

## MEANING HOLISM AND INTERPRETABILITY

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Meaning holism is the view that each of a speaker's beliefs is determined to be the belief it is by the systematic connections it bears to other beliefs. Donald Davidson gives this example:

I can believe a cloud is passing before the sun, but only because I believe there is a sun, that clouds are made of water, that water can exist in liquid or gaseous form; and so on, without end. No particular list of further beliefs is required to give substance to my belief that a cloud is passing before the sun; but some appropriate set of related beliefs must be there.<sup>1</sup>

Davidson has long been a proponent of meaning holism, but he nonetheless finds one of its consequences unacceptable. Because meaning holism makes beliefs interdependent, there is a danger that a false belief will infect a great number of other beliefs. Thus an interpreter who finds a speaker mistaken in one case might be obliged by meaning holism to find him mistaken in most cases. But according to Davidson, the possibility of massive error threatens interpretability; and since Davidson maintains there can be no language that is uninterpretable, he dismisses the possibility that most of a speaker's beliefs could be false. Meaning holism, then, according to Davidson, must somehow be constrained.

Here Davidson relies upon a causal account of meaning. He holds that in the methodologically most basic cases the content of a belief is given by the cause of that belief and, hence, that in such cases beliefs are true. So interpreters must not, on this view, ascribe beliefs holistically when doing so would render basic beliefs false.

Davidson's proposed solution to the problem he sees with meaning holism is itself problematic, however. According to his causal account, all methodologically basic beliefs are true. But clearly this is wrong. As

<sup>1</sup> Donald Davidson, 'The Method of Truth in Metaphysics', *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford 1985), p. 200.

Davidson himself maintains, there are no epistemically privileged beliefs – any particular belief could in principle be false. So while Davidson is committed to the need for a causal account, it is in keeping with his anti-foundationalism that this account be tempered so that it implies not that *all* methodologically basic beliefs must be true but rather that *most* methodologically basic beliefs must be true. Davidson's considered view, therefore, should presumably be that neither the possibility of massive error, nor a guarantee of general veridicality in basic cases is acceptable – some basic beliefs will likely be false, though most must be true.

This attempt to find a middle ground between the extremes of massive error and no error at all in basic cases cannot succeed. Once the possibility of error is taken seriously, there is, we will argue, no way in principle to constrain meaning holism. But this conclusion does not have the consequence Davidson finds unacceptable. Meaning holism, though it allows for massive error, does not, as Davidson thinks, undermine interpretability. Interpretation, as Davidson says, requires that causes of beliefs be discoverable; we will show, however, that it does not require that believers be right about the causes of their beliefs. Contrary to Davidson, what ensures interpretability is not that most beliefs are true, but merely that beliefs are caused to have the specific contents they have by events that others can in principle identify and describe.

## I

Imagine a speaker whose uses of the sound 'cloud' are on the whole tied to the same situations to which our own uses of that sound are tied. We are able to discriminate between situations in which this speaker would say, 'A cloud is passing before the sun', and those in which he would not. We are even able to identify and correct his perceptual mistakes. When this speaker expresses a belief by saying, 'A cloud is passing before the sun', and we inform him, in our own words, that the thing passing before the sun has too definite a shape and is too evenly coloured to be a cloud, he accepts that he was wrong, that, as he would put it, 'in fact there is a dirigible, not a cloud, passing before the sun'. Now this speaker holds that what something is made of is extremely important to whether it is truly a 'cloud'. But while we think most, if not all, clouds are composed of water vapour, he thinks 'clouds' are composed of the immaterial thoughts of spirits. For this speaker to be able to believe that 'clouds' are the immaterial thoughts of spirits, he must, of course, believe that the thoughts of spirits exist and that some of them can be perceived by mortals on the ground. But there are no spirits, and thus no spirit thoughts to be perceived. On a holistic account of meaning the speaker's sentence, 'A cloud is passing before the sun', is true

– given his belief that for something to be a ‘cloud’ it must be the immaterial thought of a spirit – if, and only if, an immaterial thought of a spirit is passing before the sun. Since it is not the case that an immaterial thought of a spirit is passing before the sun, a meaning holist must conclude that the speaker has formed a false belief.<sup>2</sup>

If the concept of spirit thoughts is so closely tied to a speaker’s term ‘cloud’ as to be partly constitutive of its meaning, and there are no spirit thoughts, then that speaker’s term ‘cloud’ cannot correctly be applied to anything in the world. This means, in turn, that most if not all beliefs that involve that term are false. The speaker of our example, then, says something false every (or almost every) time he utters a sentence containing his word ‘cloud’.<sup>3</sup> If most of his terms likewise fail to have conditions of correct application, then most (if not all) of his beliefs are false.

Meaning holism poses a threat to the idea that most of our beliefs must be true because there is no general principle a meaning holist can appeal to to limit the effect false beliefs will have on other beliefs. There is no reason why the effect false beliefs have on the meanings of terms will always be restricted to small segments of a speaker’s language, or why some particular false beliefs will render false only some other beliefs. The fact that terms are shared by sentences about very different things, and the fact that beliefs are extensively interconnected, would seem to ensure that a speaker can be massively mistaken about the world.

## II

Despite his commitment to meaning holism, Davidson dismisses *a priori* the idea that it is possible for a speaker to be massively mistaken. All speakers, Davidson rightly maintains, are in principle interpretable, for if there is no way to describe and explain the movements of an individual

<sup>2</sup> In this example it is assumed that the meaning of the speaker’s sentence is determined solely by what he himself believes. It might be thought that this assumption is mistaken, that it is the linguistic practices of a speaker’s community that determine what the speaker’s sentences mean. There is, however, a serious problem with this idea. Speakers seldom if ever know all of the linguistic conventions of their communities; but, if meanings are interconnected in the way the holist supposes, then someone who is ignorant of one convention will likely be ignorant of countless others. Hence, if it is community practices that determine meanings, it would seem that speakers often know neither what their words mean nor what they believe. But a speaker who lacked such knowledge would not be interpretable. (See Donald Davidson, ‘First Person Authority’, *Dialectica*, 38 (1984), and Davidson, ‘Knowing One’s Own Mind’, *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 60 (1987).) We comment on a related matter in footnote 10 below.

<sup>3</sup> In one of his discussions of meaning holism Davidson comes close to saying explicitly that false beliefs can infect the meanings of terms in such a way as to make them generally inapplicable and thus render countless sentences and beliefs false. See Davidson, ‘Thought and Talk’, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, p. 168.

using such familiar concepts as 'belief', 'desire', 'sentence', and 'meaning', there is no reason to think any of those movements are linguistic acts.<sup>4</sup> But, he adds, a speaker who has mainly false beliefs would be uninterpretable, and therefore would not in fact be a speaker or have beliefs. Thus it is not possible for a speaker to be massively mistaken.

Clearly it is not possible for speakers standardly to make simple perceptual errors. Speakers do, of course, sometimes make mistakes about what is in front of them, and thus come, by their own standards, to misapply their words. A speaker might, for instance, mistakenly apply his term 'mouse' to a shoe in a dark corner. But such mistakes must be exceptional. This is because the sole evidence a radical interpreter, an interpreter unfamiliar with her subject's language and lacking prior knowledge of his beliefs and desires, can have of what her subject's terms mean is the regularity with which he applies them to objects and events. Perceptual errors foster misapplications of terms, and misapplications of terms introduce irregularities into behaviour. The idea of an individual who standardly makes perceptual errors is therefore the idea of an individual who evinces no regularity in his application of sounds or marks to things. But when there is no regularity, neither the concept 'application' nor the concept 'misapplication' can gain purchase, and thus neither can the concepts 'term' and 'meaning'; and, as said above, when these concepts can gain no purchase there is nothing to interpret.

Our concern, however, is with the misidentifications, and thus the false beliefs, meaning holism directs interpreters to ascribe to speakers who think such things as 'clouds are the immaterial thoughts of spirits' or 'the earth is flat'. The misidentifications such speakers make do not rest on simple perceptual errors. The argument of the preceding paragraph shows that it is impossible for a speaker to have mainly false beliefs if this would deprive his application of words to things of all regularity. But there is no obvious reason why a speaker who has false beliefs that render most of his terms inapplicable would fail to apply his terms to objects and events in regular ways. Though according to the holistic account the speaker of the above example misapplies his term 'cloud' when he applies it to a cloud, he still does regularly apply his term to a particular sort of thing in the world, namely, clouds, and would count himself mistaken if he applied it to something else. Thus Davidson needs some further argument if he is to maintain generally that a speaker cannot be massively mistaken.

The argument that follows is, we believe, in keeping with Davidson's views. It builds on the claims about radical interpretation found in the argument why no speaker can standardly make perceptual errors. There it

<sup>4</sup> Donald Davidson, 'The Myth of the Subjective', in Michael Krausz (ed.), *Relativism: Interpretation and Confrontation* (Notre Dame, 1989), p. 160.

was said that a radical interpreter's sole source of evidence for the meanings of her subject's terms is the regularity with which he applies them to things in the world. Thus, it would seem, if interpreters could not presume that in most cases terms mean just what they are regularly applied to, there would be no way for them to begin to collect evidence of what their subjects' terms do mean, and therefore no way for them to begin to interpret their subjects. But if a speaker is massively mistaken because his terms cannot correctly be applied to any existing things, the regularity with which he applies them to things could *not* be taken by an interpreter in most cases to be direct evidence of what they mean. Though there is regularity of application, the direct connection between objects and events in the world and the massively mistaken speaker's words has been severed. This lack of direct connection would make it impossible for an interpreter to begin to discover the true meaning of the speaker's sentences, and thus would render him uninterpretable. But, again, no speaker can be in principle uninterpretable, and therefore no speaker can be massively mistaken about the world.

It follows from this discussion that an interpreter must take her subject's sentence, 'A cloud is passing before the sun', to involve the concept of those things to which his term 'cloud' is regularly applied. The speaker's sentence, 'Clouds are the immaterial thoughts of spirits', will turn out to be a sentence conceptually about the clouds above us, and to be false because the clouds above us are made of water; it will not, that is to say, turn out to be a sentence partly constitutive of the meaning of the speaker's term 'cloud'.

### III

The argument that there could not be a language that cannot be used to express many truths is intimately connected to an account of the identity of belief and the source of meaning quite different from meaning holism. Davidson holds that in methodologically most basic cases, cases such as 'A cloud is passing before the sun' and 'This is the earth', the object of a belief is the cause of that belief.<sup>5</sup> On this causal account of belief and meaning, the content of basic beliefs is provided directly by the world. As Davidson says, on this account 'your utterance means what mine does if belief in its truth is caused by the same events and objects'.<sup>6</sup> Thus, in a methodologically basic case, the belief that a cloud is passing before the sun is the belief that it is because it was caused by a cloud passing before the

<sup>5</sup> Donald Davidson, 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge' in Ernest LePore (ed.), *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 317-18.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 318.

sun. Further, on this account, the basic non-logical terms found in methodologically basic beliefs derive their meaning from their application to things, and not from the roles they play in various beliefs. 'Cloud' means cloud because it is regularly applied to individual clouds.

This causal account of belief and meaning is consistent with the directive to ascribe to speakers true beliefs about the things they are observing, or with which they are otherwise in sensory contact. This directive is an aspect of what Davidson calls the principle of charity. The interpreter who sees both that a cloud is passing before the sun and that her subject has his eyes open and is facing toward this event is to ascribe to him the true belief that a cloud is passing before the sun. She ignores other beliefs her subject might have and ascribes to him this particular belief solely on the basis of her appreciation of what objects and events are standing or occurring nearby.<sup>7</sup>

The threat Davidson thinks meaning holism poses to interpretability is removed, then, according to Davidson, when meaning holism is constrained by a causal account of belief and meaning. His causal account requires interpreters not to be holistic about the meanings of terms they see regularly applied to objects and events in the world. Instead, in keeping with the principle of charity, they are required to ascribe to their subjects, in methodologically basic cases, beliefs whose content is given by true descriptions of their causes.

There is, however, an obvious problem with this account of belief and meaning. It seems that since the content of a basic belief is determined by whatever causes the speaker to have that belief, error at the level of most basic beliefs has been ruled out completely. A speaker, for instance, who regularly calls samples of both H<sub>2</sub>O and XYZ 'water', because they are both tasteless, colourless and liquid at room temperature, must be held to be correct to do so, for the meaning of his word 'water' is determined by his applications of the word 'water'. But what if this speaker also believes that the chemical make-up of water is H<sub>2</sub>O, and that anything that is not H<sub>2</sub>O is not water? Is this speaker not making a mistake when he calls a sample of XYZ water? Despite his past applications of 'water' to samples of XYZ, it is difficult to deny that this speaker's belief that water is H<sub>2</sub>O is partly

<sup>7</sup> It is important that the interpreter remember that every event has countless true descriptions. The description that specifies the content of the interpreter's belief might not specify the content of the speaker's belief, though speaker and interpreter are present to the same event. A speaker who witnesses what an interpreter would describe as a cloud passing before the sun at the same time witnesses a white thing passing before the sun and a stratocumulus cloud passing before the sun. What to the interpreter seems the most 'natural' belief might not be the belief formed by the speaker; still, according to the principle of charity the interpreter is to find a *true* description of the event, to identify the content of the belief the event caused with that description, and so to ignore as irrelevant to the belief's content beliefs the speaker has that would render it false.

constitutive of the meaning of his word 'water', and thus that he was wrong to say of samples of XYZ that they were samples of water.

Of course there are situations in which it does make sense to take the cause of a belief directly to give the content of that belief. Rather than ascribe to a speaker a series of errors of application, often it is better that the interpreter ascribe to him some false beliefs about the nature of the things to which he consistently applies his term, or about the meaning of his term itself (these alternatives often come to the same thing). A person who believes that all water is H<sub>2</sub>O but who calls something water just when it is clear, potable, tasteless and liquid at room temperature, and who would call a sample of XYZ water even after discovering that it is XYZ, is, an interpreter might conclude, wrong that all water is H<sub>2</sub>O, or that his word 'water' means what he thinks it does.<sup>8</sup> For this person, though he is unaware that this is so, what is crucial to the correct application of his word are the observable properties of the substance which is present to him.

Still, there are cases in which it is decidedly counterintuitive to take only regularity of application to determine meaning, and so the question arises whether from a Davidsonian perspective the possibility of error in cases of basic beliefs can be explained. Davidson's position on the general issue of the ascription of error is that error must be ascribed when and where, from the point of view of the interpreter's theory, it makes sense to ascribe it: an error is to be ascribed to a speaker when doing so simplifies the interpreter's general theory of that speaker's language, beliefs, and linguistic and non-linguistic behaviour, and does not compromise its explanatory or predictive power.<sup>9</sup> In the above examples it was precisely considerations of how best to describe and explain a range of behaviour, both linguistic and non-linguistic, both actual and counterfactual, that inclined the interpreter to find the speaker mistaken in the way she did. An interpreter concerned with the efficacy of her general theory of her subject will, then, sometimes have reason to hold him mistaken in cases of methodologically basic beliefs as well as in cases of other beliefs.

Something like a principle for the ascription of errors of application is suggested by these examples. One important piece of evidence an interpreter must accommodate in her theory of her subject is what the speaker himself would hold about his application of his term (and how he would behave) should he acquire certain true beliefs about the things to

<sup>8</sup> Since XYZ does not exist, another example might make the point more clearly: a person who thinks all glasses are made of glass but who regularly calls things made either of glass or plastic glasses, and who would not reform his speech should he discover that some items he calls glasses are made of plastic, perhaps should not be thought to misapply his word 'glasses' when talking about a thing in fact made of plastic; he should, rather, be accounted wrong that all glasses are made of glass, or that 'glasses' (in his idiolect) means (is correctly applied to) only glass glasses.

<sup>9</sup> Davidson, 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge', p. 318.

which he has applied his term in the past. Would he, given the idiolect he has been speaking (not some idiolect he or his interpreter thinks he *should* have been speaking),<sup>10</sup> maintain he was sometimes or always wrong in his application of his term, or would he instead think that he was wrong about the nature of that to which he correctly applied it?<sup>11</sup> The rule of thumb for ascribing an error of application and thus a false basic belief is this: if an interpreter has reason to believe that her subject, if apprised of the relevant facts, would think (or would behave as if he thinks) he has been wrong in his application of the term, then, because there is no easier way to explain why he would think this (or would behave this way), she should take him to have made an error, or a series of errors, of application. On the other hand, if an interpreter has reason to believe her subject would not think (or would not behave as if he thinks) he has been wrong in his applications of the term, she should take him not to have made an error of application, but rather to have been mistaken about how the world is or what his term really means.<sup>12</sup>

This rule of thumb amounts to a constraint on the causal account of belief and meaning. By itself, we said, that account makes it impossible for a speaker to have any false basic beliefs. However, the rule by which speakers can be held to have misapplied their terms, and thus by which they can be ascribed false basic beliefs, allows interpreters sometimes to bring some of their subjects' beliefs to bear on their ascriptions of basic beliefs.

The principle of charity must be revised if the causal account of belief and meaning is constrained in this way. Interpreters are charitably to identify the contents of their subjects' most basic beliefs with true

<sup>10</sup> This qualification is important. An error of application is not an error about what a dictionary, or an average or elite group of speakers, would say concerning some term that has the same sound or shape as the term the speaker used. A speaker has not necessarily misapplied his term 'insect' when he calls a spider an 'insect'; perhaps in his idiolect 'insect' covers not just insects but some other arthropods as well (and maybe not even all insects). A speaker can, of course, mistakenly think he uses a term in the way a dictionary or other authority says it is standardly or properly used. But such a speaker is wrong about what the authority says about the conventional meaning of the term, not about what the term means when he uses it.

Davidson discusses the difference between conventional meaning and literal meaning, and between what a speaker's words mean and what a speaker means by his words, in 'Moods and Performances' and 'Communication and Convention', both in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, and in 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs', LePore (ed.), *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*.

<sup>11</sup> A speaker can, in some cases, legitimately deny that he has made either sort of mistake. Perhaps he just came to learn something new, such as that there are at least two types of water. A person who only *supposed* that all water was H<sub>2</sub>O, but who never actually held the *belief* that it was, neither changes nor loses a belief on hearing about XYZ – he simply gains a new belief. Something like this could easily be true of someone who learns that there are plastic glasses, or that there are two types of jade, or that zebras do not all belong to one species.

<sup>12</sup> There might well be cases in which there is no way to decide between whether an error of application or an error of meaning has been made; after all, the interpreter might be speculating, with little solid evidence, about counterfactual matters.

descriptions of their causes, but they are to take each of their early identifications as provisional, as a working hypothesis. They are to interpret so that at least *most* of their subjects' basic beliefs come out true, but they might be required by considerations of overall efficacy to re-evaluate *some* of their initial ascriptions as their theories evolve.

## IV

It might seem that constraining the causal account of meaning with the need to ascribe error holistically reduces the tension we identified between the causal account and meaning holism. The possibility of massive error, which Davidson sees as a threat to interpretability, is removed when meaning holism is constrained by the causal account of meaning, while the untenable consequence of the causal account, that methodologically basic beliefs are necessarily true, is removed when the causal account is constrained by the need to ascribe error holistically. Since each account is constrained by the other, it would seem that interpreters will, in principle, be prevented from finding speakers either necessarily correct in all basic beliefs or wrong about most things.

Indeed, as a practical matter of fact, interpreters will find that most, though not all, of their subject's most basic beliefs (and most of his other beliefs as well) are true. The threat posed by meaning holism is that the meanings of a speaker's terms will be affected by his false beliefs in such a way that his terms are rendered inapplicable to existing things, and that this inapplicability will make false other beliefs that contain these terms. But this threat is undercut just by the fact that the regularity with which a term is applied to a thing, or a type of thing, turns out in most cases to be crucially constitutive of its meaning. Interpreters are grossly unlikely ever to find a massively mistaken speaker primarily because speakers do not need to have, and rarely think they need to have, much detailed knowledge of what things are made of, where they come from, or what their place is in some grand design, to be able to talk about them and know what they are talking about. 'Clouds are those things', a speaker asked what he means by his term 'cloud' might insist – 'That is what I mean by "cloud".' The chance of finding a speaker whose belief that 'clouds are the thoughts of spirits' is central to his concept 'cloud' – despite the fact that he consistently applies his term only to things that are clouds – is no doubt small. Smaller still is the chance of finding a speaker for whom the meanings of *most* of the basic terms he uses are intimately tied to scientific, metaphysical, and theological beliefs, whether they be false or true, and not to beliefs that stem from his practical manipulations of familiar items. Such

a speaker would be one who, should he discover that his high-level beliefs are false, would not say he was wrong about some of the things he was speaking of, but rather that he was speaking of things he now knows do not exist. In all probability, there has never been such a speaker.

Yet while it is exceedingly improbable that a speaker will be massively mistaken, it is not, contrary to Davidson, in principle impossible, and it is the in principle question that has been posed. It is not easy to imagine circumstances in which a speaker would be massively mistaken, for such circumstances would be highly bizarre. But consider these two examples. (i) Suppose there is a speaker who believes that, as he says, 'Clouds are the thoughts of spirits.' This speaker is a devout animist who sees spirits everywhere. His explanations of natural phenomena are thoroughly intentional. In fact, the meanings of his basic terms so depend on his theological and metaphysical beliefs that were he to come to believe that animism is false, he would hold himself mistaken in every (or almost every) particular belief he has about the world. Since animism is false, this speaker is massively mistaken about the world.<sup>13</sup>

(ii) Suppose a speaker's brain has just been envatted, and in such a way that the environment of the vat seems as familiar to him as the environment of his home did the moment before. Should this person become aware that he is now a brain in a vat, he would think almost every thought he had had after being envatted was false, for since being envatted he has not been perceiving the walls of his room, or anything he would rightly call walls at all. Although because of the cleverness of the envattor he had been getting around in the vat world as well as he did in the world that contains the vat, he had been correctly applying few if any of his terms to the things that were causally responsible for his beliefs. He was, then, not only mistaken in thinking he was not a brain in a vat, but mistaken in his beliefs about his environment.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> This example does not support the idea that animists *are* massively mistaken. Animists need be no more mistaken about most of the sensible and insensible things of the world than are Christians, Berkeleians, Newtonians, or eliminative materialists. An animist who comes to find animism false might correctly view his previous self as deeply mistaken, but not massively mistaken. He might discover that trees are not a certain sort of visible spirit, not that 'trees', because nothing is a certain sort of visible spirit, do not exist. The point is that false scientific, metaphysical, or theological views *can* render many and even all methodologically basic beliefs false, not that they must or even that they actually ever have.

<sup>14</sup> After a while in the vat the situation becomes more complicated, for soon there develops a history of causal relations between computer events and the speaker's beliefs, desires and actions. The contents of his mental states and the meanings of his sentences become inextricably tied to their actual causes in the vat environment. He never becomes aware that he has become a brain in a vat, and so is at least *deeply* mistaken about the nature of his existence; but as he comes to have a history as a vat dweller, the contention that he is *massively* mistaken, that most beliefs he forms are false, becomes harder to formulate and defend.

## V

If it is possible for a speaker to speak a language in which no basic terms can correctly be applied to existent things, and thus for him to have mainly false basic beliefs,<sup>15</sup> it is illegitimate for an interpreter to hold, prior to interpretation, that her subject has mainly true basic beliefs. Whether he does have mainly true beliefs is something to be discovered. But the presumption that most of a speaker's most basic beliefs are true is an important part of the principle of charity; and, Davidson maintains, interpretation requires charity, for without it an interpreter cannot establish connections between language and the world. Are we, then, rejecting the principle of charity and asserting that it is possible for a language to be uninterpretable?

In order to answer this question, we must distinguish the charitable methodological maxim with which we are concerned – specifically, that the interpreter interpret so as to make most basic beliefs true – from the ontological presupposition that underlies it, the presupposition that most basic beliefs *are* true.<sup>16</sup> What the argument sketched above shows, we maintain, is that the methodological maxim must be followed in the *initial* stages of interpretation. That is, we agree that interpretation can get off the ground only if the interpreter begins by assuming that most of her subject's basic beliefs are true. But though regularity of application is the only source of evidence of word meaning an interpreter has to begin with, it is clearly not the only source available to her in the ongoing process of interpretation. At later stages evidence of the contribution particular beliefs make to the meanings of her subject's words can come from any of his linguistic and non-linguistic acts – from his inferences, his bets, his choices. The need to develop a systematic theory of her subject, one that reveals him to be a rational agent and explains his behaviour, might sometimes require the interpreter to re-evaluate her earlier hypotheses about what his words mean, as we have said, and to charge him with errors of application even when his use of a term is perfectly regular. And there is, we maintain, no in principle reason why her need for a comprehensive, consistent and powerful explanatory theory would not lead her to find most of his basic terms without application to existent things, and his beliefs mainly false.

<sup>15</sup> It is not possible, however, for a speaker's *first* language to consist mainly of terms that cannot be correctly applied to objects and events in his environment. A speaker cannot come to have the sophisticated scientific, metaphysical and theological beliefs that can render his basic beliefs false unless he has already acquired a language. Furthermore, it is not enough that a speaker's metaphysical beliefs be false for him to be massively mistaken; he must also have developed an awareness of the power of explanation and the comfort of belief, and this awareness presupposes the ability to explain things and have beliefs.

<sup>16</sup> The terms 'methodological maxim' and 'ontological presupposition' appear in J. E. Malpas, 'The Nature of Interpretative Charity', *Dialectica*, 42 (1988).

An interpreter must begin by being charitable, and strive continually to be charitable, but the pressures exerted by her evolving theory *could* bring her to find her subject massively mistaken about the world.

Here Davidson would no doubt object that there *is* a reason why an interpreter's re-evaluation of her initial ascription of basic beliefs cannot eventually bring her to find her subject massively mistaken. We have said that an interpreter is justified in charitably ascribing true basic beliefs to her subject in the initial stages of interpretation simply because, on methodological grounds, she *must* ascribe true basic beliefs. Davidson would agree that use of the maxim in early stages is justified methodologically; but, he would ask, if the methodological maxim is not accompanied by the ontological presupposition that most of the speaker's basic beliefs *are* true, what guarantee is there that an interpreter who employs the maxim initially can succeed in her endeavour? For Davidson, given the maxim's ontological presupposition, since the regularity with which words are applied to things is direct evidence of what those words mean, interpretation is just a matter of discovering which words are regularly applied to what things. Charitable interpretation is always potentially successful just because correct application is accessible directly through regular application. However, *no* assignment of true basic beliefs to a massively mistaken speaker will assign to him any belief he actually has; in the case of a massively mistaken speaker, the question 'What counts as the correct application of a term?' seems divorced from the question 'To what is that term regularly applied?' What, then, ensures that an interpreter can get from charitable ascriptions of true beliefs to a correct account of her subject's massively mistaken beliefs? Unless we can answer this question, it would seem that by dispensing with the ontological presupposition we are committing ourselves to the possibility of uninterpretable languages.

We begin our answer by noting, with Davidson, that speakers come to have beliefs and other propositional attitudes because of events in the world, and that beliefs and other attitudes are themselves causes of events in the world. We also accept, with Davidson, the claim that there are no events that cannot, in principle, be described. We would add to what Davidson says, though, that there must be causal explanations of such facts as that a speaker who sees a cloud passing before the sun, and who thus forms the belief that a cloud is passing before the sun, formed *that* belief, and not the belief, say, that a stratocumulus cloud is passing before the sun. This is to say that why the belief a speaker forms has the *specific* content it does is also something that can be explained causally. Davidson is certainly aware of this, but he neglects to consider how it makes possible the ascription of false basic beliefs. One can in the causal course of things

acquire a concept that cannot correctly be applied to any existing thing, and then apply that concept regularly to some existing things. Neither the causal history behind one's acquisition of an inapplicable concept, nor one's application of it to some existing things, nor the effects of one's application, is in principle inaccessible to an interpreter.

What ensures that an interpreter can get from charitable ascriptions of true basic beliefs to correct ascriptions of mainly false basic beliefs? Our answer is simply that speaker and interpreter are in causal contact with the same objects and events. However differently they describe their common environment, what is causally responsible for the fact that the speaker describes it as he does, employing the concepts he does, is something about which the interpreter can theorize, and, in principle, get right. When an interpreter's efforts to explain her subject's behaviour do not go well, she can re-examine her ascriptions of true basic beliefs, and attempt to determine just what concepts are available to him and thus what concepts actually figure in his basic beliefs. While truth speeds interpretation along, it is not what makes it possible; all that is required for interpretation is that there be causes of what precisely the subject thinks and of the fact that he possesses just the concepts he does, and that there be effects of his thinking that way. There is, of course, no guarantee that an interpreter will in fact be able to fashion a correct theory of her subject's beliefs and language, for she might lack either evidence or ingenuity; but there is no reason why, with evidence and ingenuity, she cannot fashion a correct theory.

Our difference with Davidson can be brought out in another way. In order to be interpretable in principle, a speaker must have beliefs about sensible things in the world like trees and clouds – about things, that is, that are publicly accessible. It is Davidson's contention that if they are beliefs *about* these things, either true or false, then the speaker must have many *true* beliefs about them, for otherwise they would be beliefs about other things, or not beliefs at all. Davidson's thinking here must be understood in a particular way. The sense of 'about' on which it depends is what might be called the conceptual sense: in order to have a belief about an object, in this sense, one must have the concept of that sort of object. Now it is true that to have a concept of a sort of object one must have many true beliefs in which that concept figures. But there is another sense of 'about', which might be called the causal sense: to have a belief about an object, in this sense, requires that one's application of a certain concept to that object be caused by that object. Thus, a person caused by clouds to have beliefs about – in the conceptual sense – spirit thoughts has beliefs about – in the causal sense – clouds. The question that must be asked here, then, is would a speaker who had few beliefs conceptually about the world be interpretable simply in virtue of having beliefs caused by the world?

According to Davidson, a speaker with few beliefs conceptually about the world might not be interpretable; though having beliefs causally about the world is necessary for interpretability, it is not sufficient. This is, Davidson would argue, because the concepts that figure in a speaker's beliefs, though the speaker is caused by public objects and events to apply them in consistent ways to public objects and events, might somehow in their content be private, and thus not knowable by his interpreter. Our view is that this worry is needless. The concepts a speaker applies to things have themselves been acquired by that speaker in his causal intercourse with the world, and thus are in principle accessible to the interpreter, whether or not they are conceptually about what caused them. What makes speakers in principle interpretable is not merely that they apply concepts in regular ways to publicly accessible things, but that publicly accessible things are causally responsible for their acquisition of particular concepts in the first place.

## VI

We have argued that the force of meaning holism is greater than even Davidson acknowledges; it cannot, as he thinks, be constrained by a causal account of meaning. This means that the charitable practice of taking speakers to have mainly true basic beliefs cannot be held to rest on the ontological presupposition that all speakers have mainly true basic beliefs; rather, the practice is justified in the early stages of interpretation just because there is no other option. Taking charity to be warranted solely on methodological grounds does not, however, open up the possibility of a speaker being uninterpretable. The possibility of interpretation rests not on a causal account of meaning that identifies the content of a belief with a true description of the event that caused it, but just on the fact that for any belief whatever there is some causal explanation of why it has the content it does.

In closing, let us make a few remarks about the possible source of what we have argued is Davidson's mistake. Davidson is concerned to champion a causal account of meaning over representationalist accounts. One of his main goals here is to dissolve the various sceptical problems engendered by an image of the mind as a surface that represents to itself things external to it. So in giving his causal account of meaning, Davidson is, to put it somewhat simplistically, siding with the contribution of the 'outer' (the world) to meaning, and against the contribution of the 'inner' (experience, sense data, conceptual schemes). This distinguishes him from Cartesians and Kantians, traditional and contemporary. At the same time Davidson is firmly committed to meaning holism, and indeed to holism about mind and

action generally. This distinguishes him from causal theorists of reference, materialists, biological functionalists, behaviourists, and most other partisans of the 'outer', traditional and contemporary. But despite his commitment, Davidson evinces a reluctance to give holism its due. What is the source of this reluctance? Perhaps, since the interconnectedness of belief is an aspect of the 'inner', Davidson associates it with accounts he has rejected. His attempt to constrain meaning holism would then be connected with his more general reaction against views that foster scepticism.

We have argued against Davidson that meaning holism need not be constrained. Though holism captures the contribution of the mind to meaning, on its own it is not problematic. It can be combined either with a representationalist or with a causal account of meaning. When combined with a representationalist account, the possibility arises that meaning is inaccessible to others, and sceptical problems ensue. When, however, it is combined with a broadly causal account of meaning, like the one outlined in section V of this paper, meaning holism poses no threat to the accessibility of meaning, and thus does not lead to sceptical problems. Davidson recognizes that meaning holism is an essential part of a correct conception of linguistic meaning; since, however, his worry that holism makes meaning inaccessible is groundless, he has no reason not to embrace it fully.<sup>17</sup>

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