

DISCUSIONES

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WARD ON DAVIDSON'S REFUTATION OF SCEPTICISM

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It seems to me that Andrew Ward's recent examination of Davidson's Omniscient Interpreter argument¹ has failed to elucidate it correctly. Ward's problems originate from the fact that he did not follow Davidson's argument *au pied de la lettre*. In "The Method of Truth in Metaphysics" Davidson presents his argument in this way:

We do not need to be omniscient to interpret, but there is nothing absurd in the idea of an omniscient interpreter; he attributes beliefs to others, and interprets their speech on the basis of his own beliefs, just as the rest of us do. Since he does this as the rest of us do, he perforce finds as much agreement as is needed to make sense of his attributions and interpretations; and in this case, of course, what is agreed is by hypothesis true. But now it is plain why massive error about the world is simply unintelligible, for to suppose it intelligible is to suppose there could be an interpreter (the omniscient one) who correctly interpreted someone else as being massively mistaken, and this we have shown to be impossible.²

Ward reinterprets the argument in the following way:

(1) A language user having *all and only true beliefs* is *intelligible*.

¹ *Crítica*, Vol. XXI/No. 61/México, abril 1989.

² Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford, 1984. p. 201.

- (2) If we cannot find a way to interpret the utterances and other behavior of a creature. . . we have not reason to count that creature. . . as saying anything.
- (3) From (1) and (2) it follows that the intelligibility of a language user having all and only true beliefs requires that *we* are, *in principle* able to interpret *his* language.
- (4) A necessary condition for interpretation is that the interpreter and the creature being interpreted share a coherent system of beliefs.
- (5) Thus if (3) is the case, it must be because *we* share a coherent system of *true* beliefs with that OI and hence scepticism has been undercut.

Ward's reconstruction of Davidson's argument not only fails to capture Davidson's main point, but is also unsound, for (3) *does not follow* from (1) and (2).

If we read Davidson's presentation of the argument carefully, we find that he affirms that the Omniscient Interpreter (hereafter OI) can interpret *us* and not —as Ward suggests— that we can interpret *him*. Negligible detail? Not at all. There is a huge difference between both claims, for there is no guarantee of *symmetry* in the radical interpretation process. Even if we grant that an OI is intelligible and we also suppose that he can interpret *us*, it does not follow that we can also interpret *him*.

Imagine the case —described by Strawson in *Individuals*— of a community of intelligent beings that has a conceptual scheme based merely on sounds. Imagine also that *we* could hear the same sounds as they do. If that were the case then we could, at least in principle, interpret them and hence communicate with them in *their* language. However, it seems to me that *they* could not interpret *our* language, for they would not share with us the massive amount of information we receive through the rest of our senses and hence they could not form the *same* beliefs. The divergence between both of us would be so big

that they would not be able to communicate with us in our language. To give another example; imagine an intelligent machine specialized in chess. I can play the game with the machine, because both of us know the rules and have —so to speak— the same beliefs about what is a good move, what is the goal of the game, etc. There is even a sense in which we could say that the machine *interprets* my game. However, despite the fact that there is communication between the two of us, it does not follow that the machine could interpret my everyday language. The same —I will argue— could happen between us and an OI. He might be able to interpret us, but we might not have all the information and the intelligence required to interpret him.

One must be fully aware of the significance of Davidson's assumption of the intelligibility of an Omniscient being. Such a being has *all and every single one of the true beliefs that can possibly be held*. It seems to me that if we want to make any sense of a being knowing *everything* he has to be virtually *omnipresent* and *eternal*. The OI must be in possession of *all the information* required in order to have all the true beliefs that can be held. But is this really intelligible? It seems to me that the notion of an OI, like the Russellian notion of a *perfect language* (*i. e.*, a language that perfectly depicts the world) is a rationalist dream that assumes a great deal about the nature and conditions of possibility of representation. Even if we accept that truth is objective and that the world is not the result of our making, we might still not agree on the possibility of a *pure representation* (mental or linguistic) of the world. An assumption behind the notion of an OI is that he could see the world *such as it is*, without any deformation or limitation produced by his own *subjectivity*. However, one might maintain the (non-sceptical) thesis that thought is necessarily *perspectival*, *i. e.* that it is necessarily framed within the context of the spatio-temporal position of a particular body. If perspectivism is right, then there are innumerable true beliefs that are out of the OI's reach. For example, he might not be able to hold the

same belief as I do when I think that *I am standing here*, even if he entertained a true belief with the content like *he is standing there*.

These questions, no matter how pressing they might be, should not worry us too much now. I am convinced that Davidson's hypothesis of the Omniscient Being is not *essential* to the basic point that he wants to make; namely, that there is a necessary connection between our *understanding of meanings* and our *apprehension of truths*. However, I would like to make a last point about the OI. I cannot *imagine* any other possible candidate for this role than God. This again shows how wrong it is to see Davidson's argument as Ward does. God's mind might be *inscrutable* and quite beyond our limited intellect. He might communicate with us, however, we might not be able to interpret *him* in the same way that we interpret, say, Hopi Indians. God's linguistic behaviour —if there is such a thing— is perhaps not recognisable as such unless he, with all his grace, allows it. But then, since the idea of a distant God that does not want to reveal anything is perfectly intelligible, the intelligibility of an OI does not guarantee, as Ward maintains, the assumption that such an OI could be interpreted by *us*.

The problems with Ward's reinterpretation do not end here. We can distinguish between:

(A) someone that has all and every single one of the true beliefs that can possibly be held. (B) someone that has no false beliefs.

As it must be obvious a real OI responds to (A)'s description and not to (B)'s. However on Ward's reading of the argument it *does not matter whether it is one or the other*. If we can interpret someone who is not omniscient, *but* has no false beliefs, then it follows that most of *our* beliefs are also true and hence that the sceptic is wrong. Compared to the OI, someone that has no false beliefs but still does not know everything is rather ignorant. But the point of the sceptic is not that we are *ignorant*, but that we are *mistaken*. It seems to me, however, that the fact that Ward's

reading of the argument tolerates this ambiguity is not a good sign. It is (perhaps) a platitude to say that there is only one reality. However it is not a platitude to say that all systems of beliefs share the same stock of objects and concepts. From the fact that all the beliefs held by a speaker are true, it does not necessarily follow that he could interpret *another* speaker that has only true beliefs. Why? Because the true beliefs held by speaker-1 can be *about completely different things* from those held by speaker-2. For interpretation to be possible there must be a coincidence of *the same beliefs* —be they true or false.

This example shows that from the intelligibility of a speaker who has *no false beliefs*, it does not follow that we can interpret him or he us, for we could imagine a speaker of a very alien language whose beliefs have a radically different *subject matter*. But, as we have seen above, it also does not follow from the fact that we can interpret someone that has *no false beliefs* that we are *not* grossly mistaken about the world, for it might be the case that such a speaker has only beliefs about chess and nothing else.

Ward's way out could be to say that a speaker who has only true beliefs is only intelligible if we can *conceive* him as speaking *our* same language *and* as sharing our same system of beliefs. But this would be a trick. Ward could not assume this *unless* he gave us an argument that showed the *unintelligibility* of a speaker who has *no false beliefs* but speaks an *untranslatable language*. In "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" Davidson offered an argument that may or may not be sound against the idea of an untranslatable language. However that is *another* argument and if we do not want to get trapped in a potentially dangerous circle, we should not bring this into Davidson's argument against the sceptic. These considerations show that Ward's way of looking at Davidson's argument is not on the right track.

In order to understand Davidson's argument we have to abandon Ward's reconstruction of it and consider the intelligibility

of a *real Omniscient Being* interpreting *our* language behaviour. The rest of this paper is devoted to showing what in my opinion is the main point of Davidson's argument.

We can agree that *if X* is a language translatable by the OI, *then* most of the beliefs of the speakers of *X* are true. The problem is that this is not the same as saying that if *X* is a language then most of the beliefs of its speakers are true. We need to show that *all languages* can be, at least in principle, translated by the OI.

The clue lies in considering the nature a language that cannot be translated by the OI. Davidson says:

... imagine for a moment an interpreter who is omniscient about the world, and about what does and would cause a speaker to assent to any sentence of his (potentially unlimited) repertoire. The omniscient speaker using the same method as the fallible interpreter, finds the fallible speaker largely consistent and correct.³

We might ask why the OI can, at least in principle, interpret any language? Why is the possibility of a language that cannot be translated by the OI dismissed *a priori*? The reason for this is that the OI has *all the relevant information* in order to translate *any* language, namely, *all that causes or may cause a speaker to assent to any sentence of his language*. The way in which OI knows what we mean is not —as Wittgenstein aptly remarked— by opening our heads or reading our minds. The OI, despite all his omniscience, has to go to the fields and interpret a speaker on the basis of his assent or dissent of certain sentences in certain situations. The only difference between him and a fallible interpreter is that he knows all the truths of the world, but these truths —and this is the crucial point— *are all that is necessary to know in order to translate a language*. If with all this information some apparent linguistic behaviour can still not be interpreted, it is because it was, after all, not

³ Davidson, "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge" in E. Le Pore (ed.), *Truth and Interpretation*, Basil Blackwell, 1986. p. 317.

linguistic behaviour. This is the hidden Quinean premiss of Davidson's argument: the meaning of any sentence is fully determined (or indetermined) by knowing what causes or would cause a speaker to assent to it. This is why the OI uses the same method as the fallible interpreter and finds perforce as much agreement as is needed to make sense of his attributions.

The core of Davidson's transcendental argument (to summarize it in words that he would never use) is this: *a condition of possibility of meaningfulness is truthfulness*. If something is a language (*i. e.* a vehicle of meaning), it must *depict* the world in an *efficient* way (though not, of course, in a *perfect* way). Otherwise it is not a language, but an attempt of language. This is what renders so incomprehensible the idea of a language speaker who is grossly mistaken *about* the world. If a language is an instrument to depict the world, then what kind of *linguistic activity* could someone have who is *totally ignorant* about how the world really is? For belief to be possible, it requires a background of success. As Davidson's puts it: "Too much mistake simply blurs the focus".⁴

If meaning is grounded on the behavioural response of speakers towards certain *stimuli* coming from their common environment, then the OI can *in principle*—and Ward is right in stressing this point—interpret any language. We can now understand why Davidson affirms with such conviction that:

What makes interpretation possible is that we can dismiss *a priori* the chance of massive error. A theory of interpretation cannot be correct that makes a man assent to very many false sentences: it must generally be the case that a sentence is true when a speaker hold it to be.⁵

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⁴ Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, p. 168.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 169.