Making Room for Comparative Philosophy: Davidson, Brandom, and Conceptual Distance

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The best comparative philosophy does more than compare. According to three recent accounts, it seeks to “integrate” or “challenge” or “seek truth.” Each of these ideas depends on being able to compare ideas, texts, and reasons across philosophical traditions, but each goes beyond comparison to urge that we engage in creative philosophy. The desire to synthesize aspects of “different philosophical traditions that developed in relative isolation from one another” [Yu and Bunnin 2001, 296], however, can seem hopeless. The many differences among the cultures and languages in which these different philosophical traditions are imbedded have led to a set of worries about the coherence of comparative philosophy: doctrines like relativism or incommensurability claim that reasoned comparison or translation across cultural gulfs can be impossible. If comparative philosophy would stick to comparisons, then perhaps these worries could be side-stepped: any two things can be compared in one respect or another. To integrate or challenge or seek truth, though, we must tackle the worries head-on.

Over the last three decades, one of the principal resources on which comparative philosophers could draw when they sought assurance has been the work of Donald Davidson. In his Foreword to Two Roads to Wisdom? Chinese and Analytic Philosophical Traditions, Davidson wrote:

A first exposure to a new tradition seems to reveal an unbridgeable gap. What experience shows, though, is that, as in other areas, differences are to be understood only as seen against a background of underlying agreement. The underlying agreement may be largely unspoken and unnoticed, but it is always available. Sometimes we need help in appreciating how philosophy builds on what we all know. No world views or conceptual schemes are truly incommensurable. [Davidson 2001, v].

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1 See [Allinson 2001], [Van Norden 2001], and [Ji and Bunnin 2001], respectively.
Davidson has argued convincingly that anything we can recognize as a language must, in principle, be translatable into any other language. As I will elaborate below, this argument has sometimes been misunderstood, but it nonetheless stands as an important support for the enterprise of comparative philosophy.

As significant as Davidson’s work has been, however, my thesis in this essay is that comparative philosophers need still more than Davidson’s theory is able to provide. It is not enough to know that translation is possible in principle: we need to be able to talk about conceptual differences with more subtlety, and to reason about what is at stake in overcoming them. Keeping in mind that Davidson’s theory has at its heart theorems that translate sentences of an “object language” into “metalanguage,” note the blasé attitude he expresses in this quote: “Even when the metalanguage is different from the object language, the theory exerts no pressure for improvement, clarification, or analysis of individual words, except when, by accident of vocabulary, straightforward translation fails” [Davidson 1984, 33]. The problem is that in an important sense, our vocabularies are often no accidents.

Davidson is not wholly without resources to explain the range of conceptual differences and the dynamics of language change. I will point to some promising ideas in his later work, as well as to some elaborations of his basic theories proposed by others. But in the end, the best solution to these matters is to be found in the work of Robert Brandom. In many respects Brandom’s views are Davidsonian; turning to Brandom is not to abandon Davidson’s core insights, but to recast them in a framework that allows them fuller expression. My goal will be to show why the creative philosophical projects of contemporary comparative philosophy are possible, even though they are often difficult.

My first step is to quickly sketch Davidson’s argument and then to distinguish it from two similar but mistaken alternatives. The essence of Davidson’s argument is that a language’s sentences can always be translated into sentences with the same propositional content in any other sufficiently rich language, and furthermore that there are no limits, at least in principle, on
how languages can be enriched or revised. Let us start with the first half: sentences can always be translated. Davidson contends that anything we can identify as a sentence is amenable to translation, because the interpretation of linguistic behavior cannot get off the ground unless we find a way to identify both what our interlocutor believes, and what she means by her words. Since there are an infinite number of false things one might say in response to a given situation, but a limited number of (salient) true ones, Davidson proposes that only a principle of charity can ground interpretation. That is, we start by provisionally interpreting our interlocutor as speaking truly. Interpretation proceeds on this basis: while no particular sentence uttered by our interlocutor must be true, we can only identify falsehoods against the background of broad agreement.

This reasoning leads Davidson to conclude that anything we can identify as language can always be translated because there is no other means to identify something as a sentence other than by interpreting it. If all attempts at interpreting the noises or movements of some creatures fail, then we (so far) have no ground for attributing language to them. And this means that we can have no grounds for attributing radical conceptual gulfs. To be sure, we can temporarily fail to understand someone, but incommensurability -- understood as the doctrine that the concepts of two languages differ so radically that they cannot be translated -- is impossible.

Let me now briefly turn to the second half of Davidson’s argument, as I explained it above, namely that there are no limits, at least in principle, on how languages can be enriched or revised. I think this is clear, albeit almost always implicit, in Davidson’s writing. He comes closest to making this point explicit when he writes about the incredibly flexible ways in which we can understand others, and make ourselves understood, despite grammatical errors and malapropisms. Davidson says that “an interpreter has, at any moment of a speech transaction, what I persist in calling a theory. (I call it a theory ... only because a description of the interpreter’s competence requires a recursive account.)” However, the theory in question is not unchanging: “The theory we actually use to interpret an utterance is geared to the occasion” [Davidson 1986, 441]. We adjust our interpretive theory on the spur-of-the-moment, taking into
account new things the speakers says. This leads Davidson to distinguish between prior theory and passing theory:

For the hearer, the prior theory expresses how he is prepared in advance to interpret an utterance of the speaker, while the passing theory is how he does interpret the speaker. For the speaker, the prior theory is what he believes the interpreter’s prior theory to be, while his passing theory is the theory he intends the interpreter to use. [Ibid., 442]

What must be shared for communication to succeed, he concludes, is our passing theories. Davidson insists, though, that passing theories do not “correspond to an interpreter’s linguistic competence,” nor can they be said to be “learned, or to be governed by conventions. Of course things previously learned were essential to arriving at the passing theory, but what was learned could not have been the passing theory” [Ibid., 443].

There are two sides to Davidson’s conclusion. On the one hand, we see that Davidson emphasizes a certain kind of linguistic change, namely our everpresent practical ability to adjust our (linguistic) theories to new (linguistic) evidence. On the other hand, in so doing he rejects a very common way of understanding our linguistic competence, namely the idea of a clearly defined, convention-governed, shared structure which language users acquire and then apply to cases. That is, as he puts it, he abandons “the ordinary notion of a language, [and thus erases] the boundary between knowing a language and knowing our way around in the world generally” [Ibid., 445-6]. Both aspects of his argument are relevant to my concerns here. As we proceed, I will argue that while much of what Davidson says here is correct, he goes too far in abandoning a central role for the norm-governed social practice that is language. Thinking about language in terms of conventions is problematic, but neglecting any role for norms makes linguistic change more easy, and conceptual difference more trivial, than they really are.

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2 There are two different levels at which norms might be relevant to language: at a general level, applicable to all language use; and at a specific level, applicable only to the use of normative words like “ought.” Sam Wheeler has developed some Davidsonian ideas to argue that the logic of conditional possibility fits how we use “ought” better than the logic of obligation. See [Davidson 1980] and [Wheeler 1974]. I am not convinced that these two options exhaust the alternatives, but will not enter that debate here. Rather, I confine myself to the first, more general level. I will argue below that contra Wheeler, Brandom’s talk of the ways in which we “commit” ourselves via language use does make sense — and this because the commitment cannot be understood in probabilistic fashion, as he would have it.
By way of further fleshing out how Davidson’s argument works let me now turn to two alternative formulations. The first, from Martin Hollis and Steven Lukes, can appear to be the same as Davidson’s but is actually importantly different in ways that matter a great deal to comparative philosophy. The second is Alasdair MacIntyre’s version of, and response to, Davidson’s argument. I will show that while MacIntyre fails to refute Davidson, MacIntyre does help to highlight a weakness that I will exploit later in this essay.

In a series of influential articles published from the 1960s through the 1980s, Hollis and Lukes argued for what they called a “bridgehead”:

In the very identification of beliefs and a fortiori of belief systems we must presuppose commonly shared standards of truth and of inference, and ... we must further presuppose a commonly shared core of beliefs whose content or meaning is fixed by application of these standards. [Lukes 1982, 262]

Lukes adds that “practical everyday beliefs” are “prime candidates for the bridgehead. Truths of this kind cannot in general be assumed not to be shared, since that would be strictly unintelligible” [Ibid., 265]. Lukes explicitly invokes Davidson to support his position, though he does realize that in arguing for a specific “bridgehead,” he is going beyond Davidson’s more general principle of charity. His reason is that Davidson’s argument is inadequate as a “method of translation.... The principle of charity gives us no guidance as to where agreements are to be assumed before disagreements can show up” [Ibid., 263].

To a significant degree, Lukes is right. Davidson does not provide us with a method of translation, but only an understanding of the nature of linguistic behavior which guarantees that translation of another language will always be possible. In suggesting that Davidson’s argument has provided assurance to comparative philosophers, I have not gone so far as to say that Davidson provides us with all the tools we need. Lukes argues that Richard Grandy’s “Principle of Humanity” is a better guide to translation than Davidson’s Principle of Charity.³ Lukes also

³ [Lukes 1982, 264f]. See [Grandy 1973, 443], wherein Grandy explains that the Principle of Humanity tells us that in interpretation, “the imputed pattern of relations among beliefs, desires, and the world [should] be as similar to our own as possible.”
suggests that guidance from sociology and anthropology will be needed to settle questions about what counts as good reasons for action or belief in a given context.\(^4\) It is likely that he is right on both of these counts, but what is important for our purposes is to see that he is wrong in seeing Davidson and Grandy (or Davidson and the anthropologists) as competitors. Davidson’s argument aims to establish possibility, and is based on very general features of languages; Grandy and the rest aim are best understood as aiming to help us actually translate in a particular context. Even when engaged in this practical activity, though, we must keep in mind Davidson’s dictum that interpretation is always provisional. I can grant many of Luke’s points, therefore, but must stop short of endorsing the idea of an inflexible “bridgehead.” Hollis supposes that an interpreter might “pin down the native counterparts of English sentences like ‘Yes, this is a brown cow’” in order to establish a bridgehead, and insists that the bridgehead is not an “hypothesis” that can be refuted or confirmed by evidence [Hollis 1970, 215]. Davidson has shown us, though, that there is no way other than via interpretation to “pin down” the beliefs or meanings of the natives, so even seemingly secure sentences about brown cows could turn out to be misinterpretations, if we uncovered enough evidence. Hollis seems to think that impossible, but counterexamples are easy to manufacture.\(^5\)

Distinguishing Davidson from Lukes and Hollis has helped us to see what Davidson can (and cannot) do for comparative philosophy. If we turn to MacIntyre’s effort to rebut Davidson, we will uncover a different kind of limitation to Davidson’s approach. MacIntyre believes that Davidson’s argument has two premises: (1) all we have to do to assure understanding of another culture’s point of view is to translate their language, and (2) nothing that we can identify as a language could resist translation. MacIntyre contends that these premises rest upon:

\[\ldots\text{a way of translating texts from alien and different cultures, and of responding to them, which is central to the cosmopolitan cultures of those modern}\]

\(^4\) [Lukes 1982, 274n39]. Lukes notes that he and Hollis part company at this point; Hollis insists that standards of rationality must be determined \textit{a priori}, and also is more explicit about the inflexibility of the “bridgehead.” See below, and [Hollis 1982].

\(^5\) For example, see the discussion below about fair-weather vs. foul-weather animals.
internationalized languages-in-use, such as contemporary Trans-Atlantic and Trans-Pacific English, one of whose central features is that utterance in them presupposes only the most minimal of shared beliefs. These are languages, so far as is possible, for anyone at all to use, for those who are equally at home everywhere and therefore nowhere. [MacIntyre 1991, p. 114]

MacIntyre’s idea, which he develops more fully elsewhere, is that certain modern languages that are spoken around the world have been, in a sense, neutered: in order to be usable by people from widely-different cultural backgrounds, these languages have lost some important characteristics that all local languages once had. 6 The chief features that he says internationalized languages have lost are: first, naming systems that presuppose certain beliefs on the part of the language’s speakers, and second, a tight relationship between canonical texts expressing “strong, substantive criteria of truth and rationality” and acceptable utterances [MacIntyre 1988, pp. 377, 384]. What we are left with are languages in which “the relationship of a name to what is named will have to be specifiable…independently of any particular scheme of identification embodying the beliefs of some particular community” [MacIntyre 1989, p. 193], and in which formerly canonical texts now serve only as sources for literary allusions, not as standards of truth [Ibid, p. 194].

How does MacIntyre think that the putative transition from local to internationalized languages might refute Davidson’s argument? Since the new languages have no tight connections to particular sets of beliefs, MacIntyre reasons, the sorts of obstacles that would stand in the way of translating from Aristotle’s Greek to Confucius’s Chinese, for example, are gone. 7 The plausibility of Davidson’s contention that we can translate anything that we can identify as a language into our own language, that is, rests on taking our own language to be one of these neutered modern languages. But once Aristotle and Confucius have been translated into English, they have lost their essential ties to particular beliefs that helped to define their standpoints. Once rendered into English, MacIntyre concludes, they are no longer genuine Confucianism nor genuine Aristotelianism, but merely new menu items for the “modern

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6 See [MacIntyre 1988, ch. 19] and [MacIntyre 1989, especially section 4].
7 See [MacIntyre 1991].
individualism of aestheticized personal choice” [MacIntyre 1991, p. 115]. Nothing has been done, in other words, to dissolve the incommensurability between the actual languages of Confucianism and Aristotelianism.

I am dissatisfied with MacIntyre’s response to Davidson for two reasons. First, MacIntyre has overstated the extent to which modern languages have been neutered. It seems true that the use of names may have changed somewhat along the lines he describes, but the blanket claim that we no longer have canonical texts is surely false, especially in ethics. Many speakers of internationalized English, by no means limited to so-called fundamentalists, still look to the Bible, for instance, as expressing “strong, substantive criteria” of right and wrong. Many others look to more recent classics, like the Constitution. Admittedly, appeal to the Bible or the Constitution does not always settle disputes. For one thing, contemporary America is composed of many overlapping communities with commitments to different sets of canonical texts. It is also true that canonical texts must be interpreted, and that they therefore supply standards of right and wrong only together with the styles of reasoning and traditions of interpretation that have grown up around them. But in this we are no different from our predecessors of any age: texts are never self-interpreting.

Second, MacIntyre’s whole discussion of internationalized languages seems to me to misunderstand the nature of Davidson’s argument. The essence of MacIntyre’s response to Davidson, after all, is that although it appears that Confucian terms can be translated into English, this is in fact only a watered-down kind of quasi-translation. This response would only be harmful to Davidson, though, if Davidson’s argument had used our apparent ability to translate Confucian Chinese into English as evidence for his conclusion. As we have seen,

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8 For those familiar with Saul Kripke’s argument that the meanings of proper names cannot contain descriptive content, MacIntyre makes the following response: “What this argument shows is, not that the names of persons do not or cannot have informational content, but that either they lack such content or it is true of them that their use presupposes commitment to a belief, such that were this belief discovered to be false, the name would not continue to be used in the same way” [MacIntyre 1988, p. 377]. For Kripke, see [Kripke 1980, Lecture One, pp. 61-2 and passim.].

9 On “styles of reasoning,” see [Hacking 1982]; that texts do not interpret themselves is of course one of Wittgenstein’s most important lessons.
though, Davidson’s argument does not depend on any specific instances of successful translation, but instead relies on very general features of languages which apply equally to modern and to pre-modern languages. Davidson could easily accept MacIntyre’s claim that current translations from Chinese into English are mere quasi-translations, in fact, because Davidson recognizes that it may be necessary to enrich or revise our language before true translation will be possible.

Still, even if MacIntyre has not given us a rebuttal to Davidson’s argument, he has helped to point out a danger. I just said that Davidson’s argument does not depend on any specific instances of successful translation. This is true, but Davidson can sometimes sound like he thinks instances of ready translation across alleged conceptual gulfs abound. About Thomas Kuhn, one of the main proponents of the idea that different scientific languages (or paradigms) can be incommensurable, Davidson writes: “Kuhn is brilliant at saying what things were like before the revolution using — what else? — our post-revolutionary idiom” [Davidson 1984, 184]. But Kuhn has emphasized that his work is no simple translation into existing vocabulary, but rather the learning and then teaching of a new language [Kuhn 1983]. In a similar way, MacIntyre helps us to see that there’s a crucial difference between a breezy rendering of Confucian texts into “trans-Atlantic English” and a genuine translation. Even without endorsing either Kuhn’s or MacIntyre’s precise diagnosis of the difficulties that conceptual gulfs can cause, I think we can see that Davidson may have been too blasé. I now turn to efforts to build onto Davidson’s framework a sensitivity to these issues.

In 1989, Bjørn Ramberg published a splendid book on Davidson’s philosophy of language in which he tried to show that Davidsonians can satisfactorily account for the phenomena that MacIntyre, Kuhn, and others call incommensurability. Indeed, Ramberg argues that Davidson’s framework is better-suited than other models of semantics to taking seriously talk of meaning change and conceptual gulfs, because it does not make essential use of the idea of reference. He realizes, though, that his goal might appear quixotic:
Assimilating the concept of incommensurability to a Davidsonian semantics ... would appear to be highly problematic. For the incommensurability thesis is not only a denial of the view that the continuity of reference is a necessary presumption of successful communication. It is also, perhaps primarily, intended to positively identify a certain kind of semantic obstruction between would-be communicators — a semantic obstruction which ... is commonly taken by critics of the idea to be intranslatability. And on the radical-interpretation model of semantics, it is hard to conceive of any such obstruction. It is so hard, in fact, that the radical-interpretation model is generally presumed to yield a powerful argument against the very idea of incommensurability. [Ramberg 1989, 119]

The “powerful argument” to which Ramberg refers is precisely the Davidsonian argument I have been discussing from the beginning, and endorsing as an important foundation of comparative philosophy.

The key to Ramberg’s effort to make Davidsonian semantics fit comfortably with the idea of incommensurability is a distinction he draws between abstract linguistic meaning, which is modeled by the synchronic truth-theories that radical interpretation is said to produce, and the actual “production of meaning,” which takes place via language and is (according to Ramberg) “constituted” by linguistic conventions.10 Davidson’s rejection of “convention” notwithstanding, Ramberg says that our conventions bind us in various ways — with “varying viscosity,” he says — and:

We rely on conventions to understand and make ourselves understood. Incommensurability, as a communication breakdown, can be understood as a breakdown of linguistic conventions, caused by changes in use that are too abrupt to be absorbed smoothly, or changes that a particular set of conventions are too rigid to accommodate. Semantically, then, incommensurability is a disruption in the ongoing interpretation-through-application of our linguistic conventions. [Ibid, 130]

With adequate time and changes to our conventions, Ramberg is saying, anything is translatable: that lies at the center of Davidson’s argument. But viscous conventions can cling to us, keeping us from seeing how different our conventions would have to be to correctly interpret some foreign language, such that we repeatedly misunderstand the foreigners.11 Ramberg concludes

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10 [Ramberg 1989, 130], and see also [Ibid, ch. 8].
11 Ramberg writes that “If Azanda magicians and Western physicists were to discuss causality, incommensurability would arise. But is would arise because translation would too often be wrong, which is to say that the interlocutors would frequently believe they were using the same language when actually they were not” [Ramberg 1989, 131].
that “incommensurability is a diachronic relation, not a synchronic one; it is not a relation between structures, but a symptom of structural change” [Ibid, 131].

I agree entirely with Ramberg’s core contention, namely that the phenomenon that has been labelled incommensurability is (1) no threat to translation or comparison in principle, because (2) it arises out of the diachronic relations between (communities of) language users, but still (3) has important practical significance. Given the always/in principle possibility of proper interpretation, I believe it makes more sense to say that languages are “incommensurate” than “incommensurable,” but this is a minor point. Ramberg’s Davidsonian version of the doctrine of incommensurability promises to simultaneously ground the possibility of comparative philosophy while cautioning us about that enterprise’s difficulties, and explaining those difficulties in terms of the viscosity of our linguistic conventions. It is this last part, the explanation in terms of conventions, that I find problematic. My next goal in this essay is to argue not just that Ramberg cannot successfully appeal to conventions to serve his needs, but also that this is for reasons which come back to haunt Davidson’s picture itself. In the end, therefore, I will not offer here a revised Davidsonian account, but an account which pushes beyond Davidson in some crucial respects.12

I have already introduced something of Davidson’s opposition to basing our understanding of linguistic competence on a “language,” in the sense of a clearly defined, convention-governed, shared structure which language users acquire and then apply to cases. He repeatedly claims that while every-day interpretation is greatly facilitated by the convergence of speech behavior that we usually mark by saying that people speak the same language, “we do well to ignore this practical issue in constructing theories of meaning, of truth, and of linguistic communication” [Davidson 1990, 311]. He believes that:

12 In other writings, I have tried to follow a strategy more like Ramberg’s, albeit without reliance on conventions, but now find the current strategy more compelling. See [Angle 1994] and [Angle 2002].
…what interpreter and speaker share, to the extent that communication succeeds, is not learned and so is not a language governed by rules or conventions known to speaker and interpreter in advance; but what the speaker and interpreter know in advance is not (necessarily) shared, and so is not a language governed by shared rules or conventions. What is shared is, as before, the passing theory; what is given in advance is the prior theory, or anything on which it may in turn be based. [Davidson 1986, 445]

Davidson adds that “of course things previously learned were essential to arriving at the passing theory, but what was learned could not have been the passing theory” [Davidson 1986, 443]. Ramberg helps us to see how radical Davidson’s view is when he says that Davidson is arguing, “in effect, that even if we used nothing but malapropisms, communication would still be possible” [Ramberg 1989, 101]. Linguistic meaning is modeled by radical interpretation, which does not (Davidson and Ramberg believe) essentially depend on the notion of a language.

While Ramberg follows Davidson in all these matters, he does believe that Davidson’s rejection of language and conventions is too complete, which keeps Davidson from seeing the proper significance of incommensurability. Ramberg writes that:

In dismissing the body of conventions that constitute a language as a contingent feature of linguistic communication, as nothing more than a complex, and immensely valuable, practical aid, Davidson obscures the dialectical relation between meaning and what we might call the production of meaning. Meaning, understanding the meaning of an utterance, is what is modeled in radical interpretation. The production of meaning, on the other hand, is modeled by what we call a language. [Ibid, 110, emphasis added]

Radical interpretation involves the construction of a truth-theory for a speaker, but Ramberg says that “in a normal speech situation,” we do not advert to truth theories. “Here, conventional strategies, not the construction of truth-theories, determine what truth-conditions we attach to utterances.” In other words, “in so far as we are speakers of a language, the truth-conditions of the sentences of that language are conventionally taken for granted” [Ibid, 111]. In at least most cases of the production of meaning — that is, actual speaking and interpreting — Ramberg thinks we are constrained by the conventions of our language. Since these conventions change slowly, while radical interpretations adjusts instantly to new evidence, a gap can appear between the radical interpretation of meaning and the conventional production of meaning. What Ramberg means by the “dialectical relation” between meaning and meaning production,
therefore, is presumably that radical interpretation only sporadically impacts our production (and consumption) of meaning, such that a “diffusion of meaning [or] a blurring of linguistic understanding” [Ibid, 112] becomes possible. This blurring is incommensurability. By restoring conventions to the broader picture of linguistic understanding, Ramberg has made room for conceptual gulfs and persistent failures of understanding, even while preserving the idea that absolute intranslatability is impossible.

Or so it might seem. In fact, Ramberg is trying to have his cake and eat it too, by relying on a fuzzy notion of convention. If we sharpen the focus, we will see that Ramberg’s so-called conventions cannot do what he wants them to, which in turn will help us see that the relation between meaning and the production of meaning must actually run deeper than Ramberg — or Davidson — realize. Conventions, according to Ramberg, are “heuristic devices,” “strategic shortcuts,” “diachronic generalizations,” and things that are “conventionally taken for granted” [Ibid, 110-1]. That is, what Ramberg calls “conventions” are ways that we tend to talk, unconscious habits that we persist in because they are useful. A first point that bears making is that this is not what most philosophers mean by convention. According to one standard account, for instance, a difference between conventions and other regularities in our behavior is that we follow conventions in part because we believe that others will also conform, and we prefer that they do so. On this view, driving on the right in the U.S. is not just an unconscious habit, convenient shortcut, or empirical generalization of people’s behavior over time, though it may also be those things: It is a convention established by the beliefs, desires, and intentions of U.S. drivers. So Ramberg’s understanding of convention is unusual. In one way, this is just as well, because as I discuss below, Robert Brandom has shown that the more standard view of convention is inconsistent with Davidson’s central tenet that belief and meaning emerge together. Still, the idiosyncrasy of Ramberg’s conventions suggests that we should ask whether they can be confined to the limited role he envisions for them.

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13 See [Lewis 1969]. Ramberg says that his own account is consistent with Lewis [Ramberg 1989, 113n1], but I see no evidence of this.
Ramberg’s conventions, to repeat, are convenient (but dispensable) shortcuts that facilitate the production of meaning. Our practical dependence on these shortcuts leads us to the blurring of linguistic understanding called incommensurability. But are conventions really dispensable? An analogy that Ramberg uses to flesh out his idea is extremely revealing. He says that “the individual speaker stands in the same relation to the conventions of his/her language as Aristotle’s *phronimos* does to the virtues.” That is, “If it is a convention to use ‘snow is white’ to say that snow is white, this convention is hammered out only in a series of assertions that snow is white, in just the way the meaning of a moral precept is hammered out for Aristotle in the actions of the *phronimos*” [Ibid, 111-12]. The problem with this analogy is that according to Aristotle, one cannot understand virtue apart from the actions of the virtuous person: they are constitutive of virtue, not dispensable shortcuts. Ramberg makes it sound like our repeated assertions, like the consistent actions of the *phronimos*, simply imbue us with habits that become hard to shake. Of course habit does play an important role for Aristotle, but virtuous actions are not just any habits: they define the standard of virtue, and as such are normative: We should all emulate the actions of the *phronimos*. Language, too, has this normative quality, as when we correct ourselves when we realize we have misused an expression. Ramberg seems to think that self-correction can be understood on his pared-down model of convention [Ibid, 110], but I cannot see how. If I have come to habitually utter “umm” when pausing to think, but then for some reason fail to do so, should I feel the need to correct myself?

I have begun to suggest here that language must be understood in a more thorough-going normative fashion than Ramberg can allow for, whether or not that means that we have to employ a more full-bodied notion of convention. (In the end, I will agree with Brandom that we must do without conventions, and follow his alternative.) A broad notion of language is essential to understanding linguistic behavior, and not merely convenient. I believe that Ramberg’s and Davidson’s view that “even if we used *nothing but* malapropisms, communication would still be possible” is wrong. As a supplement to the considerations just offered about conventions, here is
a more general argument that Ramberg and Davidson (at his most radical) are missing something crucial.

A central feature of Davidson’s view of linguistic behavior is that we are to be understood as possessing (largely implicitly) theories. I mentioned the “prior” and “passing” theories briefly above, and quoted Davidson’s statement that: “I call it a theory ... only because a description of the interpreter’s competence requires a recursive account.” In much of his work he refers to these theories as truth theories or T-theories, because he believes that truth conditions — that is, the conditions under which a given sentence is true — play critical roles in the theories. Davidson argues that a description of the speaker’s competence requires a theory for two main reasons. First, without a recursive theory able to generate infinitely many new theorems, we would be at a loss to explain our manifest ability to generate and understand new sentences. Second, unless our understanding of a given sentences is systematically inter-related to other sentences (as well as sub-sentential units), interpretation will not be successful.

Let me explain. In the imagined case where an interpreter uses radical interpretation to construct a T-theory from the ground up, we have no problem seeing that the theorems she attributes to her interlocutor will be systematic. Clearly, we cannot demand that, in order to have adequate evidence that a theorem is systematic, the interpreter test all possible other theorems and axioms that might bear on the truth of the theorem in question. On the other hand, more is needed than our interpreter hearing her subject utter “It rains every Tuesday,” and, observing that it is raining quite hard, attributing

(A) The subject’s T-theory states that “‘It rains every Tuesday’ is true-in-L at this time for her iff it rains hard today.”

to the speaker. This is clearly inadequate, since “It rains every Tuesday” does not mean that it rains hard today. Of course, Davidson never suggests that an interpreter should stop with (A). The provisional attribution of (A) is no more than an appropriate step in the long process of puzzling out a speaker’s T-theory, and it would be followed by attempts to determine whether
the speaker would utter “It rains every Tuesday” on a clear day, on a day when it rains lightly, and perhaps on a Tuesday without rain. These tests—the very essence of radical interpretation—would lead our interpreter to reject (A) since that interpretation, while adequate to explain her initial evidence, manifestly fails to be systematic, since it is not part of a consistent theory.

Exposure to a long series of the speaker’s utterances is therefore required for radical interpretation, as is the assumption that the meanings of the speaker’s words do not change greatly over the course of investigation. Without this assumption, we could have no guarantee that a theorem could be confirmed or disconfirmed by the evidence: If the second time our interpreter heard “It rains every Tuesday” she could not assume that it meant the same as the first time she heard it, she could not take the fact that it was not raining that day as tending to disconfirm her initial hypothesis. Davidson himself even suggests that it will be necessary to assume rough equivalence of meaning across speakers in order to avoid unacceptable level of indeterminacy:

A theory for interpreting the utterances of a single speaker, based on nothing but his attitudes towards sentences, would, we may be sure, have many equally eligible rivals, for differences in interpretation could be offset by differences in the beliefs attributed. Given a community of speakers with apparently the same linguistic repertoire, however, the theorist will strive for a single theory of interpretation: this will greatly narrow his practical choice of preliminary theories for each individual speaker. (In prolonged dialogue, one starts perforce with a socially applicable theory, and refines it as evidence peculiar to the other speaker accumulates.) [Davidson 1984, 153]

The idealized process of constructing a T-theory for a speaker, we can conclude, requires taking a language as the primary object of one’s theorizing. In one essay, Davidson acknowledges that, in some of his early writings, he had neglected the possibility that someone might know a set of theorems without knowing them to follow from a T-theory (and thus without knowing them to be systematic) because he “imagined the theory to be known by someone who had constructed it from the evidence, and such a person could not fail to realize that his theory satisfied the constraints” [Davidson 1984, 173]. Davidson does not go on to tell us how someone in a less imaginary situation could be justified in attributing systematic theorems to a speaker, but this is just the issue that we must now face.
We have seen that what justifies the radical interpreter in modeling her subject as possessing a T-theory is—among other things—both exposure to a long series of the speaker’s utterances, and assuming that the meanings of the speaker’s words (and perhaps even: the words of speakers in the relevant linguistic community) do not change greatly over the course of investigation. Our problem is to identify conditions that would justify an everyday interpreter in modeling her subject in the same fashion. The answer seems obvious: both conditions are met, roughly, in the course of speaking a language. We construct T-theories, that is, by relying on evidence not from individual utterances, but from a language.

If the language has been returned to the center of our theorizing, we have come a long way from the notion that “even if we used nothing but malapropisms, communication would still be possible.” Communication would not be possible under such circumstances. It is worth noting, though, that a language-based approach can also handle the individual idiosyncrasies of T-theories which seem to have driven Davidson to speak of prior versus passing theories. Recall that Davidson did allow that “things previously learned were essential to arriving at the passing theory.” I think that a proper appreciation of the force of this admission — so-called passing theories are essentially parasitic on theories that take as their subject a whole language, rather than an occasion of utterance — should convince us to abandon talk of “passing theories” altogether. We begin any linguistic interaction with a theory for the language-in-use of our prospective interlocutor. As we converse, we may have to make some adjustments to that theory. Some will be unconscious, automatic, and passing, as when we take malapropisms into account. Some will be conscious, lasting, and perhaps even carried out with the interlocutor’s help, as when we need to ask “What do you mean by X?” So long as “X” is another word for a concept that we already possess, or stands for a simple concept that we can readily add to our conceptual scheme, such adjustments will pose no difficulties to our communication.

Let me review. Comparative philosophers want two things from a philosopher of language. On the one hand, we look for an assurance that — sometimes only after hard work —
communication, comparison, and challenge are possible across languages, cultures, and traditions. On the other hand, we do not want these things to seem misleadingly easy, as if there were no difficulties in arriving at correct translations or legitimate comparisons. Thusfar I have argued that Davidson succeeds on the first score but falls down on the second. I looked at Ramberg’s promising-seeming effort to combine Davidson’s argument against untranslatability with the possibility of incommensurability, but showed that both Ramberg and Davidson himself still run into trouble by not taking seriously enough the role of language in linguistic meaning. It is time to look at an alternative that strays farther from Davidson’s theory than did Ramberg, though still without giving up on the core orientation that provides us with the first of the assurances just mentioned.

The alternative I have in mind is Robert Brandom’s inferentialist and pragmatist account of semantics. In the next several paragraphs, I aim to show that although Brandom has little to say about radical interpretation, he shares an approach with Davidson that grounds the ultimate possibility of translation of all languages. He carries this out quite differently from Davidson, taking “commitment” to be central instead of Davidson’s stress on truth, but these differences do not overshadow their shared starting point in what Brandom calls a “relational” theory of language and thinking. What is crucial for my purposes is that Brandom has found a way to do this that nonetheless has a fundamental place for social norms. While Brandom argues against talking of linguistic “conventions,” he shows that the norms implicit in our practices play central roles in making possible linguistic interactions. This role for norms will allow me to make good on the second need of comparative philosophy, thus completing my task.

Recall that Davidson has argued that neither beliefs nor meanings can be established independently of the other. This is illustrated by the plight of a radical interpreter who knows neither what his interlocutor’s words mean, nor what she believes. Davidson’s solution is that we must provisionally assign true beliefs to the speaker: only against a background of agreement can we come to identify things on which we disagree — things that we think are true and she, or they, think are false. In fact, Davidson goes farther than this, arguing that only in the context of
interpretation can we make sense of the notion of something’s being objectively true, as opposed to our just thinking things are a certain way. Only when we can say something like “She thinks that rabbits are bigger than hares, but I know differently” do we have access to the difference between thinking that things are a certain way, and their actually being that way. (This is independent of whether we are right about the way they are, of course.) By putting interpretation at the center of his theory, therefore, Davidson is able to accomplish two things: (1) show that we must generally interpret people as speaking truly, and (2) show how we come to appreciate the difference between speaking truly and speaking falsely.

Brandom follows Davidson’s lead in arguing that “the concepts of objective truth and error necessarily emerge in the context of interpretation.”14 Brandom also puts the interpretive interaction between speaker and hearer at the center of his theory. Like Davidson, he believes that “intentional states” (cf. Davidson’s “beliefs”) and “speech acts” (cf. Davidson’s “meanings”) are “fundamentally of coeval conceptual status, neither being explicable except in an account that includes the other” [Brandom 1994, 152]. It will not be lost on readers, though, that “meanings” and “speech acts” are quite different from one another; speech acts (like asserting) are typically thought to express meanings. Davidson says: start with someone’s behavior that you think might be linguistic. The only way to arrive at the person’s beliefs and meanings simultaneously is to provisionally fix one, so you apply the Principle of Charity and assume that her beliefs are true. Then try to build a theory of her language. If (in principle) you cannot, then you conclude that she is not speaking a language -- her behavior was not linguistic, after all.

In contrast, Brandom says: start with that same behavior, which you think might be linguistic.15 To interpret someone as speaking is to treat her as having taken part in a certain kind of practice, the paradigm for which is assertion.16 To perform an assertion is to take on a certain

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14 [Davidson 1984, 169], cited in [Brandom 1994, 152].
15 This paragraph is based on [Brandom 1994, ch. 3]; see in particular p. 142.
16 Brandom tends to use “interpretation” in the narrow sense, following Wittgenstein, of explicit hypothesis formation. He notes that Davidson has been criticized for thinking of ordinary intralinguistic understanding as this
kind of commitment: one becomes socially answerable for one’s performance. If I say “There is a red ball on that table,” and there is no ball on the table, or only a blue one, then — subject to correction by further evidence — it seems that I am not playing the assertion game. In the typical case, though, my interpreter will understand me as having taken on various commitments through my assertion, and will understand my utterance as an expression of these commitments. Brandom argues that we should view the (semantic) contents of my utterance in terms of the inferential relations I have licensed by expressing these commitments: my saying that there is a red ball on the table licenses the inference that there is a ball on the table, that there is not nothing on the table, and so on. These various inferences make up the “meaning” of the utterance. It seems clear enough, then, that for Brandom, attribution of intentional states (taking on the commitments which undergird inferences, which Brandom calls “doxastic commitments”) and attribution of the particular sort of performance called a speech act (assertion or whichever) must go hand-in-hand. Brandom says that when we do this, we are acting as “deontic scorekeepers,” by which he means that we keep track of the commitments and entitlements that people we are interpreting as speakers take on. If you utter “There is a red ball on the table,” I score you as committed to a variety of inferences. If you then say “It’s the only thing on the table,” I update my deontic scorebook, since there are now new commitments you have taken on. If you then push the ball off the table, I update the scorebook again: since our shared situation has changed, your “deontic status” has changed without your needing to say, for instance, “Now there’s nothing on the table.”

sort of interpretation, though Brandom himself remains silent on whether this criticism is apt. Brandom does allow that his deontic scorekeeping is a “kind of interpreting,” but it is “implicit, practical interpretation” [Brandom 1994, 508-9].

17 Sam Wheeler has argued (in a personal communication) that since (1) “commitment” carries with it the logic of obligation (according to which the addition of a new premise to a valid argument cannot invalidate the argument), and yet (2) what we “ought” to believe based on our existing beliefs is better understood according to the logic of conditional probability, so (3) Brandom is wrong to talk of commitment. Wheeler writes: “The ‘rules’ of successful language use are not like rules of games, but more like rules of thumb, that is, generalized conditional probabilities.” I think he is wrong about this, and we can see this if we think about one of Wheeler’s examples. The person who believes that “chien” means “dog,” but does not think that a chien is a mammal (because he does not believe that dogs are mammals) is not just rare, but wrong. If we were to encounter such a person, we would expect that when we presented him with the appropriate reason or evidence, he would acknowledge a mistake—that is, the violation of something the use of “dog” committed him to.
Instead of Davidson’s approach, according to which we attribute sentences “held true,” then, we start with the practice of assertion.\textsuperscript{18} Brandom is quite explicit about inverting a central principle of Davidson’s, even while preserving the insight it embodies:

The attitude of taking-true is just that of acknowledging an assertional commitment.... Evidently this principle can be exploited according to two different orders of explanation: moving from a prior notion of truth to an understanding of asserting (or judging) as taking, treating, or putting forward \textit{as} true, or moving from a notion of asserting to a notion of truth as what one is taking, treating, or putting forward a claim \textit{as}. [Brandom 1994, 202]

Davidson has made it very clear that he thinks we should start from a prior notion of truth [Davidson 1990, 314], whereas for Brandom, truth has an “expressive” role rather than an “explanatory” role. That is, using the concept of truth permits us to say various things about assertion — to make explicit the connections between some assertions and others, for instance. It is not something that “can be understood in advance of assertion” and used to help us understand assertion itself [Brandom 1994, 202].

If Brandom eschews an explanatory role for truth, though, he cannot appeal to Davidson’s Principle of Charity to explain how radical interpretation gets off the ground: We cannot look to an antecedent, shared notion of truth to (provisionally) fix the beliefs of interlocutors, in order to work out what their words mean. Instead, I will argue that Brandom can look to at least three things to explain how communication might get off the ground: shared circumstances, shared inferences, and the default attribution of assertion. Before looking at each of these, let me note where we stand in the argument. Since Brandom agrees with Davidson that understanding someone to be engaging in linguistic behavior — that the noises she or he is making constitute a language — can only be accomplished through successful interpretation, Brandom is on firm ground to reject the idea that there might be an untranslatable language. By way of clinching my account of Brandom as sharing this basic orientation with Davidson, I now

\textsuperscript{18} For instance: “Specifically \textit{linguistic} practices are distinguished as just the social practices according to which some performances have the significance of undertakings of assertional commitment” [Brandom 1994, 168].
propose to explicate how Brandom would motivate the idea that successful interpretation could be possible.

To begin with, we share circumstances with those whom we would interpret. There are things in our world with which we both interact. At least in most cases, assertional practice gets its empirical content via what Brandom calls “language entry” and “language exit” transitions: that is, assertions we make upon perceiving something (rather than upon hearing or reading or thinking of something), and things we do upon hearing (or reading or thinking of) something [Brandom 1994, 222]. To borrow Quine’s famous example, a rabbit runs by and our interlocutor says “Gavagai.” Does this mean “There’s a rabbit”? Initially, of course, any interpretation is dramatically underdetermined by the evidence, but if we presume an assertion has been performed, we can begin to try out assigning different sets of “deontic scores.” The process will be a familiar one, and I need not dwell on its details.

Two points are important to make, though. First of all, what about Quine’s insistence that his Gavagai example shows how translation is indeterminate? Wouldn’t all situations in which we might translate “Gavagai” as “There’s a rabbit” also be situations in which we could translate it as “There’s an undetached rabbit part”? Brandom has an ingenuous, though quite technical, answer to this worry, based on the strategy that he has developed to deal with singular terms.19 Second, are we just assuming that our interlocutor picks out objects the same way we do? If so, this starts to sound like Hollis’s “bridgehead” that we rejected above. Mightn’t “Gavagai” refer only to rabbits seen on sunny days, or to some sort of rabbit-like god? Certainly it could. Suppose that we spend some time with our subject, and begin to see that the assertion — and concomitant commitments — we initially attributed was not entirely apt. We might come to understand, for instance, that she sorts animals into fair-weather and foul-weather types [Ramberg 1989, 84]. This still provides the language-entry transition that Brandom has said is

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19 See [Brandom 1994, 409-12]. The basic idea is that the natives’ linguistic and other behavior provides us with no reason to attribute complex sortal categories like “undetached part” to them. For Davidson on related worries, see [Davidson 1984, 26n10]. For discussion, see [Angle 1994, 117-19].
crucial to securing empirical content for our assertions. In addition, Brandom emphasizes that deontic scorekeeping always involves keeping separate track of what an interlocutor takes to follow from her or his commitments, on one hand, and what (as we see it) actually follows, on the other [Brandom 1994, 185 and 488]. Suppose that we have come to see that our subject does take “Gavagai” to signal the presence of a rabbit-shaped deity. We know how to score such an assertion both for her, and for ourselves. That is, when she says “Gavagai,” we attribute to her a commitment to there being a rabbit-god nearby, while we are entitled to inherit a commitment to a mere mortal rabbit being present. This is so even if our backs were turned and we did not see the rabbit.20

One thing that is shared and which undergirds interpretation, in short, is our circumstances — even though, as we have just seen, one can come to see that an interlocutor may interact with those circumstances differently than one does oneself. A second thing that needs to be shared is what Brandom calls “sapience,” which he explains in terms of a responsiveness to reasons [Ibid, 5]. This does not mean that for us to successfully interpret someone as speaking a language, he must find convincing all of our reasons, but rather that the practice of assertion itself essentially involves committing oneself to the propriety of various inferences, and the notion of inferring is to be understood, says Brandom, as “a certain kind of move in the game of giving and asking for reasons” [Ibid, 158]. Let us return to someone’s having uttered “There is a red ball on the table.” Unless the speaker is thereby committed to a whole range of inferences — and will be responsive to reasoning about them — then she has not, in fact, spoken, but just made some noises that sounded like words. She must deny “There is nothing on the table” and affirm “There is a ball on the table.” In general, our starting point in radical interpretation will be our whole inferential apparatus, that which is made explicit through the use of logical vocabulary but which is implicit in our everyday linguistic practice.

20 Brandom gives examples and discusses related issues at [Brandom 1994, 480-90]. Particularly important is that way that pronouns and other anaphoric expressions help us to communicate, even when our differing commitments lead us to mean very different things by our words.
So far my discussion of Brandom has only aimed to show that Brandom provides as solid a grounding for comparative philosophy as Davidson does, by showing that Brandom shares Davidson’s ability to rule out untranslatable languages. To bring home my larger argument, it now remains to show that the fundamental role played by social norms in Brandom’s account enables him to make good on what I have been calling the second need of comparative philosophy, namely to show how conceptual differences can be robust and important, even if radical incommensurability is not in the offing. While Brandom argues against talking of linguistic “conventions,” he shows that the norms implicit in our practices play a central function in making possible linguistic interactions.

The simplest place to start is with Brandom’s rejection of convention. The most influential account of conventions — which is endorsed by Ramberg [Ramberg 1989, 113] — is that of David Lewis [Lewis 1969]. According to Lewis, conventions are social regularities that are sustained by various beliefs, intentions, and desires of the parties to the convention. In addition to conforming to the convention, they must believe that others will do so, to prefer that everyone so conform, and so on. According to Brandom and Davidson, though, intentions and meanings arrive together: neither can be prior to the other. Brandom cites Davidson as follows: “Philosophers who make convention a necessary element in language have the matter backwards. The truth is rather that language is a condition for having conventions.”

Without conventions, though, we seem to be without resources to explain how social norms might structure and constrain our meanings.

Brandom’s solution is to look to norms implicit in our practices. Rather than looking to conventions that we can define in terms of prior intentions, look to proprieties (that is, norms or

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21 [Brandom 1994, 232], citing [Davidson 1984, 280]. Davidson does sometimes say that correct interpretation involves hearer matching how the speaker intended to be understood, which might seem to make intention prior to interpretation; see, e.g., [Davidson 1986, 442]. Brandom points out, though, that Davidson “does not take it that the contents of these communicative intentions can be made sense of antecedently, in abstraction from interlocutors’ interpretation of one another” [Brandom 1994, 670n6].
rules) that we acknowledge in practice. Brandom shows that Ludwig Wittgenstien and Wilfrid Sellars both advanced this idea; he cites Sellars as follows:

We saw that a rule, properly speaking, isn’t a rule unless it lives in behavior, rule-regulated behavior, even rule-violating behavior. Linguistically we always operate within a framework of living rules. (The snake which sheds one skin lives within another.) In attempting to grasp rules as rules from without, we are trying to have our cake and eat it. To describe rules is to describe the skeletons of rules. A rule is lived, not described.22

Language, too, is lived rather than described. Dictionaries describe what we meant by our words yesterday. Most of the time we still mean the same things today, but if our usage has evolved, then the lexicographers need to catch up. This is not to say that an individual can mean anything she or he wants with a given word: usually, idiosyncratic usages are malapropisms and, if it is socially appropriate to point out the error, the speaker will acknowledge his or her mistake.23 The point, though, is that we authorize our language’s norms by what we do: what we say, the commitments we attribute and acknowledge, and so on.

With an understanding of using language as one among the many things that we do, it is straightforward to see that specifically linguistic practice must be bound up with many other practices. Brandom in fact emphasizes this when he talks about “language entry” and “language exit” transitions: our words are intimately bound up with what we perceive and do in our world. Like linguistic practice, our many other forms of practice also have norms implicit in them: proprieties and improprieties that shape how we interact with others and with our shared world. We understand ourselves in and through these practices, both linguistic and otherwise. When we seek to make explicit these self-understandings, we often advert to notions like “community.” A community is a group with whom we share (argue, play, eat, shop, reason, etc.). We belong to

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22 [Sellars 1980, 135], quoted in [Brandom 1994, 25].
23 Davidson reflects insightfully on the tension between speaker intention and hearer knowledge in [Davidson 1991]. As his discussion of Joyce’s Finnegans Wake shows, radically idiosyncratic uses are not always mistakes, but can be efforts to “provoke the reader into an involuntary collaboration.” Davidson notes that “coopted into Joyce’s world of verbal exile, we are forced to share in the annihilation of old meanings and the creation—not really ex nihilo, but on the basis of our stock of common lore—of a new language. All communication involves such joint effort to some degree, but Joyce is unusual in first warning us of this, and then making the effort so extreme” [Ibid., 11]. This seems exactly correct to me: our “stock of common lore” is, in Brandom’s terms, our stock of common commitments, some of which we will come to violate as we interpret Joyce’s language. Thanks to Sam Wheeler for this reference.
many communities, and they often overlap and have fuzzy borders. Brandom puts this thought in terms of how, and with whom, we say “we” [Brandom 1994, 3]. Sociologists, anthropologists, and historians have explored many of ways in which our practices define us. Or rather, they have explored the ways that we define ourselves through our practices, for, once again, we authorize our practices and their proprieties by engaging in them.

If linguistic practices cannot be neatly separated out from the other practices through which we define ourselves, then what “we” can appropriately say becomes a complicated matter. Contrary to Davidson’s blasé remark quoted above, failures of straight-forward, word-for-word translations are often not “accidents.” 24 Brandom writes that: “When the prosecutor at Oscar Wilde’s trial asked him to say under oath whether a particular passage in one of his works did or did not constitute blasphemy, Wilde replied ‘Blasphemy is not one of my words’” [Ibid, 126]. Wilde recognized, that is, that using the word “blasphemy” brought with it certain commitments that he — and other like-minded individuals — rejected, even if he were to deny that a particular passage was blasphemous. Communication, seen here as the shared effort to understand one of Wilde’s writings, temporarily breaks down.

Comparative philosophy rarely involves dramatic, face-to-face encounters between alternative communities, but such encounters do help to sharpen the issues involved in comparison and communication. Mario Biagioli gives us such an instance in his discussion of communicative breakdowns between Galileo and his Aristotelian rivals; Alasdair MacIntyre imagines difficulties of comparison when Confucians encounter Aristotelians, or when a single individual is torn between two communities. 25 According to Brandom, we are to understand the resistance to accommodation and the difficulty in finding common ground experienced by parties to these encounters in terms of the norms implicit in their (linguistic and other) practices. At the same time, Brandom assures us that where there is a will to overcome differences, we can

24 Two particularly relevant studies — relevant because of the ways they examine the inter-dependence of linguistic and non-linguistic practices — are [Bourdieu 1974] and [Biagioli 1990].
25 [Biagioli 1990], [MacIntyre 1991], [MacIntyre 1989].
communicate, for there are no untranslatable languages. The courtroom scene I described above was not well-suited to communication about the nature of Wilde’s writings, just as both Galileo and his rivals, according to Biagioli, had something at risk (their “socio-professional identities”) if they successfully communicated. Comparative philosophy, though, seeks to get beyond these barriers.

This is not the place to evaluate the specific recent proposals, mentioned at the outset of my essay, in terms of which several comparative philosophers have proposed we can “integrate” or “challenge” or “seek truth” across traditions. My goal has instead been to demonstrate how Donald Davidson and, more completely, Robert Brandom have shown us both why the synthetic projects of comparative philosophy are possible, and why they can be difficult. These synthetic projects lie at the core of what might more properly be called an emerging global philosophy, and they are well worth their trouble.26

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