Davidson’s “Method of Truth” in Metaphysics

William G. Lycan
University of North Carolina

Davidson made a strikingly distinctive and valuable contribution to the practice of ontology. It was a species of argument for the existence of things of one kind or another. It was inspired by Quine’s doctrine that “To be is to be the value of a bound variable,” but it combined that with Davidson’s own apparently anti-Quinean views on semantics and logical form in natural language. Roughly: Suppose truth-conditional analysis of certain English sentences assigns them logical forms containing characteristic quantifiers, and the quantifiers’ domains include entities of a certain sort. Then, assuming that some of the relevant sentences are true, it follows that there exist entities of that sort.

1. Davidson’s own classic instance of this method was his argument for the existence of events, in “The Logical Form of Action Sentences” (1967b). But, preliminaries:

According to his theory of meaning (1967c, 1970), the core meaning of a natural-language sentence—its propositional or locutionary content as opposed to its illocutionary force or what on an occasion its utterer might have meant by it—is that sentence’s truth condition. The truth condition is determined by the meanings of the sentence’s smallest meaningful parts together with their syntactic mode of composition, and it is best represented by a formula of some explicitly truth-defined logical system acting as what Quine called a canonical idiom.1 Such a formula wears its own truth condition on its sleeve, in that its truth condition is computable on the basis of the usual Tarskian set of extensions for the atomic
elements of that system plus a set of recursive rules that project the semantic values of a formula’s elements through truth-functional and other syntactic compounding into a truth-condition for the formula as a whole.

In that way, our original English sentence has its logical and semantical features predicted by its associated formula (call that explicitly truth-defined formula the sentence’s semantic representation, though that is not Davidson’s own term). Via the semantic representation too, logical anomalies are resolved, and other semantically puzzling features of the target sentences explained, just as Russell intended at the time he fashioned the Theory of Descriptions. The natural-language sentences simply inherit their perceived semantical features, such as entailments, from the formal properties of their semantic representations.

To do semantics in Davidsonian fashion is (using his method of deriving Tarskian “T-sentences”) to assign semantic representations and thereby explicit truth-conditions to natural-language sentences, in such a way as to illuminate semantic structure consonantly with what is known of the sentence’s syntactic structure. A semantic analysis of a target sentence will have, or should have, testable consequences: it will predict ambiguities, synonymies, anomalies, logical implications, and the like. Capturing implications is a main goal, perhaps the main goal, of the enterprise.¹

². Davidson did all that, in the most dramatic way, for the case of action verbs and their most typical modifiers. Focusing on the demodification inference (from ‘Jones buttered the toast slowly, deliberately, in the bathroom, with a knife, at midnight’ to ‘Jones buttered the toast slowly, with a knife, at midnight’, ‘Jones buttered the toast deliberately, in the bathroom’,
‘Jones buttered the toast’, and the like), Davidson hypothesized that the modified verbs are really existential quantifications over actions construed as concrete events, and that their modifiers are really conjoined predications of the corresponding bound event variables. Thus, the sentence ‘Jones buttered the toast’ would be represented as

\[ (1) (\exists e) \text{BUTTERING}(e, \text{Jones, the toast}) \]

(‘There occurred a buttering, by Jones, of the toast’), or more elaborately, picking up further obvious implications, as

\[ (1^*) (\exists e) (\text{BUTTERING}(e) & \text{AGENT}(\text{Jones, e}) & \text{PATIENT}(\text{the toast, e})). \]

\((1^*)\) will allow the derivation of ‘Jones did something’, ‘Something happened to the toast’, and the like.) Modifiers, then, are just further conjoined predications, which explains why they may be stripped singly or in groups:

\[ (2) (\exists e) (\text{BUTTERING}(e, \text{Jones, the toast}) & \text{SLOW}(e) & \text{DELIBERATE}(e) & \text{OCCURRED-IN}(e, \text{the bathroom}) & (\exists x) (\text{KNIFE}(x) & \text{INSTRUMENT}(e,x)) & \text{OCCURRED-AT}(e, \text{midnight})). \]

So demodification is at bottom just ampersand-elimination, the trivial derivation of one or more conjuncts from a conjunction. A puzzling and potentially troublesome felt implication is reduced to a clean, extensional, and indeed classical form of inference.\(^3\)

But for ontological purposes, the point is the event quantifiers that occur in those semantic representations. If (1) directly exhibits the logical form of ‘Jones buttered the toast,’
then that sentence itself existentially quantifies over events. If the sentence is true, i.e., if Jones did butter the toast, then there exist events, occurrences, in addition to ordinary physical objects, people, and whatever else there may be.

Of course, it is left open exactly what an “event” is, but an event has to be such as to ground the fact of Jones’ doing the buttering, for according to Davidson’s semantics, the buttering is that event. One well-known candidate that is ruled out is a Kim-event (Kim (1976)), a triple of an entity, a property and a time. For a triple is a set, an abstract entity, and no act of buttering is an abstract entity. (Assuming that there are sets, properties and times, there is no doubt that Kim-events exist. But if sound, Davidson’s reasoning shows that there also exist events of a more robust and physical nature.)

It should be noted that this ontological method can be used especially in the face of deliberate attempts to deflate ontology by semantical posturing. Consider the “adverbial” approach to sensory contents (Sellars (1956), Chisholm (1957)), that reigned in the philosophy of mind until the late 1970s. It originated as a way of eschewing Russellian sense-data: Instead of saying “There exists a blue patch [sense-datum] in my visual field,” we should say only “I am appeared to bluely.” But Jackson (1977) and Lycan (1987) argued that (a) the adverbial analysis is a semantic proposal and so is subject to semantic evaluation on the basis of specifically linguistic evidence and (b) that the evidence, especially in the form of felt implications, goes directly contrary to the adverbial view; semantic analysis of the proposed adverbial constructions themselves reintroduces reference to colored individual items.

(The “ordinary language” philosophers of the 1950s tried to draw ontological conclusions, positive or negative, from observations about the ordinary uses of relevant
linguistic expressions. Whatever the merits of that project, it is not Davidson’s. It had no use for formal logic and certainly none for any notion of logical form, which notion is central to Davidson’s style of ontological investigation.5)

3. Not till ten years after “The Logical Form of Action Sentences” and “Truth and Meaning” did Davidson present his distinctive argument form in a considered way. “The Method of Truth in Metaphysics” (1977, hereafter “Method”) wove it up out of his previously defended views and elaborated it.6

The paper begins:

In sharing a language, in whatever sense this is required for communication, we share a picture of the world that must, in its large features, be true. It follows that in making manifest the large features of our language, we make manifest the large features of reality. One way of pursuing metaphysics is therefore to study the general structure of our language. (p. 244)

Speaking of large, these are highly substantive claims. (i) To share a language is to share a picture of the world. Well, I suppose. But then (ii) that picture “must, in its large features, be true” (!). And then (iii) it follows that to exhibit the large features of our language, we reveal the large features of reality.

The largest of the claims is (ii). It is defended by appeal to Davidson’s (1973) familiar interpretivism with regard to both utterance meaning and belief content. He is highly sympathetic to Quine’s model of “radical translation,” and appreciates the epistemological difficulty of assigning meanings without knowing beliefs and attributing beliefs without
knowing meanings. His solution is based on the principle of charity, according to which, other things being equal, we should attribute beliefs to our subject that agree with ours and fit obvious features of the environment.

[W]e damage the intelligibility of our readings of the utterances of others when our method of reading puts others into what we take to be broad error. We can make sense of differences all right, but only against a background of shared belief. (“Method,” p. 244)

That accounts for (i) above. Acknowledging that (ii) is a vastly further claim, Davidson proceeds:

Just as too much attributed error risks depriving the subject of his subject matter, so too much error robs a person of things to go wrong about.... We do not need to be omniscient to interpret, but there is nothing absurd in the idea of an omniscient interpreter; he attributes beliefs to others, and interprets their speech on the basis of his own beliefs, just as the rest of us do. Since he does this as the rest of us do, he perforce finds as much agreement as is needed to make sense of his attributions and interpretations; and in this case, of course, what is agreed is by hypothesis true. But now it is plain why massive error about the world is simply unintelligible.... (p. 245)

Hence (ii). This is a brilliantly original argument. I do not accept it, but for a reason to be given below, I shall not evaluate it here.
4. “Method” goes on (p. 247) to compare Davidson’s semantic project to that of Tarski which inspired it. Of course Tarski had no concern for natural languages in the first place. But in addition, Davidson’s T-sentences are not homophonic, since their RHSs are formulas of a formal system. Moreover, some relativization is needed to accommodate indexicals and such, and the RHSs will accordingly contain some technical vocabulary; there will no longer be any clear sense in which the RHS formula is supposed to “translate” the target sentence mentioned on the LHS, and Tarski’s Convention T is not available as a purely formal test. Finally, for the latter reason, the Davidsonian semantic program cannot and does not claim to have defined truth itself, but must “assume a partial understanding of truth, and use the theory to throw light on meaning, interpretation, and translation.”

5. Davidson now goes on to argue (sec. III) that although semantically relevant structure does not always force ontological commitment, “[i]n general,…[it] is apt to demand ontology” (p. 249). He leads off with the example of quotation.

Take the simple view of quotations as proper names of their contained expressions. That view is untenable in a Davidsonian semantics, for there are infinitely many quotations and each would have to be taken as primitive. (Davidsonian semantics cannot allow infinitely many primitives, for such a language could not have been learned by a finite being (1965).) One solution would be Quine’s, to replace quotation with spelling. Instead of “‘cat’,” use “((see ˇeh) ˇtee).” This treats the original quotation as a complex description. But to give such structure to quotations is to introduce structural elements, the letter-words, which commits us to the existence of letters—for English, twenty-six of them. To see that there really is ontological
commitment here (not Davidson’s way of putting it), notice that from ‘((see ˘h) ˘tee) is a noun’ we can deduce ‘(∃x)((see ˘x) ˘tee).’

Second (pp. 249-50), he turns to Frege’s theory of oblique contexts. Frege recognized that the propositional sense named by the complement clause of a belief sentence had to have structure for there are infinitely many such propositional senses; they must be built up out of the individual senses of the complement’s component terms. And of course in Frege’s own ontology “senses” are intensional abstract entities referred to by the relevant terms. But, Davidson points out, his finitude problem has not been solved merely by assigning structure to propositional senses, for intentional operators such as ‘believe’ can iterate to infinity, which requires an infinite hierarchy of senses for each term. New approach needed.

Next (pp. 251-52), consider ‘Jack fell down before Jack broke his crown.’ ‘Before’ is not truth-functional. Following Frege, Davidson tries the obvious if ungainly philosophical monster, “true iff there exists a time t and there exists a time t’ such that Jack fell down at t and Jack broke his crown at t’, and t is before t’”—which would commit us to the existence of times. (Presumably, for deeper analysis, we could revert to Davidson’s theory of action sentences and use the time variables as parameters on the event predicates ‘Falling’ and ‘Breaking.’ But he suggests we may even dispense with the time variable, by making ‘Before’ a direct relation on events, and thereby at least temporarily lay down the ontological burden of individual entities called “times.”)

Finally, Davidson moves to consider causal predication. As in (1967a), again invoking event predication, ‘Causes’ becomes a simple relation on events, here the falling and the breaking. ((1967a) of course compared this analysis to competitors and argued that it is
superior on semantic grounds.) That provides further support for the existence of events, and helps to illuminate the metaphysical nature of causation.

6. On p. 253, Davidson alleges “a further, rather different way in which a theory of truth may have metaphysical repercussions: if for its own explanatory purposes, it must quantify over items of certain kinds. Davidson (1967c) argued to handle demonstratives, other indexicals, tense, and such, entities such as utterances must be introduced in the T-sentences’ RHSs, an utterance presupposing a speaker, a sentence, and (anew) a time. Some such entities may also be ascribed to the respective target sentences, but obviously others will not be. Yet the theorist is committed to that ontology, because s/he has quantified over those items.

Quite so, but (perhaps a bit stipulatively) I would not count such an argument as an instance of the “method of truth.” For it does not require the truth of any target sentence as a premise, but proceeds directly from the assumed truth of the semanticist’s own theory; it is a humdrum application of Quine’s criterion of ontological commitment, and not the unique style of ontologizing that is afforded by Davidsonian semantics.

7. Now it is time to consider a panoply of objections to the method of truth. But first a potential complaint, not about the method itself, but about its degree of support: The method has been defended on the basis of the Davidsonian program for semantics. But that program is highly elaborate, and committed to each of many claims that are vigorously disputed. Indeed, there are few philosophers who accept all of them. Thus, Davidson’s overall case for the method is very weak, and we have little reason to accept it.
Some of the disputed components: His interpretivism. Much more so, obviously, his claim that massive error is conceptually impossible. His Tarskian appeal to derivations of T-sentences. His rigid extensionalism, in particular his assumption that truth rules for every natural-language can be stated in first-order logic with identity. His (early) view that the concept of truth is more fundamental than those of meaning, asserting, and utterer’s meaning. –Quite a lot to have to defend.

But notice that very little of this figures in the method of truth proper. In particular, despite the structure of “Method”’s sections I and II, the method itself is entirely independent of interpretivism and can be defended just as well without it—indeed, it is so defended by Davidson himself (1965, 1970b). In fact, as we shall see below, interpretivism is in tension with each of several other Davidsonian positions.

Nor, though less obviously, does the method require support from the Tarskian format, and certainly not extensionalism. It would be too strong to say that those are just other things Davidson happens to believe, since they do figure directly in his development of his semantic format; but the method of truth could equally be supported by Montague Grammar, which makes no use of T-sentences and is based triumphantly on intensional logic.

All the method (proper) needs are: a motivated truth-conditional assignment of logical forms to target sentences, revealing quantificational structure, and the premise that at least one of the relevant target sentences is true. Ontology follows.

But now for the objections to the method itself.

8. Objection 1. Quine (1960, 1970) notoriously defended the radical claim that a sentence’s meaning properties—synonymy, entailment and the like, as well as the sentence’s
meaning itself—are entirely relative to a “translation manual” based on an utterer’s behavior, and that there are different such manuals equally well justified by the behavioral evidence. Accordingly, the meanings are objectively indeterminate; a sentence does not have a meaning except relative to an arbitrarily chosen “manual” parameter. “There is no fact of the matter.”

This is an eliminative view of meaning, for if sentence S had a determinate meaning and translation manual M assigned that meaning to S, then M would be to that extent objectively correct.

And clearly, if a target sentence has no determinate meaning the first place, it has no determinate logical form either, and the method of truth cannot get a grip.

Quine’s thesis is, to say the least, highly counterintuitive. And some of his arguments are entirely unconvincing; but he worked hard to produce better ones and to remove obstacles to seeing the indeterminacy. It would be hard to say how many philosophers have ever been convinced. But if Quine is right, the method of truth is bankrupt; there would be no fact of the matter regarding a sentence ‘s ontological commitments either.\(^\text{11}\)

What is odd, and has been widely remarked (as by Lycan (1976)), is that Davidson himself has evinced at least great sympathy for the indeterminacy doctrine. Davidson (1970) appealed to it as part of his case for the “anomalous monist” theory of the mental.\(^\text{12}\) Davidson (1973a) seemed to defend it as a way of showing the unintelligibility of the idea of radically different conceptual schemes. Davidson (1973b) and (1974) tried to elaborate some methodology, more liberal than Quine’s own, for reducing the scope of indeterminacy, but he did not claim it could be eliminated entirely, and he did not frankly repudiate the indeterminacy
doctrine. Davidson (1979) defends an “inscrutability” claim about reference that seems to entail the indeterminacy of interpretation.

Incidentally, return for a moment to Davidson’s notion of an “omniscient interpreter” (sec. 3 above), and notice that it is an oxymoron. If the being is omniscient, he knows everything there is to know, i.e., every fact. But then he has no epistemological need to interpret. Alternately, if he is omniscient but is still doing some interpreting, the latter activity cannot be a matter of getting at facts, but can be only the imposing or projecting of an interpretation in a nonfactual sense.

9. Objection 2. Some philosophers, most notably Wittgenstein and his followers, granted that meaning is determinate but repudiated the entire notion of logical form, the idea of a subterranean conceptual system that differs dramatically from surface grammar and but as dramatically explains why the surface grammar and the target sentences’ semantic behavior are as they are. If linguistic meaning arises out of conventional social behavior, it should be and will be able to be explained in term of conventions governing overt behavior; appeals to spooky, hidden “logical forms” are specious.

Alternately, a theorist might grant a notion of “logical form” but deflate it to a device of what Quine (1960) called “regimentation.” The idea would be that it is often useful to paraphrase natural-language sentences into formulas of some canonical idiom, say for purposes of disambiguation or other clarification, or of drawing attention to inferential similarities or whatever. But no claim of actual synonymy or exact truth-conditional equivalence is made, much less any about the target sentence inheriting its semantic properties from the formula
used as a paraphrase. Moreover, there need be no single privileged (“canonical”) idiom; different formal languages may be useful for different purposes as well.

These two views are mutually compatible, and each stands opposed to the idea that a natural-language sentence has a determinate logical form. On either view, the method of truth falls apart, for it infers the ontological commitments of a sentence from a factual claim about the sentence’s logical form.

Now, given the illuminating force of Frege’s semantic arguments (accept them or not), the brilliance and staying power of Russell’s Theory of Descriptions, the breakthrough quality of Davidson’s work on actions and events, and many other such, it is otiose to take the hard-line Wittgensteinian view as against the regimentation view. So the only question is, have we been given—by Davidson, or by Russell or Montague or methodologically inclined linguists—sufficient reason to maintain that there is a single most efficacious canonical idiom and that natural-language sentences can determinately be assigned truth conditions with respect to it? Here opinions will differ, depending on one’s experience of the literature and on one’s standard of proof. My own position is that we have strong, though not crushing reason for belief here, so long as we are not dogmatic in our choice of standardized notation and allow it to co-evolve with our variously best semantic analyses. (This is the way many linguists look at the issue.)

Moreover, even if there is no single best canonical idiom and/or no single best semantical representation modulo a given idiom, there may be invariances. If every reasonable semantic representation in every efficacious idiom includes quantification over Fs, then the method of truth yields a powerful argument for the existence of Fs.
10. *Objection 3.* As noted above, the method of truth requires a premise to the effect that at least one member of the relevant class of target sentences is true. That premise is normally secure (has Jones *never once* buttered toast?). If, barring demon skepticism, it is perfectly obvious that lots of members of the class are true, then if you want to reject the proffered ontology, you must either make an objection to the semantic defense of the logical form in question, or reject the entire method of truth on some independent grounds.

But it is not always so obvious that the relevant class does have any true members; sometimes an error theory is possible. To take an obvious example, Mackie (1977) argued that for moral properties to exist would require the existence of “objective prescriptions.” Let us imagine an ontologically clearer version of this claim made on semantic grounds. Someone looks at moral judgments and assigns them logical forms that quantify over God (or some relevantly similar cosmic lawgiver), so that by the method of truth it follows that God exists. (Now, there’s ontology.) Mackie of course would turn this argument on its head. The atheist, or for that matter anyone else who inclines against moral realism need not reject the semantic argument; s/he has the option of accepting it but adopting an error theory and denying that any moral judgment is ever true.¹⁵

But considered as an objection to the method, that point is weak. Any instance of the method is a deductive argument, and of course any deductive argument may be turned on its head. One who wants to resist the ontology always has the option of rejecting the truth premise. In some cases that will be ludicrously implausible, but in other cases it may be tenable. No proponent of the method of truth should, or would, say otherwise.

However:
11. Objection 4. So far our discussion has ignored the question of whether truth itself is robust or in some way deflationary. But now consider views according to which although truth per se is deflationary, we should still distinguish between two different kinds of explanation in regard to the making of judgments. Quasi-realists regarding, e.g., moral judgments grant that such judgments can be true. But they are selectively concerned to explain the makings of moral judgments in an expressivist way, without reference to any actual moral properties, while allowing the makings of ordinary factual and scientific claims to be explained as responses to real worldly objects and properties. What motivates the “quasi-” is that such theorists are concerned not to deny the semantic appearances, including especially the fact that the logical behavior of a moral judgment is typically just the same as that of an uncontroversially factual judgment; that is why they grant that moral judgments have truth-values.

Does this selective sort of position affect the method of truth? Presumably so, though I am not entirely sure how. Take a moral judgment such as ‘Eating people is wrong.’ Davidsonian semantics will assign it a semantic representation that applies the predicate ‘Wrong’ to a type of action (however the latter is represented). And so an existential statement can be derived: ‘(∃x)(Wrong(x)).’ Yet by the quasi-realist’s design, no ontology is intended, because the original judgment was true only in the deflationary sense.

Of course quasi-realists think that truth itself always deflationary; what makes someone a realist rather than only a quasi-realist about a subject-matter is what they believe about what explains people’s moral judgments. If that view is correct, does it simply invalidate the method of truth?
Not eo ipso, because the moral realist can still point to the existentially quantified conclusion concessively shared by the quasi-realist: There are types of action that are wrong. What the quasi-realist resists is the ontological inference that the world contains substantive moral properties. (Shades of Davidson’s contention that predication per se is of no ontological import, but the quasi-realist means to be selective here.) So perhaps s/he will want to say that neither truth nor quantification is the issue. The realist will rejoin that the battle has been won once the quasi-realist has conceded that there are wrongful types of action; whether there are “substantive” moral “properties” is a further question about which s/he does not care.

In any case it seems that the quasi-realist has in mind a deflationary notion of quantification to go with her/his deflationary notion of truth. If so, or if not, that brings us to the next and final objection.

12. Objection 5. Following Quine, Davidson has assumed that the quantifiers employed in the method of truth are classical and, in particular, objectual. Quine can do what he likes, because he does not endorse the method, but why does Davidson get to assume that? So far as has been shown, the quantifiers appearing in the semantic representations may be substitutionally interpreted; or they may be of some third sort that do not deliver the promised ontological conclusions.

Quine (1968, 1969) of course acknowledged the substitution interpretation, which he attributed to Leśniewski. Presumably Davidson acknowledges it too, since it is formally impeccable. But I know of no work in which Davidson discusses it.

Yet Quine offered two caveats, each of which would seem to help Davidson resist the present objection. First, for a quantifier to “range over” a given individual, the individual must
have a name that occurs in the relevant formal system. Of course, names need not be proper names, and complex descriptions can be concocted for individuals that in fact satisfy those descriptions. But there is a well-known problem of cardinality. No lexicon affords more than denumerably many expressions, and so it appears that universal quantifiers substitutionally interpreted will not be able to range over all the real numbers, much less possible worlds. Thus, Davidson may say, substitutional quantification will not allow us to quantify over everything that science does.\(^{19}\)

Quine’s second caveat, following Leśniewski (in conversation), is that in another way substitutional quantification is cheap: It is not restricted to singular term positions, but can apply within any syntactic category, including, famously, that of parentheses. Thus, formulas like ‘\((\exists x)(y)(\text{Admires}(x, y, \text{Davidson}))\)’ (not a misprint!) are perfectly well-formed and have clear truth conditions; this one is true because ‘\((y)(\text{Admires}(y, \text{Davidson}))\)’ is true and we have substitutionally quantified into the left-parenthesis position. “To conclude that entities are being assumed that trivially, and that far out, is simply to drop ontological questions” (p. 12). (The Leśniewski example struck Lycan (1979) as posing a deeper and more pervasive problem for appealing to substitutional quantification in analyzing natural language, though I shall not here digress into that. For a related argument, see van Inwagen (1981).) Thus, Davidson may say, substitutional quantification cannot be an ontological mark at all. Do not be fooled by the fact that our semantic representations quantify only into singular-term or possibly also predicate positions, for that is only a happenstance due to the structures of the natural-language target sentences; it does not make the substitution interpretation of those quantifiers any less ontologically trivial than that which occurs in the foregoing Leśniewski formula.
However, since Quine’s time, advocates for the substitutional approach have put in some work on the not-enough-names problem. Lance (1996) makes a bold and technically brilliant attempt at it, first allowing merely possible names in order to provide for uncountability, but then, admitting that there are other sorts of objects that we could not in principle name, he brings in possible arbitrary names, and argues that they take up the slack. One may wonder if the introduction of merely possible expressions does not reintroduce substantive ontological commitment in the metatheory, but Lance and other Sellarsians have an answer to that.

If Lance is right, then Davidson must after all say why he gets to insist that the quantifiers occurring in his semantic representations are objectual—or at least that some of them are, and how to tell the difference.

There is a further non-objectual option, a kind of quietism. Suppose we are mathematical anti-realists, and we want to account for quantification over numbers without incurring Quinean commitment. Well: There are things that do not exist. That is a near-Moorean fact. So there are (at least) two distinct quantifiers or anyway existential expressions in English, and one of them is ontologically noncommissive. Now, it is possible for us to say, truly or not: There are numbers, prime ones and large ones and irrational ones and imaginary ones, but they do not exist.

Is this not just Quine’s dreaded “Wyman” position, = Meinong? Not yet. All our objector has pointed out is that, like it or not, there are things that do not exist, an indisputable truth. What metaphysical exegesis one gives of it is what is horribly difficult and contentious. Meinong’s own exegesis is just one among eight or nine. (Another, still among eight or nine, is
Ruth Marcus’ (1975-76) suggestion that the noncommissive quantifier is substitutional. But it remains: There is at least one noncommissive quantifier in English. And for illustrative purposes I have stipulated that I am using that one on numbers.

So again we can challenge Davidson to say how he can tell which among the quantifiers in one of his semantic representations are objectual. But here I think he has a reasonable reply: If we try to flag the noncommissive quantifier as such, say by writing it as ‘(N)x...x...’ in a semantic representation, we need to have in mind an interpretation of some sort. If we deliberately leave it unexplicated, then we will have gone over to Meinong. If we say it is substitutional, then we collapse the present option back into the previous one. If we give it a nonstandard domain, we must say what that domain is, and be answerable for the consequences. If we offer an analysis of it, then it would no longer qualify as an element of a semantic representation, for it merely abbreviates further hidden structure. So Davidson would be within his rights to ask which option the objector has in mind, even though the objector has tried precisely to be neutral as among them.

Davidson is still subject to the Lance challenge, though he has made the aforementioned further reply to Objection 4 based on Quine’s second caveat. And now we come to something of an impasse. As portrayed here (though absent textual support), Davidson holds that substitutional quantification is of no ontological import. I said that he owes us a principled account of when an apparent commitment can be written off as merely the shadow of a substitutional quantifier. But he will be pulled in opposite ways here, in each way by Quine. First, when we speak we make ontological commitments; everyone should agree to that. So some of our quantification must be objectual. But, second, when we are able to avoid
ontological commitment consistently with the first point, we should do so, on grounds of parsimony.

Quine himself would favor objectual quantification over things to be found in nature and, be it adequate following a solution to the not-enough-names problem, merely substitutional quantification over everything else. But that is a metaphysical preference on his part that is in no way inspired by the method of truth. If the method is to be effective, it must come with its own guide to the choice between objectual and substitutional interpretations.

(All that assumes that Lance (or someone) has indeed solved the not-enough-names problem. There may be objections of various kinds to Lance’s construction, and the Lycan-van Inwagen argument aforementioned may undercut it as well, but those issues abide our question.)

I offer a criterion on Davidson’s behalf, obliquely supported by at least one important metasemantical view of his. The view is that, as noted above, elements of semantic representations are not allowed to abbreviate or otherwise contain hidden structure; even though the RHS of a T-sentence is no longer required to be synonymous with the target sentence, it is at least supposed to be fully explicit, itself requiring no further truth-conditional analysis. But that suggests that semantic representations should not contain substitutional quantifiers, for, as is well known, the semantics of substitutional quantifiers are given by objectual quantification over linguistic entities. As is equally well known, it does not follow that the relevant target sentence is or entails anything about linguistic entities, but a semantic representation is supposed to wear its own truth condition on its sleeve. (Granted, this is not a case of an RHS containing hidden structure, but it is at least a small failing of candor.)
There may of course be semantic or even syntactic reasons for analyzing some natural-language quantificational expressions as substitutional. But that would at least be a departure from normal semantic practice. The Davidsonian should treat objectual quantification as the default, resorting to substitutional only when some special specifically linguistic reason is in view.

13. Where does all this leave the method of truth?

Objection 1 stands or falls with Quine’s radical indeterminacy doctrine. Objection 2 will succeed if truth-conditional semantics is entirely wrongheaded to begin with, or if short of that there are no sufficiently determinate logical forms.

Objection 3 (error theory) simply fails. Objection 4 (deflationary truth) gets nowhere unless the deflationist deflates quantification along with truth, in which case the complaint collapses into Objection 5.

Objection 5 is hard to adjudicate, as the substitution interpretation remains controversial in each of several ways, and my proposed default as between objectual and substitutional interpretation is hardly immune to challenge. But as yet we have been given no reason to abandon the method of truth.
References


Footnotes

1 Though Quine had in mind an ideal language designed to replace natural language for purposes of theorizing, while Davidson intends only a “standardized notation” in which to do semantics of natural language (1977, p. 246).

2 Lycan (1984) is an extended elaboration and defense of this program.

3 In similar wise, the analysis solves the problem of “variable polyadicity”: On a naïve representation, ‘Buttered’ would be a relational predicate. But depending on the number of modifiers, it would have to be a 2-place predicate here, a 3-place predicate there, and so on to infinity; and each such predicate would have a different meaning. On Davidson’s view, ‘Buttered’ is always monadic.

4 Davidson (1977, p. 253) himself gives this example; he also mentions the Goodmanian idea of adverbializing “that”-clauses as a way of avoiding commitment to propositions. As he says, “It is mildly ironic that in [then] recent philosophy it has become a popular maneuver to try to avoid ontological problems by treating certain phrases as adverbial.”

5 N.b., Davidson made no claim of exclusivity for his “method of truth.” It is one guide to ontology among others.

6 Of course, there is another approach that could have been called the “method of truth,” a highly reliable one: It can be formulated as “Always hold true metaphysical views.”

7 The omniscient interpreter first made his appearance in Davidson (1975).

8 Davidson actually qualifies this (p. 250): “[T]he part of the language used in stating truth conditions for all sentences may become indistinguishable from what is often called a formalized or artificial language. It would be a mistake, however, to suppose that it is essential to find such a canonical subdivision of the language.”
Did a language contain only finitely many sentences, the homophonic T-sentences themselves would constitute a finite truth theory for the language. Even to make that language infinite by adding iterable connectives such as the truth functions would not introduce ontology.

In an aside (p. 251), Davidson comments on the apparent asymmetry of subject and predicate. At least in a system based on first-order logic, “for large stretches of language, anyway, variables, quantifiers, and singular terms must be construed as referential in function; not so for predicates.” Subjects bring quantification over particular individuals with them, but (so far as has been shown) predicates do not; ‘(\(\exists x\))\(\text{Mouse}(x) \& \text{Edible}(x)\)’ does not by itself require the existence of a class of edible mice, but only that of some such mice themselves or other.

Lycan (1976, 1984) considered two different ways of deflating the Davidsonian semantic program in order to make it compatible with Quinean indeterminacy, but argued that neither deflated view would answer to Davidson’s own demands on a semantic theory.

Notice that there is also a strong tension—I do not say an outright contradiction—between Davidson’s interpretivism about belief, and the token-identity theory of mental states that is entailed by his anomalous monism. To ascribe beliefs by interpretation using the principle of charity is a form of projection of a belief scheme onto the whole subject; it could scarcely identify a particular brain state within the subject.

The repudiation is sometimes dramatic as well. Wittgenstein’s biographers have suggested that what helped to disabuse him of his original allegiance to logical form was Piero Sraffa’s question to him, “What is the logical form of that?” [vulgar Neapolitan gesture here].

An intermediate view might be an inferentialist one such as Robert Brandom’s (1994), according to which we may speak of logical forms, but they are abstractions from a Sellarsian system of social inferential norms. Thus it is the social norms that ground and explain the logical forms, not vice versa.
Indispensability arguments for the existence of numbers are normally instances of the method of truth. It may seem undeniable that ‘2 + 2 = 4’ is true. But notoriously Hartry Field (1980) has defended an error theory of arithmetic, precisely as a way of turning such arguments on their heads.

An interesting variant on the Mackie position is that of Harman (1975), who argues positively, on (allegedly) semantic grounds, not for any particular ontology, but for moral relativism—the view that moral predicates contain hidden parameters. On that view, some apparent moral disagreements will not qualify as genuine disagreements, because of parameter shift, and moral realism is to that extent impugned.

Lycan (1984) defended the view now called Maximetaminimalism: that it is extremely important not to care what theory of truth is true.


Asay (forthcoming) offers a different characterization of the difference between the realist and the quasi-realist, in terms of kinds of truthmaker; I myself prefer his account. Quasi-realists regarding moral judgments are as before concerned to expunge moral ontology in favor of expressivism, and so they hold that the judgments’ truthmakers are facts about people’s attitudes and preferences, while ordinary factual and scientific claims have truthmakers of the face-value sort.

And what about ‘(∃x)(x has no name)?

This move goes back to Dunn and Belnap (1968).

Roughly that all quantification, formal and natural-language, always and everywhere, is substitutional. Lance’s containing project is to defend that thesis, and to make a novel contribution to the program of normative-inferential as opposed to truth-conditional semantics generally.

Some others (I will not take up space with full references): N can be paraphrased away in terms of counterfactuals or the like (Kripke); N ranges over Ersatzes, like sets of sentences or structured sets of properties (Carnap, Hintikka, Adams, Plantinga, Lycan); what I am calling noncommissive is no such
thing, but can in context be restricted to worldmates of ours (Lewis); N is used fictionally (Rosen); N occurs as part of a pretense, or with an illocutionary force different from that of standard assertion, or the like (Walton, Currie).

23 Well known or not, it may not be so. That is the radical move proposed by Lance (n. 21 above): to hold that all quantification is substitutional. For me it raises an issue of intelligibility: I understand substitutionally quantified formulas (up to the separate Lycan-van Inwagen argument aforementioned) so long as their truth conditions are given objectually. But if you give me a semantic interpretation and add the caveat that the quantifiers occurring in it are themselves substitutional, I feel I am none the wiser until a further semantic interpretation has been given for the semantic interpretation....

24 E.g., Hofweber (2005a), (2005b).