

DOXASTIC SKEPTICISM

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In "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge," Donald Davidson offers an attempt to refute skepticism, an attempt that is an expansion of the dense argument in part I of "The Method of Truth in Metaphysics" for the claim that "massive error about the world is simply unintelligible."¹ To help in his attack, he presses into service tightly interrelated theories about belief and meaning. In particular, he relies on the claim that ideal interpreters, who are fully informed and charitable, must attribute to a speaker what are by their lights largely true beliefs. I argue that this assumption is false, as is his claim to have disarmed skepticism. In fact, I shall argue, he only manages to lay the ground for a kind of skepticism that is even worse than the traditional sort. I call it Doxastic Skepticism.

I. Doxastic Internalism

An important element in Davidson's approach is *Doxastic Internalism*, which asserts that "nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief." (426)² Doxastic Internalism Davidson takes to be what "distinguishes" coherentism (426), and his view is either that coherentism just *is* Doxastic Internalism (which is plainly false), or (to give the charitable interpretation) that coherentism is the only plausible version of Doxastic Internalism. One way or the other, the latter leads Davidson to adopt coherentism, defined as the claim that "our knowledge . . . of an objective public world," a world which is "not of our own making," (426-7) must be limited to what we can conclude on the basis of the coherence of our beliefs.³

Doxastic Internalism itself Davidson adopts because he thinks that it is the only hope for antiskeptics. The only viable approach to basing

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knowledge on something outside of the scope of our beliefs is to “ground belief on the testimony of the senses: sensation, perception, the given, experience, sense data, the passing show.” (427) Unfortunately, “the search for an empirical foundation for meaning or knowledge leads to skepticism.” (431) “For clearly a person’s stimulations could be just as they are and yet the world outside very different. (Remember the brain in the vat.)” (430) If we adopt Doxastic Internalism, however, we can develop a coherence theory of justification and then see if we can “provide a skeptic with a reason for supposing coherent beliefs are true.” (426) Thus Davidson’s thesis is that the one and only group of people who can defeat skepticism is the group that combines Doxastic Internalism with coherentism. But the case he makes for this claim is flawed, as I shall argue after I have sketched his antiskeptical argument as nearly as I can make it out.

II. Davidson’s Antiskeptical Strategy

In spite of his announced intention to “provide a skeptic with a reason for supposing coherent beliefs are true,” Davidson is not out to develop a *coherentist* refutation of skepticism. That is, he does not attempt to show that once we see what must be the case if a body of beliefs is to be coherent, we will see that its coherence makes it very likely to be true. Indeed, Davidson says virtually nothing about the elements of coherence; his title notwithstanding, he does not develop a coherence theory of knowledge (and rather than developing any theory of truth, coherentist or otherwise, he says at the outset that “truth is beautifully transparent compared to belief and coherence, and I take it as primitive.” (425)) Instead, his main idea is to offer theories of belief and meaning that combine a doctrine of paternalistic charity with a kind of paternalistic verificationism and which together are supposed to justify his antiskepticism.

The paternalistic charity consists in the view that when others take on the role of interpreters of what we say, that is, when they attempt to figure out the meaning of our discourse and the beliefs we are revealing through it, they must make a substantial effort to help ensure that (we and) our speech is intelligible (hence ‘charity’). However, interpreters cannot consider us intelligible if they ascribe to us mostly false beliefs or bad logic. Hence when others interpret our speech, they must read their beliefs and logic into it (hence my addition of ‘paternalism’).⁴ On this basis he offers the following principle.

(a’) Principle of Charity: interpreters must “favor interpretations that [by their own lights] as far as possible preserve truth [and good logic].” (434)

But charity does not end there. Davidson thinks that there are ways that, as translators, we must show charity other than by refusing to believe that people could be telling us things they think are largely false.

He also thinks that “when the interpreter finds a sentence of the speaker the speaker assents to regularly under conditions he recognizes,” it is charitable to take “those conditions to be the truth conditions of the speaker’s sentence.” (434) And it is charitable to “take the objects of a belief to be the causes of that belief,” at least “in the plainest and methodologically most basic cases.” (436) Apparently the thought is that interpreters know of themselves that when they give regular assent to sentences in conditions they recognize, then those conditions are the truth conditions for those sentences. As well, interpreters know that (in the most basic cases) their own beliefs are caused by the objects of those beliefs. Since it is only neighborly to think of others as we do ourselves—that is, since doing so is necessary if they are to be intelligible to us—charity demands that we take the beliefs of others to be caused by their objects (and to have conditions of regular assent as their truth conditions). Thus a more generous Principle of Charity is called for.

(a) Principle of Charity: interpreters must “favor interpretations that [by their own lights] as far as possible preserve truth [and good logic],” and they must also “take the objects of a belief to be the causes of that belief” in “the plainest and methodologically most basic cases.”

As a consequence of their paternalistic charitableness, obviously interpreters must attribute to us beliefs that are largely true given their own views.

(b) So interpreters must attribute to a speaker beliefs that on their view are by and large true.

At this point Davidson’s ‘paternalistic verificationism’ plays a crucial role. He is committed to the verificationist claim that what interpreters who have full knowledge of our circumstances and speech dispositions (as evidenced by our behavior) would *say* we believe *is* by and large what we *do* believe, and what such informed interpreters would say we *mean* by the sentences we assent to is what we do mean.

(c) Verificationism: what an interpreter who is fully informed about the circumstances and behavior of speakers would say they believe (and mean) is what those speakers believe (and mean).

Davidson is quite explicit on this matter. Thus at one point he says that “what a fully informed interpreter could learn about what a speaker means is all there is to learn; the same goes for what the speaker believes.” (433) Moreover, since Davidson thinks that charity calls for interpreters to *take* the objects of beliefs to be the causes of those beliefs, his verificationism leads him to claim that what interpreters “must take [the objects] to be is what they in fact are.” (436)

Let us put together what we have so far. Their charity will lead interpreters to credit us with nothing but beliefs about our circumstances which they think are largely true. *Ideally situated* interpreters

are ones who *know* all about our circumstances and speech dispositions. Hence ideally situated and charitable interpreters will attribute to us nothing but beliefs they know to be largely true. But what they say about our beliefs goes. So Davidson's two paternalistic doctrines yield the conclusion that what we believe must by and large be true.

(d) So "most of the sentences a speaker holds to be true . . . *are* true. . . ." (434) "Belief is in its nature veridical." (432)

The above reasoning can now be applied by anyone who wonders whether his or her beliefs are largely true.

The agent has only to reflect on what a belief is to appreciate that most of his basic beliefs are true The question, "How do I know my beliefs are generally true?" thus answers itself, simply because beliefs are by nature generally true. (437)

What Davidson gives us, then, is an ideal observer (or 'ideal interpreter') theory of belief and meaning. The views of ideal (i.e., ideally informed and charitable) interpreters are largely true; in interpreting me, they are kind enough to credit me with their own, largely true, beliefs. Moreover, what they say my beliefs are *is* what they are. Therefore, my beliefs, too, must largely be true. Ideal interpreters can attribute some false beliefs to me, but not many, and since what they say goes, then I can have some false beliefs but not many. So while any one of my beliefs might be false, each one of them that coheres with the bulk of the others may be presumed true since the bulk *must* be true.

Clearly this approach to skepticism is a far cry from a coherentist refutation. On Davidson's view, I should think, our beliefs are *inevitably* coherent. For just as charity would constrain interpreters to ensure that each speaker's discourse is intelligible, which according to Davidson can be done only if they attribute sound logic and mostly true beliefs to speakers, so charity would lead them to ascribe a *coherent* set of views to speakers (including themselves: charity begins at home). Thus Davidson's position had better not be that their coherence shows that the bulk of our opinions must be true. Instead, the inevitability of both the truth *and* coherence of people's views is the result of a *third* thing, namely constraints on the ideal interpreters whose pronouncements constitute the facts about our beliefs. The approximate truth of our belief system is not, on Davidson's view, the product of its coherence; nonetheless, once the majority of our views has been shown true, then individual beliefs can be defended on trivially coherentist grounds: since the bulk of our opinions must be true, then individual views that cohere with our system are themselves likely.

III. The Skeptical Solution to Davidson's Antiskeptical Doubts

Davidson's view that charitableness calls for attributions of truth is based on his views that "the point of the principle [of charity] is to make

the speaker intelligible . . . ,” (433) and that speakers whose beliefs we consider by and large false are unintelligible to us. This appears to suggest that the charity interpreters ought to display is a concern with intelligibility. But if that *is* what charity is all about, then one concern skeptics should have about Davidson’s argument against skepticism is that imputing our opinions and other attitudes to speakers is not always the charitable thing to do. What charitable interpreters really ought to attribute to a speaker are attitudes which *they* would have if they were in the speaker’s situation.⁶ Yet this policy would sometimes call for the ascription to speakers of (what according to the interpreter are) mostly false beliefs, for the beliefs interpreters would have were they in the shoes of certain unfortunate people would be mostly false. Thus if I witness the transfer of some poor man’s brain to a vat where it is fed a sensory input that I know to be the sort that ordinarily leads people to think that all is normal, charity would demand that I credit him with the beliefs I would have were I in his shoes (or rather: his vat). The vast majority of these opinions, however, would be false. And of course even more would be false in other versions of this familiar brain-in-the-vat example. Combine, now, these points about charity with Davidsonian verificationism: what ideally informed interpreters would say about the unfortunate fellow’s views goes; since their charitableness would lead them to credit him with beliefs they would have if they were in his situation, ones that are quite mistaken, then his views *are* predominately false. So the threat of skepticism remains.

Again, Davidson’s view seems to be that charitableness calls for intelligibility which in turn calls for attributions of truth. However, he has overlooked the fact that people who are in circumstances described by skeptics would be unintelligible if their views were *not* mostly false. They are intelligible to us only if their convictions are as mistaken as ours would be if we were victims of the same tribulations. If through some bizarre inferences they *did* come to believe that contrary to appearances they *are* brains in vats, they would have to be as deranged as we would be if we thought we were brains in vats. A spirit of charity calls for us to avoid seeing them as deranged; instead, we should think of them as deluded.

Still, this criticism has depended on construing charity as a commitment to the imperative, ‘Render the discourse of speakers intelligible.’ And that, it might be objected, is to take too much license with Davidson’s view that the “point” of the principle of charity is “to make the speaker intelligible,” and to overlook the fact that the principle of charity consists in the requirement that we render the discourse of speakers largely true. But such an objection simply forces us to rephrase the criticism. Now the point is that while following the principle will always lead us to find a preponderance of truth in what speakers say, it will not always help render discourse intelligible, and hence there will not always be any point to following it. Translators

should not always be charitable, there being no point to charity in many cases. It may have seemed that charity was an essential attribute of an (ideal) interpreter, but only because it seemed that the capacity to render discourse intelligible was a necessary attribute, and the former seemed to be a crucial ingredient of the latter.

Another consideration helps show that even the best interpreters will sometimes come to view a speaker as largely misled: whatever merit there is to the claim that interpreters must render speakers *intelligible* derives from the fact that interpreters must devise the most plausible theory about the beliefs, desires and discourse of others given the available evidence. All sorts of facts about people might be of use to interpreters, including a great deal about the behavior of the speakers at hand; interpreters would construct the best explanation they could of these facts, and part of that explanation would be some theory of what the speakers desire, believe, and mean by what they say. In the extreme case in which people are incapable of verbal behavior, as are mutes who have not learned sign language, or the even more extreme case in which people are incapable of any overt behavior at all, as are brains in vats, it can still be possible to construct a theory concerning their beliefs and desires by relying on evidence exclusive of verbal behavior. Not all such theories must be explanations of people's behavior. If we know of a brain in a vat that its sensory input is the sort that ordinarily leads people to think all is well, it is reasonable to conclude that the poor individual involved *believes* that all is well and has the ordinary desires consistent with that belief. And of course these beliefs would be entirely wrong, which shows that it can be reasonable to attribute mostly false beliefs to others.

Brain-in-vat cases are extreme ones, and points made using them can seem trivial. It is therefore useful to note that Davidson's case against the skeptic can be criticized using less extreme examples. Consider a Gettier-style situation used by Richard Grandy against Quine's version of the principle of charity.⁷ Party-goer Paul says 'The man with a martini is a philosopher,' unaware that the martini glass of the man before him is filled with water and that the only man at the party drinking a martini is a philosopher hidden away in the garden. To the extent that charity consists in attributing correct beliefs to people and in attributing to their discourse meanings consistent with its being correct, interpreters of Paul's utterance have no business being charitable toward him since that would involve attributing to him the correct belief that the philosopher in the garden is drinking a martini. What interpreters ought to do is give the best available theory of what Paul believes and means by what he says, which obviously is the false claim that the man before him is drinking a martini and is a philosopher. Now, Davidson's principle of charity allows for an occasional falsehood, but the point is that Grandy's example is on a continuum with other scenarios (like brain-in-vat situations) that involve more global

deception.⁸ The more seriously deceptive people's circumstances, the more extensive the deception an interpreter must attribute to them. To insist on attributing correct beliefs to them would be to create the needless difficulty of then explaining how they managed to see through forms of deception that we know would have gotten the better of us.

But let us put aside all doubts about the soundness of Davidson's antiskeptical argument. What sort of implications would his argument have if it *were* sound? To begin with, we must certainly acknowledge that his account of belief makes it very easy to know that the bulk of my beliefs is true. I know the bulk is true since Davidsonian beliefs by their very nature are such that when they come in big bundles they are mostly true. Moreover, I can know of any opinion which is supported by the bulk of my beliefs that it is probably true (and hence may be presumed true) because it is so easy for me to know that the majority of my beliefs is true. On the Davidsonian view, the skeptical questions, 'How do I know that my beliefs about reality are not completely wrong?' and 'Am I ever justified in thinking of one of my opinions about the world that it is true?' either do not arise, or else are absurdly simple to deal with.

However, the Davidsonian analysis of belief invites a form of skepticism that is even more encompassing and threatening than traditional skepticism ever was. The new, more virulent strain replaces the question, 'How do I know that my opinions about the world are by and large true?' with the question, 'How do I know that I *have* any beliefs about the world that are largely true?' Originally skeptics did not worry about the possibility that we may not *have* any opinions about the world. That was something they thought we could take for granted. The concern was just that the convictions we certainly do have may be mistaken. But what we might call *Doxastic Skepticism* does not even allow us to take for granted the fact that we have opinions about the world.⁹ Today's skeptic must perhaps acknowledge that if belief is by its nature veridical then whatever opinions we *have* about the world are mostly true. But skeptics could cheerfully grant that, yet remain doubtful at a deeper level. They need only point out that having granted the veridicality of belief, we must *still* ask, 'How do we know that we *have* beliefs about the world?'

But why would Davidson's account of belief lead the skeptic to worry about the possibility that we may not have opinions about the world? Well, for the same reason that skeptics have always worried about various sorts of possibility. Skeptical doubts about a given claim *p* typically consist primarily in the observation that there are (possible) situations in which *p* is false yet everything seems the same to us. We think that *p* is true, but there are situations in which everything seems just like it does to us now but *p* is nonetheless false. Call such a situation a *skeptical scenario* relative to *p*. Then skeptical doubts about a view arise when it is possible to provide a skeptical scenario relative to that view. Just this sort of doubt arises vis-à-vis Davidsonian beliefs. We

think we have a great complicated set of beliefs about the world. However, there are situations in which everything seems just as now, yet it is false that we have a great complicated set (or even a tiny simple set) of Davidsonian beliefs about the world. So, says the skeptic, maybe we do not.

I do not mean to say that the existence of skeptical scenarios vis-à-vis a hypothesis really does impugn that hypothesis. I should think that only more substantial grounds would suffice us to call our beliefs into doubt. However, it is precisely this sort of skepticism that Davidson means to undermine. He is himself willing to say that the existence of skeptical scenarios relative to claims impugns them. Otherwise he would not be concerning himself with brain-in-vat possibilities. So in claiming to refute skepticism, he wants to argue that there are no skeptical scenarios relative to the bulk of our beliefs about the world.

Consider an example of the sort of thing skeptics worry about. Imagine that you are and have always been a brain in a vat whose sensory input is being supplied by elaborate computing machinery which does not provide causal links between your input and your environment. In such a situation, an outside observer who heeds the Principle of Charity's injunction concerning belief causes (i.e., the requirement to take the causes of belief to be the objects of belief) could not interpret you as having beliefs about the world around you; at best, you could be interpreted as having beliefs about the sensory input supplied to you by the computing equipment. Now imagine that you are just a brain in an otherwise empty world and that your brain states just appear out of nowhere. They are uncaused. Again, observers who always equate the causes with the objects of belief could not interpret you as having beliefs about the world around you, and now they cannot even construe you as having beliefs about your sensory input. Since your brain states would be uncaused, Davidson seems forced to say that interpreters would conclude that you have no beliefs at all.

Still, Davidson would at this point remind the skeptic that so long as we have any, our beliefs, whatever they are about, must be true, even if we are mere brains in vats. But how comforting is it to know that our beliefs are true whatever they are about if we cannot even tell what they are about or even whether or not we have any? If we do not know what our beliefs are about then we certainly do not know what they *are*, and *a fortiori* we do not know that they are about the world. So if the fact that there are skeptical scenarios relative to claims shows (or can be used to show) that those claims are doubtful, then it is doubtful that we have beliefs about the world. The skeptic is therefore ready with the question, 'Do you really know that you have beliefs about the world?'

Davidson might be tempted to accuse the Doxastic Skeptic of incoherence. In an introductory sketch of his antiskeptical argument, Davidson writes that

anyone with thoughts, and so in particular anyone who wonders whether he has any reason to suppose he is generally right about the nature of his environment, must know what a belief is, and how in general beliefs are to be detected and interpreted. (431)

According to this passage, anytime people are capable of thinking that or even wondering whether they have beliefs about the world, they must know what beliefs about the world are. Given one further assumption, Davidson's passage can be used effectively against the skeptic. The further necessary assumption (which is not made by Davidson) is that we can know what beliefs about the world are only if we have them. It follows that we must have beliefs about the world if we think that or wonder whether we do. So, upon seeing all this, it would be absurd for us to give a negative answer to the skeptic's question 'Do I really know that I have beliefs about the world?'

However, the Doxastic Skeptic's rejoinder is obvious. If Davidson takes up this new antiskeptical approach, he will not succeed in showing that we know that we have *a posteriori* views. On the contrary, if the new reasoning is correct, then what Davidson would *now* have shown is that an even stronger form of Doxastic Skepticism holds. The moderate form only held that we cannot be sure that we have beliefs about the world. But according to the new sort, we do not even know whether we *think that* or *wonder whether* we have beliefs about the world! Imagine that I am a brain in a vat in an otherwise empty universe, and that my brain states are uncaused but extremely orderly. Suppose that I come to have the same sort of brain state that people normally have when they have Davidsonian beliefs about the world, and the same sort of brain state that people normally have when they think that or wonder whether they have *a posteriori* opinions. Unlike these normal people, I would not have any Davidsonian beliefs about the world, and I would not be thinking that or wondering whether I have Davidsonian beliefs about the world. Yet we would all have the same sort of brain states. Things would seem exactly the same to us all.

IV. Conclusion

According to Davidson, we can know the truth of a belief which coheres with the rest of our conceptual scheme, for this scheme could not be wholly inaccurate given that (a) our views are the ones ideal interpreters attribute to us and (b) such interpreters must make sure we are intelligible by crediting us with mostly true opinions. However, I have pointed out that in some skeptical scenarios ideal interpreters would render us intelligible only if they say our views are deluded. So Davidson has not rebutted the standard skeptical worry after all. Moreover, if Davidson's analysis of belief were correct, a very strong form of skepticism would arise: Doxastic Skepticism. For on Davidson's account, we cannot know what we believe about the world if anything.

And of course an exactly parallel form of skepticism is generated by his account of meaning. For what the contents of one of my beliefs is, and what my speech means (if anything), is what an ideally informed and charitable interpreter would say it means. Davidsonian charity, in turn, requires that interpreters take the causes of beliefs to be what the beliefs are about. Unfortunately, the states of a vatted brain in an otherwise unoccupied universe will be uncaused. Hence such persons cannot be interpreted as having beliefs with contents (or rather, they cannot be interpreted as having ones whose contents refer to the world). So they cannot be interpreted as having any beliefs about the world whatever. Thus Davidson's view of meaning prompts what may as well be called Semantic Skepticism: skepticism concerning the contents of beliefs.¹⁰

NOTES

¹ "The Method of Truth in Metaphysics," *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 201.

² Parenthetical references are to Davidson's essay "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge," *Kant Oder Hegel* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta Buchhandlung, 1983) 423-438.

³ Actually, this formulation of coherentism suppresses a difficulty: since Doxastic Internalism restricts the basis of knowledge to *beliefs*, then the *coherence* of our beliefs, which is not itself a belief, cannot be part of the foundation of knowledge. Here Davidson has two choices. He can remain a Doxastic Internalist and say that our knowledge can rest only on what we can conclude from our *belief*, whether true or not, that our views are coherent. Or he can adopt a modified version of Doxastic Internalism, one that allows the coherence of our beliefs itself to be a basis of knowledge.

⁴ A similar point is made in "The Method of Truth in Metaphysics," *op. cit.*, p. 200: "we 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." In "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation, op. cit.*, p. 197, the claim is put as follows: "Charity is forced on us; whether we like it or not, if we want to understand others, we must count them right in most matters." Davidson's is a version of W. V. O. Quine's very similar maxim of charity, "assertions startlingly false on the face of them are likely to turn on hidden differences of language," which appears in *Word and Object* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960), p. 59.

⁵ Confer "The Method of Truth in Metaphysics," *ibid.*, p. 200: "good interpretation breeds concurrence."

⁶ Thus if Davidson implements the suggestion he makes in his footnote 7, namely requiring interpreters "to includethe desires of the speaker from the start, so that . . . both belief and desire . . . are related to meaning," then my point will be that interpreters should attribute to a speaker not their own desires, but rather the desires they would have were they in the speaker's circumstances.

⁷ "Reference, Meaning, and Belief," *Journal of Philosophy* 70 (1973) 439-452.

⁸ For a further discussion of the reasons to think of Gettier-style cases like Grandy's as skeptical scenarios, see my "Knowers, Inside and Out," forthcoming in *Synthese*.

⁹ This type of skepticism is defended by Lawrence Bonjour in his *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985) and by Hilary Kornblith in his "How Internal Can You Get?," forthcoming in *Synthese*.

¹⁰ I am grateful to David Shatz and my colleague Curtis Brown for useful comments on this essay.