As so many others I have my doubts about whether Davidson’s omniscient interpreter argument is valid. The conclusion of the argument is that it is “impossible correctly to hold that anyone could be mostly wrong about how things are”.¹

The argument has two parts: First, there is the omniscient interpreter. This is a creature who is omniscient about the physical aspects of the world. He does not know anything about any individual belief of a speaker, nor his language. Second, in order to interpret the speaker he uses the same method of interpretation as any fallible interpreter would. That is, he is a radical interpreter adhering to the principle of charity.

The omniscient interpreter argument is a part of Davidson’s strategy to argue that our beliefs are veridical by nature. Thus, we cannot be massively mistaken about how the world is, and as such it is an anti-sceptical argument. What is interesting about the argument is that it reveals something about the conditions for interpretation in Davidson’s theory. It reveals in particular an ethnocentric mechanism in the principle of charity.

Without a good argument that our beliefs in fact are mostly correct we cannot assume that sort of correctness in our methods of interpretation. And certainly not use that assumption to draw conclusions about the correctness of our beliefs. In what follows I will try to examine arguments against massive error in Davidson’s work as well as his version of the principle of charity, in order to exclude some ethnocentric elements from the principle. This ethnocentricity stems from a need to synchronise a speaker’s beliefs with his interpreters, and if their beliefs really were more or less the same, this mechanism would not be ethnocentric; it would be universal. However, if one cannot show that our beliefs are mostly true by nature, this mechanism will turn out to be not only ethnocentric, but inconsistent with the necessity of the principle of charity. We must adjust our formulation of the principle of charity to the arguments we have about the veridicality of beliefs.

In order to pull this through I need to take a great deal of Davidson’s theory for granted, and very quickly give a sketch of the relevant parts of his arguments.

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Quine sets the agenda of this discussion in his *Word and Object* from 1960. There he introduces the notion of radical translation, which is a thought experiment meant to reveal the empirical evidence interpreters of a language really have. He also introduces Neil Wilson’s principle of charity to a larger audience.²

Quine imagines a field linguist coming to a tribe speaking a language he does not know; neither does he have anyone able to translate the tribe’s language into his own. Davidson adopts this scenario and develops his theory of radical interpretation based on Quine’s radical translation. All the field linguist has to go on, in terms of evidence, are linguistic and non-linguistic behaviour and observable circumstances. He cannot assume any specific intentional content; however, he can identify assent to and dissent from sentences without knowing neither what the sentences mean nor any specific beliefs the speaker has.

The assent to/dissent from utterances is a factor of two unknowns: what the speaker takes the words to mean and what he thinks is the case, in short meaning and beliefs. These two are mutually dependent in Davidson’s work. The speaker utters (truthfully) or assents to sentences because of what they mean and what he believes is the case. If we know his beliefs we could together with the assent/dissent structure know the meaning of the sentences. If we know the meaning of the sentences we would be able to know his beliefs. But in radical interpretation we know neither. Enter the principle of charity. If we assume that (some of or most of) the speaker’s beliefs are mostly true (and that some of or most of our beliefs as well are mostly true), we could use that assumption to project what we believe are the truth conditions when a sentence is assented to (or dissented from) into the meaning of the speaker’s sentence. This will work if we have independent reasons to believe that our beliefs are mostly true.

2. N. L. Wilson “Substances Without Substrata”,
Davidson discerns two important elements in the principle of charity: the Principle of Coherence and the Principle of Correspondence.

The Principle of Coherence prompts the interpreter to discover a degree of logical consistency in the thought of the speaker; the Principle of Correspondence prompts the interpreter to take the speaker to be responding to the same features of the world that he (the interpreter) would be responding to under similar circumstances. Both principles can be (and have been) called principles of charity: One principle endows the speaker with a modicum of logic, the other endows him with a degree of what the interpreter takes to be true belief about the world. Successful interpretation necessarily invests the person interpreted with basic rationality.  

The principle of charity operates on the following: 1. Observational sentences (Quine), basic perceptual beliefs (Davidson); 2. Basic logic: “logical constants” (Quine) and Davidson adds to that first-order quantification theory with identity. 3. Davidson applies charity across the board, to sentences not included in 1 and 2. It is this expansion of the principle that bothers me. If we are to assume that the speaker has mostly correct beliefs about the world (that is, both his basic observational beliefs as well as his non-observational beliefs), then we need an argument for the correctness of these beliefs without the support of the expanded principle of charity.

If one accepts, as Davidson certainly does, the necessity of the principle of charity, one must be careful of what one puts in to it.

Since charity is not an option, but a condition of having a workable theory, it is meaningless to suggest that we might fall into massive error by endorsing it. Until we have successfully established a systematic correlation of sentences held true with sentences held true, there are no mistakes to make.

I am not really criticizing the principle of charity as such; it is the expansion of the principle that worries me. If the principle of charity is to be correct, it must reflect a

3. Donald Davidson, “Three Varieties of knowledge” p. 211.
mechanism behind belief and language acquisition. That is, a principle of charity cannot assume the truth of beliefs, if beliefs in general do not have the property of being mostly true. If there are arguments to support that a certain class of beliefs has that property we could use the truth assumption on that class.

In order to examine Davidson’s expansion of the principle of charity to all beliefs I will have to say something about the holistic and public nature of beliefs in Davidson’s theory.

Beliefs are holistic because in order to have a belief (correct or incorrect) about something, let us say about a cat climbing up an oak tree, we need to have some true beliefs about cats, climbing, oaks and trees etc. in order for the first belief to be about whether the cat climbed the oak tree. To have beliefs about cats and oaks we need further true beliefs; they come in clusters.

The same goes for attributing beliefs to others: in order to attribute a false belief about a cat climbing up an oak, we must attribute to that person true beliefs about cats, oaks etc. Identifications of a certain (true of false) belief “must depend on a background of largely unmentioned and unquestioned true beliefs.”5 That background of shared belief need not to be assumed beforehand, in fact two interlocutors need not be in agreement before they communicate, but in order to communicate they need to establish such a background. If this is true we should be careful to include too much agreement in the principle of charity. Massive agreement is a result of communication not a condition for it.

Beliefs, according to Davidson, are not justified by anything other than (other) beliefs, there are no self-evident beliefs nor is there a relation of justification between experience and beliefs. Every single belief could be false, but not all at once. I will not contest this (at least not here), but Davidson wants to say more: he argues that most of our beliefs are true. The notion of most of our beliefs is far from clear and Davidson of course realizes this. The amount of beliefs that could be attributed is infinite, as are the sentences we could use to assert them with. Belief according to Davidson is

intrinsically veridical, any belief consistent with a large consistent set of beliefs would have a presumption in favour of its truth. I cannot really see that he can establish this and I will try to explain why.

Beliefs are public because one needs a social setting of at least two individuals in order for us to acquire beliefs. What is needed is an idea of objective truth, a sense of the difference between my believing something and that being the case, in short we need to understand what it is to make a mistake. This social aspect of belief is stressed in Davidson’s “Three Varieties of Knowledge”, where he argues against reducing one of three varieties of knowledge to one or two of the other. Knowledge of the world, of other minds and of one’s own mind are all mutually dependent. The hub in this relationship is communication.

A reason for this social character of belief is to be found in Davidson’s view that beliefs are not justified by events or objects in the world but can be caused by them. That causal relation needs a social setting to be identified properly. Without interpersonal control we cannot identify what causes our beliefs, if the cause is a sensory stimulation, something further out or further in. Davidson acknowledges two kinds of indeterminacy with respect to identification of causes, both the distance (sensory receptors, further in or further out) of the cause and the width (what should be included) of the cause. Davidson needs a common cause, common that is to the interlocutors, and that common cause cannot be private, it needs to be out in a shared world.

Semantic triangulation is a metaphor Davidson introduces into the philosophy of language. Trigonometric triangulation is a method of determining position: if we know the length of one of the sides of a triangle and the two of its angles, the length of the two remaining sides and the remaining angle can be calculated. In semantic triangulation two persons and a common cause (of a belief) build up the triangle. Peter Pagin distinguishes between two uses of the metaphor of triangulation. It gives us the content

of our most basic perceptual beliefs (and their accompanying sentences) as well as a normative standard of these beliefs and their accompanying sentences. In order for a cause of a belief to be shared by the interlocutors it must be located outside the believer, the common cause cannot be experience or firing of sensory nerves. Davidson has what he calls a distal theory of meaning and evidence where the causes of beliefs are typically cats climbing oak trees, rabbits scurrying by, tables in the vicinity etc.

The criterion on the basis of which a creature can be said to be treating stimuli as similar, as belonging to a class, is the similarity of the creatures’ responses to those stimuli; but what is the criterion of similarity of responses? This criterion cannot be derived from the creature’s responses; it can only come from the responses of an observer to the responses of the creature. And it is only when an observer consciously correlates the responses of another creature with objects and events of the observer’s world that there is any basis for saying the creature is responding to those objects or events rather than any other objects or events.8

So, according to Davidson, if we are to assign belief-content to a person uttering “Gavagai”, we need several instances of proper gavagai utterances. We must so to speak narrow our scope, in order to see that it is rabbits that cause the utterance of “Gavagai”. The other person is needed to act as a judge that the utterances are similar, that Gavagai is uttered in a systematic manner under appropriate circumstances.

This systematic way is not necessarily a shared language or a shared set of rules, even though it could be and often is. We do not even have to go on as before, that is, we do not have to follow the rules of some idiolect. We could change idiolects during a conversation. Davidson wants to get rid of the supposed necessity of a shared language or of following rules in order to communicate; sharing a language and following rules are phenomena explained by communication rather than the other way around. Davidson must base his normativity on something else.

8. Donald Davidson, “Three Varieties of Knowledge” p. 212
The answer is that the intention of the speaker to be interpreted in a certain way provides the ‘norm’; the speaker falls short of his intention if he fails to speak in such a way as to be understood as he intended.\(^9\)

In order for a speaker to intend to say something he must believe that the interpreter could be able to interpret him as saying that. The speaker must in semantic triangulation believe that the speaker could find the cause of the utterance.

This would mean that when the field linguist encounters some tribe with unknown language and unknown set of beliefs he must be prepared to extend his language and acquire some new beliefs in order to be able to communicate properly. He need not necessarily project his own beliefs onto the tribe.

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One advantage of the expansion of the principle of charity across the board is that it puts a further constraint on the possible belief ascriptions the interpreter can make. The drawback is that it assumes too much.

Sentences and predicates less directly geared to easily detected goings-on can, in Quine’s canon, be interpreted at will, given only the constraints of the interconnections with sentences conditioned directly to the world. Here I would extend the principle of charity to favor interpretations that as far as possible preserve truth: I think it makes for mutual understanding, and hence for better interpretation, to interpret what the speakers accepts as true as true when we can. In this matter, I have less choice than Quine, because I do not see how to draw the line between observation sentences and theoretical sentences at the start.\(^{10}\)

This would be a fair move if we had independent arguments to support that most of our beliefs are true. What I find disturbing in Davidson’s way of constraining the possible belief ascriptions to the speaker by the interpreter is the ethnocentricity of it. This move

\(^9\) Donald Davidson, “The Second Person”, p. 116

\(^{10}\) Donald Davidson, “A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge” p. 149.
contradicts the infallibility clause of the principle of charity. Even though Davidson cannot in an epistemologically valid way make the distinction between observation sentences and the rest he can distinguish them causally. The Davidsonian version of observation sentences are the “sentences whose cause to assent come and go with observable circumstances”, sentences which the interpreter takes their truth conditions to be the conditions under which they are assented to/dissented from. These sentences do have a privileged role in Davidson’s theory.

What stands in the way of global scepticism 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 really 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.11

Our basic perceptual beliefs are mostly correct because their content is given by their causes. The interpreter takes their truth conditions to be the conditions under which they are assented to. These basic beliefs are very banal; they are the kind of things we teach our children when they learn to speak.

From the assumption that most of our most basic perceptual beliefs are true and that for every belief with content (it being about something) we have to have a sufficient set of true beliefs, we can at most conclude that non-basic beliefs that cohere with most of the basic beliefs have content; they may of course be false. In order to come to the conclusion that most of our beliefs are true Davidson’s needs an additional argument.

When Davidson tries to answer the sceptic with his omniscient interpreter argument, he makes use of the ethnocentric part of charity. It is about this argument that Susan Haack wrote: “This argument is so confusing that it is more apparent that it must go wrong

somewhere than where the somewhere is.” 12 Even if we as Susan Haack do not accept the omniscient interpreter argument it gives us some indication of the intended strength of the ethnocentric part of the principle of charity. It is presented as an argument against the possibility that two interlocutors could communicate and understand each other based on mostly false beliefs. This possibility is consistent with the arguments I have referred to.

For imagine 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. We may also, if we want, let the omniscient interpreter turn his attention to the fallible interpreter of the fallible speaker. It turns out that the fallible interpreter can be wrong about some things, but not in general; and so he cannot share universal error with the agent he is interpreting. Once we have agreed to the general method of interpretation I have sketched, it becomes impossible correctly to hold that anyone could be mostly wrong about how things are. 13

The omniscient interpreter is using the same method as the fallible interpreter, that is, he is projecting his own beliefs onto the speaker. The omniscient interpreter is omniscient about all aspects of the physical world; he knows nothing of course of any individual belief of the speaker before the interpretation. He assumes that the speaker’s beliefs are mostly true. But in order to allow the interpreter to use the ethnocentric part as a part of charity we must have an independent argument for the correctness of the bulk of our beliefs. If we have no such argument the omniscient interpreter would ascribe true beliefs to a consistent set of sentences uttered by the speaker, whether the speaker has

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12. Susan Haack, Evidence and Inquiry, p. 64.
them or not. This is even worse for the fallible interpreter; if he were not mostly correct in his beliefs, he would risk ascribing false beliefs to a consistent set of true sentences uttered by the speaker. And we have no reason to suppose that his beliefs are mostly true, save for the basic perceptual beliefs. One might even be so bold as to say that the ethnocentric part invites scepticism since an interpretation correctly performed according to the extended principle of charity may still be false. We would be making a mistake by using the principle.

References


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