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Skepticism and Interpretation*

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Donald Davidson has argued in a number of recent papers that attention to the necessarily public character of language shows that we cannot be massively mistaken about the world around us, and that consequently skeptical doubts about empirical knowledge are misplaced. The arguments Davidson advances rely on taking as the fundamental methodological standpoint for investigating meaning and related concepts the standpoint of the interpreter of another speaker, on the grounds that it is from the interpreter's standpoint that we discover what constraints are placed on meaning by the public character of language.

In this paper, I argue that although Davidson's arguments reveal important conceptual connections between meaning and belief on the one hand, and truth and interpretation on the other, they do not show that it is impossible that we are massively mistaken about the external world.

The essays I will be concentrating on are Davidson's "The Method of Truth in Metaphysics," and "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge."¹ In part I, I advance and briefly defend an account of the assumptions underlying skepticism. In parts II and III, I examine the argument for the unintelligibility of massive error Davidson advances in "The Method of Truth in Metaphysics." In parts IV and V, I examine the argument against skepticism in "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge." I conclude in part VI with a criticism of the central argument for a coherence theory of

* I wish to record my debt to Donald Davidson, with whom I disagree about the prospects for finding a refutation of skepticism in the publicness of language, but from whom I have learned a great deal in disagreeing. I want to thank also Bruce Vermazen for helpful discussion of issues addressed here, and an anonymous referee of this journal for helpful comments.

¹ "The Method of Truth in Metaphysics" is reprinted in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984). Henceforth 'IT&T'. "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge" appeared originally in *Kant oder Hegel*, ed. Dieter Henrich (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1983), and is reprinted in *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, ed. Ernest LePore (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986). Henceforth 'CT'. Page references to this article will be to *Truth and Interpretation*.

knowledge and a suggestion based on that criticism for an alternative approach to the problem of skepticism.

I

Skepticism about the external world can be seen as resting on two fundamental assumptions about the nature of the mind-world relation.

- (1) The content of the mind as a whole is logically independent of the nature and existence of the external world.
- (2) The contents of the mind are all our evidence for the nature and existence of a world around us.

(1) alone is not sufficient for skepticism. It is logically possible for this page to have undergone spontaneous fission right after you read the previous sentence. But it is not epistemically possible because something you know rules it out. If this page had undergone spontaneous fission a moment ago, you would not be reading this sentence now. Since you know you are, you know it didn't. This shows that nothing follows in general about epistemic possibility, what might be true for all you know, from logical possibility. To say that it is logically possible that *p* is to say that it might have been the case that *p*, or to switch to talk of possible worlds, that there is some logically possible world in which *p*, but nothing follows about what might (actually) be (for all you know) from what might have been, or what is simply in some possible world.

(2) adds to (1) the claim that all our evidence for the character of the world is in the mind, that we don't, so to speak, start out knowing anything about the world around us. If we did, and we knew something about the mind, we could set about building a bridge between the mind and the world. But, given (1), if we start out with knowledge only of the mind, and being justified in believing something about the external world requires that we be in a position to show that the experiences we have justify us in, or gives us a ground for, believing the world is one way rather than another, then it follows that we cannot be justified in believing anything about a world beyond our experiences.² (1) assures us that there is no logical connection between

² I sidestep an issue here: whether being justified requires that we be in a position to establish the experiences which prompt us to form various beliefs about our environment guide us reliably to true beliefs. To require that we have established that is obviously much too strong. Most people have done no such thing and never will. If it were doable, requiring that it be done would ensure that at most only a few philosophers and perhaps their students would know anything about the external world. As flattering as that would be to the profession, it has little else to recommend it. But should we even require that we be in a position to show that our experiences prompt us by and large to true beliefs? It is tempting simply to deny this. For most skeptical arguments, including this one, turn upon

the mind and the world, and we could not show that our beliefs are justified by appeal to a contingent connection between the mind and the world because establishing such a connection would require us to have already established something about the world, which (2) assures us we have not. Thus, if (2) is correct, and to be justified in believing anything about the external world we must at least be in a position to show that our experiences provide a ground for our beliefs, we can be justified in believing something about the external world only if there is some necessary connection between the character of our experiences and of our environment.

Assumptions (1) and (2) are sufficient for skepticism, provided that knowledge requires minimally that one have more reason than not to believe that *p* in order to know that *p*, and that one be in a position to see that that is so. There is not space here to go into the relations between these two assumptions and the traditional skeptical reflections which start with particular counterpossibilities to knowledge of things around us, like the dream possibility. Let me say without argument that I believe that the role of the dream possibility and structurally similar possibilities in skeptical reflections about our knowledge of the external world is to suggest the conception of the relation between the mind and the world captured in (1) and (2) above, and that without those two assumptions traditional arguments for skepticism do not succeed.

II

Davidson has advanced two distinct, but related arguments that attack the first of our two assumptions by trying to show that it is logically impossible that we are massively mistaken about the world around us. As Davidson puts the conclusion at one place, we can't be massively mistaken about the world because belief is by its nature veridical (CT 315). Not every belief is true, but most beliefs must be true if some are to be false. If this is right, assumption (1) above is false, and the argument for skepticism is defeated. Furthermore, since anyone who has beliefs must, as Davidson might put it, in some dim sense be aware of this, all true believers can be said to know this. While this does not constitute a proof that we know things about the external world, it provides grounds for thinking we can, and undermines the principal reason for thinking we don't.

such a requirement. My own view, which I cannot argue for here, is that we need to retain this requirement if the knowledge we have is to be accessible to us. Anything less, I feel, call it what you will, would be but the pale shadow of knowledge. Evidence for the appeal of this requirement is the repeated attempts to solve the skeptical puzzle by rejecting the first assumption of the skeptical argument as I have presented it. For those who do not feel the pull of this requirement, the paper can be read as an exploration of the options in responding to skepticism conditional on its acceptance.

The argument we will look at first appears initially in Davidson's "The Method of Truth in Metaphysics," which opens with the following remark,

In sharing a language, in whatever sense this is required for communication, we share a picture of the world that must, in its large features, be true. It follows that in making manifest the large features of our language, we make manifest the large features of reality. (IT&I 199)

Of particular importance to the epistemologist is what counts as a large feature of language, for in identifying these, we identify those things, if the argument is good, that are beyond the bounds of skepticism. It is not clear that at the time he wrote this article Davidson thought that the true picture of the world revealed by sharing a language showed that most of our *empirical* beliefs are true. But the way he puts his conclusion suggests this—"massive error about the world is simply unintelligible" (IT&I 201)—and the argument (apparently) reappears in later work in which he does explicitly draw this conclusion.

The argument is short. The first step consists in pointing out that any people who understand each other's speech must largely share the same view of the world, because we can make sense of error in another with whom we talk only against a background of agreement. "We can make sense of differences all right," Davidson says, "but only against a background of shared belief" (IT&I 200). This is of a piece with the holism of the mental. "Beliefs are identified and described only within a dense pattern of beliefs" (IT&I 200). To attribute to someone the belief that fornication is pleasurable, I have to attribute to him beliefs about what fornication is, and what pleasure is, and beliefs that support the beliefs involved in those additional attributions. If it turned out that someone's idea of fornication was drinking battery acid, what would be called for is not a revision (or not just a revision) of the truth of the belief, but a reinterpretation of its content. I can't find you right or wrong about pleasure and fornication unless I can see you as agreeing with me on what fornication and pleasure are, and in what circumstances to call something one or the other. We can identify a belief as having a particular content only if we place it in a pattern of other beliefs, many of which have to be true, since their truth is what supports the attribution of the belief. Therefore I must see you as right about a lot of things, if I'm to see you as wrong about some. "I can interpret your words correctly," then, "only by interpreting so as to put us largely in agreement" (IT&I 200).

The next step consists in extending the point about agreement and disagreement to true and false belief.

The basic claim is that much community of belief is needed to provide a basis for communication or understanding; the extended claim should then be that objective error can occur only in a setting of largely true belief. Agreement does not make for truth, but much of what is agreed must be true if some of what is agreed is false. (IT&I 200)

The difficulty is in seeing why we should move from the basic claim to the extended. The observation that language speakers must share a picture of the world if they are to communicate is no help against skepticism unless we have an argument to show that what they agree on is not mostly false. Davidson argues that the bridge between subjective agreement and objective truth is provided by the idea of an omniscient interpreter, who, however, is not so omniscient that he knows already what another thinks or means by his words. "We do not have to be omniscient to interpret," Davidson remarks, "but there is nothing absurd in the idea of an omniscient interpreter" (IT&I 201). The omniscient interpreter "attributes beliefs to others, and interprets their speech on the basis of his own beliefs, just as the rest of us do" (IT&I 201). He finds himself in agreement with us, if he succeeds in interpreting us. But since his beliefs are, by hypothesis, true, the agreement he finds with us is agreement on truth. So objective error, on our part, is possible only against a background of largely true beliefs. As Davidson summarizes his argument: "It is plain why massive error about the world is simply unintelligible, for to suppose it intelligible is to suppose there could be an interpreter (the omniscient one) who correctly interpreted someone else as being massively mistaken, and this we have shown to be impossible" (IT&I 201).

Bruce Vermazen has raised two objections to this argument.³ According to Vermazen, the argument relies on these two premises:

- (1) To suppose that massive error about the world is intelligible is to suppose there could be an omniscient interpreter who correctly interpreted someone as massively mistaken.
- (2) It is not possible that an omniscient interpreter should correctly interpret someone as massively mistaken.

Vermazen's main objection is to the equation in (1) of the intelligibility of massive error and the intelligibility of an omniscient interpreter who correctly interpreted someone as massively mistaken. The equation can't be supposed to be correct because we suppose the interpreter, being omniscient, already knows what the person who is massively mistaken believes. That's not part of what he knows, as Davidson imagines the situation. He learns about the beliefs of others in the same way we do, by what sort of environment they are in when they do and say things. This captures the idea that interpretation reveals constitutive features of meaning and belief. Vermazen suggests that "One way to give the equation *prima facie* plausibility is offered by a link between understanding a thing and being able to construct it,

³ In "The Intelligibility of Massive Error," *Philosophical Quarterly* 33, pp. 69–74. Henceforth 'IME'.

at least in thought" (IME 72). Since, "To say that a situation is intelligible is to say that someone or other can understand it" (IME 72), to make intelligible massive error is to construct (at least in thought) a situation in which someone is in massive error. Doing this, however, seems to require imagining that we interpret another as being in massive error. That seems to require that, on the one hand, we find the other in massive agreement with us, and, on the other, attribute to him mostly beliefs which we hold to be false. Since we hold our own beliefs to be true, this is impossible. So it looks as if we can't make sense of massive error in another. As Vermazen points out, if this is the argument, the omniscience of the interpreter plays no role.

Vermazen accepts this requirement on making intelligible the situation in which someone is in massive error, but argues that we can construct a situation in thought in which someone is in massive error without imagining that we are interpreting him as massively mistaken according to our own lights. This is possible because the less than omniscient interpreter doesn't have to believe that all his beliefs are correct. He may have to suppose that a preponderance of them is correct, at least his general beliefs, on pain of losing contact with the meanings of his words; and he may have to suppose each one true considered individually. But he can imagine a significant portion of them to be false, though he doesn't know which portion. So he can imagine that he has attributed massive error to another by imagining, say, that of the beliefs that he has attributed to a speaker about a third of them are ones he holds false, and about a third are ones he holds true, but which are in fact false.⁴ Since it is intelligible that we could be correctly interpreting someone in this situation, it is intelligible that someone could in fact be *mostly* wrong about the world. We can therefore make sense of massive error in another without making sense of an interpreter attributing beliefs to a speaker most of which he holds false. If we can make sense of it in another, then we can make sense of it in ourselves.⁵ In this way we construct the intelligibility of our being in massive error from the intelligibility of more limited error.

Adding that the interpreter is omniscient, Vermazen argues, doesn't change this in any way: "an omniscient interpreter isn't barred from imagining that he has false beliefs; I can imagine I am four feet tall" (IME 72).

If Vermazen is correct about the form the argument takes, then he is right that it does not show that massive error about the world is unintelli-

⁴ Both Davidson and Vermazen understand 'most' as applied to beliefs to mean most of a person's most central beliefs.

⁵ It may seem that this goes against the claim that one must suppose a preponderance of one's own beliefs to be true. This touches on an issue that we shall discuss in section III. The beliefs one must suppose are true are the ones that tie down the meanings of one's words, but not necessarily empirical beliefs.

gible. But on Vermazen's interpretation of the argument, the omniscience of the interpreter plays no real role, and it is mysterious why Davidson brings it in. It is not clear to me that the omniscience of the interpreter can be dismissed as irrelevant. I think his omniscience can be seen to make an important difference, for at least two reasons. First, if the interpreter is omniscient, then he knows he has true beliefs. He can't then be imagining that it is an epistemic possibility that he might have false beliefs. So for him it is not open in the same way as for a fallible interpreter to imagine the possibility that a speaker he is interpreting is massively mistaken. Second, given that all the interpreter's beliefs are correct, if he interprets another correctly, the other is mostly right. Once we see this, then we see that provided that anyone who has a language is in principle interpretable by the omniscient interpreter, anyone who has a language is mostly right about the world. This is true even if there is no omniscient interpreter, provided only that there could be. Provided, then, that it is possible for there to be an omniscient interpreter, and that anyone who has a language would be in principle interpretable by him, massive error about the world is not possible.⁶

This interpretation of the argument, however, is no help to Davidson if Vermazen's second objection is correct. In his second objection, Vermazen argues that the idea of an omniscient interpreter ought not to make sense to Davidson. If that's right, this would leave us with the less than omniscient interpreter, who apparently provides no defense against the claim that we could be massively in error.

Davidson's omniscient interpreter has all true beliefs, but doesn't have beliefs about everything, since he doesn't know, prior to interpretation, the contents of the beliefs of the person he is interpreting. So, from the description of the case, we can say definite things about the interpreter's beliefs, if not what their contents are. We know that the omniscient interpreter's beliefs are determined by extra-mental reality. Vermazen suggests that this comes to saying that "there is a fact of the matter about what the omniscient interpreter's beliefs are" (IME 73), at least if there are facts about extra-mental reality. Davidson has strongly suggested that there is no fact of the matter about which of any number of interpretation theories that meet certain formal constraints and account equally well for all the empirical evidence is correct.⁷ But then how can the idea of an omniscient interpreter make sense for Davidson, since it requires that we make sense of the supposition that there is a fact of the matter about his beliefs?

⁶ It's worth noting that what's doing the work here is not the interpreter's omniscience, but the fact that all his beliefs are in fact true.

⁷ See, for example, IT&I, pp. 153–54, p. 235; also, "Mental Events," reprinted in *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 222.

The answer is, I think, that Davidson is not committed to saying there is no fact of the matter at all about what the content of a belief is, for that would just be equivalent to saying a belief has no content, and so, effectively, that there are no beliefs. Davidson is committed only to the claim that there is no fact of the matter about which of a number of empirically equivalent interpretation theories that meet the same formal constraints is correct. But another way of putting this, and, indeed, a way that seems to be required to make sense of it, is that each of the theories captures equally well what the facts of the matter are. This would mean that there were no facts of the matter only if there were no limits set by the formal constraints and empirical evidence on how one interpreted another. But this is not something Davidson holds. It is compatible with the omniscient interpreter's beliefs being fixed by extra-mental reality that there be many different ways to assign contents to them on the basis of public evidence. It appears to me, then, that this second objection is not successful, and that the interpretation of the omniscient interpreter argument I suggested above is one that Davidson can consistently hold.⁸

However, representing the argument as I have above raises other problems. One of the assumptions the argument requires is that the omniscient interpreter in principle be able to interpret correctly any language speaker. But why must the omniscient interpreter be able to interpret us correctly? If he is mostly right, and he can interpret us only by finding us mostly in agreement with him, should not the conclusion be that either we are mostly right and correctly interpretable by the omniscient interpreter, or we are largely wrong and so *not* correctly interpretable by the omniscient interpreter? We are mostly right only if the omniscient interpreter must be able to interpret us.

This lacuna in the argument is supposed to be filled, in part, I think, by the argument in "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" (IT&I 183–98). There Davidson argued that the criterion for another's having a language (and conceptual scheme) is translatability into familiar idiom. The argument consists of an attack on the two dominant metaphors of conceptual relativism: the idea that conceptual schemes are supposed to organize or fit, variously, the world or experience. Organizing does not suffice to make the idea intelligible, if we must specify what is to be organized, for that provides a common subject matter for all conceptual schemes and so a common

⁸ Perhaps, however, another aspect of Davidson's views does raise a problem for his holding that we can make sense of an omniscient interpreter. According to Davidson, the objective contents of a person's beliefs do not exceed what can be determined in radical interpretation. The omniscient interpreter, however, has all true beliefs, and this is a fact that could not emerge (for us) in interpretation if we are fallible speakers. If we find him largely in agreement with us, and some of what we believe is false, we may falsely attribute to him some beliefs, where this transcends what we can determine through interpretation.

basis for translation. The idea that the scheme is supposed to fit the facts seems just to come to the idea that it should be true of the world.⁹ But then, in Davidson's words,

the criterion of a conceptual scheme different from our own...becomes: largely true but not translatable. The question whether this is a useful criterion is just the question how well we understand the notion of truth, as applied to language, independent of the notion of translation. The answer is, I think, that we do not understand it independently at all. (IT&I 194)

If translatability into one's own idiom is the criterion of languagehood, then all language speakers can in principle communicate with one another. If there is nothing absurd in the idea of an omniscient interpreter, then as language speakers we are in principle interpretable by a being who is omniscient about the world. Since he must find us largely in agreement with him, we cannot be massively mistaken about the world.

There is a strong verificationist strain in this argument against conceptual relativism. The verificationist strain comes out in the requirement that to make sense of differing conceptual schemes we have to have a criterion for telling when we have come across one. This is seen in the idea that to make sense of some other scheme organizing objects we must be able to specify what objects it organizes, and in the idea that whether a theory is true depends on whether we can see that it is. Both of these criteria require us to translate a foreign scheme into our own, and thereby show that they were not after all (all that) different. The argument is only as good as the requirement that we be able to tell when another scheme organizes objects, or is true, to make sense of the possibility. Someone who was in sympathy with the idea that there could be different conceptual schemes would object to this assumption of the argument. The question, it might be said, is not whether we can make sense of different conceptual scheme whose differences we can describe, but whether it makes sense to suppose there are different conceptual schemes whose differences we can't describe. And it is not whether we can understand truth independently of translation, but independently of translation into our idiom, which is a rather more parochial requirement.

The (or one) main aim of Davidson's paper, to show that conceptual relativism is incoherent, can be accomplished without verificationism, provided that we take conceptual relativism to be relativism of the truth of an utterance to a scheme. The trouble for relativism comes from the fact that the truth conditions for an utterance are determined by its meaning. If an utterance is to be true relative to one scheme, and false relative to another, in

⁹ This introduces what might be thought to be an odd shift. On this view a conceptual scheme is not a set of concepts we employ in thinking about things, not even what we actually believe about the world, but a *true* theory about the world.

any non-trivial sense, it must mean the same thing in both schemes. If an utterance type uttered on a particular occasion means one thing relative to scheme 1 and another relative to scheme 2, there's no mystery in their giving different verdicts on its truth. An utterance that means the same thing in two different schemes, however, must have the same truth conditions relative to those schemes. So both schemes will give the same verdict on its truth or falsity. The relativity of the truth of an utterance to anything other than speaker, time, and language of utterance is incoherent because it requires that we simultaneously hold that the utterance has the same truth conditions relative to two schemes and doesn't.

There are two different issues here. One is whether the truth of an utterance can be intelligibly supposed to be relative to a scheme. I think the answer to this is that it cannot. The other is whether there could be some conceptual scheme, a language, that had no overlap with our own. These two issues are independent. The falsity of conceptual *relativism* (as opposed to what we might call conceptual pluralism) requires only this: that where schemes are intertranslatable, schemes are talking about the same things, and so are right and wrong on the same points. Where schemes are not intertranslatable, we must understand their users to be saying different things. But there's no paradox in this. There are portions of any person's idiolect that are not translatable into other portions of his idiolect. Why should this be less intelligible when we imagine this happening between different persons?

It might also be thought that the argument doesn't need to be so strong to support the claim that if we are language speakers, the omniscient interpreter will be able to interpret us. The omniscient interpreter will be able to talk about all objects there are, and so will have a language that includes all others. So whether or not from our provincial standpoint there might be schemes we can't gain access to, the omniscient interpreter will have access to ours.

But the requirement that the omniscient interpreter be able to interpret us foundered on the possibility that we were massively mistaken, not on the possibility that if right we would be talking about different kinds of things than he. This provides only that if we are largely right, the omniscient interpreter will be able to interpret us. We still need the stronger assumption that every language speaker must be interpretable by the omniscient interpreter, so that we are guaranteed to be right. Reliance on a general principle that claims that unless a statement is verifiable it is not intelligible lacks immediate appeal. When we come to the argument in "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge" we will look at one sort of justification for a principle like this specifically for the case of language. We need not press the point here, however, because even if we accept the principle that all lan-

guages are intertranslatable, there is a serious problem with the present argument.

The problem lies in the assumption that there's nothing absurd in the idea of an omniscient interpreter. What is wrong with that assumption, at least in the present context, is that it begs the question. To see this, consider the claim that there is nothing absurd in the idea of an 'omnignorant' interpreter, one who is mostly wrong about the world.¹⁰ Combining this assumption with the assumption that all language speakers must potentially be in communication with each other, and the impossibility of communication without massive agreement, we can conclude that most of our beliefs are false. As we might put it: true belief is possible only against a background of largely false belief. But this conclusion and our earlier conclusion that most of our beliefs must be true can't *both* be right. So one or the other of the premises we start with has to be false, if the argument form is valid. But it is clear that to have grounds for rejecting as false the assumption that there's nothing absurd about the idea of an omnignorant interpreter we would already have to have an argument to show that we can't be massively mistaken about the world. In assuming, then, that the right premise to start with is the idea that there is nothing absurd in the idea of an omniscient interpreter, we are assuming what we want to prove. The omniscient interpreter argument, then, fails to show that we cannot be massively mistaken about the world.¹¹

¹⁰ The argument which follows does not require that the omnignorant interpreter have *all* false beliefs, but only that *most* of the omnignorant interpreter's beliefs about his environment be false. Indeed, the idea that *all* of a person's beliefs could be false is *not*, I think, intelligible, in part for reasons given in the next section of the paper. But something less will do for the present argument.

¹¹ Davidson might claim that an omnignorant interpreter couldn't interpret another individual correctly. What seems clear is that if an omnignorant interpreter did interpret another successfully, it would be by chance. But this seems imaginable. Consider two brains in a vat wired up so that their experiences mesh and they are in communication. Unless we already have an argument to show that brains in vats can't be massively mistaken about their environment, this shows the intelligibility of an omnignorant interpreter interpreting another speaker successfully.

By the present argument, if an omnignorant interpreter can exist, then if he successfully interprets another, the other is mostly wrong about the world, and wrong in the same way the omnignorant interpreter is. If another must be potentially in communication with him to be interpretable, then every language speaker is mostly wrong about the world if an omnignorant interpreter can exist. Insisting on the possibility of community of speech cannot yield objective truth by means of supposing an omniscient interpreter exists, because supposing this is possible is just equivalent to supposing the community of speech shares a largely true picture of the world.

III

The idea of an omnignorant interpreter may seem less intelligible than that of an omniscient interpreter. How could all of a person's beliefs, or even the great majority of them, be false? If we imagine that too many of our beliefs are false, in particular our general beliefs, we seem threatened with incoherence. As Vermazen put it, we lose contact with the meanings of our words. If we don't know what we mean, we don't know what we think, and consequently know nothing at all. This seems to me to represent a genuine bound to the intelligibility of skepticism. The inquiry into the rational basis of skepticism assumes that there are some things we know. If we don't know the meanings of our own words, we can know nothing whatever, and that puts an end to all inquiry. So we cannot reasonably entertain the possibility that we are mistaken in our beliefs that trace out the connections between our concepts and give our words their meanings.

This highlights a vagueness in the conclusion of the omniscient interpreter argument. How many of our beliefs must be mistaken in order for us to be massively mistaken? How many of our beliefs must be true in order for us to be mostly right about things? How do we even go about counting them? In "Thought and Talk" Davidson suggests the right term for what the interpreter does is not 'maximize agreement', since there is an infinity of sentences, but 'optimize agreement', and emphasizes that not all beliefs are equal in the degree to which their falsity would undermine intelligibility (IT&I 169). Perhaps the beliefs that have to be true, those general beliefs that provide meaning connections, are numerous and important enough to make true the conclusion that massive error (appropriately understood) is impossible. Really massive error, it might be said, would have to include error about a significant number of our general beliefs. This shows that the argument, if directed specifically toward skepticism about the external world, should not focus on the impossibility of massive error as such, but on the impossibility of massive error about a particular domain of facts, those about the actual states of affairs in the world around us. Objective agreement on necessary (or analytic) truth is no salve to epistemology if what we want to know is whether our beliefs about the external world are correct.

The method that Davidson goes on to describe and apply in "The Method of Truth in Metaphysics" in fact doesn't seem to have much to do with discovering truth about the way the world actually is. To reveal large features of the world, we must say what it is in general for a sentence to be true: "if the truth conditions of sentences are placed in the context of a comprehensive theory, the linguistic structure that emerges will reflect large features of reality" (IT&I 201). What count as large features of reality turn out to be facts about basic ontology, which hold out little hope of shedding any

light on the way the world actually is. This becomes clear in some of Davidson's remarks about a specific application of the method to show that our basic ontology must include events. "The method [does not] suggest what truths, beyond those it counts as logical, we must accept as a condition of mutual understanding" (IT&I 214). And, equally important, "a theory of truth, even if it took the form I propose, would not specify which events exist, nor even that any do. If I am right...unless there are events, there are no true sentences about change, there are no true sentences about objects that change" (IT&I 214). Here it looks as if Davidson's point is simply that if we accept certain things as true, then we are committed to a lot more in virtue of what's required in giving a truth theory for certain sentences. But this is not a claim about true beliefs about the world, or the world reflecting large features of language. We've retreated to the claim that if our beliefs are true, they reflect the world.

IV

This retreat is a consequence of the fact that in "The Method of Truth in Metaphysics" Davidson was not mainly concerned with skepticism about the external world, but with how to investigate metaphysical questions through revealing the structure of language. That he thinks the argument applies also to beliefs about the external world is shown (it seems) by the fact that he invokes the omniscient interpreter in "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge," in which the focus is on the debate over the empirical foundations of knowledge. In that paper Davidson connects his view with a coherence theory of truth and knowledge, with a novel twist: he argues that his coherence theory is not in conflict with a correspondence theory of truth and knowledge, but in conformity with it, because coherence yields correspondence. There are interesting issues here that are separate from the arguments Davidson advances, and I want to come back to them at the end. But first I want to look in some detail at the argument Davidson advances against skepticism in this article, which is based on constraints on the procedures of the radical interpreter. This will lead us to an argument distinct from the omniscient interpreter argument for the claim that we cannot be in massive error about the world.

We gain insight into belief and meaning in interpretation, because the necessarily public character of language entails that meanings are publicly available. What can't be communicated is not a part of language. Therefore, if someone speaks a language, he is interpretable. And, conversely, if he is not interpretable, then there's no sense in which he speaks a language. These facts provide Davidson his basic methodological standpoint.

As a matter of principle...meaning, and by its connection with meaning, belief also, are open to public determination. I shall take advantage of this fact in what follows and adopt the stance of a radical interpreter when asking about the nature of belief. What a fully informed interpreter could learn about what a speaker means is all there is to learn; the same goes for what the speaker believes. (CT 315)

Since meaning and belief, from the point of view of radical interpretation, are interdependent, insight into one is simultaneous with insight into the other. Meaning depends on belief because what a person's assertion means depends on how the sentence he holds true is related to other sentences that he holds true. Belief depends on meaning because the access to the finer structure of belief is through what a person's words mean. To gain understanding of either, we have to start with something that presupposes neither. To capture the necessarily public character of meaning, we adopt the interpreter's standpoint; to provide illumination we choose evidence available to the interpreter that does not include an interpretation of the speaker's words or the finer structure of his beliefs. Davidson argues that sentences held true on various occasions provide the appropriate kind of data.

This is a fair place to start the project of identifying beliefs and meanings, since a speaker's assent to a sentence depends both on what he means by the sentence and on what he believes about the world. Yet it is possible to know that a speaker assents to a sentence without knowing what the sentence, as spoken by him, means, or what belief is expressed by it. (CT 315)

From this starting point the aim of interpretation "is to produce a Tarski-style characterization of truth for the speaker's language, and a theory of his beliefs" (CT 315). This is an aim interpretation must have whether or not one thinks a theory of truth, arrived at in a certain way, suffices for a theory of meaning. For at least one thing we need to do in interpretation is to construct a theory of truth for a person's language to be able to assign truth values recursively to his potentially infinite set of sentences. Necessities that follow from the need to read a theory of truth into the other's language should hold no matter how one views the relation between a full theory of meaning and a theory of truth for a language.

The interpreter, then, starts out knowing on what occasions a speaker holds true various sentences. To focus on essentials, we can suppose he knows also the conditions under which a speaker would hold various sentences true. How does he get from this to meaning and belief?

The crucial point for our concerns is that he can't get anywhere unless he assumes that the speaker is largely right about what's going on in his environment. The sentences that the speaker holds differentially true, on some, but not all occasions, give the interpreter his first access to the speaker's words. If the interpreter doesn't assume that what the speaker says on these

occasions is true, then he can't even get started in interpreting him. If he assumed that the speaker was usually wrong, he would have no way to assign meanings to those of his utterances which express beliefs, because there are too many ways in which he could be wrong. But if the interpreter assumes that the speaker is usually right, by the interpreter's own lights of course, then he can as an initial hypothesis assume that the truth conditions for the speaker's occasion utterances which express beliefs are given by the conditions under which he regularly utters them. The procedure is this: "when the interpreter finds a sentence of the speaker the speaker assents to regularly under conditions he recognizes, he takes those conditions to be the truth conditions of the speaker's sentence" (CT 316). In effect, the interpreter assumes that the meanings of the speaker's utterances are given by the conditions that regularly cause him to hold them true (allowing, of course, for intelligible error, and subject always to revision in the light of further evidence). Davidson calls this the principle of charity, though this is misleading, because it is not a matter of being charitable to the speaker to assume that he's usually right, but of methodological necessity. The principle of charity "directs the interpreter to translate or interpret so as to read some of his own standards of truth into the pattern of sentences held true by the speaker" (CT 316). This makes the speaker intelligible; "From a formal standpoint," Davidson says, "the principle of charity helps solve the problem of the interaction of meaning and belief by restraining the degrees of freedom allowed belief while determining how to interpret words" (CT 316).

The interpreter cannot "discover the speaker to be largely wrong about the world. For he interprets sentences held true...according to the events and objects in the outside world that cause the sentences to be held true" (CT 317). The truth of this depends on what "largely wrong about the world" means. Someone might object that we can find people really wrong in interpretation and still find them intelligible. They might think of the sky as a physical object, a kind of roof over their heads, or that the earth is a disk at the center of whirling hoops of fire shrouded in mists. They might think all objects are possessed of or contain or simply are gods, or that they live forever, or that the earth is flat or a vegetable, and so on. But the basic point is that making sense of these errors still requires a lot of correct beliefs, and, moreover, correct beliefs about the environment. These are errors that would be characterized as theoretical. It is a fatal mistake, according to Davidson, to think that we can in general fix what someone means independently of what he believes and independently of what caused the belief.

...we can't in general first identify beliefs and meanings and then ask what caused them. The causality plays an indispensable role in determining the content of what we say and believe. This is a fact we can be led to recognize by taking up...the interpreter's point of view. (CT 317)

To the person who objects that all this shows is that the interpreter must find the speaker largely in *agreement* with him, Davidson points out that an omniscient interpreter would find the fallible speaker in agreement with *him*, and so largely right by objective standards.

If we had to rely on the assumption that there could be an omniscient interpreter, the argument would beg the question. But in contrast to the argument in "The Method of Truth in Metaphysics," this appeal to the omniscient interpreter can be seen as peripheral to the main argument here. We have the materials for constructing an argument that does not rely on supposing as a *premise* that there can be an omniscient interpreter. The key idea, which can be seen in the last quotation above, is that in interpretation when we determine, epistemically, the meanings of another's words, and the contents of his thoughts, because the procedure we follow as interpreters captures the necessarily public character of language, we see what *logically* determines his meanings and thought contents. Because meanings must be publicly accessible, speakers must talk about public objects. Because interpreters have only the causal relations between public objects and individuals to go on in interpreting speakers, and speakers must be interpretable if they are to have a language, speakers must be talking about, and largely right about, those objects that, in the basic cases, cause those utterances they hold true. In brief: to be a language speaker one must be interpretable; to be interpretable is to be seen (or seeable) as talking about, and largely right about, the objects that regularly cause those of one's utterances one holds true. To be a language speaker, then, is to be largely right about the world.

That this is the argument that Davidson wants to rest his conclusion on is shown by the fact that in "Empirical Content," and in "On Knowing One's Own Mind," he argues in the way I have sketched for the same conclusion while omitting reference to the omniscient interpreter. Indeed, the omniscient interpreter seems to drop out of the picture even in "The Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge" when Davidson sums up his position:

What stands in the way of global skepticism 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. Communication begins where causes converge: your utterance means what mine does if belief in its truth is systematically caused by the same events and objects. (CT 317–18)

In "Empirical Content" he puts the case this way, "My main point is that our basic methodology for interpreting the words of others necessarily makes it the case that most of the time the simplest sentences which speakers hold true *are* true."¹² Again, he says, "the sentences that express the be-

¹² "Empirical Content," in *Grazer Philosophische Studien*, ed. Rudolf Haller, 16/17, 1982; reprinted in *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald*

iefs, and the beliefs themselves, are correctly understood to be about the public things and events that cause them, and so must be mainly veridical” (EC 332). The theme is taken up in “On Knowing One’s Own Mind”:

The issue depends simply on how the basic connection between words and things, or thoughts and things, is established. I hold...that it is established by causal interactions between people and parts and aspects of the world. The dispositions to react differentially to objects and events thus set up are central to the correct interpretation of a person’s thoughts and speech. If this were not the case, we would have no way of discovering what others think, or what they mean by their words. The principle is as simple and obvious as this: a sentence someone is inspired (caused) to hold true by and only by sightings of the moon is apt to mean something like ‘There’s the moon’; the thought expressed is apt to be that the moon is there; the thought inspired by and only by sightings of the moon is apt to be the thought that the moon is there. Apt to be, allowing for intelligible error, second hand reports, and so on. Not that all words and sentences are this directly conditioned to what they are about; we can perfectly well learn to use the word ‘moon’ without ever seeing it [the moon, not the word]. The claim is that all thought and language must have a foundation in such direct historical connections, and these connections constrain the interpretation of thoughts and speech.¹³

A consequence of this is that if that old philosophical bugbear, the brain in the vat, has a language, then it is talking about things in its environment that regularly cause its beliefs, that is, it is probably talking about the computer that is feeding it electrical signals. Another consequence Davidson claims for the theory is illustrated by his story of the swampman.

Suppose lightning strikes a dead tree in a swamp; I am standing nearby. My body is reduced to its elements, while entirely by coincidence (and out of different molecules) the tree is turned into my physical replica. My replica, The swampman, moves exactly as I did; according to its nature it departs the swamp, encounters and seems to recognize my friends, and appears to return their greetings in English. It moves into my house and seems to write articles on radical interpretation. No one can tell the difference.

But there is a difference. My replica can’t recognize my friends; it can’t re-cognize anything, since it never cognized anything in the first place. It can’t know my friends’ names (though of course it seems to), it can’t remember my house. It can’t mean what I do by the word ‘house’, for example, since the sound ‘house’ it makes was not learned in a context that would give it the right meaning—or any meaning at all. Indeed, I don’t see how my replica can be said to mean anything by the sounds it makes, nor to have any thoughts. (KM 443–44)¹⁴

Davidson, ed. Ernest LePore (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 332. Henceforth, ‘EC’. Page references are to *Truth and Interpretation*.

¹³ “Knowing One’s Own Mind,” *Proceedings and Addresses of The American Philosophical Association* 60, p. 450. Henceforth ‘KM’.

¹⁴ It’s less clear why this follows from Davidson’s principles. If we imagine that the knowledge that the interpreter has of the swampman is not only what the occasions are on which he has uttered sentences (virtually none), but those on which he would utter sentences in his present environment, then it seems that he already, knowing the swampman’s dispositions, has the materials to construct a theory of interpretation for him; why should we not say, then, that he has thoughts now in virtue of the rich set of dispositions he has to respond verbally to the world? (I first heard this objection from John Heil.) One response

In any case, the benefits for epistemology are substantial. If we are language speakers, as we certainly are, then we are mostly right, not just in our general beliefs, but in our basic beliefs about the actual world. If this is right, by showing that a crucial premise of the skeptical reasoning we examined in part I above is false, it solves at least one important philosophical problem about our knowledge of the external world.

V

The argument can be represented as resting on these two premises:

- (1) If one is a language speaker, then one must be correctly interpretable on the basis of public evidence.¹⁵
- (2) If one is correctly interpretable on the basis of public evidence, one must be found to be largely right about one's environment.

I am convinced that (2) is true, if not exactly in this form, then in some related, weaker form, which, however, is still sufficient to refute radical skepticism about the external world in conjunction with (1).¹⁶ But (1) contains a crucial ambiguity. (1) is supposed to capture the fact that meanings are nec-

might be that requiring a history would give us some way of non-arbitrarily selecting one environment relative to which to interpret. For if all one knows is someone's dispositions to respond to things, one doesn't yet know what sort of environment one should think of him as responding to.

¹⁵ Public evidence here is evidence available from the standpoint of the radical interpreter, unnamed with theories about connections between, e.g., brain state types and mental state types, or any information about such correlations. It is the evidence that is available simply from observing a speaker interacting with his environment. It is clear that the interpreter's evidence is in a certain way primary when it comes to assigning mental states to others, since discovering correlations between brain states and mental states, if they exist, would require identifying the mental states on particular occasions independently of identifying the brain states they are to be correlated with. This would require employing the methods of the interpreter first. I think this is so even considering the possibility of originally discovering correlations between one's own mental states, which we clearly do not identify by interpreting ourselves on the basis of public evidence, and one's brain states. For projecting that correlation to other individuals requires at least some confirmation. That confirmation requires independent access to others' mental states, which must come through the methods of the interpreter.

¹⁶ This premise may not be acceptable in this form because although our only way to gain an initial access to a person's language and thoughts is by observing his interaction with his environment, we might gain this access and then find reason to think that his relation to his environment has changed (or was different in the past) in a way that makes (or made) him largely wrong about it, relying on our interpretation of his words at a time when we found him largely right about his environment. For example, having interpreted him in an ordinary environment, we may put him in a vat, or, having interpreted him in a vat, we may embody him. If his thoughts are determined by his past causal interactions with his environment, then, in either case, after the transfer most of his beliefs about his environment will be false.

essarily publicly available. And it must be right that if someone isn't in principle interpretable, he's not a language speaker. But there are two different ways we can interpret (1) so as to capture this undeniable fact:

- (1a) If one is a language speaker, then one must be correctly interpretable on the basis of public evidence in whatever environment one is in.¹⁷
- (1b) If one is a language speaker, then one must be correctly interpretable on the basis of public evidence in some environment.

It is only (1a) that leads to the conclusion that we must be mostly right about our environment. (1b) leads only to the conclusion that we must be mostly right in some environment, but no one would deny that. We're mostly right in any environment in which most of our beliefs are true. The stronger requirement leads directly to the conclusion that the brain in the vat, if it is a language speaker, is mostly right about its environment, and this leads to the conclusion that it is talking about something like elements of the machine that is feeding it signals. The support for (1a) is that "As a matter of principle,...meaning, and by its connection with meaning, belief also, are open to public determination" (CT 315). This is an expression of the idea that "language is a social art."¹⁸ But this does not support the stronger premise over the weaker one. The requirement that meaning and belief be open to public determination comes from the fact that words are tools used for communication. But an object can be a tool provided that it operates effectively in *some* environment. It is not necessary that it operate effectively in every environment. We do not expect a level or a plumb line to operate in outer space. Similarly, a person's words can be seen to be tools that can be used for communication provided that there is some environment in which they operate effectively. Words are not magic wands: they do not put us automatically in contact with others. The only thing required of them by the public character of language is that they not make this *impossible*. This is embodied in (1b); (1a) is not required. The argument, then, either has a question begging premise, (1a), or its conclusion is merely that there is some possible environment in which we are interpretable so as to be mostly

¹⁷ An even stronger requirement would be that one actually be correctly interpreted, or have been correctly interpreted, on the basis of public evidence in whatever environment one is in. This would rule out a world in which a solitary speaker exists. Rejecting (1a) I must reject this stronger principle as well; neither is justified by the requirement of the essentially public character of language.

¹⁸ The first sentence in the preface to *Word & Object*, this can be regarded as the fundamental premise of both Quine's and Davidson's philosophy of language.

correct, (1b). In either case, it fails as an argument against skepticism about the external world.

We can see how this is connected with the problem we set aside in examining the omniscient interpreter argument. One premise of that argument was that the omniscient interpreter is able to interpret us correctly in any environment in which he finds us. That premise is our premise (1) above.

The retreat to a general principle of verificationism is still open. This I don't find very appealing, and the troubles in formulating a workable criterion are well known. In any case, if we are forced to make this appeal, reflection on the public character of language has not advanced the case against skepticism. We need an independent argument to support a general verificationist principle, which would then rule out skepticism directly. We should conclude that reflections on the necessarily public character of language, and constraints on interpretation, do not show that we cannot be massively mistaken about the existence and character of the external world.

VI

Davidson identifies his position as a coherence theory of truth and knowledge.¹⁹ Two reasons to adopt coherence as the criterion for truth are that (1) provided that we know that our beliefs are for the most part true, coherence can be relied on as a guide to truth, for coherence of a belief with others most of which are true is evidence for its truth, and that (2) if coherence cannot serve as a criterion of truth, then nothing can, for the alternative to coherence as the criterion of truth (correspondence) is unintelligible. In concluding, I want to take a look at this second motivation for the coherence theory, for I believe the argument for this claim contains an important mistake, and that in seeing what's wrong with this argument we can see an important suggestion for where to locate the mistake (if any) in skepticism.

The problem with correspondence theories of truth, from the point of view of epistemology, is that they seem to require us to confront our beliefs with reality in order to tell whether or not they are true, and confrontation of belief with reality is absurd (CT 307).²⁰ "No such confrontation makes

¹⁹ Davidson has lately rejected this characterization of his position, though not, I think, the position. See in particular his Dewey Lectures, "The Structure and Content of Truth," *Journal of Philosophy* 87, p. 302. But this will not affect any points I want to make below, which are not so much about Davidson's position as about reasoning which is supposed to lead to a rejection of a correspondence criterion of truth.

²⁰ This is Davidson's formulation, as is the argument in the rest of this paragraph. The idea is *not* that a correspondence theory of truth *is* a correspondence theory of knowledge, but that a correspondence theory of truth *would require* a correspondence theory of knowledge, a theory according to which we know a belief is true provided that we can see the conditions for its truth are met, that is, if truth is correspondence, confront it with the reality to which it corresponds. This requirement presupposes the more general requirement on knowledge or justified belief discussed in note 2.

sense, for of course we can't get outside our skins to find out what is causing the internal happenings of which we are aware" (CT 312). The basic problem with foundationalist theories that seek to justify belief by appeal to something other than belief is that the only thing that will justify a belief is information, and nothing but another belief can be information. Of course beliefs are caused by sensations and experiences and ultimately by the world; but the events that cause our beliefs are not a justification of them. According to Davidson, what "distinguishes a coherence theory is the claim that nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief" (CT 310). It is not the view that reasons don't come to an end, because some correspondence theorists, or perhaps better, confrontationalists, hold this; and some coherence theorists hold some beliefs have a privileged position in our body of beliefs. In any case, if confrontation is absurd, it seems that if we're to have knowledge, we're left with coherence as the criterion of truth.

But if there's a problem about confronting beliefs with reality as such, the retreat to coherence as a criterion of truth doesn't get around it. To discover truth it is said we need to discover whether our beliefs cohere. In doing this we will acquire a belief. Surely we need to know that that belief is true. But how do we determine that? Do we see whether it coheres with our beliefs? But then we only get another belief which requires in turn justification. Or do we just directly confront the belief with the reality? But then we haven't got rid of confrontation, we've just decided to confront a different bit of reality. This shows that retreating to beliefs doesn't solve the problem of confrontation as such. Consequently, the problem of the confrontation of beliefs with reality is a poor motivation for the coherence theory. Similar remarks will apply to any criterion for truth that is offered as an alternative to confrontation. The moral we should draw is that if we don't already have knowledge of some domain of facts (or some domain connected with it reliably in a way we know about), there's no way to get any. If we do know something about some domain of facts, confrontation of beliefs with reality is not absurd. It is absurd only if we don't already know something about the world we want to confront.

The germ of truth in the coherence theory is that if a body of beliefs about the world constitutes knowledge, then coherence (in the appropriate sense) of a belief with that body is support for that belief. But obviously coherence with other beliefs that are not knowledge or justified to some degree is not support for a belief. Typically, coherence theories claim that because a belief coheres with a lot of other beliefs, it is likely to be true. But the argument should go the other way around: if we have reason to think most of our beliefs true, then coherence is a test of truth. For in showing that a belief coheres with a set of beliefs most of which are true, we con-

front it with the facts, and show it to be in accord with them. As we might put it: correspondence yields coherence.

The mistake can be seen in the claim by the coherence theorist that the only evidence we have for the truth of a belief is other beliefs. For beliefs about the external world, this is just false. The beliefs themselves aren't evidence, and neither is the fact that we have the beliefs. Nothing follows about the world around us from that. The evidence for there being a mouse in cupboard is not that I believe that rustling noises emanate periodically from the cupboard, or that I believe that the bread has obviously been nibbled on by little teeth, but simply that rustling noises emanate periodically from the cupboard, and that the bread has obviously been nibbled by little teeth. Having a certain pattern in one's beliefs is a necessary condition for having information or evidence, but having information or evidence is not having a certain pattern of beliefs. What counts in the case of beliefs is that they constitute knowledge of the world. Since evidence is for truth, what counts as evidence must be propositional in form, so evidence is not an event, or object, or state, or process, but that a certain event occurred, an object was in such and such a place, a state existed, or a process took place, in short, the propositional structure of the world itself.

What does this tell us about how knowledge of the external world must be secured? It tells us that not only is confrontation with the facts not absurd, it is required in order to have knowledge of the world around us. The trouble is generated by supposing that we start out without such knowledge, that what we really know, if we reflect on it, is something much closer in, something merely subjective, our own experience and thoughts, from which we must work our way out to the world. If that is our position, and there is no logical connection between our thoughts and the world, then we cannot know anything about the world around us.

I am not optimistic about finding a logical bridge between the mind and the world. Theories that build a logical bridge between the mind and the world take two forms. There are those (idealism) that make the world out of the stuff of the mind. On a view like this the world becomes an annex to the mind. It has no independent existence. There are those, more recent, like the one we have considered in this paper, that constitute the mind from its relations with the world (*externalism*, to give it a name). An obstacle to this sort of theory in addition to producing an argument for it is the relation between consciousness and our knowledge of our own thoughts. Since we know the contents of our thoughts in the way we know we have pains, in virtue of their subjectivity, externalism leads to (what seems to me) the absurdity that conscious phenomenal states are relational in character. The mind ceases to be an entity independent of its history. It becomes a construc-

tion out of the relations among things past in the world. If idealism makes the world too subjective, externalism makes the mind too objective.

Both idealism and externalism accept a common assumption, that if there were no logical connection between the mind and the world, skepticism would be true. Each, I think, pays too high a price for establishing a logical link between the mind and the world. I want to suggest that the common assumption they make is a false assumption, and that the mistake the skeptic makes is not the assumption that the character of the mind is logically independent of the world, but rather the assumption that knowledge of the mind must serve as the basis for knowledge of the world. The solution, if there is a solution, I suggest will lie in denying that our only way of knowing facts about the world is by first knowing facts about the mind, that is, in denying the epistemic priority of experience, thoughts, and other mental states and events, to the world. The relation between our knowledge of our minds and our knowledge of things in the world should turn out to be something like the relation between our knowledge of the heavens and the earth. They causally interact; we can know things about each independently of knowing things first about the other.