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1. Introduction

The legitimacy of transcendental arguments – arguments which are based on an assertion of the form "X is a necessary condition for the possibility of Y", concluding that X must be true because of the truth of Y – has been widely questioned.[1] Transcendental arguments that purport to establish truths, are said to be implicitly based on dubitable antirealist assumptions, such as idealism or verificationism. In the case of idealism, not only is it a highly controversial position in contemporary philosophy, it is also a view that is categorically unacceptable, if one would accept it as a crucial premise in any transcendental argument. For, if we assert that reality and truth are ultimately constructed by our judgments, perceptions or other mental features, a transcendental argument for any truth about the mind-*independent* world becomes contradictory, since idealism essentially holds that reality and truth are fundamentally mind-*dependent*. Thus, idealism is itself a form of scepticism in taking the mental or mentally mediated world as the only available reality.[2]

In denial of the general illegitimacy of transcendental arguments, Donald Davidson argues transcendentally for 'doxastic veridicality', the thesis that most of our beliefs are necessarily true.[3] In doing so, he makes the critical reader suspicious whether such a strong claim can be established, considering the questionable nature of transcendental reasoning. In addition, Davidson has also been accused of being an idealist by several philosophers.[4] As a result, the suspicion only grows.

Does Davidson's transcendental argument for doxastic veridicality contain a concealed idealist assumption? In my step-by-step analysis of Davidson's argument, I will discuss all of its premises and the relevant objections against them. It starts from Davidson's Principle of Charity, subsequently applying it to the hypothetical case of the so-called 'omniscient interpreter', which will finally lead us, via a critique of languagehood, to the conclusion that our beliefs are largely true. Throughout the whole of my programme, Davidson's arguably idealist tendencies are of grave concern to me. Essentially, discussions of the Principle of Charity, the omniscient interpreter and languagehood will support the pursuit of discovering any unacceptable form of idealism in Davidson's transcendental argument, and so, objections that would not clarify what a given premise is all about and would not serve the quest for idealism either, will not be discussed. To look forward, we will see that assumptions of rationality, lack of asymmetry and translatability pose serious problems for Davidson's argument with respect to idealist tendencies.

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[1] Robert Stern, 2015, 'Transcendental Arguments', in Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2015/entries/transcendental-arguments/.

[2] Robert Stern, 2000, 'The Idealism Objection', *Transcendental Arguments and Scepticism*, pp. 49-53.

[3] Donald Davidson, 1983, 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge', in ibid., 2001, *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, pp. 137-157.

[4] The main figures making accusations are Thomas Nagel and Simon Evnine, whom I will bring to the foreground when their criticisms are relevant.

2. The Argument

Robert Stern presents Davidson's argument in 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme' (1984) as a truth-directed transcendental argument for the reliability of our doxastic practices.[5] Since my inquiry is focused on Davidson's transcendental argument for doxastic veridicality, we will confine and mould Stern's outline in such a way that it becomes an argument for the claim that most of our beliefs are true.

Furthermore, Stern starts with two premises formulated in explicitly Wittgensteinian terms that underlie Davidson's transcendental argument – arbitrarily to my mind. For, although the Wittgensteinian premises are truly an indispensable part of the argument, they are not the transcendental foundation from which Davidson argues towards the veridical nature of our beliefs. Rather, it is the Principle of Charity (or, as it is sometimes called, the Principle of Rational Accommodation).[6] Therefore, we will take it as our first premise:

(P1)   *For interpretation to be possible at all, any interpreter must take the speaker's beliefs to be mostly true by his (the interpreter's) standards.[7]*

This is the imperative given by the Principle of Charity. In Davidson's formulation it is aimed at the optimization of the speaker's intelligibility: we must assume general correctness and consistency in a speaker's belief-system in order to understand him as well as possible. Davidson insists that the Principle of Charity is rather molecular, consisting of two atoms: the Principle of Coherence and the Principle of Correspondence. The former atom commands an interpreter to "discover a degree of logical consistency in the thought of the speaker", while the latter "prompts the interpreter to take the speaker to be responding to the same features of the world that he (the interpreter) would be responding to under similar circumstances."[8] In summary, interpretation is made possible through the ascription of beliefs that are optimally coherent and corresponding with external events in the world.

What must be borne in mind here is that the application of the Principle of Charity is not a mere virtue, in rhetoric for example. As a matter of fact, it is (according to Davidson) not even optional:

> The policy of rational accommodation or charity in interpretation is not a policy in the sense of being one among many possible successful policies. It is the only policy available if we want to understand other people. So instead of calling it a policy, we might do better to think of it as a way of expressing the fact that creatures with thoughts, values, and speech must be rational creatures, are necessarily inhabitants of the same objective world as ourselves, and necessarily share their leading values with us. We should not think of this as some sort of lucky accident, but as something built into the concepts of belief, desire, and meaning.[9]

Thus, the Principle of Charity is considered the transcendental foundation of interpretation. Recall the definition of a 'transcendental argument' in the introduction: it is an argument based on a claim that X is a necessary condition for the possibility of Y. Here, X has as its content the application of the Principle of Charity and Y is interpretation in general. Thus, for interpretation to be possible, the Principle of Charity must necessarily be applied. In other words: its application is the transcendental condition for interpretation. From this point onwards, Davidson argues what necessarily follows from the possibility of interpretation, until he arrives at the conclusion of our doxastic veridicality.

But before he can reach his destination, Davidson must fend off accusations of idealism. And indeed, the question of idealism is already relevant at this point: could there be an idealist presumption hidden underneath this premise? As I take it, Simon Evnine's characterization of Davidson as an idealist is exactly directed at the Principle of Charity that I have displayed here. Evnine detects an idealist position regarding propositional content implicit throughout Davidson's interpretative project. He calls it

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[5] For Stern's logical outline of Davidson's transcendental argument, see 'Appendix I'.

[6] Recall the definition of a 'transcendental argument' in the introduction: an argument based on a claim that X is a necessary condition for the possibility of Y. Here, X has as its content the application of the Principle of Charity and Y is interpretation in general. Thus, for interpretation to be possible, the Principle of Charity must necessarily be applied. In this sense, the Principle of Charity is the transcendental foundation of Davidson's argument.

[7] The original premise in Stern's outline is: "In interpreting a speaker's utterances, any interpreter must take them to be mostly true by his (the interpreter's) standards"; see 'Appendix I'.

[8] Donald Davidson, 1991, 'Three Varieties of Knowledge', in ibid., 2001, *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, p. 211.

[9] Donald Davidson, 1984, 'Expressing Evaluations', in ibid., 2004, *Problems of Rationality*, p. 36.

"rationalist idealism": the view that "what people actually believe, desire and mean is, at least partly, constituted by what is ideally rational for them to believe, desire and mean."[10] Evnine distinguishes this idealist theory enjoining Davidson's "interpretative, hermeneutic project" from the realism permeating his "causal, explanatory project" – two projects that contradict each other at some points due to the simple fact that the former sees the world as mind-dependent and the latter does not.[11]

My intuition to connect Evnine's criticism with this particular premise is based on Davidson's characterization of the Principle of Charity as a collection of norms of rationality and Evnine's focus on rationality in the idealism he articulates. What Evnine is essentially saying, is that a speaker's beliefs and the contents and meanings of them are actually constituted by the interpreter who applies the Principle of Charity to the speaker's speech behaviour. The interpreter then finds, through the assumption of rationality in the speaker, that the speaker is largely correct (by the interpreter's light) about the world. Furthermore, it might not be a coincidence that Evnine literally speaks of the ideal rationality of "what people *believe, desire and mean*", while Davidson says (in the above quote from 'Expressing Evaluations') that the fact "that creatures with thoughts, values, and speech must be rational creatures [is] built into the concepts of *belief, desire and meaning*."[12] The similarity is evident.[13]

Why at all is this type of idealism relevant to the 'idealism objection' discussed in the introduction? Recall that in transcendental arguments, idealism is often seen as the hidden premise enabling the reduction of 'appearance' to 'truth'. The idealist theory described by Evnine is not in any way identical to a simple assumption such as 'What there is, is constituted by what appears to us' or 'Reality is constituted by appearance'. Nonetheless, this version of idealism is problematic for the legitimacy of the argument for doxastic veridicality, because it assumes that the recognition of beliefs, desires and meanings as rational constitutes their actuality. Thus, intentional phenomena would be constituted by ideal rationality.

If what people actually believe, desire and mean is constituted by ideal rationality, then how is irrationality possible? Evnine talks about irrational *action*, but we are concerned with irrational *belief*. How can we hold irrational beliefs? Irrationality, as Davidson conceives it, can be understood in two different ways: as irrationality *by the interpreter's light*, or as *internal* irrationality.[14] The former is of course ubiquitous: we attribute irrationality to another's beliefs quite frequently. For instance, I might think the world is such-and-such, while someone else believes the world to be slightly different. Given the evidence I have about the world (correspondence) and the logical constraints on belief (coherence), I am not able to ascribe perfect rationality if I cannot explain the falsities in his belief-system. Thus, his assertions seem irrational to some extent. Moreover, it follows from the attribution of extensive irrationality that the speaker's speech behaviour becomes unintelligible. With the ascription of global irrationality, interpretation has failed. Thus, for interpretation to be possible at all, we must ascribe general rationality to the speaker's assertions.

The latter form of irrationality, the internal kind, is more interesting. For how is it possible to be internally irrational at all? Are beliefs not by their very nature rational, given the fact that they are formed in accordance with the evidence available to the believer, whether it be delusional evidence or evidence conforming to reality? These intuitions are all generally correct, but only apply to *reasons* as possible causes of belief.

Consider the phenomenon of cognitive dissonance. Aesopus wants to eat the grapes hanging from a tree. He tries to reach them, but does not succeed. In his very failure, he decides that he did not want to eat the grapes anyway, now having formed the belief that the grapes are probably sour. This story is philosophically interesting, for it is a typical case of irrationality. Aesopus initially held the belief that the grapes were desirable, but somehow came to form the belief that they were inedible, without having any evidence for their sourness whatsoever. How is such a scenario possible?

Davidson would deal with the problem of Aesopus' irrationality as follows. All examples of internal irrationality are, according to Davidson, "characterized by the fact that there is a mental cause that

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[10] Simon Evnine, 1991, *Donald Davidson*, pp. 148-149.
[11] Simon Evnine, 1991, *Donald Davidson*, p. 175.
[12] Emphasis added in both quotes.
[13] Even though I think claims of these phrases being coincidentally similar in terminology are questionable, my argument surely does not depend on the similarity. The *terminological* similarity merely adds further emphasis on the *substantive* similarity.
[14] Donald Davidson, 1982, 'Paradoxes of Irrationality', in ibid., 2004, *Problems of Rationality*, pp. 169-188.

is not a reason."[15] The irrationality of Aesopus, manifest in the inconsistency between the initial belief "The grapes are sweet" and the latter belief "The grapes are sour", is explainable by pointing at the mental state – a desire that the grapes be sour caused by the impossibility of eating them – that is not a reason for his belief in the sourness of the grapes. In fact, there is no reason for the latter belief. The belief is held by Aesopus, yet unjustified given the coherence criterion of justification: "all that counts as evidence or justification for a belief must come from the same totality of belief to which it belongs."[16] In other words: one's belief must be coherent with his belief-system, and in the case of Aesopus, it is not.

If Davidson truly holds that people's beliefs are constituted by what is ideally rational for them to believe, then he finds himself in contradiction with his account of irrationality. A rationalist idealist theory of belief must hold that beliefs cannot possibly be irrational. However, there is a nuance between the irrationality of a belief, and the irrationality of a belief-*system*. Although particular beliefs can be irrational, irrationality cannot be the norm, since beliefs can only be irrational in virtue of a largely coherent system. It is simply impossible to be mostly irrational, because doxastic irrationality assumes a mental cause of a belief that is not a reason and is at the same time inconsistent with the doxastic economy. With a majority of 'irrational' beliefs, the inconsistency with the entire system vanishes, making the system's 'irrational' status vanish accordingly.

Belief is, indeed, in its very nature rational. If one has reasons for believing, then one is generally rational. If one does not have any reasons, it would not be irrationality we are dealing with, but non-rationality. The causes of his beliefs would not be reasons and, as a consequence, he could not be identified as having any beliefs at all. He would properly be identified as someone who is merely uttering sounds in a pseudo-linguistic fashion – as an animal in human's clothing. This is essentially what Davidson means when he says:

> The methodological advice to interpret in a way that optimizes agreement should not be conceived as resting on a charitable assumption about human intelligence that might turn out to be false. If we cannot find a way to interpret the utterances and other behaviour of a creature as revealing a set of beliefs largely consistent and true by our standards, we have no reason to count that creature as rational, as having beliefs, or as saying anything.[17]

Evnine's accusation is also manifest in the problem of asymmetry between knowing one's own mind and knowing other minds. He says: "For an idealist position, according to which content is a kind of theoretical construct, there ought to be no asymmetry."[18] If one takes the idealist position, the content of other minds is theoretically constructed with the application of the Principle of Charity. With this idealism, the project of interpreting the mental content of others becomes successful. However, one's own mind does not appear to us as a theoretical construct needed to grasp the meaning of our propositional attitudes. Then why do we apply to others the same mental concepts as we do to ourselves? Hence, Evnine thinks that asymmetry is a problem for Davidson; rationalist idealism must deny that "we know the contents of our own minds better than we know the contents of other people's minds", which is an absurd denial.[19]

According to Davidson, there are three varieties of knowledge: knowledge of the world, knowledge of one's mind and knowledge of other minds. These varieties are inextricably connected; we cannot know things in one realm without appeal to the other. Thus, the three types of knowledge form a triangular shape. Anita Avramides notices that the connection between one's own mind and the minds of others is the "base line", since communication is basic to all knowledge.[20] I take this to be correct if she thereby means that language is a necessary condition for knowledge and mindedness in general. As we will see in (P6), knowledge and mental states have *propositional* content; thus they are linguistic. Since mental concepts (like any other concept) are learned publicly, by the successful ascription of propositional attitudes in the public domain, we know that the propositional attitudes theoretically constructed by

[15] Donald Davidson, 1982, 'Paradoxes of Irrationality', in ibid., 2004, *Problems of Rationality*, p. 179.
[16] Donald Davidson, 1983, 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge', in ibid., 2001, *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, p. 153.
[17] Donald Davidson, 1973, 'Radical Interpretation', in ibid., 1984, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, p. 137.
[18] Simon Evnine, 1991, *Donald Davidson*, p. 179.
[19] Simon Evnine, 1991, *Donald Davidson*, p. 179.
[20] Anita Avramides, 1999, 'Davidson and the new sceptical problem', in Ursula M. Zeglen (ed.), 1999, *Donald Davidson: Truth, Meaning and Knowledge*, p. 139.

others generally conform to our *real* propositional attitudes. Likewise, we learn that the concepts applied to us are also applicable to the minds of others.

It follows that the propositional content of others are not theoretical constructs, even though we ascribe mental concepts as such. The fact that language-speakers have learned to correctly apply mental concepts proves that the theoretical constructs are generally in accordance with the real mental states. Thus, for interpretation to be possible, one must ascribe to others mental concepts as theoretical constructs, as a hypothesis for finding overlap between those theoretical constructs and the real propositional attitudes. However, with regard to introspection, theoretical construction is senseless, given the fact that it is a tool to understand sentences that are semantically uncertain; the meanings of our own thoughts cannot be completely unknown to us. Hence, the problem of asymmetry is solved, by doing away with the idealism that Evnine attributes to Davidson.

I have defended Davidson regarding both the problem of irrationality and the problem of asymmetry, as two specific areas in which his supposed rationalist idealism becomes manifest. Concerning irrationality, it is the *general* aspect of rationality that provides an answer to Evnine's criticism. In claiming that what people believe is constituted by constraints of rationality, he is only right to the extent that this consists in an *overall* constitution of rational beliefs. The claim that a belief-system generally conforms to standards of rationality leaves room for the realist position that one might hold *some* beliefs that are not ideally rational. With respect to asymmetry, theoretical construction does not undermine the fact that a first person perspective offers more insight in one's mind than any other perspective. Essentially, the theoretical construction of the contents of other minds is not constitutive of the actual contents of the minds of other people. To conclude, Evnine's point lacks argumentation and I think it remains to be shown why his rationalist account of propositional content would ultimately make him an idealist.

(P2)   *In interpreting a speaker's beliefs, an omniscient interpreter must take them to be mostly true by his standards.[21]*

As any interpreter would have to, an omniscient one has to apply the Principle of Charity to the speech behaviour of a speaker. Thus, in this premise, Davidson makes the step from the general norm prescribed by the Principle of Charity to a specification of that norm, by determining the nature of the interpreter. Before we engage in a critical discussion of the results of an omniscient interpreter's application of the Principle of Charity, we must raise the question of the intelligibility of the idea of an omniscient interpreter. What is an omniscient interpreter? Is it even possible for an omniscient creature to interpret – i.e. can we properly call his understanding of someone's speech behaviour 'interpretation'?

In short, an omniscient interpreter is a creature that knows everything. According to Davidson, the omniscient interpreter is not only omniscient about events in the world, but also about "what does and would cause a speaker to assent to any sentences in his (potentially unlimited) repertoire."[22] In logical terms: a proposition is true if and only if the omniscient interpreter believes the proposition. Beware that this is in no way idealist (or otherwise antirealist), for the omniscient creature does not *make* propositions true. His belief is not a causal or explanatory conditional for the truth of a proposition: it is a mere correlation between objective truth and the omniscient interpreter's belief.

How could an omniscient creature be able to interpret at all? Is interpretation not a tool for fallible creatures like ourselves to discover truths in the speech behaviour of another? Indeed, an *absolutely* omniscient creature cannot possibly interpret, given the contradiction between the truth-directed function of interpretation and the absolutely omniscient interpreter's belief-system, which encompasses all true and no false propositions. Since the enhancement of one's own understanding as the purpose of interpretation and a semantically uncertain phenomenon (in language: speech behaviour) as the object of interpretation are analytically integral to the concept of interpretation, interpretation presumes, to some degree, ignorance. This difficulty is echoed by Davidson himself in one of his lesser known later works, 'Method and Metaphysics' (1993): "the omniscient interpreter [knows] not everything, for then he would know what the speaker believed without having to go through the process of interpretation."[23] Drawing lessons from this, I propose that the omniscience of any hypothetical interpreter ought to be limited to the non-

[21] The original premise in Stern's outline is: "In interpreting a speaker's utterances, an omniscient interpreter must take them to be mostly true by his standards"; see 'Appendix I'.

[22] Donald Davidson, 1983, 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge', in ibid., 2001, *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, p. 150.

[23] Donald Davidson, 1993, 'Method and Metaphysics', in ibid., 2005, *Truth, Language and History*, p. 44.

mental for him to be an interpreter at all: the composition of the material world is entirely clear to him, and the potential causes of speakers' mental events are as well, but he cannot be aware of the propositional attitudes of a speaker *a priori*. Given this epistemic restriction, it remains a difficulty whether it will pose any problems in further premise of Davidson's argument.

    Having clarified the idea of an omniscient interpreter, we will now turn to the relation between the interpretative programme of the omniscient interpreter, and truth itself.

(P3)   *If an omniscient interpreter would interpret most of a speaker's beliefs as true by his standards, then they are mostly true.[24]*

If an omniscient interpreter aims to grasp the meaning of the speaker's utterances, he is, like any other interpreter, forced to attribute beliefs that are largely correct. "By his own standards, of course, but since these are objectively correct, the fallible speaker is seen to be largely correct and consistent by objective standards."[25] With this third premise, Davidson allows himself to bridge the gap between 'holding true' and 'being true', the gap that is so easily (i.e. *too* easily) crossed by idealists. Accordingly, it is in this premise that the anti-sceptical force of Davidson's transcendental argument is facilitated. If the antecedent can be shown to be fulfilled, it follows that the bridge has in fact been crossed. But before we continue to the discussion of the antecedent, we must consider the implication as a whole first.

    The semantic and epistemic symmetry between the omniscient interpreter's attitude towards the speaker's beliefs (i.e. "This speaker believes that the floor is wet") and the speaker's attitude (i.e. "I believe that the floor is wet") that is associated with an idealist theory of interpretation, is a recurrent difficulty. For the necessity of perfect interpretation of a speaker's speech behaviour by an omniscient interpreter *either* assumes that the speaker's propositional attitudes are entirely manifest in the relation between his utterances and the outer world *or* tells us that beliefs are constituted by ideally rational interpretation.

    However, there is an important aspect of belief-ascription that is easily overseen: the *general* character of the omniscient interpreter's understanding. Indeed, even an omniscient interpreter might not understand a speaker's words to the fullest. This has to do with Davidson's account of irrationality. The irrational beliefs of a speaker are caused internally, by mental states that are not at the same time reasons for his beliefs. From the discussed (a priori) restrictions on the omniscient interpreter's knowledge, we know that he does not have access to the mental world of the speaker and therefore, he cannot appeal to the evidence that is the cause of the speaker's assents. Thus, the origin of irrational beliefs is quite mystical to him. They are unexplainable given the totality of evidence provided by the non-mental world. But again, inexplicability or falsity cannot be the norm in one's doxastic economy, for internal inconsistency can only be recognized as such in relation to a largely true and coherent belief-system.

    Having elucidated the whole implication, it is time to discuss its antecedent.

(P4)   *An omniscient interpreter would interpret most of a language-speaker's beliefs as true.[26]*

This step in the transcendental argument is of crucial importance, for the bridge between 'holding true' and 'being true', which has been facilitated in the previous premise, can actually be crossed by means of affirming the antecedent. So, *why* would an omniscient interpreter ascribe to a language-speaker mostly true beliefs?

    It is sensible to argue for the very possibility of interpretation. By this I do not mean why it is possible for an *omniscient interpreter* to interpret, for we have discussed such matters earlier, but why a *language-speaker* is necessarily interpretable. While the possibility of interpretation from the omniscient interpreter's perspective lies in epistemic questions, interpretability seen from the speaker's viewpoint is essentially a semantic issue.

    For interpretation to be possible, a language-speaker must be largely rational. Language-speakers are, as we have seen in the discussion of irrationality in (P1) and will see again in the discussion of

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[24] The original premise in Stern's outline is: "If an omniscient interpreter interprets most of a speaker's utterances as true by his standards, then they are mostly true"; see 'Appendix I'.

[25] Donald Davidson, 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge', in ibid., 2001, *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, pp. 150-151.

[26] There is no corresponding premise in Stern's outline; see 'Appendix I'.

languagehood in (P6), by definition rational. In a more general sense, *meaning* is the ultimate condition for interpretability: the speech behaviour of a speaker must be meaningful.

What is it for a sentence to have meaning? In Davidson's truth-conditional semantics, the meaning of a sentence is given by its truth-conditions.[27] Davidson connects this view with an externalist account of meaning and content. Endorsing Putnam's semantic externalism, he emphasizes multiple times that 'meanings just ain't in the head'.[28] Instead, meanings are fixed by the causes that are also their objects, and Davidson affirms that his externalism possesses an anti-sceptical force:

> What stands in the way of global skepticism of the senses is, in my view, the fact that we must, in the plainest and methodologically most basic cases, take the objects of a belief to be the causes of that belief. And what we, as interpreters, must take them to be is what they in fact are.[29]

There are broadly two interpretations of the premise, both of which pose, as we will see, problems for Davidson's argument. The first reading is by no means idealist, and makes the argument succeed; however, as a consequence, we might not be able to know the meaning of our own beliefs. The second is distinctively idealist because of mind-dependence tied to holism. Davidson's transcendental argument for doxastic veridicality thus stands in front of what could be called a 'Pyrrhic dilemma': both options would enable the step towards the overall truth of our beliefs, but at a devastatingly high cost.

To get back to the premise, why is it that an omniscient interpreter would interpret most of a language-speaker's beliefs as true? In order to cast light on the matter, consider a brain in a vat who has beliefs such as "I own a house", "I am married with Donna" and "I work at the local bar", while in reality he is nothing but a brain drifting in a highly technological basin controlled by a mad professor. The brain is wired to a hi-tech computer that can send electrical stimuli to all parts of the brain. Thus, the mad professor constructs the brain's sensory experience of an environment that is actually fictional. Now, think of the envatted brain as a language-speaker, uttering sentences stemming from his belief-system. The mad professor would thus be the omniscient interpreter, having perfect access to all the possible evidence for the brain's assents, yet being completely ignorant about the meanings of the brain's beliefs *a priori*.

The brain utters "Donna is asleep". Trying to interpret those words, the mad professor does not translate the utterance as "'Donna is asleep" is true if and only if Donna is asleep', because he knows Donna does not exist. Alternatively, he comes with the following translation:

> "Donna is asleep" is true if and only if the envatted brain is experiencing certain electrical stimuli.

The professor's interpretation is guided by the Principle of Charity and takes into account the external determinant of the meanings of his beliefs, namely the electrical stimulation. Thus, since the meaning of the sentence "Donna is asleep" is found in its cause, of which the professor is fully aware, he must ascribe truth to his assertions. Put in a larger perspective of the brain's entire belief-system: he would interpret most of the brain's beliefs as true.

Obviously, this content externalism leaves room for scepticism about our knowledge of meanings: how do we know what we mean? What contents do my beliefs have? Although the belief-system of the envatted brain is largely true, he is being deceived about the meanings of his own beliefs. We could be in the same position, deluded in thinking we actually know what we mean.

The difficulty in Davidson's argument is in this premise. If we endorse an externalist account of propositional content, our beliefs would be true without us having a guarantee that we grasp their meanings. What good does that do?[30] Davidson seems to defeat the sceptic who is challenging the veridicality of our beliefs, only by inviting another sceptic. He acknowledges this pitfall:

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[27] Donald Davidson, 1967, 'Truth and Meaning', in ibid., 1984, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, pp. 17-36.
[28] Donald Davidson, 1987, 'Knowing One's Own Mind', in ibid., 2001, *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, pp. 15-38; D. Davidson, 1988, 'The Myth of the Subjective', in ibid., 2001, *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, pp. 39-52; Donald Davidson, 1990, 'Epistemology Externalized', in ibid., 2001, *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, p. 197.
[29] Donald Davidson, 1983, 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge', in ibid., 2001, *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective,* p. 151.
[30] Externalism alone is already strong enough to deal with the sceptic, so why would Davidson introduce the Principle of Charity and the omniscient interpreter in his argument for doxastic veridicality? I believe it is because these elements would help him deal with the sceptic who claims that we do not know the contents of our beliefs. Thus, Davidson provides a theory that deals with all malign forms of scepticism at once.

> Those who accept the thesis that the contents of propositional attitudes are partly identified in terms of external factors seem to have a problem similar to the problem of the skeptic who finds that we may be altogether mistaken about the 'outside' world. In the present case, ordinary skepticism of the senses is avoided by supposing that the world itself more or less correctly determines the contents of thoughts about the world. [...] But skepticism is not defeated; it is only displaced onto knowledge of our own minds. Our ordinary beliefs about the external world are (on this view) directed onto the world, but we don't know what we believe.[31]

However, it is easy to overlook an important aspect of Davidson's remark: propositional content is *partly* identified in terms of external factors. Here, Davidson seems to nuance his externalist account of propositional content. This nuance is in accordance with Evnine's characterization of rationalist idealism: "what people actually believe, desire and mean is, *at least partly*, constituted by what is ideally rational for them to believe, desire and mean."[32] (emphasis added) Hence, propositional content has two determinants, according to both Davidson and Evnine: external factors and rational constraints. However, they disagree on the nature of one of them in Davidson's philosophy – rationality.

Evnine thinks, as we have seen, that Davidson's account of rationality is essentially idealist. Furthermore, its idealism is a consequence of Davidson's semantic holism.[33] Oddly, while the meaning of a sentence can be (according to Davidson) identified with its truth-conditions, meaning is also partly determined by the "interconnection that obtains among expressions within the structure of a language as a whole."[34] Consequently, Davidson's two determinants are difficult to unite in his theory of meaning.

Contrary to what Davidson has said from an externalist position against the sceptic, he takes holism as another reason why our beliefs are veridical: "Because of the holistic character of empirical belief, then, it is impossible that all our beliefs about the world are false."[35] Thus, it appears that both holism and externalism are, according to Davidson, able to respond to the sceptic.

Somehow, externalism and holism need to be unified into one account of why an omniscient interpreter would interpret a language-speaker's beliefs as mostly true, without allowing that the language-speaker cannot know the contents of his beliefs, and without any idealist assumption permeating the account. This unification is accomplished in the concept of 'triangulation', which I have already discussed briefly in (P1). There we saw that knowledge of our own minds is not isolated from knowledge of the minds of others and from knowledge of the world. Whereas in that paragraph we were concerned with asymmetry between knowledge of our minds and knowledge of other minds, we focus here on the relation between knowledge of our minds and knowledge of the world, because when taken in isolation, the externalist account of knowledge of the world introduces the scepticism with regards to our lacking to know the contents of our beliefs. However, the problem needs to be solved by investigating the concept of 'triangulation'.

First, it is important to notice a distinction between meanings of *sentences* and meanings of *words*. The former type is tied to externalism, whereas the latter is essentially holistic. As we have seen in the earlier discussion of this premise, the content of a proposition is fixed by the cause that is also its object. This externalism, which specifies the relation between the world and our beliefs, applies to sentences.

With the meaning of a word, however, things are quite different. The meaning of a word is not given by objective truth-conditions, but by all sentences in which the word appears, a relation between our minds and those of others – a relation of sharing a language. This comes into conflict with the externalist account of sentence meanings when we discover that the meaning of a sentence is composed of the meanings of its parts.[36] How is it possible that the meanings of sentences – and therefore propositional content – are specified by both holism and externalism? To return to Evnine's characterization of Davidson's idealism as a consequence of his semantic holism: how can we maintain a realist semantics when the meaning of a sentence is not only determined by objective truth-conditions, but also by its ties with the language to which it belongs?

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[31] Donald Davidson, 1987, 'Knowing One's Own Mind', in ibid., 2001, *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, p. 22.

[32] Simon Evnine, 1991, *Donald Davidson*, p. 149.

[33] Simon Evnine, 1991, *Donald Davidson*, p. 156.

[34] Jeff Malpas, 2015, 'Donald Davidson', in Edward N. Zalta, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

[35] Donald Davidson, 1988, 'Epistemology Externalized', *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, p. 195.

[36] Jeff Malpas, 2015, 'Donald Davidson', in Edward N. Zalta, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

Surely, a satisfactory response to these questions would probably solve the problem of the ignorance regarding our own propositional content, while maintaining our doxastic veridicality as the conclusion. It must provide an account of triangulation that has an externalist element strong enough to conclude that our beliefs are generally true, but not so strong that we are left with a kind of introspective scepticism. But I do not see a simple way of dealing with this matter.

Nonetheless, externalism alone can provide a realist justification of the truth of this premise. Hence, in order to keep the transcendental argument idealism-free, as has been the main purpose of this inquiry, I will interpret Davidson as an overall externalist and conclude that the argument is not contaminated by an idealist assumption, even though the solution to the dilemma leaves us with a severe case of introspective scepticism. As a result, we can continue our quest for now.

To conclude, the difficulty as well as the force of Davidson's transcendental argument is lodged in this premise. It can either make or break the argument. Why would an omniscient interpreter interpret a language-speaker's beliefs as mostly true? The answer lies, for Davidson, in the external nature of 'meaning'.

(P5)   A language-speaker's beliefs are mostly true.[37]

This step needs not much argumentation, because it is merely a logical deduction: we have established an implicative proposition and affirmed its antecedent, thereby enabling ourselves to deduce the consequent as a result. Thus, because of the nature of interpretation, in this argument specified to the omniscient interpreter's interpretation, a language-speaker's beliefs are mostly true.

I have argued to this point in very much the same fashion as Stern, although his interpretation lacks argumentative support. He reasons from this conclusion to the veridicality of *our* beliefs by discussing what the possibility of raising the reliability of our doxastic practices presupposes and introducing as a crucial step the premise that our beliefs have meaning, thus in a rather devious manner.[38] It takes a needless amount of attention to figure out what he is actually saying. Why can we not simply show that we are language-speakers and affirm our doxastic veridicality by means of syllogism at once? This approach appears to me far more intelligible than Stern's, and I will use it henceforth.

(P6)   We are language-speakers.[39]

Why are we language-speakers? What it means to be a language-speaker, and what languagehood consists in, has already been implicit in earlier premises, being essential throughout Davidson's entire programme of proving our doxastic veridicality. As we have seen, the question of languagehood arose when we discussed the omniscient interpreter's application of the Principle of Charity to the language-speaker's utterances, but it has actually been implicit since the very postulation of the transcendental foundation, that is, (P1). Again, but for the first time in such explicit terms, the question re-arises. What is 'language'?[40]

Language is essentially public. To Davidson's philosophy of language, this is arguably the most significant legacy of Ludwig Wittgenstein.[41] It is due to the impossibility of a private language that every language-speaker can be interpreted by definition.

Furthermore, language is a necessary condition for belief, thought and mind in general, since believing and thinking only have content because of their propositional form. Content *is* propositional, and accordingly requires language. It is thought that language and rationality are bi-implicative entities: every rational creature is a language-speaker and every language-speaker is rational.[42] But most importantly, translatability is a criterion of languagehood.[43]

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[37] The original premise in Stern's outline is: "Most of a language-speaker's utterances are true"; see 'Appendix I'.

[38] For the deviation in Stern's logical outline, see 'Appendix I'.

[39] The conception of language is stated by Stern in explicitly Wittgensteinian terms; see premises (1) and (2) in 'Appendix I'.

[40] Here and elsewhere, I use the term 'language' as referring to '*natural* language'.

[41] Recall Wittgenstein's famous Private Language Argument, aimed to show that the idea of a language not understandable by more than one person is incoherent. Ludwig Wittgenstein, 1953, *Philosophical Investigations*.

[42] Kathrin Glüer, 2011, *Donald Davidson: A Short Introduction*, pp. 4-5.

[43] Donald Davidson, 1974, 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme', in ibid., 1984, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, p. 186.

Is Davidson's project perhaps rendered unacceptable due to a form of idealism implicit in his conception of 'language'? With the revelation of 'conceivability idealism' in contemporary philosophy, Thomas Nagel has earned quite some notoriety as a critic of Davidson's conception of 'language'. He allegedly revealed a new variety of idealism in Davidson's philosophy: not "the [old-fashioned] view that what there is must be actually conceived or even currently conceivable", but rather "the position that what there is must be possibly conceivable by us, or possibly something for which we could have evidence."[44] Thus, according to the conceivability thesis, to exist is to be conceivable.

Nagel's criticism is aimed at the argumentation in 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme'. In arguing against the idea of radically different and partially different conceptual schemes, as well as the very idea of a conceptual scheme itself, Davidson raises the question "how well we understand the notion of truth, as applied to language, independent of the notion of translation. The answer is, I think, that we do not understand it independently at all."[45] Evidently, Nagel's label of idealism stems from Davidson's assertion that language is translatable into a familiar tongue.

First of all, Nagel's claim that Davidson would hold that what there is, must be possibly conceivable by us, is too strong. It does not follow from Davidson's translatability criterion that reality or truth is reduced to the possibly conceivable. For there might be truths that cannot possibly be expressed, neither in our language, nor in that of creatures with an infinitely greater intelligence. Perhaps this leads Davidson to speculate that "there are things mortals will never understand."[46] As a consequence, the conceivability thesis must be revised if Nagel wants to attribute it to Davidson's philosophy: what is possibly conceivable (by any rational creature), we can possibly conceive.

In the question whether the revised thesis can properly be called 'idealism' (the revocation of 'reality' ('what there is') out of the conceivability thesis does seem to annul at least the metaphysical nature of the presumed idealism) I am not interested at this point. Granted, for the sake of argument, that it *is* in fact a variety of idealism that would render Davidson's transcendental argument illegitimate, it is, unfortunately for Nagel and his followers, still not ascribable to Davidson. This is due to the conceptual distinction between 'translatability' and 'conceivability'. Indeed, the language of a quantum physician is (contrary to Nagel's intuition) translatable to the language of a nine-year-old.

But this does not amount to saying that the nine-year-old would be able to understand the language of quantum physics, for its cognitive capacities would not be sufficient. The fact that a given language has "an underlying structure equivalent to the first-order predicate calculus with identity, an ontology of medium-sized objects with causal potentialities and a location in public space and time, ways of referring to the speaker and others, to places, to the past, to the present and future",[47] is enough for it to possess "expressive powers very similar to the most highly developed languages."[48] Davidson adds that every nine-year-old would have these powers. Moreover, they are sufficient for infinite translation of superior languages into one's own language, even though one's cognitive powers might be inadequate to understand the translation. Hence, the ascription of the conceivability thesis to Davidson's translatability criterion is simply wrong.

Moreover, the fact that Davidson says that we do not understand the notion of truth, as applied to language, independent of translatability does not imply that translatability is a necessary condition for truth. For, in discussing translatability, Davidson is not just concerned with truth, but with truth *as a predicate to sentences*. Thus, not every truth, but every true expression is translatable. This reaffirms the possibility of there being truths not capable of being linguistically expressed.

To summarize, there is no symmetrical conceivability in Davidson's notion of 'language'. But there is, at the same time, symmetry evident in translatability. This is due to the basic powers inherent to language. Despite our finite intelligence and the possibility of beings of superior intelligence, translation of superior languages into our own is possible, and this is not in any sense an idealist assumption.

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[44] Thomas Nagel, 1986, *The View from Nowhere*, Oxford University Press, p. 93.

[45] Donald Davidson, 1974, 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme', in ibid., 1984, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, p. 194.

[46] Donald Davidson, 'Reply to Simon J. Evnine', in Lewis E. Hahn (ed.), 1999, *The Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, p. 307.

[47] Donald Davidson, 'Reply to Simon J. Evnine', in Lewis E. Hahn (ed.), 1999, *The Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, p. 308.

[48] Donald Davidson, 'Introduction', in Stevan Harnad, H. Steklis, and Jane Lancaster (eds), 1976, *Origins and Evolution of Language and Speech*, p. 18.

(P7)   Our beliefs are mostly true.[49]

We have arrived at the end of the transcendental argument, by the simple means of syllogism with a particular affirmative ('Our beliefs are mostly true') as the conclusion from a universal affirmative ('A language-speaker's beliefs are mostly true') and a particular affirmative ('We are language-speakers') as respectively the major and the minor premise.

Ergo, if one both endorses the veracity of all premises and contradicts the idealism supposedly implicit in Davidson's transcendental argument, then one is committed to the acceptance of the overall truth of our belief-system. In other words: one must confirm our doxastic veridicality.

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[49] The original premise in Stern's outline is: "Most of what we say is true"; see 'Appendix I'.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, Davidson's transcendental argument is successful in the sense that it can establish our doxastic veridicality without appealing to idealism. Davidson is justified in asserting that we, as language-speakers, can know that our beliefs are generally rational and true. However, there is no anti-sceptical certainty whatsoever concerning our knowledge of their meanings. Thus, Davidson's transcendental argument has been identified as generally sound and does not necessarily contain idealist assumptions, but it does leave room for the sceptic that we might not know what are sentences mean at all. We might be envatted with largely true belief-systems. But if we do not grasp the meanings of our beliefs, then what is that veridicality really worth?

To be able to fight every sceptic, Davidson's argument needs a more comprehensive account of why an omniscient interpreter would interpret a language-speaker's beliefs as mostly true – or why a mad professor would interpret an envatted brain's utterances as veridical. The desired account would unite holism and externalism, while still avoiding idealism. Unfortunately, I could not provide such an account. But then again, providing such an account has not been the purpose of this inquiry. Instead, it focused on finding a way to arrive at the conclusion from within a Davidsonian perspective, without resorting to problematic types of idealism. Searching for the best interpretation possible, in accordance with the Principle of Charity, I saw no other option than to sacrifice our certainty our own meanings. In the purpose of arguing transcendentally without a hidden idealist premise, the project has succeeded, showing that transcendental arguments can in principle work.

It is obvious that this inquiry has been inadequate with regard to 'introspective scepticism'. In future inquiries, it is important to show how Davidson's transcendental argument for doxastic veridicality can work while also giving an anti-sceptical account of the knowledge of our own minds. Again, idealism must be avoided in doing so. Suggestions towards arguing for general knowledge of the contents of our beliefs have been given, but to show how triangulation combines externalism and holism in order to deal with malign sceptics, a lot of contemplative work has to be done. Philosophers who are interested in Davidson's transcendental argument for doxastic veridicality, are thus given the burdensome task of balancing holism and externalism – a task that I would like to pursue myself.

Appendix I: Stern's original outline of the transcendental argument

(1) If an utterance is not part of a public language, it has no meaning.

(2) If a language cannot be interpreted by another language-user, it is not public.

(3) In interpreting a speaker's utterances, any interpreter must take them to be mostly true by his (the interpreter's) standards.

Therefore, from (3)

(4) In interpreting a speaker's utterances, an omniscient interpreter must take them to be mostly true by his standards.

(5) If an omniscient interpreter interprets most of a speaker's utterances as true by his standards, then they are mostly true.

Therefore, from (5)

(6) Most of a language-speaker's utterances are true.

(7) If most of a language-speaker's utterances are true, his doxastic practices are reliable.

(8) If our utterances do not have any meaning, then it is impossible for us to raise the question of the reliability of our doxastic practices.

(9) We can raise the question of the reliability of our doxastic practices.

Therefore, from (8) and (9)

(10) Our utterances have meaning.

Therefore, from (1) and (10)

(11) Our utterances form part of a public language.

Therefore, from (6) and (11)

(12) Most of what we say is true.

Therefore, from (7) and (12)

(13) Our doxastic practices are reliable.

(14) Our doxastic practices consist in forming beliefs on the basis of various sorts of criteria: perceptual experience, memory experience, testimony, inference, and so on.

(15) If belief-forming practices are reliable, then they constitute correct standards of doxastic justification.

Therefore, from (13), (14), and (15)

(16) Perception, testimony, memory, and so on constitute correct standards of doxastic justification.[50]

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[50] Robert Stern, 2000, *Transcendental Arguments and Scepticism*, pp. 116-118.

Appendix II: Declaration Regarding Plagiarism and Fraud

Universiteit Utrecht

Faculteit Geesteswetenschappen
Versie september 2014

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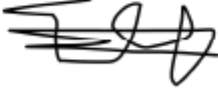- het knippen en plakken van tekst van digitale bronnen zoals encyclopedieën of digitale tijdschriften zonder aanhalingstekens en verwijzing;
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