

Self-knowledge and Scepticism

Donald Davidson has argued, in a number of places, that it is unintelligible to suppose that most of our beliefs could be mistaken - most of our beliefs, says Davidson, are true.¹ Davidson's argument to this conclusion has often appeared to give a central place to the claim that the objects of belief should be identified with the causes of belief and in this respect Davidsonian anti-scepticism seems to rely on a theory of mental content that might broadly be described as 'externalist', and that is similar to the externalist theories developed by Tyler Burge and others.² The most famous version of the Davidsonian argument against scepticism makes use of the notion of an 'omniscient interpreter'. Such an interpreter would know all the truths that could be known and yet, in order to interpret another speaker (whether omniscient or not), such an interpreter would have to take the speaker to have beliefs mostly in agreement with those of the interpreter. Hence the speaker would have to be interpreted as having mostly true beliefs - beliefs not merely held to be true, but, given the hypothesis of omniscience, known to be true. Why must the interpreter assume agreement in beliefs? Because, according to Davidson, beliefs are only identified in relation to other beliefs. In the most basic cases we identify beliefs by matching them with the objects and events in the world that we believe are the causes of those beliefs: 'What stands in the way of global scepticism of the senses is, in my view, the fact that we must, in the plainest and methodologically most basic cases, take the objects of a belief to be the causes of that belief. And what we, as interpreters, must take them to be is what they in fact are'.³ Too much error in beliefs would undermine the relations between beliefs, thereby undermining the possibility of the identification of beliefs.

Edward Craig argues, against Davidson, that even though we might grant that our beliefs cannot involve massive error and that 'most of our beliefs are true', we could nevertheless be mistaken about what beliefs we hold.⁴ Such a conclusion, argues Craig, follows from Davidson's 'externalist' strategy against the sceptic. For even if it is granted that we could not be mistaken about the truth of our beliefs, we

could still be mistaken as to what it is our beliefs are about, and could thus be mistaken as to which beliefs are mostly true. To know which beliefs are true – to be able to identify beliefs – would require knowing what the beliefs are about, but this would itself require knowing what is true, and it is, of course, just this that scepticism casts in doubt. Thus, Craig argues, the Davidsonian argument against scepticism is 'either impotent (if not slightly worse) or redundant'.⁵ A similar point has been made, though in more general fashion, by Peter Klein, who argues that the Davidsonian position 'presupposes some of the very knowledge which the sceptic denies that we possess'.⁶ In the same vein Anthony Brueckner writes that:

Unless I can claim to know what my beliefs' contents are, I cannot claim to know that I am a brain in a vat rather than a sitting, embodied being. And I cannot claim to know what my beliefs' contents are unless I claim to know what their causal determinants are. To claim the latter is to beg the question against the sceptic.⁷

Once again, impotence or redundancy threatens.

Davidson's anti-sceptical arguments have certainly generated a good deal of criticism, but the line of argument to be found in Klein, Brueckner and especially Craig, seems to suggest a particularly acute difficulty for the Davidsonian position. Indeed, Craig claims that granting the Davidsonian concession that our beliefs cannot involve massive error does not merely fail as an answer to the sceptic, but actually broadens the range of sceptical doubt 'since it puts our knowledge of what it is that we believe at risk along with our knowledge of what is the case'.⁸ Here I intend to defend the Davidsonian position, or my reconstruction of that position, against the objections of Craig, Klein and Brueckner. I will show that the connection between self-knowledge and knowledge of the world, understood in conjunction with Davidson's holistic approach to understanding and the mental, is indeed such as to seriously threaten the sceptical position. My argument to this conclusion will depend on the claim that it is not externalism but holism that underlies the Davidsonian position (though Davidsonian externalism can be seen as a consequence of that holism) and that holism requires that if we have beliefs at all

then it must be the case both that most of our beliefs are true and that we generally know what our beliefs are about.

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Craig, Klein and Brueckner present Davidson, correctly I think, as holding the view that the question of self-knowledge – of knowing the contents of our own minds – is closely tied to the question of knowing what the world is like. On this view, a failure of self-knowledge would compromise our knowledge of the world and vice versa. The further claim that is made, in various forms, by Craig, Klein and Brueckner is that since we cannot establish either self-knowledge or knowledge of the world without already having one or the other, and since scepticism now places both in question, this Davidsonian view is of no help against the sceptic. Craig points out, in addition, that while Davidson ties together self-knowledge and knowledge of the world, he also seems to separate, to some extent, the question of content from the question of truth. On Craig's reading of Davidson our beliefs may well be true and yet we may not know what we believe – so Davidson may be able to establish that most of our beliefs are true, but he will be unable to do more than that, and, more specifically, he will be unable to demonstrate any knowledge of the content of our true beliefs. Since he is unable to do the latter, so he will be unable to demonstrate that scepticism, as it is usually understood, is false.

Of course, on this reading, not only is the Davidsonian strategy unsuccessful, it also seems to alter the character of scepticism itself. Thus Craig claims that in separating truth and content while tying together knowledge of ourselves and knowledge of the world Davidson's argument actually leads to a broadening of sceptical doubt. The possibility that in adopting externalist strategies to answer scepticism about our knowledge of the world we might open up a new form of scepticism about our knowledge of ourselves is, however, something that Davidson has himself recognised. In a discussion of the sort of externalist theories of mental content developed by Burge and others, Davidson argues that the consequence of adopting such theories is that:

ordinary scepticism of the senses is avoided by supposing the world more or less correctly determines the contents of thoughts about the world. But scepticism is not defeated; it is only displaced onto our knowledge of our own minds. Our ordinary beliefs about the external world are (on this view) directed onto the world, but we don't know what we believe.⁹

Davidson's argument here seems to reflect a similar scenario to that outlined by Craig, Klein and Brueckner. Unlike Craig, however, Davidson talks of a shift in the focus of sceptical doubt – from the question of truth to the question of content – rather than a broadening of such doubt. And, certainly, one might view Craig's own presentation of the matter as also shifting the focus of doubt from truth onto content rather than actually broadening the scope of such doubt. Craig might seem to acknowledge this latter point when he criticises the Davidsonian argument for relying on a method 'which simply transmutes any doubt there may be about ... truth into a doubt about ... content'.¹⁰ Yet, in fact, there need be no conflict between these two ways of putting matters. Craig can argue that the shift in the focus of doubt from truth to content necessarily brings with it a broadening of doubt from doubt about our knowledge of the world to doubt about our knowledge of ourselves. The shift in the focus of doubt is thus also a broadening in the range of doubt.

However we put matters, it seems that Davidson's argument against scepticism places in question our knowledge of our own minds – if it succeeds in saving first-order knowledge from sceptical attack it does so at the cost of sacrificing second-order knowledge. Yet Davidson has himself explicitly claimed that speakers do know their own mental states in a way that others do not, and that such knowledge is indeed a prerequisite for successful use of language. In this respect one might conclude that the criticisms of Craig, Brueckner and Klein, particularly when they are taken with Davidson's own comments above, demonstrate a simple inconsistency in the Davidsonian position: on the one hand Davidson argues against scepticism in a way that threatens the possibility of self-knowledge, while on the other he argues that we must have knowledge of our own mental states if communication and interpretation are to be possible. In fact the apparent

inconsistency between externalism and self-knowledge is one that Davidson has noted and which he also claims can be resolved. The inconsistency arises only if we assume that the contents of first-order beliefs and the contents of second-order beliefs are determined independently of one another. But if externalism is the view that the contents of belief are determined by the causes of belief, then this must apply to beliefs in general, both first and second-order beliefs, and not just to one class of beliefs, for instance, to first-order beliefs alone. As Davidson points out in replying to Tyler Burge 'there is no conflict [between externalism and self knowledge] ... what determines the contents of thoughts also determines what the thinker thinks the contents are'.¹¹ What the thinker thinks her thoughts or beliefs are about and what those thoughts or beliefs are about are both determined in the same way. To suppose that the contents of beliefs, or of thoughts, are determined differently in one case compared to the other is like supposing that beliefs of one sort could be identified by using one theory of interpretation, while a different theory was used to identify beliefs of the other sort.

Yet although this strategy ensures that there is no inconsistency between what the objects our thoughts are about and the objects we think our thoughts are about (and so no conflict between externalism and the possibility of self-knowledge), it still remains a possibility that we know neither the objects our thoughts are about (and so are mistaken about the objects and events in the world around us) nor the contents of our thoughts about those objects. In that case scepticism remains and we are back with the original criticisms of Craig, Klein and Brueckner. For us to know about the world we need to know about the contents of our minds, but to know about the contents of our minds we need to know about the world. That we do know about the world, however, is just what the sceptic disputes. In that case it seems that Davidson does not defeat the sceptic, although he has, perhaps, demonstrated that the sceptic must be committed to a stronger claim than just that we might not have knowledge of the world: perhaps the sceptic is also committed to denying knowledge of our own minds. This would be an important conclusion in itself. It would suggest that scepticism cannot be restricted to just a scepticism about

knowledge of some 'outside' world, but undermines all of our knowledge, including knowledge of our own mental states, of our thoughts and language.¹²

It seems then that externalism alone is insufficient as an argument against scepticism. Yet it might well appear that Davidson himself thinks otherwise and that he views externalism as providing all that is needed to defeat scepticism. Thus, in discussing Burge's view that perceptual representations 'represent what ... they normally stem from and are applied to', Davidson says that this is a view he has 'long held' and adds that 'perhaps unlike Burge I find in it the makings of a cogent argument against some forms of scepticism'.¹³ Yet it is noteworthy that Davidson presents this idea as having only the 'makings' of an argument. Indeed, in the same passage he goes on to discuss the way in which, while externalism may show that perceptual judgements cannot generally be in error, this leaves still to be established just what representations 'normally stem from and are applied to'.¹⁴ And Davidson continues:

What is needed in order to give objective content to perceptions, words, or thoughts is not only causal interaction between different observers and the same objects or events, but the right sort of causal interaction between the observers in their shared environment; in a word, communication. Neither knowledge of one's own mind nor knowledge of the 'outside' world is possible except in a social setting, 'impersonal' thoughts, like other thoughts, depend on interpersonal connections.¹⁵

The emphasis on the 'interpersonal' is characteristic of Davidson's other presentations of his argument against scepticism and is indicative of Davidson's emphasis on treating epistemological issues in a way that also implicates questions of interpretation and communication. In this respect even the omniscient interpreter argument can be seen as moving the question of scepticism into the 'interpersonal', and hence interpretative, domain. Both self-knowledge and knowledge of the world depend, says Davidson, on 'interpersonal' or intersubjective connections. However, neither Craig nor Klein nor Brueckner pay very much attention to what might be involved here. That they do not is an indication that perhaps there are elements of the Davidsonian position they have missed.

Indeed, Brueckner's discussion, which focuses on the possible anti-sceptical force of the principle of charity, treats charity almost exclusively in terms of its externalist implications, for the interpretation that Brueckner seems to regard as the most plausible interpretation of the principle is that we should 'assign beliefs by reference to their cause'.¹⁶ Such a reading of charity is acceptable only if it is seen against a broader holistic background. Charity (and the externalism with which it is associated) has to be seen as deriving from the holism that Davidson claims to be constitutive of the mental realm itself.¹⁷ This holism is most often expressed in terms of the claim that beliefs are only to be identified in relation to other beliefs. Thus Davidson writes that 'a belief is identified by its location in a pattern of beliefs; it is this pattern that determines the subject matter of the belief, what the belief is about'.¹⁸ Insofar as such holism is the determining factor in the structure of interpretation and communication so it is precisely what comes to the fore in Davidson's emphasis on the interpersonal. Yet holism is given little attention in Brueckner or in Klein (even though Klein provides a fuller discussion of the Davidsonian position). And while Craig seems to give greater prominence to Davidson's holistic conception of interpretation and of the mental, he too fails to appreciate the extent and nature of the holism that is involved.

In fact, it is not merely an interdependence between beliefs that is at issue here: the identification of beliefs is part of a wider project of interpretation that includes the interpretation of utterances and behaviour and the identification of attitudes in general (not merely beliefs but 'wishes, hopes, desires, emotions ... and fears'¹⁹). Interpretation is thus never a matter of identifying single beliefs or even groups of beliefs, but is rather a matter of developing an overall account that will apply to the whole range of the speaker's attitudes and behaviour. Indeed, to attribute beliefs to a speaker or to attach a meaning to her utterances is already implicitly to assume the speaker as possessing a whole range of attitudes and linguistic and behavioural capacities such that one cannot properly attribute beliefs and attitudes to a creature or attribute meanings to the creature's putative utterances in the absence of such an overall account. Davidson thus sees mental states as having content only insofar as they are logically related to other mental states and so to the

propositions those states take as their objects, to the sentences in which those propositions are expressed, and to both linguistic and non-linguistic behaviour. It is this whole complex of relations that is invoked in the process of interpretation:

We might know, for example, that a particular sentence apparently stands in certain logical relations to others for a given speaker; that he would prefer it true rather than some others; that his faith in its truth is modified to various degrees by observed changes in the world and by changes in his faith in the truth of other sentences. All of these considerations bear on the interpretation of the sentence, for on deciding it expresses a certain proposition, one has also decided on something believed and something desired; and the interpretation of further beliefs, sentences and desires has been much restricted.²⁰

Yet although the holism of the mental is most obviously apparent in consideration of the problems of interpretation, it is not restricted to interpretation but is an intrinsic feature of the mental. As Quine has emphasised with respect to his own indeterminacy of translation (to which Davidsonian holism is closely related), the holism of the mental is an ontological and not merely an epistemological thesis.²¹ There is no fact of the matter concerning mental states independent of the holistic interconnections exhibited in the project of interpretation. In order for a creature to have a belief, and not merely to be interpreted as having a belief, that creature must have many beliefs, those beliefs must be located within a dense system of other attitudes, and those attitudes must be appropriately related to the creature's utterances and actions. That this sort of interdependence amongst attitudes and between attitudes and behaviour is indeed a characteristic feature of the mental is presupposed by the Davidsonian argument against scepticism, including the omniscient interpreter argument, rather than established through that argument – as is clearest in the discussion in 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge'.²² It is also, one might say, a premise of the argument, were one to be advanced, in favour of the principle of charity or of Davidsonian externalism, rather than a conclusion of such an argument.

If one accepts Davidson's holistic account of the mental, that is, if one accepts that beliefs, desires and the rest are differentiated and individuated, and therefore

constituted, by the relations between them (and this means accepting that holism is not merely a feature of our interpretation of mental states, but a feature of the states themselves), then there will be serious difficulties in making sense of the idea that there could be any widespread ignorance of mental content. Davidson himself has sketched out the basis of an argument to this effect claiming that 'unless there is a presumption that a speaker knows what she means, i.e. is getting her own language right, there would be nothing for an interpreter to interpret'.²³ The simplest way of justifying this presumption is by appealing directly to the holism of the mental. One of the most obvious constraints of holism is that, in so far as beliefs and other attitudes are individuated by their relations with other beliefs, so there is a basic requirement that those beliefs and attitudes be consistent with one another. The consistency requirement cannot be absolute, it must be possible for there to be some degree of inconsistency (cases of akrasia provide clear examples of the existence of some inconsistent attitudes and behaviour), but the requirement must be satisfied in general and for the most part. To suppose that a speaker might not know what she believes and means is to suppose that some of her attitudes and utterances may be inconsistent with the rest of her attitudes and behaviour: in particular, it is to suppose that the beliefs she has about what she believes and means and the utterances she makes about what she believes and means will be inconsistent with what she actually does believe and mean. But the requirements of holism, and so the requirement of overall consistency, operate no less against this form of inconsistency than they do against any other. Second-order attitudes are thus not immune from the requirement that attitudes, in general, be consistent with one another, and so second-order beliefs must exhibit a certain degree of consistency both with other second-order beliefs and with first-order beliefs. But since second-order beliefs concern the content of first-order beliefs, if second-order beliefs are to be consistent with first-order beliefs then those second-order beliefs must generally be true – we must know what we mean and believe if our beliefs about what we mean and believe are to be consistent with what we actually do mean and believe. From an interpretative point of view, the attribution of attitudes and interpretation of utterances depend on developing an account that takes the speaker to be generally

consistent in what she believes, desires and means. Moreover such consistency constrains our interpretation of a speaker's attitudes overall rather than constraining merely the interpretation of first-order attitudes. Just as Davidson emphasises the applicability of externalism to attitudes in general, including both first and second-order beliefs, so too is holism applicable to attitudes in general and not merely to any one class of attitudes.

One might, of course, reply that second-order attitudes and utterances are relatively few compared to the entire set of our attitudes and utterances. Since Davidsonian holism does not require that utterances exhibit complete consistency or that all attitudes should be consistent with one another, so it seems that the Davidsonian position must allow the possibility that, while most of our attitudes are consistent, second-order attitudes are not (at least, they are not generally consistent with any first-order attitude). Yet it is not obvious that second-order attitudes do indeed represent only a small proportion of our attitudes. Second-order attitudes can, for instance, be readily multiplied, and indeed every first-order attitude can be paired with at least a possible second-order attitude, for one can always adopt second-order attitudes with respect to any first-order attitude.

More important, however, is that one cannot separate first from second-order attitudes in any way that would be sufficient to establish the possibility of overall inconsistency between the two. Indeed the interconnection between first and second-order beliefs itself provides a further reason for rejecting the idea of any widespread ignorance of mental content. It is crucial to successful communication and interpretation that both we and our interlocutors should be able to correct our misunderstandings and misinterpretations of each others' attitudes and behaviour (especially our linguistic behaviour). Interpreting the utterances of others, identifying their beliefs and desires, and successfully communicating with them, is precisely a matter of locating their attitudes and behaviour in relation to ours; it is in many ways a matter of adjusting and correcting our attitudes and behaviour in the light of the attitudes and behaviour of others and in response to the objects and events in our environment. Such a procedure presupposes that we have some knowledge of the contents of our own attitudes, and that we can arrive at knowledge

of the contents of the attitudes of others. This is not merely a methodological point, however, for on the Davidsonian account the mental is itself understood as always implicated within a broader social setting. Thus to be a creature capable of belief is to be a creature capable of attributing beliefs to others, and as the attribution of beliefs to others presupposes one's ability to correctly attribute beliefs to oneself, so the very having of beliefs involves having knowledge of those beliefs. In this respect one might say that, while not all our knowledge of mental states is interpretative (for we do not have to interpret to know what we mean in speaking - this is the essence of first person authority), all our knowledge of mental states arises within an interpersonal and hence interpretative context. It is within that context, a context in which we are interpretatively engaged with others as well as with ourselves (and, of course, with the world), that beliefs and other attitudes are constituted, for the identity of such states is determined by their relations with other states.

Indeed one might say that to hold a particular belief - say the belief that linguine is a variety of pasta - is simply for one's experiential and behavioural life to exhibit a certain pattern that includes (among many other things) a tendency to assent both to certain first-order utterances ('Linguine is a variety of pasta') and to certain second-order utterances ('Yes, I do believe that linguine is a variety of pasta'). To attribute an attitude to a speaker is thus to assume, in the absence of specific evidence to the contrary, that the speaker knows the content of that attitude, and what counts as evidence of a speaker's ignorance of what she believes or means is also prima facie evidence that we have interpreted the speaker wrongly. Widespread inconsistency between first and second-order attitudes will itself undermine the integrity of the system of attitudes as a whole. This does not rule out the possibility that, in some cases, speakers may be in error about what they mean or believe or desire. But such cases (for instance the sorts of cases cited by Tyler Burge in this regard²⁴) must represent the exceptions rather than the rule. Indeed, such cases can only be made intelligible by assuming that the speaker does know what she means and believes in respect of many other matters. So if I say that 'I love to eat linguine', and I believe that linguine is a variety of pasta made in the shape of small sea shells, then one may well say that I have misunderstood the conventional meaning of my

words, since linguine is a flat, thin pasta like flattened spaghetti (what I love to eat is actually conchiglie), but there is hardly sufficient evidence to infer that I actually believe that what I love to eat is a pasta like flattened spaghetti. Our utterances and the conventional meanings of those utterances are not the only evidence on which attributions of belief depend. As Davidson comments 'Thoughts are not interdependent atoms, and so there can be no simple, rigid, rule for the correct attribution of a single thought'.²⁵ Indeed, even the hypothesis that the speaker is mistaken in her beliefs about the conventional meaning of 'linguine' depends on the supposition that she does have many other true and justified beliefs (including beliefs about pasta, about what she believes about pasta and about the meanings of other of her utterances). In the absence of such knowledge not only will the speaker be unable to recognise any error, but it will be unclear whether her utterances express any belief on her part at all or whether she has any beliefs that could be in question.

That a breakdown in our knowledge of others or in our knowledge of ourselves would threaten the very existence of our own mental states is an element of Davidson's position that may sometimes go unnoticed. Certainly it may appear as if what is at stake is merely a claim about the epistemic interdependence of different forms of knowledge. In 'Three Varieties of Knowledge', for instance, Davidson writes that:

If I did not know what others think I would have no thoughts of my own and so would not know what I think. If I did not know what I think, I would lack the ability to gauge the thoughts of others. Gauging the thoughts of others requires that I live in the same world with them, sharing many reactions to its major features.²⁶

Such an assertion of the interdependence and irreducibility of these three forms of knowledge - of ourselves, of others and of the world -leaves open the possibility that one might deny the existence of knowledge in one of these domains, and so deny that we have knowledge in any of them. As Davidson comments '[these] three sorts of knowledge form a tripod: if any leg were lost no part would stand'.²⁷ This is, in fact, just what Craig, Klein and Brueckner insist on: accepting Davidson's claims of

interdependence among the three varieties of knowledge, they claim that the whole tripod must collapse since we cannot demonstrate that we have knowledge in any one of these three realms. Yet Davidson's tripod is not merely a piece of epistemological furniture. The interdependence it exhibits between these three forms of knowledge rests upon an interdependence among attitudes themselves, and between attitudes and behaviour, such that the loss of any one of the tripod's legs is not merely a threat to the possibility of knowledge, but to the very existence of beliefs, desires and intentions: 'If I did not know what others think' says Davidson 'I would have no thoughts of my own'. The same conclusion would also follow if I did not know what I myself thought. Our thoughts - and our beliefs, intentions, desires, hopes and fears exist only in so far as they are articulated with respect to one another, with respect to our behaviour, with respect to other speakers and with respect to the world itself. To assume otherwise is to assume the existence of a realm of mental objects distinct from us and with respect to which we may or may not have access. Such a notion is as essential to scepticism about our knowledge of mental content as the idea of an external world of objects distinct from us and to which we may or may not have access is to ordinary scepticism about the senses. Both notions are, on the Davidsonian account, equally mistaken for they violate the necessarily holistic character of the mental.

The idea that one should not construe self-knowledge as a matter of gaining access to some inner realm of mental objects is also explicitly discussed by Gareth Evans in The Varieties of Reference and his comments bear directly on the issues at stake here. Taking a somewhat gnomonic comment from Wittgenstein as his starting-point²⁸ he points out that second-order judgements - 'I think it is going to rain' - depend on the same evidence as do the corresponding first-order judgements 'it is going to rain' and so second-order judgements must generally be consistent with first-order judgements. Evans writes:

If someone asks me 'Do you think there is going to be a third world war?', I must attend, in answering him, to precisely the same outward phenomena as I would attend to if I were answering the question 'Will there be a third world war?' I get myself in a position to answer the question whether I believe that p by putting into operation whatever procedure I have for answering the question whether p ... If

a judging subject applies this procedure, then necessarily he will gain knowledge of one of his own mental states: even the most determined sceptic cannot find here a gap in which to insert his knife.²⁹

Evans' point here is very like Davidson's response to the supposed conflict between externalism and self-knowledge: that what determines the contents of our first-order beliefs also determines the contents of corresponding second-order beliefs. Yet Evans also takes this as demonstrating the error in treating self-knowledge as if it were a special form of knowledge distinct from and independent of our ordinary knowledge of the world; in this respect his conclusions also reinforce my own claims concerning the close inter-relation of first and second-order attitudes. Whether we emphasize interpretative or evidential considerations here the conclusion is the same: second-order attitudes are too closely bound up with first-order attitudes as part of a single attitudinal system - a system constrained by the requirements of holism - to allow for any widespread error in identifying attitudinal contents.

What these considerations show is that the very having of beliefs requires some degree of knowledge about the contents of beliefs, and in this sense first-order beliefs presuppose second-order beliefs. Of course, on the reading of Davidson that Craig, Klein and Brueckner advance, self-knowledge is itself interdependent with knowledge of the world (and this does indeed follow from Davidson's holistic premises) - it was in virtue of just this interdependence that the sceptical threat to our knowledge of the world seemed to become a threat to our knowledge of ourselves. And the consequence of this is that, if we are to have knowledge of our own mental states, that is, of our own beliefs and attitudes, then we must have knowledge of the world also, since according to Davidsonian externalism (which is not itself contested in the arguments developed by Craig, Klein or Brueckner) in the most basic cases we identify beliefs and other attitudes 'according to the events and objects in the outside world' that give rise to those attitudes.³⁰ In that case, we can see that even to have beliefs is to have mostly true beliefs and to have knowledge of the content of those beliefs - that beliefs are both true and known is a necessary condition for the existence of those beliefs. Put hypothetically we can say that if we have beliefs, then we have mostly true beliefs the contents of which we also know.

On the assumption that the antecedent of that hypothetical statement is true - we do have beliefs - we can finally conclude that most of our beliefs are true and that we have knowledge of the contents of those beliefs.

Of course, in presenting the argument thus externalism seems to operate as an independent premise in the argument, and while this does not affect the cogency of my reply to the line of argument found in Craig, Klein and Brueckner, it would be useful if the direct connection that has been shown to exist between holism and first-person authority could also be shown to obtain between holism and externalism. Indeed, one of my claims earlier was that externalism follows from holism, but this is a claim for which I have not, so far, properly argued. In fact both first-person authority and externalism can be seen as particular instances of holism as it applies, in the first case to the relation between first and second-order beliefs, and in the second case to the relation between beliefs and the world. We have already seen the connection between holism and self-knowledge, what then is the connection between holism and externalism? Perhaps the simplest way of setting out this connection is through consideration of the structure of interpretation. The problem in interpreting a speaker is that because the content of a speaker's beliefs (as well as her other attitudes) and the meanings of the speaker's utterances are interconnected, so we have no access to a speaker's beliefs independent of our access to the meanings of her utterances and vice versa. But while the holism of the mental sets up this initial problem it also offers a solution. In so far as we have access to our own beliefs and attitudes so we can we go on to attribute beliefs to the speaker by matching utterances that the speaker appears to hold true with utterances to which we would also assent (or to which we would assent under relevantly similar conditions). We can do this, and so use our beliefs to get at the meaning of the speaker's utterances as well as at the speaker's beliefs, only because of the holistic character of the mental - because beliefs depend for their identity on being part of a wider system of belief, and of belief, attitude and behaviour. Of course, in proceeding in this fashion, we are also effectively identifying the objects of belief through identifying the causes of belief in the speaker's immediate environment. And so the principle of charity that is involved here can be put in terms either of the advice to optimise agreement

between ourselves and those we interpret (assume similarity in beliefs) or in terms of the advice to take the causes of belief as the objects of belief (assume externalism). Whichever form is adopted the effect is the same: the holistic interconnection between attitudes and behaviour is maintained, and the identification of attitudes and interpretation of utterances is thereby made possible.

Indeed, given that Davidsonian holism involves a transformed conception of the mental, and of the relation between mind and world, so too does the Davidsonian position require a transformed conception of externalism. It is because of the social or interpersonal character of language and the mind that we must look to objects in the world in order to identify attitudes and interpret utterances. It is only through the interconnection between attitudes and meanings that attitudes and meanings are identified and individuated, and such interconnection can only be established through interaction between a number of speakers who each have a slightly different perspective on the world. The possibility of interaction between speakers presupposes their ability to interact with each other and with a set of common objects. It is thus that, through identifying the objects that are the causes of speakers' beliefs, we are able to gain access to those beliefs themselves. Of course in this process we do not first gain access to the objects in the world and only then gain knowledge of beliefs. Knowledge of the world, of other speakers, and of ourselves are each dependent on one another, and no one of them is more fundamental than the other - such interdependence is another expression of the holism that underlies the Davidsonian account.

It is not merely that in order to have knowledge of ourselves we must have knowledge of the world and of other speakers. Rather, if we are to be said to have beliefs, or desires, or intentions, and if we are to be said to speak or act meaningfully, then we must have knowledge of ourselves, of the world, and of other speakers. On the assumption that we do indeed have beliefs, then we have here a version of the Davidsonian argument against scepticism that does not fall victim to the objections of Craig, Klein and Brueckner. Moreover it is not an argument that takes any form of externalism as its sole, or even its central, premise. Instead it focuses on the holistic conception of the mental that is the single most significant feature of the

Davidsonian account. That it is not to say that externalism does not play a part here, but only that externalism needs to be understood in relation to the holistic considerations from which it ultimately derives. Unlike some of Davidson's own presentations of the argument, the version given here makes no reference to the notion of an omniscient interpreter either. Of course the omniscient interpreter argument, when used by Davidson, has only ever been an element in his antisceptical strategy, and has never been the sum of that strategy. When it has appeared, it has been employed as a way of demonstrating that the presumption of overall agreement which follows from holism cannot be construed in terms of shared but mostly erroneous beliefs. Yet the argument seems to have been more of a hindrance than a help to the Davidsonian cause, and has probably served only to obscure some of the more important features of the Davidsonian position. It is useful, therefore, to be able to restate the argument against scepticism without reference to such a notion and in this connection it is significant that Davidson has not employed the omniscient interpreter argument in any of his more recent discussions. In fact the Davidsonian argument against scepticism need not rely solely on externalism nor need it depend on any form of deus ex machina. What shows the falsity of the sceptical position is simply the holistic interrelation of attitudes with other attitudes and with behaviour and of speakers with other speakers and with the world.

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It seems that if the sceptic allows that we do have beliefs, then that alone is enough to enable us to show both that we generally know what we believe and that what we believe is mostly true. The sceptic could of course respond to this by denying that we have beliefs at all. Klein himself seems willing to adopt this line when he writes of the Davidsonian argument that '[t]he most that such an argument could show is that if we have beliefs, then we have knowledge. But what is then called for is an argument which provides a good reason for the claim that we have beliefs'.³¹ Yet such a response can lead only to absurdity. Scepticism, at least in the form

considered here, is a doubting of the overall truth of our beliefs, that is, of the very beliefs that we hold. To question the existence of those beliefs is thus to question an assumption from which scepticism itself begins. Indeed, questioning must always take its place, along with believing, deciding, wondering, considering and so forth, within a system of other attitudes and beliefs. Without such attitudes there can be no questioning. The conclusion to which we are therefore led is that, if such scepticism is indeed to be counted a significant position, then most of our beliefs will count as knowledge, for if scepticism is significant (that is, if it is to involve the raising of doubts about the truth and justification of our beliefs), then it must already presuppose the existence of beliefs, and if there are beliefs, then, by the argument I advanced above, they will be mostly true and their contents known. We can conclude, in other words, that if scepticism is significant, then, by its own account, it will also be false.

Of course, in the above discussion I have, following Davidson and also Craig, Klein and Brueckner, used the term 'scepticism' to refer to what is actually a quite specific form of scepticism (though it is a form that has been common in epistemological discussions since Descartes). Consequently my (and Davidson's) antisceptical conclusions have to be taken as operating only against that form of scepticism that consists in doubting the truth of our beliefs in general - what might be called global epistemological scepticism. Nothing that I have said here can be used to vindicate the truth of our beliefs in total nor of any special class of beliefs. Even particular beliefs about ourselves, and about what we have believed or intended, can, on occasion turn out to be mistaken.³² In this respect the Davidsonian position does not take issue with more limited forms of scepticism such as can be found, for instance, in some of the ancient sceptics such as Sextus Empiricus³³ or in the work of Hume. And while the Davidsonian considerations I have adduced above demonstrate the unacceptability of such global scepticism, those same considerations can also be seen as expressing a form of limited scepticism akin to that of Hume and others. Such scepticism is directed, not at the possibility of knowledge as such, but against certain attempts to employ concepts beyond their appropriate contexts: against, for instance, the attempts of the global epistemological sceptic to employ

notions of doubt against belief in general; or, in another guise, to employ the distinction between word and thing, concept and object, so as to establish a global separation between language and the world - the latter attempt is the target of Davidson's arguments in 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme'.³⁴ This kind of limited scepticism - a scepticism that, understood as an attempt to carefully mark out the limits and the preconditions for knowledge, seems to be an important element in Davidson's thinking - is clearly in a tradition that encompasses not only Sextus Empiricus and Hume, but also Kant and Wittgenstein (and perhaps, more recently, Michel Foucault). Indeed, the Davidsonian arguments I have developed here can be seen as developments of a position we are already familiar with in Wittgenstein,³⁵ particularly in Wittgenstein's On Certainty. Yet while Wittgenstein's position draws attention to, among other things, the quite general point that doubt always requires a background of beliefs held true, the Davidsonian position provides a more detailed and systematic account of the close interconnection between self-knowledge and our knowledge of objects that arises out of the holistic character of the mental.

¹ (Davidson 1984a, pp. 168-170, 199-214; 1986a, pp. 307-319; 1986b, pp. 320-332; 1991a, pp. 191-202)

² (see for instance Burge 1988. The important differences between Davidsonian externalism and other varieties - particularly the externalism or 'non-individualism' found in Burge - should not, however, be overlooked. To a large extent this paper concerns one of those differences: namely Davidson's insistence that externalism does not conflict with self-knowledge.

³ (Davidson 1986a, pp. 317-318)

⁴ (Craig 1990, pp. 213-214)

⁵ Craig 1990, pp. 213

⁶ Klein 1986, p. 386

⁷ Brueckner 1986, p. 26.

⁸ Craig 1990, p. 213

⁹ Davidson 1987, pp. 445-446)

¹⁰ Craig 1990, p. 213

¹¹ Davidson 1988, p. 664, see also Davidson 1991a, pp. 195-196

¹² David Papineau claims that a scepticism that calls into question even whether we have beliefs (what Papineau calls 'total' scepticism) is actually incoherent (Papineau 1987, pp. 11-12).

¹³ Davidson 1988, pp. 664-665

¹⁴ Davidson comments that 'we cannot answer "what they represent," since the cause was supposed to answer this very question. But which of the many possible causes is the right one? Events in the nervous system, patterns of stimulation of the nerve-endings, or something further out' (Davidson 1988, p. 665).

¹⁵ Davidson 1988, p. 665

¹⁶ Brueckner 1986, p. 266

¹⁷ For a detailed discussion of the nature of Davidsonian holism, see (Malpas 1992, pp. 53-188).

¹⁸ Davidson 1984a, p. 168

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- ¹⁹ Davidson 1982, p. 3021
- ²⁰ Davidson 1986c, p.207
- ²¹ Quine 1969, p. 303
- ²² Davidson 1986a
- ²³ Davidson 1987, p. 456; see also Davidson 1984b, pp. 110-111
- ²⁴ see for example Burge 1979
- ²⁵ Davidson 1987, p. 449
- ²⁶ Davidson 1991b, p. 166
- ²⁷ Davidson 1991b, p. 166.
- ²⁸ see Evans 1982, p. 225
- ²⁹ Evans 1982, p. 225
- ³⁰ Davidson 1986a, p. 317
- ³¹ Klein 1986, pp. 385-386
- ³² see Malpas 1992, p. 238
- ³³ Myles Burnyeat has emphasized the more limited character of ancient scepticism in (Burnyeat 1982, pp. 3-40, esp. 25ff.) This is not to say, of course, that ancient scepticism was without problems. Hume, for instance, attacked the ancient sceptics on the grounds that their scepticism was, in practice, inconsistent - an issue taken up by Myles Bumyeat in (Burnyeat 1980).
- ³⁴ Davidson 1984a, pp. 183-198
- ³⁵ Clear parallels between the Davidsonian and Wittgensteinian positions are suggested by Marie McGinn in 'The Third Dogma' (McGinn 1981-2). It is worth noting that Wittgenstein's arguments against scepticism in On Certainty (Wittgenstein 1977) are developments on a line of argument that was already apparent in Russell and in the early Wittgenstein - see Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, Section 6.51 (Wittgenstein 1962).