Workshop:

The Principle of Charity in Language, Thought, and Interpretation

Online, 19-20 December 2024

BOOK OF ABSTRACTS

Pedro Abreu, "Charity, Verbal Disputes, and Fragmentation"

In this paper, I examine the phenomenon of fragmentation of mind — the instantiation of incoherent beliefs, desires, or intentions, by the same agent, across contexts — and its consequences to our understanding of interpretation as governed by the principle of charity.

I begin with a specific interpretative challenge: determining whether two interlocutors in apparent disagreement genuinely disagree or are merely talking past each other. Inquiries into the potentially verbal nature of disputes offer a particularly valuable test case for establishing the indispensable role of the principle of charity, while also probing its effectiveness and limitations.

The possibility that the agents' minds be fragmented is then introduced as an overlooked yet extremely significant complication, further adding to other formidable obstacles for the principle's application in realistic scenarios. I explore various aspects of this phenomenon, and I outline strategies for dealing with the challenges they may pose.

Anita Avramides, "*Charity Goes Deep"*

In this paper I will trace a possible overlap between the Davidsonian appeal to the principle of charity in connection with the interpretation of a radically different language and an idea that can be found in the writing of Stanley Cavell. While Cavell puts forward his idea as an understanding of the work of the later Wittgenstein, I want to treat these ideas as standing on their own and I shall leave aside any assessment of Wittgenstein scholarship. What we learn from Davidson is that the principle of charity is not optional and that it goes deep. What I find in the work of Cavell is a possible account of why the principle is not optional and a sense of just how deep it goes. While I think we can use the work of Cavell to explain the need for charity, it is not entirely clear to me that Davidson would accept (the entirety of) this explanation. I suggest there may be a difference between what Davidson himself would accept and what a Davidsonian programme of radical interpretation may leave room for.

William Child, "Charity versus Knowledge-Maximization"

Timothy Williamson has argued that a theory of content-determination should focus on knowledge rather than truth; the principle of charity, which says that an assignment of beliefs to a person should maximize (or optimize) true belief, should be replaced by a principle of knowledge-maximization, which says that an assignment of beliefs should maximize the person's knowledge (The Philosophy of Philosophy, Oxford: Blackwell, 2007, chapter 8). Williamson contents that knowledge-maximization has two important advantages over charity. First, it generates the right assignments of content in cases that the principle of charity gets wrong. Second, it can readily explain the fact that people often know, a fact that cannot be generated from the principle that a person's beliefs are generally true.

The paper explores the effectiveness of these criticisms of Davidson's version of the principle of charity and of related criticisms made by Colin McGinn (Journal of Philosophy, 1977). It discusses the relation between the various arguments that Davidson offers in favour of the principle of charity. It is argued that, when Davidson's position is considered as a whole, his principle of charity can be seen to have effective responses to the charge that it generates implausible assignments of content and misrepresents the nature of intentional relations. It is conceded that Davidson himself does not forge a convincing link between charity and knowledge. The significance of that fact is considered.

Devin Curry, "Nonfiction Stories about Minds"

According to mental fictionalists, human folk psychological practices constitute "a kind of (useful) storytelling which does not commit us to the existence of mental states" (Demeter, Parent & Toon 2022: 4). In this talk, I'll argue that applying the principle of charity to nonfiction stories (and the people they are about) casts doubt on mental fictionalism. Magazine profiles, for example, constitute a kind of (useful) storytelling that does commit the journalists writing them to the existence of mental states.

Kirk Ludwig, "Charity in Radical Interpretation"

In later work, Davidson distinguished two strands in the Principle of Charity which he called the Principle of Coherence and the Principle of Correspondence ("Three Varieties of Knowledge" 1991). Each of these admits of more than one interpretation. Roughly, the Principle of Coherence tells us to find another to be rational and intelligible with respect to the *pattern* of attitudes attributed to her. The narrow version of the principle might be called the Principle of Rationality and enjoins finding the other to be largely rational. The broad version requires finding the other to be intelligible to us psychologically and might be called the Principle of Humanity (after Richard Grandy). The Principle of Correspondence deals with the connection between another's hold true attitudes and her environment. I consider three interpretations. The first is the Principle of Agreement, which requires the interpreter to find the speaker to be largely in agreement with the interpreter about her environment. The second is the Principle of Truth,

which requires the interpreter to find the speaker to be largely right about her environment. Formulations for both of these can be found in Davidson's work. The third is what I will call the Principle of Salience, which requires the interpreter to find the speaker to be speaking truly about things that the interpreter would find salient in the speaker's position. The last of these is connected with the intuitive idea of triangulation in Davidson's later work. I argue that for interpretation to have a reasonable hope of success for speakers like us the interpreter needs to employ the Principle of Humanity and the Principle of Salience, but that each of these requires the interpreter make and to justify a posteriori assumptions about targets of interpretation. I assess the implications of this for Davidson's anti-Cartesian epistemology and philosophy of mind.

Andrew Smith, "Charity, Parity, and Pluralism in Quine's Philosophy"

W.V. Quine uses the principle of charity to argue that a change of logic implies a change in meaning, in the sense that speakers who believe classical logic use logical connectives that do not have the same meaning as the connectives used by speakers who do not believe classical logic. I reject Quine's argument on Quinean grounds. I also argue more generally that Quine's mature conception of ordinary translation practice is in tension with the thesis that a change in theory implies a change in meaning, regardless of the domain of inquiry.

However, Quine seems committed to pluralism in some domains such as set theory: that at least two apparently conflicting theories in the domain fail to conflict and are true. This may seem to require that a change in theory implies a change in meaning in such domains. But it does not. We can argue for pluralism not because our best interpretation of speakers requires it, but because we change our view of what the world is like. We can reject the presupposition that there are two theories that make incompatible claims about one kind of thing and believe instead that the theories make true claims about two different kinds of thing. We can justify this change in belief by recognizing there is enough reason to endorse at least one of the theories and in addition that the theories are on a par: there is enough reason to endorse one theory if and only if there is enough reason to endorse the other. I provide evidence Quine accepts this way of justifying pluralism, and I draw historical and contemporary morals.

Claudine Verheggen and Robert Myers, "The Status and the Scope of the Principle of Charity"

The principle of charity was first introduced by Donald Davidson as an essential ingredient of radical interpretation, that is, as a principle that needs to be followed in order to interpret from scratch the speech and thoughts of alien speakers and thinkers. Did Davidson intend it also to be an essential ingredient of meaning itself, that is, a principle whose demands must be satisfied by speakers and thinkers? And did he intend it to apply to evaluative contents as well as to non-evaluative ones? This paper defends affirmative answers to these questions.

First, it has to be emphasized that Davidson engaged in the thought experiment of radical interpretation in order to shed light on the nature of meaning itself, not just on the nature of

meaning attribution. Thus, the conclusions to be drawn from the thought experiment were supposed to concern the constitution of meaning, not just its attribution. This already indicates that the principle of charity is supposed to be constitutive of meaning, in that only those whose basic beliefs are by and large true and justified, and whose basic desires are by and large reasonable and coherent, can be speakers and thinkers. Second, Davidson's triangulation argument, to the effect that only those who have interacted simultaneously with others and their shared environment can be speakers and thinkers, further confirms this indication. What, importantly, it adds to the reflections on radical interpretation is an argument for the necessary publicness of language and thoughts, which was initially taken for granted.

As is to be expected, these claims have not been universally accepted, even as the correct interpretation of Davidson, but especially as the correct view about meaning. When it comes to evaluative contents, the resistance has in fact been considerable. Some have insisted that triangulation is not at all necessary to fix the contents of desires, and that it is in any case absurd to suppose that evaluative properties exist upon which triangulation could occur. They thus deny that the principle of charity is a truly essential ingredient either of the constitution or of the interpretation of desires. Others have granted that triangulation may be necessary to fix the contents of the very most basic of desires, but argue that this is a much less interesting and important result than the corresponding claim about beliefs. The paper proceeds by responding to these worries and considering what can be learned from these responses about Davidson's project as a whole.

Benjamin Winokur, "Charitable Interpretation and Self-Understanding"

Donald Davidson argued that a certain principle of charity necessarily governs our interpretive activities: there is just no way to interpret one another without identifying widespread rationality among one another's attitudes. This implies that successful interpretation culminates in understanding one another, for it culminates in seeing one another's attitudes as by and large reasonable to their possessors, hence not as brute psychological facts to which their possessors hold no evaluative stance. And yet Davidson also argued that interpreters are not generally in the position of having to interpret their own meanings or attitudes. Granting this, how does self-understanding arise? In other words, how do agents learn to see their own attitudes as by and large reasonable, if not by engaging in charitable self-interpretation? After arguing that self-understanding is not easily explained by Davidson's account of the "first-person authority" with which agents typically ascribe attitudes to themselves, I argue that a better approach takes its cue from certain contemporary explanations of self-knowledge. More specifically, I argue that there are some ways of gaining self-knowledge that do not require self-interpretation and that deliver self-understanding at the very same time. These, I conclude, are the best places to look for a satisfying theory of self-understanding.

José Zalabardo, "The Justification of Charity. A Pragmatist Approach"

I discuss how the principle of charity could be justified on an account that takes the meaning of meaning ascriptions to be grounded in the (charity-involving) procedure that we employ to regulate their acceptance.