which to speak or think. Even our sensory impressions only have their meanings and roles for us in the context of our culturally given meanings, language, and beliefs. This side of the issue of relative truth will help to clarify various aspects of Rorty's and Davidson's discussions of cross-cultural truth, and I shall occasionally draw on it.

Ethnocentrism, however, does not mean that we cannot test our beliefs. We can test them against each other, and against what we understand in the beliefs of other communities (41). What we ultimately settle on as the best understanding in and between such communities or cultures is true, since truth only has meaning as what we, who can only work with our culture's meanings, can stably understand (50). Rorty therefore sees legitimate science, for example, "as solidarity" and open-mindedness (38ff.).

Rorty relies heavily on Davidson in arguing the anti-relativistic side of these points. Davidson argues against the relativistic idea defended by, for example, Thomas Kuhn and W. V. O. Quine, that it is possible for a culture or position to be so different from ours that we could not translate the meanings of its language into ours.[iv] If this idea is justified, we cannot avoid the conclusion that truth is relative. The ideas of a position or culture like this would be "incommensurable" with ours: that is, it would have such different ideas about everything that there would be no common standard of meaning or sense-making with which to compare its meanings with ours. As a result, there would be no way even to begin to compare its ideas with ours so as to decide which is right.

Against this view, Davidson argues that if a language were so fundamentally different from our own, we would not even be able to regard it or meaningfully talk about it as a language at all.[v] (Davidson notes that "putting matters this way is unsatisfactory," and goes on to "improve" the "credibility of the position" (186): I address his subsequent arguments below in discussing translatability.) Consequently the idea of such a radically different language is literally meaningless (232). This is the same kind of argument Rorty offers, in connection with cultures or positions radically other than "ours."

If, on the other hand, Davidson argues, we are able to regard a different language as a language -- and this capacity is presupposed and so conceded by the very idea of a different language -- we are then also able to translate it into our language. This would remove the basis for thinking that its and our truths are incomparable with each other and so inescapably relative to different standards. And we are in fact able to regard a different language as a language, for two related reasons, that are also arguments supporting his claim that "languages" incommensurable with our own are rightly not regarded as languages at all.

First, Davidson argues, in order to make sense of the idea of a language at all, we have to assume that most of what the speakers of the language say is true (27, 137, 196). Davidson calls this assumption the principle of charity. If this assumption were not true, no-one could come to understand any language (200). If someone were trying to learn a language while the people around her/him were making mainly false statements, the words and sentences that person learned would not serve the communicative and practical functions that they do serve in a working language. To put this more accurately, the person would not be able to learn the meanings of the words and sentences at all, since they can only be learned in the course of serving those communicative and practical functions. Since languages are all learned, the assumption that most of what the speakers of the language say is true is involved in the very idea of a language. And in all cases this refers to how we understand truth, since it is our assumption. Consequently, if we are talking about languages, very different or not, the same connection with and standards for truth are already established with respect to all languages, in common.

Davidson expresses this by saying that the concept of truth is "primitive":

I shall call such theories absolute to distinguish them from theories that (also) relativize

> truth to an interpretation, a model, a possible world, or a domain. In a theory of the sort I am describing, the truth predicate is not defined, but must be considered a primitive expression. (216)

That is, the term "truth" is not analyzed into anything more basic. It does not require analysis to understand it beyond its immediate, unanalyzed meanings, because it itself is the basis of analysis and understanding (216-218).[vi]

Since language is learned in the course of its communicative and practical functions, and since, in fact, its meanings partly consist in just those functions (one necessary test that someone understands what is said, for example, is that s/he reacts in certain ways and performs certain activities), Davidson points out that we can learn the meanings of a language by observing which statements people make in which specific circumstances (162). And because it is already part of the concept of a language that most of what its speakers say is true, we can establish the truth of what the speakers are talking about in the same way.

The second, related reason Davidson gives for our ability to translate any language into ours, is that any disagreement we might have about truth, or about anything else, presupposes a background of innumerable agreements (153, 192). If we can say that we differ from another position in any respect, then we have already conceded that we share agreements with the other position about, for example, some of the characteristics of the issue or object we are disagreeing about. If we did not share such agreements, we could not begin to disagree, since we could not even refer to what it is we disagree about. Disagreeing languages, then, share innumerable agreements, and so have an extensive common basis for translating each other into their own terms.

Davidson, then, argues for "a theory of absolute truth" (221; and see also 216, quoted above). And as he also insists, ". . . we do not relinquish the notion of objective truth -- quite the contrary. . . . we . . . re-establish unmediated touch with the familiar objects whose antics make our sentences and opinions true or false" (198). He argues for this kind of absolute objectivity via a theory of "radical interpretation," based on the arguments discussed above for the possibility of "radical translation."

Rorty works out some of the social and scientific consequences of just this idea that we cannot meaningfully question our basic beliefs, although he rejects the terminology of truth, absolute or otherwise. He rejects this terminology because, if, as he argues, there is no comparison between our beliefs and the world independent of our (culture's) beliefs, the idea of truth can contribute nothing to how we assess our beliefs beyond the relations of those beliefs among themselves. Consequently, "There is a human activity called 'justifying beliefs' . . . but this activity does not have a goal called Truth." And if "one takes the principal use of the adjective 'true' to be endorsement [like a term of praise] rather than description, one can drop the notion that there are propositions out there that have a property called truth . . . ."[vii] But as Rorty also explains, "Davidson has helped us realize that the very absoluteness of truth is a good reason for thinking 'true' indefinable and for thinking that no theory of the nature of truth is possible."[viii] Consequently, while Rorty insists that, "On my interpretation . . . Davidson joins the pragmatist in saying that 'true' has no explanatory use" (136),[ix] he can also note, in a related discussion of Bernard Williams, that the "pragmatist wants to . . . aim at what Williams thinks of as 'absolute' truth, while denying that this latter notion can be explicated in terms of the notion of 'how things really are'" (59).

Importantly, for the same reasons that Rorty rejects the terminology of "truth," both Rorty and Davidson also often tend to avoid the terminology of "meaning." If, as they argue, there is no world simply independent of the meanings given to us in language, words can only be explained in terms of other words. The idea of meanings, then, contributes nothing to explaining how words work: there is nothing outside of other words for an "entity" like a "meaning" to reflect. But, as in the case of truth, the issue for Davidson and Rorty is really what one takes to be the use of the term "meaning," what one understands by it. If one understands meaning, for example, as nothing but the relations of words and activities, then it no longer refers to a world ultimately independent of language. And in that case it serves a perfectly satisfactory purpose in naming those relations. As a result Davidson is often content to use the language of "meanings," as well as that of "truth."

In the following discussion I shall largely use the language of meanings, to be taken, when I am discussing their arguments, in a Davidsonian and Rortian sense. As I shall occasionally indicate, the arguments will work equally with the substitution of Davidson's and Rorty's preferred terminology. I shall also often use equivalents of the terms "useful" and "useless" as shorthand for the vocabulary that Rorty, in particular, uses in place of talking about "truth" and "meaning": for example, "useless for our purposes," "profitless," "pointless," "getting in the way of our preferred ways of talking."

2. The Explicit Self-Cancellation of Davidson's and Rorty's Standpoints

In this section I shall discuss a self-canceling step that Davidson and Rorty both explicitly take. This is a step in which they show how their arguments (productively) undermine their own

sense. In the next section I shall try to show that their work requires them to take a further self-canceling step that they do not take, a step in which the first self-cancellation (also) cancels itself, undermines its own sense.

If it is meaningless -- not wrong, but literally meaningless -- to talk about our beliefs being relative in comparison with the beliefs of other cultures or communities, then it follows that it is also meaningless to talk about our beliefs not being relative in that way. It is meaningless to say that something meaningless is or is not true. Or, in language that Rorty might prefer, it does not contribute anything to say that a useless piece of language should be used in one way rather than another. The arguments Rorty and Davidson give are radical or foundational: they show that any talk or thought about beliefs that are sufficiently different to involve the relativity of truth, is (literally and completely) meaningless, or profitless and pointless.

Davidson and Rorty, in different ways, both insist on this point. Davidson argues, for example, that "if we cannot intelligibly say that schemes [frameworks to which our beliefs might be relative] are different, neither can we intelligibly say that they are one" (198, my insertion). And even further (here with respect to the related denial of a world or objects independent of language), “we have erased the boundary between knowing a language and knowing our way around in the world generally. . . . I conclude that there is no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed. . . . We must give up the idea of a clearly defined shared structure which language-users acquire and then apply to cases.”[x] And Rorty writes, for example (here again with respect to the denial of a language-independent world),

> We are tempted to say that there were no objects before language shaped the raw material . . . But as soon as we say anything like this we find ourselves ourselves accused (plausibly) of making the false causal claim that the invention of "dinosaur" caused dinosaurs to come into existence . . . Davidson, however, has shown us how to make our point without saying anything susceptible to that misinterpretation. He suggests that we stop trying to say anything general about the relation between language and reality . . . We should just refuse to discuss such topics as "the nature of reference."[xi]

They both argue, then, that if it is literally meaningless or pointless to talk or think about fundamentally different belief-systems (or a world independent of belief-systems) at all, then it is just as meaningless or pointless to talk about them in trying to show that one cannot talk about them, as it is in trying to show that one can.

As Davidson and Rorty imply in these quotes, we cannot avoid this paradox of language by distinguishing between the language we discuss (the object language: for example, "fundamentally different belief systems") and the language in which we discuss that language (the meta-language: for instance, "phrases like 'fundamentally different belief-systems' are unhelpful"). It is true, for example, that one can specify or mention a meaningless sequence of sounds or letters ("inka dinka doo") and say that it is meaningless ("'inka dinka doo' is meaningless") without also making that meta-statement meaningless. But, first, this kind of example really concedes the point: it states that this sequence of marks is not a piece of language at all, does not do anything other than being a set of sounds or marks, at any level of language. It does not itself specify anything. Any argument, then, at any level, that uses "inka dinka doo" to specify what we can or cannot say is only going through the motions of saying something, of

using a piece of language. And similarly with "fundamentally different belief-systems" and "language ultimately separate from objects." Davidson and Rorty are not discussing pieces of language, but strings of marks that fall outside the constraints of meaningful or functioning language in general. And of course a meta-language, like any language, is also subject to those constraints.

Second, Davidson and Rorty are not simply specifying or mentioning a meaningless or functionless sequence of marks, but establishing, justifying the claim that a proposed piece of language is really just meaningless or functionless marks. And this justification must itself explore what the proposed piece of language purports to specify, its proposed meanings or functions, in order to show that it is meaningless or profitless. That is, it must make statements about what is specified by what it will show does not specify anything. In other words, the justification must itself repeat what it will show is the failure of this proposed piece of language to specify, contribute or mean. Consequently, if it succeeds, it will show that what it itself has stated is largely meaningless or without useful function. Again, then, it is just as meaningless or pointless to talk about these issues in trying to show that one cannot talk about them, as it is in trying to show that one can.

In fact, Davidson elaborates his theory of translation in a way that avoids relying on meanings, precisely to avoid this kind of self-referential paradox (71ff., 148-149). But the arguments he makes to justify this avoidance, being meaningful, have to rely on something that functions like meanings, and so functions in the ways I have described. Or, even if one successfully avoids the vocabulary of "meanings," his arguments have to function within the constraints they specify for language as a whole, with the result that these constraints still refer to

the arguments that specify them. That is, his arguments are still paradoxically self-referential.

Even where the scope of this paradox extends beyond where Davidson and Rorty themselves insist on it, I am not trying to present it as simply an objection to their views. As I have mentioned, my aim is in fact to show that the paradox both resolves itself and offers solutions to the problem of truth in the context of genuine comparison between conflicting standpoints. But it does nonetheless have consequences for Davidson's and Rorty's conclusions, and I shall explore those in the next section.

3. Self-Cancellation of the Self-Cancellation

By demonstrating that discussion of the possibility of incommensurable beliefs is meaningless or pointless, Rorty and Davidson succeed in showing that the "possibilities" themselves are unintelligible or non-contributing. But now I want to try to show that, because they are dealing with the constraints for meaning or useful language in general -- because there is no meta-language immune to the range of their arguments -- this meaninglessness or profitlessness of their arguments also works to invalidate this conclusion. That is, I want to show that they have not simply shown that talk about fundamentally different belief-systems is meaningless or non-contributing, and so that truth is not relative. Rather, they have produced a "liar's paradox" (on the model of the statement "I am lying"): if their arguments succeed in making their point, they have no meaning and so fail to make their point, and if they fail to make their point, they have the meaning that succeeds in making their point.

Let me emphasize this does not mean that their conclusion is false or unprofitable. On the contrary, it is exactly if their argument succeeds, if their conclusion is true or profitable, that they

respectively fail and are false or unprofitable, and vice-versa. This is a paradox that makes the meanings or functions of its own terms undecidable. It is precisely its truth or useful functioning that makes it false or useless, and precisely its falsehood that makes it true, and this means that the meanings of "true" and "false" incorporate what they are defined by excluding. These meanings, then, turn out to be incompatible with themselves. It is not clear what those meanings are any more, and they cannot be clarified, because these meanings are not clear as a result of their clarity.

To put this in a less general context: there are further self-referential consequences of, for example, Davidson's comment that "if we cannot intelligibly say that schemes [frameworks to which our beliefs might be relative] are different, neither can we intelligibly say that they are one" (198, my insertion). One way of expressing the point of this comment is that, if there is no intelligible idea of different schemes, then there is no contrast that might make sense of the idea of a unique scheme. Similarly, given no contrast between language and the world it refers to, Davidson can conclude, as I quoted above, that "there is no such thing as a language." It follows that, if, similarly, we eliminate the intelligibility or coherence of talk about, for example, both the alternatives of "fundamentally different belief systems" and "no fundamentally different belief systems," then we have also eliminated the contrast that might give sense to not talking about those alternatives.

Another way of expressing the point of Davidson' comment is that, since an unintelligible idea does not specify anything, asserting or denying anything about what it specifies is equally unintelligible. It follows that, if both the alternatives that schemes are different and that they are the same are unintelligible, and so do not specify anything, then saying

anything about what this combination of alternatives specifies is equally unintelligible. That is, it is unintelligible to say that what this combination of alternatives refers to is unintelligible. Now, again, appeal to a meta-language does not help us avoid this result. As I noted in discussing the appeal to a meta-language in the last section, Davidson's and Rorty's arguments are not simply mentioning an evidently meaningless or profitless string of marks here, but trying to establish that a proposed piece of language is just a meaningless or profitless string of marks. That is, their arguments involve exploring what this proposed piece of language purports to specify, in order to show that those purported specifications are empty or non-contributing. Their arguments therefore repeat what they show is meaningless or profitless, and so are themselves meaningless or profitless. Any statements, then, about what this unintelligible idea specifies, including statements that it is unintelligible, are equally unintelligible.

In the language I have been using here, the self-cancellation of their arguments also cancels itself.

As I have argued, because this is a genuine paradox, it does not simply negate their argumentative strategy. Instead, it does so by virtue of the success of that strategy. As a result, it introduces an entirely different kind of problem. That it is possible to develop this kind of paradox means that the very ideas of "successful argument" and "failed argument" in this context already contain in themselves what they exclude. It shows that a successful argument can fail precisely in being successful, and vice-versa. But what it means to be a successful argument is, precisely, that it does not fail. Consequently we cannot simply proceed, when this kind of paradox occurs, on the basis of the typical meanings of "successful" and "failed" arguments. We need to re-understand the meanings of these ideas before we can know what to say about this

kind of paradox. That is, we are not in a position to say, for example, that arguments involving this paradox have failed. In this context the idea of "failing" no longer has the meaning that we are familiar with. If we say that the arguments have failed in this context, we literally do not know what we have said.

Now, while this paradox renders its own meanings meaningless, I have been arguing that it also renders its own results meaningless in the same act. Consequently, it restores its meanings in the very act of canceling them. In other words, it is both a self-cancellation of these meanings and a self-cancellation of that self-cancellation itself. In the language of undecidability, it is an indecision of meaning that is so fundamental that it is even undecidable as to whether it is undecidable. This paradox, then, maintains mutually exclusive, incompatible positions in one thought. I shall try to show, on this basis, that Davidson's and Rorty's arguments rigorously justify both their own position(s) on truth and the relativistic position they oppose.

4. Absolute Justification of Both Relativism and the Unintelligibility of Relativism

I have discussed Davidson's argument that we could not consider a language radically incommensurable with our own to be a language at all. If it were really incommensurable with our own, it would not do any of the things done by anything that we could, given our own language, consider a language. There is a tempting objection that this argument is circular. Now, in fact, presented at this level of the discussion, the objection is incorrect, but presented at a more comprehensive level it is, I suggest, also right, in keeping with the paradox we are exploring here. The importance of this discussion here is that Davidson's response to this objection is typical of his arguments that truth is absolute. Consequently, showing how his argument both is

and is not circular will help me to show why relativism and the unintelligibility of relativism are both absolutely justified (and also relative).

The objection, then, is that the argument is circular. Davidson's argument seems to go: what we mean by "language" is the only meaning we can consider, because what we mean by "language" is the only meaning we can consider. But stated at this level the objection misses Davidson's point. Given the radical nature of his point about meaninglessness, the circle cannot even begin to occur. As soon as we use the word "language" in the context of incommensurability with our own meanings, we are, by definition, not saying or thinking anything that has meaning. There is no circularity, because the "circle" of argument cannot even get under way.

But the objection is only this simply incorrect if it stays at this level. To show why this is so, I shall need to make a fairly lengthy digression, though one that is helpful in its own right.

As I have argued, Davidson's argument itself is meaningless, whether as a circle or not. Consequently it justifies our considering the issue from the beginning again as though he had said nothing -- which, on his own arguments, is in fact exactly what he has said.

Davidson, as I have discussed, makes the point that we could not learn an incommensurable "language" if we could not regard what its speakers say as true. And, if it is thoroughly incommensurable with our own language, so that its notions of what "truth" means have no connection with ours, we would not be able to regard what its speakers say as true. We would not, then, be able to learn the language, and any arguments about its incommensurability could not get under way. But this argument is another version of the self-canceling arguments I have discussed, and so, like them, renders itself and its conclusions meaningless.

And, what is more, it seems clear that we have all learned at least one language, our own, before having any language with any notion of what "truth" means, or, for that matter, any of the "vast common ground" of "shared belief" for which Davidson argues (200). There seems to be no difficulty, then, in accepting that we could learn another language, including its incomparable notions of the meaning of "true."[xii] "Untranslatability," as Rorty puts it, "does not entail unlearnability" (48). The resulting situation would be one in which we can speak two or more incommensurable languages, and think in two or more incommensurable ways.

But this in no way affects Davidson's and Rorty's point that we could not compare the truths of the two or more languages or standpoints or communities at all. That is, truth is still not relative. But it is not simply absolute either. We have something like incompatible absolute truths, so that, as in the case of “true” and “false” discussed above, the meaning of "absolute," and with it the meaning of "relative," need to be re-understood.

This situation only occurs when the meanings of both or more positions or communities are being considered at once. It is only that act of simultaneous consideration that links them. The meanings of each literally have no meaning for the others; only the simultaneous thought of both sets of meanings can connect them, and then only in a purely external way, with no logical or meaningful connection between them. But when each position is considered simply on its own, the other sets of “meanings” have no meaning in any relevant context and cannot meaningfully be thought or talked about.

(Actually, this last paragraph is not quite accurate. We cannot rule out in advance the possibility that incommensurable positions can meaningfully mention each other in some way, because the arguments that successfully rule out that possibility, again, reduce themselves to

meaninglessness. And this justifies us, as I have argued, in considering the issue from the beginning again.)

It is partly because this contradictory situation of conflicting absolutes is limited to certain kinds of context that it is manageable, and partly because, as I shall explore further below, it is self-canceling.

If a position can, then, meaningfully mention another incommensurable one at all (or, equivalently, if incommensurable positions can be spoken about at all: the position that talks about them would have to be incommensurable with at least one of them, since if it were commensurable with one it would be incommensurable with the other), let me suggest that, when two or more such positions are being considered together with respect to the truth of their claims, we have two or more circular justifications. For, first, if we can talk about incommensurable positions or languages, we can talk intelligibly about entire positions (or frameworks or conceptual schemes) in contrast with others, and so about their justification relative to each other. But since the two or more languages are nonetheless still meaningless to each other, each will ultimately justify itself exclusively on the basis of its own meanings. And it is just those meanings that are ultimately what is in dispute, so that each will really be justifying its own meanings on the basis of its own meanings. That is, each will justify itself as a whole circularly.

But, second, at the point at which the circle closes, when the position has justified its own meanings, the incommensurably-meaning other position(s), since they contrast with the meanings that are now justified, is(/are) definitively established as meaningless. And at that point the circle ceases to have existed meaningfully, since some of the connections in the circle consist in mentions of the meanings of the other position(s). In one respect, then, the positions justify

themselves circularly to each other, and in another respect there is neither a circle nor a meaningful need for this justification.

But, third, these two respects are the same: it is only the closing of the circle that makes the circle and the need for justification that produces it meaningless. The need for justification is first meaningful and is then given the answer that it is meaningless. In other words, the need for justification is met, or at least legitimately deflected. We are back to the paradox of successful argument that fails by being successful, here specifically in connection with circularity. If it is a circle, it is not, and vice-versa. That is, this circle is self-canceling. Again, then, what "circular" and "non-circular" mean in this kind of context are not their familiar meanings, and we need to establish what their meanings are before we can conclude anything from their applicability here.

In short, then: at the point at which the circle closes, it loses meaning as a circle. But, because there is then no circle and so no circularity in the argument, but the standpoint has nonetheless been able to consider itself as a whole in reaching that point at which the circle closes, the standpoint can in fact fully justify itself, that is, justify itself absolutely, at that point. This kind of circularity itself allows a non-circular kind of justification of positions, and of conflicting positions, (each) as a whole.

It follows that we can talk about different positions each as a whole. As a result, we can distinguish between talk “inside” the position and talk “outside” it. As we have seen, inside a position, its standards for truth are absolute, since no contrasting standards can be meaningful. But from outside that position its standards for truth are relative to those of other positions. And each of these perspectives is literally meaningless in the context of the others. It follows that each position is sometimes simply absolute and sometimes simply relative.

I need to make one more point to try to show why the objection that Davidson's argument in particular is circular is ultimately right (as well as still being mistaken). As I have argued, again, the paradox in the meaninglessness of Davidson's argument justifies us in considering the issue from the beginning again. That is, it justifies our starting on the basis of considering two or more incommensurable positions simultaneously. And in fact if we do start on that basis, we develop a way of thinking about languages and positions that can only take both into account, or (how to speak accurately is becoming precisely the issue here, where incommensurable meanings are simultaneously relevant) take both into two incommensurable but simultaneous accounts, since that is the basis of this way of thinking. Since we start with both, that is, since both are part of what we familiarly understand in speaking our language, we can speak meaningfully about both. But, as Davidson shows, this language and the "not even a single standpoint" language he is familiar with cannot consider each other to be languages at all. If we start on this alternative basis, then, we can only talk meaningfully in terms of the possibility of incommensurable positions. In this context, Davidson's arguments are not part of what we can consider a meaningful language at all. Like the initial objection of circularity against his position, they cannot even begin to get under way.

On the other hand, the justification of this other way of thinking relies on the same kind of appeal to the meaninglessness of alternative standpoints that Davidson's arguments do, and so also results in the same paradoxical meaninglessness that they do. Consequently it too justifies our beginning again, for example with Davidson's basic assumption of considering only one "language" or "position" at a time. And here, as Davidson has shown, the counter-arguments in turn cannot begin to get a purchase.

What we have, again, then, is two positions (here, positions on the possible relations of positions) that can only justify and/or explain themselves circularly to each other. Since the justification and/or explanation of either to the other ends in meaninglessness, there is no reason in advance to begin with his basic assumption rather than the basic assumption of two incommensurable positions or languages considered simultaneously.[xiii] (Although the position that begins on the basis of simultaneously considered incommensurable positions perhaps has more to recommend it, given that Davidson's arguments about the unlearnability of incommensurable languages do not hold up.) Davidson's choice of his own position on the grounds of the meaninglessness of the other, then, amounts to a choice of his own position on the grounds of having chosen his own position. It is in this way, I suggest, that his argument is circular, once the initial non-circularity of his argument has been taken into account.

Rorty, having abandoned the vocabulary of truth as expressing more than the justification of our beliefs by other beliefs, as well as the vocabulary of frameworks or positions-as-a-whole, is happy to acknowledge this kind of ultimate circularity: "the pragmatist cannot justify . . . without circularity, but then neither can the realist" (28-29). Again, “a circular justification of our practices, a justification which makes one feature of our culture look good by citing still another, or comparing our culture invidiously with others by reference to our own standards, is the only sort of justification we are going to get.”[xiv] In fact, Rorty takes this inescapable circularity, our being necessarily limited to our own standpoint, as one of the justifications for abandoning the connection between justification or knowledge, on the one hand, and truth, on the other. As he argues, accepting that there is no truth outside of our language and habits means that questions like “‘How can we justify our knowledge claims without falling into infinite regress, or

circularity, or relativism?'" will no longer "seem urgent."[xv]

But circularity is not the end of the story. The objection of circularity is still also mistaken. As I have argued, this objection, like the arguments appealing to meaninglessness, is self-canceling. And if this is so, there is no reason to find Rorty's arguments simply persuasive. Not because they are circular, which he is content to insist on himself, but because their claim that circularity is all there is, is (not only right but also) simply mistaken. In that case, the "profitability" of a view, and its relation to "our standards," are no longer a necessarily ultimate consideration, since it is in fact possible that we can establish the truth of a view by balancing our senses of profitability and our standards with wholly different ones.

5. The Truth of the Knower and Negotiation between Truths

What we necessarily have, then, at certain points of thinking through the nature and bases of truth, is a self-incompatible and self-canceling negotiation of incompatible positions, each circularly justified and/or explained against or to each other. Because this negotiation is between incommensurable positions, the meanings on which it is based, and so the negotiation itself, are, as I have argued, undecidable. I suggest that the negotiation is ultimately resolved partly by the knower's making honest or existential decisions between the positions. That is, s/he resolves the negotiation partly by establishing the truth of her/his own being in that particular context: what s/he finds herself honestly (as the truth of herself) committed to.

Again, this is not simply subjective relativism. One's own truth, and the truth of one's circumstances, are parts of reality and hence of truth in general. In particular, this kind of subjective decision in particular contexts is part of the establishing or justifying of positions, and

so of their ideas of truth themselves. It is therefore prior to the successful establishment of positions and ideas of truth, including the ideas that truth is relative or absolute. That is, one's existential decisions cannot be simply described as subjective and relative, because those decisions partly establish what those terms mean and how they are to be assessed.

As Rorty puts what I think is a related point, "Nobody is being any more arbitrary than anybody else. But that is to say that nobody is being arbitrary at all. Everybody is just insisting that the beliefs and desires they hold most dear should come first in the order of discussion. That is not arbitrariness, but sincerity" (195).

6. Conclusion

As Davidson and Rorty make clear, it is in fact a real difficulty to find a way of talking about such incommensurable contexts in relation to each other that would allow talk like that of relativity, whether subjective or any other, and so would allow any sense to the idea of comparison between them. And this is part of what I have been trying to do by exploring the character of certain kinds of talking and thinking that are established as literally meaningless. These moments of meaninglessness and contradiction are the bridges that allow, and by canceling themselves make sense of, comparison between very different standpoints.

They are also what allow non-circular establishment of the truth of singular standpoints, considered without reference to others. And singular, non-comparison-permitting standpoints are, of course, relevant to the concerns of a comparative framework. A genuinely comparative framework must make room for the possible legitimacy of standpoints that reject the relevance of reference to other standpoints, that is, that reject the sense of comparison itself.

Notes

i. I am grateful to Jeff Ruff, chief editor of Theory and Method in the Study of Religion, for his advice and help in contextualizing my discussion in this way.

ii. See, for example, Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York: Routledge, 1990); Diana Fuss, Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference (New York: Routledge, 1989); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, The Epistemology of the Closet (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

iii. Richard Rorty, Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers Volume 1 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 29, 50. Unless otherwise noted, further references to and citations of Rorty will be from this book.

iv. See, for example, Thomas S. Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); Willard Van Orman Quine, "Ontological Relativity," Ontological Relativity and Other Essays (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 26-68.

v. Donald Davidson, Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 185f. Unless otherwise noted, all further references to and citations of Davidson will be from this book.

vi. See, similarly, Donald Davidson, "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge," Truth and

Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson, ed. Ernest LePore (Cambridge, Ma.: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 308-309: "Truth is beautifully transparent compared to belief . . . and I take it as primitive. . . . the truth of an utterance depends on just two things: what the words as spoken mean, and how the world is arranged. There is no further relativism to a conceptual scheme, a way of viewing of things, a perspective."

vii. Richard Rorty, Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers Volume 3 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 163, my insertion.

viii. Truth and Progress, 3, Rorty's emphasis.

ix. And see Richard Rorty, Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 67, where Rorty argues that we need to be "content to call 'true' (or 'right' or 'just') whatever the outcome of undistorted communication happens to be, whatever view wins in a free and open encounter."

x. Donald Davidson, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," Truth and Interpretation, 445-446.

xi. Rorty, Truth and Progress, 90, Rorty's emphasis.

xii. Alasdair MacIntyre also argues that we can learn a second, incomparable language, with its own, different standards for truth, just as we learned the first one. Alasdair C. MacIntyre, Whose Justice? Which Rationality? (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), e.g., 374: "Just as a child does not learn its first language by matching sentences with sentences, since it

initially possesses no set of sentences of its own, so an adult who has in this way become a child again does not either." He makes this point specifically in response to Davidson's view, among others', that if "two rival points of view are successful in understanding one another, it must be the case that they share standards of rational evaluation," so that "Translatability . . . entails commensurability" (371).

xiii. Hilary Putnam concludes a different line of argument by noting that "if one recognizes that the radical interpreter himself may have more than one 'home' conceptual scheme, and that 'translation practice' may be governed by more than one set of constraints, then one sees that conceptual relativity does not disappear when we inquire into the 'meanings' of the various conceptual alternatives: it simply reproduces itself at a meta-linguistic level!" Realism with a Human Face, ed. James Conant (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 104.

xiv. Contingency, 57.

xv. Richard Rorty, "Transcendental Arguments, Self-Reference, and Pragmatism," Transcendental Arguments and Science: Essays in Epistemology, ed. P. Bieri, R.-P. Horstmann, and L. Krüger (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1979), 100.