

Finding Value in Davidson

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Can an effective argument against scepticism about objective values be modelled on Donald Davidson's familiar argument against scepticism about external things?

Davidson evidently thinks so. He has long been on record as maintaining that a theory of interpretation must be 'unified' in the sense that it cannot merely solve for beliefs and meanings but must simultaneously solve for desires as well.¹ And he has made it quite clear that he thinks a theory of interpretation can do this only by subjecting attributions of desires to a 'principle of charity' analogous to the principle that he claims must govern attributions of beliefs. Since his argument against external world scepticism is in large part powered by his claim that charity must govern attributions of beliefs, his feeling that charity must likewise govern attributions of desires might appear to commit him to a similar argument against value scepticism. And in fact Davidson accepts this, arguing that there are fully objective standards to which everyone's desires and evaluative beliefs are answerable and that no one's desires and evaluative beliefs could fail to be at least roughly as these objective standards say they should be.²

1 Davidson (1980) provides his first sustained discussion of this claim.

2 This emerges with steadily increasing clarity in his 1980, 1984, 1986, 1995 and 2000.

Since desires do not have truth conditions, how could they answer to anything objective? Davidson himself tends to fudge this question, blithely maintaining that evaluative judgements are judgements that both have fully objective truth conditions and give expression to people's actual desires — the idea apparently being that desires are as the objective standards say they should be if the evaluative

Why, then, has Davidson's argument against value scepticism received so much less attention than his argument against external world scepticism?³ One explanation may be that he has not developed the argument against value scepticism in anything like the same detail. But it is doubtful that this argument has been ignored simply because critics do not have it clearly in focus. Their silence suggests a much more fundamental failure to understand how the argument could have any serious chance of succeeding. Some probably assume it to be a non-starter because they find it perfectly obvious that charity need not govern attributions of desires; others perhaps agree that charity must govern attributions of desires but assume this could not possibly ground any conclusions about objective values. My aim here is to develop Davidson's argument against value scepticism in a way that indicates how such worries might be overcome.⁴ I don't claim to prove anything — except that the argument is promising enough to merit more consideration than it has hitherto received.

I Davidson's Core Argument: Interpretation and Charity

As I understand him, there are four main claims that one must accept if one is going to accept Davidson's core argument against scepticism. I begin by laying them out in rather blunt and dogmatic terms, leaving many nuances and supporting arguments to be added in subsequent sections.

The first claim that one must accept is a claim about the essentially *public* character of beliefs and the other propositional attitudes. Proposi-

judgements that would give expression to them would be true. But how can evaluative judgements express desires, if desires do not have truth conditions? The answer, I believe, is that an evaluative judgement expresses a desire when valid practical reasoning that was based on that desire would give rise to that judgement. Of course, this just raises another question: if practical reasoning is based on desires, how can it yield evaluative judgements that have truth conditions that are fully objective? But that, as we'll see, is a question Davidson is well-placed to answer.

- 3 Some have clearly been influenced by Davidson's general take on value. But discussions of his specific argument are surprisingly difficult to find. For a sympathetic discussion, though one that concentrates on defending only one component of the argument, see Hurley (2002); for a critical discussion, though one that I think pays too little attention to Davidson's holism, see Sreenivasan (2001).
- 4 Although my intention is to develop Davidson's argument and not just a Davidsonian argument, it should be acknowledged straightaway that my suggestions might not always meet his approval.

tional attitudes are to be thought of as theoretical entities of a sort, not known by direct observation but inferred in the attempt to explain and predict behavior. (To be sure, one typically has non-inferential knowledge of one's own attitudes, but even this is not the product of direct observation.⁵) But this is not to be taken as opening a possibly unbridgeable gap between people's behavior and their propositional attitudes, as in the traditional problem of other minds. For minds require contents, and Davidson's claim is that minds would not have contents if they were not interpretable as having them. What he means by this is not simply that the contents of people's minds must in principle be accessible to anyone who has sufficient evidence at their disposal. A general commitment of this sort to empiricism would not guarantee the essentially public character Davidson is claiming for the propositional attitudes. That involves the stronger claim that people must be interpretable solely on the basis of evidence concerning observable features of their behavior and its relation to their environment.⁶

This claim might seem misguided because it might seem to suggest that background information has no essential role to play in interpretation. It might seem to suggest that a person would have to be interpretable even by someone who knew *nothing* about how prior interpretations of other people had fared. Yet, as Jerry Fodor and Ernest Lepore have remarked, the possibility of any such 'first linguistics' is surely something we should dismiss.⁷ Surely, in our endeavor to interpret any one person, we must be guided by what we believe to be the lessons of previous endeavors to interpret other people. I think this is clearly right; but for that very reason I also think Davidson's claim is not meant to deny it. His claim speaks only to questions about the sorts of evidence we need regarding the particular person who is at the particular moment the subject of our interpretation. He is not denying that other sorts of information, including information gleaned from interpretations of other people, will be necessary as well. He is simply maintaining that all we need regarding the particular subject of any particular interpretation is evidence regarding her observable behavior and its relation to her environment.⁸

5 For his views concerning first person authority, see Davidson (1987).

6 This evidently presupposes, at a minimum, that an external world does exist. We'll consider how Davidson tries to justify this presupposition in Section IV.

7 Their 1994 presses this point as an objection against Davidson.

8 See his 1994, especially 125, for some confirmation of this reading.

Now the fact that background information has an essential role to play in interpretation might seem to indicate that interpretations can be constructed in a straightforwardly empirical manner.⁹ This illusion is shattered, however, by the second cornerstone of the Davidsonian argument, to wit, by the *holism of the mental*. The thought here is that the content of any one of a person's propositional attitudes depends upon the contents of many of the other propositional attitudes she has. And Davidson's claim is that this creates an obstacle to interpretation that no amount of background information can be expected to overcome. For it means we cannot advance an hypothesis about any one of a person's propositional attitudes without simultaneously advancing supporting hypotheses about many of her other propositional attitudes. Yet it is difficult to see how publicly accessible evidence could justify us in making such a sweeping attribution of propositional attitudes. There will undoubtedly be many isolated respects in which the behavior our subject displays resembles the behavior displayed by other people whose propositional attitudes we are familiar with. But inevitably these similarities will be too fragmentary to justify us in postulating a broad similarity between her propositional attitudes and theirs.¹⁰

Some believe Davidson's holism commits him to the extreme claim that the content of every one of a person's propositional attitudes depends upon the content of *every* other.¹¹ And because they believe this extreme claim to be patently absurd, they believe his consequent worries about interpretation to be largely unfounded. It seems to me, however, that the extreme nature of this claim should again make us wonder whether it can really be what Davidson intends to convey.¹² Moreover — and perhaps more importantly — I think a considerably less extreme claim suffices to generate the problem he envisions for interpretation. For surely the fact of the matter is that the similarities to be found between one person's behavior and the behavior of other people are rarely very extensive. Fragmentary bits of her behavior will resemble fragmentary bits of theirs, but broader swathes of her behavior will typically lack strict precedents. It follows, therefore, that the holism of the mental does not have to be taken very far before background information starts becoming of doubtful help to interpreters. For how, once

9 This is clearly the suggestion in Fodor and Lepore (1994).

10 Thus Davidson's worry is that the holism of the mental turns what would otherwise be a simple problem of underdetermination into something much worse.

11 Fodor and Lepore raise this objection in 1992, ch. 3.

12 For an explicit denial that it is, see Davidson (1994), 124.

again, can merely fragmentary similarities among people's behavior possibly justify us in postulating much broader similarities among their attitudes?

The third main tenet of the Davidsonian conception, the unhappily named *principle of charity*, constitutes Davidson's solution to this puzzle.¹³ The claim is that interpretation can and must proceed on the assumption that others see things largely as we do. We are to begin the process of interpretation by provisionally assigning our subjects beliefs and desires roughly like our own; we can then tailor this assignment to fit the facts about their actual behavior and its relation to their environment. We can count on receiving help here from the information we have gleaned from previous attempts to interpret other people, from our empirically conditioned sense of the ways in which different histories and circumstances can generate different beliefs and desires. Applying this knowledge to the case at hand, we will justifiably expect our subjects to harbor certain disagreements with us, and this will help us decide how our provisional assignment of beliefs and desires should be adjusted to fit them. One must not conclude from this, however, that no limits exist on the form that these disagreements could take. It is one thing to allow that the subjects of our interpretation might deviate somewhat from the precedent we set. It would be another thing altogether, however, to suppose that the precedent we set is not relevant to them. One must not suppose that the existence of rival precedents is something previous interpretations of other people could have revealed.¹⁴

Before introducing the fourth major tenet of the Davidsonian argument, we need to be a little clearer about the sense in which our own beliefs and desires must be assumed to set a precedent for other people's beliefs and desires. The claim here is not simply that we must assume every person to share in a common nature or psychology, so that we set a precedent for others only in the sense of providing instantiations of that nature or psychology.¹⁵ The claim is rather that we must assume every person to be influenced or shaped by that which is true, so that we set a precedent for others in the different sense of providing indications of

13 As Davidson himself has often stressed, this terminology is unfortunate because it might suggest that this step is somehow optional — as if we should find others largely in agreement with us just because that is the decent thing to do.

14 Some support for this claim, which, as Fodor and Lepore rightly remark, is clearly crucial to the argument, will be offered in Section II.

15 There is admittedly not much temptation to read the assumption about beliefs this way. As we shall see, however, this reading of the assumption about desires can seem tempting.

what those truths are. In order to highlight this idea, the principle of charity might usefully be reformulated by saying that we must begin the process of interpretation by provisionally assigning our subjects roughly the beliefs and desires *we take to be correct*.¹⁶ Since we typically take our own beliefs and desires to be correct, this reformulation will make little difference in practice; but its implications for theory are extremely important, for it indicates that we are committed to thinking in objective terms. By putting the principle this way, we bring to the fore Davidson's contention that in our interpretations of one another we necessarily reveal ourselves to have real convictions both about what is independently existing and about what is objectively valuable.

Thus we are led to the conclusion that interpretation requires us to exhibit real convictions about external things and objective values and to find others largely in agreement with them.¹⁷ The fourth and final step in the Davidsonian argument is meant to take us to the further conclusion that these convictions on which we must largely agree must be largely *true*. To this end, we are asked to imagine an 'omniscient' interpreter who, unlike poor us, actually knows the full story about objects and values.¹⁸ How is this interpreter to make sense of us, if its knowledge of us concerns only our behavior and its relation to our environment? Only, Davidson famously claims, by following the very same procedure — that is, only by assuming us to have beliefs and desires roughly like the ones it takes to be correct. And since it is, by hypothesis, fully knowledgeable about objects and values, it follows that the beliefs and desires we actually do have approximate the ones we really should have. Thus, summing up the Davidsonian argument, we can successfully interpret one another only because we have real convictions about external things and objective values, which convictions, by the same argument, can be successfully interpreted in their own right only because they are largely true to how things are.

Various critics have objected that this final step in the argument is hopelessly question-begging. For why should we suppose an omniscient

16 Following my earlier suggestion, we might say a desire is correct whenever valid practical reasoning that was based on that desire would yield an evaluative judgement that was true.

17 Perhaps I should say that when I speak in this paper of people's convictions about external 'things' I mean to refer to their convictions both about what objects or events there are and about what non-evaluative properties they have.

18 To be more precise, the full story minus the truth about what we believe and desire (for otherwise it wouldn't need to interpret us).

being would be able to interpret us correctly?¹⁹ If a successful interpreter would have to share many of our convictions about objects and values, isn't this simply to assume that our convictions about such matters are largely true? Why couldn't the sceptics simply reply by insisting that an omniscient being would not share our manifold illusions about external things and objective values, and so would prove constitutionally incapable of interpreting us solely on the basis of evidence concerning our behavior and its relation to our environment? It should be clear, however, that by allowing the argument to reach this stage, these critics have given Davidson all the ammunition he needs to deal with their complaint. For the publicness condition, after all, stipulates precisely that people must be interpretable by *anyone* who has at their disposal both sufficient behavioral and environmental evidence and adequate background information. Pretty clearly, an omniscient being would have such information at its disposal, so there would be nothing preventing it from succeeding as an interpreter. And so, if that would require it to share many of our convictions, it just does follow that our convictions must be largely true.²⁰

More discerning critics are therefore careful to get their objections in earlier, usually directing their complaints against Davidson's initial assumptions of publicness and holism. Why, some will ask, should we grant that publicly available evidence is all the evidence anyone ever needs in order to interpret other people? Why not suppose, on the contrary, that it will sometimes also be necessary to know various facts about people's internal make-up, about the constitution and organization of their brain states? That would open the door to the thought that, in certain special cases at least, a person's internal constitution might reveal her propositional attitudes to be massively off the mark. In a similar spirit, some critics challenge the holism of the mental, arguing that it takes anti-reductionism about propositional attitudes much too far. Why not allow, they will ask, that certain patterns of behavior are in fact at least presumptively correlated with certain combinations of propositional attitudes? If we were to allow this, we would once again open the door to scepticism, since a person's behavior could very well reveal her to have radically mistaken propositional attitudes. If holism is not assumed, then, even if publicly available evidence is all interpreters

19 On the other hand, of course, if omniscience is defined so as to secure this result, the question becomes why we should think an omniscient being is possible at all.

20 So the correct complaint to make against the omniscient interpreter argument is not that it begs the question but that it is largely superfluous. Davidson concedes as much in 1999.

need, there will not be any reason to conclude that interpretation must be guided by charity.

I do not deny that these are perfectly fair points to press; but it is not my aim in this paper to rebut them. I will be commenting later (in Section 4) on the kind of argument that Davidson advances in support of the publicness and holism assumptions, but there are many serious objections that have been raised against arguments of this kind, and I will by no means be trying to address (let alone answer) them all. My aim in this paper is simply to show that it would be a mistake to suppose Davidson's arguments have force against external world scepticism but not against value scepticism. I noted earlier how very reluctant some people are to acknowledge that charity must govern attributions of desires as well as attributions of beliefs. As we shall see, some resist this even though they grant that the publicness and holism assumptions hold of desires no less than beliefs. Others insist that these two assumptions hold only for beliefs and that either the need for or the implications of charity will in consequence be different where desires are concerned. My aim in this paper is to address these misgivings, to explain why anyone willing to take the first steps with Davidson should be prepared to go the full distance.

II The Application to Desires and Values

Let us grant, for the moment, that Davidson is right in applying the assumptions of publicness and holism to desires as well as beliefs. Does it really follow that charity must govern the attribution of desires? And does this really bring commitments to objective values in its train?

Some people find it hard to see why substantive assumptions of any sort are required for the attribution of desires. They may grant that, when we are engaged in interpretation, some measure of charity is unavoidable, and in particular that we have no alternative but to begin by provisionally assigning our subjects *beliefs* roughly like the ones we have ourselves. But they insist that, once this step has been taken, we can assign desires to our subjects simply by assuming them to have all and only the desires that together with their beliefs make the best sense of their behavior. The idea is not that we can assign these desires without paying heed to norms of any sort at all. Clearly we cannot make good sense of people's behavior if we ignore formal norms of consistency and the like. The claim is simply that we can interpret our subjects without making substantive assumptions about the contents of their desires, since their desires can be read off from their behavior when the latter is considered in light of their beliefs. No doubt it would be surprising to discover that our subjects have desires dramatically different from the

ones we have — to discover, for example, that they care not a whit for individual survival or individual flourishing, cherishing only the collective. But this does not justify us in prejudging the matter; we should let it be settled by their actual behavior.

The appeal of this objection is not easy to fathom, given that its misapprehensions lie so close to the surface. I think it is actually far from obvious that we could simply read off our subjects' desires from their behavior even if application of the principle of charity somehow sufficed to give us complete and detailed knowledge of their beliefs. But we need not venture out onto that limb here. We can make do with the perfectly safe point that application of the principle of charity does not give us anything like complete and detailed knowledge of our subjects' beliefs. It simply gives us a rough guide to their beliefs that must then be adjusted to fit their actual behavior. Yet their behavior cannot throw any light on their beliefs if we are completely in the dark about its aims. So even if it were true that we could read off our subjects' desires from their behavior if we were somehow in possession of complete and detailed knowledge of their beliefs, that would have no bearing on our interpretations of them, since we would not have been in a position to acquire this complete and detailed knowledge of our subjects' beliefs in the first place if we had not all along been making substantive assumptions about the contents of their desires. Only if we were making substantive assumptions about *both* sorts of attitudes would progress on *either* front have been possible.

The next objection we should address concerns the nature of the substantive assumption that we must make about the contents of our subjects' desires. Why must we assume that the whole set of their desires is roughly like our own? Even if some substantive assumption is necessary, why, exactly, must it be as sweeping as that? One might have thought it should be possible to get by with a more restricted assumption, an assumption that would give us the help we need without settling so much in advance. For example, would it not be enough just to assume that our subjects' most basic desires are roughly like our own most basic desires? This would enable us to begin our interpretations by provisionally assigning them desires for food and shelter, for family and friends, and the like. And it might be thought that some such provisional assignment of desires, even if combined only with an equally restricted provisional assignment of beliefs, would give us all the help we need. For it might be thought that, once these assignments are in place, we could use the behavior our subjects exhibit as a guide to a more complete interpretation of their propositional attitudes. And if interpretation could proceed in this manner, why could it never reveal that their desires as a whole are radically different from ours?

The problem with suggestions like this, however, is that they are flatly at odds with our assumption that desires are holistic in nature. We can assume this and still allow that some desires are in a sense more basic, but not in a sense that would allow interpretation to proceed in the manner indicated here. The assumption that desires are holistic in nature rules out any possibility that knowledge of people's less basic desires could be derived in this way from knowledge of their more basic desires. It entails that, even in the case of their more basic desires, what people actually want always depends on what other desires they have. Even a desire for food is really a desire for good food, and what people regard as good food depends on their other desires. And it allows that, in the case of their less basic desires, what people are after can be something more than ways to satisfy their more basic desires as fully as possible. Tenured professors commonly are in a position to satisfy their basic desires more fully, but sometimes they aren't, yet rare is the untenured professor who would be put off by that prospect. If desires are holistic in nature, therefore, there is no chance that interpretations can be built upon a foundation that is unduly restricted.

So our interpretations must begin with some assumption about the whole set of our subjects' desires. That much seems undeniable as long as we are assuming that desires are holistic in nature. But why must we assume that the desires our subjects have are roughly like our own? Why can we never assume instead that a newly encountered group of people will prove to have desires roughly like the desires some previously interpreted group of people were found to have? Their history and circumstances, after all, might be more like those of the previously interpreted group. So why should it always be our desires that must be assumed to set the precedent? Let us suppose for the moment that interpretation could in fact proceed in this different way; then the question to consider next is whether this possibility knocks the Davidsonian argument off track. And that, of course, is going to depend on whether it is possible that some previously interpreted group of people might have been found to have desires radically different from our own. Have we good grounds on which to conclude that there is no possibility of this happening?

There is a line of argument that might seem to rule out this possibility quite decisively. After all, it might be suggested, when we first began interpreting others, we simply had no choice but to take our desires as setting the precedent, since we knew of no alternatives. And so, it might be concluded, what we must have found is that the subjects of our initial interpretations all had desires roughly like our own. But now consider our subsequent interpretations. Perhaps, by this point, we no longer had to take our desires as setting the precedent. Perhaps we could have taken it to be set by the desires of our initial subjects. But if it is true, as has just

been argued, that our initial subjects must all have been found to have desires roughly like our own, what difference would that have made? What we would then have discovered about our subsequent subjects is that they all had desires roughly like the ones our initial subjects had — that is, once again, roughly like our own. We would be no closer to the possibility that radical differences among people's desires are possible.

This is not an argument I would recommend, however, for it makes the Davidsonian case for charity dependent upon the claim that there must have been a first interpretation. That claim, as I earlier conceded to Fodor and Lepore, does not seem terribly plausible; it seems much more likely that interpretation always requires background information gleaned from previous interpretations.²¹ If our hope is to defend the principle of charity by discrediting the idea that previous interpretations might have revealed some people to have desires radically different from our own, I think we need to look not at some mythical moment when interpretation first began but at the ways in which information gleaned from previous interpretations might actually be employed. Let us suppose, therefore, that we are trying to interpret group B on the assumption that their desires are roughly like those group A was previously found to have. My question is then this: is there anything inherent in such particular attempts at interpretation that ensures that we cannot succeed unless group A's desires are roughly like our own?

I submit that there is. For suppose that, having made our provisional assignment of desires, we find that we cannot make adequate sense of the behavior one B is exhibiting. What are we to do? Obviously we must assign somewhat different desires to this person, but how are we to determine what adjustments to the provisional assignment we should make? Now it might be thought that this question has a straightforward answer: we should make the smallest adjustments sufficient to make sense of the behavior this person has been exhibiting. But what is it for one adjustment to be smaller than another?²² What determines the distance between the typical A's desiring certain outcomes and our

21 Or, anyway, from previous *communications* with other people (not all communication being the product of interpretation, if by interpretation we mean the express attempt to construct accounts of people's propositional attitudes and meanings on the basis of observable evidence concerning their behavior and its relation to their environment).

22 One might be tempted to suggest that the smallest adjustment in desires would be the one that would necessitate the smallest adjustment in beliefs. But this would be, in effect, to repeat the mistake of supposing that charity has no role to play in the attribution of desires.

wayward B's desiring other outcomes? I submit that we would find ourselves unable to make much headway with these questions if the desires the As were previously found to have were systematically unlike our own. And of course what follows from this is not the possibility that the As might not serve as a precedent but the impossibility that their desires could be totally alien.

I don't deny that we could discern what adjustments were called for in simple cases, cases where the initial assignment of desires was proving problematic only in some isolated respects. Modifying an example of Elizabeth Anscombe's, let us imagine that the As have been found to desire to get together and drink saucers of mud whenever the moon is full.²³ Clearly the fact that our wayward B gives no sign of sharing this particular desire needn't prevent us from interpreting her in light of the standard the As have set. After all, we might know that this desire is connected in the typical A's thinking with a desire to express contempt for humankind by participating in self-abasing rituals, in which case the task confronting us as interpreters would simply be to identify the different activity our wayward B regards as a better expression of the contempt she feels. So long as our wayward B can be assumed to share enough of the desires that support the typical A's desire to drink mud, there need be no problem here.

But now let us imagine that this assumption proves to be problematic in its turn. Suppose our wayward B in fact gives no sign of feeling contempt for humankind. Indeed, to make matters worse, suppose she gives no sign of sharing any of the desires that are connected in the typical A's thinking with such feelings of contempt.²⁴ The task confronting us as interpreters will once again be to identify the different desires she regards as a better fit with the ones she does share with the As. However, as we imagine the discrepancies between the behavior our wayward B actually exhibits and the desires the As are already known to have becoming more and more widespread, it is bound to become more and more difficult for us to get a grip on why one set of desires and not some other might seem a better fit. I believe matters would quickly reach a point where the standard set by the As would be of no use to us at all, if their desires were totally alien.

23 Anscombe's example is from her 1963, 70. For my take on her wonderful claim (75) that *bonum est multiplex*, see Section III below.

24 Although she is making a slightly different point, Anscombe's discussion (in 1963, 71) of someone wanting a pin for no reason is relevant here.

To see why I think there is a problem here, let us consider how the situation is altered if we revert to the principle of charity and assume this wayward B to have desires by and large like our own. It will probably still happen that the desires we provisionally assign to her do not explain her behavior terribly well. So we will probably still find ourselves having to decide what adjustments we should be making to that provisional assignment. And it will still become increasingly difficult to decide what adjustments we should be making as the discrepancies between this wayward B's behavior and our own desires become increasingly widespread. In all these respects, the situation is exactly as before. But there is, nonetheless, one extremely important difference. For the fact that it is our own desires that are now setting the standard ensures that we have an understanding of the standard that cannot very easily be subverted. Even if this wayward B gives no sign of sharing certain desires that we regard as perfectly basic or central, our other desires will still serve as a kind of beachhead from which we can launch our interpretations of her. We will still understand them well enough to ask how this wayward B's different history and circumstances might have led her to find different desires a better fit with them. The going may become difficult, but it needn't become impossible.

But with an alien standard it quickly would become impossible. If we did not share any of the desires that are common to the As, it would not take very much to loosen our grip on what their desires are. This may not be evident on the periphery, where no one desire owes very much of its content to others. A desire to drink mud may be alien, but it is readily apparent what it is a desire to do. But a more central desire, such as the desire to express contempt for humankind, owes its content to other desires to a degree that makes understanding it more difficult. The difficulty is not to say what the desire is. It is a desire to express contempt for humankind. The difficulty lies in understanding what is being aimed at by someone who desires this, for that is going to depend on many of the other desires that she has. Unless we have a firm grip on what those other desires are, our understanding of this desire is inevitably compromised. And as this is true of all of a person's central desires, our understanding of them can be remarkably fragile. In the case of someone whose desires were totally alien, it would be hopelessly fragile, leaving us unable to make sense of them as soon as the interpreting got difficult. That's why totally alien desires cannot provide a viable standard.

Of course, by stating my case so bluntly, I am likely to provoke the familiar objection that in the work of anthropologists and others we find straightforward counterexamples to these abstruse arguments. How can we maintain that interpreters must find people in fundamental agreement, when what they actually report is that people sometimes harbor massive differences? However compelling the Davidsonian argument

might appear to be in theory, don't the facts show that it must somewhere have gone badly wrong? Before responding to this familiar complaint, however, I want to take up a different objection, one that is only a little less familiar but that is much more easily dealt with. The objector I have in mind here is someone who may concede that interpretation requires charity but who denies that invoking charity requires us to be thinking in terms of objective values. According to this objector, we can assume that other people's desires are roughly like our own without assuming that our own reflect anything objective. According to this objector, we need only assume that all agents share a common psychology and that our desires provide an instantiation of it. So even if the Davidsonian argument does show that charity must govern the attribution of desires, there is nothing in this that need be of concern to anyone sceptical about objective values.

I would like to think enough has already been said to show how misguided this is. For consider once again how we are obliged to proceed when confronted with the wayward B. Finding that she lacks some of our desires, we have to identify the different desires she regards as a better fit with the rest. Now we might approach this problem by asking how our own desires would have differed if our history and circumstances had been like hers. And it might appear that by proceeding in this fashion we would be treating the problem as a purely descriptive one concerning the different ways in which our common nature manifests itself. But remember that in asking how our own desires would have differed we would be asking what different desires would have seemed to us to be a better fit with the rest. So the real question is whether we could be proceeding in this explicitly normative fashion if we were not thinking there are objective values. By assuming that our desires would have differed only if different desires would have struck us as being a better fit with the rest, would we not in effect be assuming that there are objective values and that differences in people's histories and circumstances can give them better or worse insights into what those values are?

It might be suggested, in response, that we could just be assuming that a tendency towards greater internal coherence is an essential feature of the common nature necessarily shared by all people. We could just be assuming that every person must have more or less the same desires, differences among people emerging only when they believe them to contribute to their own internal coherence. But why would we assume that every person must have more or less the same desires unless we thought there are objective values and people's desires are sensitive to what they are? And why would we assume that these desires invariably get adjusted with a view to increasing internal coherence unless we regarded that as a way of getting clearer about those objective values?

Try as these objectors might to explain how we could be thinking in purely descriptive terms, it is hard to see how we could avoid having thoughts of these explicitly normative kinds. The judgements we must make when attributing desires to others just do seem to commit us to claims about what a world of objective values looks like from different points of view.

Of course, if these conclusions follow at all, they follow only on the condition that Davidson's two assumptions of publicness and holism hold as much for desires as they do for beliefs. The assumption of holism has been especially important so far, for it is the interconnections among people's desires that make it so hard to interpret them without the aid of evaluative judgements. The assumption of publicness has to this point been making its contribution to the argument offstage, by encouraging us to think that people's desires can be uncovered via procedures of this sort. How we might try to justify these assumptions, and whether it's even plausible to suppose that their application to desires could be justified, are questions that we still need to consider. Before turning to them, however, we should respond to the complaint that in the reports of anthropologists and others we find straightforward counterexamples to Davidson's conclusion about the need for charity. If it's an established fact that some people do have desires very different from our own, what point is there in pursuing an argument that purports to show this is not possible?

III Davidson's Position on Disagreement and Difference

Davidson's theory of interpretation entails that there are objective values and that everyone's desires must be roughly as these values say they should be. How is this to be squared with the plain fact that we often do find people to have desires very different from our own?

It might be thought that this question has a very simple answer. People's propositional attitudes can, after all, be roughly in agreement even though they are in many respects not the same. Two people's beliefs can, for example, both be largely true to how things are even though they differ on a wide range of topics. Some of these differences might run very deep, touching on matters quite fundamental to their entire understanding of the world in which they live. Thus the one, an Israeli, and the other, a Palestinian, might hold very different beliefs about both the nature and the causes of the conflict in which they so tragically find themselves. But these differences, profound and pervasive though they clearly are, do not prevent them from agreeing on any number of other things about what there is, about what has happened, and why. On the

contrary, if they — and we — did not share many points of agreement we would not be able to understand them as differing. As we've seen, we need those shared points in order to identify the differences their different histories and circumstances might make to their beliefs. And in fact we have no trouble understanding why certain aspects of their histories and circumstances make it so very difficult for each side to grasp certain simple truths about their situation.

Now many differences in desires can be treated in the same way. My view, for example, is that the Israelis and Palestinians would do best to accept joint governance of one state. Even if they could agree on a partition of the disputed territory, and trust each other to respect whatever agreement had been made, I believe they would do better to form a single, secular state, thereby obliging themselves to work out their differences through normal, democratic means. However, even though it is clear to me that some such resolution would be best, I can of course understand why so few of them seem to desire any such thing. But again, what makes it possible to understand these differences is the fact that the attractiveness of many other outcomes is something on which I, the Israelis and the Palestinians all agree. Obviously there is much to be said for a situation in which people with different languages and cultures are free to form separate nations; obviously there is much to be said for a situation in which those separate nations occupy the principal territories each group considers its birthright. So it's easy to understand why so many Israelis and Palestinians are drawn to this outcome, even though it is, if I am right, not the best outcome in their particular case.

It is perfectly possible, therefore, for a Davidsonian to acknowledge that there are often profound and pervasive differences among people's desires. Interpretation could be guided by the thought that everyone should desire the same outcomes and yet find that they frequently do not. The trouble with this, however, is that it answers our first question only by inviting a second. For are the differences we find among people's desires most plausibly viewed as deviations from a *single* standard? Even if it is true that deviations from a single standard could in some cases be very large, isn't it more plausible to see in the differences we actually find a very much more complicated pattern? Isn't it more plausible, for example, to see the desires many Israelis and Palestinians possess as being clustered around two conflicting standards, one fixed by the needs and interests of the Israelis people, the other by the needs and interests of the Palestinian people? In fact, if truth be told, isn't it even more plausible to see many of these people's desires as being clustered around still more narrowly defined standards reflecting the needs and interests of their colleagues, or their friends, or their families, or just themselves? It might appear tempting to respond by arguing that the existence of such patterns points towards nothing more than the fact that there are

several common ways in which people's desires deviate from the single standard. However, the obvious rejoinder would be to insist that these differences are so common and so great that any attempt to treat them as mere deviations would make a mockery of the principle of charity. The question, therefore, is whether there is some other way for Davidsonians to accommodate the enormous complexity desires actually do exhibit. Or is this complexity the proof that charity does not govern attributions of desires in the way it governs attributions of beliefs?

This is not a question Davidson has ever squarely addressed.²⁵ But it is easy enough to anticipate how he might answer. According to the principle of charity, the desires we find people to have must be ones we believe to be largely correct. This is, in one sense, to insist that people's desires must always be interpreted as deviations from a single standard — the standard, whatever it is, indicated by our beliefs about the real value things have. In another sense, however, the possibility that people should sometimes be held to different standards has been left open — for it has, to this point, been left open what our beliefs here actually do indicate. In particular, nothing that has so far been maintained rules out the possibility that we believe many values to be *agent-relative*, and so often believe the same outcomes to have different values for different people in consequence of their different histories and circumstances. For example, believing the value of friendship to be agent-relative, we might believe people often should feel differently about one another, each person possessing a special kind and degree of concern for the particular people who over time have become special to her. And so, in our endeavors to interpret other people, we might begin by provisionally assigning them concerns of this special kind and degree for the particular people who their histories reveal to be special to them. If we believe many values to be agent-relative, the result of these endeavors is going to be that we will find people to have desires that are in many respects quite different from our own. Though the general form of their concerns will be like ours, we will find that the particular outcomes they desire often differ — and not necessarily because we see them as being in error, but often simply because that's how we think things should be.

Of course, differences in people's histories and circumstances can also cause them to exaggerate the importance that certain things have. Because people get so deeply involved in the lives of their friends, it is easy for them to make mistakes when they assess the importance of what their

25 Davidson (2000) admittedly does make passing reference to the fact that the relativity of value is compatible with its objectivity, but I don't think enough is said to show how this actually defuses the worries people have about his argument.

friends do and of what happens to them. Thus we often find people favoring their friends more than they should when their friends' needs are in competition with the needs of strangers, or reacting to their friends' actions in ways that are plainly incorrect. Friends can be much too slow to find one another at fault for harms that have been inflicted upon strangers, and much too quick to find one another at fault for harms that have been inflicted upon the relationship itself. So even if it were not the case that their special involvement in one another's lives gives friends a special importance to one another, the friends themselves could often be expected to believe that it does. And since it frequently happens that people have few friends in common, this shared propensity for error could go some way towards explaining why they tend to disagree in their desires as much as they do. And no doubt similar propensities for error would be associated with the other values standardly held to be agent-relative.

But again, I don't think it would be very plausible to try to explain all our disagreements in this way. Better to allow that differences in people's histories and circumstances can influence not only the value that things will appear to them to have but also the value that things in fact do have for them. Thus we should allow that their special involvement in one another's lives really can lead friends to have a special importance for one another even if it can also cause them sometimes to exaggerate that importance. We should of course also keep in mind that people can sometimes be caused to err in the opposite direction; it can sometimes be difficult for people fully to appreciate the special importance others have come to have for them. Much more could be said about the possibilities here, but the point for us to stress is simply that nothing prevents a Davidsonian from assuming that many values are in this sense objective yet agent-relative. And if some such assumption as this is made, the Davidsonian argument will itself lead to us to expect that in our interpretations of one another we will find that our desires often differ in significant ways. Thus the fact that we differ greatly in our desires does not by itself count very heavily against the argument.

Indeed, my own view is that this train of thought can be pursued even further. For suppose we believe, not just that different people can have their different friends, each deserving to be an object of their special concern, but also that friendship can *mean* different things to them, so that the form their concern should take differs too. Perhaps we believe that some people have reason to take friendship more seriously than others do. Perhaps we believe that, though every person has reason to take friendship equally seriously, it can call for different people to do different things, for some to confide their intimate secrets, for others to engage in rough humor, and so on and so forth. Either way, the upshot will again be that, though we interpret everybody by our own lights,

provisionally assigning to them roughly the desires we believe to be correct for them, what we actually find is that people's desires differ greatly — not, again, because we necessarily see them as making mistakes, but simply because that's how we think things should be.²⁶

My conclusion, therefore, is that Davidson's argument is not obviously at odds with the facts. Though we obviously do interpret some other people as having desires that differ from our own in a sizable number of quite significant ways, it is not obvious that these differences ever actually exceed the limits of what the principle of charity deems possible. Of course, to say this is not obvious is not to say it is not true. There is nothing stopping Davidson's opponents from continuing to search for the aberrant individual or the exotic culture that will finally make their case. My point is simply that we must be clear about the burden of proof these opponents would be taking on. What they would have to establish is not just that the desires in question are unusual, but also that they are not even approximately the ones we believe someone having undergone that history and now inhabiting those circumstances should have. And the possibility that we believe many values to be agent-relative makes that a very difficult conclusion to establish.

Thus even a character like Thrasymachus, so much beloved by the sceptics, is far from decisive. In the first place, though he claims to care little for others, we must be careful not simply to take him at his word. He might just be trying to score a rhetorical point; he might actually be confused about his own nature. Any interpretation of Thrasymachus must be based on the full range of behavior that he exhibits, and it is possible that various other things he does will reveal him to care more about others than he is prepared to acknowledge. But even if this proves not to be the case, that will not necessarily give the lie to Davidson's argument. What Davidson's opponents need to show is not just that Thrasymachus's desires differ from our own, but that they point towards a completely alien set of values and not just a permutation of or deviation from values familiar to us. And it is far from clear that that is a case that they are going to be able to make.

In fact, if we ask ourselves why Thrasymachus serves Plato's purposes as effectively as he does, the honest answer must surely be that we can see how outcomes could come to have something like the values he assigns to them. Thrasymachus may pose a challenge to the claims of *morality*; but he doesn't pose a challenge to value per se. It seems to me, therefore, that the example of Thrasymachus actually supports the

26 For further discussion of the possibilities here, and their important implications for moral theory, see my 1999, esp. ch. 4.

Davidsonian case, by demonstrating just how far one would have to go to find an example of differences greater than the principle of charity can tolerate. Though I won't take time to argue the matter here, I think the anthropological examples can be dealt with similarly. Without exception, what at first sight look like unthinkable practices turn out to be surprisingly intelligible. The good anthropologist tells us enough about another people's history and circumstances to enable us to appreciate why they are acting as they are. And this invariably involves explaining how values we all share take for these people a form hitherto unknown to us.²⁷

Now it might be objected that Davidson's argument does not really leave so much room for the belief that values can be agent-relative. Few, I suspect, would go so far as to deny that it leaves room for beliefs such as the belief that people have reason to be especially concerned about their own friends.²⁸ Some, however, might look askance at my suggestion that it also leaves room for beliefs such as the belief that friendship itself might quite properly mean different things to different people. For they might wonder how anyone with beliefs like that could determine what desires to assign to the people she was trying to interpret. If one believes friendship can mean such a wide variety of things, how can one's views about friendship guide one's interpretations of other people? Reasoning in this way, opponents of Davidson's argument might insist that I have greatly overstated the resources he has with which to make sense of the differences we find among people's desires. He can, of course, still put some differences down to the innocuous kind of agent-relativity. Others can be put down to the factors sometimes causing desires to deviate from shared norms. But the claim might be that maneuvers such as these will never account in a plausible way for all the differences that we find.

But surely, if there is anyone guilty of overstatement here, it is those who would find in this reasoning a cause for such alarm. For surely a person who believes friendship can quite properly mean different things to different people will have views about when and why particular norms of friendship become applicable to particular people. So why should she not be able to look at the histories and circumstances of the people she is trying to interpret and determine what desires should be

27 For a discussion of the anthropological literature that I found both extremely helpful and extremely congenial, see Moody-Adams (1997).

28 Consequentialists are of course the notable exception here. They often do insist that values appear to be agent-relative only because different people, as a result of their different circumstances, need different desires in order to promote the overall good.

provisionally assigned to them? This might prove problematic, of course, if for some reason we assume her not to have complete knowledge of her subjects' histories and circumstances. In that case, there will be grounds to worry that her views about friendship might not provide her with the guidance an interpreter needs. But the publicness condition on which Davidson's argument is so substantially based does not require that people be interpretable even by someone who possesses only incomplete information about their histories and circumstances. It does require that people be interpretable on the basis of evidence that is publicly available, but this notion of availability is obviously intended to be understood in the broadest possible way. So long as we keep this in mind, I don't see why Davidson's argument should be thought hostile to convictions about agent-relativity.

Even after these points about agent-relativity are conceded, some people are still going to feel that there is a kind of hubris about the Davidsonian argument that makes it very difficult for them to accept. Perhaps Davidson allows interpretation to be guided by beliefs such as the belief that friendship can mean different things to different people. And given how extensive the differences in people's histories and circumstances can be — especially the differences in their social histories and circumstances, in their past and present interrelations with one another — perhaps this allows us to find some people answering to extremely unusual norms. But in the view of these opponents Davidson still gives too much importance to our views about the merits of these norms. We are to decide what norm of friendship has merit for our subjects given their histories and circumstances, then look for ways to interpret them as having roughly the desires that norm of friendship calls for. In the view of these opponents, this does not take sufficiently seriously the possibility that our subjects might be better understood as answering to norms we find lacking in merit even given their histories and circumstances. It might be difficult to produce an unimpeachable example of someone who is best understood by the light of such puzzling norms. Indeed, given that we do not know of any people who are not human — who have not evolved in pretty much the same ways we ourselves have evolved — it is perhaps not to be expected that such a person ever will be encountered. So perhaps it was a mistake to maintain that Davidson's argument can be refuted simply by holding it up to the facts. So far as these opponents can see, however, a refutation of that sort is not strictly necessary; it is enough that we can imagine having to interpret someone by the light of some puzzling norms.

But could we really interpret someone by such light? How effectively could we apply a norm of friendship if there was nothing in our subjects' histories and circumstances that we believed gave it merit for them? I doubt very much that we could apply such a norm well enough to use

it as a guide to our interpretations. It seems to me that our predicament here would actually be almost identical to the one we confronted in the previous section. At first, one might suppose our grasp of merely puzzling norms could be much firmer than our grasp of fully alien norms. After all, we might already have had considerable success applying these norms to people for whom we did not find them puzzling. But the reason we would find these norms puzzling in connection with our current subjects would be that we could see nothing in their histories and circumstances that would give these norms any authority over them. And our inability to see why these norms would have any authority over these people would make it impossible for us to say how they called for these people to rank the outcomes they might promote. For example, suppose we tried to interpret our subjects by the light of a norm of friendship demanding great fidelity even though, in our opinion, nothing in their histories or circumstances made it reasonable for them to conceive of friendship as demanding so much. How effectively could we apply this norm of friendship to them, given that we didn't believe it had any authority over them? Given that we didn't believe their situation called for this norm, could we see what this norm called for in their situation? I doubt very much that we could see this — not, anyway, as clearly as we would need to if we were really to succeed in interpreting these people by the light of this norm of friendship.

If we don't believe friendship demands much fidelity of our current subjects, that must be because we don't think there would be any point in its doing so given the nature of their histories and circumstances. Perhaps their world is one in which people are required to spend the majority of their time with their colleagues, but also one in which people are constantly being reassigned, so that no one ever has the same colleagues very long. Now one might be tempted to argue that, in such a world, friends could still find ways to exhibit their fidelity to one another, even if the point of their doing so would be somewhat obscure. Thus one might be tempted to argue that we could still interpret these people by the light of a norm of friendship demanding great fidelity even if we believed that norm had no point for them. But if we believed fidelity had no point for them, could we really say which actions would exhibit their fidelity? Suppose someone bombards her long-lost friends with Christmas e-mails recounting in excruciating detail how cute her children have been. Should we interpret her as wanting to be faithful to her friends, or should our belief in the pointlessness of that exercise lead us to look for some other way to make sense of her behavior?

It does seem to me that, as the point of a norm becomes harder for us to appreciate, it also becomes harder for us to recognize which desires the norm would call for people to have. Now if these difficulties were limited to a single norm, we might very well still manage to interpret our

subjects. But suppose many of the norms allegedly governing our subjects struck us as having no point for them at all. I submit that, in that case, we would find ourselves lacking the guidance we would need in order to interpret them simply on the basis of evidence concerning their behavior and its relation to their environment. We might understand what these norms would have required of other people — people for whom, in our opinion, they would have had some point — but we would have no idea what they required of these people. So while we might try to interpret these people by assuming their desires to be largely shaped by these norms, we would have no idea what desires this might actually cause them to have in the situations they actually face. Though we might seem to understand these merely puzzling norms better than we understood the totally alien ones, we would in fact be in no better position to use them as a guide to our interpretations.

IV A Final Worry: Triangulation and Value

More could of course be said about this, but my guess is that a different worry will now be looming larger in many minds. For suppose we can't guide our interpretations by puzzling norms. Doesn't this indicate that some people might not be interpretable by us at all?

This is a possibility Davidson's publicness condition is meant to rule out. He assumes people are interpretable by anyone who possesses sufficient evidence concerning the observable features of their behavior and its relation to their environment.²⁹ As he sees things, therefore, the fact that we are unable to interpret people by the light of puzzling norms entails that they must be interpretable by the light of norms we find more congenial. But of course opponents who are not yet fully committed to the publicness condition are going to wonder why the inference shouldn't be drawn in the opposite direction. Why not take our inability to interpret people by the light of puzzling norms as indicating that interpretation requires something more than evidence of this publicly available sort? As we briefly noted earlier, back in Section I, the publicness condition frequently comes under attack from those who think interpretation at least sometimes requires additional evidence concerning the constitution and organization of people's brain states. The worry

29 It is true that, in 1994, at 121, Davidson explicitly allows that *radical* interpretation might *not* prove to be possible. But his point here concerns not the truth of the publicness condition but our ability to exploit it in special cases.

we are contemplating now is somewhat different, having less to do with the evidence interpretation requires and more to do with the possibility that there might be various other requirements successful interpreters must meet. Perhaps one person is interpretable by another only if the norms by which the former is governed are ones the latter finds at least to some degree congenial. But then there is no guarantee that we could be interpreted by someone omniscient, and so no guarantee that our convictions about value are not massively in error.

Can Davidson's publicness condition be defended against worries of these two kinds? The argument he advances begins by asking what makes it the case that a person's propositional attitudes have the specific propositional contents they do. Davidson assumes that this must somehow be explained by the causes that gave shape to the person's attitudes, then argues that these causes must be understood to include more than the person's reactions to external things. He claims that they must also be understood to include the person's reactions to other people's reactions to those same external things and her own reactions to them. It is, he claims, only by *triangulating* in this way with other people as well as external things that a person can acquire content-bearing attitudes at all.³⁰ But now, if this is correct, it would indeed appear to follow that this person must be interpretable solely on the basis of evidence concerning observable features of her behavior and its relation to her environment. After all, the record of her triangulations will include nothing other than evidence of this publicly available sort, of her own and other people's interactions with one another and the external things in their immediate surroundings. And if these triangulations do play the definitive role in fixing her propositional contents, the record of them would appear to provide evidence sufficient to interpret those contents. As I keep acknowledging, successful interpreters might also need background information of various sorts. But why should we suppose they would need further evidence concerning this person herself?

Now it might seem, at first sight, that this argument simply overlooks our worry that possessing sufficient evidence might not be the only requirement successful interpreters must meet. Even if a person's triangulations with others do fix the contents of her attitudes, would knowledge of these facts put just anyone in a position to interpret her? Couldn't these triangulations take very different forms within different groups of people, so much so that one group might prove incapable of interpreting another, no matter how good its evidence about the other were to

30 See, e.g., Davidson (1990 and 1992). As I shall explain in a moment, this argument also underwrites the holism assumption.

become? On a second look, however, I think it proves impossible to make clear sense of this worry without abandoning the idea that the contents of people's thoughts are fixed by their triangulations with external things. On the one hand, if two groups of people are triangulating differently with the same objects only because they are directly sensitive to different properties of those objects, then there is no insurmountable obstacle to interpretation, for properties to which some people are directly sensitive can always be identified by other people in more roundabout ways. On the other hand, if two groups of people are triangulating differently with the same objects because they already think differently about those objects, then we need to know how they came by those different thoughts.³¹ And unless we are prepared to deny that those different thoughts must themselves have resulted from different triangulations, I see no way matters could have reached the point that neither side was interpretable by the other.

As far as I can see, therefore, everything turns on Davidson's triangulation argument. If it is accepted, his general case against scepticism becomes extremely difficult to resist. But should we accept this argument? In particular, should we accept it as applying, not just to beliefs, but also to the various other propositional attitudes people have? My guess is that many readers are going to wonder what reason we could have to accept this argument in the case of desires. They might note, to begin with, that when Davidson develops the argument, he applies it only to beliefs, saying nothing about desires at all.³² They might then go on to argue that there are some very good reasons why the argument should be developed in this restricted way. In order to explain what it is that fixes the contents of people's beliefs, we must explain, among other things, how the referents of their beliefs are determined. And of course one way to explain this is to maintain, as Davidson maintains, that the referents of people's beliefs are determined by the causes of their beliefs. Since people's beliefs have countless causes, this cannot be the whole story, thus further questions arise that the triangulation argument is intended to answer. Now whatever comes of all this, the point to stress is that these arguments at least address questions about beliefs that do need answering. When we turn to people's desires, do we find similar

31 This is, in outline, the argument Davidson advances in 1974 against the possibility that there might be rival conceptual schemes. Let me be the first to say that it requires much more discussion than I am allocating to it here.

32 But it should be noted that later papers, such as Davidson (2000), do apply the argument to desires as well.

questions arising, questions to which the triangulation argument might again be offered in response?

Certainly it would be a mistake to suppose, as Hume perhaps supposed, that desires do not have referents at all.³³ A desire that the cat be on the mat, for example, refers to some particular cat and some particular mat. It might, however, be argued that this has more to do with attendant beliefs than with the desire itself. One cannot desire that this cat be on this mat unless one has at least some beliefs about these things. Questions really do arise, therefore, about what would make it the case that one's beliefs actually meet this condition. And perhaps Davidson is right in thinking that the answers are to be found among the causes of one's beliefs. Be this as it may, it might be thought that, once these questions are answered, no further questions arise about the referents of one's desire, since one's desire is just a disposition to act on such beliefs in certain ways. Further questions of course do arise about how the content of this disposition is fixed, about what makes it a disposition to act in ways that one believes will promote the cat's being on the mat and not something else. But it might be thought that the answers to these questions are somehow to be found in the constitution and organization of one's brain states, not in the causes that gave rise to those brain states in the first place.

My guess, as I say, is that many readers will respond to Davidson's triangulation argument along something like these lines. Certainly the history of our subject provides many examples of philosophers who insist on treating desires very differently from beliefs. Think, for instance, of Kant. He agrees that the contents of people's beliefs are importantly shaped by their common environment. Yet it seems never to cross his mind that the contents of people's desires might be subject to similar constraints. In Kant's view, however, people's interactions do not play an essential role in fixing the contents of their beliefs. So the fact that he treats beliefs and desires differently does not indicate that a Davidsonian should do the same. Obviously the crucial question for a Davidsonian is whether the contents of people's beliefs could be fixed by their interactions with one another and external things if the contents of their desires were not fixed by such interactions as well. And surely the answer is that they could not be. Triangulation does not require that people already understand one another, but it does require that they have some ability to sense what one another is responding to and aiming at. This makes it very hard to see how their triangulations could lead

33 Hume's claim (in 1739, 415) that passions are 'original existences' with 'no representative qualities' is often read this way.

people to fix on views about what is to be believed without at the same time leading them to fix on views about what is to be desired.³⁴

If this is right, and if the triangulation argument underwrites the publicness condition in the case of beliefs, then it must underwrite the publicness condition in the case of desires as well. Anyone with sufficient knowledge of the interactions responsible for fixing the contents of a person's desires must be in a position to figure out what those contents are. Although I will not take time to develop the point properly here, I think it is also the triangulation argument that accounts for the fact that the holism assumption holds for beliefs. This further suggests that, if the triangulation argument cannot apply to beliefs without applying to desires, neither can the holism assumption hold for beliefs without holding for desires. The thought here might be put like this: if it is by interacting with one another and external things that people come to fix on views about what is to be desired, then how they come to fix on any one of these views is inevitably going to depend on how they come to fix on a great many others, for each one of the people participating in the interactions by which these contents are fixed will at any given moment be responding to and aiming at a variety of different things, and so how any one part of this gets sorted out is inevitably going to depend on how a great many other parts of it get sorted out.³⁵

Now of course, even if this is right, it won't be of much concern to anyone who is not persuaded that the triangulation argument has some merit in the case of beliefs. And of course many people do reject the social version of externalism Davidson advocates, some preferring more direct forms of externalism, others rejecting externalism in all its forms. A complete defence of Davidson's case for objective value would have to overcome all such doubts, an enormous undertaking to which I do not pretend to have made any contribution at all.³⁶ Thus, as I warned at the beginning, we are still very far from having anything even remotely resembling a proof that scepticism about objective values can be dismissed. My argument is really addressed to those who find some merit in Davidson's claims about beliefs but who doubt for one reason or

34 It follows that, for Davidson, a desire is not merely a disposition to act on certain beliefs in certain ways; it is also an attitude underwriting a commitment to the value of acting on those beliefs in those ways.

35 Thus, as I suggested earlier, even something seemingly as simple as a desire for food is actually quite complicated, since what a person finds desirable in the way of food is going to depend on the other desires she has.

36 Though I do hope to have given objectivists about value some reason to align themselves with Davidson on these issues.

another that similar claims can be made about desires. What I hope to have demonstrated here is that their doubts are not warranted, that the theory is in fact unified, just as Davidson has long been arguing. If the publicness condition really holds for beliefs, then it must hold for desires as well; in which case the very nature of desire must be shaped by the demands of interpretation; in which case (given holism) our desires must be largely as they should be, since it is only on that assumption that others could succeed in interpreting us.

It must be acknowledged, however, that this argument does not respond in a direct way to some of the questions that typically fuel scepticism about objective values.³⁷ In particular, nothing has so far been said about what sort of *property* objective value is.³⁸ How, exactly, are objective values involved in causing people to have the desires that they do? How, exactly, is the objective value of an outcome related to its other properties? How, exactly, are disputes about the objective value of an outcome to be resolved? This last question might not be quite as pressing as the others, for the success of Davidson's argument would appear to guarantee evaluative judgements the sort of presumptive correctness coherentist epistemologies require. (Though troubling questions would of course remain about how, in the case of values, one tells whether an amendment to our views increases or reduces their overall coherence.³⁹) But it is, in any case, the more metaphysical questions that many sceptics find most worrisome. And yet it is exactly on such points that Davidson's argument has the least to say.⁴⁰ It attempts to reassure us that our desires answer to values that are objective, but without explaining to us what these values are or how they exercise authority. But as long as we are left in the dark about details as important as these, how reassured can we really be that the sceptics' doubts have finally been laid to rest?

37 With others, however, it does much better. For example, it obviously suggests an answer to the sort of scepticism that rests on Bernard Williams's (1980) thought that reasoning 'internal' to desires cannot be expected to yield answers binding on all people.

38 In recent years, the most influential statements of these worries are to be found in Harman (1977) and Mackie (1977).

39 As one of the referees has reminded me, it is far from clear that Davidson himself would regard these questions as troubling, for he has never expressed much interest in trying to develop a general account of justification, whether coherentist or otherwise.

40 Davidson does, however, briefly provide independent arguments in response to some of these worries in his 1995 and 2000.

I see no point in trying to deny that these metaphysical worries are important.⁴¹ As long as they remain unanswered, our refutation of scepticism will be fundamentally incomplete. And as I don't propose to try to answer these worries here, this is another respect in which my argument falls very far short of demonstrating that there really are objective values. My own view is that these worries would seem considerably less damning if we were clearer about how to think of training in the context of Davidson's externalism.⁴² I also think it would help a lot if we could get clearer about the ways in which we believe different histories and circumstances bring people under the jurisdiction of different norms. We saw earlier, in Section 3, how a better understanding of the possibilities here might quiet worries about the 'hubris' some opponents claim to find in Davidsonian interpretation. My thought now is that a better understanding of the possible interconnections among value and history and circumstance would almost certainly make it easier to deal with the metaphysical worries as well.⁴³ But as the merits of these suggestions can hardly be said to be obvious, it must be admitted that our case for objective value is far from complete. All I claim to have established here is that Davidson's arguments concerning the nature and the interpretation of the propositional attitudes give us reason to approach these old debates with some renewed hope.⁴⁴

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41 In particular, Davidson's own treatment of these worries in his 1995 and 2000 is much too dismissive to my taste.

42 I suspect greater clarity here would be especially helpful in addressing worries about the explanatory role objective values could play, for these worries often do rest on views about the nature of training that no externalist should regard as reasonable.

43 In particular, with worries about how evaluative properties are related to non-evaluative ones — the thought being that this relation perhaps seems as mysterious as it sometimes does only because evaluative properties are portrayed as being less mutable than they really are.

44 Thanks to Taylor Carman, Leslie Green, Henry Jackman and Claudine Verheggen for helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.

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