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DAVIDSON AND RADICAL SCEPTICISM

DUNCAN PRITCHARD

University of Edinburgh

ABSTRACT. Donald Davidson famously argued, *contra* radical scepticism, that belief is in its nature veridical. In assessing whether Davidson was successful in this regard, it is first necessary to establish the exact philosophical basis Davidson was adducing for this claim, which is far from clear. In particular, a lot of the critical focus on Davidson's approach to radical scepticism has tended to focus on his appeal to an omniscient interpreter, and yet a closer evaluation of Davidson's anti-scepticism reveals that this notion is almost certainly dialectically inessential. Following some introductory remarks, in §1 I outline how the project of radical interpretation, and the associated principle of charity, are key parts of the philosophical background to Davidson's argument against radical scepticism. In §2, I critically evaluate Davidson's appeal to an omniscient interpreter. In §3, I demonstrate the role that Davidson's specific brand of content externalism plays in his anti-scepticism, in particular in virtue of his notion of triangulation. Finally, in §4 I consider, and defend, an interpretation of Davidson's view which treats it as a kind of transcendental argument against scepticism.

KEYWORDS: Content Externalism; Donald Davidson; Omniscient Interpreter; Principle of Charity; Radical Interpretation; Radical Scepticism; Transcendental Arguments; Triangulation.

0. INTRODUCTION

Donald Davidson famously argued that "belief is in its nature veridical" (Davidson 1983, 314). If this were true, then it would have obvious ramifications for radical scepticism, at least insofar as it trades on the possibility of widespread error in our beliefs.

Consider, for example, the famous 'brain-in-a-vat' (BIV) hypothesis that is often used to motivate radical scepticism. This is a person whose brain has been removed and placed in a vat, whereupon it is 'fed' experiences by supercomputers which are subjectively indistinguishable from ordinary, non-envatted, experiences. As a result, so the argument goes anyway, the BIV ends up

having mostly false beliefs. The sceptical predicament then ensues, for if a BIV's experiences are subjectively indistinguishable from normal experiences, how could one know that one is not a BIV? That is, how could one know that one does not have beliefs which are massively false?

If Davidson is right that we can establish, on purely philosophical grounds, that belief is in its nature veridical, then we can stop this kind of argument for radical scepticism at its root. In particular, we can argue that while it might well be intuitive to suppose that we can imagine a person who, like the BIV, has beliefs which are mostly false, this possibility is in fact unavailable, and hence cannot be employed in an argument for radical scepticism.

Of course, it wouldn't follow from the fact that belief is in its nature veridical that we necessarily have the widespread knowledge of the world that we tend to attribute to ourselves, something which Davidson freely admits. As he puts it, even though an agent's beliefs may be mostly true, it doesn't follow that they are all "justified enough, or in the right way, to constitute knowledge" (Davidson 1983, 438). Even so, if Davidson's argument at least demonstrates the impossibility of massive error, then one may well be willing to live with the much more restricted sceptical possibility that one's mostly true beliefs might not amount to knowledge. For one thing, one would at least know that one is not in the predicament of the BIV that was just described.

In §§1-3, I critically explore Davidson's motivation for his anti-scepticism, concluding that his view is best understood as a kind of transcendental argument. With his anti-scepticism so understood, in §4 I consider some problems that this kind of approach to the sceptical problem faces.

1. DAVIDSON ON RADICAL INTERPRETATION AND THE PRINCIPLE OF CHARITY

Key to Davidson's anti-scepticism is the notion of *radical interpretation*. Building on earlier work on radical translation undertaken by W. V. O. Quine (1960), Davidson conceives of radical interpretation as taking place when one interprets a speaker without reliance on any prior knowledge of either the speaker's beliefs or the meanings of the speaker's utterances. The importance of radical interpretation for Davidson's work is that he holds that it is a necessary truth that any content-bearing sentence is interpretable under these epistemological conditions.

Radical interpretation faces a problem, however, which is that one cannot assign a meaning to a speaker's utterances without knowing what the speaker believes, and one cannot identify the speaker's beliefs without knowing what her utterances mean. So, for example, if one does not already have a purchase on a speaker's beliefs, then how is one to interpret an utterance

of a sentence (in the vicinity of a rabbit, say) as being a sentence with a particular content (such as, 'that's a rabbit')? But if one cannot assign meanings to the speaker's utterances, then how is one to determine, in the conditions of radical interpretation, what the speaker's beliefs are? One is thus apparently stuck within an interpretative circle.

Davidson's resolution of this problem is to appeal to the principle of charity. While this is never given a particularly precise rendering, roughly it instructs the interpreter to treat the speaker as having mostly true beliefs (by the interpreter's lights anyway). It's clear from how Davidson applies this principle that there are two key dimensions to applications of charity. On the one hand, interpreting a speaker as charity demands will tend to lead to an interpretation which treats the speaker as having a *coherent*—or, at least, *consistent* anyway—set of beliefs. On the other hand, charity will tend to lead to an interpretation which treats the speaker's beliefs as being correctly about the objects in the speaker's immediate environment which the speaker is interacting with.[1]

By using the principle of charity in this fashion, we have a way out of the interpretative circle just noted. The radical interpreter is using her beliefs as a way of assigning beliefs to the speaker, and in doing so is able to assign meanings to her utterances. So, for example, if the speaker is observed uttering sentences in the vicinity of a certain object, such as a rabbit, then by treating the speaker as having mostly true beliefs (by the interpreter's lights anyway), one will have a way of ascribing a meaning to the speaker's utterances, such as 'that's a rabbit'. Of course, the ascription will be defeasible, and in time the radical interpreter may settle on a very different interpretation of the speaker's utterances. But at least this application of the principle of charity enables the radical interpreter to coherently *begin* the project of radical interpretation.[2]

On the face of it, the principle of charity offers us no particular respite from the radical sceptical challenge. That it may be methodologically necessary for the project of radical interpretation to treat a speaker's beliefs as mostly true by our lights does not in itself give us any more reason to think that the speaker's beliefs are in fact true than it does for thinking that our beliefs are true. Indeed, the radical sceptic might well concede the methodological necessity of the principle of charity to the project of radical interpretation while nonetheless insisting that, for all that, one's beliefs could be mostly false.

2. DAVIDSON'S ROUTE TO ANTI-SCEPTICISM I: THE OMNISCIENT INTERPRETER

Exactly how Davidson bridges the argumentative gap from a 'subjective' application of the principle of charity in the project of radical interpretation to the claim that belief is in its nature

veridical is controversial, as we will see. Nonetheless, it is clear that at one point in the development of his thinking at least Davidson held that he could bridge this gap by appeal to what he refers to as an *omniscient interpreter*. While the idea of an omniscient interpreter made brief appearances in earlier work—such as Davidson (1975; 1977)—let us focus on its clearest expression in Davidson (1983).

At one juncture in this text Davidson is occupied with the thought that a speaker and an interpreter could make sense of each other's utterances on the basis of shared, but false, beliefs. Clearly, Davidson cannot deny that this is a possibility. Nonetheless, he insists that this cannot be the norm, and to explain why in a famous passage he introduces the idea of an omniscient interpreter:

> For 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 in his (potentially unlimited) repertoire. The omniscient interpreter, using the same method as the fallible interpreter, finds that fallible interpreter largely consistent and correct. By his own standards, of course, but since they are objectively correct, the fallible interpreter is seen to be largely consistent and correct by objective standards. (Davidson 1983, 317)

Since the omniscient interpreter, whose beliefs are by definition true, would in interpreting us find most of our beliefs true as well, so we can be assured, goes the argument, that most of our beliefs are true too. Clearly, if this line of argument works, then Davidson has the argumentative bridge that he needs to go from the methodological necessity of the principle of charity in the project of radical interpretation to the anti-sceptical claim that belief is in its nature veridical. But does it work?

The short answer is that it probably doesn't. One difficulty that has been raised is the very idea of an omniscient interpreter being bound to use the principle of charity in making sense of our utterances. For although we can understand why non-omniscient creatures such as ourselves might need to employ the principle of charity in interpreting the utterances of others, why would an omniscient creature be so restricted? In particular, why would a creature who is omniscient about 'what does and would cause a speaker to assent to any sentence in his (potentially unlimited) repertoire' need to rely on a methodological principle like the principle of charity in making sense of a speaker's utterances? After all, a core part of the reason why we need to appeal to this principle is our supposed lack of epistemic access, in the context of radical interpretation anyway, to what is causing the speaker's utterances.[3]

Moreover, even if we grant that the omniscient interpreter will ascribe mostly true beliefs to us, this still seems consistent with there being a significant mismatch in how we conceive of our own situation and how the omniscient interpreter, from its epistemically elevated viewpoint,

conceives of it. In short, that our beliefs are mostly true does not in itself guarantee that we are not in some fundamental respect in error. Here is Michael Williams on this point:

> […] what possible reason do we have for supposing that the interpretation available to the omniscient interpreter, through his knowledge of the real causes of our beliefs, matches the self-understanding that we generate through exploring the inferential relationships between beliefs in our system from the 'inside'. For example, if we were brains in vats, kept ignorant of our fate and hooked up to some kind of speaking apparatus, the omniscient interpreter would take our utterances to be about events in the computer that controls our stimulated sensory input, though presumably we would not. (Williams 1989, 190)

While, as noted above, Davidson's proposal is not meant to guarantee us widespread knowledge, it is meant to exclude the kind of fundamental error at issue in a BIV case. If it turns out that it doesn't even exclude this possibility, then its anti-sceptical potential is severely blunted.

A third kind of worry about the appeal to the notion of an omniscient interpreter is that it is somehow question-begging. One version of this charge is put forward by Kirk Ludwig (1992). He argues that insofar as we can make sense of the idea of an omniscient interpreter, then we should also be able to make sense of an 'omnignorant' interpreter, where this is someone who is "mostly wrong about the world." (Ludwig 1992, 327) He writes:

> Combining this assumption with the assumption that all language speakers must potentially be in communication with each other, and the impossibility of communication without massive agreement, we can conclude that most of our beliefs are false. As we might put it: true belief is possible only against a background of largely false belief. (Ludwig 1992, 327)

By appealing to the notion of an omnignorant interpreter rather than an omniscient interpreter we can thus, by parity of reasoning, generate the exact opposite conclusion to the one that Davidson was trying to motivate. In order for the omniscient interpreter argument to work, it is thus essential that we have a basis for rejecting the possibility of an omnignorant interpreter. But as Ludwig points out, if we have such grounds, then there is no need for the appeal to an omniscient interpreter, since we'd already have an assurance that we can't be massively mistaken about the world.

Given how problematic Davidson's appeal to the notion of an omniscient interpreter is, we might reasonably ask whether he can do without it in his argument. In this regard it is notable that where Davidson does appeal to this notion it is usually as part of a dialectical move that does not seem to be significantly weight-bearing in terms of the argument as whole. In Davidson (1983), for example, the appeal to the idea of an omniscient interpreter comes after the main thread of argument, as if it is merely an illustration of that argument rather than an extension of it. Moreover, by Davidson (1999*a*) we have him saying that he regrets ever appealing to the notion of an omniscient interpreter and conceding that such an appeal "does not advance my case". He goes on to remark that if "the case can be made with an omniscient interpreter, it can be made without,

and better." (Davidson 1999*a*, 192) Accordingly, our focus in understanding the motivation for Davidson's anti-scepticism should not be side-tracked by the problems that face his appeal to an omniscient interpreter.[4]

But if the argumentative bridge needed to get from Davidson's use of the principle of charity to his anti-scepticism does not come from the appeal to the omniscient interpreter, then where does it come from? The answer lies in Davidson's commitment to a form of content externalism.

3. DAVIDSON'S ROUTE TO ANTI-SCEPTICISM II: TRIANGULATION AND CONTENT EXTERNALISM

In order to understand Davidson's particular variant of content externalism, we first need to say a little about his conception of *triangulation*.[5] According to Davidson, triangulation involves a causal nexus involving two subjects and an object in a common physical environment. Triangulation occurs when both creatures react to that object and then react in turn to each other's reactions.[6] Crucially, according to Davidson, triangulation is essential to there being mental content in the first place, in the sense that it is a metaphysically necessary condition for the acquisition of (contentful) thought. Consider, for example, the following passage:

> Without this sharing of reactions to common stimuli, thought and speech would have no particular content—that is, no content at all. It takes two points of view to give a location to the cause of a thought, and thus to define its content. We may think of it as a form of triangulation: each of two people is reacting differentially to sensory stimuli streaming in from a certain direction. If we project the incoming lines outward, their intersection is the common cause. If the two people now note each other's reactions [….] each can correlate these observed reactions with his or her stimuli from the world. The common cause can now determine the contents of an utterance and a thought. The triangle which gives content to thought and speech is complete. But it takes two to triangulate. Two, or, of course, more. (Davidson 1991*b*, 159-60)

The idea that triangulation is metaphysically necessary for the acquisition of thought makes Davidson's view a form of *content externalism*, since it makes causal relationships to matters external to the subject necessary for thought. But this kind of content externalism is very different from the more familiar varieties defended in the literature. This is because the idea is not that particular kinds of contents, such as concerning a natural kind like water, should be conceived of along externalistic lines, but rather the more general thesis that there are external conditions for the acquisition of thought.[7]

In order to see how triangulation might be related to Davidson's views on radical interpretation and the principle of charity, consider this passage, which comes just after a discussion of how the principle of charity blocks radical scepticism:

> What stands in the way of global skepticism of the senses is […] 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. Communication begins where causes converge: your belief means what mine does if belief in its truth is systematically caused by the same events and objects. (Davidson 1983, 317-8)

Here we can see how the principle of charity, *qua* an indispensible ingredient in radical interpretation, is guiding an implicit commitment to triangulation. The connecting thought is that those cases where triangulation occurs are precisely the kind of 'plainest and methodologically most basic cases' in which we are required, following the principle of charity, to interpret a speaker so that she ends up speaking truly.

Moreover, notice the remark that 'what we, as interpreters, must take them [*i.e., the objects of belief*] to be is what they in fact are'. As he puts it elsewhere, commenting on the previous passage:

> If anything is systematically causing certain experiences (or verbal responses), that is what the thoughts and utterances are about. This rules out systematic error. If nothing is systematically causing the experiences, there is no content to be mistaken about. To quote myself: "What stands in the way of global skepticism of the senses is […] 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." (Davidson 1991*a*, 199)

That we must interpret these utterances in the plainest and most basic cases as true is thus more than a methodological constraint on radical interpretation. Instead, Davidson's point is that these most basic cases effectively determine the contents of the relevant beliefs, so that there is no logical gap between what we as interpreters take the objects of a belief to be and the causes of that belief which could allow for the possibility of massive falsehood in one's beliefs. Here is Davidson:

> [*I*]t cannot happen that most of our plainest beliefs about what exists in the world are false. The reason is that we do not first form concepts and then discover what they apply to; rather, in the basic cases the application determines the content of the concept. (Davidson 1983, 436)

Davidson is thus appealing to a form of externalism about mental content, whereby mental content can be determined, in part, by factors external to the subject. The idea is that the content of our thoughts and utterances is fixed, at least in part, by the social settings in which triangulation takes place. This is why the possibility of massive error in one's beliefs is impossible, *contra* the sceptic, and thus why 'belief is in its nature veridical'. For to suppose that this is possible is to suppose that the belief ascriptions offered in the 'plainest and methodologically most basic' cases

of triangulation could be systematically false, and that claim is incompatible with Davidson's content externalism.

There are two points to note about this way of describing Davidson's anti-scepticism. The first is that at no point in setting out Davidson's position in this regard did we need to appeal to the notion of an omniscient interpreter. This reinforces the suggestion made earlier that it is really Davidson's content externalism, and his associated conception of triangulation, that is carrying the anti-sceptical load.[8]

The second point is that with Davidson's response to the radical sceptic set out this way it becomes much clearer why some have referred to it as a kind of *transcendental* argument. For the general style of the argument is to demonstrate on purely *a priori* grounds that there is a necessary condition for one even thinking a contentful thought—*viz*., that most of one's beliefs must be true. Since even the sceptic is committed to the possibility of there being contentful thought (as otherwise we could not even make sense of the sceptical enterprise, still less the specific sceptical appeal to radical error-possibilities, such as the scenario that one might be a BIV), so even the sceptic must accept the anti-sceptical consequences of this transcendental argument if it is sound. Indeed, if this transcendental argument is sound, then one can never even coherently expound radical scepticism.[9]

4. *CONTRA* DAVIDSON'S TRANSCENDENTAL ANTI-SCEPTICISM

Understanding that Davidson is offering a transcendental response to the problem of scepticism explains why certain objections that have been made against his proposal fail to hit their target. For example, Williams has argued that Davidson's response to the sceptical problem is in effect question-begging in that it presupposes that we have a kind of knowledge of the world which the sceptic would dispute. In particular, Williams charges Davidson with a subtle sleight of hand in his argument, by moving from the use of the principle of charity in the context of radical interpretation to applying that same principle in the context of the problem of radical scepticism. After all, in the former context we are using "our knowledge of the observable features of the world, taken as unproblematic, as the basis for determining referents for the alien speaker's terms" (Williams 1989, 188). But once we start to appeal to the principle of charity to deal with the problem of radical scepticism this no longer makes sense, since none of our knowledge is in this context unproblematic. As Williams puts the point:

> […] the appeal to charity turns out to involve the idea of unproblematic access to certain causal relations between speakers and objects in the world. If, in the context of the sceptic's question, we grant ourselves this access, the game is over before it begins. (Williams 1989, 188)

It should be clear that this is not a fair criticism of Davidson's anti-scepticism, at least once we understand that this anti-scepticism is transcendental in form. To begin with, note that Davidson isn't presupposing that we have any particular empirical knowledge of instances of triangulation as part of his argument against radical scepticism, but rather arguing, on *entirely a priori* grounds, that such triangulation is metaphysically necessary for contentful thought. If one cannot appeal to *a priori* considerations in dealing with the problem of radical scepticism, then obviously *all* philosophical responses to this problem are excluded.

But the mistake in Williams's reasoning runs deeper. We have noted above that Davidson's style of argument is transcendental, in the sense that he is demonstrating that from commitments that even the sceptic has we can derive anti-sceptical conclusions. One of the commitments which even the sceptic has is the idea that we are able to think contentful thoughts, since otherwise the sceptical doubt would be itself without content. We have just noted that Davidson argues on purely *a priori* grounds that triangulation is a metaphysically necessary condition for contentful thought. The upshot is that even the sceptic can be taken to be committed to triangulation, and all that comes with it, such as the instances of interpretation that occur in particular cases of triangulation. There is thus no begging of the question here. It is not as if Davidson is presupposing something contentious from the sceptic's point of view and then using it to undermine radical scepticism. Instead, the style of argument is simply to show that the sceptic herself has metaphysical commitments which are incompatible with her avowed scepticism.

The transcendental nature of Davidson's anti-scepticism does, however, leave it open to variations of the familiar criticisms of transcendental arguments. In particular, there is the influential criticism of this style of argument which is due to Barry Stroud (1968). Very roughly, Stroud's charge is that transcendental arguments demonstrate only what we are committed to thinking is the case, but fall short of actually showing what *is* the case.

In terms of Davidson's transcendental treatment of radical scepticism, the point would be that all that follows is that we must think of belief as being in its nature veridical, but that it need not follow from this that belief *is* in its nature veridical. We find a version of this critical line defended by A. C. Genova. He notes that the sceptic can respond by saying that what Davidson's transcendental argument establishes,

> […] is not that our coherent belief systems are mostly true, not that [*massive falsity in our beliefs*] is unqualifiedly unintelligible; but rather that if we accept his premises, then it is *necessary for us to think or believe* that coherent beliefs systems are massively true and that [*massive falsity in our beliefs*] is unintelligible. But that doesn't demonstrate the truth of those claims, just the subjective necessity

> to think that they are true. What Davidson […] needs is *another* argument to show that what we must think is the case *is* the case. He has merely offered us 'a good reason' as to why we must *believe* that a coherent, comprehensive belief system is true, but has not shown that such a system is in fact true. (Genova 1999, 187)[10]

That is, one can accept the Davidsonian line of argument and yet still resist the conclusion that belief is in its nature veridical. Sure, one is committed to accepting that one is committed to treating belief as if it were veridical, but that's a logical step away—and a philosophical world away—from agreeing that belief is in its nature veridical.

Still, one might wonder whether a criticism of this sort is entirely fair. If Davidson has provided us with a very plausible philosophical story on which everyone, even the sceptic, is committed to the scepticism-undermining claim that belief is in its nature veridical, shouldn't this be enough to give us the intellectual comfort we seek from the sceptical threat? Remember, after all, that for all the talk of 'sceptics' here, there are no real sceptics of the kind that Davidson is interested in. Scepticism of this sort is rather a philosophical conundrum which we seek a resolution of. Even if Genova is right that there is a sense in which we don't have a reassurance that our beliefs are mostly true, isn't it enough to be offered a philosophical account of why we are rationally committed to doing what we do anyway, such that we regard most of our beliefs as true?

This relates to a broader metaphilosophical issue regarding what we should expect from a response to a deep philosophical problem like radical scepticism. At times, Davidson can seem as if he is offering a *direct* response to the sceptic, one that confronts the sceptical problem head-on.[11] I suspect that the kind of worry that Genova is directing towards Davidson essentially presupposes that Davidson's response to radical scepticism is of this kind. And yet in later work Davidson is quite explicit that, despite the earlier rhetoric, he isn't aiming to offer a response to scepticism of this sort. Instead, he expresses his anti-scepticism in *therapeutic* terms, where this means, roughly, as providing us with a good reason for disregarding the sceptical problem and so no longer taking it seriously (i.e., he gives us a good reason for regarding it as a *pseudo-problem*, one that does not require a direct philosophical response).[12]

Here, for example, is Davidson in one of his later reflections on the nature of his anti-sceptical argument:

> Reflecting on the nature of thought and interpretation led me to a position which, if correct, entails that we have a basically sound view of the world around us. If so, there is no point in attempting, *in addition*, to show the sceptic wrong. (Davidson 1999, 163)

On this way of thinking about Davidson's anti-scepticism, what he is offering us is a compelling philosophical position which generates welcome anti-sceptical consequences, but what he is not offering us are philosophical considerations which would necessarily persuade someone who is

already sold on the sceptical problem. This is the point of the second sentence. Once one has bought into the philosophical picture which Davidson presents, one which is for the most part at least not motivated in terms of the sceptical problem, then there is nothing to be gained by trying to in addition to resolve the sceptical problem, as on this picture it doesn't even arise. Conversely, however—although Davidson himself does not here extract this implication—if one does not accept the philosophical picture that Davidson presents (as presumably someone who is sold on the sceptical problem wouldn't), then one won't be at all convinced by his response to the problem of radical scepticism, since without that picture he has no response to the problem of radical scepticism at all.

There are good reasons for thinking that the therapeutic route is the only way to deal with the problem of radical scepticism. For once one has conceded that one should answer this philosophical problem on terms that are acceptable even to the sceptic, then one seems to have given up any chance to adequately deal with the problem. The sceptic, after all, is in effect trading on a philosophical picture of their own—one that they claim we are rationally committed to, for sure, but still a picture—and with that picture in place the sceptical conclusion can seem irresistible. In terms of the Davidsonian response to radical scepticism, the salient ingredient of the sceptical philosophical picture is the claim that we can even make sense of the idea of beliefs as being genuinely contentful and yet massively false.

Whether one goes down the Davidsonian route or not, the key to responding to radical scepticism seems very much to be to show that what looks like a paradox that arises in a vacuum of philosophical theory is in fact a problem with philosophical presuppositions of its own, and contentious philosophical presuppositions at that.[13] On the therapeutic reading of Davidson's anti-scepticism, that's just what he is attempting to do: to show that the sceptic is in effect presupposing contentious theses about the way in which beliefs are contentful. On the alternative philosophical picture that he offers, in contrast, there is no sceptical problem.[14,15]

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NOTES

[1] In later work—e.g., Davidson (2001, 211)—Davidson referred to these two elements of the principle of charity as, respectively, the principles of coherence and correspondence.

[2] One question we might raise at this juncture is whether it is the principle of charity, specifically, which is required for the project of radical interpretation, and not some weaker principle. One candidate in this regard, offered by Grandy (1973), is the 'principle of humanity'. Very roughly, this directs us to interpret speakers in such a way as to make them intelligible, but does not (explicitly, anyway) demand that we interpret them in such a way as to maximize truth in their beliefs. See also McGinn (1986). For reasons of space, I set aside this question in what follows.

[3] See Williams (1988, §5) for a pointed critical discussion of the notion of an omniscient interpreter along these lines. See also Klein (1986) for a related critical discussion about the very idea of an omniscient interpreter as Davidson's describes him engaging in a genuine project of interpretation. (Note that in the background here is the question of whether on Davidson's view there is any fact of the matter about someone's mental states, since if this is the case then of course the omniscient interpreter will need to engage in a project of interpretation, even despite his epistemically privileged position. On this point see Vermazen (1983, §2)).

[4] The three objections to Davidson's appeal to the notion of an omniscient interpreter offered here far from exhaust the critical literature in this regard. For example, one prominent critical line—offered by Foley & Fumerton (1985)—contends that Davidson is committed to the implausible conclusion that such an interpreter actually exists. For another important critical discussion of the notion of an omniscient interpreter, see Brueckner (1991). See also Brueckner (2010).

[5] Davidson defends (versions of) triangulation in a number of places. For a particularly explicit discussion of this notion, see Davidson (1991*b*; cf. Davidson 1987; 1991*a*).

[6] Note that the use of the, possibly intentional, notion of 'reacting to' may be controversial in this context, though for our purposes I think we can reasonably bracket such concerns in what follows.

[7] A useful contrast here is between Davidson and the kind of content externalism famously proposed by Putnam (e.g., 1975). For further discussion of content externalism, see Kallestrup (2011).

[8] I think it is telling that Davidson's most subtle critics in this regard do not put any significant weight on Davidson's appeal to the notion of an omniscient interpreter, preferring instead to focus on his content externalism and his associated appeal to triangulation and the principle of charity. Stroud (1999), for example, doesn't mention Davidson's appeal to the notion of an omniscient interpreter at all, while Williams (1988) effectively only discusses the notion of an omniscient interpreter as an appendix to his discussion of the main Davidsonian line on radical scepticism. For a defence of the opposing view that the appeal to the notion of an omniscient interpreter is key to Davidson's anti-scepticism, see Genova (1999) and Carpenter (2003).

[9] It is now quite common to interpret Davidson as offering a kind of transcendental argument against radical scepticism. See, for example, Maker (1991), Genova (1999), Carpenter (2003), LePore & Ludwig (2005, ch. 19), and Bridges (2006). Davidson's anti-scepticism is also described as an 'exemplar' of a transcendental argument in Stern (2011, §1).

[10] Unsurprisingly, we also find Stroud advancing a version of this objection. See Stroud (1999). Interestingly, Stroud adds a further twist to this line of objection by suggesting that if Davidson had demonstrated the stronger conclusion, then this would have represented a kind of *reductio* of his position. For example, he writes that to rule-out the possibility of massive error in our beliefs threatens

> "[…] the objectivity of what we believe to be so. It would be to deny that, considered all together, the truth or falsity of the things we believe is independent of their being believed to be so." (Stroud 1999, 155)

The charge that Davidson's argument, if successful, proves too much, is also made by Nagel (1999).

[11] This is especially true of Davidson (1983).

[12] See especially Davidson (1990*a*). See also Davidson (1999*b*).

[13] The key text in the contemporary literature when it comes to the idea that the problem of radical scepticism should be understood as a paradox is Stroud (1984). For a seminal discussion of the sceptical problem so construed, see Williams (1991).

[14] These days, a therapeutic response to the problem of radical scepticism is most often associated with the work of McDowell (e.g., 1991; 1994), someone who offers a very different response to the problem of radical scepticism to Davidson (indeed, McDowell is someone who has been very critical of Davidson—see, especially, McDowell 1994, particularly part 1 of the afterword). I discuss this general line of response to radical scepticism, and in doing so explore some of the metaphilosophical issues raised (metaphilosophical issues which, as we have just seen, are also raised by Davidson's treatment of radical scepticism), in Pritchard (2012, part 3).

[15] I am grateful to Kirk Ludwig for detailed comments on an earlier version of this paper. Thanks also to Chris Ranalli.