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Steven L. Reynolds [a]
[a] Arizona State University

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SKEPTICAL HYPOTHESES AND 'OMNISCIENT' INTERPRETERS

Steven L. Reynolds

Donald Davidson offers the following argument against the possibility of massive error in a person's beliefs:

> . . . there is nothing absurd in the idea of an omniscient interpreter; he attributes beliefs to others, and interprets their speech on the basis of his own beliefs, just as the rest of us do. Since he does this as the rest of us do, he perforce finds as much agreement as is needed to make sense of his attributions and interpretations; and in this case, of course, what is agreed is by hypothesis true. But now it is plain why massive error about the world is simply unintelligible, for to suppose it intelligible is to suppose there could be an interpreter (the omniscient one) who correctly interpreted someone else as being massively mistaken, and this we have shown to be impossible.[1]

I think that a version of this argument is sound, and I shall defend it by answering some of the more important published objections. Davidson presents it while arguing for a linguistic method in metaphysics, and again in the course of arguing against skepticism about the external world.[2] I shall not attempt to evaluate these larger arguments.

One apparent cause of resistance to the quoted argument is the impression that it lacks philosophical substance. It seems to rely on an unmotivated gimmick, the 'omniscient' interpreter.

However, such interpreters are natural subjects for thought experiments, given the commonly accepted view that non-intentional facts determine intentional facts (to the extent that they are determined). If the non-intentional determines the intentional, a sufficiently intelligent interpreter who was ideally well-informed about the non-intentional facts and the determining relations could know all intentional facts. Whether it is possible for a person to have a certain sort of belief system may thus be investigated, with some hope of illumination, by asking whether an 'omniscient' interpreter could so interpret him.

[1] D. Davidson, 'The Method of Truth in Metaphysics', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy 2: Studies in the Philosophy of Language,* ed. P.A. French, T.E. Uehling, Jr., and H.K. Wettstein (Morris: University of Minnesota Press, 1977) pp.244-254, reprinted in D. Davidson, *Inquiries Into Truth and Interpretation,* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984) pp.199-214, esp.201.

[2] D. Davidson, 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge' in D. Henrich (ed.), *Kant oder Hegel?* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1983) pp.423-438 reprinted in *Truth and Interpretation: Essays on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson* (ed.) E. LePore (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986) pp.307-319.

I.

Richard Foley and Richard Fumerton claim that Davidson's argument tacitly employs a subjunctive conditional subconclusion of the following sort: 'If there were an omniscient interpreter employing Davidson's methods of interpretation he would believe that most of what Jones believes is true.'[3] According to Foley's and Fumerton's reconstruction, Davidson's argument holds that it follows that most of what Jones believes is true.

They object that the closest possible world in which an omniscient interpreter employs Davidson's methods of interpretation may be very different from the actual world. If it is, then, even if the quoted counterfactual is true, Jones' beliefs may fail to be mostly true.

To avoid this objection, I shall restate the argument without a subjunctive conditional, as I believe Davidson intended. The restatement is not completely accurate as a rendering of Davidson's intended argument however, for it refers to possible worlds, which he professes not to understand.[4]

Consider a possible world w_1 in which there is a believer, S. For any possible world w, there is a possible world w' such that w' exactly resembles w in all of its non-intentional features, except those non-intentional features necessary for there to be an omniscient interpreter. (If w already has an omniscient interpreter, w = w'. But w' need not be the closest world containing an omniscient interpreter, and it is unlikely to be the closest such world if having a sufficiently unobtrusive omniscient interpreter requires differences in natural laws.) Let w_2 be thus related to w_1, and let O be w_2's omniscient interpreter. An omniscient interpreter knows all of the nonintentional facts about her world that are relevant to interpretation, and uses this knowledge without error to interpret all persons there. Thus in w_2 O discovers all of S's beliefs. An interpreter must agree with her subject in most of the beliefs she attributes to him. So O agrees with S with respect to most of S's beliefs. Since O is an omniscient interpreter, all of her beliefs are true. It follows that in w_2 most of S's beliefs are also true. Then since w_1 and w_2 are so similar, in w_1 most of S's beliefs must also be true. Therefore, necessarily, any believer's beliefs are mostly true.

The controversial premises in this argument are:

i) For any possible world w, there is a possible world w' such that w' exactly resembles w in all of its non-intentional features, except those non-intentional features necessary for there to be an omniscient interpreter.

ii) An interpreter must agree with her subject in most of the beliefs she attributes to him.

II.

First we shall discuss premise ii). Notice that it claims only that an interpreter must

[3] R. Foley and R. Fumerton, 'Davidson's Theism?', *Philosophical Studies* 48 (1985) pp.83-89.

[4] In discussion at a conference on 'The Implications of Realism and Antirealism for Epistemology' Santa Clara University, February 28, 1992.

agree with her subject in most of the beliefs *that she attributes to him.* She may still regard him as having no beliefs whatever on some topics about which she herself knows a great deal. An ordinary, non-omniscient interpreter may also think that her subject holds beliefs that she is incapable of interpreting, due to her own ignorance of their subject matter.

The claim that the interpreter agrees with most of the beliefs she attributes is not to be understood as entailing that she agrees with a numerical majority of those beliefs. As has often been pointed out, we lack good standards for counting beliefs. Premise ii) should instead be understood as claiming something rather vague, but still intelligible: the interpreter must be in broad agreement with her subject on many of the important topics of the attributed beliefs.

Premise ii) is sometimes thought to depend on the Principle of Charity: when interpreting, maximize truth in the beliefs and appropriateness in the desires attributed. If ii) did so depend, it might be challenged by arguing instead for the rival Principle of Humanity, which enjoins the interpreter to maximize intelligibility, attributing beliefs, whether true or false, as it is intelligible that the subject has them.[5] Following the Principle of Charity maximizes the reported agreement between subject and interpreter, since an interpreter can maximize truth only as she sees it. It is not clear that maximizing intelligibility maximizes agreement however, since it may be more intelligible that the subject holds beliefs the interpreter regards as false.

Davidson apparently holds that the only way to maximize intelligibility is to maximize truth, so that there is no real need to choose between these principles: 'The point of the principle [of Charity] is to make the speaker intelligible' and 'we interpret so as to make an agent as intelligible as possible'.[6]

Whether he is right about the (rough?) equivalence of the two principles doesn't matter here. For when presenting the omniscient interpreter argument Davidson doesn't argue for ii) from the Principle of Charity. Instead he argues from claims about the possible evidence for interpretation.

According to Davidson, at least in the beginning the interpreter 'interprets sentences held true (which is not to be distinguished from attributing beliefs) according to the events and objects in the outside world that cause the sentence to be held true'.[7] The interpreter identifies 'the causes with the objects of [the subject's] beliefs, giving special weight to the simplest cases, and countenancing error where it can be best explained'.[8]

Suppose that a given utterance type is produced or assented to only when the subject is looking in the direction of a running rabbit. His holding that sentence true on those occasions is probably caused by the event of a rabbit's running by. So his utterance should be interpreted as meaning that a rabbit is running by, and the corresponding belief should also be attributed to him.

5 R. E. Grandy, 'Reference, Meaning, and Belief', *The Journal of Philosophy* 70 (1973) pp.439-452.

6 D. Davidson, 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge', pp.316, 318.

7 *Ibid,* p.317.

8 *Ibid,* p.318.

An interpreter thus begins by hypothesizing that her subject's perceptually caused beliefs are about the objects or events that cause them. But she can't attribute to her subject a belief that a rabbit is running by, on the ground that his holding true a certain sentence is in fact caused by the event of a rabbit's running by, unless she herself believes that a rabbit is running by. Thus the starting point in interpretation must be the attribution of perceptual beliefs that the interpreter regards as true.

But even if this claim about the necessary starting point of interpretation is correct, what reason has Davidson for thinking that other beliefs that are not thus directly linked to perception must be interpreted as true? He says: 'If I suppose that you believe a cloud is passing before the sun, I suppose you have the right sort of pattern of beliefs to support that one belief, and these beliefs I assume you to have must, to do their supporting work, be enough like my beliefs to justify the description of your belief as a belief that a cloud is passing before the sun.'[9]

Let us try to imagine ourselves attributing to a person the perceptually caused belief that a cloud is passing before the sun, while supposing him to have massively false beliefs about clouds and the sun. We might try to do this by imagining him as a member of a primitive tribe, who has no idea of the true constitution of clouds or of the sun. But this would not be a case of massively false belief. For the primitive person has, along with his superstitions and misconceptions, many true beliefs about clouds and the sun — that clouds produce rain and shade and the sun light and heat, that both are too far away in the sky to be reached, even with thrown objects, that the sun moves with greater regularity and more consistently retains its shape than do the clouds, and so on. Furthermore, he has many related true beliefs about rain, shade, light, and heat.

A *massively* false set of beliefs about clouds and sun would have to deny even such banalities. That is what Davidson claims we cannot imagine. I think he is right. If we interpreted someone not only as failing to have the appropriate modern beliefs about the constitution of clouds, but also as believing that clouds do not come in irregular shapes and are not observed in the sky, then it would be very hard to think of ourselves as attributing to him beliefs about clouds. So, if Davidson is right, an interpreter must also attribute to her subject many non-perceptual beliefs that she regards as true.

III.

Davidson evidently intends his comments about the evidence for interpretation as a rough characterization. Some small refinements are desirable.

The account seems insufficiently explicit about which events to count as the relevant causes of the beliefs. On what principles do we decide that it is the rabbit's running that is the relevant cause of the subject's belief, and not the leporine light waves' striking the subject's eyes, or the subsequent events in the visual cortex? I don't know how to give a complete answer to this question. But the correct answer

[9] D. Davidson, 'The Method of Truth', p.200.

will probably include mention of the behaviour and behavioural dispositions produced. Any behaviour resulting from the belief expressed in the uttered sentence will be directed toward the rabbit, not toward light patterns just off the surface of the eye, or toward processes in the visual cortex. An account of perceptual intentionality that took into consideration the normal consequences of the subject's behaviour or behavioural dispositions could probably thus explain our decision to interpret the subject as holding a belief about the rabbit.

Davidson allows attribution of error for the sake of simplicity. But we also attribute error when we judge that a person is perceptually affected by objects in the way that other sorts of objects usually or normally affect him. I judge that Sam believes there is an apple on the table, because the piece of wax looks like an apple, and because he is behaving as he usually does around apples.

It might be thought that Davidson's account of the evidence for interpretation seems to give us little reason to think it necessary that *most* of the beliefs attributed are true. Even if it is correct, it apparently requires only that the perceptual and background beliefs be true.

Most of our beliefs probably are perceptual beliefs, for perception is much more fertile as a source of new beliefs than theorizing or listening or reading. One can't look around without acquiring, at least temporarily, dozens, maybe hundreds of beliefs. Acquiring beliefs in other ways takes more time, and occurs less constantly. But perhaps this is only a contingent fact about us. Some creature might have our perceptual abilities or less, combined with the ability to acquire, say, false mathematical beliefs very rapidly. (If a creature's 'mathematical thinking' yielded mostly falsehoods, would we have to conclude that he was only babbling to himself?)

However, the skeptic who tells us stories of massive error — that we are brains in vats, or spirits deceived by demons, but still hold the same beliefs we actually hold — primarily intends to put in doubt our perceptual beliefs and the closely related background beliefs. If such stories are impossible, because perceptual and related background beliefs cannot be massively false, then the relevant sort of massive error is also impossible. For it is from the stories that we learn what would count as massive error.

IV.

Now let us consider the most important objection to Davidson's argument for ii): it holds that Davidson is mistaken in supposing that radical interpretation *must* begin with observation of the subject's perceptual contacts with his environment (and of the behavioural consequences). Such observation may be indispensable to us. But, says the objection, there is other evidence of the contents of intentional states, and an omniscient interpreter would have access to it, even if we do not.

Perhaps the beliefs naturally associated with sensory qualia must be about the kinds of things the qualia resemble. If a subject has elephant-shaped visual qualia, any perceptually resulting beliefs must be about elephant shaped animals. So if an unembodied mind were to have sensory qualia sufficiently similar to those I have had, it would believe itself surrounded by physical objects of the same shapes as I

believe surround me. Someone who knew its qualitative states could properly so interpret it, in spite of the massive falsehood of the beliefs thus attributed.

A second sort of evidence might be alleged by someone who, unlike Davidson, holds a type-type identity theory of some mental states. A brain in a vat might have some of the same relevant types of neurological states as would more normally situated human brains, and thus, on this view, have the same types of (narrow content) mental states, including, perhaps, beliefs that physical objects of certain sizes and shapes surround it. Even if the brain-in-a-vat's beliefs were massively false, they could thus be discovered by an interpreter who had the relevant knowledge of brain states.

Colin McGinn claims a third sort of evidence.[10] An interpreter who observes the spatial configurations of her subject's bodily movements may infer therefrom the contents of some of his beliefs. Thus a human being who moves in a square path probably believes that he is moving around a square physical object. The interpreter may also discover the biological function of the observed sorts of behaviour, and treat that as evidence of the content of the beliefs that cooperated to produce that behaviour. For example, beliefs about square things may be attributed to the subject on observing in him 'behaviour whose biological function it is to promote survival in the face of square things'.[11] The species' normal environment and its evolutionary history are thus relevant to belief attribution as evidence of the biological function of the subject's behaviour.

Even someone who holds a causal theory of intentionality might concede some evidential weight to these facts — as indicators of the subject's causal relations to her environment. But for these sorts of evidence to make it reasonable for an omniscient interpreter to attribute massive error on a given occasion they must outweigh the perceptual and behavioural causal relations. There must be cases where beliefs should be attributed according to the qualia, the neurological types, or the individualistically described behavioural types, contrary to the interpretation suggested by the perceptual and behavioural relations.

Suppose aliens who have the usual fantastic technological abilities raise exact replicas of a large number of human beings, starting the replicas from embryonic cells taken after the first cellular division or two and carefully subjecting them to exactly the same sorts of individualistically describable causal influences. Suppose this can be done so that from their bodily surfaces inward there is no difference between them and their twins on earth. In response to eating, drinking, and breathing behaviour, food, water, and air appear in the appropriate bodily passages. The right sort of light strikes their eyes, and so on. Their 'speaking' produces sounds in the ears of other alien-raised humans, but usually not those closest to them. Each of these alien-raised humans is suspended in empty space, thousands of miles from all (other) ordinary physical objects.

By each of the three kinds of alleged evidence, it seems that these humans-in-the-void have massively false beliefs. Their neurological states are type-identical to

[10] C. McGinn, *Mental Content* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989) pp.63-70, 106-117.
[11] *Ibid*, pp.106, 144-149.

their twins' (we can suppose). So, if a type-type identity theory is true for perceptually caused beliefs about the perceptible qualities of ordinary sized physical objects, they must hold massively false beliefs about such objects.

Presumably their qualitative states are similar to ours. If qualitative states determine the contents of the associated beliefs, they believe themselves surrounded by physical objects, and are thus again in massive error.

Their movements will be shaped as if responding to physical objects. Such behaviour evolved to permit survival among bodies of various shapes, sizes and solidities. So, by McGinn's evidence too, they believe themselves surrounded by bodies, and are again in massive error.

Not only does the alleged evidence support the conclusion of massive error, but it would be our natural first impression on seeing a human-in-the-void. She would seem to be performing a pathetic pantomime — eating without food or fork, putting on non-existent make-up with non-existent brushes, saying goodbye to the void, getting into a non-existent car, driving without moving an inch. She would make writing or typing motions, but no writing would remain when she finished. She wouldn't be talking to people in her vicinity, although she would talk to real people (we allow this to avoid concerns about the possibility of a private language, or about rules in the absence of communities).

On more careful consideration however, I think it is clear that she is not really in massive error. First, it should be noted that her belief system and recognitional abilities are the product of a long, gradual process of delicate cognitive adjustment to her environment. (We refrain from calling it 'learning' so as not to beg the question.) This cognitive adjustment uses the capacities of her brain as fully as does our learning. And it is not merely going through the motions. Developing the capacity to respond appropriately to the stimuli produced by the alien technology is necessary to her health and well-being. If she fails to respond appropriately, she will be frustrated, or injured. Even if what she 'sees' isn't food, she must 'eat' it if she wants to avoid hunger, and even if what she 'sees' isn't a real car, she must still 'step out of its path' if she wants to avoid serious injury. For, from her skin inward, it is and will be *exactly* as if she were in the earthly situations that would produce the sorts of perceptual stimulations she has. She will be physically affected, in all individualistic respects, just as she would have been had she engaged in that behaviour in the corresponding situation on earth. (If the example were instead a demon-tormented spirit, or a brain-in-a-vat, the spirit or brain would still have to suffer for responding wrongly. The deception would fail if it didn't.)

So the gradualness, the sophistication, and the practical necessity of her cognitive adjustment to her environment are reasons to regard her as not massively in error. These reasons are reinforced by the reflection that, if we were to convey our true beliefs about her environment to her, and if she were to attempt to base her actions on those beliefs, she would not be able to act successfully at all. Our description of the forces that affect her, even if it were sufficiently complete and accurate, would be too lengthy and technical to use as a guide to action. For practical purposes, her cognitive response to her environment is much better than ours.

Although I think these reflections should be given considerable weight against

the view that she is massively mistaken, I admit that they are not conclusive. Her beliefs may have been acquired by a sophisticated process, and be extremely useful to her, and yet still be false.

V.

There is a better reason for holding that the woman in the void is not massively deceived. If she is massively deceived because of her qualia or her behaviour, then if one of us became a human-in-the-void, even temporarily and with advance warning, he would have to be similarly mistaken about his surroundings. For if the humans-in-the-void are massively in error, then, in the determination of their intentional contents, perceptual and behavioural contacts with the environment, past or present, must be outweighed by current individualistically described behaviour and qualitative states. And while we sampled the human-in-the-void life we would exhibit the same sorts of behaviour and have the same sorts of qualitative states as they do.

But it is absurd to claim that I would have to be mistaken about my surroundings in such conditions. Imagine that I am told exactly when the artificial sensory input is to begin, and that it will last five minutes. At the appointed time, instead of perceiving myself floating in the void, I abruptly seem to perceive myself standing on a city street on a rainy day. I would realize that the rain I seemed to feel was not rain. My qualitative mental states and my behaviour might indicate that I believed myself to be walking in the rain on a city street, but I wouldn't really believe that. So the claim that, in this case, these sorts of evidence outweigh the history of perceptual and behavioural contacts, thus supporting the allegation of massive error, must be mistaken.

It might be replied that the verbal behaviour and dispositions of the temporary human-in-the-void are different from those of a permanent human-in-the-void undergoing stimulation of the 'rainy day in the city' sort. For example, as a temporary human-in-the-void I would probably say to myself, 'That isn't really rain'. And if the artificial stimulation were suddenly stopped I would not be as surprised. Such differences in verbal behaviour and dispositions make the difference between believing and not believing, it might be said. But should small changes in verbal behaviour, which is to be interpreted in the light of other behaviour and qualitative states, have the consequence that a temporary human-in-the-void fails to have the beliefs his behaviour and qualitative states would otherwise indicate?

Let us suppose it does. Similar behaviour, dispositions, and neurological states could be produced in the woman-in-the-void. Thus suppose we whisper the truth about her situation in her ear and she believes us, acquiring the disposition to say things such as 'There is no car coming toward me, but car-type surface irritations produced by the alien machinery are reliably correlated with the production of unpleasant collision-type effects. So I should move as if I were stepping out of the way.'

What should she then say about whether her fellow humans-in-the-void are massively mistaken? It seems that she stands with respect to them pretty much where

Berkeley stood with respect to the ordinary people of his day. (If, contrary to Berkeley, they were realists about material substances.) Just as Berkeley thought his and his fellows' sensations to be caused immaterially by God, so this woman now believes her and her companions' bodily surface irritations to be caused by not very material alien machinery. And, as Berkeley continued to speak and think in much the same language he used before rejecting material substance, for example anticipating the occurrence of a certain constellation of ideas by thinking 'My coach will soon arrive', so this woman must also continue to speak and think much as she previously did, if she is to communicate with her fellows and make continuing use of her previous cognitive adjustment to her environment.

Berkeley did not regard non-philosophers, or even the philosophers he opposed, as *massively* mistaken.[12] He may have thought the philosophers had mistaken beliefs about some very general metaphysical questions, but he evidently didn't think that it followed that they must also have mistaken beliefs about whether they were sitting at a table eating dinner or about whether the weather was fair or foul. (Pretending that he did was a popular way of caricaturing his views.[13]) Surely he was right about this. A change in one's views about the intrinsic nature of tables, trees, and reading lamps shouldn't change the *content* (and so potentially the truth value) of one's other beliefs about those objects. A similar attitude about her companions' beliefs is correct for this woman-in-the-void. She should say that although they may hold mistaken beliefs about the nature of the objects of their perception, that does not entail that they are massively in error.

If this is the right way for her to think of the other humans-in-the-void, then it must be correct for us too, since, by hypothesis, she shares the relevant portions of our language. But then it follows that she herself never was massively in error.

We should think of these humans-in-the-void as having true beliefs about the aspects of their environment that are most important to them: the relevant features of the alien machinery with which they constantly interact. The three sorts of non-intentional facts mentioned do not determine the contents of their intentional states, and they are not massively in error. But this is an ideal case for an interpretation of massive error, so the attempt to describe evidence allowing such an interpretation fails.

VI.

We will now consider objections to i): for any possible world w, there is a possible world w' such that w' exactly resembles w in all of its non-intentional features, except those non-intentional features necessary for there to be an omniscient interpreter.

Let us try to be more precise about the similarity relation between these worlds. Every object that exists in w also exists in w', and those objects have the same

[12] Consider for example the bits of stage-setting dialogue between Philonous and Hylas, in G. Berkeley, *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous* in *Berkeley's Philosophical Writings* (ed). D. M. Armstrong (New York: Collier Macmillan, 1965), pp.135, 170, 173-174.

[13] J. Boswell, *Life of Johnson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976) p.333; P. D. Stanhope, 4th Earl of Chesterfield, *Letters to His Son* (New York: Tudor Publishing, 1937) vol.1, p.118.

intrinsic non-intentional properties that they have in w, and stand in the same non-intentional relations to one another as in w. All of the relations an object has in w' which it does not have in w are relations to the omniscient interpreter, to its parts, to compound objects of which it is a part, or to such other objects as may be necessary for it to be an omniscient interpreter (e.g. objects involved in its processes of perception, if any). There are no extra objects in w'. If w is not identical to w', persons in w' who exist in w will have many non-intentional relations to the omniscient interpreter in w' which they did not have in w. But, if other non-intentional properties and relations are held constant, this should make very little difference in the intentional relations. (There may be some difference however: perhaps persons in w have some belief-like states which in w' are beliefs about the omniscient interpreter.)

One might wonder whether an interpreter can know as much as the omniscient interpreter is said to know. Does i) wrongly assume the contingency of uncertainty principles in quantum mechanics, or the possibility of knowing free future actions?

It is easy to avoid such assumptions in giving the argument. The argument merely requires an interpreter who knows the facts that are relevant to interpreting a given person or community, and these are apparently knowable without violations of uncertainty principles. To avoid problems about knowing future free actions we can imagine the interpreter working long after the events, states, or processes she interprets.

Bruce Vermazen suggests a more serious objection. He claims that if Davidson is right about the indeterminacy of belief attribution, an omniscient interpreter is not possible.[14] But then i) is false.

An omniscient interpreter has true beliefs about everything non-intentional. But it follows, says Vermazen, that '. . . an important subset of such a being's propositional attitudes — namely his beliefs about extra mental fact — is completely determined by extra-mental fact. . . This seems incompatible with the idea that there is no fact of the matter about anyone's propositional attitudes . . .'[15] So there could not be an omniscient interpreter.

It seems to me that Vermazen is confusing two different sorts of determination of beliefs by extra-mental fact. One is determination by the facts qua evidence for interpretation. That would be incompatible with the thesis of indeterminacy of translation. The other is merely 'determination' relative to a true assertion.

As Vermazen notes, Davidson holds that there is no fact of the matter about a person's beliefs because attributions of beliefs (S believes that p) include translations of sentences the believer would accept into sentences of the interpreter's language. Translation is indeterminate. So, since there is no fact of the matter about which translation is correct, there is also no fact of the matter about which belief attributions are correct, and so no fact of the matter about which beliefs a person holds.

The arguments for indeterminacy of translation allege indeterminacy after all rel-

[14] B. Vermazen, 'The Intelligibility of Massive Error', *Philosophical Quarterly* 33 (1983), pp.69-74, esp.73.

[15] *Ibid*, p.74.

evant evidence is in. As translations of the same native utterance, two sentences of the interpreter's language, which to the interpreter are intuitively unlike in meaning, can be equally well supported, and supported as well as any other sentences, by all possible evidence. That's the sort of indeterminacy Davidson accepts for translation and hence for attributions of belief.[16]

But Vermazen is not claiming that there would be enough evidence about the languages of omniscient interpreters to determine translations up to intuitive synonymy. Instead he suggests that if the attribution to the omniscient interpreter of all of the beliefs that satisfy a certain description, 'true non-intentional beliefs', were true, that would have the consequence that there is a fact of the matter about what the omniscient interpreter believes.

But if there is a description of some portion of what I believe of the form 'the true F-beliefs', then that portion of what I believe could be determined by the state of the world and the true assertion that I have all of the true F-beliefs. So this seems to be a problem for the indeterminacy thesis quite independently of the possibility of omniscient interpreters.

Vermazen's difficulty is an instance of a general problem: whether the indeterminacy thesis about beliefs, and indeterminacy theses generally, are compatible with claims that some assertions employing the supposedly indeterminate predicates are true. If it is true that Sam believes that a rabbit is running by, does it follow that there is a fact of the matter as to whether Sam believes this, and so no indeterminacy? Since this is not a problem about omniscient interpreters as such, we need not consider it any further.

There is a more superficial response to Vermazen's objection, which is still of some interest. It seems that, for the special case of omniscient interpreters, the indeterminacy of translation does not support the indeterminacy of belief attribution. There may be a fact of the matter about what an omniscient interpreter believes, even if there is no fact of the matter about the correct translation of his language.

Suppose there are two omniscient interpreters, A and B, and that they interpret each other. There is only one system of beliefs about non-intentional matters that A can attribute to B (at any rate there is only one if we individuate systems of belief by their propositional content, and not by their character or way the content is encoded). For every sentence of A's language regarding non-intentional matters is such that A accepts it or denies it (or at least accepts or denies its appropriately indexically altered counterpart). If A accepts p, then p is true. Since B is also omniscient, A will, as a result of interpreting B, attribute to B a belief that p (with appropriate indexical modifications). If A denies p, he will attribute a belief that not p to B. Thus for every sentence p of A's language which contains no intentional vocabulary, he attributes to B a belief that p if p is true, and a belief that not p if p is false. So, for non-intentional belief contents, there is no indeterminacy of A's belief attributions to B.

But this state of affairs is nevertheless compatible with indeterminacy of *translation,* which is Davidson's reason for holding that belief attribution is generally inde-

[16] D. Davidson, 'Semantics for Natural Languages' in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, pp.55-64, esp.62.

terminate. For there may be more than one intuitively distinct translation manual which results in attributing the same set of beliefs to B. On one manual of translation, B's utterance *u* is about, say, undetached rabbit parts, while on another it is about rabbits. But on the latter, if B can express all of his beliefs, there must be a different sort of possible utterance *u'* which is interpreted as being about undetached rabbit parts, since B, in his omniscience, also has every true belief about undetached rabbit parts. We could thus have two incompatible manuals of translation that, when used, result in the attribution of the same set of beliefs to B.

If the thesis of indeterminacy of translation held that for any pair of persons s_1 and s_2, there is some sentence p of s_1's language, such that s_1 could interpret s_2 as holding that p, on one acceptable scheme of translation, and as holding that not-p, on another acceptable scheme of translation, then that thesis would be incompatible with the claim that an omniscient interpreter is possible, as Vermazen claims. For there would have to be an acceptable scheme of translation on which one omniscient interpreter attributed to the other a belief he held to be false. But it does not appear that any of the plausible arguments for indeterminacy of translation support this extreme claim.

It should be noted finally that Davidson's argument does not require indeterminacy of belief attribution, and that it might still be a sound argument, even if one of its premises conflicts with Davidson's other views.

So the objections to i) are unconvincing.

The omniscient interpreter argument has provoked many other interesting published objections. I think that the objections I have discussed are the most promising however, and they don't succeed. A convincing objection, if one is to be found, will have to be based on a deeper understanding of the conception of belief that underlies the argument.[17]

Arizona State University

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