
**CAUSATION, INTERPRETATION AND OMNISCIENCE:
A NOTE ON DAVIDSON'S EPISTEMOLOGY**

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In 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge', Donald Davidson argues that it is not possible for us to be massively mistaken in our beliefs. The argument is based on the possibility of an omniscient interpreter who uses the method of radical interpretation to attribute beliefs, since an omniscient interpreter who uses this method will attribute largely true beliefs to those he is interpreting. In this paper we investigate some of the assumptions behind this argument, and we argue that these assumptions are incompatible with Davidson's view that the object of a belief is its cause. If Davidson wants to keep his interpretationist theory of mind, he should therefore abandon that view.

1 Davidson's argument against global scepticism

In his well-known paper, 'A coherence theory of truth and knowledge' (CT) Davidson argues that 'given a correct epistemology, we can be realists in all departments'.¹ What is more, he argues that this epistemology and considerations pertaining to radical interpretation together guarantee that it is not possible to be massively in error about the world: most of our beliefs must be true. A pivotal move in this argument is what has become known as the 'omniscient interpreter argument'. Our aim in this note is to question the internal coherence of the assumptions behind the omniscient interpreter argument, and to relate the tensions we find between these assumptions to other themes in Davidson's theory of interpretation, mind and meaning.² In

¹ D. Davidson, 'A coherence theory of truth and knowledge', E. LePore (ed.), *Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986) pp. 307-319. An embryonic version of the omniscient interpreter argument (in a somewhat different form) appeared in Davidson's paper 'The method of truth in metaphysics' in Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

² For other relevant criticisms of Davidson's argument, see R. Foley & R. Fumerton, 'Davidson's theism?' *Philosophical Studies* 48, 1985, pp. 83-89; V. Dalmiya, 'Coherence, truth and omnis-

particular, we will conclude that one unexpected lesson of the omniscient interpreter argument is that it shows why Davidson must reject the principle that the object of a belief is its cause.

We will begin by setting out some of the context for Davidson's discussion in CT. One distinctive and controversial aspect of Davidson's view in CT is the way he combines metaphysical realism with a kind of transcendental argument which forms his refutation of scepticism. This is unusual because transcendental arguments against scepticism have traditionally been of an anti-realist or idealist character.³ The reason for this, in very general terms, is that all that transcendental arguments can establish, on the face of it, is some constraint on how *thought* must be; and to turn such a constraint into a constraint on how *reality* must be involves linking thought and reality in a way that is characteristic of anti-realism or idealism, rather than realism. Clearly, a transcendental argument against scepticism which also conforms to the constraints of realism would be of great philosophical interest.

In CT, Davidson expresses his commitment to realism in terms of the following claims:

We can accept objective truth conditions as the key to meaning, a realist view of truth, and we can insist that knowledge is of an objective world independent of our thought or language. (CT p. 307)

The idea that truth conditions are the key to the understanding of meaning is, of course, one of the cornerstones of Davidson's philosophy of language. As for a realist view of truth, he explains this in CT by saying that truth can be thought of as correspondence with reality. But this correspondence claim is not meant, as it often is, as a substantial thesis about truth, or as a definition of truth.⁴ To say that truth is correspondence with reality is just another way of saying that something is true when it says how things are—a claim which even a minimalist or redundancy theorist about truth could accept. No independent notions of 'fact' or 'correspondence' are presupposed by Davidson when he says that truth is correspondence with reality.

Nor does Davidson attempt to define truth in terms of the notion of coherence, as some idealists have done. In fact, truth is not defined at all:

cient interpreter', *Philosophical Quarterly* 40, 1990, pp. 86-94. See the response to this criticism in A. Brueckner, 'The omniscient interpreter rides again', *Analysis* 50, 1990, pp. 199-205.

³ See, for instance, the view of such arguments presented in Barry Stroud, 'Transcendental arguments' in Kant on Pure Reason R. Walker (ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

⁴ Davidson has elsewhere rejected such definitions. See, for instance his paper 'The structure and content of truth' *Journal of Philosophy* 87, 1990, pp. 279-328.

It should be clear that I don't hope to define truth in terms of coherence and belief. Truth is beautifully transparent compared to belief and coherence and I take it as primitive. (CT p. 307)

So if truth is not being defined in terms of correspondence and coherence, what is the connection between coherence, correspondence and truth? Davidson's strategy is first to show how our beliefs must, as a whole, cohere with one another. Then he argues (assuming familiar aspects of his theory of belief and interpretation) that if our beliefs do as a whole cohere, then they must be mostly true. Since truth is correspondence with reality—in the innocuous sense described above—then the link between coherence and correspondence is made:

The theory I defend is not in competition with a correspondence theory, but depends for its defence on an argument that purports to show that coherence yields correspondence. . My slogan is: correspondence without confrontation. (CT p. 307).

By 'confrontation' Davidson means the idea that beliefs can be compared with the bits of the world to which they correspond. This idea makes little sense, Davidson thinks, since all we can compare are our beliefs, one with another. And it is this fact about the comparison of beliefs is used as a premise in an argument for a correspondence theory of objective truth: 'coherence yields correspondence'.

What exactly is the argument? Davidson maintains that the only way a belief can be justified is by reference to other beliefs. Accepting this view of the justification of beliefs is just what distinguishes those who hold a coherence theory from those who think that epistemic assurance (of whatever kind) must come from outside the belief system. But it is a familiar point that the mere fact that a belief coheres with a substantial body of beliefs does not establish its truth. Coherence does not suffice for truth. As Davidson says:

Perhaps it is quite clear that the coherence of a belief with a substantial body of belief enhances its chance of being true, provided there is a reason to suppose the body of belief is true, or largely so. But how can coherence alone supply grounds for belief? (CT p. 309)

Davidson's answer to this question is based on his theory of radical interpretation. The central principle in interpreting another's beliefs is the principle of charity:

the principle directs the interpreter to translate or interpret so as to read some of his own standards of truth into the pattern of sentences held true by the speaker. (CT p. 316)

An interpreter has no other option than to make speakers ('interpretees') intelligible by ascribing them a large amount of truth and consistency. But this, as Davidson himself observes, is still insufficient for establishing that interpretees' beliefs are not massively in error:

Why couldn't it happen that speaker and interpreter understand one another on the basis of shared but erroneous beliefs? This can and no doubt often does happen. (CT p 316)

The principle of charity requires the interpreter to interpret a speaker's beliefs as true, by the interpreter's own lights. But what if the interpreter's own beliefs are not objectively true? What if the interpreter is massively deceived about the world? Then, although the principle of charity dictates that the interpreter should attribute beliefs which are coherent and mostly true by the interpreter's lights, this will not suffice to establish the link between coherence and objective truth which Davidson wants.

Davidson then makes the following ingenious move:

[I]magine for a moment an interpreter who is omniscient about the world, and about what does and would cause a speaker to assent to any sentence in his (potentially unlimited) repertoire. The omniscient interpreter, using the same method as the fallible interpreter, finds the fallible speaker largely consistent and correct. By his own standards, of course, but since these are objectively correct, the fallible speaker is seen to be largely correct and consistent by objective standards. (CT p. 317)

The idea is this. If there were an interpreter all of whose beliefs were true, then the interpreter would interpret the non-omniscient interpretee as having mostly true beliefs. But—and this is the crucial point—the omniscient interpreter employs the same 'unimpeachable method' as everyday, fallible interpreters do. In particular, the method of the omniscient interpreter is based on the principle of charity. So, given this method, the omniscient interpreter would ascribe to the interpretee a substantial portion of the beliefs it holds itself. So the mere possibility of an omniscient interpreter establishes that most of our beliefs are true: one kind of global scepticism is defeated.⁵

⁵It is worth pointing out that although Davidson's argument is aimed against scepticism, it is not designed to refute all traditional sceptical claims. For example, he explicitly admits that each particular belief from a coherent set of our beliefs could be false, and at this point he is in agreement with one kind of sceptic. His argument tries to convince those who are concerned that we could be entirely or largely mistaken about the world. A detailed analysis of the relation between Davidson's argument and different sorts of scepticism can be found in P.Klein 'Radical interpretation and global scepticism', in *Truth and Interpretation*, E LePore (ed.) pp 367-386. See also Colin McGinn, 'Radical interpretation and epistemology' in the same volume.

That is Davidson's argument, and some of the philosophical context in which it belongs. But does the argument work?

2 Is the idea of an omniscient interpreter coherent?

The argument as it stands presupposes the coherence of the idea of an omniscient being. There are of course problems associated with the idea of omniscience, but we do not want to engage in a discussion of these problems here.⁶ For the purposes of this paper, we will assume that the concept of omniscience is relatively unproblematic. Our question rather is: how can such an omniscient being be an *interpreter*?

To interpret someone is (at least) to obtain beliefs about their beliefs. An omniscient being's beliefs will all be true, so the hypothesised omniscient interpreter (OI) obtains true beliefs—in fact, knowledge—about the beliefs of any subject, S, it is interpreting. However, if we take the idea that the OI is omniscient literally, then the OI knows everything, including everything about S. Indeed, it must know everything prior to interpretation of S; otherwise it would not be omniscient prior to an act of interpretation. So if the OI is literally omniscient, then it cannot be an interpreter, since interpretation is a matter of gaining knowledge, and the OI cannot, *ex hypothesi*, gain any knowledge.

This simple line of thought could be rejected by Davidson on the following grounds. What the OI is omniscient about is all the facts other than the facts about interpretees' propositional attitudes and the meanings of their words. That is, prior to interpretation, the OI is omniscient about all the non-semantic and non-intentional facts.⁷ From its knowledge of these facts, the OI can gain knowledge of the semantic and intentional facts about speakers, by the familiar process of radical interpretation.

This suggests we should make a distinction between the facts which the OI knows prior to interpretation and the facts which interpretation delivers. Some terminology might be useful to distinguish these two kinds of fact.

⁶The concept of an omniscient being has been thought problematic both from logical and theological points of view. Logical problems with the possibility of such a being are discussed e.g. in P. Grim, 'Some neglected problems of omniscience', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 20, 1983, pp. 265-276. K. Simmons, 'On an argument against omniscience', *Noûs* 27, 1993, pp. 22-33. For discussion of theological problems concerning the concept see e.g. J.L. Kvanvig, *The Possibility of All-Knowing God* (London: Macmillan, 1986). W. Hasker, *God, Time and Knowledge* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

⁷Like Davidson, we do not mean anything philosophically controversial when talking of 'facts': in the present context, facts are just the objects of knowledge, or what is known.

Without wanting to prejudice any significant philosophical issues, we shall call the first kind of fact a 'hard' fact, and the second kind a 'soft' fact. Hard facts are facts about the physical environment and the physical properties of people; soft facts are facts about meaning, belief and other attitudes. To make strict and literal sense of the idea of an omniscient interpreter, then, we should say that the OI is omniscient about the hard facts prior to interpretation, but can still gain knowledge of the other facts by interpreting others. Interpretation is a matter of getting from knowledge of hard facts to knowledge of soft facts.

This picture is of a piece with Davidson's acceptance of Quine's doctrine of the indeterminacy of translation.⁸ For Quine, the hard facts are the physical or behavioural facts which the translator has at his or her disposal, and uses in order to assign meanings to utterances. Davidson rejects Quine's behaviourism, but he nonetheless would accept that even for an OI, there is not a unique correct interpretation which fixes, from the knowledge of the non-semantic and non-intentional facts about the subject S, the meaning of S's words and the contents of S's beliefs and other attitudes. That is, there is no unique correct mapping of hard facts about S (and S's world) onto the soft facts about what S means and believes.

But this conception of how interpretation and omniscience are supposed to be related is not as unproblematic as it seems. For consider what should we say about the OI's own beliefs. Take any belief, B, which the OI has. Given the above distinction between facts, we should be able to ask: is the fact that the OI has B a hard fact or a soft fact? That is, is it a fact that another OI (call it OI*) would know about OI prior to interpretation, or is it a fact that OI* would have to obtain by means of interpretation? This question poses a dilemma for Davidson.

If the fact that OI has B is a hard fact, then there is more to having a belief than is revealed by the process of radical interpretation: for whatever it is that makes this belief the belief it is would (*ex hypothesi*) be there *prior* to radical interpretation. But this is incompatible with Davidson's whole theory of belief, his 'interpretationism'.⁹ For Davidson, there is no more to believing something than that what can be recovered by the process of radical interpretation. So Davidson should take the second option: the fact that OI has B is a soft fact, one which is only available through radical interpretation.

⁸ See 'Mental events' in *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford University Press, 1980)

⁹ For the idea of interpretationism, see William Child, *Causation, Interpretation and the Mind* (Oxford Clarendon Press 1994).

This option might seem the obvious one for Davidson to take, and it might not be clear at first sight why there is any dilemma for Davidson at all here. In order to see why there is a problem, we need to look more closely at what it is to have a belief, on Davidson's view.

Davidson accepts, along with many philosophers, that beliefs are (or involve) complex dispositions to speak and act. Equating the belief that P with the explicit assent to our utterance of the sentence 'P' is obviously inadequate, for well-known reasons.¹⁰ Someone can believe that the moon is round even when they are not assenting to the sentence, 'The moon is round', and even actual assent to the sentence will not establish belief unless other attitudes (e.g. the desire to say what one believes) are in place. So the relation between belief and assent must be expressed in terms of dispositions. Other actions, in addition to speech acts, can be linked constitutively to beliefs, in ways that are now familiar in the literature on belief. For instance, we might say, with Stalnaker, that to believe that the moon is round is to be disposed to act in ways that would satisfy one's desires (whatever they are) in a world in which 'the moon is round' and one's other beliefs are true.¹¹ Such dispositional definitions of belief are not without their problems, but it gives us some idea of how having a belief is related to the sentences one utters.

The idea that beliefs are dispositions to act is, in one form or another, common currency among many philosophers, including those functionalists and reductionists whose approach to the mind Davidson would reject. So, obviously, the mere idea that beliefs involve such dispositions is not one which will distinguish Davidson's view from other views of beliefs. So what more does Davidson say about belief? In CT and elsewhere, he adopts another principle in giving an account of the contents or objects of beliefs: 'the object of a belief is its cause'.¹² When looking at believers in order to ascribe them beliefs, the radical interpreter must also look at what causes those beliefs. Now Davidson says little by way of defence of this principle, and he does not respond to the natural objections which arise concerning false beliefs, general beliefs, beliefs about abstract objects and non-existent objects. However, our concern here is not to criticise this principle of David-

¹⁰ See, e.g., Tim Crane, *The Mechanical Mind* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books 1995) chapter 2

¹¹ See Robert Stalnaker, *Inquiry* (Cambridge, Mass. MIT Press 1984), p. 15.

¹² See CT. Davidson does not distinguish between the object of belief and its content. However, it is standard practice in contemporary theories of mind to make such a distinction: the object of a belief that *a* is *F* is what the belief is about, namely *a*. The content of the belief is what a sentence ascribing that belief expresses, namely, that *a* is *F*. But it is not important for our purposes to dwell on this distinction

son's. but to draw out the consequences of accepting it for his theory of interpretation and belief.

Remember that we were discussing the status of the OI's beliefs. We saw that Davidson cannot say, consistent with maintaining his interpretationism, that the OI's beliefs are hard facts. So the OI's beliefs must be soft facts. But now consider a particular case. Suppose it is a fact that a particular cat is on a particular mat. This is a non-semantic, non-intentional fact—so in our previous terminology it is a hard fact, a fact knowable prior to interpretation. Since it is a hard fact that the cat is on the mat, the OI knows it, since the OI knows all hard facts. Therefore the OI believes that the cat is on the mat. Now if Davidson's causal principle is right, the object of the belief—what the belief is about—is its cause. Assuming (as seems reasonable) that what is true of our belief-forming processes is true of the OI's, then the OI's belief that the cat is on the mat is caused by the (hard) fact that the cat is on the mat.

Now we introduce an assumption about causation, which we shall call 'The Causal Assumption'. The Causal Assumption is that—however precisely it should be analysed—causation is a determinate relation. Or, in the terminology introduced above, the fact that a cause C causes an effect E is a hard fact. Now causal relations can hardly be determinate (or hard) if their relata are not determinate (or hard). If it is determinate that C causes E, then neither C nor E themselves can be indeterminate. A relation holding between relata one or more of which are indeterminate cannot itself be determinate.

Given this assumption, it follows that the OI's belief that the cat is on the mat must itself be a hard fact, which is contrary to the position which we attributed to Davidson in the last but one paragraph. And this makes explicit our dilemma for Davidson: his interpretationism forces him to say that the OI's beliefs are soft facts, whereas his principle that the object of a belief is its cause (together with the Causal Assumption) forces him to say that the OI's beliefs are hard facts. And, as we saw, the distinction between hard facts and soft facts is forced upon him by his acceptance of Quine's thesis of the Indeterminacy of Translation.

And what is true of the OI's beliefs is true, *mutatis mutandis*, of ours. If the nature of our beliefs is exhausted by what interpretation reveals, then they must be soft facts. But if the objects of our beliefs are their causes, and the Causal Assumption is true, then they must be hard facts. And in fact, we can draw a stronger conclusion: that if any beliefs are determined by hard facts (in this case, causal facts) then interpretation is inessential to the individuation of beliefs. This is a conclusion that would be welcomed by many physicalists

and functionalists, but the conclusion would be anathema to Davidson's theory of mind and meaning.

It turns out, then, that contained within the notion of an omniscient interpreter is a notion which threatens to undermine Davidson's concept of radical interpretation, and attendant philosophical projects, such as his coherence theory of truth and knowledge. This, it seems to us, is the underlying tension within Davidson's argument: either it is false that the content of a belief is its cause, or Davidson's theory of radical interpretation cannot be correct.

Anthony Brueckner has raised the question of whether the OI would have to apply the principles of radical interpretation, and therefore whether it should really be called an *interpreter*:

One might think that an omniscient being would not need to interpret my sentences under the constraint of Davidsonian principles in order to know the meaning of my sentences and the contents of my beliefs.

However, as Brueckner says, this is ruled out by Davidson's view of belief:

But on Davidson's view of meaning and belief (which we will accept for the sake of the argument), my meanings and beliefs are just what would be attributed to me by an interpreter guided by the constraining principles of radical interpretation.¹³

Now this is certainly the correct response for a Davidsonian to make. In fact, this response adequately answers E.J. Craig's criticism of Davidson.¹⁴ Craig argues that even if we granted the whole of Davidson's argument, scepticism would not be refuted because we may not know what our beliefs are, even if we knew that they were all true. This begs the question against Davidson, since it presupposes that even if we had applied all the principles of radical interpretation, there might be a further question about which beliefs we have. That is, there might be some further individuating fact about beliefs which is inaccessible to radical interpretation. But this is incompatible with Davidson's view, mentioned above by Brueckner, that all that there is to belief and meaning is what can be recovered from radical interpretation. This view might not be true, but its falsehood cannot be assumed in arguing against Davidson.

¹³ 'The omniscient interpreter rides again' *Analysis* 1991, p. 200.

¹⁴ E. J. Craig, 'Davidson and the sceptic. the thumbnail version' *Analysis* 1990. Craig's argument has been ably criticised by A. C. Genova, 'Craig on Davidson: the thumbnail refutation' *Analysis* 1991

Now this consideration of Craig's argument is another way of bringing to the surface the problematic relationship between Davidson's interpretationism and his view that the content of a belief is its cause. Craig assumes that it makes sense to suppose that we might not know what our beliefs are, even after the whole process of radical interpretation has taken place, because he assumes that it makes sense to assume that there can be more to belief than is given in radical interpretation. On the official view of Davidson, this begs the question. But by assuming that the content of a belief is its cause, Davidson balances on the brink of saying that facts about beliefs are fixed by determinate causal relations. But then facts about beliefs must be determinate too—in the sense that they are facts which hold prior to any possible radical interpretation. So contained within Davidson's project in CT is an idea which threatens his central thesis that there is no more to belief and meaning than can be given to a radical interpreter.

How should Davidson respond? Should he reject the Causal Assumption? This would seem unwise: for Davidson himself holds that causation is a relation between particular events, and that sentences describing causation are purely extensional.¹⁵ Now being extensional is one way of a relation's being determinate: if a sentence describing a given relation is extensional, this means that the substitution of any true description of the relata does not affect the truth-value of the sentence. (The sentence might not have a truth-value, but that is a different matter.) But in any case, it would be dialectically unwise to hold onto the principle that the object of a belief is its cause, and to reject the Causal Assumption, since the latter is surely much weaker than the former.

Now Davidson cannot reject the thesis that there is no more to belief and meaning than what can be produced by radical interpretation, if he wants to keep the essence of his unified theory of belief and meaning. Nor can he reject the distinction between the determinate physical facts and those facts which are acquired by interpretation, since this Quinean distinction is central to his whole project. It seems, then, that the most plausible move for Davidson is to reject the principle that the content or object of a belief is its cause.¹⁶

¹⁵ See 'Causal relations' in *Essays on Actions and Events*.

¹⁶Cf. P. Klein, 'Radical interpretation and global scepticism', in *Truth and Interpretation*, E. LePore (ed.)

Whatever its other merits or disadvantages, this seems to be a clear, but unexpected, consequence of Davidson's omniscient interpreter argument.

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