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Possibly *versus* Actually the Case: Davidson's Omniscient Interpreter at Twenty

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ABSTRACT

Recent anthologizing of Davidson's articles from the 1980s and 1990s encourages us to reconsider arguments contained in them. One such argument is Davidson's omniscient-interpreter argument ("OIA") in "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge," first published 20 years ago. The OIA allegedly establishes that it is necessary that most beliefs are true. Thus the omniscient interpreter, now 20 years old, was born to answer the skeptic. In §1 of this paper, I consider charges that the OIA establishes only that it is possible that most beliefs are true; if correct, then it is also possibly the case that most beliefs are false—the skeptic's very position. Next, I consider two responses on Davidson's behalf, showing that each fails. In §2, I show that the OIA establishes neither that it is necessarily nor possibly but actually the case that most beliefs are true. I then conclude that this is enough to answer the skeptic.

Recent anthologizing of Davidson's articles from the 1980s and 1990s encourages us to reconsider arguments contained in them. One such argument is Davidson's omniscient-interpreter argument ("OIA") in "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge," first published 20 years ago.¹ The OIA allegedly establishes that it is necessary that most beliefs are true. Thus the omniscient interpreter, now 20 years old, was born to answer the skeptic.

Let me grant Davidson's premises. In §1 of this paper, I consider charges that the OIA establishes only that it is possible that most beliefs are true; if correct, then it is also possibly the case that most beliefs are false—the skeptic's very position. Next, I consider two responses on Davidson's behalf, showing that each fails. In §2, I show that the OIA establishes neither that it is necessarily nor

possibly but (merely) actually the case that most beliefs are true. I then conclude that this is enough to answer the skeptic.

Before turning to §§1–2, however, let me consider just what sort of skeptic Davidson is answering. First, the OIA assumes that the preconditions for radical interpretation exist: at least two language-users, an interpreter and alien, and an external world common to both. So, unlike the Cartesian skeptic, Davidson’s skeptic assumes the existence of another mind and an external world.² Like the Cartesian skeptic but unlike the Pyrrhonian, however, Davidson’s skeptic accepts the legitimacy of logical proof, lest there be no point in his presenting the omniscient-interpreter *argument*.

Second, Davidson’s skeptic has taken the linguistic turn. For she grants that semantics sheds light on epistemology. In particular, as becomes apparent below, the skeptic agrees with Davidson that “[t]he methodology of interpretation is ... nothing but epistemology seen in the mirror of meaning” (1975, 169).

Third, Davidson’s skeptic unlike Gettier (1963) is not skeptical about the nature of knowledge *per se*. For Davidson takes knowledge to be true, justified belief (1983, 139). And though Davidson (1983) seems concerned with showing that most beliefs are true, and not true *and justified*, beliefs that follow from radical interpretation are, for Davidson, already justified.³

I now consider charges that the OIA establishes only that it is possible that most beliefs are true, therefore not answering the skeptic.

1. Possibly the Case?

Foley and Fumerton (1985), also granting Davidson’s premises, contend the OIA establishes only that *were* there an omniscient interpreter then most beliefs *would* be true. Since there *is* no omniscient interpreter—since the omniscient interpreter is merely *possible*—the OIA establishes only that it is *possible* that most beliefs are true. But then as the skeptic maintains it is possible that most are false. Thus, according to Foley and Fumerton, for the OIA to establish that it is *necessary* that most beliefs are true, Davidson would presumably need either to assume or prove the *necessity* of an omniscient interpreter.

Foley and Fumerton consider an alternative. ‘*Were* there an omniscient interpreter, then most beliefs *would* be true’ entails that at the closest possible world at which there *is* an omniscient interpreter, most beliefs *are* true, where to respond to the skeptic ‘most beliefs’ refers (at least) to actual beliefs that we have.

To test for actuality, Foley and Fumerton ask whether *our* beliefs are true at the closest possible omniscient-interpreter world. Concluding that we have no reason to think so—for presumably *any* possible world at which there is an omniscient interpreter is too distant from the actual world for most of *our* beliefs to be true there—they conclude that the OIA fails to establish actuality let alone necessity.

Brueckner (1991), starting where Foley and Fumerton stop, devises a way in which a merely possible omniscient interpreter interprets beings whose beliefs have the same truth-values as ours, insuring that most of *ours* are true. Brueckner conceives of an interpreter *more* omniscient than Davidson's: this merely possible interpreter interprets beings whose beliefs have the same truth-values as ours, *because this being interprets us*. Brueckner's omniscient interpreter sees between possible worlds. What kind of being could do this? Brueckner explains that Leibniz's God could. Since, according to Brueckner and Leibniz, such a being is possible, Davidson's argument establishes actuality. Since such a being can interpret us at the actual world—which is just one possible world—such a being could interpret rational beings at all possible worlds. Hence, if Davidson's premises are correct, then his argument establishes necessity, just as Davidson maintains.

Yet Brueckner's "solution" suggests a way in which both radical interpretation and the principle of charity could be *irrelevant* to the OIA, putting its conclusion in doubt. Davidson holds that beliefs are constructed *via* radical interpretation, so Leibniz's God could not know what we believe by reading our minds: there are no beliefs there *to* read. But Leibniz's God would not be limited to *actual* humans. Since a language of thought is possible,⁴ Leibniz's God sees a possible world whose inhabitants believe what we believe, but in virtue of beliefs tokened in a language of thought in response to objects perceived in the world. If Leibniz's God identifies patterns between tokenings and objects perceived—there is no reason to think that there is not *some* possible world at which such patterns are identifiable—then she can read the minds, and so beliefs, of these possible humans. Thus, identifying our language-of-thought doppelgangers, Leibniz's God could dispense with radical interpretation and the principle of charity altogether. But because Leibniz's God sees *between* possible worlds, she can use determinations about our doppelgangers to construct a theory of meaning and belief *for us*.

Further, suppose that these doppelgangers need to read each *other's* mind, so that at this possible world radical interpretation is insufficient, even for

Leibniz's God, to construct a theory of meaning and belief. But if there is a possible world at which radical interpretation is insufficient to construct a theory of meaning and belief, then at that world nothing follows from radical interpretation and the principle of charity. So the OIA cannot establish that at *that* world most beliefs are true. But then it is not *necessary* that most beliefs are true.

Genova (1999) also tries responding to the charge that the OIA does not establish necessity. Preliminarily Genova claims, correctly, that Davidson does not need an omniscient but "veridical" interpreter, "a fallible interpreter ... who just has true beliefs about all the relevant data for interpretation" (167). Then Genova claims, correctly, that Davidson construes possibility epistemically. But Genova next claims, incorrectly, that so construing possibility allows Davidson to avoid ontological commitment to an omniscient *or* veridical interpreter, *and* to establish necessity:

... I contend that Davidson's argument ... turns only upon epistemic possibility equals intelligibility equals interpretability.... Nothing turns on an existing OI [omniscient interpreter] or VI [veridical interpreter] but turns on what the skeptic concedes as conjointly possible at this world. The skeptic is shown to be asserting an inconsistent triad, consisting of (1) the intelligibility of an MF [a coherent system of massively false beliefs], (2) a Davidsonian methodology of interpretation, and (3) the intelligibility of a VI. This conjunction is not an epistemic possibility (183).

Genova rejects (1).

Yet Genova's argument fails. On the one hand, its conclusion is too weak. Rejecting the epistemic possibility of a coherent system of massively false beliefs does not entail accepting the necessity of a coherent system of massively true beliefs. For if beliefs are not massively false then they could divide evenly between true and false. To answer the skeptic Davidson needs to show the necessity of massive truth.

On the other hand, the argument is invalid. Intelligibility seems as fair an explication of 'epistemic possibility' as any: suppose that they are in Genova's terms "equal." Nonetheless neither intelligibility nor epistemic possibility equals interpretability. Though Genova argues that Davidson's focus on "what is possible to believe" shows his restricting possibility to the context of human understanding, itself intimately tied to interpretation (Genova 1999, 180), this establishes that epistemic possibility and interpretability are correlated, not equivalent. In fact, for Davidson, epistemic possibility and interpretability come apart. Consider that, for Davidson, it seems epistemically possible that there is a solipsistic mind, since we can *conceive* of one, regardless of whether there could

be one. Genova also equates epistemic possibility with conceivability (177): suppose them equal too. Now, for Davidson, a solipsistic mind *is conceivable*, lest solipsism be worth neither his worry nor response.⁵ But if Davidson’s views on interpretation are correct, then a solipsistic mind is *not interpretable*.⁶ Hence epistemic possibility (or conceivability or intelligibility) does not equal interpretability.

Now consider Genova’s claim that it is “not an epistemic possibility” that (1) an MF is intelligible, (2) Davidson’s views of interpretation are correct, and (3) a VI is intelligible. When Genova uses ‘intelligible’ in the premises he could mean either conceivable (epistemically possible) or interpretable, both consistent with his view that they are equal. But when Genova observes the alleged epistemic “impossibility” of the premises’ conjunction, he cannot mean its *uninterpretability* but rather *inconceivability*. Otherwise he is claiming that we cannot *interpret* an MF’s interpretability conjointly with Davidson’s views of interpretation and a VI’s interpretability. But what would it mean to interpret, in Davidson’s sense of ‘interpret’, something’s interpretability, let alone interpret something’s interpretability conjointly with someone’s views and someone else’s interpretability? We might *conceive* of something’s interpretability, but given Davidson’s use of ‘interpretation’ Genova’s taking intelligibility to equal interpretability leads to incoherence.

So Genova must mean it *inconceivable* that the three premises are consistent. But *is* it? It is conceivable (and likely) that no one knows *all* the consequences of Davidson’s views on interpretation, let alone Genova’s modifications thereof. In particular, it is conceivable that one such consequence allows (1), (2), and (3) to be consistent. That consequence might concern a fuller understanding of an MF or VI than Genova provides; as with Davidson’s omniscient interpreter, no one has offered anything close to necessary and sufficient identity conditions for any of these.⁷ Or it might concern something else. For I can conceive of the consistency of (1), (2), and (3) without conceiving of the precise way in which they might be consistent. After all, I can conceive of the establishment of world peace without conceiving of the precise way in which it might be established. Hence it is conceivable—or epistemically possible—that (2) and (3) hold and that (1) need not be rejected. Genova’s conclusion therefore does not follow. Epistemic possibility is too weak to do Genova’s work.

If epistemic possibility is too weak, then perhaps Genova should argue that it is *metaphysically* impossible that (1), (2), and (3) are consistent. His

conclusion's "not an epistemic possibility" would then be replaced with "not a metaphysical possibility." But then his premises' "intelligible" could not be construed as *epistemically* possible, lest the argument have no chance at validity. In other words, should Genova's conclusion concern metaphysical possibility, then he would have to treat *all* modality in the OIA metaphysically. Yet doing so restores Foley and Fumerton's point, now in terms of a veridical interpreter: such a being's *metaphysical* possibility entails its *existence* at some possible but not necessarily the actual world. And so for the OIA to establish that it is *necessary* that most beliefs are true, Genova would need either to assume or to prove the *necessity* of a veridical interpreter, neither of which he does. For avoiding this consequence just is avoiding Foley and Fumerton's objection (*modulo* a veridical interpreter), and avoiding there objection is why Genova turns to epistemic possibility in the first place.

Hence whether Genova understands the possibility as epistemic *or* metaphysical, his conclusion does not follow. And so, *contra* Brueckner and Genova, Foley and Fumerton seem right: if the OIA's premises are true, then it establishes only possibility.

2. *Actually the Case*

Now *I* contend that, if its premises are true, then the OIA establishes that it is (merely) *actually* the case that most beliefs are true. I *also* conclude that properly understood this is enough to answer the skeptic. Seeing both, however, requires revisiting the argument.

The OIA has us accept our having beliefs, Davidson's story about radical interpretation and the necessary role of the principle of charity, and the possibility of omniscient interpreter. From the last it follows that there is some possible world at which an omniscient interpreter interprets as fallible interpreters do. But if there is one such possible world, then there are *infinitely* many.⁸ And if there are *infinitely* many omniscient-interpreter possible worlds, then there is no reason that one is not identical to the actual world *except* that it has an omniscient interpreter.

It might be objected that the addition of such a being forces that possible world to differ drastically from the actual. Foley and Fumerton so objected. But the theist and atheist identify two possible worlds that are the same except for an omnipotent being; each understands the other lest there be no reasoned debate between them. And that each understands the other shows that the two worlds are

conceivable, *i.e.*, epistemically possible. The agnostic herself identifies two such possible worlds; her agnosticism is about which is actual. So it *is* possible that there is a world just like ours only with an omniscient interpreter, arguably as possible as an omnipotent being.

Thus there is some possible world at which all the conditions at this world obtain *plus* there is an omniscient interpreter. At *that* world most beliefs are true. Now the *only* difference between that world and the actual world is the omniscient interpreter. Thus his absence from the actual world would not make the truth-values of most beliefs differ, since *ex hypothesi* everything other than the omniscient interpreter (including the truth-value of most beliefs, the sufficiency of radical interpretation to construct a theory of meaning and belief, and the necessity of the principle of charity for such interpretation) is the same. This does not show that it is *necessarily* the case that most beliefs are true, since there are possible worlds at which some of these conditions do not obtain; necessity requires that there be no such worlds. But it does not show that it is only *possibly* the case that most beliefs are true either, since at this world, just like at the omniscient-interpreter possible world, these conditions do obtain; and so at this world, just like at the omniscient-interpreter possible world, most beliefs are true. Thus the OIA shows that it is (merely) *actually* the case that most beliefs are true.

Further the OIA shows at which worlds *relative* to the actual world most beliefs are true: *viz.*, at worlds at which beings have beliefs, radical interpretation is sufficient to construct a theory of meaning and belief for these beings, and the principle of charity plays a necessary role in that interpretation. Since, as explained below, the principle of charity is a necessary condition on radical interpretation, it plays a necessary role in radical interpretation at *every* world at which radical interpretation is sufficient to construct a theory of meaning and belief. And since, as explained above, radical interpretation constructs a theory of meaning *and* belief, beings have beliefs at *every* world at which radical interpretation is sufficient to construct a theory of meaning and belief.⁹ *Hence, if the OIA's premises are correct, then the argument really establishes that most beliefs are true at every world at which radical interpretation is sufficient to construct a theory of meaning and belief.*

Again this does not entail that it is *necessarily* the case that most beliefs are true, since radical interpretation is not sufficient to construct a theory of meaning and belief at every world: remember our language-of-thought doppelgangers. Nor does it entail that it is only *possibly* the case that most beliefs

are true, either, since radical interpretation is sufficient at *this* world—this is one of the OIA’s premises which I do not question here. Rather, it entails that it is (merely) *actually* the case that most beliefs are true.

Though not realizing it, Brueckner also shows that it is actually the case that most beliefs are true. *Contra* Brueckner, Leibniz’s God sees possible worlds at which radical interpretation is insufficient to construct a theory of meaning and belief, and so at which the principle of charity is not needed: at at least some of these worlds most beliefs are not true. It is therefore *not necessarily* the case that most beliefs are true. Nonetheless, for Brueckner, Leibniz’s God sees the *actual* world, at which *ex hypothesi* radical interpretation is sufficient, and so at which most beliefs *are* true. For Brueckner, it is therefore *actually* the case that most beliefs are true.

Just what does assuming an omniscient interpreter, Davidson’s *or* Brueckner’s, show? Assuming it *emphasizes* rather than *entails* the argument’s conclusion. Let me formalize the OIA minus any omniscient interpreter. Let ‘RI’ stand for ‘radical interpretation is sufficient to construct a theory of meaning and belief’, ‘PC’ for ‘most beliefs are true by an interpreter’s lights’, and ‘T’ for ‘most beliefs are true’.

For Davidson, radical interpretation is sufficient to construct a theory of meaning and belief:

1. RI

and radical interpretation needs to be constrained by the principle of charity:

2. $\Box (RI \rightarrow PC)$

The necessity is on the conditional, since 2 describes a necessary condition *on* rather than consequent *of* radical interpretation.¹⁰ Thus *any* being for whom radical interpretation is sufficient, and *a fortiori* Davidson’s and Brueckner’s omniscient interpreters, must abide by the principle of charity; assuming an omniscient interpreter is superfluous.

Most beliefs are therefore true by an interpreter’s lights:

3. PC

Now Davidson’s conclusion is stronger in two ways: (i) most beliefs are true not relative to an interpreter but absolutely and (ii) this is not (merely) actually but necessarily so.

The OIA does establish (i). Assuming a possible omniscient interpreter allows moving from *taking* most beliefs to be true to its being possibly the case that most *are* true. Yet assuming Davidson’s account of radical interpretation

allows moving to its being *actually* the case that most beliefs are true. For Davidson 1973, introducing radical interpretation, gives an account of interpretation in *terms* of truth: “[A]ssuming translation, Tarski was able to define truth; the present idea is to take truth as basic and to extract an account of translation or interpretation” (1973, 134). Davidson explains there and elsewhere that he takes Tarski’s Convention T to entail that truth and translation, of which his interpretation is a variant,¹¹ are explicable only correlatively.

Davidson, employing his account radical interpretation elsewhere, suggests this too. Concerning his argument against the very idea of a conceptual scheme, Davidson writes:

Since Convention T embodies our best intuition as to how the concept of truth is used, there does not seem to be much hope that a test that a conceptual scheme is radically different from ours if that test depends on the assumption that we can *divorce the notion of truth from that of translation* (1974b, 195, my emphasis).

Thus, for Davidson, the notion of truth cannot be divorced from that of translation, and translation is performed by a translator. This suggests that, for Davidson, true by a translator’s, and *a fortiori* an interpreter’s, lights is the only sense of ‘true’ applicable to sentences meant and believed.

One might object that it is unfair to claim that Davidson thinks that the only applicable sense of true is true by an interpreter’s (or translator’s) lights. Instead, the objector might claim, Davidson argues that the possibility of communication between interpreters requires that a belief’s being true by an interpreter’s lights *is*, in the most basic cases, true. So, the objector might conclude, for Davidson, true is logically prior to true by an interpreter’s lights.

In fact, in Davidson 1983 itself, two paragraphs after the OIA itself appears, Davidson writes:

What stands in the way of global skepticism of the senses is, in my view, the fact that we must, in the plainest and methodologically most basic cases, take the objects of a belief to be the causes of that belief. And what we, as interpreters, must take them to be is what they in fact are. Communication begins where causes converge: your utterance means what mine does if belief in its truth is systematically caused by the same events and objects (1983, 151).

So after going through the trouble of invoking a possible omniscient interpreter, Davidson argues that—at least in the plainest and methodologically most basic cases—what an interpreter takes to be objects of a belief, and so what the belief is about, need to be the causes of that belief. But then, since in these basic cases a belief’s being true involves its being (appropriately) caused by what the belief

is about, Davidson is arguing that an interpreter's *taking* a belief to be true in such cases is proof that it *is* true.

Davidson's reason for thinking this, as he elliptically states, is that otherwise communication is impossible. Now, for Davidson, communication involves his procedure of "triangulation": two language-users interpret one another against a shared environment. But then communication involves reciprocal interpretation. Now Davidson claims that communication requires a common subject matter, this shared environment. And for utterances to have such a subject matter, belief in them, so Davidson argues, must be caused by the same events in the environment. Since communication occurs, basic beliefs must be true.

Yet communication does not require a convergence but *agreement* on a convergence of causes. And so, for all that communicating interpreters know and so attribute to one another, their beliefs might be false. But Davidson does not consider this possibility. Instead, for him, the only sense of true that he considers is true by, this time, a *communicator's* lights: as far as the communicator is concerned, her and her interlocutor's basic beliefs are true. But then, for Davidson, since all communicators are interpreters—for communicators need to be able to understand one another's utterances—the only sense of true that Davidson considers is, again, true by an interpreter's lights.

Why does Davidson put so much emphasis on truth by a translator's, interpreter's, and now communicator's lights? Davidson later explains:

Communication, and the knowledge of other minds that it presupposes, is the basis of our concept of objectivity, our recognition of a distinction between false and true beliefs. There is no going outside this standard to check whether we have things right.... A community of minds is the basis of knowledge; it provides the measure of all things. It makes no sense to question the adequacy of this measure, or to seek a more ultimate standard (1990, 164).

Now, for Davidson, communication, recall, involves reciprocal interpretation. So interpretation, and the knowledge of other minds that it presupposes, is then the basis of our concept of objectivity and so truth. Hence, for Davidson, there is no going outside the bounds of interpretation to question the adequacy of our knowledge of truth. True by an interpreter's lights remains the only sense of true that Davidson thinks is worthy of consideration.

And all this, I contend, is implicit in the second premise of the OIA—that radical interpretation is sufficient to construct a theory of meaning and belief for an alien—because, for Davidson, such a theory is ultimately a Tarski-style theory

of *truth*. It is not a theory of truth *by an interpreter's lights*. So the interpreter determines meanings and beliefs that are true.

Thus, for Davidson, most beliefs are true if and only if an interpreter takes them to be true. But then most beliefs are true if and only if most beliefs are true by an interpreter's lights:¹²

4. $T \leftrightarrow PC$

It follows that, for Davidson, most beliefs are true:

5. T

No omniscient interpreter is needed.

Now, *contra* Davidson, the OIA does not establish (ii), that it is *necessarily* the case that most beliefs are true. Nonetheless here is a diagnosis why Davidson thinks that it does establish this: Davidson thinks (a) that it is *necessary* that radical interpretation is sufficient to construct a theory of meaning and belief and (b) that it is *necessary* that true by a translator's lights is the only sense of 'true'. Thus he rejects 1 and 4 in favor of 1' and 4':

1'. $\square RI$

4'. $\square (T \leftrightarrow PC)$

The rest follows:

2. $\square (RI \rightarrow PC)$

3'. $\square PC$

5'. $\square T$

Note that assuming an omniscient interpreter remains superfluous.

I take Davidson to favor 1' and 4', because doing so seems the only way to take the OIA to establish necessity. Davidson is clear that the principle of charity is a necessary condition *on* radical interpretation.¹³ For it to be necessary *simpliciter*, radical interpretation, and in particular its being sufficient to construct a theory of meaning and belief, must itself be necessary: hence 1'. And unless Davidson favors 4', then he cannot use the necessity allegedly just established to establish that it is necessary that most beliefs are true.¹⁴

Yet it is *not* necessary that radical interpretation is sufficient to construct a theory of meaning and belief. For, recall, it is not sufficient for all our doppelgangers.¹⁵ Thus, if its premises are true, then the OIA establishes that it is actually, and not necessarily, the case that most beliefs are true. Further most beliefs are true at *any* world at which radical interpretation is sufficient to construct a theory of meaning and belief; but these are not *all* worlds.

Nonetheless, if Davidson's premises are true, then the only requirement for it to be actually the case that most beliefs are true is that we actually interpret most beliefs as true. The OIA emphasizes this by having us conceive of an omniscient interpreter, only to realize that even such a being would if she used our methods make our determinations. But conceiving of this being *per se* does not prove anything: there is no 'omniscient interpreter' in either formal proof.

If correct, then Davidson's account of radical interpretation, I conclude, answers those skeptical about the truth of most beliefs. If the skeptic requires that it be *necessary* that most beliefs are true, however, then the skeptic has the burden of explaining why. For to require this stronger conclusion is to insist that we can be confident about the truth of most of *our* beliefs only if *all* our doppelgangers, some of whom read each others' minds without the principle of charity, have most beliefs that are true. Though the skeptic might herself worry about the truth-value of most of *their* beliefs, she has the burden of explaining why such a worry should be *ours*.

Notes

¹ “A Coherence Theory” is Davidson 1983. An earlier version of the OIA appears in Davidson 1977. So though I conclude in this paragraph that the omniscient interpreter is 20 years old, *strictu sensu* only the second version of the interpreter is that old.

Pagination in all articles refers to their reprinted editions. All emphasis is in the original unless otherwise noted.

² Klein (1986, 372) is therefore wrong that she agrees with the Cartesian that an argument against skepticism cannot assume these.

³ This time I agree with Klein (1986, 381).

⁴ Following Davidson, by this I mean epistemically possible, or conceivable (see note 2). And Davidson should grant that a language of thought is at least as conceivable as an omniscient interpreter.

Fodor and his followers, of course, take a language of thought to be actual.

⁵ Davidson worries and responds to the possibility of solipsism in several articles, including 1982, 1991a, 1991b, 1992, 1998, 1999.

⁶ Nor would it be metaphysically possible.

⁷ It is, *e.g.*, unclear whether two omniscient interpreters would necessarily construct the same theory of meaning and belief for an alien *and* how they would not do so. This and other issues are as unclear for Davidson’s omniscient interpreter as they are for Genova’s VI. If they would, then there would be a fact of the matter about which, of all possible theories of meaning and belief, is correct, *viz.*, the one constructed by an omniscient interpreter. But this would contradict Quine’s (1960) indeterminacy thesis, which Davidson applies to translation and interpretation alike. Yet if two omniscient interpreters would not necessarily construct the same theory, then it is mysterious just how the two theories could differ, since the interpreters would base their theories on the same thing, *i.e.*, *everything* radically interpretable.

A different set of issues plagues Genova’s MF. Recall that Genova really needs to show massive truth; but even this is not enough, unless ‘massive truth’ is taken to mean *most* beliefs’ being true. Yet since beliefs are even by Davidson’s reckoning infinite there seems no clear sense in which *most* of them could be true: any number of beliefs would be infinitely fewer than the total number of beliefs. So both Davidson and Genova have much clarifying to do.

It is conceivable that some of these issues could be made clearer, and that these clarifications could show that (1), (2), and (3) ultimately are consistent.

⁸ Recall that these are epistemically possible worlds.

⁹ They do not, however, have beliefs *only* at these worlds. For they have beliefs *also* at worlds at which their doppelgangers have a language of thought.

¹⁰ “If we *cannot* find a way to interpret ... as revealing a set of beliefs largely consistent and true by our own standards, we have no reason to count that creature as rational, as having beliefs, or as saying anything” (1973, 137, my emphasis throughout this note); “charity is not an option, but a *condition* of having a *workable* theory” (1974b, 197); “[c]harity is forced on us; whether we like it or not, *if* we want to understand others, we *must* count them right in most matters” (1974b, 197).

¹¹ For Davidson, the sentence ‘s’ is interpreted by constructing (according to Tarski’s recursive mechanism and the principle of charity) a T-sentence whose left branch mentions ‘s’ and whose right branch is the metalinguistic translation of ‘s’: if English is both the object and

metalanguage, then the translation is homophonic, *e.g.*, ‘Snow is white’ is interpreted by constructing: ‘‘Snow is white’ is true if and only if snow is white’.

¹² McDowell (1994) seizes on such views to charge Davidson with idealism. Nonetheless Davidson maintains that radical interpretation requires repeated agreement between a radical interpreter and alien *concerning* interactions with an external world. (Though the angles of this triangle—interpreter, alien, world—are in Davidson 1973, triangulation is not introduced by name until Davidson 1982 and does not take center stage until Davidson 1991a and 1991b.) Thus for Davidson truth does follow from radical interpretation, but radical interpretation involves more than radical interpreters.

¹³ See note 13.

¹⁴ There is a second reason why I take Davidson to favor 1’. As Eldridge (1986, especially §3) observes, Davidson throughout his writings on radical interpretation tends to dismiss rather than consider the possibility of its being insufficient to construct a theory of meaning and belief. This means that he takes radical interpretation’s being sufficient as itself being necessary. See Eldridge (1986).

¹⁵ Since some of our doppelgangers, *qua* mind-readers and not interpreters, determine that most of each other’s beliefs are true, it is *not* necessary that most beliefs are true if and only if most beliefs are true by an interpreter’s lights. Hence 4’ is false. Nonetheless the falsity of 1’ is sufficient to entail the falsity of 5’ and, since 4’ entails 4, the truth of 5.

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