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The Role of Convention in Language:

Donald Davidson's and Jean-Luc Nancy's Conceptions of Communication and

Community

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Abstract

The Role of Convention in Language

Donald Davidson's and Jean-Luc Nancy's
Conceptions of Communication and Community

By
Michal Gleitman

This dissertation asks whether and to what extent linguistic meaning is conventional. By combining Davidson's theory of meaning with Nancy's conception of community it develops a model of communication in which the meaning of words is not determined by a fixed set of norms, but is constantly negotiated through a multiplicity of concrete communicative events. By presenting linguistic norms as fluid and contested, the dissertation undercuts the idea that linguistic communities are unified in the way that the idea of convention suggests, thus exposing the extent to which the boundaries of linguistic communities are subject to constant political and cultural negotiation.

Chapters 1 and 2 present Davidson's and Nancy's position that language is nothing but a pattern of relations between the observable behaviors and practices of speakers and interpreters. Accordingly, the set of conventions we call "language" is supervenient upon actual occasions of interpretation, and is only a part of the variety of means we employ in order to interpret one another and ascribe meaning to utterances. So while shared linguistic norms are often employed in interpretation, they are not a precondition of communicative success.

Chapters 3 and 4 argue that if conventions are secondary to actual interpretation, then the interpreter's first task is to determine what constitutes linguistic behavior, i.e. when a pattern of behavior justifies the attribution of intentions to a creature. The question of "speakerhood," of what makes one take another being to be a creature whose behavior is potentially meaningful and warrants interpretation, thus emerges as a crucial issue. It is argued that "speakerhood" cannot be reduced to a biological or cognitive fact, but is subject to constant social negotiation, which is concealed by linguistic norms that reify meaning and make the answer to the question "what and who is meaningful?" seem more settled than it is.

By posing the question of nonhumans' participation in communication, **chapter 5** calls attention to the need to articulate and examine the various constraints that can prevent a creature (whether human or not) from being considered a speaker, and thus receiving a fair opportunity to participate in a linguistic community.

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To my parents, who made this work possible in every way imaginable

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…meaning something is like going up to someone.
— Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §457

It is good to rely upon others. For no one can bear this life alone.
— H ô l d e r l i n

Introduction

"It is a platitude – something only a philosopher would dream of denying – that there are conventions of language."
(David Lewis)

Perhaps it is a testimony to my truly philosophical nature, or just to my contrarian tendencies, but this dissertation began with the vague, yet persistent intuition that the importance of linguistic conventions to successful communication is vastly overestimated, and that correcting this misconception will produce a better account of how we come to understand one another through communication. In exploring the role of convention in communication I chose to use two philosophers, Donald Davidson and Jean-Luc Nancy, who on the face of it have very little in common, as they differ significantly in terminology, philosophical background and interests. So in a way this dissertation functions on a performative level as well, because getting Nancy and Davidson to talk to one another in an insightful and fruitful way sometimes felt like the work of radical interpretation. I hope however that the result demonstrates why communication across differences is not just possible, but also desirable and perhaps even necessary.

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Linguistic meaning is both a common, almost trivial phenomenon, and one of the most mysterious facts of our lives. We spend our lives surrounded by various sounds,[1] yet not

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[1] Throughout this dissertation I concentrate on sounds as carriers of meaning, mainly for reasons of convenience; while most of my arguments regarding language are formulated in terms of sounds, I suspect that they can be extended to gestures and therefore to sign language. However, this contention does require additional support which extends beyond the purview of this work. It is worth noting that even limiting the

all sounds are created equal – some we perceive to be empty noises, while others, whether we understand them or not, are taken to be meaningful speech. This dissertation, which is an inquiry after the secret ingredient that distinguishes mere noises from meaningful speech, starts by discerning where this secret ingredient (i.e. meaning) is located. The most obvious answer to this question is that meaning is located in someone's head; on this view, what turns empty noises into meaningful speech is that they result from a speaker's intention to make his or her internal thoughts manifest to someone else (leaving aside for the time being the degree of success with which this goal is achieved). The view of meaning as residing in a person's head (and language as the expression of that meaning) is as common, among philosophers and non-philosophers alike, as it is problematic. Such a conception of meaning views speakers as container-like entities, that encapsulate meaning; accordingly, meaning exists in the interiority of individuals prior to its communication, and regardless of whether or not it is actually communicated. The second chapter presents Nancy's criticism of the kind of subjectivity or personhood assumed by such a conception of meaning, but simply put, the problem is that if meaning is in the speaker's head it cannot be shared, thus making it hard to understand how communication is possible.

This dissertation therefore posits as a starting point that meaning has to be public in order for communication to be possible, which still leaves a lot of room for different theories of meaning. One way of making meaning public is locating it in objects; on this view, which Quine names the myth of the museum, the world is a place "in which the

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discussion to sounds and gestures contains a human bias, as these are the main ways in which humans communicate. Ultimately though, this dissertation asks about the meaningfulness of observable behavior, which can include additional elements besides sounds and gestures, for example smells.

exhibits are the meanings and the words are the labels."[2] However, attaching meaning to concrete objects makes it hard to explain words and sentences (and thoughts) that do not seem to bear a direct relation to a particular object in the world (questions, indexicals, the king of France, not to mention ironies, etc). This problem has led Frege to conclude that meaning cannot be in the world, but must be located in a third realm, which is neither psychological nor physical in nature. While Frege's idea of a third realm of meaning is innovative as far as modern philosophy of language is concerned, it is also reminiscent of Platonic ideas as well as religious frames of thought that take God to be the source of meaning.[3] Even if one is comfortable making such an ontological commitment, the epistemological problems it raises might deter us from taking such stance in regards to language, because if meaning is located in a supernatural realm, how can we utilize it to express things in this world?

The frustration with all these approaches (speaker intention, meaning as reference, and abstract meanings) is what prompts Quine's rejection of the "myth of the museum," which ultimately has broader consequences. Quine's objection is not to meaning being located in concrete objects per se, but more broadly to the idea that meanings can be separated from the "labels" that express or designate them. Quine's criticism is therefore equally detrimental to a position that takes the labeled exhibits to be mental ideas, concrete objects or Platonic ideas. The conviction that meanings are not entities that exist separately from their expression or reception drives both Quine and Wittgenstein, the two most prominent influences behind Davidson's theory of communication, to develop new

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[2] Willard Van Orman Quine, "Ontological Relativity," in *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 27.

[3] Nancy and Davidson both reject explicitly any attempt to locate meaning (linguistic or otherwise) in a divine-like realm that is beyond the material world, and in that sense I see both their philosophies as bearing a profound and fundamental secular, and in a certain sense anti-metaphysical, commitment.

theories of language without "meanings" (but not without meaning). By suggesting that the meaning of words is found in the way they are used by a linguistic community, Wittgenstein turns the focus onto the social context as the location of meaning. Put another way, to find out what words mean we need to observe how they are regularly being used by the linguistic community, which makes meaning conventional and normative.

The first chapter presents Davidson's critique of this conventional approach to language; it explains how Davidson rejects the idea that meaning is rule bound, while still insisting that meaning must be located in social interaction. The meaning producing social interaction envisioned by Davidson takes after Quine's notion of radical translation. True to his assertion that language cannot be separated from the world it describes, Quine suggests a scientific approach to language, on which the meaning of words can be reduced to the observable behavior of speakers. By observing a speaker's behavior over time, a translator can work out the conditions under which the speaker utters particular sentences; the meaning of a sentence is determined by the stimulation that regularly prompts the speaker's assent to that sentence. The first chapter demonstrates how Davidson uses Quine's model of radical translation as a basis for his own theory of meaning, on which the meaning of a sentence is the conditions under which that sentence is being held true (i.e. assented to) by a speaker. I discuss the crucial changes that Davidson introduces into Quine's theory, especially his move away from behaviorism and his emphasis on the social interaction between the interlocutors, changes which shape his alternative model of radical interpretation, and end up producing a theory

of meaning that is both indebted to Quine and Wittgenstein, yet diverges from them significantly.

The remainder of the first chapter explores the social aspect of Davidson's theory of interpretation, arguing against critics who claim that by rejecting linguistic conventions Davidson reverts back to a solitary notion of language, on which meaning is determined by speaker intention. In order to explicate the social aspect of Davidson's model of interpretation the second chapter turns to Nancy's innovative notion of community, which does not ultimately rely on shared conventions. Using Nancy, I demonstrate how the model of speaker intention (the idea that meaning is located in the interiority of a person) relies on a conception of subjectivity or individuality that is not only detrimental for communication, and hence for the forming of a community, but is also self-contradictory and unsustainable. Put another way, Nancy shows that the speaker envisioned by the speaker intention approach is an unviable entity; his alternative notion of the singular is then used to elaborate on the kind of subjectivity entailed by the model of radical interpretation, the social interaction that takes place between radical speaker-interpreters, and the conception of community that follows from it.

The new understanding of communication and community that arises out of Davidson's and Nancy's works brings to the fore the issue of "*speakerhood*." On Davidson's model of radical interpretation there are no pre-established rules for identifying linguistic behavior, consequently, the decision of who is a speaker (whose behavior is linguistic) must be made on a case by case basis, by actual interlocutors in the course of their interaction. The precondition for interpretation is therefore a decision that a creature's behavior is linguistic and intentional, thus meriting interpretation; the third

chapter therefore makes the argument that the principle of charity, Davidson's precondition of interpretation, ought to be understood along these lines, as a principle of speakerhood (as what makes one take another creature to be a speaker).

The principle of charity has been construed as a normative principle, however, as argued in chapter three, charity cannot play a normative role precisely because it is constitutive of meaning and mental content. As a principle of speakerhood, charity determines what utterances are meaningful (and not how a certain sentence ought to be used or what anyone should do), thus delineating the boundaries of rationality. In this capacity charity has an unavoidable meta-ethical import; it is no longer just a principle for adjudicating between correct and incorrect theories of interpretations for a speaker, but it is about who is allowed into the normative realm, i.e. who is viewed as a rational agent that can be held accountable for his or her actions. Chapter four takes on this ethical aspect of charity and uses Nancy to develop a conception of agency and responsibility that complements the conception of subjectivity and community developed in chapter two. On this account, agents are not autonomous in determining the meaning of their utterances because they are primordially related, so their relatedness precedes their agency. Accordingly, agency and responsibility are not attributes of an individual agent, but are shared from the outset (so that a so called "individual agent" is the result or effect of this primary relation).

As chapter four demonstrates, on Davidson's theory of interpretation meaning is conditioned by this primary relation, which Nancy (following Heidegger) names "being-with" (*Mitsein*). Since Nancy does not restrict being-with to humans, the question arises as to Davidson's justification for asserting that language is a singularly human trait.

Chapter five therefore explores how Davidson and Nancy explain what allows a creature into this relation of being-with, and consequently into the normative realm. I argue that while Davidson's work does not support his a priori and categorical exclusion of nonhuman animals from the rational realm, Nancy's analysis is too indiscriminative to yield effective conceptual tools for discerning between different degrees to which different creatures can be said to partake in the rational realm. Although the fifth and last chapter does not provide an answer to the question of nonhuman animals' participation in the rational realm, it aspires to show that despite their individual shortcomings, the combination of Nancy's and Davidson's philosophies opens a new avenue for the investigation of the role of normativity in nature, by directing us to focus on the role of speakerhood in the delineation of the boundaries of normativity.

I. From Communication to Community:

Davidson's theory of language and interpretation

In the introduction to *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, a collection of his early essays on interpretation and meaning, Davidson describes his work on language as an attempt to answer the question "what is it for words to mean what they do?"[4] In a sense this is the question that guides Davidson's entire philosophy, and while his attempts to answer it took him down different paths in the course of his career, one point which he insisted on from the beginning, and never wavered on, is that the answer to this question is found not in the analysis of abstract concepts such as "meaning" and "language," but in actual, everyday communication.[5] In "Radical Interpretation," arguably his most important early essay on meaning and interpretation, Davidson describes an occasion of everyday communication in the following way:

> "Kurt utters the words 'Es regent' and under the right conditions we know that he said that it is raining. Having identified his utterance as intentional and linguistic, we are able to go on to interpret his words: we can say what his words, on that occasion, meant."[6]

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[4] Donald Davidson, "Introduction," in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), xiii.

[5] See for example: "the notion of meaning is a theoretical concept which cannot explain communication but depends on it." (Donald Davidson, "The Social Aspect of Language," in *Truth, Language and History* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001 (1994)], 121). As well as: "the concept of meaning would have no application if there were not endless cases of successful communication, and any further use we give to the notion of meaning depends on the existence of such cases." (Ibid, 122). And: "the notion of meaning depends entirely upon successful cases of communication" (Donald Davidson and Kathrin Glüer, "Relations and Transitions - An Interview with Donald Davidson," *Dialectica* 49 [1995]: 81). And: "the concept of language is of a sort with, and depends on, concepts like name, predicate, sentence, reference, meaning … these are all theoretical concepts … the main point of the concept of a language, then, … is to enable us to give a coherent description of the behavior of speakers, and of what speakers and their interpreters know that allows them to communicate. (Donald Davidson, "The Second Person," in *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001 (1992)], 108).

[6] Donald Davidson, "Radical Interpretation," in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984 [1973]), 125.

The rest of the essay explains how the task of interpreting Kurt is carried out and what we know that enables us to interpret Kurt, i.e. to say what his words mean. The first section of this chapter presents Davidson's account of radical interpretation (which is how we interpret Kurt), and the following two sections explore its implications and examine some of the objections it incurred. However, in the last section I argue that, as Davidson himself came to realize more clearly in his late writings, the question of interpretation runs much deeper than saying what Kurt's words mean. Davidson states rather off handedly that we proceed to interpret Kurt after "having identified his utterance as intentional and linguistic;" but what makes an utterance intentional and linguistic (and thus interpretable) to begin with, and how do we come to identify a creature as producing such utterances? I will argue that these questions, which started as a trivial remark in "Radical Interpretation," gradually became the heart of Davidson's work on language. I will show how Davidson's early focus on specifying the process of interpretation has led him to realize that the question of who gets to count as a creature whose utterances are intentional and linguistic underlies and conditions every effort to interpret; this question, which I will henceforth refer to as the question of "speakerhood," constitutes the horizon of this dissertation.

Radical Interpretation

This section describes Davidson's model of radical interpretation and how it takes after, but also differs significantly from, Quine's radical translation. Quine's radical translation is a thought experiment that demonstrates how a translation manual can be empirically constructed for a foreign language in the absence of any previous knowledge of that

language. Radical interpretation is similarly designed to portray how conversationalists can come to understand one another in the absence of any common linguistic knowledge. Davidson takes after Quine's externalist approach to interpretation, and maintains that to the extent that meaning is determinate, it is entirely determined by observable behavior, so interpretation is carried out based solely on the speaker's observable behavior and observable circumstances: "meaning is entirely determined by observable behavior, even readily observable behavior…public availability is a constitutive aspect of language."[7] This view of meaning follows from Quine's (and Davidson's) understanding of language learning; since a language learner has nothing more than behavior as evidence, insofar as meaning is determinate at all, it must be determined by behavior. Davidson therefore advocates that meaning is extensional, and that interpretation (the construction of theories of meaning for a speaker) must rely on empirical evidence, as they are revealed in actual occasions of utterance. It is important to note that although Davidson concurs with Quine that meaning is determined by observable behavior, he rejects Quine's behaviorism and maintains that meaning is not reducible to behavior; this important difference between the two thinkers will be discussed in more detail later in this section.

Radical interpretation is the model formulated by Davidson to illustrate how the linguistic behavior of a speaker can be interpreted "from scratch," without relying on any prior knowledge of either the speaker's beliefs or the meanings of her utterances. Davidson observes that an interpreter cannot assign meanings to a speaker's utterances without knowing what he believes, or identify his beliefs without knowing what his utterances mean; she is consequently faced with the challenge of figuring out both

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[7] Donald Davidson, "The Structure and Content of Truth," *Journal of Philosophy* 87 (1990): 314.

meanings and beliefs simultaneously, without assuming either beforehand. Unable to rely on either meanings or beliefs as a starting point, Davidson advocates that the interpreter relies on truth as a primitive concept.[8] He points out that "a speaker who wishes his words to be understood cannot systematically deceive his would-be interpreters about when he assents to sentences – that is, holds them true;"[9] the interpreter can therefore presuppose that in uttering a sentence a speaker assents to that sentence being true under present conditions. The dependence of the speaker's assent on both beliefs and meaning allows the interpreter to utilize the former, which is publicly available, to infer the latter, which is not yet known. Davidson explains that 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," it provides the interpreter with the basis for identifying and interpreting both meanings and beliefs, without knowing either in advance."[10]

The task of a radical interpreter is therefore to specify the relevant conditions under which a speaker takes a sentence to be true, and this task is carried out empirically: the interpreter observes the speaker's linguistic behavior, and attempts to discern in it patterns that can be formulated as T-sentences. For example: if a speaker repeatedly utters "Yorred Geshem" whenever it is raining, this evidence can be formulated into the following T-sentence: "'Yorred Geshem' is true if and only if it is raining." The T-

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[8] In "Truth and Meaning" Davidson urges "philosophers, logicians, psychologists, and linguists" to see "in the semantical concept of truth (under whatever name) the sophisticated and powerful foundation of a competent theory of meaning." (Donald Davidson, "Truth and Meaning," in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984 (1967)], 24). See also: "our outlook inverts Tarski's: we want to achieve an understanding of meaning or translation by assuming a prior grasp of the concept of truth." (Donald Davidson, "Belief and the Basis of Meaning," in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984 (1974)], 150).
[9] Donald Davidson, "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge," in *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001 [1983]), 147.
[10] Ibid.

sentences form the basis for hypotheses, which compose the interpreter's theory of interpretation (or truth theory) for the particular speaker on a particular time. The hypotheses are consequently tested against further linguistic behavior on the part of the speaker, and modified in accordance with the results, in order to refine the theory of interpretation for the speaker.

To get a sense of how radical interpretation works it is helpful to consider a simple example. I encounter a speaker who speaks a language I am completely unfamiliar with. After observing her behavior for a while I notice that she repeatedly utters the word "parah" in the presence of what I take to be a cow, and deduce accordingly that in her language the word "parah" means cow. One day the speaker points to something that I judge to be a donkey and utters "parah." Now there is a discrepancy between the meaning I attributed to the word "parah" based on my previous observations and what I take to be a reasonable belief based on my understanding of the circumstances. I am consequently confronted with two options: I can either amend my understanding of the meaning of the word "parah" (perhaps it means a four-legged animal) or I can amend the belief I attribute to the speaker (perhaps she is blinded by the sun, or maybe she has never seen a donkey before and is therefore misrecognizing the animal).[11] Whatever course I choose to take, the goal is to make the belief I attribute to the speaker, the circumstances of the

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[11] For Davidson's discussion of a similar example see: Donald Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984 [1974]), 196. It is interesting to note that although Davidson recognizes that in case of a discrepancy between the interpreter's theory of interpretation and the speaker's behavior the interpreter can choose between reinterpreting beliefs and reinterpreting the meaning of words, he clearly prefers reinterpreting the latter. It should also be noted that not all beliefs are created equal: we would be hard-pressed to allow for a disagreement in beliefs about whether or not the sun is shining, for it would be hard to come to any kind of understanding with a speaker with whom we disagree about such a plain and apparent fact. However, when it comes to beliefs regarding matters of taste, or even the question whether a certain flower is blue or purple, we might be much more lenient in allowing for disagreement in beliefs (and so would refrain from assuming that a speaker does not know the meaning of the word "purple" just because he calls purple to a flower that I think is blue).

utterance (as I perceive them), and the meaning I attribute to the speaker's utterance fit together in a plausible way. Radical interpretation is therefore like doing a jigsaw puzzle – the interpreter has to make the pieces fit together in one holistic pattern. The catch is that not all the pieces are available in advance (they become gradually available as the conversation unfolds), and the final pattern is unknown (there is no picture on the box).[12]

The above example is of course a crude one, while it demonstrates the fundamentals of radical interpretation it also glosses over its more difficult, as well as more interesting intricacies. In what follows I will highlight and discuss some of those intricacies. First of all, it is important to dispel the somewhat widespread notion that Davidson is a behaviorist like his teacher Quine. Although he concurs with Quine that insofar as it is determinate meaning is completely *determined* by observable behavior, he also maintains that it is not *reducible* to observable behavior; his externalist account of meaning is not meant to rid of intentional concepts, on the contrary, he argues that psychological explanations are irreducible to physical explanations.[13] Davidson's rejection of behaviorism stems from his understanding that it is impossible to interpret the meaning of a speaker's utterances without applying mental concepts. Quine's naturalized epistemology entails that knowledge is entirely based on sense stimuli: some knowledge is directly related to stimulation of nerve endings, and the rest is based on what fits best with that sensory experience so as to form a holistic system of knowledge. Language, according to Quine, follows a similar pattern: most of the sentences in language are based on a select group of sentences, called observation sentences, which

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[12] The analogy of the jigsaw puzzle is borrowed from Jeff Malpas, see: Jeff E. Malpas, "The Nature of Interpretive Charity," *Dialectica* 42 (1988): 18–19.

[13] See for example: Donald Davidson, "Psychology as Philosophy," in *Actions and Events* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980 [1974]), 229–239.

embody knowledge directly related to sense stimulation. So for Quine the entire edifice of language is anchored to reality through observation sentences, i.e. through the stimulation of nerve endings. Davidson follows Quine in adopting a holistic conception of knowledge, but he utterly rejects Quine's reliance on observation sentences.

Quine overlooks the fact that a person's disposition to assent to a sentence depends not only on external stimuli, but also on the person's internal state. When faced with a simulation of a rabbit a person who is not aware that the rabbit is simulated will assent to "rabbit," while a person who is aware of the simulation will not, even though they both experience the same stimulus.[14] The difference between the two agents is that the former believes that the rabbit is real, while the latter believes it is fake, so we cannot explain the difference in behavior between them without appealing to the intentional concept of belief. Davidson argues accordingly that the concept of belief, or the distinction between a sentence being held true by a speaker and it being actually true, is a necessary part of interpretation. He writes: "the distinction between a sentence being held true and being in fact true is essential to the existence of an interpersonal system of communication…the concept of belief stands ready to take up the slack between objective truth and the held true."[15] In fact, interpretation for Davidson is the only context for applying mental concepts such as belief and desire, for it is only in the context of

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[14] The example is taken from Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy's entry on Quine, see: Peter Hylton, "Willard Van Orman Quine," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, n.d.<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/quine/#ObsSen> (cited 16 Feb. 2012).

[15] Donald Davidson, "Thought and Talk," in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984 [1975]), 169–170. See also: "belief is built to take up the slack between sentences held true by individuals and sentences true (or false) by public standards." (Davidson, "Belief and the Basis of Meaning," 153).

interpreting the speech of others that the need for such concepts arises.[16] His only objection is to specifying meaning in terms of intentional concepts because of the circularity of such account (since meanings and beliefs are interdependent and are both derived from observable behavior, explaining one in terms of the other is meaningless).

Davidson's insistence on keeping intentional concepts in the picture leads to another significant difference between him and Quine on the subject of indeterminacy. Quine's indeterminism reflects the fact that as far as linguistic meaning is concerned one has no choice but to be a behaviorist, and that the observable circumstances of an utterance never provide enough information so as to determine exactly the object of the utterance.[17] Quine notes that no amount of observation and evidence collection will ever tell us whether the term "gavagai" applies to "a whole enduring rabbit" or to "mere stages, or brief temporal segments, of rabbits," since in both cases the observable circumstances are the same.[18] Quine's indeterminism is therefore a consequence of the limits of observation, and it marks the limits of translation: there is a limit to how finely we can grain our theory based on observation alone, and anything beyond this limit unavoidably remains underdetermined, so theoretically speaking there can always be more than one adequate translation to a given set of evidence. The source of

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[16] Davidson argues that without speech, or more accurately without interpretation, we have no need for the concept of belief which is central to thought. He explains that when interpreting a speaker the interpreter constantly comes across utterances that prompt him to attribute beliefs to the speaker in order to maximize her intelligibility; the attribution of beliefs is the means by which the interpreter bridges any gaps between the way things are and the meaning of the speaker's utterances (as perceived by the interpreter), thus facilitating intelligibility and mutual understanding. It is therefore in a situation of interpretation that the need for the concept of belief emerges in the first place, and not for the speaker but rather for the interpreter. See for example: "we have the idea of belief only from the role of belief in the interpretation of language, for as a private attitude it is not intelligible except as an adjustment to the public norm provided by language. … given the dependence of other attitudes on belief, we can say more generally that only a creature that can interpret speech can have the concept of a thought." (Davidson, "Thought and Talk," 170).

[17] Willard Van Orman Quine, "Indeterminacy of Translation Again," *Journal of Philosophy* 84 (1987): 5.

[18] Willard Van Orman Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1960), 51–52.

indeterminism in Davidson's theory on the other hand is directly connected to the application of intentional concepts.

For Davidson indeterminism of interpretation is brought about by the interdependence of meaning and belief. As conveyed by the above example, radical interpretation is a dynamic process in which interlocutors continuously adjust their theories of interpretation for one another in order to make the exchange between them as intelligible as possible. The dynamic nature of interpretation entails that theories of interpretation are always underdetermined, for they are always subject to potential future adjustments brought on by new evidence. But radical interpretation is an endless process not just because new evidence is always being revealed that can change a previous theory of interpretation, but because there can never be an ultimate theory of interpretation for any set of evidence. As previously demonstrated, when confronted with a discrepancy between a theory of interpretation and the speaker's behavior the interpreter can choose between reinterpreting beliefs and reinterpreting the meaning of words. This means that there can always be more than one theory for any given set of evidence, depending on the interpreter's choice to reinterpret beliefs or meanings.[19] Put another way, there is no fact of the matter as far as meaning is concerned, because different interpreters can choose to attribute different truth theories to a speaker based on pragmatic considerations. So for

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[19] Malpas notes that although unavoidable, the indeterminacy of interpretation is less obvious in practice, because in actuality there are practical constraints that cause us to prefer one theory over the others even though from a purely theoretical perspective they are interchangeable. (Malpas, "The Nature of Interpretive Charity," 23, n. 13).

Davidson indeterminacy is an inherent and indispensable part of interpretation, which no amount of additional information can eliminate.[20]

However, Davidson's view that the meaning of utterances depends on the speaker's beliefs and intentions makes him susceptible to criticism from another direction. Wittgenstein argues that for meaning to be public it has to be subject to convention, that is, the meaning of words must be determined by the regular use of the members of a linguistic community, and not by the intentions of an individual speaker. By introducing the speaker's intentions back into the picture, Davidson risks reverting to an individualistic conception of meaning, thus violating Wittgenstein's argument against private language. The next section explains Davidson's reasons for rejecting the Wittgensteinian approach on which meaning is conventionally determined, and why such rejection of convention does not compromise the sociality of meaning.

The Role of Convention in Communication

Davidson's contention that meaning is determined by observable behavior entails that interpretation must be carried out concretely and empirically, so it cannot rely on abstract meanings that persist independently of actual speakers. On Davidson's view, the model of radical interpretation suffices to explain how interlocutors come to understand one another in the course of actual occasions of speech; linguistic conventions are therefore unnecessary for communicative success, and are nothing but a theoretical artifact that we use to organize and analyze linguistic interactions after the facts. Davidson's famous

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[20] For an explanation of Davidson's indeterminism see also: Malpas, "The Nature of Interpretive Charity," 22–23.

(some would say infamous) conclusion that "there is no such thing as a language" is an extension of this position: language understood as a set of conventions is nothing but a theoretical concept, in actuality all that exists are "people and their various written and acoustical products."[21] While he rejects concepts like "language" and "convention," there is one notion that Davidson argues is absolutely necessary for giving an account of how people communicate – that is the notion of understanding. While the model of radical interpretation makes no use of linguistic conventions, it cannot do without the notion of understanding, because understanding is the ultimate purpose of all communicative acts. In this section I will present Davidson's argument against the role of convention in communication, and demonstrate how he uses the notion of understanding as a substitute linguistic norm. I will also discuss some of the objections brought about by this move, particularly the allegation that by abandoning convention Davidson is renouncing the social aspect of language, opting instead for an individualistic view on which meaning is determined by speaker intention.

Plainly put, the conventional approach to language upholds that the phonetic form "apple" designates an apple because it is conventionally used in this way among English speakers. Since the meaning of the word "apple" is determined by the regular use of the community of English speakers, it persists independently of any individual speaker, which is what enables us to judge that a speaker who uses the word "apple" to designate an orange is wrong.[22] The notion of conventional meaning rests on the idea that every

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[21] Davidson, "The Second Person," 108.
[22] This is an overly simplified description, because linguistic conventions are not static, and can change over time, partly due to individual acts. Moreover, the idea of meaning being determined by an agreement among a linguistic community is not as straight forward as it might seem, because the boundaries of a linguistic community can be fluid and contested (for example, it is not at all obvious that all English speakers belong to the same linguistic community, if for no other reason than because some of them live in

linguistic token has a standard use, one thing (or a finite number of things) that it is meant to do, and that when carried out under normal circumstances this standard use yields the literal meaning of a sentence.[23] The notion of conventional meaning therefore requires that the linguistic meaning of an utterance can be associated in a binding way with its nonlinguistic circumstances, so that the utterance only yields its literal meaning when carried out under normal circumstances (and not for example when used ironically).[24]

Against this approach Davidson argues that no convention can ever tie in a binding way the linguistic meaning of an utterance with its nonlinguistic circumstances, if for no other reason than because the idea of a standard use assumes a sincere or serious speaker (a speaker who means what she says, not an actor on stage or a liar), but there is no way to test for such sincerity because if there was a publicly recognizable sign that testified to such sincerity every actor or liar would have surely used it.[25] Conventions are therefore not as social as they appear to be, because as it turns out conventional meaning requires making assumptions about the internal state of the speaker (that he is earnest and sincere). Davidson therefore rejects the conventional approach to meaning for compromising the public nature of meaning, and concludes accordingly that "it is not an accidental feature of language that the ulterior purpose of an utterance and its literal

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Australia and others in England). The important point however is that generally speaking, at any given time in a given community, we can determine the meaning of a word, independently of how it is used by any particular speaker.

[23] C.f. Donald Davidson, "Communication and Convention," in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984 [1984]), 271, 273.

[24] Ibid., 271–272.

[25] Ibid., 274.

meaning are independent, in the sense that the latter cannot be derived from the former: it is of the essence of language."[26]

The rejection of linguistic conventions compels Davidson to prove that his conception of meaning is not individualistic, that on his view meaning is not determined by what a speaker means to say. Why the rejection of linguistic conventions puts Davidson in this position can be easily appreciated if we look at Humpty Dumpty, who is an example of what happens when a speaker rejects linguistic conventions, and maintains that he is free to use words however he pleases, to mean whatever he wants.[27] As demonstrated by Wittgenstein, linguistic conventions make possible the distinction between what a speaker thinks her words mean and what they actually mean by posing a norm by which speakers are generally required to abide and against which their utterances are evaluated and judged to be correct or mistaken. As Alice quickly discovers, a speaker who rejects the linguistic norms and takes absolute freedom in his use of words is practically impossible to understand. To show that he is not like Humpty Dumpty, and that his rejection of convention does not result in a similar failure of understanding, Davidson must provide an alternative way for drawing Wittgenstein's "distinction between using words correctly and merely thinking one is using them correctly," and he must do that "without appeal[ing] to the test of common usage."[28]

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[26] Ibid.

[27] "'There's glory for you!' 'I don't know what you mean by "glory",' Alice said. Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. 'Of course you don't — till I tell you. I meant "there's a nice knock-down argument for you!"' 'But "glory" doesn't mean "a nice knock-down argument",' Alice objected. 'When *I* use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, 'it means just what *I* choose it to mean — neither more nor less.' (Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass* [1st Edition Media, 2009], 54).

[28] Davidson, "The Social Aspect of Language," 119.

To address this challenge and articulate the difference between himself and Humpty Dumpty Davidson examines malapropism, which serves as an example of a wider category of cases in which understanding is achieved despite the fact that the speaker uses language improperly (in an unusual or unconventional way). With malapropism a speaker intentionally strays from the standard meaning of a word, yet she is understood in the way she intended, so like Humpty Dumpty, malapropism seems to be an example of speaker intention superseding conventional meaning, consequently threatening the distinction between speaker meaning and linguistic meaning.[29] There is however a major difference between Humpty Dumpty and malapropism: a speaker who uses malapropism intends her interpreter to understand her ulterior, nonlinguistic motive (for example, her intention to make a joke). So even though they both reject linguistic conventions, Davidson differs from Humpty Dumpty in that while the latter could not care less whether Alice understands him or not so he gives meanings to his utterances based on his arbitrary caprice, for Davidson intelligibility is paramount, so he envisions a speaker who wants, above all else, to get his intentions across to someone else.

Davidson recognizes what Humpty Dumpty ignores – that communication is pointless without understanding; he explains that the only thing that all acts of speech have in common is "communication, getting across to someone else what you have in mind by means of words that they interpret (understand) as you want them to."[30] Strictly speaking, Humpty Dumpty speaks but he does not communicate, because a recipient is not part of Humpty Dumpty's linguistic scenario, which is what allows him the freedom

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[29] Donald Davidson, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," in *Truth, Language and History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005 [1986]), 91.
[30] Davidson, "The Social Aspect of Language," 120.

to mean whatever he wants. In Davidson's scenario on the other hand, the speaker is not completely free, but is held responsible, not to an abstract convention (to linguistic meaning) but to the actual, concrete interpreter with whom he is in conversation. Unlike Humpty Dumpty, Davidson recognizes the need for norms in communication, he only contests the idea that conventions can set those norms.[31] Moreover, Davidson concurs with Wittgenstein that the challenge of setting a linguistic norm "can be met only by appeal to a social setting,"[32] but the social setting Davidson appeals to is composed of two people – the speaker and the interpreter. On his view, the production of meaning depends on both a speaker and an interpreter, because an utterance means what both interlocutors understand it to mean. Meaning is thus never established by a single person, but only through a collaborative interaction that results in understanding (in mutual recognition of that meaning). In other words, for Davidson understanding takes the place of convention and functions as the sole linguistic norm.[33] Davidson argues that only understanding can serve as a norm for communication, because while communication can succeed without conventions (as demonstrated by radical interpretation), understanding is the universal purpose of all acts of speech. He writes: "the intention to be taken to mean what one wants to be taken to mean is…so clearly the only aim that is common to all verbal behavior that it is hard…to see how anyone can deny it." This observation seems trivial and is thus often overlooked, but "if it is true, it is important, for it provides a

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[31] Ibid., 119–120.
[32] Ibid., 119. See also: Ibid, 113.
[33] Davidson, "Nice Derangement," 98.

purpose which any speaker must have in speaking, and thus constitutes *a norm* against which speakers and others can measure the success of verbal behavior."[34]

Davidson's rejection of convention relies on his model of radical interpretation, which demonstrates how interlocutors can come to understand one another without sharing a common language in advance. However, while not assuming that linguistic conventions must be shared beforehand, radical interpretation does assume two competent speaker-interpreters that are no strangers to linguistic conventions because they have both mastered a set of conventions in their respective home languages. When radical interpretation is understood in this way language still plays an essential role in Davidson's semantics, which seem to conflict with his late writings, in which he outright declares that there is no such thing as a language. When engaging with Davidson's philosophy as a whole we must therefore decide between two competing paths: we can read his late work as a rhetorical hyperbole, made for the sake of argument, and aimed against the idea of conventions being necessarily shared in advance and not against the relevancy of convention to a theory of meaning. Otherwise, we need to show that language does not play a necessary role in radical interpretation and own up to everything that follows from this radical claim. The next section examines Davidson's late writings in order to assess the full extent of his rejection of linguistic conventions and determine whether radical interpretation actually entails that the notion of language ought to be abandoned completely.

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[34] Davidson, "The Social Aspect of Language," 120 (my italics). See also: "if the speech behavior of others does not provide the norm for the speaker, what can? The answer is that the intention of the speaker to be interpreted in a certain way provides the 'norm'; the speaker falls short of his intention if he fails to speak in such a way as to be understood as he intended." (Davidson, "The Second Person," 116).

Is There Such a Thing as a Language?

More than any other essay, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs" (published in 1986) symbolizes the transition from Davidson's early writings on meaning, which were organized around the model of radical interpretation, to his late writings, which seem to move away from the technical analysis and relatively formal approach to language which characterized his work in the 1960's and 1970's.[35] To some extent, all of Davidson's late work on meaning remains in the shadow of his provocative conclusion in "Nice Derangement" that there is no such thing as a language, which is often seen as marking a significant shift in his thought. I will show that while Davidson's late work marks a change in emphasis and rhetoric, it is continuous with his early work. In addition to shedding new light on the role of language (or convention) in communication, I will use the late work to further examine whether understanding can function as a linguistic norm, and if appealing to a two-people interaction suffices to make meaning social.

In "Nice Derangement" Davidson uses the example of malapropism discussed earlier to undermine the idea that linguistic conventions are necessary for understanding. The critical argument is followed by an illustration of how linguistic communication can proceed without the use of convention. On this new account, both the speaker and the interpreter approach each other with a *prior theory*. For the interpreter the prior theory is his expectations from the speaker and how he is prepared in advance to interpret her utterances. These expectations are composed not only of linguistic knowledge but also of the interpreter's assessment of the speaker's linguistic ability, socioeconomic

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[35] For further discussion of this shift in Davidson's philosophy and how it was received see: Jeff E. Malpas, "Introduction: Davidson and Contemporary Thought," in *Dialogues with Davidson: Acting, Interpreting, Understanding*, ed. Jeff E. Malpas (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2011), xvii–xxv.

background, the circumstances of the interaction, and so on. For the speaker the prior theory is what she assumes to be the interpreter's prior theory, to which she will try to direct her speech in order to make herself as comprehensible as possible.[36] The prior theories of both interlocutors are constantly being adjusted and modified during the interaction so as to adapt to the flux of new evidence revealed in the course of the interaction. At the end both interlocutors emerge with a *passing theory* which is the result of all the revisions: it is the theory which the speaker tried to lead the interpreter to use and the theory according to which the interpreter ended up actually interpreting the speaker's intended meaning.[37] Davidson underscores that nowhere in this picture are the interlocutors making use of rules or conventions; the prior theory is not a convention which the interlocutors bring into the interaction because what the interlocutors must share in order for the communication to succeed is not the prior theory but the passing theory.[38] The passing theory which the interlocutors create together in the process of their interaction is also not a convention because it is too specific to sum up to a rule that can be broadly applied. These considerations lead Davidson to determine that "neither the prior theory nor the passing theory describes what we would call the language a person knows, and neither theory characterizes a speaker's or interpreter's linguistic competence."[39] He therefore concludes that "there is no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed. There is

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[36] Davidson, "Nice Derangement," 101.

[37] Davidson writes: "the passing theory is the one the interpreter actually uses to interpret an utterance, and it is the theory the speaker intends the interpreter to use. Only if these coincide is understanding complete." (Ibid., 102).

[38] See for example: "most of the time prior theories will not be shared, and there is no reason why they should be. Certainly it is not a condition of successful communication that prior theories be shared." (Ibid., 103). See also:"what the speaker and the interpreter know in advance is not (necessarily) shared." (Ibid., 106).

[39] Davidson, "Nice Derangement," 104. See also: "the prior theory is neither shared by speaker and interpreter nor is it what we would normally call a language." (Ibid.)

therefore no such thing to be learned, mastered, or born with. We must give up the idea of a clearly defined shared structure which language-users acquire and then apply to cases."[40]

Denying the existence of language is a provocative conclusion, especially from a philosopher who dedicated most of his career to the study of language, so it is not surprising that even sympathetic readers of Davidson find it hard to swallow. While Davidson's account of prior and passing theories certainly drives home the point that understanding can sometimes be achieved even when linguistic conventions are not shared in advance, it is not clear that this conclusion justifies a complete renunciation of language. Michael Dummett for example argues against Davidson that his portrayal of communication in "Nice Derangement" does not preclude the notion of language. According to Dummett language facilitates successful communication most of the time, and it is rather rarely that we need to employ additional case-specific interpretational aids to make sense of an odd occasion of a speaker that does not conform to convention. Dummett therefore takes the prior theory to be a general, long-range theory, according to which the speaker wants the hearer to interpret him most of the time, while the passing theory is a short-range and case-specific solution for idiosyncratic utterances that are incompatible with the prior theory.[41] On this view, Davidson's conclusion that language does not exist is too extreme and does not follow from his model, because the prior theories constitute an enduring, language-like structure that serves as the background against which irregular utterances are interpreted. The passing theories are therefore only

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[40] Davidson, "Nice Derangement," 107.
[41] Michael Dummett, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs: Some Comments on Davidson and Hacking," in *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, ed. Ernest LePore (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 459–460, 466.

a supplement, and they do not undermine conventional meaning (i.e. the accepted use of a sentence).

Dummett is not alone in his discomfort regarding the ease with which Davidson dismisses language just because in real life speakers often use it in ingenious or incorrect ways. In their essay "Is There Such a Thing as a Language?" Dorit Bar-On and Mark Risjord accept Davidson's argument that interpretation is essentially an incomplete process because there are always new words and uses being introduced into language. However, they argue that while this fact "captures something important and interesting about natural languages" it does not entail that we can never use the same truth theory for different speakers or for the same speaker at different times.[42] Similarly to Dummett, Bar-On and Risjord insist that the overlap between different truth theories (or prior theories) justifies regarding a cluster of slightly different theories as de-facto constituting a language, that is nonetheless flexible enough to accommodate occasional variations.[43]

Dummett, Bar-On and Risjord share the feeling, common to other critics of Davidson,[44] that the example of malapropism is simply not pervasive enough to justify Davidson's conclusion that language does not exist. They therefore maintain that while language is surely not a rigid routine, it is also not so precarious so as to justify its complete deconstruction. By insisting that language persists behind or beyond any sporadic, secondary and derivative occasion of malapropism, Davidson's critics hang on to the commonsensical impression that irregular uses of language (malapropism, irony,

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[42] Dorit Bar-On and Mark Risjord, "Is There Such a Thing as a Language?," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 22, no. 2 (1992): 183–184.

[43] Ibid., 184–185.

[44] For a prominent example of such a critic see: Ian Hacking, *Why Does Language Matter to Philosophy?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

an actor on stage) are parasitic[45] on the more widely accepted ways of speaking

(language, perhaps loosely construed), and are therefore understood against them: "the

interpretive flexibility manifested in our everyday treatment of malapropisms may

be…*parasitic* on the expectation of general adherence to linguistic conventions shared

across speakers or at least over time."[46] Dummett presses this point and maintains that

language serves as a background set of binding conventions or rules from which a

speaker can deviate but not without a price. For Dummett a speaker is held accountable to

a language by virtue of being a speaker of that language, and this accountability will

always trump the speaker's unique idiolect which, for that reason, is viewed as a

deviation from and derivative of the widely accepted convention.

For Davidson on the other hand language always falls short: mastering and

sharing the ability to proceed according to a given routine (language) is not sufficient for

successful communication, because knowing a language amounts to knowing only one

truth theory, and one theory, no matter how refined it is, can never cover all possible

utterances because there is no limit to the variations that actual speakers introduce into

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[45] For an illuminating discussion of the use of the word "parasitic" in regards to irregular or incorrect uses of language see: Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc*, ed. Gerald Graff, trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1977). Derrida's work on this issue is discussed further in chapter four.

[46] Bar-On and Risjord, "Is There Such a Thing as a Language?," 185. The authors base this claim partly on the fact that "in practice, we hold individual speakers responsible to the norms of speech of their linguistic community, and only rarely resort to ascribing completely idiosyncratic uses of language. The most common and natural reaction to malapropisms, as well as slips of the tongue and Spoonerisms, in the speech of our interlocutors is correction. We take speakers in such cases to have misspoken (which is not to say we do not understand what they intended – but failed – to say)." (Ibid., 185–186). This automatic need to correct others as well as ourselves is addressed by Davidson in response to a similar charge raised by Dummett; Davidson explains that speakers correct themselves in such cases for the same reasons that they try to use the right fork at a dinner party. He writes: "using a word in a nonstandard way … has as little to do with communication as using the wrong fork has to do with nourishing oneself, given that the word is understood and the fork works." Davidson's point is that as long as we understand the speaker (as long as the fork works), holding her responsible to a general standard on top of that adds nothing to our ability to communicate with her and understand what she means: "what magic ingredient does holding oneself responsible to the usual way of speaking add to the usual way of speaking?" The question is rhetorical of course, Davidson's answer is a decisive nothing. (Davidson, "The Social Aspect of Language," 117).

language. For Davidson no preexisting convention or regularity can explain all, or even most, linguistic occasions, especially when taking into consideration the endless number of possible variations and inventions that can be introduced by an ingenious or ignorant speaker.[47] As the example of malapropism shows, speakers deviate from the linguistic standard all the time without being misunderstood, from which Davidson concludes that interpretation is not about applying a predetermined theory of truth (an already existing set of conventions), but about devising and revising different theories for different speakers at different occasions.[48] Put another way, while an interpreter can determine that her interlocutor speaks English, "English" is a theoretical set of conventions abstracted from actual occasions of utterance, and as such it cannot explain what a particular speaker means when he uses a certain word in a certain context.[49]

Taken in this way, the disagreement between Dummett and Davidson seems like a matter of degree and not substance. If what Davidson is objecting to is the idea that the way people actually talk can be neatly fitted into a rigid, preexisting general framework, then Dummett will probably agree with the basic sentiment. It will be ridiculing Dummett's position to say that he does not recognize that actual speakers often diverge significantly from what grammar books define as proper ways of speaking, so even if he gives such occasions a secondary and derivative role it does not mean that he denies their existence. But articulating the dispute as revolving around the primacy of language

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[47] Davidson, "Nice Derangement," 100. See also Davidson's portrayal of James Joyce as an extremely inventive user of language; for Davidson Joyce exemplifies what to an extent takes place in every situation of communication. (Donald Davidson, "James Joyce and Humpty Dumpty," in *Truth, Language and History* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005 (1989)], 157).

[48] C.f.: Bjørn Ramberg, *Donald Davidson's Philosophy of Language* (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 104.

[49] "The general framework of theory, whatever it is, may be a key ingredient in what is needed for interpretation, but it cannot be all that is needed since it fails to provide the interpretation of particular words and sentences as uttered by a particular speaker." (Davidson, "Nice Derangement," 104–105).

versus the primacy of idiolect does not take Davidson's contention that language does not exist seriously enough; an idiolect is still a language, so speaking in terms of idiolect still reifies meaning, it still suggests that meaning is found in language, even if that language is used by only one speaker.[50] Doing justice to Davidson's thought requires realizing that he is not arguing for the primacy of unique ways of speaking over the general way of speaking, but making a far more radical claim about the primacy of specific occasions of utterance (the utterance of a certain sentence by a particular speaker at a specific time).[51] During the aftermath of "Nice Derangement" Davidson comes to the conclusion that "meaning…gets its life from those situations in which someone intends (or assumes or expects) that his words will be understood in a certain way, and they are;"[52] meaning is therefore completely contextual, it is embedded in a specific, concrete occasion of communication, and not in anything that we would normally call a language. This understanding regarding the nature of meaning is already implied in Davidson's departure from Quine's radical translation in favor of his own notion of radical interpretation, and matures in the model of prior and passing theory introduced in "Nice Derangement."

As previously explained, from the very beginning of his effort to articulate a theory of meaning Davidson was adamant that such theory cannot rely on meanings or

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[50] On the possibility of language being spoken by only one person and why that does not amount to language being private see: "speaking a language requires that there be an interpreter, it does not follow that more than one person must speak the same language. This is fortunate, since if we are precise about what constitutes a language, it is probably the case that no two people actually do speak the same language." (Davidson, "The Second Person," 114–115).

[51] Ramberg, *Donald Davidson's Philosophy of Language*, 106. See also: "the radical interpreter, quizzing a sole informant, can count at best on coming to understand just that one speaker. What the … interpreter hears invests those utterances with whatever meaning they can have for him." (Donald Davidson, "Reply to W. V. Quine," in *The Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, ed. Lewis Edwin Hahn [Illinois: Open Court Publishing, 1990], 80).

[52] Davidson, "The Social Aspect of Language," 120.

intentions and must instead be extensional and rely on truth as a primitive concept. By explicating meaning in terms of truth conditions Davidson is not suggesting that the truth value of a sentence (whether it is true or not) is determined by its semantics, but posits that uttering a sentence is assenting to the sentence being true under present conditions. Consequently, the task of a theory of meaning is to specify the relevant conditions under which a speaker takes a sentence to be true, since knowing the truth conditions of a sentence is understanding it. The extensional nature of meaning dictates that interpretation (the construction of theories of meaning for a speaker) will be carried out empirically: an interpreter who tries to construct a truth theory for a speaker cannot rely on ideal meanings or conventions, all she has to go on is empirical evidence as revealed in actual occasions of utterance. If radical interpretation is nothing but this process of theories construction then it cannot be a process of correlating between two languages (the language of the speaker and the language of the interpreter). As aforementioned, Davidson states that radical interpretation assumes two speaker-interpreters that, despite being completely unacquainted with each other's language, are nonetheless already competent speakers and interpreters of at least one language. Consequently, it is easy to misconceive the interpreter's undertaking as seeking to match each sentence in his home language with an equivalent sentence in the speaker's language, which would make radical interpretation a process of constructing a translation manual for the speaker's foreign language in the interpreter's home language. Although such approach to radical interpretation seems plausible, it has always been rejected by Davidson, as indicated also by his choice of words (radical interpretation instead of radical translation). From the early stages of articulating his theory of interpretation Davidson has stated clearly that he

"do[es] not think a translation manual is the best form for a theory of interpretation to take."[53] The reason radical interpretation cannot be a process of translation stems directly from the extensional nature of interpretation: if meaning is nothing but the truth conditions under which a sentence is uttered, and thus assented to, then to give the meaning of an utterance is not to provide an equivalent sentence in another language but to describe the truth conditions under which a certain sentence is uttered by a particular speaker at a specific time. Interpretation is therefore the construction of an explanation for each utterance of the speaker; deciding on and describing the relevant conditions under which a sentence is true *is* interpreting, and no further action such as substituting the speaker's sentence with a sentence in the interpreter's language is required for understanding to take place.

This is also the reason Davidson rejects the "extremely restricted meaning given to the word 'interpretation' by the translators of Wittgenstein...[according to which] an interpretation of a word or expression is always another word, or expression." For him asking about the interpretation of an utterance is not asking "what other words the hearer might have substituted" for those uttered by the speaker but asking "how the person [the interpreter] understood the utterance of those words."[54] The interpreter can no doubt use words in her own language to describe her understanding (the relevant truth conditions), but these words do not compose a translation manual, they are an explanation of what it means for the speaker to assent to a certain sentence under specific conditions. Davidson thus concludes that to understand a speaker does not mean to translate his words into my

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[53] Davidson, "Radical Interpretation," 129.
[54] Davidson, "The Social Aspect of Language," 112.

own since "translation is no part of the transaction between speaker and hearer that I call interpretation."[55]

Such conception of interpretation entails that meaning is always contextual, i.e. specific to a particular speaker at a particular time and place. Because meaning is contextual, it is always up to the interpreter to decide, at any given moment, whether a change in the circumstances of an utterance is relevant to, and therefore has a significant effect on, its meaning. What takes place between a speaker and an interpreter in radical interpretation is therefore not an exchange of words but an ongoing negotiation about what constitutes a significant change in the circumstances of an utterance, thus affecting its meaning.[56] Radical interpretation is therefore a process that can never, in principle, exhaust itself; it is always ongoing, and never generates a finalized meaning because meaning is determined in the course of a concrete exchange between actual interlocutors and can never be abstracted and separated from such exchange.

The realization that meaning is necessarily contextual because it is embedded in concrete truth conditions transforms the notion of literal meaning, which is what ultimately exasperates Dummett, because it precludes the relegation of malapropism into a parasitic position. In "Nice Derangement" Davidson asserts that "every *deviation from ordinary usage*, as long as it is agreed on *for the moment*…is in the passing theory as a feature of what the words mean *on that occasion*. Such meanings, transient though they be, are *literal*."[57] If passing theories are just as literal as prior theories then literal

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[55] Ibid., 112–113.
[56] "Indeterminacy of meaning or translation does not represent a failure to capture significant distinctions; it marks the fact that certain apparent distinctions are not significant." (Davidson, "Belief and the Basis of Meaning," 154).
[57] Davidson, "Nice Derangement," 102 (my italics).

meaning cannot fulfill the stabilizing, standardizing function assigned to it by Dummett, because it is revealed to be as momentary and transient as passing theories are.[58] For Davidson the priority of prior theories is merely chronological, they do not reflect a "proper meaning" that is privileged over the limited, parasitic passing theories; strictly speaking prior theories *are* passing theories; a theory only becomes prior in relation to the theory that comes after it and replaces it. As a result, prior theories cannot be neatly detached from the passing theories that come to their aid, which means that they cannot fulfill the role of an unaffected touchstone for evaluating utterances which Dummett assigns to them. Dummett's conception of language is therefore incurably shattered by Davidson: if even literal meaning is split into an infinite number of occasions of utterance, then it no longer resembles what we ordinarily think of as language. Davidson's use of the phrase "deviation from ordinary usage" in the above quote must therefore be understood as provisional, because his argument in fact entails that there is nothing to deviate from, there is no literal or standard meaning from which speakers can consequently deviate, since literal meaning is created in the moment by actual interlocutors.

When literal meaning is conceived as provisional in this way, interpretation can no longer be reserved for speakers of a foreign language; Davidson asserts that "the problem of interpretation is domestic as well as foreign: it surfaces for speakers of the same language in the form of the question, how can it be determined that the language is

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[58] C.f.: "one way to appreciate the difference between the prior theory and our ordinary idea of a person's language is to reflect on the fact that an interpreter must be expected to have quite different prior theories for different speakers." (Ibid., 104).

the same?"[59] Interpretation is indispensable even in one's home language because the question what language a person speaks (what theory of interpretation ought to be attributed to a speaker) can only be answered in the future, as his linguistic behavior unfolds: "it will not help to mention that the speaker has performed according to expectation so far, or that she went to the same school you did, or belongs to the same culture or community, for the question [of what language she speaks] concerns not the past but the future. Nor can we appeal to the idea that the speaker has mastered a set of conventions (which conventions?), or has learned a set of rules (which ones?). The concepts of conventions or rules, like the concept of a language, cannot be called on to justify or explain linguistic behavior."[60] Language cannot determine concrete occasions of speech because it is a theoretical construct that we apply after the facts to the actual behavior of speakers: "we talk so freely about language, or languages, that we tend to forget that there are no such things in the world; there are only people and their various written and acoustical products."[61] The task of assembling these "various written and acoustical products" into a language is endless because new evidence is always being produced, so the question of what language a person speaks remains underdetermined and therefore subject to interpretation.

Ian Hacking observes that since language for Davidson is not "a natural property of the person," but is "attributed to a person in the light of evidence," we might even say that in a sense every speaker speaks a number of languages simultaneously, which is not to say that he speaks English and French at the same time but that different interpreters

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[59] Davidson, "Radical Interpretation," 125.
[60] Davidson, "The Second Person," 110–111. See also: "it is also questionable whether, even if we agree that the use of a language requires a social setting, we should accept without question the idea that meaning something demands (as opposed to sometimes involving) a convention, custom, or institution." (Ibid., 114).
[61] Ibid., 108.

might apply different formal constructions to the same utterances.[62] This is not a new insight, it is anticipated by Davidson's indeterminism: a given set of evidence (a set of utterances) can never be said to belong to a particular language, because there is always more than one theory of interpretation that can be correctly applied to it. This radical deconstruction of language leads Hacking to wonder if Davidson has not gone too far, if the diversity of theories he endorses is not too permissive and results in a solipsistic conception of meaning that obliterates the notion of linguistic standard. Hacking wonders whether two people suffice for establishing criteria of correctness and if we do not need a larger linguistic community for there to be a notion of error. He suggests that Davidson might be a "duetist," a solipsist whose basic unit is two rather than one, thus making his conception of communication a variation on private language.[63]

Dummett's insistence on bringing language back into the picture stems from a similar concern. In arguing that interpretation is indispensable even in the home language Davidson is turning his back on Wittgenstein's claim that "there is a way of grasping a rule which is *not* an *interpretation*;"[64] for Dummett being a competent speaker of a language is grasping a rule in this way, so understanding the speech of others is something one does, for the most part, without having to interpret. Interpretation is needed only when an exception occurs, when a speaker uses language in an irregular way that breaches understanding, thus forcing the hearer to pause and devise a passing theory in order to restore understanding.[65] The important point is that interpretation is the *exception* to the rule, and that interpreters can always appeal to a linguistic standard that

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[62] Ian Hacking, "The Parody of Conversation," in *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, ed. Ernest LePore (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 153–154.
[63] Ibid., 458.
[64] Dummett, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs: Some Comments on Davidson and Hacking," 464.
[65] Ibid., 471.

persevere regardless of particular speakers and occasions of interpretation. Dummett's view of interpretation is therefore profoundly at odds with Davidson's notion of interpretation as going all the way down: for Davidson every act of communication is an act of interpretation, what Dummett allows only in exceptional cases he sees as the norm. Whereas for Dummett interpretation is of a second order and is applied according to the standard established by a first order theory of meaning (which is a description of language), for Davidson the so called "first order theory" is already infiltrated with interpretation.[66]

Dummett goes back to Humpty Dumpty to articulate this disagreement with Davidson regarding the role of interpretation. He explains that there are only two pictures of meaning: Alice's picture maintains that words carry meaning independently of speakers, which is why she can protest against Humpty Dumpty that the word "glory" does not mean a "nice knock-down argument." Humpty Dumpty on the other hand upholds that "it is the speaker who attaches the meaning to the word by some inner mental operation," which is why he thinks he can make words mean what he wants them to mean.[67] While this dichotomy is admittedly crude, Dummett maintains that every theorist of language offers a version of one of these two options, and that Davidson subscribes to the second one. The only reason Davidson differs from Humpty Dumpty,

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[66] For Dummett's worries that Davidson's over emphasis on interpretation leads him to abandon the Wittgensteinian notion of linguistic standard see: Dummett, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs: Some Comments on Davidson and Hacking," 471. Dummett is not the only one that finds Davidson's ideas too difficult to digest for these reasons, see for example: Meredith Williams, "Wittgenstein and Davidson on the Sociality of Language," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior* 30, no. 3 (2000): 299–318. See also Jennifer Hornsby's attempt to find a midway between Dummett and Davidson: Jennifer Hornsby, "Davidson and Dummett on the Social Character of Language," in *Knowledge, Language, and Interpretation: On the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, ed. Maria Cristina Amoretti and Nicla Vassallo (Frankfurt: Ontosverlag, 2008), 107–122.

[67] Dummett, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs: Some Comments on Davidson and Hacking," 470.

Dummett points out, is that the Davidsonian speaker *intends* his words to be understood, which means that the determination of meaning still remains within the purview of the speaker's intention, thus creating the appearance of a conversation while in fact being a monologue.[68] Understanding cannot function as a norm for Dummett, because it cannot make speakers proceed in a certain direction rather than other, it cannot put an end to interpretation the way Wittgenstein's notion of rule following does. After all, how is a Davidsonian interpreter, who is constantly interpreting even in her home language, better off than Alice, who interprets constantly because her interlocutor makes up meanings as he goes along?

In his reply to Davidson's essay "The Social Aspect of Language" (which is Davidson's reply to Dummett's reply to "Nice Derangement") Dummett concludes that what he ultimately finds troubling about Davidson's approach is the predominance given to understanding. For Dummett speakers ought to be held responsible to the socially accepted meaning of their words,[69] while for Davidson concepts like "responsibility" or "obligation" have very little to do with language: "so far as the point of language is concerned, our only *obligation*, if that is the word, is to speak in such a way as to accomplish our purpose by being understood as we expect and intend."[70] In a sardonic manner Davidson asks: "what magic ingredient does holding oneself responsible to the usual way of speaking add to the usual way of speaking?"[71] His answer is of course nothing at all. Even a case in which a speaker corrects herself after becoming aware of

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[68] See: "in this picture, there is no interaction, no exchange of the roles of speaker and hearer: the hearer remains mute throughout the conversation, or, rather, monologue." (Ibid., 462).

[69] Michael Dummett, "Reply to Davidson," in *The Philosophy of Michael Dummett*, ed. Brian McGuinness and Gianluigi Oliveri (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994), 265–266.

[70] Davidson, "The Social Aspect of Language," 118.

[71] Ibid., 117.

committing a mistake is dismissed by him as reflecting not a responsibility to a social norm but peer pressure: we tend to speak like others do for the same reasons we make an effort to dress appropriately and watch our table manners; this kind of behavior has to do with social conformity in general, it is not a characteristic of meaning.[72] Davidson therefore concludes that "it is absurd to be obligated to a language."[73]

Dummett is noticeably irritated by this conclusion, he protests that by rendering the very notion of responsibility to language absurd "Davidson is unwittingly allaying himself with a great body of English speakers who hold observance of linguistic norms in contempt, and justify doing so precisely by the plea that the sole purpose of speech is to convey one's meaning [i.e. to be understood]."[74] To fully understand the source of Dummett's indignation it must be realized that the responsibility to language reflects the speaker's commitment to her fellow linguistic community members. For Dummett the shared conventions that we call "the English language" are the product of a joint effort carried out by generations of English speakers. Consequently, the demand that one speaks in a certain way is a demand that he respects the rich tradition that produced the finely honed instrument we call language.[75] Deviating from the accepted linguistic standard as a matter of course breaks the speaker's obligation to current and future speakers not to weaken language's "expressive power" and damage "its effectiveness as an instrument of communication."[76]

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[72] Ibid., 117–118.

[73] Ibid., 118. See also: "for me the concept of 'the meaning' of a word or sentence gives way to the concepts of how a speaker intends his words to be understood and how a hearer understands them. … it is understanding that gives life to meaning, not the other way around." (Ibid., 121).

[74] Dummett, "Reply to Davidson," 266.

[75] Ibid., 267.

[76] Ibid., 266–267.

Although Dummett's point about the importance of preserving a community's linguistic inheritance is well taken, his condemnation is misdirected and results from a mistaken and reductive reading of Davidson's notion of understanding and community. Dummett is underestimating the normative power of understanding: a speaker who wishes his words to be understood by an interpreter is no longer the omnipotent, autonomous, Humpty-Dumpty-like speaker envisaged by Dummett, because the objective of being understood undermines the autonomy of the speaker, it opens the meaning of words to negotiation between the speaker and the interpreter, and makes the production of meaning a profoundly intersubjective enterprise. On Davidson's view, Alice is not a passive recipient, her defiant replies shape the meaning of the exchange with Humpty Dumpty just as much as the latter's self-aggrandizing conduct.[77] Dummett would reason that what gives Alice the authority to argue with Humpty Dumpty is the appeal to a widely accepted linguistic standard, but Davidson maintains that as long as Humpty Dumpty wishes to be understood all she needs to do is say "what?! I don't understand what you mean…"

The debate between Dummett and Davidson is ultimately of a more ethical nature, it revolves around the question of what it takes to be a member of a linguistic community. For Dummett "to invest a word with a sense is just to grasp the pattern of its use,"[78] so a responsible community member speaks more or less like everybody else does. But for Davidson partaking in a community means connecting with others around you, so it is possible to be a nonconformist community member as long as one is willing

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[77] In fact, I suspect that Alice is well aware of her power, and is not at all the pushover philosophers of language had made her out to be. When Humpty Dumpty scornfully tells her that when he uses a word that word means just what he chooses it to mean Alice retorts, not without sarcasm: "the question is … whether you *can* make words mean so many different things." (Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*, 54).

[78] Dummett, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs: Some Comments on Davidson and Hacking," 473.

to negotiate the meaning of her utterances with others by interpreting them and being interpreted by them. Dummett and Hacking are wrong in their assessment that Davidson's conception of meaning is duetist or monological; meaning for Davidson cannot be confined to one origin because interpretation is not a linear process that stems from a single point of origin, but a dynamic interaction that circulates between (at least) two speaker-interpreters, and it is this dynamic circulation that makes meaning social while resisting any reification into language. The last section expands on the underlying ethical dispute between Davidson and Dummett and explores the notion of community that underlies Davidson's theory of meaning.

Community without Convention

Eight years after "Nice Derangement" Davidson published another essay, "The Social Aspect of Language," in which he addressed some of the reservations that were brought up against his rejection of convention and language. In these subsequent reflections he reaffirms that the empirical nature of meaning makes language both insufficient and unnecessary for communicative success; he writes: "in learning a language, a person acquires the ability to operate in accord with a precise and specifiable set of syntactic and semantic rules…I argued that sharing such a previously mastered ability [i]s neither necessary nor sufficient for successful linguistic communication."[79] On the other hand, Davidson explains that he is not denying the role that language in fact plays in communication, and that he is not advocating that we stop using linguistic conventions

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[79] Davidson, "The Social Aspect of Language," 110.

when it is useful,[80] he is however challenging the explanatory force of these conventions in explicating the linguistic behavior of actual conversationalists. He writes: "of course I did not deny that in practice people usually depend on a supply of words and syntactic devices which they have learned to employ in similar ways. What I denied was that such sharing is sufficient to explain our actual communicative achievements, and more important, I denied that even such limited sharing is necessary."[81]

Bjørn Ramberg proposes an effective and insightful way for reconciling Davidson's insistence that we always interpret, even in our home language, with his admission that in practice people make use of preexisting linguistic conventions all the time. Ramberg argues that there is no actual tension between radical interpretation and conventional language. He explains that while it is true that in practice we tend to rely on conventions when conversing in our home language, explaining the meaning of utterances always involves constructing a truth theory (a theory of interpretation) for these utterances, because the meaning of the utterances is not conventional but empirical. So from a theoretical point of view communication is composed of two distinct stratums: radical interpretation is the necessary foundation of every act of communication because it is through interpretation that we understand the speech of others; the reason we think that interpretation is uncommon is that this practice is often veiled by an overcoat of convention, i.e. by the tendency of speakers, fueled by peer pressure and convenience, to conform to ordinary ways of speaking. Drawing a theoretical distinction between

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[80] For Davidson's explanation that his argument against convention in language is a hypothetical inquiry into the conditions of successful communication and not an empirical study of how people actually communicate see: Davidson, "The Social Aspect of Language," 119. Davidson explains further that even though people use conventions all the time when they actually communicate, "the theoretical possibility of communication without shared practices remains philosophically important because it shows that such sharing cannot be an essential constituent in meaning and communication." (Ibid., 111-112)

[81] Davidson, "The Social Aspect of Language," 110.

conventional language and interpretation allows us to examine the ideological functions of language: it lets us question why certain patterns of speech prevail over others, how gender or socioeconomic background influence what linguistic conventions a person uses, and why every generation is convinced that the language of kids today is substandard compared to that of past generations. Such questions have social and ethical significance, but they bear only a contingent relevance to the ability of a speaker-interpreter to understand and be understood by others.[82]

The theoretical separation of understanding from language puts Davidson's theory of interpretation in a whole new light, for it entails that radical interpretation is not about the ability to learn *a particular* language such as Hebrew or English, but about the ability to use *Language*. If language is a common but contingent feature of linguistic communication, then what Davidson is ultimately after in explaining the conditions of understanding is not what makes one a fluent speaker of French, but what makes one a speaker, i.e. how one acquires his first language. While being a competent speaker of English requires acquiring the ability to use a given set of conventions more or less like other English speakers do, being a speaker requires acquiring the ability to create theories of interpretation for the linguistic behavior of others, and getting others to do the same for oneself; Davidson writes: "a person's ability to interpret or speak to another person consists [of]…the ability that permits him to construct a correct, that is, convergent, passing theory for speech transactions with that person."[83] Attempts to regulate these speech transactions by demanding that the passing theory conforms to the way others

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[82] Bjørn Ramberg, "Charity and Ideology: The Field Linguist as Social Critic," *Dialogue* XXVII (1988): 637, 646–647. See also: Ramberg, *Donald Davidson's Philosophy of Language*, 107–111.

[83] Davidson, "Nice Derangement," 106.

speak may have social, political or ethical significance, but they add nothing to the interlocutors' ability to understand one another.

Davidson explains that what a child undertakes when acquiring her first language is not the ability to speak as everybody else does or in accordance with a social agreement, but the ability to meaningfully interact with her teacher. When language is learned for the first time "a meaning is being bestowed on words quite apart from any use those words may have at other times and with other people. If we think of ostension only as the teaching of a socially viable meaning we miss the essential lesson, which is that for the learner ostension is not learning something already there. The learner is in at a meaning baptism."[84] In this picture the teacher does not function as the gate keeper of the community and the child does not have to demonstrate that she can conform to a general standard. What is expected from the child (and the teacher) is the aptitude to establish between them a relationship in which the child is able to interpret and understand the teacher; it is only in the context of such relationship that meaning is bestowed and language is learned.[85]

In other words, speakerhood (being a speaker) is nothing more than the ability to understand other speaker-interpreters and be understood by them, which, as Davidson readily admits, makes for a circular account: "this characterization of linguistic ability is

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[84] Donald Davidson, "Seeing Through Language," in *Truth, Language and History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005 [1997]), 140.

[85] Davidson's discussion of the teacher and the child is meant to bring to mind Wittgenstein's portrayal of the same situation. Whereas Davidson adamantly rejects Kripke's interpretation of this situation it is implied that Wittgenstein's account can (and should) be read differently. For such alternative interpretation, in which the interaction between the teacher and the child is read as bidirectional, see: Stanley Cavell, "The Argument of the Ordinary," in *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 64–100. For a discussion of Davidson's account of language acquisition and how it differs from Wittgenstein's see: Claudine Verheggen, "How Social Must Language Be?," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 36, no. 2 (2006): 214.

so nearly circular that it cannot be wrong: it comes to saying that the ability to communicate by speech consists in the ability to make oneself understood. It is only when we look at the structure of this ability that we realize how far we have drifted from standard ideas of language mastery."[86] The circularity of Davidson's account is not a vicious one, rather it highlights the fact that linguistic competence, the ability to produce truth theories for the linguistic behavior of others, cannot be regulated by conventions. Davidson describes interpretation as a work of genius in the Kantian sense, something that requires invention with no prior guiding rules. Like a scientist or an artist, the interpreter must use her "wit, luck, and wisdom" to devise a passing theory for making sense of her interlocutor's linguistic behavior, and Davidson explains that "there is no more chance of regularizing, or teaching, this process than there is of regularizing or teaching the process of creating new theories to cope with new data in any field."[87] These considerations lead Hacking to conclude that when discussing passing theories the word "theory" must be understood in a very loose sense, because what the interpreter uses is not "one uniform recursive system for generating meaning" but "a whole bunch of tricks for seeing what connects with what. It is good that students of formal logic can to some

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[86] Davidson, "Nice Derangement," 106–107.

[87] Ibid., 107; Donald Davidson, "Appendix: Replies to Rorty, Stroud, McDowell, and Pereda," in *Truth, Language and History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005 [1998]), 327. See also: "mutual understanding is achieved through the exercise of imagination, appeal to general knowledge of the world, and awareness of human interests and attitudes." (Davidson, "The Social Aspect of Language," 110). See also Ramberg's description of Davidson's notion of linguistic competence as an art form: "what enables us to communicate is the mastery of something like an art, namely the art of theory construction, in the form of interpretation." (Ramberg, *Donald Davidson's Philosophy of Language*, 106). About theory construction as an art form see also Davidson's essay on James Joyce where he compares communication to the work of a of highly inventive artist like Joyce. Davidson declares that Joyce makes up his own language and then "provokes the reader into involuntary collaboration, and enlists him as a member of his private linguistic community." He then explains that it is not only exceptional authors like Joyce that do so but that "all communication involves such joint effort to some degree." (Davidson, "James Joyce and Humpty Dumpty," 157).

extent regiments these into one or a few formal systems, but what the 'interpreter' brings to conversation is a whole bunch of little, not too closely connected moves."[88]

The futility of regulating linguistic understanding transforms the notion of linguistic community and what holds such community together. For Davidson's critics communicators by themselves are not enough to compose a linguistic community; for such an assembly to become a community there must exist, in addition to the actual interactions between the communicators, a standard (language) that is common to all of them, which brings them together and makes them members of the same community. This is not to say that all the community members strictly abide by this standard all the time or that the standard is rigid and is not influenced over time by actual interactions between conversationalists; still, the community is defined and held together by the (perhaps ideal) existence of such standard, vague as it may be, and one becomes a member of the community by virtue of abiding by that standard, by virtue of speaking like others in the community do.

While Davidson does not deny that from a theoretical point of view such communities exist, he points out that their communality is conditioned by another kind of being in common that consists in being a speaker and an interpreter of the speech of others. This insight is so patently obvious it is easy to overlook its importance, but only a speaker can potentially become a member of the community of English speakers, so before the community of English speakers can be united by virtue of speaking English in a similar enough way, its member are already connected by virtue of taking one another to be speakers of language. So what ties a member to a linguistic community first and

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[88] Hacking, "The Parody of Conversation," 456.

foremost is not an ability or willingness to conform to a shared standard or authority, but an ability and willingness to engage in interpretation with other members of the community: "to belong to a speech community [is] to be an interpreter of the speech of others."[89] The result is a community that has no focal point in the form of a shared background language to which all its subjects must orient their speech in order for their utterances to be meaningful. In a community of radical interpreters there is no social contract that precedes the conversationalists and by which they must abide to be considered legitimate members; there is only the web of interpersonal interactions in which interlocutors orient themselves toward one another and endow each other's speech with meaning.[90] The idea of conventional language envisions a fairly cohesive linguistic community (or as Hacking puts it: "a communion of all the speakers of 'English'"[91]), in which everyone can follow the same routine (at least ideally, even if not in practice). Davidson's notion of radical interpretation undercuts the idea that linguistic communities are unified in the way that the idea of convention suggests, because a union that is regulated by convention is a theoretical construct that hinges on the actual community of radical interpreters, which does not share a routine, but is a decentralized, open ended network, made of duets of conversationalists, that constantly evolves and takes shape with every new interaction.

The next chapter uses Nancy's writings on community to explicate how the communality of radical interpreters, which underlies and conditions conventional linguistic communities, takes shape. Nancy's critique of the modern subject leads him to

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[89] Davidson, "Thought and Talk," 161.
[90] Ibid., 170.
[91] Hacking, "The Parody of Conversation," 458.

develop an externalist model of self, which he names singular; while the modern subject relies on its interiority to define its identity, thus putting it in constant conflict with others and permanently challenging its ability to be in a community, the singular is constituted by, rather than compromised by, its relations, thus making it communal from the outset, and bringing about a new understanding of community and communication. In a way Nancy's work mirrors that of Davidson: Davidson starts by rethinking communication, and his novel notion of interpretation brings about a new notion of community; Nancy starts by introducing a novel notion of community which leads him to realize that re-envisioning community requires explicating a new notion of communication that can explain how such community comes together. By introducing Nancy's thought, the next chapter provides theoretical vocabulary for spelling out the kind of communality implied by Davidson's theory of interpretation and how this communality conditions the conventional notion of linguistic community.

II. From Community to Communication:

Nancy's critique of the modern subject and community

Being-with (*Mitsein*) is the key ontological concept that runs throughout Nancy's philosophical corpus. By rereading the concept of *Mitsein* with and against Heidegger, as the originary ontological concept, Nancy attempts to rethink existence as co-existence, thus making the question of Being social and political through and through. Put another way, Nancy attempts to think the self as part of a community from the outset, thus reframing the human condition and making it fundamentally relational. The result is a transformation of both subjectivity and communication: subjectivity is conceived as closely tied to questions of communication while meaning is grounded in intersubjective and concrete relations. This chapter will present Nancy's critique of the modern subject and the way this critique transforms traditional conceptions of subjectivity, community and communication. I will claim that using Nancy's conception of being-with (or being-in-common) to explicate how radical interpreters relate to one another helps fend off any accusation of duetism; furthermore, I will examine how the structure of the relationship of being-with brings about a reformulation of the notion of communication.

The Modern Subject and Community

Nancy declares the metaphysics of the subject to be a metaphysics of the absolute in that it conceives and defines the individual as an absolute entity. The logic of the absolute dictates that the subject will be "perfectly detached, distinct, and closed: being without

relation."[92] Nancy undertakes to analyze this logic of the absolute and demonstrate the contradictions it entails, an analysis which challenges the notion of the modern Individual as well as its political community. By exposing the modern notion of an individual to be an impossible being, he demonstrates that when conceived in such a way (i.e. as subjects), individuals can never come together to form a community.

Nancy observes that western metaphysics conceives of the individual as an absolute entity whose interiority is completely enclosed and closed off by its boundaries. The individual is depicted as an entity whose being is for itself, so to be an individual one must have an essence of one's own, that is distinct and separated from its surrounding. Individuation thus becomes an act of demarcation, the affecting of a separation and closure. This logic demands that in order to become an individual one will be enclosed in its limits and distinguished from everything that is not part of its particular nature. Nancy notes that such an individual, i.e. a subject, is completely enclosed in itself and determined by its interiority, which is prior to and preconditions any engagement with an outside.

The problem with this model of individuality is that the logic that enables the subject to individuate itself by demarcating an interiority ends up betraying that interiority when taken to its final conclusion. In order to be completely closed off and distinguished from any outside an individual must have a limit that demarcates it, a limit that must be exposed to the outer world. So in order to be absolute, to completely separate itself from the outside, the subject must not only delimit itself but also delimit

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[92] Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. and ed. Peter Connor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991 [1983]), 4.

the borders which enclose it. Nancy writes: "the separation itself [of the absolute] must be enclosed…the closure must not only close around a territory (while still remaining exposed, at its outer edge, to another territory, with which it thereby communicates), but also, in order to complete the absoluteness of its separation, around the enclosure itself."[93] The logic of the absolute therefore leads to infinite regression because the edges of the entity will have to be enclosed as well and so on. So in order for an absolute entity to avoid contradicting itself it is not enough that it prioritizes its interiority over its outside, but it must preclude relations to an outside altogether. The inevitable conclusion of the logic of the absolute is therefore a solitary entity without relations. But such non-relational entity is self-contradictory; it is undone by the very thing that conditions its being, because in order to exist the subject needs borders to determine and guard its interiority, borders which violate its absoluteness by necessarily implicating it in relations. Nancy writes: "the absolute must be the absolute of its own absoluteness, or not be at all. In other words: to be absolutely alone, it is not enough that I be so; I must also be alone being alone – and this of course is contradictory. The logic of the absolute violates the absolute. It implicates it in a relation that it refuses and precludes by its own essence."[94] Nancy thus concludes that no entity can be absolutely closed in upon itself; the absolute is always torn and forced open by the very logic that makes it absolute.

Nancy's analysis of the subject reveals not only that it cannot be completely closed and separated from its environment, but furthermore, that there can be no entity whose interiority is prior to its relation to an outside. There can be no essence or nature that is not, from the outset, relational, because there can be no interiority without a border

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[93] Ibid., 9.
[94] Ibid., 4.

that delineates it; a subject determined by its interiority, which is prior to its relation to an outside, is therefore a self-contradictory notion, furthermore, it is an impossible entity: an absolute individual with no relations is a being that cannot be. Nancy's analysis therefore transforms the subject from an interiority whose relations are secondary and posterior to its self determination into an entity that is always, from the outset, implicated in relations with its surrounding. In other words, the subject is always part of a community; the reframing of the subject thus gives rise to a reconsideration of community as well.

According to Nancy, the modern understanding of community is atomistic: it is made of closed off, atom like individuals that come together to form a collective the way atoms combine to create molecules. The problem with this picture is that a community requires not only individuals but also something that holds these individuals together and connects them to one another. So as long as the individual is regarded as an absolute entity, individuals cannot form a community because they lack this relational quality that will enable them to connect to one another. Nancy writes: "one cannot make a world with simple atoms. There has to be a *clinamen*. There has to be an inclination or an inclining from one toward the other… Community is at least the *clinamen* of the 'individual.'"[95] Because absoluteness requires eliminating all relations, metaphysics cannot account for this clinamen that makes community possible without, at the same stroke, violating the absolute nature of the subjects that form the community. Being in common is being in relation, and since this is the very thing that tears the subject apart and violates its nature, entering a community puts it in great distress. Communal existence is always a source of conflict for the modern subject. The logic of the absolute is revealed by Nancy to be not

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[95] Ibid., 3–4.

only self-contradictory but also to exclude the very idea of community, of being in common; he writes: "the relation (the community) is, if it *is*, nothing other than what undoes, in its very principle…the autarchy of absolute immanence."[96] By devaluing relations the logic of the absolute makes both the individual and community impossible.

The implications of the absolute logic of the subject on the modern conception of community become particularly apparent through Nancy's critique of the Hegelian subject. Nancy takes Hegel's philosophy to be the culmination of the modern thought of the subject (of the absolute individual), thus making it the ultimate illustration of the logic of the absolute as well as its inevitable failure. By bringing the logic of the absolute to its final conclusion Hegel exposes the complete denial of community that underlies it, thus demonstrating Nancy's claim. Hegel recognized the difficulties involved in the logic of absoluteness; he realized that it is at the border, where it is in relation to something else, that the subject comes undone; moreover, he realized that if the threat to the absolute is found on the borders, then the logic of the absolute demands solitariness, the elimination of the border and with it any kind of outside. The Hegelian subject thus has no relation to the outside but rather sublates all of its conflicts and tensions and holds them inside. So in order to eliminate the external relations that endanger it, Hegel turned the absolute subject itself into a relational entity, to an entity that has only internal relations.[97]

Nancy's treatment of the Hegelian subject and its relation to community is ambivalent – he acknowledges its potential, but also Hegel's failure to realize it. Nancy

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[96] Ibid., 4. See also: "community is, in a sense, resistance itself: namely, resistance to immanence." (Ibid., 35).
[97] Ibid., 5-6.

recognizes that the Hegelian subject provides a relational model of Being which makes it a valuable resource for Nancy's thinking of community: "[with Hegel], Being 'itself' comes to be defined as relational, as non-absoluteness, and, if you will – in any case this is what I am trying to argue – *as community*."[98] However, Hegel's conception of relations prevents his subject from realizing its communal potential, turning it instead into a (non-relational) totality. The Hegelian subject ends up effacing community because its immanence does not allow for the kind of relations that Nancy thinks are necessary for a community to take place.

For Nancy the relations that compose the Hegelian subject do not reflect real alterity and differentiation but are merely the result of the alienation between thesis and antithesis, a difference that can be dialectically sublated. He writes: "the subject cannot be outside itself: this is even what ultimately defines it – that its outside and all its 'alienations' or 'extraneousness' should in the end be suppressed by and *sublated* in it."[99] By eliminating the border of the subject Hegel in effect eliminates its outside; according to the dialectical logic the outside is only a moment that acquires its significance and universality through its sublation in the interiority of the subject. The self does pass to the outside but only in order to rein it back in. Nancy writes: "dialectical logic requires the passage through exteriority as essential to interiority itself. Nevertheless, within this logic, it is the 'interior' and subjective form of the 'Me' that is needed in order to finish the project of finding itself and posing itself as the *truth* of the universal."[100] By putting

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[98] Ibid., 6. Nancy develops this reading of Hegel's subject (or being) as a communal, open ended entity rather than a closed, totalitarian system in: Jean-Luc Nancy, *Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative*, trans. Jason Smith and Steven Miller (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002 [1997]).

[99] Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 24.

[100] Jean-Luc Nancy, "Of Being Singular Plural," in *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O'Byrne (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000 [1996]), 30.

the inside first and subjecting the outside to it Hegel is making relations dependent on the inside, consequently making all relations immanent.

The dialectical logic allows Hegel to maintain a back and forth relation between the self and the other while establishing a type of otherness whose alterity does not undermine the immanence of the self. However, this is a hazardous move because it makes all relations inessential, for an immanent relation, a relation that in the final conclusion can be integrated into the subject, does not represent a real difference. Hegel's dialectical logic dictates a negative relation between the self and the other: in order to maintain its otherness, the other must be negated, but this power of negation that passes to the other and back to the self is not really a relation in the sense of something that happens between the self and the other, rather it ultimately belongs to the self. Put another way, if all differences, antagonisms and relations can be sublated and made part of one subject then there is no real plurality, because plurality becomes secondary to the totalizing movement of the subject, it becomes something accidental that the subject strives to overcome. Hence, we get the semblance of a relation when in fact the self remains in its solitude: "the power of the negative which holds the self to the other…will always be presupposed as the power of the self…the Self remains alone in itself even as it emerges out of itself. What is properly lacking or passes over in this false emergence is the moment of the *with*."[101] Hegel's dialectical logic conceals the fact that the back and forth between the self and the other remains under the control of the self, and is therefore not a real relation but actually an immanence.

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[101] Ibid., 78.

For Nancy the Hegelian subject, despite its relational appearance, in fact does not allow for the kind of alterity that facilitates a real difference, a difference that must be endured because it cannot be overcome. Since Hegel envisions relations and differences without alterity his subject cannot be communal (at least not in the sense envisioned by Nancy), rather it is an immanence which sublates differences and turns the potentially relational being into a unified fusion. Nancy writes: "political and collective enterprises dominated by a will to absolute immanence have as their truth the truth of death. Immanence, communal fusion contains no other logic than that of the suicide of the community that is governed by it."[102] The Hegelian subject is the death of community because it turns Being into a totality, making it a fusion rather than a diffusion. The only type of community that Hegelian philosophy can conceive of is a community in which different individuals become one subject by virtue of joining the community. This type of community replicates the logic that governs the absolute individual in that it rejects difference and strives to overcome relations in order to become a unified whole.

The logic of the absolute produces a model of community as a totality that is tightly held together by close intimate bonds which have the power to turn the multiplicity of individuals into one cohesive body. This model is posited as the ideal to which existing communities should strive, but it is an impossible ideal, for the same reasons that fail the absolute individual. Positing such an impossible ideal cannot help but produce great disappointment in the face of the fissures and conflicts (or simply plurality) that characterize actual communities. Nancy diagnoses this kind of disappointment to be constitutive of modern society, which constantly mourns the loss of the ideal community

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[102] Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 12. See also: "immanence, if it were to come about, would instantly suppress community, or communication, as such." (Ibid.).

which "was woven of tight, harmonious and infrangible bonds" and enjoyed "not only intimate communication between its members" but also an "organic communion with its own essence."[103] This ideal community is contrasted with society today, in which social bonds are weak and instrumental. Nancy views this kind of disdain and disappointment in modern society as the expression and inevitable outcome of the same sentiment conveyed by the Hegelian subject's inability to accept real alterity.

The ideal of a cohesive community manifests on a social level Hegel's logic of the absolute subject: as an individual the absoluteness of the subject is directed outside, at the elimination of a relation to a difference that resides outside; as a community the same logic is directed inside, into a purifying of the inside of the community from any kind of difference that might threaten its cohesion. In both cases, as an individual and as a community, the subject is constituted and self-determined through a process of smoothing out differences and overcoming relations. In both cases alterity is regarded as a threat to the self determination of the subject. The next section presents the singular, Nancy's alternative to the Hegelian subject, which reconciles individuality and communality.

Nancy's Notion of the Subject as a Singular

Applied at the level of the individual or at the level of community, the model of the absolute subject leads to a contradiction and to an impossible result. But reaching this inevitable failure is not in vain, it exposes the inherent contradictions and impossibilities of the logic of the absolute, letting it exhaust itself and consequently opening the door to the next step, which makes possible Nancy's notion of community. Once we have

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[103] Ibid., 9.

uncovered "the impossibility, both ontological and gnosological [epistemological], of absolute immanence (or of the absolute, and therefore of immanence) and consequently the impossibility either of an individuality, in the precise sense of the term, or of a pure collective totality" we are compelled to think Being as community (in Nancy's sense of the term).[104] Nancy rejects all models of community as a collective of individuals that are fused together, and endorses instead a model of community that is a plurality of singulars. To understand this alternative we must examine the differences between a singular and an individual, which facilitate a pluralistic community.

As mentioned before, the absolute nature of the subject makes it impossible for metaphysics to account for the clinamen that enables individuals to relate to one another and come into a community. Metaphysics struggles with the clinamen because it is a property of the border, it is what separates individuals but also connects them to one another and therefore cannot be squarely placed inside or outside the outskirts of the individual. If we accept Nancy's conclusion that the logic of the absolute fails in its relentless attempt to do away with the limit (with the relation to an outside), and follow him in rejecting this logic, then one possible alternative would be embracing the limit. Nancy turns the limit from a problem to an invaluable resource, making the clinamen the focus of his investigation of subjectivity and community. He writes: "it is the *horizons* themselves that must be challenged. The ultimate limit of community, or the limit that is formed by community, as such, traces an entirely different line."[105] Nancy's study of both the individual subject and community is meant to reinforce the question of the limit, but not in order to strengthen the limit so as to better determine and enclose the interiority it

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[104] Ibid., 6.
[105] Ibid., 8.

confines, but rather in order to re-trace the limit. Nancy's notion of limit traces a different line because it no longer functions as a demarcation of interiority but rather as the exposition of an exteriority. Nancy wants to rethink the limit so it is no longer the place where interiority is in danger of being invaded by alterity, but a space where alterities touch.

Nancy sets up the task of rethinking the limit in the following way: "I would like here to open up an exploration of the space that is common to all of us, that makes up our community. … This common space is infinitely slight. It is nothing but the limit that separates and mixes at once."[106] Nancy's critique of western metaphysics leads him to turn to the very thing metaphysics finds most problematic, the infinitely slight space that is neither inside nor outside, but the limit between the two. One of the benefits of and motivations for focusing on the limit is that it lets us avoid the dichotomy between immanence and transcendence. Instead of counteracting the logic of the absolute by shifting the focus from the inside to the outside (by leaving immanence and going back to transcendence), Nancy chooses to challenge both. By definition the limit is what cannot be squarely placed inside or outside the thing it confines; the limit of an entity is the space where it is exposed to an outside, and this space can be attributed neither to the interiority of the entity nor to its surrounding, otherwise it would not be, properly speaking, a limit. Such space must be infinitely slight in order to fulfill its function of bringing together different entities (or the inside and outside of an entity). If it was not the slightest space it would have formed a place, in which case it would have been its own entity with its own limit.

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[106] Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, trans. Jeffrey S. Librett (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997 [1993]), 9.

A limit is infinitely slight in yet another way: it is an infinite proximity, yet the closeness that it comprises can never be completely fulfilled. Like a function in mathematics that tends to zero because it comes closer and closer to it without ever becoming zero, the limit is an ever increasing closeness that never results in a fusion, because in fusion separation is eliminated and with it the limit that separates. Nancy writes: "the resistance to fusion…is the fact of being-in-common as such: without this resistance, we would never be in common very long, we would very quickly be 'realized' in a unique and total being."[107] The limit is paradoxical in this respect because it brings together but also divides. In fact it is only by dividing and separating that it can bring together, because without separation there is no longer being-with; without separation there can be no being together of different beings but only one amalgamated totality. The limit is therefore a relentless resistance to the temptation of immanence and cohesion, to the temptation of becoming one.

A limit is accordingly a space of duality in more than one way: it is inside and outside or neither; it divides or connects or both; it is more than one because it brings together (at least) two different beings, but it is also nothing because it belong neither to the one nor to the other. This paradoxical quality of the limit, which is the paradoxical nature of any relationship, reveals a new logic that is different from that of the absolute. A relationship with an other is fundamentally paradoxical because to recognize the alterity of the other is to be denied access to the other because of its otherness. An access to the other can be achieved only by means of a radical alteration of this otherness, in which case it is not other anymore. It is this aporia that Hegel endeavors to undo with

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[107] Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 20.

dialectic;[108] faced with the paradoxical nature of the limit, of the space where the self and the other are in a relationship, Hegel attempted to resolve the impasse using dialectic. As mentioned before, the logic of dialectic produces a subject that is only seemingly relational; it is a way of dodging the paradoxical logic of the limit and undoing the necessarily aporetic nature of any relationship while maintaining a relational appearance.

Nancy contrasts the logic of dialectic with the logic of the limit: "according to the logic of the limit in general: to touch it is to pass it, to pass it is never to touch the other border."[109] Because the limit is so slight, because it can never form an actual place, touching it is always already passing it into the other side. Yet passing to the other side of the limit does not entail touching the other border, because that would mean that both sides of the limit become encompassed by the same border, which violates the logic of the limit by assimilating it into an interiority. Encompassing and assimilating the limit expresses a desire to eliminate the difference and separation that the limit preserves, thus realizing the closeness it promises. Touching the other border is the logic of Hegel's dialectic that strives to enclose the outside and integrate it into the interiority, thereby eradicating alterity. The logic of the limit is different, it is not about consuming the outside and containing the border, rather it is about being exposed to whatever lies at the border.

This exposure at the border which constitutes the limit allows for a relation to the other that preserves alterity in two respects. On the one hand it brings alterity to the fore, because touching the limit is already passing it toward the alterity that is beyond it. It is

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[108] Nancy, "Of Being Singular Plural," 77–78.
[109] Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 40.

this aspect of the limit that haunts modernity and threatens the absolute subject by constantly exposing its inability to maintain its absoluteness. By being always already exposed to the outside the limit presents a perpetual threat to the absolute subject that aspires to remain enclosed in itself because it exposes the impossibility of solitariness and the inevitability of alterity. On the other hand, passing the limit preserves alterity by never touching the other border. The border is passed but not sublated, it is not consumed, which guarantees that the alterity of the other remains intact. Passing the limit is not an act of sublation by which the other becomes a part of my immanence, rather there is always an excess that keeps me exposed to alterity by preventing me from reaching the other border and appropriating the other. Put another way, the kind of relation envisioned by Nancy always involves something that is beyond my being and my control because the alterity of the other is such that it cannot be integrated into the self. Hence, a relationship always involves an excess because it exceeds the limits of the self by surpassing the self toward another being that cannot be encompassed within the limits of the self.

Nancy's rethinking of the limit has far reaching implications for the philosophical conception of the subject, both at the individual level and as a community. It entails thinking finitude as the condition of subjectivity and community rather than its failure or ending; the limit stops being the ruins of individuality or communality and is conceived instead as their condition of possibility, as the space where subjectivity happens. A subject that happens rather than comes apart at the seams is a whole new subject, Nancy names it *singular* and substitutes it for the modern individual: "singularity never has the nature or the structure of individuality. Singularity never takes place at the level of atoms,

those identifiable if not identical identities; rather it takes place at the level of the clinamen."[110] As this statement indicates, the nature of the singular has everything to do with the clinamen and the limit. Nancy describes the singular and distinguishes it from the individual in different ways, all of which can be traced back to his new conception of the limit and viewed as different ways of parsing out this new conception and its implications on the notion of the modern subject.

The limit plays a very different role for an individual and for a singular: whereas the individual is an interiority demarcated and determined by a limit, the singular is the limit itself; Nancy writes: a singular is "an outline, a configuration, a point without dimensions, a limit."[111] The singular is a limit that does not define anything because there is nothing to define. Since the singular is a point with no dimensions it has no interiority, no identity or essence that its limit encloses, it is only the contour itself. The identity of the individual is determined by its interiority, to which the limit is nothing but a (problematic) appendage: "the limit of the individual, fundamentally, does not concern it, it simply surrounds it."[112] The role of the limit for an individual is to secure and preserve what really matters, the interiority, so it remains intact and does not get subverted by external influences. A singular on the other hand is constituted not by its interiority but by its relations to an outside. Because there is no prior interiority, the relation to the outside is not an addition to the identity of the singular, it is not something that the singular enters into. Since a limit by definition has two sides, being a limit means that the singular is constituted simultaneously with its relations: "the unconditioned existentiality

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[110] Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 6.
[111] Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 70.
[112] Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 27.

of each *one* [of each singular] is this: it cannot *exist* through *consisting* by itself and in itself alone. … It is not a matter of adding to a postulation of individuality or autonomy a certain number of relations and interdependencies, no matter what importance one may accord to such addenda. The 'someone' does not enter into a relation with other 'someones'…the relation is contemporaneous with the singularities."[113]

How can we think a limit that does not constrain anything? What does it mean to be a limit without an interiority to limit, what would be the function of such a limit? Because the limit of a singular has nothing to enclose and constrain, it functions as an exposure to whatever lies beyond the singular. Nancy explains what it means to have an identity that is not interiority but rather exposure to exteriority: "the mode of existence and appropriation of a 'self' (which is not necessarily, nor exclusively, an individual) is the mode of an exposition in common and to the in-common, and that this exposition exposes the self even in its 'in itself', in its 'ipseity' and in its own distinctiveness, in its isolation or in its solitude. Only a being-in-common can make possible a being-separated."[114] Being with no internal dimensions, being a limit, entails that to exist is to be exposed, an exposition that does not expose an interiority but only the exposition itself.[115] Being always already exposed, already implicated in relations, does not mean that a singular has no identity of its own, no self; its selfhood however comes into being at the moment of exposure, through its relations and not in spite of them. The self is exposed even at its ipseity because it is the exposure which constitutes the self at the same moment that it exposes it to its surrounding. Consequently, the very selfhood of the

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[113] Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 71.
[114] Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, xxxvii.
[115] Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 74.

singular does not constitute an insulated interiority but is always already relational, exposed and open to the outside.

The exposure of the singular does not presuppose an initial inside or interiority that gets opened up: "properly speaking, there is no laceration of the singular being: there is no open cut in which the inside would get lost in the outside (which would presuppose an initial 'inside', an interiority)."[116] Being lacerated assumes the existence of a container like self that is cut opened in order to expose it inside. The exposure of the singular is different though; because the singular is itself a limit it cannot have outskirts which contain it, but should be conceived as a surface without depth, which is therefore always exposed to the outside. No matter how much such a surface is folded and turned upon itself, it never constitutes an interiority, so even in its most intimate folds the ipseity of a singular remains exposed.

Such notion of selfhood relies on the transformation of the relation between interiority and exteriority brought about by Nancy's conception of the limit. As mentioned before, the slightness of the limit makes it interior and exterior at the same time; the logic of the limit therefore reformulates the relation between inside and outside, so this relation can no longer be a relation of opposition or exclusion but rather of interdependence: one comes into existence by virtue of the other. Undoing the distinction between inside and outside inevitably affects another distinction: between identity (viewed as sameness) and difference. Since it cannot be unequivocally ascribed to the interiority of a subject or to what is outside and therefore foreign to it, the limit is something that cannot be said to be identical to the subject, nor can it be said to be

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[116] Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 30.

completely other. Transforming the subject from an absolute individual to a singular thus means that difference receives ontological precedence over identity. Put another way: being a limit means that the subject is a difference (from itself as well as from others) before it can ever become an identity; or better yet: his identity consists in this difference rather than in a coincidence with itself.

By taking the limit as his starting point Nancy allows difference to take precedence over sameness, which he sees as the only way to truly preserve alterity. As long as difference is conditioned by sameness it is destined to be sublated and assimilated back into the sameness from which it originated. As long as we start with resemblance it does not matter how much importance we give to relations of difference they will always be only a supplement, they will always remain secondary to the original similitude. Certainly, the same kind of objection can be raised against Nancy: if difference is prioritized over sameness we can never have real identity; beings that are fundamentally different cannot truly have a common ground between them. Grounding sameness in difference thus entails a dispersed world of beings with nothing in common, with no hope of coming together into a community. Viewed in this way, Nancy's approach seems just as problematic for the being of community as Hegelian immanence; however, by thinking the limit in terms of exposure Nancy transforms difference from the thing that threatens community and even precludes it to the very thing that makes it possible and even unavoidable. This transformation of the notion of community hinges on understanding individual subjects as singulars, i.e. as fundamentally communal beings, consequently enabling both alterity and communality. The next section explicates this pluralistic notion of community, which enables rather than eliminates differences.

Nancy's Notion of Community as Being-in-Common

Nancy's conception of community follows from his conception of the singular as different from an individual. An individual is enclosed by its limit, which separates it from its environment, as well as from other individuals, in order to protect its individual identity that stems from an internal self-coincidence that must remain uninterrupted by the surrounding alterity. Consequently, a similarity or some form of common denominator is required to bridge the gap between different individuals and allow them to become a community despite their separateness. What constitutes the selfhood of a singular on the other hand is not a private, internal territory, but rather its limit which exposes it to other singulars. Nancy writes: "there is no original or origin of identity. What holds the place of an 'origin' is the sharing of singularities. This means that this 'origin'…is nothing other than the limit: the origin is the tracing of the borders upon which or along which singular beings are exposed. We are alike because each one of us is exposed to the outside that *we* are *for ourselves*. The like is not the same... I do not rediscover *myself*, nor do I recognize *myself* in the other: I experience the other's alterity."[117] The being in common of singulars does not constitute a similarity; they do not have to be similar in order to be together. Singulars are alike in the sense that one singular cannot be completely detached from other singulars because they are always exposed to one another. Because of their mutual exposure, singulars do not need a common ground to facilitate their being together, they are together by virtue of being themselves, because it is the same thing (the limit) that facilitates both, that singularizes and exposes at the same time.

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[117] Ibid., 33.

Accepting the twofold nature of the limit means that individuality is not contrasted with communality but rather the two are interdependent. Whereas an individual defines itself against its outside, against other individuals, singulars are connected to each other and set apart by the same stroke, and are therefore always singular and plural at the same time. Singulars are necessarily in common, but not because they are born into a community that precedes them and from which they need to distinguish themselves; a singular is always also plural because it is always exposed, and its necessary exposure entails that it can never exist in solitude because its very existence entails the existence of other singulars around it. The notion of the singular therefore evokes a fundamental sociality that makes community unavoidable: "community means, consequently, that there is no singular being without another singular being, and that there is, therefore, what might be called, in a rather inappropriate idiom, an originary or ontological 'sociality' that in its principle extends far beyond the simple theme of man as a social animal."[118]

Nancy's rethinking of the limit, through the transformation it affects on the individual subject (by turning it into a singular), profoundly transforms the notion of community. Like the individual subject whose interiority is held together by the limit that encompasses it, a community of individuals is also brought together by the border that encompasses it and fuses all the individuals into a collective. In order for individuals to be together they must overcome their limits which separate and individuate them; they do that by subjecting themselves to a common limit (or ground, or body) that transcends

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[118] Ibid., 28. See also: "*The plurality of beings is at the foundation of Being*. A single being is a contradiction in terms. Such a being, which would be its own foundation, origin, and intimacy, would be incapable of *Being*, in every sense that this expression can have here." (Nancy, "Of Being Singular Plural," 12). And: "one equals more than one … The One as purely one is less than one; … One as properly one is always more than one." (Ibid., 39–40).

their differences and unites them into one community. Since Nancy conceives the limit differently, his notion of community is different as well: "being-in-common does not mean a higher form of substance or subject taking charge of the limits of separate individualities."[119] A community of singulars does not need an addendum to bring them together despite the limits that separate them since they are already brought together by virtue of these limits, which divide them but also connect them by exposing them to one another. Community is therefore not the overcoming of limits (or differences) but the mutual exposure of singulars at their limit: "*Community does not sublate the finitude it exposes. Community itself, in sum, is nothing but this exposition.* It is the community of finite beings, and as such it is itself a *finite* community. In other words, not a limited community as opposed to an infinite or absolute community, but a community *of* finitude, because finitude 'is' communitarian, and because finitude alone is communitarian."[120] The nature of the singular is therefore "constitutive of the question of community,"[121] a singular does not need additional means to be in common with other singular, it is always already communal.

This point is further explicated by Nancy's distinction between singularity and particularity. A particular acquires its individuality through a process of differentiation from its surrounding, so even as an individual it is always defined against a general background, it is always part of a more general group or category from which it exempts itself in order to become an individual. A singular on the other hand is utterly unique: "individuation detaches closed off entities from a formless ground…but singularity does

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[119] Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 27.
[120] Ibid., 26–27.
[121] Ibid., 6.

not proceed from such a detaching of clear forms or figures."[122] A singular is not born by way of negating its surrounding or extracting itself from it, it is not produced by or derived from a general rule, it is distributed and shared: "[it] is made up only of the network, the interweaving, and the sharing of singularities."[123] The singular is revealed to be as paradoxical as the limit which it is: it is unique, but it is also like everyone else, yet it is not like everyone else by virtue of being subject to the same general rule. Nancy explains that a singular carries the same ambiguity as the term "someone," which can be used to name a unique being but can also be applied to anyone. He writes: "someone: a certain someone, anyone at all, each and every one, but also this one and none other, of whom one says, 'she (or he) is really someone!'"[124] A singular is unique, but its uniqueness is the rule because each and everyone is unique. Still it is a rule that "has no instance other than its cases of exception and exemplarity. The example, here, does not refer us back to a generality or universality."[125] Singulars are therefore exceptions that are not derived from a general rule, and their community is a community of differences that are not preceded by a common ground or similarity. In other words, singulars do not enter a community, they are by nature communal: there is not "a 'community' that precedes interrelated individuals: the singular is not the particular, not a *part* of a group (species, gender, class, order). …'One' means: some ones *and* some other ones, or some ones *with* other ones."[126] Community conceived as sameness, as a common denominator or substance or body that precedes the individuals and grounds their being together,

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[122] Ibid., 27.
[123] Ibid.
[124] Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 70.
[125] Ibid., 73.
[126] Ibid., 71.

allows only for particulars. A community of singulars on the other hand is not a common being but a being-in-common.

Nancy's notion of community as singulars sharing only the borders that divide them (and not a common body or ground) challenges traditional conceptions of community. It requires thinking being-in-common as a sharing of differences, as a plurality rather than a unity. Nancy summarizes his notion of community and the demands inflicted by it in the following way:

> "To think of the community not as a totality in which the people would have to share a common being, that is a common position, a common body if you want, body taken in the sense of an organized whole, organized entity, the body of a politics thought of as an organism. But to think of community as the being in common, having to share, precisely the impossibility, to a certain extent, the impossibility of being in common. The community of love is a community having to share the absence of common being, not the absence of being in common but the absence of common being, there is no common property and that is what we have to share."[127]

Nancy emphasizes that a community is not a totality because the purpose of a totality is to create a common position, one place for all the community members to stand in together. It is this being in the same position that functions as the uniting force behind a community of individuals, who become a community by virtue of partaking in the same thing, of having one thing which belongs to all and via which one becomes a community member. But singulars are in common not because they all stand on the same ground, on the contrary, what allows singulars to share their existence is the fact that they do not and

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[127] Jean-Luc Nancy, "Love and Community," 2001,
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oStBeOXFRzY&NR=1>.

cannot stand in the same position, for it is by virtue of standing next to one another[128] that singulars can have limits between them rather than be inside one limit which encompasses them all. Put another way, singulars share in a different way; sharing for them does not mean one thing that everyone has in common but sharing of borders. Nancy is playing on the multiple meanings of "to share," which can mean "to partake in" but also "to divide."[129] He invokes both meanings in order to convey that what singulars share is not a common ground but a difference; singulars are in common not only despite but due to the fact that they are not in the same place or have the same body, but are finite, divided beings that are different from one another.

Another crucial aspect of Nancy's notion of community is the fact that what is shared is not an understanding or a common being or property, but the absence of such a property and the impossibility of having such a common being. Nancy is adamant about this point, which he reiterates in different ways, for example: "what is common to one and all, their communication with each other, is what singularizes them and consequently what shares them out and divides them up. What is commensurable in them is their incommensurability."[130] Here again it is underscored that singulars share an impossibility, that because of their uniqueness singulars are incomparable to one another, they are never equal in the sense of being able to stand in for one another, and it is this

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[128] This relation of being right next to one another rather than at the same place is insightfully captured by the French term *à même* which is often used by Nancy. For an explanation of this term, see translator's preface to: Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Gravity of Thought*, trans. François Raffoul and Gregory Recco (Amherst: Humanity Books, 1997 [1986]), xvi. As well as translator's note in: Nancy, "Of Being Singular Plural," 194, n. 3.

[129] The French verb used by Nancy is *partager*, which has roughly the same double meaning as its English counterpart. See translator's note in: Nancy, "Of Being Singular Plural," 194, n. 2.

[130] Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 72.

incommensurability, their inability to occupy the same place, which enables them to be in common.

Nancy's distinction between a community that relies on a common ground and a community of being-in-common echoes the debate between Dummett and Davidson regarding the responsibilities of the members of a linguistic community. On Dummett's view, members of a linguistic community are held responsible to the linguistic standard, which is the common ground that holds them together and facilitates their mutual understanding. Nancy on the other hand envisions a Davidsonian linguistic community, in which speakers do not have to orient themselves toward a shared linguistic standard in order to be understood. The question therefore, in Nancy's case as well as in Davidson's, is what brings together the members of such community and enables them to understand one another. In other words, if all that singulars share is an impossibility or incommensurability, what does hold them together? What provides the linkage and grounds the mutual responsibility that we expect in a community, and prevents the being in common of singulars from amounting to no more than an estranged coexistence? Nancy looks to communication to answer these questions: "only in this communication are singular beings given – without a bond *and* without communion, equally distant from any notion of connection or joining from the outside and from any notion of a common and fusional interiority. Communication is the constitutive fact of an exposition to the outside that defines singularity."[131] Nancy's world of singulars is held together by the special relation of exposition or sharing that exists between singulars and enables them to be in common without fusing them into a totality. Nancy calls this constitutive relation

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[131] Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 29.

"communication" and distinguishes it from a bond, an external joining together or internal fusion. He attempts to articulate a notion of communication that can take place between beings that have no common property, and explain how such beings, who share only incommensurability, can make sense of and for one another. Looking into this notion of communication will shed light on what allows singulars to communicate through their differences and incommensurability, thus making possible their being-in-common.

Nancy's Notion of Communication

Nancy clearly states that the communication that takes place between singulars is different from that which exists between subjects. He describes it as "'communicating' by not 'communing'" and explains that "these 'places of communication' are no longer places of fusion, even though in them one *passes* from one to the other; they are defined and exposed by their dislocation. Thus, the communication of sharing would be this very dis-location."[132] One thing that is readily apparent is that communication between singulars, even when it leads to an understanding, cannot be conceived in terms of agreement or identification. Communication must somehow allow for a passage between singulars while maintaining the discrepancies that result from their inability to stand in the same place. Communication which acknowledges that the other is necessarily in a different place than mine cannot be about bringing the other to me and getting it to see things from my perspective. It also cannot be about opening the other and penetrating it in order to get access to its inner intentions, because that would be the same move in

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[132] Ibid., 25.

reverse. Nancy stresses that as long as communication is conceived as "the passage of one being into an other" it cannot be what takes place between singulars, because such penetration presupposes that there is something to penetrate. But a singular has no interiority that can be penetrated in this way, it is a surface with no depth, hence between singulars there can only be "the passage of one through the exposed limit of the other."[133] Because singulars do not have an interiority that precedes their mutual exposure, the communication between them is not about expressing an internal content, nor is it about eliminating the separation between them and getting them to stand at the same place, rather singulars are surfaces brushing against each other, touching at their limits without breaking in.

However, communication is also not about bridging the separation by means of a medium or connecting tissue that fills in the gap. This is why Nancy refuses to describe communication as a bond that binds singulars to one another. A bond is a "communal fabric," which Nancy maintains does not exist: "there is no tissue, no flesh, no subject or substance of common being."[134] Communication cannot be a bond because then it would be a common property, which implies that singulars can exist independently and come to bond with one another only consequently. This cannot be Nancy's notion of communication because singulars do not enter into relations (they do not exist prior to being with one another), so the communication which exists between them has to appear simultaneously with the singulars it relates.[135] What Nancy names "communication" is

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[133] Ibid., 30.
[134] Ibid.
[135] In a footnote calling for the deconstruction of the term "communication" Nancy asks that the traditional conception of communication will be superimposed with, and sometimes substituted by, the word "sharing" to indicate that there cannot be an isolated being prior to communication, nor can communication exist independently of the beings who communicate. (Ibid., 157, n. 14).

something more originary than a bond, it is something that "does not set itself up, it does not establish itself, it does not emerge among already given subjects (objects). It consists in the appearance of the *between* as such."[136]

Nancy explains that in order to designate the way in which singulars appear "we would need to be able to say that finitude *co-appears* or *compears* (com-paraît) and only *compear*: in this formulation we would need to hear that finite being always presents itself 'together'…in being-in-common."[137] As aforementioned, a singular is always also plural, because being a limit (being finite) means that it necessarily appears together with what is beyond its limit. Hence, a singular does not only appear, but always co-appears with other singulars. Understanding being-in-common not as a common being (a common property) entails that singulars share their appearance, and it is in this sharing that communication consists: "communication consists before all else in this sharing and in this compearance (com-parution) of finitude: that is, in the dislocation and in the *interpellation* that reveal themselves to be constitutive of being-in-common – precisely inasmuch as being-in-common is not a common being."[138]

One way of thinking communication as co-appearance and not as means for creating a common ground is to realize that before any understanding or agreement can come about there must first be an interpellation, an appeal, a mutual exposure, and that communication consists first and foremost in such interpellation. Nancy's allusion to interpellation as the basis of being-in-common is yet another way of illuminating the

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[136] Ibid., 29.
[137] Ibid., 28.
[138] Ibid., 29. For more about Nancy's use of the term *Comparution* see translator's note in: Jean-Luc Nancy, "La Comparution/The Compearance," trans. Tracy B. Strong, *Political Theory* 20, no. 3 (August 1992 [1991]): 371.

clinamen that relates singulars and makes up their community. As aforementioned, the clinamen is the inclination from one singular toward the other. Since singulars are unique they cannot relate to one another through a similarity that they both possess (through linguistic conventions by which they both adhere), so their inclination toward one another consists in the fact that they intrigue each other with their strangeness and exceptionality. Nancy writes: "in order to have a relation with the example, one must be interested in it, one must be curious about what it exposes, about its sense as example. Singularities relate to each other first of all through this curiosity. They intrigue each other. A 'transcendental' curiosity institutes the relation."[139] Singulars summon or demand each other's attention by virtue of their uniqueness which intrigues others around them. A singular is always strange, and its strangeness calls attention to it, makes others question and inquire about it. It is this mutual questioning that mediates and intercedes between singulars despite their strangeness.

However, interpellation is a multifaceted concept that reveals the complex nature of the clinamen, which consists not only or not simply of inviting and reconciling qualities. In the notion of interpellation we must hear not only the appeal and mediation which make possible a mutual curiosity and inclination between singulars, but also the interposing and interruption which are entailed in the term as well. Strangeness can be intriguing but also intimidating and repelling, which is why the sharing of singulars imparts but also divides. Furthermore, communication is not a benign act, in fact Nancy refers to the "unbearable extremity at which communication comes into play."[140] Communication is extreme because it takes place at the limit, at the outermost region of

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[139] Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 73.
[140] Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 30.

every singular, but it is also extreme because it is excessive and unrestrained. When considering Nancy's notion of communication we must keep in mind that exposure always carries the risk of overexposure.

Communication as portrayed by Nancy is an incredibly precarious act. Since the very being of a singular is to always be extended toward what is outside and beside it, toward others which it invites and resists by extending itself in this way, then no matter how self-centered a singular is, how much it tries to fold in on itself, it cannot help being extended and exposed to the outside: "the entire 'inside' of the singular being is exposed to the 'outside.'"[141] If communication consists in such an involuntary extension then it is not necessarily an act of determination, it takes place before the singular can deliberate and decide to extend itself and address an other. Nancy therefore distinguishes between communication and language (although the former conditions the latter): "this exposure, or this exposing-sharing, gives rise, from the outset, to a mutual interpellation of singularities prior to any address in language (though it gives to this latter its first condition of possibility)."[142] Language is communication by means of a common ground, by means of agreed upon conventions that enable individuals to bridge the gaps between them. Nancy observes that before such communication through a common property can take place there has to already be another form of communication. This other form of communication is not an intentional act that originates with an individual and is consequently delivered over to an other, rather it has a double origin: "the speaking mouth does not transmit, does not inform, does not effect any bond; it is…the beating of

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[141] Ibid.
[142] Ibid., 29.

a singular site against other singular sites: 'I speak, and from then on I am.'"[143] The double origin of communication entails that it can never be brought under the control of one singular, so singulars are to an extent left at the mercy of communication and not the other way around.

The risk posed by communication results directly from its unintentional and uncontrolled nature. Misunderstanding is usually conceived as the main risk posed by communication, as its possibility of failure. However, if we follow Nancy then being misunderstood is not even a feature of communication because interpellation is not about understanding; misunderstanding is the risk of language, which is only secondary to communication. Communication on the other hand presents the risk of being "understood too much" so to speak. If the act of communication is not entirely controlled by me then there is always the risk of communicating too much, of my appeal revealing things about myself that I did not anticipate and did not want revealed. It is in that sense that when taken as exposure communication runs the risk of turning into an overexposure. Overexposure is a chance: it is the opportunity as well as the danger in which we are implicated whenever we communicate.

The non-intentional nature of communication directly follows from Nancy's conception of the relation between singulars. The relation between singulars is a touching of surfaces, and communication starts the moment that touching comes into being. Hence meaning cannot be appropriated by one singular since touching necessarily involves (at least) two beings, and as a result access to meaning (or communication) is achieved by neither penetration nor intention, both of which imply the possession of meaning by one

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[143] Ibid., 31.

singular prior to its communication. Nancy writes: "[sense] is in contact…there is difference of places…dis-location, without appropriation of one place by another. There is not 'subject' and 'object.'"[144] The notion of communication advocated by Nancy provides a different kind of access to the other, it is not access in the form of appropriation which polarizes the relation into a subject and an object, and it is also not a gift that one offers the other. Before meaning can be appropriated or given it must first exist, and for Nancy meaning comes into existence the moment two singulars touch each other while remaining each in its own place. Philosophy that takes penetration as its paradigm for accessing the other's hidden interiority or intention, and as a condition for communication and subjectivity, is a philosophy that tries to go beyond the limit, consequently missing the surface and everything that happens at the surface, where things touch and sense emerges.[145]

Nancy uses the metaphor of tying to describe what happens at the surface between singulars and convey the non-intentional and precarious nature of communication. He introduces the knot as an alternative to the bond, in order to emphasize that communication between singulars does not require a stable medium, established prior to the engagement of concrete beings, via which messages can pass. He writes: "everything, then, passes[146] *between us*. This 'between', as its name implies, has neither a consistency nor continuity of its own. …it constitutes no connective tissue, no cement, no bridge. …[it is] the *inter*lacing of strands whose extremities remain separate even at the very

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[144] Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 61.
[145] Ibid.
[146] Nancy uses the French verb *Se passer* which is commonly used to mean "to happen." See translator's note in: Nancy, "Of Being Singular Plural," 195, n. 5.

center of the knot."[147] Communication between singulars is envisioned by Nancy as weaving, [148] as singulars getting mutually intertwined as well as unraveled in one another. This image captures Nancy's idea that singulars pass along each other's borders rather than through one another, that they touch without piercing or binding.

The metaphor of tying helps illustrate both the singular and the community. The singular conceived as a knot is not a bond; the threads that compose it might be so tightly entangled that it is no longer clear whether each movement of a thread serves to unravel or further entangle the knot, still the threads are never fused together. Accordingly, the singular serves as a hub or a switchboard, an entanglement of threads that go in different directions and intertwine with other threads, thus interweaving together a network or community. Nancy concludes:

"It is less the tie that binds than the tie that reties, less the tie that encloses than the tie that makes up a network. And if it is necessary to use this word at least once: yes, it is a politics of communication, but taken in the opposite sense of all our communicative ideologies, where 'each communication is, above all, communication not of something held in *common* but of a *communicability*,' according to the formula of Giorgio Agamben. Where, consequently, sense is not what is communicated but *that* there is communication."[149]

This quote demonstrates how Nancy's reformulation of subjectivity as singularity, the notion of community (or politics) that it entails, and the new conception of communication that facilitates it are all brought together by the metaphor of tying. Tying is the dynamic, endless gesture that brings together singulars without binding them, that weaves them together into a network but does not enclose them in a joined boundary that

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[147] Ibid., 5.
[148] Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 113.
[149] Ibid., 114.

fuses them into one body. Such community demands a new politics, it requires different means for holding its members together, means which Nancy reluctantly calls communication. The kind of tying together envisioned by Nancy differs significantly from any traditional notion of communication, or better yet: it re-inscribes the act of communication by exposing and giving priority to a different aspect of communication that is often overlooked in philosophy – the interpellation that conditions any address in language.

As mentioned before, Nancy's notion of communication is not a medium for passing messages back and forth but an interpellation between singulars. This aspect of communication cannot be bound up in rules or conventions due to its open ended, unstable and dynamic nature; although it does not exclude rules it also can never be completely determined by them. Yet it conditions any formulation of rules, any formulation of language, so it must be studied if we are to understand the way language works. At the heart of Nancy's philosophy there is therefore a call for a new program for the study of communication and language:

> "In other words, perhaps: how do we communicate? But this question can be asked seriously only if we dismiss all 'theories of communication,' which begin by positing the necessity or the desire for a consensus, a continuity and a transfer of messages. It is not a question of establishing rules for communication, it is a question of understanding before all else that in 'communication' what takes place is an *exposition*: finite existence exposed to finite existence, co-appearing before it and with it."[150]

Nancy is urging philosophy to find a new theory of communication, a theory that does not presuppose linguistic rules or conventions as a necessary condition for

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[150] Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, xi.

communicative success; such model of communication is provided by Davidson. Nancy explains that this new notion of communication requires an understanding that before communicating any particular content, communication communicates communicability itself ("sense is not what is communicated, but that there is communication"). the question therefore is what brings about communicability, what prompts interpretation by indicating that something is being communicated. As explained at the end of the first chapter, what radical interpretation ultimately boils down to is not the acquisition of a particular language, but the acquisition of Language, i.e. the means by which one becomes a speaker. Using Nancy's terminology, radical interpretation is not a matter of conforming to a community's linguistic standard, thus communicating the right content by virtue of the right words, but it is about communicability, about the very existence of communication. Nancy's call to rethink communication is therefore a call for the rethinking of the conditions of possibility of communication, of what it is about another singular that prompts interpretation, that makes other singulars see its behavior as communicating anything at all. The next chapter explores the principle of charity, which is Davidson's precondition of interpretation, and looks more closely at the conditions of interpretation (or communicability), which delineate the boundaries of the community of language users.

III. Charity and the Question of "Speakerhood"

The role of charity in Davidson's model of communication without language

As explained in the first chapter, Davidson's contention that passing theories are just as literal as prior theories does more than downgrade prior theories in the semantic hierarchy, it effectively obliterates the difference between prior and passing theories. Communication thus becomes a flux of passing theories that, as their name indicates, chase and substitute one another. This contextual and provisional nature of (prior and passing) truth theories is what prevents them from amounting to a language, which, on Davidson's view, is not necessary for interpretation. Nevertheless, Davidson claims that while radical interpretation does not assume a shared language, it does require two competent speaker-interpreters. But if all that exists are fleeting passing theories, what is it that radical interpreters must be competent in? Surely their competence cannot amount to mastering a set of conventions, but this does not mean that there is not an ability that radical interpreters need to bring to the table in order to communicate. Nancy articulates this initial ability to enter interpretation in terms of interpellation or an exposure, which facilitates the being-in-common of interlocutors even before they come to agree on particular ways of speaking. In this chapter I will examine Davidson's principle of charity, which embodies a similar precondition of language and interpretation (or communicability). I will argue that according to Davidson's formulation of charity, what it takes to partake in the being-in-common of the community of interpreters is *speakerhood*, that is, the ability to be taken to be a speaker by others. The first section will argue against a common misconception of charity as a principle for adjudicating between competing theories of interpretation, and claim that for charity to fulfill its role

as a precondition of interpretation it must be conceived as a principle of speakerhood, i.e. as a guiding rule for deciding when it is justified to generate theories of interpretation for a creature. The rest of the chapter will explore how conceiving charity as a principle of speakerhood transforms the standard understanding of linguistic competence.

The Principle of Charity as a Precondition of Interpretation

The challenge of interpretation, as described by Davidson, is working out a speaker's beliefs and the meaning of her utterances simultaneously, without assuming either beforehand. The conventional approach to language cuts this Gordian Knot by holding meaning constant while solving for belief: if meaning is conventional, then an interpreter needs only to learn a set of conventions in order to know the meaning of a speaker's utterances, and then use this knowledge to infer her beliefs (assuming that she is sincere). Since Davidson rejects the notion that meaning is conventional, he offers instead the principle of charity as an alternative solution for the interdependence of belief and meaning. In the absence of shared conventions or a general prior theory (literal meaning) to rely on, charity provides the grounds for interpretation and becomes its necessary condition.

Given its crucial role, it is surprising how little Davidson has actually written on the principle of charity. While charity appears often in his work, it is usually not discussed in detail and is never defined rigorously, thus soliciting an array of critiques and interpretations (some more charitable than others). The slight yet significant changes in Davidson's definition of the principle throughout his work suggest that he honed and

modified his conception of it, and although he never wavered on charity being a necessary condition of interpretation, his explanations of the manner in which it conditions interpretation are not always consistent. I believe that this inconsistency is partly caused by Davidson's gradual realization, as his thought progressed, that charity serves two related, yet significantly different functions in his theory of interpretation. The first, which is more dominant in the early writings, is the role of distinguishing between competing theories of truth for a speaker; in this adjudicatory role the principle serves as an aid in actual occasions of interpretation, by providing an ad hoc solution to the interdependence of meaning and belief. However, as Davidson's thought developed, it became more evident that charity conditions interpretation in yet another, more profound way, by providing the content to belief (and consequently the meaning to utterances), thus constituting a situation in which there is something to interpret in the first place.[151]

Charity's dual role in interpretation becomes explicit as Davidson eventually comes to define two different principles, coherence and correspondence, which have both been previously called principles of charity:

> "The process of separating meaning and opinion invokes two key principles which must be applicable if a speaker is interpretable: The Principle of Coherence and the Principle of Correspondence. The Principle of Coherence prompts the interpreter to discover a degree of logical consistency in the thought of the speaker; the Principle of Correspondence prompts the interpreter to take the speaker to be responding to *the same features of the world* that he (the interpreter) would be responding to under

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[151] For a discussion of the dual role that the principle of charity plays in Davidson's semantic theory see: Bar-On and Risjord, "Is There Such a Thing as a Language?" Bar-On and Risjord see this dual role as a problematic inconsistency in Davidson's theory, but, as this chapter explains, I think it reflects a development in Davidson's thought, which leads to the articulation of two principles that, when kept separated, are not incompatible.

similar circumstances. Both principles can be (and have been) called principles of charity."[152]

In the above excerpt, Davidson's descriptions of both the principle of coherence and the principle of correspondence presuppose the existence of a speaker, and thus the presence of interpretable utterances; however, such presupposition is only justified as far as the principle of coherence is concerned. The principle of coherence helps the interpreter choose between truth theories by prompting her to prefer theories that allow her to find greater consistency in the speaker's observable behavior. The existence of truth theories presupposes the existence of a speaker who generates interpretable utterances which these theories consequently aim to interpret. However, for interpretation to be possible in the first place, there must first be interpretable utterances. So if charity is truly the precondition of interpretation, its role cannot be limited to guiding an interpreter in deciding what is being said, it has to also guide the interpreter in deciding whether something is being said in the first place. This latter task is reserved for the principle of correspondence; by prompting the interpreter to take the speaker to be responding to the same features of the world, the principle of correspondence provides the content to beliefs, consequently giving meaning to the utterances that express them, and separating linguistic behavior from mere sounds and marks. The principle of correspondence therefore cannot presuppose the presence of a speaker, because it is itself the condition of speakerhood. In what follows I will examine different formulations of the principle of charity, and demonstrate how its function in Davidson's theory of interpretation has

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[152] Donald Davidson, "Three Varieties of Knowledge," in *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001 [1991]), 211.

evolved over time from the adjudicatory role of the principle of coherence to the principle of correspondence and its role in constituting speakerhood.

Up until the mid-1970's the prevailing formulation of charity in Davidson's writings is as a principle for choosing between alternative theories of interpretation. Davidson asserts that the solution for the indeterminacy of interpretation, which allows for more than one truth theory for each occasion of utterance, is to apply the principle of charity across the board, to all sentences.[153] Charity helps the interpreter adjudicate between competing theories by directing him to prefer theories that maximize the agreement between himself and the speaker by way of ascribing to the speaker beliefs that are true by the interpreter's own standard.[154] On this view, concurrence in belief between interlocutors provides the grounds for interpretation in the absence of shared linguistic conventions. However, since the speaker's beliefs are yet unknown, the exercising of charity in fact entails reading the interpreter's beliefs (the interpreter's view of what is right) onto the speaker's speech, as the only way of gaining a foothold that will get interpretation going.

Unfortunately, maximization of agreement is a highly problematic condition for interpretation, because it suggests that there can be only one standard of rationality, thus

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[153] See: Davidson, "Radical Interpretation," 136, n. 16; Davidson, "Belief and the Basis of Meaning," 153.

[154] See: "if we cannot find a way to interpret the utterances and other behavior of a creature as revealing a set of beliefs largely consistent and *true by our own standards*, we have no reason to count that creature as rational, as having beliefs, or as saying anything." (Davidson, "Radical Interpretation," 137, my italics). And: "[the principle of charity] is intended to solve the problem of the interdependence of belief and meaning by holding belief constant as far as possible while solving for meaning. This is accomplished by assigning truth conditions to alien sentences that make native speakers right when plausibly possible, according, of course, to *our own view of what is right*." (Ibid., my italics). On charity as maximizing agreement between interlocutors see: Davidson, "Radical Interpretation," 136; Davidson, "Thought and Talk," 169.

bringing about what some critics see as linguistic or cognitive imperialism.[155] Several critics have consequently voiced their objection to Davidson's formulation of the principle of charity on the grounds that maximizing agreement is too strong of a constraint on interpretation because it does not allow for the explication of reasonable and intelligible disagreements. Graham Macdonald and Philip Pettit argue that the principle of charity is "scarcely persuasive" because "in advocating maximization of agreement in interpretation it counsels neglect of considerations as to whether the interpretees are likely to have attained knowledge of the truths on which they are construed as agreeing."[156] Maximizing agreement is problematic when a speaker and an interpreter have a significantly different body of knowledge; the difference in knowledge can be the result of a different educational or cultural background, but it can also be of a more specific nature, for example when the interpreter has a clear view of an object that is hidden from the speaker's eyes. In such cases disagreement would sometimes be more plausible, so we want to allow for a situation in which the interpreter, having information that is not available to the speaker, holds on to his beliefs, while at the same time reasonably attributing the speaker with a false belief, which nonetheless can be easily explained given the latter's deficient (or simply different) knowledge.

Bar-On and Risjord, who criticize Davidson on the same grounds, offer the following enlightening example to demonstrate the shortcomings of a principle that demands maximization of agreement between conversationalists:

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[155] For a criticism along these lines see: Hacking, *Why Does Language Matter to Philosophy?*, 149.

[156] Graham Macdonald and Philip Pettit, *Semantics and Social Science* (London and Boston: Routledge, 1981), 29. See also: Dagfinn Føllesdal, "Triangulation," in *The Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, ed. Lewis Edwin Hahn, vol. XXVII, The Library of Living Philosophers (Illinois: Open Court Publishing, 1999), 727, n. 7.

> Suppose, for example, the investigator is working with a group of people who appear to believe in invisible spirits. They (apparently) say that one can tell when a spirit is present because one has a particular feeling in the abdomen. Interpreting some of their sentences as about the spirits would require attributing to them beliefs that are patently false by the interpreter's lights. … Suppose…that by tinkering with her truth-theory the interpreter can reinterpret the native sentences as about intestinal gas, rather than invisible spirits, and thus make more sentences uttered by the speakers come out true (by her lights). PC [principle of charity]…dictates that the second truth theory would be preferable.[157]

This example is especially interesting because an anthropologist's encounter with a formerly unknown native society is Quine's paradigmatic example of a situation that requires radical translation. By situating charity in the anthropological field, Bar-On and Risjord expose the broader cultural and even ethical implications of radical interpretation. As their example clearly demonstrates, maximization of agreement as a condition for interpretation does not allow for a diversity of epistemic and cognitive differences, thus impairing out ability to articulate reasonable cultural differences (either within our own culture or between different cultures). As Bar-On and Risjord rightly observe, it seems possible for a group of people to believe in invisible spirits, and if they do have such beliefs, this is something that we should be able to explain rather than explain away.[158]

This obvious fault has led to some attempts to amend the principle of charity and replace it with the principle of humanity, which emphasizes the ability to explicate the source of disagreement, thus allowing the interpreter to attribute false beliefs to a speaker as long as she can reasonably explain, in her own language, the circumstances that have

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[157] Bar-On and Risjord, "Is There Such a Thing as a Language?," 174.
[158] Ibid., 174–175.

led the speaker to hold these false beliefs.[159] By emphasizing the explicability of attributed beliefs the principle of humanity allows for false, yet rational beliefs, and avoids imposing the interpreter's standard of rationality on the speaker. It should be noted that Davidson himself realized the problems involved in maximizing agreement, and later retracted his position, calling maximization of agreement "a confused ideal" and asserting instead that "the aim of interpretation is not agreement but understanding. My point has always been that understanding can be secured only by interpreting in a way that makes for the right *sort* of agreement."[160] In light of these considerations Davidson endorses an improved formulation of the principle of charity which allows for an explicable error.[161]

Nevertheless, even when allowing for explicable error, a principle of agreement still imposes a relatively strong regulation on belief, which discords with Davidson's general tendency to refrain from over-regulating interpretation. It seems odd that Davidson would go to so much trouble to argue against the idea that interpretation can be regularized by a (relatively) uniform linguistic standard only to accept so casually the strict enforcement of a similar standard on thought. The impression that any kind of strong regulating principle does not accord with Davidson's theory of interpretation is shared by a number of critics, who proceed accordingly to suggest more subtle formulations of charity. For example, Michael Root explains that "Davidson's principle

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[159] The most notable formulation of the principle of humanity is Richard Grandy's, in: "Reference, Meaning, and Belief," *The Journal of Philosophy* 70 (1973): 439–452. For other formulations see: Michael Devitt, *Realism and Truth* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); Martin Hollis, "The Social Destruction of Reality," in *Rationality and Relativism*, ed. Martin Hollis and Steven Lukes (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1982), 67–86; Steven Lukes, "Relativism in Its Place," in *Rationality and Relativism*, ed. Martin Hollis and Steven Lukes (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1982), 261–305. For a clear review and explanation of the principle of humanity see: Bar-On and Risjord, "Is There Such a Thing as a Language?," 171.

[160] Davidson, "Introduction," xix (my italics).

[161] Donald Davidson, "Replies to David Lewis and W.V. Quine," *Synthese* 27 (1974): 346.

of charity does not recommend that in interpreting the thoughts of others we simply maximize agreement between ourselves and others. The principle is more subtle. It is primarily a norm that the interpreter employs in the initial stages of interpretation; it helps her to get a foot in the door."[162] As illustrated by Root, the principle of charity is a very loose norm that makes possible the construction of truth theories, but does not provide rules for sorting between alternative theories. The idea is not that interpretation can or should be boundless; interpretation of course involves the employment of various principles for adjudicating among theories, but charity cannot be one of these principles. Davidson defines charity as a precondition of interpretation, so it cannot be a principle that we employ in the course of interpretation because it is what we need to get interpretation started in the first place. Furthermore, as a precondition of interpretation charity cannot be grounded in belief, for that would irredeemably conflict with the extensional nature of Davidson's theory of meaning. As previously explained, for Davidson interpretation is a process of constructing theories of truth for a supply of empirical evidence. Intentions can only be the end product of this process because they are attributed in the context of interpretation (based on the empirical evidence), so it only makes sense to talk about intentions at the end of interpretation.[163] The principle of charity, which is the starting point of interpretation, cannot be based in an intentional concept like belief; at the most we could say that one ought to interpret in a way that will

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[162] Michael Root, "Davidson and Social Science," in *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, ed. Ernest LePore (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 286.

[163] See: "[having a belief] requires grasping the contrast between truth and error – true belief and false belief. But this contrast … can emerge only in the context of interpretation, which alone forces us to the idea of an objective, public truth." (Davidson, "Thought and Talk," 170).

make for either agreement or explicable disagreement at the end, but attribution of beliefs cannot serve as a precondition for interpreting.[164]

In view of such considerations, attempts have been made to reformulate the required agreement as concerning not the content or object of any specific belief but the criteria that guide the ascription of beliefs. Such attempts reflect an understanding that while disagreement regarding the content of certain beliefs can be easily dealt with in the course of conversation, some disagreements are conversation stoppers in the sense that they make interpretation impossible to begin with. Macdonald and Pettit explain that disagreement regarding everyday matters that are covered by "beliefs which inform practical activity" would scarcely be intelligible, and conclude accordingly that Davidson's principle of charity concerns not the content of beliefs but the criteria that guide their ascription, criteria which they describe as forming "the core of a sort of theory of person."[165] If we take seriously Davidson's assertion that all that exists are sounds and marks that people make, then charity has to embody a principle of personhood, because the interpreter's first decision, which is necessary for any occasion of interpretation, is the decision that certain sounds and marks are linguistic (i.e. interpretable). Charity therefore runs deeper than adjudicating between theories of truth, it determines when such theories are warranted, and to whom they ought to be attributed. In other words, charity guides the constitution of speakerhood by determining whose utterances are

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[164] For a detailed explanation of how the extensional nature of Davidson's theory of meaning dictates that the principle of charity cannot serve as an adjudicatory principle see: Ramberg, *Donald Davidson's Philosophy of Language*, 71.

[165] In fact Macdonald and Pettit qualify their assertion even further, and explain that such assumptions do not even amount to a theory per se, but are "nothing more than a mass of platitudes of common sense." (Macdonald and Pettit, *Semantics and Social Science*, 30–33). For other formulations of charity as embodying a theory of person see: Root, "Davidson and Social Science," 286; David Lewis, "Radical Interpretation," *Synthese* 27 (1974): 331–344; Wai-Hung Wong, "Interpretive Charity, Massive Disagreement, and Imagination," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 29 (1999): 49–74.

regarded as expressing beliefs (whether true or false) in the first place. The next section examines what, according to Davidson, is involved in the making of such determination.

Charity as a Principle of Speakerhood

As aforementioned, interpretation requires, and indeed involves, principles for adjudicating between alternative theories of interpretations, but while such principles are an indispensable part of actual interpretation, they only come into play once interpretation is already under way, so they cannot be a precondition for interpreting. Both kinds of principles (adjudicatory and precondition) are at play in Davidson's semantic theory, and the fact that both kinds have been referred to as principles of charity by him only adds to the confusion. I therefore suggest following Davidson's retroactive distinction between the principle of coherence (which serves an adjudicatory role and helps the interpreter decide between competing truth theories) and the principle of correspondence, and argue that it is only the latter that can be properly called a precondition of interpretation. In this section I will explain in what sense the principle of charity functions as a principle of correspondence, and why when understood in this way it constitutes a principle of speakerhood (i.e. a guiding principle for deciding who can legitimately be considered a speaker).

The common misconception of charity as a (less of more viable) principle for adjudicating between alternative theories of interpretation stems from the idea that for Davidson agreement is a condition for interpretation, which leads him to prescribe a condition of interpretation (charity) that facilitates agreement between interlocutors by

directing the interpreter to assign true beliefs (namely beliefs she concurs with) to the speaker. Davidson indeed asserts that "disagreement and agreement alike are intelligible only against a background of massive agreement," and it is this demand for a background of agreement which generates the impression that one can only interpret those with whom one agrees. However, Davidson stipulates that "applied to language, this principle reads: the more sentences we conspire to accept or reject (whether or not through a medium of interpretation), the better we understand the rest, whether or not we agree on them."[166] This addition is crucial because it instructs that the principle of charity is not meant to maximize agreement between conversationalists regarding the content of beliefs, but to maximize the evidentiary base for creating a theory of interpretation, which is the basis for attributing beliefs (whatever their content is) to a speaker. The conception of charity as an obligation to maximize the evidential base for interpretation follows from the holistic aspect of Davidson's philosophy: since the interpreter strives to discern patterns in the speaker's linguistic behavior, the more evidence she has to work with the more successful she can be at interpreting. Plainly put, the more occasions of utterance that are available for the interpreter, the more T-sentences that she will be able to construct and test, the more refined her hypotheses will be, and the more likely she will be to interpret correctly.

Once agreement is understood in this fashion, we can reexamine the role of truth in Davidson's theory, and reformulate the way in which charity serves to maximize truth. Davidson maintains that the principle of charity "favor[s] interpretations that as far as possible preserve truth" and adds that he "think[s] it makes for mutual understanding, and

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[166] Davidson, "Radical Interpretation," 137.

hence for better interpretation, [for the interpreter] to interpret what the speaker accepts as true as true when she can."[167] It is these sorts of statements that are sometimes taken to affirm that charity counsels the interpreter to interpret in a way that attributes the speaker with as many true beliefs as possible (thus depriving the interpreter of tools for explicating how a speaker might come to hold some false, yet reasonable, beliefs). But the preservation of truth in the above quote should not be read as pertaining to the content of belief (thus entailing a maximization of true beliefs), but to the attribution of the *concept* of truth. By maximizing the evidentiary base, charity maximizes the attribution of beliefs, thereby maximizing the attribution of the concept of truth as well, because on Davidson's view a creature can only have beliefs if it has the concept of truth (the understanding that its beliefs might be false).

What an interpreter must assume about a speaker in order to engage in radical interpretation with him is that the speaker's utterances express assent to the uttered sentence being true under present conditions. What the speaker believes to be true (the content of her beliefs) and what truth conditions are relevant for determining the content of her beliefs, as well as the meaning of her utterances, are questions that can only be answered collaboratively in the process of interpretation. However, for interpretation to commence, the interpreter must assume that utterances express assent, otherwise she will have nothing to go on when attempting to interpret. By making this assumption the interpreter is attributing the speaker with both thought and language (but not with any specific mental or semantic content), because assuming that the speaker's utterances bear a systematic connection to the observable circumstances effectively amounts to declaring

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[167] Davidson, "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge," 149.

these utterances to be meaningful (i.e. linguistic and intentional) and not just empty noise. The reason most of us do not attempt to interpret trees for example is because we do not consider the sounds they produce to be a language, to be something interpretable. The first step toward interpreting therefore is taking another creature to be intentional and linguistic, which is why Davidson insists that "charity is not an option, but a condition of having a workable theory" of interpretation;[168] taking a creature to be using language is obviously a condition of interpretation because it means that there is something to interpret. So by being charitable in the way just described the interpreter is not being generous toward the speaker (assuming that his beliefs are true), but is giving herself the necessary tools for interpretation by providing herself grounds for associating his utterances with truth conditions. As far as interpretation goes then, charity is not a matter of choice, but a matter of necessity.

Davidson repeatedly explains that an interpreter cannot choose whether or not to be charitable; although I will later argue that charity has an irreducible ethical aspect, which suggests a certain degree of freedom to choose, taking the utterances of others to be an expression of assent is not a matter of deliberation, but an inseparable part of becoming a language user. Davidson explains that first language acquisition starts with a child's ability to causally connect sounds (for example crying) with pleasure or satisfaction: "before we have an idea of truth or error, before the advent of concepts or propositional thought, there is a rudiment of communication in the simple discovery that

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[168] Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," 197. See also: "charity in interpretation is not a policy in the sense of being one among many possible successful policies. It is the only policy available if we want to understand other people." (Donald Davidson, "Expressing Evaluations," in *Problems of Rationality* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004 (1984)], 36).

sounds produce results."[169] Linguistic competence is therefore set off by the child's recognition that there is a systematic causal connection between certain sounds she produces and getting what she wants. Over time this connection gets progressively wider and more complex as the child begins to use more sounds to produce different results, and what is more important, realizes that people around her do the same. Somewhere along this gradual process thought and language appear, and the child becomes a linguistic and intentional creature.

Although Davidson sees little point in trying to pin point the exact moment in which the child becomes a rational creature he has no difficulty pointing out the crucial element that gives rise to this remarkable transformation: it is the shift from having a "disposition to respond to stimuli of a certain sort, to employing a concept with the awareness of the chance of error;" recognizing the possibility of error is a crucial step toward the acquisition of language because it "is where the concept of truth enters."[170] Davidson remarks that language acquisition may seem like a process of trial and error from an adult point of view, because for a speaking adult the child picks up language by learning meaning that is already there, but this is not the case from the child's point of view. For the child the meaning does not exist before he becomes aware of it, so in the early stages of learning a first language the possibility of error does not exist, because from the child's perspective there is nothing to be in error about.[171] In these early stages

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[169] Donald Davidson, "Truth Rehabilitated," in *Truth, Language and History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005 [1997]), 13. For another, more concise, yet similar account of first language acquisition see also: Davidson, "Seeing Through Language," 140.

[170] Davidson, "Truth Rehabilitated," 14.

[171] See: "[when a first language is learned] a meaning is being bestowed on words quite apart from any use those words may have at other times and with other people. If we think of ostension only as the teaching of a socially viable meaning we miss the essential lesson, which is that for the learner ostension is not learning

the child is a pragmatist, as far as she is concerned there is no difference between success (getting what she wants) and truth.[172] Davidson concludes that it is once the child learns to assemble the separately learned parts of language in new ways that "truth separates from the merely useful or approved" and she can be said to have become a speaking and thinking creature. A concept of truth is therefore the hallmark of meaning, because whereas social convention determines whether the phonetic form "chair" refers to a chair or a table, and even though it is usually society that provides the grammar for combining words and sentences, truth is in the hands of each and every individual speaker.[173] Even when an individual's speech diverges significantly from social convention, even when a sentence is grammatically wrong or when a term fails to refer, a concept of truth is still central to understanding because "sentences are understood on condition that one has the concept of objective truth."[174]

This description of first language acquisition is illuminating because, unlike Davidson's account of radical interpretation, it does not assume linguistic competence and so gives insight into what is involved in developing such competence. Davidson argues that a creature cannot speak and think, or treat others as thinking and speaking creatures, without grasping the concept of truth: "without a grasp of the concept of truth, not only language, but thought itself, is impossible. Truth is important…because without the idea of truth we would not be thinking creatures, nor would we understand what it is for someone else to be a thinking creature."[175] As this quote demonstrates, to be

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something already there. The learner is in at a meaning baptism." (Davidson, "Seeing Through Language," 140).
[172] Davidson, "Truth Rehabilitated," 14.
[173] Ibid., 15.
[174] Ibid., 16.
[175] Ibid.

considered an intentional and linguistic creature one does not have to have correct knowledge of what is true (correct by my standard or any other standard), because the existence of thought relies not on the *content* of belief but on the *concept* of belief, on the recognition that my beliefs can be mistaken, which involves a distinction between objective truth and the content one's thought. So for Davidson linguistic competence relies not on shared mental content but on sharing a concept of truth in the sense just described, and since taking another creature to be speaking a language is obviously a precondition for interpreting him, it can be concluded that what the principle of charity demands is that we attribute to the speaker a concept of truth, i.e. regard "as causally related a bit of presumed linguistic activity and some feature of the world" and consider the speaker to be doing the same.[176]

When the maximization of truth is understood as referring to the attribution of a *concept* of truth, and not true beliefs, it becomes apparent why charity turns out to be a principle of correspondence. If having a concept of truth is a necessary condition of understanding, then being a speaker-interpreter requires conceiving utterances as holding some kind of correspondence to the world; on this view, the ultimate precondition of interpretation is not shared linguistic conventions, but a *shared world*. Formulating charity in terms of sharing a world conveys a common sensical presupposition, shared by Davidson as well as his harshest critics, that understanding requires sharing of some sort. Davidson's choice to articulate this sharing in terms of a shared world and not shared conventions stems from his view that meaning is empirical, a point which I will develop

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[176] Ramberg, *Donald Davidson's Philosophy of Language*, 124.

shortly, but first I would like to dispel the notion that for Davidson sharing is connected to empathy.

Davidson explains that Quine, with whom he shares the view that meaning is fundamentally public and empirical, "stressed…the role of empathy in teaching language and in radical translation: we see how the learner or speaker is located, and what she seems to be attending to, and then imagine what proximal stimulations we would have if we were in her shoes."[177] The idea that interpretation involves putting oneself in someone else's shoes appears in some articulations of the principle of charity that take after Davidson. David Lewis for example states that charity dictates that we take a speaker to "believe what we believe, or perhaps what we would have believed *in his place*; and…desire what we desire, or perhaps what we would have desired *in his place*."[178] While I am not sure we can completely discard empathy as part of what it takes to share a world, it must be made clear that as far as Davidson is concerned empathy does not play an explanatory role in his notion of interpretation because it is irrelevant to having a concept of truth. Empathy is about finding potential similarities between the behaviors of interlocutors, it is about the interpreter realizing that he too could have, or would have

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[177] Donald Davidson, "Reply to Dagfinn Føllesdal," in *The Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, ed. Lewis Edwin Hahn (Illinois: Open Court Publishing, 1999), 730. The idea that interpretation requires a degree of identification, of putting oneself in the other's shoes, naturally leads to the assumption that only humans can count as persons. In fact, this assumption follows so naturally that Lewis takes it for granted in his explication of the principle of charity, referring to persons and humans interchangeably, without questioning whether they are actually the same thing. This can also help explain Davidson's decisive refusal to consider the possibility of nonhuman rational animals. However, as will be discussed in detail in chapter five, the assumption does not follow, especially as far as Davidson's theory of interpretation is concerned, because he actually rejects the notion that empathy is required for interpretation.

[178] Lewis, "Radical Interpretation," 336. In light of Lewis' choice of words it is interesting to compare his description with Nancy's portrayal of singulars as communicating and sharing by virtue of standing *next* to one another (and not in each other's place).

behaved like the speaker given the latter's circumstances.[179] But, as Davidson points out, interlocutors can be conditioned or programmed to act similarly, so similarity in behavior does not indicate the existence of a concept of truth.[180] Put another way, interpretation for Davidson is not about potentially or actually matching the behavior of the interpreter with the behavior of the speaker, but about the interpreter and the speaker sharing a world, because the content of belief and the meaning of sentences both come from the world (they are both empirical), so it is when this world is shared that the interpreter can inquire after the speaker's beliefs and the meanings of her utterances.[181]

The understanding of charity in terms of sharing a world follows from the extensional nature of Davidson's semantic theory: if meaning is determined by truth conditions, if meaning is empirical, then for an utterance to be meaningful it has to be systematically connected to certain circumstances in the world. Put another way: to be a competent speaker and interpreter one must understand why "the snow is white" is true when the snow is white but not when the grass is green even though "the grass is green" can be true in a different context (i.e. when the grass is green). Understanding charity as the attribution of a concept of truth to a speaker construes the principle of charity as a

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[179] It is worth mentioning that in conceiving empathy as putting oneself in someone else's shoes Davidson is expressing a common, yet reductive view on which empathy is about identifying with the other. But empathy can also be understood as not including (and in fact excluding) an element of identification; on this view, empathy is not about feeling someone else's pain so to speak, but about realizing the uniqueness of the other's pain, hence relating to his pain without conflating it with my feelings. I think that Nancy's notion of the phatic function of language, which will be introduced in chapter four, captures something of this alterative understanding of empathy.

[180] See: "nothing in Quine's approach seemed to me suited to explaining how the concept of truth was to be introduced. … where, in the matching of verbal behaviors, does a sense of *objectivity* come in? What is the difference between being trained to follow others and understanding that one might be wrong? (Davidson, "Reply to Dagfinn Føllesdal," 730).

[181] See: "What are the conditions necessary for the existence of thought, and so in particular for the existence of people with thoughts? I believe there could not be thoughts in one mind if there were no other thoughtful creatures with which the first mind *shared a natural world*." (Donald Davidson, "The Conditions of Thought," in *The Mind of Donald Davidson*, ed. Johannes Brandl and Wolfgang L. Gombocz (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1989), 193, my italics).

narrow and formal precondition that does not put any constraints on the content of beliefs and sentences, and one might wonder what kinds of constraints, if any, does charity put on interpretation when conceived so minimally. In other words: when Davidson's view is taken to its final conclusion, is it ever possible to suspend charity? If I create a theory that systematically connects the sounds and marks made by my pet Shoshi to certain truth conditions, are there any grounds in Davidson's theory for excluding Shoshi from the community of language users? And even if we are willing to maintain that Shoshi is a speaker, how far can we stretch this logic, can trees be speakers too as long as someone can come up with a truth theory for the sounds they make? These crucial questions are explored in chapters four and five; the next section will set up that inquiry by defining more clearly what constitutes a suspension of charity.

Mistakes and the Limit of Charity

Composing a truth theory for a speaker on which he is gravely mistaken or makes very little sense (in the interpreter's eyes) does not amount to a suspension of charity. An interpreter can make a speaker out to be saying that he is dressed in purple when he is naked, that his head is made of clay, or that he is a pumpkin or made of glass without transgressing the limits of the rational realm; while such interpretation definitely makes the speaker out to be irrational or insane, irrationality is still part of reason.[182] The negotiation over the content of beliefs and utterances takes place within the boundaries of

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[182] See: "the irrational is not merely the non-rational, which lies outside the ambit of the rational; irrationality is a failure within the house of reason. (Donald Davidson, "Paradoxes of Irrationality," in *Problems of Rationality* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004 (1982)], 169). The above description of the madmen beliefs is of course taken from Descartes' first meditation, so it is curious to note that it is unclear whether Descartes himself sees the Cogito, the hallmark of thought, as applying to the madmen as well.

rationality, while a suspension of charity consists in expelling a creature from the rational realm by declaring it to be devoid of thought all together, i.e. by declaring it non-rational. Hence, charity is not suspended when a speaker is attributed with a mistake (no matter how fundamental and pervasive), because such judgment can only be made in the context of interpretation, which already assumes charity. Charity is suspended only when a creature is not seen as a speaker to begin with, i.e. when a creature's utterances are not given the chance to be interpreted as meaningful speech. To spell out the distinction between attributing mistakes, even preposterous ones, and suspending charity, let us take another look at how mistakes are attributed in the process of radical interpretation.

In the first chapter I argued that for Davidson understanding takes the place of convention in providing the norm for communication; in the absence of linguistic conventions, it is the need to be understood and understand that constrains communication and prevents a Humpty Dumpty situation in which the notion of mistake is obliterated. Since Davidson rejects linguistic conventions, a mistake for him cannot consist in a speaker deviating from a pre-established linguistic standard, in fact such "deviation" will be considered literal as long as it is understood by the interpreter. Ramberg explains that the only possible incentive a radical interpreter has for attributing error to a speaker is if an utterance conflicts with a previously constructed T-sentence. This is why disagreement is possible only against a background of agreement: it is only once the interpreter has a fairly developed theory of truth for a speaker that she has a reason to attribute a mistake to him. In attributing a mistake to a speaker the interpreter judges that the speaker's assent to a sentence resulted either from attributing the wrong meaning to the uttered sentence or from a misconception of the conditions under which it

was uttered. In any event, the interpreter rules that the uttered sentence should not have been assented to under the present circumstances, which in effect means discarding that occasion of utterance from the evidential base because it reflects an erroneous association between an utterance and a state of affairs. Accordingly, attributing error to a speaker before collecting enough[183] T-sentences does nothing but hinder the interpreter's ability to construct a theory of interpretation by unnecessarily discarding occasions of utterance from the evidential base. Since the principle of charity counsels us to maximize the evidential base, the only motivation to attribute error to a speaker is when two pieces of evidence conflict.[184]

When two T-sentences that were formulated based on different evidence conflict, the interpreter is presented with three options: 1. She can attribute herself with a mistaken belief (suppose that the truth conditions for at least one of the speaker's past utterances were different than she originally perceived). 2. She can attribute the speaker with a mistaken belief. 3. She can decide that her theory is deficient (that she has mistakenly attributed a meaning to a sentence).[185] The principle of charity counsels the interpreter to prefer the third option whenever possible because it maximizes the empirical content of her theory: going back and reformulating her theory by attributing new meanings to utterances enables the interpreter to account for what seemed like a mistaken occasion of

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[183] The use of the term "enough" here is of course vague and raises the question of what constitutes enough T-sentences. Unfortunately, there is no way of providing exact rules in this case; generally speaking, an evidentiary base will be large enough when it allows the interpreter to understand the better part of the speaker's utterances and anticipate his linguistic behavior. In the end, this is up to the interpreter and speaker to negotiate and decide on a case by case basis, and so cannot be formulated into a binding rule.
[184] Ramberg, "Charity and Ideology," 642. It is important not to confuse the role of charity in eliminating conflicting utterances with the role of adjudicating among truth theories (which is reserved to charity as a principle of coherence). It can be argued that expanding the evidentiary base by eliminating conflicting utterances entails maximizing agreement; such argument is acceptable, but only as long as we keep in mind that the agreement is *the outcome* of the process of interpreting charitably and not required by it.
[185] Ibid.

utterance, thus including it in her evidentiary base. The second option (attributing a mistaken belief to the speaker) will be chosen only when the theory cannot be amended to include the occasion of utterance without also eliminating from it previously collected evidence. In a nutshell: attributing a mistake to a speaker (thus discarding a piece of evidence) is warranted when the only alternative is losing even more evidence.[186]

As previously discussed, Dummett argues against Davidson that interlocutors do not interpret in the home language; for Dummett as long as everyone conforms more or less to the same linguistic standard understanding is achieved effortlessly, and the need to interpret never arises; interpretation is only needed when a speaker deviates from the accepted standard, thus forcing the listener to devise novel ways for understanding her. For Davidson on the other hand, interpretation happens all the time, because no amount of convention can overcome the fundamental differences in the ways interlocutors speak and see the world. Moreover, for Davidson such differences, either semantic or epistemic, propel interpretation by prompting the interpreter to come up with new theories for understanding the speaker.[187] So Dummett and Davidson are in agreement that it is the discrepancies between conversationalists that prompt interpretation, but whereas for Dummett these discrepancies mark a failure of communication, for Davidson they are a necessary part of communication and the motivating force behind it. By emphasizing the necessary role of interpretation, Davidson does not eliminate mistake, he only accounts for it differently. By undercutting the reification of meaning into a set of conventions he

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[186] Ibid., 643.

[187] C.f. "understood as a precondition of interpretation, [the principle of charity] is much more limited than is sometimes supposed. It says nothing about what we must assume regarding other speaker's concept of truth, their rationality, etc. … nor does it require that interpretees 'agree' with their interpreters in all their beliefs, or in their 'conception of the world.' On the face of it, seeing [the principle of charity] as a precondition would leave room for great divergence between speaker and interpreter." (Bar-On and Risjord, "Is There Such a Thing as a Language?," 170).

allows for interlocutors who negotiate and develop their own "standards" in the course of conversation, while relying on the need to understand and be understood to "regulate" this dynamic process. If charity is not an option but a condition of interpretation then suspension of charity must be a conversation stopper; since a mistake, even an atrocious one, is never a conversation stopper for Davidson, it must be concluded that irrationality is not grounds for suspending charity.

A notion of charity that is flexible enough to accommodate a man who thinks his body is made of glass seems to be limitless. To show that this is not actually the case, let me revisit Davidson's description of everyday communication which opened the first chapter; Davidson writes:

> "Kurt utters the words 'Es regent' and under the right conditions we know that he said that it is raining. *Having identified his utterance as intentional and linguistic*, we are able to go on to interpret his words: we can say what his words, on that occasion, meant."[188]

Davidson's account of radical interpretation takes for granted the ability to identify Kurt's utterances as intentional and linguistic, and focuses on specifying the process of interpreting those utterances, of saying what Kurt's words mean on a particular occasion. But identifying Kurt's utterances as intentional and linguistic is no simple matter, especially once we reject linguistic conventions; if there is no such thing as a language, if it cannot be determined in advance what a language a person speaks, how can it be determined in advance that he is speaking a language at all? In the absence of a standard for what counts as part of a specific language is it ever possible to determine from the outset what counts as linguistic behavior? So on Davidson's view, the first decision an

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[188] Davidson, "Radical Interpretation," 125.

interpreter has to make is what part, if at all, of a creature's behavior is linguistic, i.e. interpretable, and it is this "decision" that constitutes the ultimate condition of interpretation. Speakerhood therefore becomes the key to the house of reason: since both meanings and beliefs are only attributed in the context of interpretation, the decision that a creature's behavior is interpretable amounts to declaring the behavior to be both linguistic and intentional, thus pronouncing its agent to be a rational creature. Correspondingly, it is by identifying a creature as non-rational (as producing no intentional and linguistic utterances but only empty noises) that charity is suspended.

If meaning is empirical, if utterances get their content from their systematic connection to the world, then interpretation becomes part of a much broader attempt to assess the way a creature relates to the world around it; the challenge in carrying out this task is that behavior can be systematically connected to the world because its agent *understands* the surrounding circumstances or because the agent has been preprogrammed to do so, in the latter case, although the behavior might be similar, it does not seem to warrant charity. The question of charity can therefore be formulated as follows: how do we distinguishing between parroting and meaningful speech? A parrot (and arguably a child in the early stages of acquiring language) can be trained to utter sentences at appropriate times, which is why such behavior is not enough to indicate that a creature understands the sentences it utters. Davidson does not deny that language acquisition may involve a process of training, in which a teacher repeatedly corrects the child's linguistic behavior; however, he observes that on principle such process of correction is no different than housebreaking a puppy, because while it can alter the child's behavior (make him utter sentences at appropriate times), it does not teach him

that a behavior is incorrect. The difference between parroting (which is the result of training) and speaking is that a speaker understands the meaning of the words she utters, so she is not just able to utter the right sentence under the appropriate circumstances but she also understands why that particular sentence and not another is to be uttered under those particular circumstances. Determining who is a speaker of language thus requires distinguishing someone who utters "the snow is white" when the snow is white and "the grass is green" when the grass is green from someone who understands why "the snow is white" is false when the grass is green, even though it can be true in a different context (i.e. when the snow is white). What makes the latter a speaker is that her pattern of uttering sentences is not just selective (the uttered sentence fits the circumstances) but involves an understanding of how the classification can be wrong (of how "the snow is white" is false when the grass is green but true when the snow is white).

The parrot responds appropriately to certain situations, but its responses are preprogrammed, so they do not manifest an understanding of the situation and how it can be otherwise, hence, according to Davidson, they do not justify charity. What the parrot lacks is a concept of error, a conception of the contrast between its beliefs and the objective truth. But, and this is the sticking point, on Davidson's view a concept of error is not something that one possesses, but something that gets attributed in the context of interpretation.[189] More accurately, a concept of error is attributed by the very decision to interpret: the decision that the sounds made by a human child are meaningful while the barking of a dog is empty effectively means that a concept of error is attributed to the

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[189] See for example: "the concept of objective truth, and of error, necessarily emerge in the context of interpretation." (Davidson, "Thought and Talk," 169).

former but denied from the latter. But based on what do we make this distinction to begin with? Why does it seem so natural to interpret other humans but not dogs?

Such considerations demonstrate that when charity is conceived as a principle of speakerhood the question of the limits of charity pertains to the delineation of the boundaries of *the community of language users*, not *a linguistic community*. A linguistic community is a group of people who speak a certain language, for example English. Determining who belongs to a linguistic community involves such distinctions as what is proper English, what native speakers of English take to be correct sentences in their language, and who they can understand. For Davidson such questions are equivalent to figuring out what a community considers to be proper table manners, and although they can be of great importance, they are not relevant to the issue of charity. Charity is not about speaking a particular language properly, but about the very ability to use language – who is considered a language user and thus interpretable, regardless of how much her speech conforms to that of others in the community, and even regardless of whether the interpreter can understand a single word she says (even though I do not know a word of Chinese, I do not hesitate to assume that the "gibberish" uttered by people in China is a language). Charity thus determines the limits of the community of language users, regardless of what specific language they use.

Davidson's conclusion that there is no such thing as a language leads to a complete revision of the notion of linguistic competence; Davidson explains that the ability to understand a speaker who diverges considerably from conventional ways of speaking or uses words unfamiliar to the interpreter "threaten[s] standard descriptions of

linguistic competence (including descriptions for which I [Davidson] am responsible)."[190] The standard descriptions Davidson is referring to conceive linguistic competence as the ability to follow a rule and conform to convention. But Davidson's account of linguistic competence must be different, it cannot be about the ability to follow an already existing rule (the ability to apply an existing theory of interpretation), but must explain the ability to invent new truth theories that can cope with new, and sometimes surprising evidence as it is being revealed.[191] It is this realization regarding the kind of aptitude that enables interpretation and understanding that leads Davidson to conclude that "we have abandoned not only the ordinary notion of a language, but we have erased the boundary between knowing a language and knowing our way around in the world generally."[192]

As a principle of speakerhood charity is therefore about much more than knowing a language, it is about a creature's comportment in the world. When understood as a set of conventions language is like glasses, we see the world through it in the sense that it makes the world appear in a certain color or a degree of clarity, but it can also be replaced with a different pair, as evident by the ability to learn a second language.[193] Put another way: the specific language a person speaks is random, which is not to say that it does not affect the way that person thinks and sees the world, but it is extraneous in the sense that whether that language is English or Hebrew is arbitrary. The ability to engage with others interpretatively on the other hand (a process in which language, among other things, can be put to use) is like our eyes, without it we would be blind, we would be

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[190] Davidson, "Nice Derangement," 95.

[191] Ramberg, *Donald Davidson's Philosophy of Language*, 104. See also: Ramberg, "Charity and Ideology," 644.

[192] Davidson, "Nice Derangement," 107.

[193] While the glasses metaphor is helpful, we should also be careful not to over stretch it, for while different pairs of glasses can be equal, a person's first language arguably enjoys a special status.

lacking a significant sense organ that determines our experience. Davidson describes interpretation as "a mode of perception…[that] is essential to the other senses if they are to yield propositional knowledge;" the ability to interpret is therefore not an instrument one uses, but "the organ of propositional perception."[194] The metaphor of language as a sense organ is insightful in that it captures the interconnectedness between language, thought and the world (or perception), and demonstrate that for Davidson language and thought do not represent a pre-given world but receive their content from their necessary and originary connection to the world.

  when the boundary between knowing a language and knowing our way around in the world generally is erased the question of the limit of charity becomes ethically laden: is it ever legitimate to approach a creature as unintelligible in principle, as unworthy of interpretation? One thing we can say for sure is that the search for answering these kinds of questions takes us far beyond what is traditionally considered the purview of a semantic theory. Although Davidson never poses the question of suspending charity as such, he answers it indirectly when he categorically excludes all nonhuman animals from the rational realm. Such categorical exclusion amounts to declaring nonhuman animals as prima facie non-interpretable, hence expelling them from the realm of the creatures worthy of charity with no right of appeal. Given Davidson's insistence that animals are not rational creatures we are faced with two options: if we determine that this exclusion has sufficient grounds, then we have also found what justifies a suspension of charity; alternatively, if we judge that this exclusion is unjustified and does not follow from Davidson's theory, then we must deal with the consequences of redefining the boundaries of the community of language users. In order to decide between these two alternatives,

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[194] Davidson, "Seeing Through Language," 135.

the next chapter goes back to Nancy, who, based on similar considerations regarding the primacy of interpretation over language, draws completely different conclusions that lead him to open up the boundaries of the linguistic community for creatures of all kinds, including even plants and stones. After presenting Nancy's reasoning, the concluding chapter will take on the issue of nonhuman language users in order to ask about the nature of the boundaries of the community of language users and how they are delineated.

IV. Nancy's Politics of Sense

The ethical implications of "unconventional" communication

For the most part, Nancy's work is viewed as bearing little relevance to philosophy of language, yet the question of language or communication is an undercurrent that runs throughout Nancy's entire philosophy. At the end of chapter two I quoted Nancy's appeal to philosophy to find a new theory of communication, that does not presuppose linguistic rules or conventions as a necessary condition for communicative success.[195] In yet another text, he describes "the question of language as an unprecedented and fundamental question" and calls upon philosophy "to think another meaning of meaning" by "put[ting] back into question an entire understanding of language."[196] As these excerpts suggest, communication is of great importance for Nancy's philosophy, which, as argued in chapter two, hinges on a new conception of meaning, which precedes conventional language and consists in an interpellation or an exposure of singulars. Nancy's call to philosophy to think another meaning of meaning is an attempt to bring to the fore and explore this new conception of meaning that composes the being-in-common of a community, prior to any communal agreement or contract. In order to bring out those aspects of Nancy's work that are the most relevant to philosophy of language I will contrast it with the work of Jacques Derrida, who wrote extensively about language and whose work is closely connected to Nancy's. The first section of this chapter will use Derrida's work to set up Nancy's conception of meaning and language; I will argue that while Nancy is indebted to Derrida, his work ends up taking a somewhat different

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[195] See: Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, xl.
[196] Nancy, *The Gravity of Thought*, 55–56.

direction that aligns him more closely with Davidson. The rest of the chapter will use Nancy's philosophy to develop a more nuanced understanding of the social aspect of Davidson's theory of interpretation and explore some of its ethical implications. More specifically, I will use Nancy's notion of sense to argue that Davidson's notion of charity includes an irreducible ethical and political element.

Nancy's rejection of signification, metaphysics and deconstruction

According to Derrida, the philosophical tradition has always conceived meaning in terms of presence, as something that can, at least potentially, make itself fully present, thus making any form of representation a secondary and temporary substitute for a currently deferred presence. Signs are thus considered derivative and external to meaning, which can never be fully captured and made present within the representational system of signs.[197] On this view, successful communication requires the presence of a subject, whose intention animates the sign and endows it with meaning; while signs are necessary for the transmission of meaning (for making the speaker's intention manifest to a recipient), they are not an integral part of meaning, they only mediate a meaning that is already present, prior to its transmission, in the interiority of the speaker's consciousness, where it is not contaminated by signification.[198] The presupposition of a meaning untouched by signification, combined with the assumption that signs cannot fully represent that meaning, drove philosophers to always search for ways to overcome

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[197] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976 [1967]), 11–13.
[198] For a representative example of such a view see Derrida's presentation of Husserl in: Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973 [1967]), 38.

signification: "logocentrism and the metaphysics of presence [i]s the exigent, powerful, systematic, and irrepressible desire for…the transcendental signified, which, at one time or another, would place a reassuring end to the reference from sign to sign."[199] Against this tradition Derrida demonstrates the necessary and central role of signification, and argues that meaning can only exist as a system of signs: "from the moment that there is meaning there are nothing but signs. We *think only in signs*."[200]

Nancy follows Derrida in rejecting the idea of an unmediated meaning, and in his critique of the philosophical tradition that assigns the transmission of this meaning a derivative and secondary role. However, while Derrida argues for the necessary role of representation and signification, Nancy asserts that there is meaning that does not consist in signification and representation. Nancy explains that by contrasting the linguistic sign with its nonlinguistic purpose, representation maintains a distance between language (the system of signs) and the unmediated reality it represents. Derrida attempts to overcome this distance by arguing that there is no unmediated meaning present outside the system of signs, so representation is inescapable and language is all there is.[201] Nancy takes the opposite approach by rejecting representation and instead thinking language as "the bursting forth of a presence."[202] The attempt to dispose of representation and conceive language as presence itself seems to align Nancy with the advocates of metaphysics of presence, thus putting him in conflict with Derrida;[203] but while in the metaphysical

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[199] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 49.
[200] Ibid., 50.
[201] Derrida is of course notorious for saying that "there is nothing outside the text," his most famous as well as misunderstood contention.
[202] Nancy, *The Gravity of Thought*, 55.
[203] Derrida himself wavers in his assessment of Nancy's philosophy. Although he recognizes Nancy as a successor that carries on Derrida's own attempt to deconstruct western metaphysics he is unsure of the extent to which Nancy's approach actually allows him to escape metaphysics of presence rather than makes

tradition representation indicates the existence of an unmediated reality beyond the system of signs, Nancy's entire work rests on the ontological claim that being is always already being-with (*Mitsein*), so everything that exists is mediated from the outset. Nancy's aim is therefore not to overcome mediation, but to reformulate it in nonrepresentational terms, thus surpassing both metaphysics and deconstruction.

Although deconstruction puts forward a powerful critique of metaphysics, in so far as it is parasitic on metaphysics it remains incurably linked with it. Since deconstruction works within the tradition it critiques, it can never do away with the metaphysical connotations of the system of signs; as Derrida himself admits, since the very concept of a "sign" was constituted and established by the philosophical tradition he deconstructs, the deconstructive movement that redeems the sign is not a movement against that tradition, but a move within that tradition, a move that seeks to bring that tradition to a closure, but at the same time has no choice but to use the very thing it wishes to do away with.[204] Nancy can therefore be seen as a rebellious heir of Derrida, who takes into account the upshots of deconstruction as far as rejecting speaker intention and the notion of subjectivity that goes along with it, while at the same time disposing of deconstruction by putting forward a conception of meaning that is free of signs.

Nancy explains that overcoming signification is a twofold task, it is a matter of "inquiring what presentation of the thing would not be an *end* of language, and what

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him its contemporary representative. The most remarkable example of such a vacillating reading of Nancy's philosophy can be found in: Jacques Derrida, *On Touching - Jean-Luc Nancy*, trans. Christine Irizarry (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005 [2000]).

[204] Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 51–52. About deconstruction being an internal movement see also: "the movements of deconstruction do not destroy structures from the outside. … the enterprise of deconstruction always in a certain way falls prey to its own work." (Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 24).

linguistic presentation would not be an instrument for the signification of things."[205] Signification relies on a juxtaposition between language and the world (between the signifier and the signified, between the linguistic sign and its ulterior, nonlinguistic purpose); as a direct result language becomes derivative, an instrument for representing a language-less "thing," while the thing functions as the end of language, as the reassuring signified that puts an end to the reference from sign to sign. Nancy realizes that this twofold problem requires a twofold solution: eliminating the derivative, representative nature of language on the one hand, and eliminating the idea of a given, unmediated reality on the other. This recognition that language and reality must be interwoven back together is shared by Davidson, who takes a similar twofold approach: by rejecting any reification of meaning into language he eliminates the separation of meaning from the concrete, empirical circumstances in which it is produced, and by rejecting empiricism and insisting on the absolute primacy of interpretation he precludes the idea that anything can be experienced or perceived directly, without the mediation of interpretation.[206] Analyzing the way in which Nancy carries out this twofold task will reveal some of the ethical potential and implications, as well as shortcomings, of Davidson's philosophy of language.

To explicate Nancy's conception of meaning and language let us go back to his notion of community and spell out its close connection to communication. In the second

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[205] Nancy, *The Gravity of Thought*, 56.

[206] For Davidson's critique of empiricism see: Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme"; Donald Davidson, "The Myth of the Subjective," in *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001 [1988]), 39–52; Donald Davidson, "Externalisms," in *Interpreting Davidson*, ed. Petr Kotatko, Peter Pagin, and Gabriel Segal (Stanford: CSLI Publications, 2001), 1–16. On Davidson's anti-representationalism see: Bjørn Ramberg, "What Davidson Said to the Skeptic, or: Anti-Representationalism, Triangulation and the Naturalization of the Subjective," in *Interpreting Davidson*, ed. Petr Kotatko, Peter Pagin, and Gabriel Segal (Stanford: CSLI Publications, 2001), 213–236.

chapter I introduced a distinction between a traditional notion of community that perceives community as a common being, and Nancy's notion of community as being-in-common. The traditional notion of community assumes that in order for a group of individuals to come together and become one community they must share a common being in the form of a common quality or an agreement to abide by the same rules. Such common being is what provides the separate individuals with a common ground that unites them into one body and turns them into a community. However, Nancy observes that before such common being can be achieved community must already exist in another manner, which he names being-in-common. In order for the community members to reach an agreement or establish a common ground they must already be in contact with one another, and that contact is what makes up their being-in-common. Nancy therefore argues that a community consists first and foremost of such being-in-common without which no subsequent agreement or union can take place.

Nancy's notion of community requires a complementary theory of communication, that can explain how members of the community can be in contact with one another at the level of being-in-common, prior to the establishment of common practices and rules. Like the common being of community, signification is also a matter of agreement because it requires speakers of a language to abide by the same linguistic conventions (since a sign is not intrinsically connected to the thing it represents a social convention or a common practice is required to link them together). So when language is conceived as signification its meaningfulness depends on social convention, which is analogous to the reliance of community on a common being for its unification. At the heart of Nancy's work on community there is therefore a call for a new theory of

communication, a theory that does not presuppose linguistic rules or conventions as a necessary condition for communicative success.

In the case of community Nancy observes that its common being is made possible by an initial being-in-common; in the case of language he recognizes in a similar fashion that its signifying function is made possible by an initial meaning that is already shared between interlocutors:

> "that which borders the meaning [sens] of significations in all discourse, and which is perhaps a 'presentation' of discourse and of words, of you to me, of one to another, that is irreducible to 'meaning' and yet is always present on its borders. I might attempt to say that this *meaning* takes place *between us* and not between signifier, signified, and referent."[207]

Here Nancy distinguishes between two types of meaning: one that is found in signification (in the relation between signifier, signified and referent), and one that exists at the borders of signification but cannot be reduced to signs because it exists "between us." By asserting that meaning cannot be exhausted by the social conventions that determine and control the use of signs Nancy is not denying that interlocutors can and regularly do use linguistic conventions to communicate with one another. However, he points out that such exchange of signs would not have been possible without a preexisting connection between the interlocutors: "meaning [sens] is the possibility of significations…[it is] *the element in which there can be* significations, interpretations, representation."[208] The use of signs is preconditioned by an initial interaction between

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[207] Nancy, *The Gravity of Thought*, 57.
[208] Ibid., 58–59. See also: "it is not a matter of signification. It should be a matter of sense insofar as it does not signify, and not because it consists in a signification so elevated, sublime, ultimate, or rarefied that no signifier could ever manage to present it, but, on the contrary, insofar as sense comes before all significations … even as it makes them possible, forming the opening of the general signifyingness [or

conversationalists because without such interaction, without an initial exposure or interpellation and the shared communicative space it opens up, any exchange of signs would be pointless and in fact impossible. To better distinguish between these two types of meaning, Nancy refers to conventional meaning as *signification*, and to the meaning that cannot be reduced to signification as *sense*.[209]

Nancy's distinction between sense and signification echoes Davidson's distinction between interpretation, which is a dynamic, meaning-producing interaction that takes place between interlocutors in actual occasions of speech, and language as a set of conventions, which is the abstraction and reification of the former. Like Davidson, Nancy rejects the reification of meaning into conventional signs, and the idea that meaning can exist in abstraction, independently of communicators, and claims that meaning arises in concrete occasions of communication between actual interlocutors. He writes: "we are meaning [sens] in the sense that we are the element in which significations can be produced and circulated. …signification…has no meaning in itself and, as a result, is what it is and does what it does only insofar as it is communicated."[210] The idea that meaning consists first and foremost in actual occasions of communication makes Nancy a natural ally of Davidson, but it seems to go against Derrida's powerful critique of the longstanding philosophical tradition, dating all the way back to Plato, which favors

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significance: *signifiance*] … in which and according to which it is first of all possible for significations to come to produce themselves." (Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 10).

[209] The distinction between sense and signification is somewhat obscured by the English translation, as Nancy's use of the French word "sens" is translated to English sometimes as meaning and sometimes as sense, but it can be found consistently in the original French text. It should be noted that the French word sens can also mean "direction" as well as "perceptual faculty," and Nancy often plays on these other meanings. See also: translator's note in: Nancy, *The Gravity of Thought*, 89, n. 1. As well as: Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 172–173. For Nancy's discussion of the equivocal nature of the word sense see: Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 76–78.

[210] Nancy, "Of Being Singular Plural," 2.

spoken communication over the written sign.[211] Derrida links this bias toward spoken signs to the metaphysics of presence, for it reflects a belief that while the written sign is easily subjected to misinterpretation, the actual presence of the speaker guards against such ambiguity of meaning. Nancy and Davidson's insistence on the primacy of actual occasions of communication over language as a system of signs might seem like a contemporary manifestation of this logic of presence, but I will argue that the way they conceive that presence actually undermines the traditional metaphysical assumptions opposed by Derrida, thus recognizing Derrida's critique, but drawing a different conclusion from it.

Derrida explains that a sign is constituted by its ability to repeat in different contexts and still be recognized as the same sign, as carrying the same meaning. In order for a sign to signify successfully its conventional or literal meaning must be recognizable even when it is used in an unconventional way (as in the case of malapropism, irony or an actor on stage); hence, the ability to understand an irregular occurrence of a sign depends on its conventional meaning coming through as well, and serving as the background for understanding its abnormal application. As mentioned in chapter one, this approach leads some of Davidson's critics (Dummett, Bar-On and Risjord) to conclude that irregular uses of language are parasitic on or secondary to the general adherence to linguistic conventions. However, Derrida contends that such hierarchy between regular and irregular uses of language is unsustainable because it requires binding the linguistic sign to a particular context as the only one that yields its literal (standard) meaning. Against this assumption he argues that the very ability of the sign to repeat itself, to maintain its

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[211] For a discussion of this tendency in Plato see: Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2004 [1972]), 67–186.

identity despite significant changes in context, also implies that a sign is in principle detachable from any context, and so can never be fully determined by any one context (or a finite number of contexts), whatever that context is. Derrida concludes: "every sign…can be *cited*, put between quotation marks; in so doing it can break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable. This does not imply that the mark is valid outside of a context, but on the contrary that there are only contexts without any center or absolute anchoring."[212] Derrida argues further that this indeterminacy of the sign is not an accident, nor is it an anomaly, rather it is the condition of possibility of signification in general; a sign that is completely determined by one context would not be able to repeat itself, i.e. would not be able to function as a sign.

As previously described, proponents of the conventional approach to language argue that by rejecting linguistic conventions and endorsing understanding as the sole linguistic standard Davidson is reverting to an individualistic notion of meaning, on which meaning is determined by speaker intention. However, Derrida's critique reveals that it is the conventional approach that fails to break away from the intentional model, because of metaphysical undertones that it fails to overcome. Despite its pragmatic appearance, the conventional approach to language is revealed to be based on some of the same metaphysical principles that guide philosophy of consciousness, in that they both assume that meaning can be traced back to a single origin. For philosophy of consciousness meaning originates in the self-presence of consciousness, and therefore depends on speaker intention (on the speaker's *vouloir dire*); the conventional approach

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[212] Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," in *Limited Inc*, ed. Gerald Graff, trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1977), 12.

rejects speaker intention as a basis for meaning, but maintains the structure of a single, unified origin of meaning by insisting that there is one context (or a limited number of contexts) that gives the proper meaning of a sign, from which all other meanings (uses) are consequently derived. The conventional approach attempts to undercut the problematic notion of speaker intention by grounding meaning in use, in a public routine, but it does not manage to escape the metaphysical structure of speaker intention, because it replaces the presence of consciousness with another kind of presence – that of the standard context, the only context that yields literal meaning. The idea that speakers of the same language do not need interpretation to understand one another, as Dummett argues against Davidson, reveals a traditional metaphysical yearning for an immediate understanding, for an apparatus (in this case language as a set of conventions) that will eliminate the need to converse (the need to interpret) by generating a concurrence that is smooth and uninterrupted (at least in principle).

In the first chapter I presented Davidson's critique of convention and literal meaning, which is almost identical to Derrida's, and leads him to similarly conclude that it is of the essence of language that linguistic signs cannot be associated in a binding way with their nonlinguistic circumstances.[213] Davidson and Derrida both come to reject the idea of literal meaning because it assumes that there is one context that gives the proper meaning of a word or a sentence, on which all other meanings are parasitic (in the sense that the literal meaning is primary and the other meanings are derivative and dependent

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[213] "It is not an accidental feature of language that the ulterior purpose of an utterance and its literal meaning are independent, in the sense that the latter cannot be derived from the former: it is of the essence of language." (Davidson, "Communication and Convention," 274). For a detailed comparison between Derrida and Davidson see: Samuel C. Wheeler III, "Indeterminacy of French Interpretation: Derrida and Davidson," in *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, ed. Ernest LePore (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 477–494.

on it), but this shared realization ends up leading them down divergent paths. While Derrida embraces signification along with the inevitable indeterminacy of meaning that follows from the inability of signs to be tied down, for Davidson the critique of literal meaning irredeemably taints any conception of meaning as consisting in conventional signs, which leads him to think a new meaning of meaning by getting away from convention all together, and embracing instead an empirical conception of meaning. To understand how Davidson's empirical conception of meaning is different from the traditional metaphysical conception of meaning as (potential) presence let us return to Nancy's notion of community.

For Nancy the linguistic community envisioned by Dummett, in which all community members are able to more or less follow the same routine (at least in theory), is not just unrealistic (a claim with which Dummett will probably agree to some degree), but utterly misguided. For Nancy Dummett's notion of linguistic community is not really a community, because it obliterates the fundamental sociality (the being-in-common) that makes a community. In the second chapter I mentioned Nancy's objection to the nostalgic yearning to a past community that was so tightly woven together that it was effectively one body. In such a perfectly cohesive community communion comes about without mediation, because its members are so close, and exist in such harmony, that they are able to understand one another and be as one without any need to converse, i.e. without the need to use signs or interpret. As Nancy points out, such communion is actually not a community, because in its perfect union it loses the plurality which is the hallmark of community. Accordingly, communication between members of such "community" is not ultimate or ideal but nonexistent; a state in which interlocutors are so

perfectly synchronized that they automatically understand one another without having to interpret eradicates the need for communicative interaction, thus nullifying the very notion of understanding by reducing it to a non-interactive parallelism. Davidson argues against Dummett that interpretation is necessary because mere synchronization through previously determined social conventions does not suffice to produce meaning; Nancy underscores this point by insisting that meaning is grounded in a fundamental relationality that can never be reduced to a single origin: "before being spoken, before being a particular language or signification, before being verbal, 'language' is the following: the extension and simultaneity of the 'with'."[214] It is this fundamental relationality that sets Nancy's notion of meaning apart from the philosophical tradition criticized by Derrida, because it dictates that meaning cannot be reduced to a single origin, which is ultimately what bothers Derrida about the metaphysics of presence.

Derrida uses the iterability of the sign (the sign's ability to break with its context) to undercut the privileged position of the subject of speech; he argues that the inability of any context to entirely enclose a sign applies to its author's intention as well: "[the] iterative structure, cut[s] off from all absolute responsibility, from *consciousness* as the ultimate authority."[215] So for Derrida the sign's ability to function independently of any particular context means that even its author does not exert definitive authority over its meaning. Derrida's contention that meaning is always implicated in signs is less about asserting the importance of signs, but more importantly about the nature of meaning. The main idea is that no one can fully contain and control meaning; Derrida takes a deconstructive approach, he undermines the metaphysical yearning to a completely

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[214] Nancy, "Of Being Singular Plural," 92.
[215] Derrida, "Signature Event Context," 8.

determinable meaning by using metaphysics' own logic against itself (in this case the logic of the sign), which is why it is necessary for him that meaning remains implicate in signification. Following Derrida's approach to meaning but parting with the deconstructive method, Nancy ventures to formulate a notion of meaning that is in line with Derrida's teachings in that it is never fully contained, but also moves beyond Deconstruction in that it leaves behind the notion that meaning must be signified and uses the notion of being-with to ensure that meaning is not reduced to a single origin. To effectively distance Davidson's theory of interpretation from an individualist notion of meaning, we must therefore spell out why the interaction that facilitates radical interpretation cannot be reduced to a single origin of meaning, that is, we want to reconstruct Davidson's model of interpretation in terms of Nancy's notion of being-with, which is the aim of the next section.

"Being-with" as the locus of meaning

While Nancy rejects representational distance, immediate communication is still a contradiction in terms for him; on Nancy's view, meaning cannot be reduced to speaker intention because a speaker is not autonomous in determining the meaning of her words, not because that meaning is subject to a wider social agreement, but because it has more than one origin. He writes:

> "language is essentially in the with. Every spoken word is the simultaneity of at least two different modes of that spoken word; even when I am by myself, there is the one that is said and the one that is heard, that is, the one that is resaid. As soon as a word is spoken it is resaid. As such, meaning does not consist in the transmission from a speaker to a receiver, but in the simultaneity of (at least) two origins of meaning:

that of the saying and that of its resaying. As far as meaning is concerned, what I say is not simply 'said', for meaning must return to me resaid in order to be said. But in returning to me in this way, that is, from the other, what comes back also becomes another origin of meaning."[216]

Nancy's claim that everything must be resaid in order to be said entails that meaning is fundamentally relational rather than intentional, because it does not stem from a speaker's intention (from what one means to say), but from the relationship between conversationalists. This is not to say that intentions do not play a central role in determining the meanings of utterances, but, like the meanings themselves, they emerge only in the context of interpretation, which is a shared enterprise. Toward the end of the first chapter I argued that Dummett reduces Davidson's conception of meaning to speaker intention because he underestimates the normative power of understanding; I explained that the objective of being understood undermines the autonomy of the speaker by opening the meaning of words to negotiation between the speaker and the interpreter, thus making the production of meaning a fundamentally intersubjective enterprise. It is now time to flesh out the intersubjective nature of interpretation.

Communication (or interpretation) can be viewed as intersubjective in a trivial sense; on this view communication is intersubjective by definition because it involves a speaker and a listener. Adapted to Davidsonian terms, this view entails that the intersubjective interaction or negotiation that grounds radical interpretation is a back and forth movement between a speaker and an interpreter who work together to gradually construct and refine a shared passing theory over time. But when conceived in this way, the intersubjectivity of radical interpretation remains within the purview of the intentional

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[216] Nancy, "Of Being Singular Plural," 86.

model of meaning (or philosophy of consciousness), because it still allows for a single origin, from which meaning is consequently expressed and transmitted. A back and forth movement still assumes, at least theoretically, that meaning originates with one interlocutor and is consequently passed around to the other. What makes such an action intersubjective is that it involves passing something (a sign) from hand to hand, like a game of catch in which a ball is passed from one player to the other. The players in a game of catch must maintain a high level of coordination for the act of passing the ball to succeed, and in that sense their action is intersubjective for it requires coordination between a number of agents. However, the communal or shared element in this scenario is only secondary or superficial, because at its base what takes place between the players is two separate actions executed by two independent agents, one that throws the ball and one that catches it. Although the two players play *with* one another, the success of their joint effort is a matter of mere synchronization: the two separate actions of throwing and catching are coordinated in order to assure that one player throws the ball in the right direction, at the right speed and force, so the other player can position herself in the right place to catch it. Though a simplified example, the game of catch illustrates the workings of signification: a linguistic sign is like a ball that is being passed around between interlocutors who try to correlate themselves with the sign's proper meaning, in much the same way that basketball players position themselves on the court. It is such conception of meaning that is assumed by the conventional approach, for which using language is like playing a game with predetermined rules (although of course the rules of language are more intricate and less explicit than those of basketball). Davidson's model of interpretation can be misrepresented in a way that makes it susceptible to a similar

charge; it could be argued that on Davidson's model theories of truth are passed around like balls or signs, on this reading the passing theory takes shape in a gradual process between interlocutors, and so in the end is affected by both of them, but they still affect it separately, so the collaboration is only subsequent. To truly break with the game of catch model (or with the conception of communication as transmission) the communality of interlocutors must be conceived in a different way.

To do away with the idea of a single origin meaning cannot be something that passes between interlocutors but must be the product of the between itself (the relation Nancy names being-with), which precedes the individual interlocutors. This is in a nutshell Nancy's point about the simultaneity of the said and the resaid: if meaning cannot be traced back to a single origin then communication is an action whose agent is non-individual.[217] An action whose agent is plural is different from an intersubjective action in that it is intersubjective not because it consists of passing something between more than one agent but because it is carried out by a single agent who is plural nonetheless, so the multiple origins of the action must be understood not as a multiplicity of agents but as a plurality within an agent (a singular-plural agent in Nancy's terminology). As a result, the agent of such action is already mediated, so the resaid is not a relaying of the said from the listener back to the speaker, rather it exposes another origin of meaning that cannot be completely separated from, nor completely merged with,

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[217] The concept of a non-individual agency loosely takes after Charles Taylor's notion of a dialogical action. In his essay "The Dialogical Self" Taylor suggests that the agency of some human actions, such as ballroom dancing or sawing a log, is shared between at least two people working in a common rhythm. He distinguishes between dialogical actions and coordinated actions; the latter involves at least two agents working in coordination with one another, whereas the former "is effected by an integrated, non-individual agent." (Charles Taylor, "The Dialogical Self," in *The Interpretive Turn: Philosophy, Science and Culture*, ed. David R. Hiley, James F. Bohman, and Richard Shusterman [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991], 304–314).

the origin of the said, so in a sense the said and the resaid originate at the same place, but that place is not unified but plural because it is already mediated.

This point is crucial for distancing Nancy from metaphysics of presence and for resisting the accusation of solipsism (or duetism) made against Davidson. Derrida's argument about the iterability of the sign is meant to contest the idea that the meaning of a sign can be completely determined by a context; he writes: "a context is never absolutely determinable, or rather, …its determination can never be entirely certain or saturated."[218] While Nancy and Davidson ground meaning in a particular context, that context is never certain or saturated because its determination is a matter of an ongoing, dynamic negotiation that can never exhaust itself. Moreover, the context of radical interpretation is shared, and it is this fundamental sharing or plurality (dissemination in Derrida's terms) that prevents meaning from being fully present to one consciousness.

Radical interpretation is therefore a relation that precedes the speaker and interpreter which it relates, and in this relation (in the process of producing meaning) the interlocutors share an integrated agency, which is not one agency (they are not merged into one agent) but also not two separate agencies working in coordination. This entails more than just realizing that both interlocutors participate in, and are responsible for, the meaning they produce in the course of their conversation. If the agency of the interlocutors is already interwoven then they are not two independent beings but rather their being is already shared, and it is only from that sharing that meaning can be produced and responsibility taken. It is only when "being-with" precedes and constitutes the being of the agents and their agency that communication is no longer about something

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[218] Derrida, "Signature Event Context," 3.

that passes back and forth between agents but is the between itself. The agency must be the relation itself since there is no agency (no intention or meaning) before there is a relation. So the agency itself (and not just the action it performs) is relational, mediated and shared. Because the relation is primary, the agency is not one, and also not two agencies combined through a third element (a linguistic standard, an imagined community), it is singular-plural.

The rejection of signification or linguistic conventions therefore hinges on an underlying sense of being-in-common (or being-with) that is necessary for all acts of communication. Uncovering this sense of being-with reveals that the ramifications of rejecting convention extend beyond formal semantics, and involve an ethical-political claim about the nature of the sociality of language and the makings of linguistic community. Since Davidson never fully acknowledged this sense of community that lurks at the bottom of his theory of interpretation he also neglected to explore some of the more significant ethical implications of his philosophy, which is where Nancy can be of aid.

Nancy's conception of communication as grounded in being-with makes language profoundly social and not merely public. If meaning consists in a set of conventions that exist independently of actual occasions of utterance, then communication becomes a matter of coordination between language users who achieve mutual understanding by orienting themselves toward the same linguistic standard.[219] It is undeniable that on such a view linguistic meaning has a public aspect, but such view of communication in fact conceals the social interaction through which meaning comes into being. Language as a

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[219] It is interesting in this context of orientation to keep in mind the French word *sens*, which in Nancy's writings is usually translated as sense or meaning but also means direction. We can therefore ask whether meaning is about going in the same direction as others do (following the same routine or orienting oneself toward the same standard) or is it about carving one's own path.

set of conventions relies on a fundamental sociality that lets such conventions come about and generate over time. However, once the linguistic conventions are set (even provisionally) meaning seems to reside in the conventions themselves and appears to be separated from the initial sociality that created it. According to Nancy this is a theoretical division that suppresses the original sociality without which no convention is useful or even possible; in practice this original sociality exists not just in extraordinary moments in which a new linguistic standard is constituted, but persists in each and every occasion of communication.[220] By glossing over this sociality the conventional approach conceals the process in which existing linguistic standards come about, thus making them appear more stable and perpetual than they actually are. Nancy's insistence on being-in-common as the origin of meaning undermines this reification of meaning and brings to the fore the actual process that makes meaning possible and from which it can never be completely divorced, no matter how entrenched the linguistic conventions are.

The fundamental sociality of meaning is embodied not in the sharing of the same linguistic standard or routine by all the members of a language community but in the fact that a language user is never autonomous in determining the meaning of his words. According to the conventional approach meaning is determined by the linguistic community which sets the standard that holds its members together and serves as their common being, as the common ground on which they all rely in order to be understood. But for Nancy meaning cannot be determined in solitary not because it is subject to the (perhaps implicit) agreement of the community (or the relevant members of the

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[220] See Davidson's essay on James Joyce, where he argues that the linguistic inventiveness typical to Joyce can be found to some degree in every act of communication. (Davidson, "James Joyce and Humpty Dumpty," 157).

community), but because nothing can be said without being resaid at the same time. Consequently, meaning is never fixed because it can never be completely controlled; the resaid is a different origin of meaning that can never be fully anticipated by the said, hence, a speaker can never completely control what she says (the said). As mentioned before, intentions for Davidson (and Nancy) emerge only in the context of interpretation, and if interpretation is, as I have argued, the doing of a plural agent, then even my intentions, let alone what I say, are not fully determined by me, are not under my complete control. So in communicating one exposes herself to the other, not in the sense of unveiling a hidden intention and making it available to someone else (such intention is meaningless before the occasion of interpretation), but in the sense that in speaking one exposes herself to a resaid; Nancy writes: "[sense is signified] by all that can make someone somewhere expose him/herself to sense, to making sense, to receiving sense, to leaving sense open."[221] The emphasis on the simultaneity and alterity of the resaid dictates that one cannot say anything, cannot mean anything, without already implicating herself or himself in an intricate network of relations with what others say, mean and understand.

Recognizing the exposure involved in communication means realizing the inconsumable alterity of the other and the fact that what I say and mean is tied to what others say and mean without the possibility of ever being disentangled. This realization calls for a reexamination of the question of responsibility in language. When speech is understood as the expression and revelation of a hidden intention, the act of speaking is

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[221] Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 165. See also Nancy's explanation that his notion of communication is "without the least connotation or intonation of an appeal to a hidden sense or revelation – but, to the contrary, abandoned as it is uttered, left, deposited, exscribed as formula." (Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 75).

viewed accordingly as an act of exposing the inner content of one's mind to someone else. Such exposure requires exercising some caution so as not to offend the listener, which is why we hold speakers accountable for what they say and demand that they take responsibility for the consequences of their speech. This notion of speaker liability focuses on the content as the most important aspect of speech, and views the act of speaking as imposing upon the speaker the duty to exercise control over the content of her speech. Responsibility in language is thus conceived in terms of a responsibility of the speaker over the content of his speech and toward the listener, i.e. as an obligation to assure that the listener is not forced to be exposed to contents that she might find offensive. Nancy's approach on the other hand highlights the responsibility of the listener toward the speaker by emphasizing the element of response that is inherent in responsibility. The interdependence between the said and the resaid entails that the speaker's ability to say anything at all depends on the availability of a listener that can respond and in his response (the resaid) facilitate the speaker's said. Responsibility in language is thus conceived as a mutual duty, shared by both the speaker and the listener, to converse in a way that does not sever the ties between them, so the emphasis is shifted from the content of what is being said to the act of saying.[222] "Saying" is not an act in the ordinary sense, it is more of a maintenance job in which both interlocutors participate in keeping the channels of communication open by addressing each other in a way that facilitates both a said and a resaid.

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[222] The distinction between the content of speech and the act of saying alludes to Levinas' distinction in *Otherwise than Being* between the said (the content of speech) and the saying (the act of addressing another), a distinction which Nancy adopts. See for example: "the meaning [sens] of Being is never in what is said – never said in signification." (Nancy, "Of Being Singular Plural," 27). See also Nancy's brief discussion of the distinction between the said and the saying, where he acknowledges Levinas' contribution on this matter, in: Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007 [2002]), 76, n. 4.

Shifting the emphasis from the content of speech to the act of addressing yields a distinction between two functions of language: the informative function which conveys facts and ideas, and the phatic function which does not convey content but maintains a relationship between the conversationalists.[223] Nancy writes: "the acts of speech tend toward the most naked function of language, toward what one calls its phatic function: the maintenance of a relation that communicates no sense other than the relation itself."[224] The phatic element performs a social task, it establishes a mood of sociability and opens up the channels of communication; the point is that before we can use language to signify and convey information there must already be an atmosphere of sharing and communality, a readiness and willingness to engage in conversation. Even when the only thing the conversationalists exchange is conventional signs they still have to approach each other with the sense of responsibility previously discussed, which is not a matter of taking charge over the content of one's speech but of saying things in the right tone, that leaves the said exposed to a resaid and vice versa, so as not to severe the relation. For Nancy every act of communication communicates communicability before anything else, it is therefore the very engagement of interlocutors with one another (and not the signs they exchange) that conditions communication; quoting Giorgio Agamben he writes: "'each communication is, above all, communication not of something held in

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[223] The term "phatic communion" was first introduced in 1923 by cultural anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski; Malinowski writes: "there can be no doubt that we have here a new type of linguistic use – phatic communion … – a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words. … Are words in Phatic Communion used primarily to convey meaning, the meaning which is symbolically theirs? Certainly not! They fulfill a social function and that is their principle aim … we may say that language does not function here as a means of transmission of thought." Malinowski gives "sociabilities and gossip" as examples of phatic communion, and explains that such use of language serves "to establish bonds of personal union between people brought together by the mere need of companionship and does not serve any purpose of communicating ideas." (Bronislaw Malinowski, "The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages," in *The Meaning of Meaning,* by Charles Kay Ogden and Ivor Armstrong Richards [Florida: Harcourt Brace Javanovich, Inc., 1989], 315–316).

[224] Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 117.

common but of a *communicability*'…consequently, sense is not what is communicated but *that* there is communication."[225]

The phatic function of language is not manifested in the ability to use words in a socially accepted way but in the ability to address another being in a manner that cultivates the relationship with him. A meaningful utterance starts with such an address: "there must be the *incipit* of the sentence: there must be the sentential or phatic opening, the affirmation, the declaration, the leap without consequence or subsequence, before all sequence, the casting into words, speaking as a cast, and perhaps a cast before all of speech, the blow or throw."[226] Grounding language in the phatic opening of meaning broadens the range of expressions that partake in linguistic communication to include "the cry, the call, and the complaint as much as the theoretical discourse, the poem, and the song, along with the gesture and even silence."[227] Nancy recognizes that some of these expressions (most noticeably gestures and silence, but also cries and calls) are not strictly linguistic and are also used by creatures that by all means cannot speak. Still, he insists that despite their position outside of language such expressions, and the creatures that produce them, participate in making sense and are "at once within language and

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[225] Ibid., 114.

[226] Jean-Luc Nancy, *A Finite Thinking*, ed. Simon Sparks (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 123. See also: "existing ex-poses itself outside language through language itself, something that would take place, in particular, within making-sense-in-common; in other words, through a language that is first and foremost an *address*. We might well say: ethics would need to be 'phatic' rather than 'semantic'." (Nancy, *A Finite Thinking*, 195). And: "sense is consequently not the 'signified' or the 'message': it is that *something like the transmission of a 'message' should be possible*. It is the relation as such, and nothing else. Thus, it is as relation that sense configures itself – it configures the *toward* that it is (whereas signification figures itself as identity)." (Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 118).

[227] Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 115.

beyond (or just short of) language, but always responding to something inherent in language."[228]

Loosening up the boundaries of making sense allows for the inclusion of more creatures in the network of beings who participate in making sense. If the making of sense does not necessarily require having the ability to use conventional language, then the door is open for more creatures to take part in the making of sense. Indeed, Nancy's line of reasoning advances in this direction, to the extent that he claims that even inanimate objects participate in making sense; without suggesting that something like a stone is conscious or has some form of comprehension, Nancy nonetheless is willing to assert that a stone too is touched by sense.[229] In that respect he differs dramatically from Davidson who draws a sharp line between humans and all other creatures, and insists that it is only the formers that can behave meaningfully. Nonetheless, Nancy's position can be interpreted more moderately, so instead of advocating some form of animism or panpsychism, which he explicitly rejects, he can be seen as pointing to the fact that the ability to use language is not a binary condition but a continuum. Whereas only some creatures are linguistic in the full sense of the word, other creatures that have social abilities and can produce cries and other noises can perhaps be described as proto-linguistic, and even inanimate beings are part of the same environment in which language is being used by other creatures. Although Nancy's conclusion on this matter conflicts with Davidson's for the most part, I believe that it also points to a certain potential in Davidson's thought about language that Davidson himself refuses to acknowledge.

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[228] Ibid.
[229] Ibid., 62–63.

Charity and the ethics of making sense

As mentioned at the end of the previous chapter, Davidson refuses to accept any gradation in the ability to use language and produce meaning, and although he acknowledges the existence of some borderline cases,[230] he still argues that interpreting nonhuman animals, i.e. attributing them with intentional and linguistic behavior, is a misguided application of anthropomorphism. He explains that since we lack the vocabulary to define distinct stages between the wholly mechanistic and the mental we run into difficulties when trying to describe nonhuman behavior that seems purposeful, and so resort to describing it in intentional terms, thus attributing thought and speech to nonhuman animals. He gives the example of a heat seeking missile to demonstrate why seemingly purposeful behavior is not grounds enough for attributing a creature with intent: to the uninformed observer the missile seems to be seeking its target, but we are sufficiently acquainted with its mechanism to know that it would be a mistake to attribute desires and beliefs to it.[231] Since for Davidson thought and speech are interdependent, he concludes that there is not enough grounds for attributing nonhuman animals with either. But, I would like to argue that a closer examination of Davidson's description of first language acquisition reveals the arbitrariness of the line he draws between humans and nonhumans, thus opening up his theory of language to alternative interpretations.

As previously explained, for Davidson first language acquisition is not about a child learning to conform to an existing linguistic standard, but about a child and a teacher establishing between them a relationship in which the child is able to interpret

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[230] Donald Davidson, "Rational Animals," in *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001 [1982]), 96.
[231] Ibid., 101.

and understand the teacher. It is in the course of her relationship with her teacher that the child gradually grows to associate certain sounds with certain results and attribute similar behavior to others around her, but the transformation from mute infancy to full blown rationality is achieved only when the child acquires a concept of truth, i.e. it is once the child begins to employ concepts with the awareness of the chance of error that she becomes a speaking and thinking creature. Davidson also explains that one cannot acquire a concept of truth without also becoming aware that others around her do the same, so becoming a speaker is inseparable from the attribution of a concept of truth to others and seeing them as speakers as well. Hence, the process of acquiring the ability to speak necessarily involves acquiring the ability to interpret, one cannot be a speaker without being an interpreter of the speech of others. Davidson uses a human child as the subject of his analysis, and does not consider the possibility of a similar process in nonhumans or between humans and nonhumans. However, it is unclear on what he bases his assumption that the child only comes to recognize other humans as holding a concept of truth; on the face of it there is nothing in Davidson's account that prevents the child from establishing a relationship of interpretation with the family pet (thus rightfully attributing him with a concept of truth), or alternatively from not attributing a concept of truth to some of the humans around her.

According to Davidson's own description the question of charity, of who is a speaker worthy of interpretation, depends on who one grows to include in those others which he sees as enough like himself in the way they use the sounds they produce. "Enough like himself" here does not mean others who use the same sounds to designate the same things as the child does (others who follow the same linguistic practice), but

others who use sounds to designate things while recognizing that they might be mistaken about the way they do that. Since interpretation is primary for Davidson, the question of whether one uses words properly or not (in accordance with the community's agreed standard) is secondary to the question whether or not she should be considered as using words at all. Charity therefore is not a merely semantic matter, for it does not revolve around the question of who uses words properly, but around the question of who one is willing to regard as enough like oneself (what I previously referred to as sharing a world), thus determining who is regarded as potentially making sense.

Davidson's philosophy of language, and in particular his notion of charity, are therefore political and ethical to the core, but in a different manner than other theories that see language as social. Conceiving meaning as socially constructed unavoidably injects the question of language with an ethical element. Generally speaking, social conceptions of language view the production of meaning as a social interaction (that can be collaborative, conflictual or simply oblivious), which leads to a social agreement that determines the proper use of words, thus establishing their conventional meaning. When the sociality of language is viewed in this way, as residing in shared conventions or practices that determine the correct use of words and sentences, the ethical aspect of language is located in the competition over the determination of these conventions and practices. Meaning thus becomes a product of power relations, of who has the social power to establish certain practices and conventions as correct while excluding others as mistaken or inappropriate. It is tempting to portray the difference between Davidson and the conventional approach on this point as fairly minimal, and consisting in a disagreement regarding whether the social battle over meaning takes place between pairs

of interlocutors or on a wider social scale. But such understanding would be mistaken. The negotiation that comprises radical interpretation is not over the determination of the proper use of words, because it is more primary than that; using Nancy's terminology, we can say that Davidson's interpretive negotiation takes place not at the level of signification but at the level of sense.

Nancy's distinction between the informative and the phatic functions of language is analogues to his distinction between signification and sense: signification fulfils an informative function while sense is phatic. The relation between these two aspects of language is asymmetrical: while an utterance can be phatic without being informative, the latter assumes the former, because though a speaker can choose whether or not to convey a particular piece of information in his speech, the very act of speaking already commits one to a relation with a recipient. So for language users the phatic function is not a matter of deliberate determination, it is not a generous gesture they can choose whether or not to extend, but a demand that is forced on them by virtue of being language users. In other words: the phatic function preconditions any attempt to signify because it is the phatic function that introduces interlocutors to one another as communicating creatures, thus setting up their utterances as linguistic and intentional and therefore worthy of interpretation. It is at the phatic level that otherwise empty noises become meaningful utterances, even before they acquire any particular meaning. So for Nancy the production of meaning starts before any distinction between correct and incorrect uses of words is made, it starts in the very sharing of sense. While the ethical (and even political) aspect of signification is about who has the power to decide the proper use of a word (thus determining what it signifies), the ethical aspect of sense pertains to the question of who

shares in the network of relationships which makes up the being-in-common of the linguistic community and serves as the bedrock for signification. The apparent affinity between Nancy's conception of the phatic function of language and Davidson's notion of charity reveals that while radical interpretation certainly involves a play of power relations and a negotiation over the determination of the meaning of utterances, it is instigated and motivated by another type of interaction which is manifested at the phatic level, an interaction that Davidson names charity and Nancy calls sense.

The ethical moment in language therefore resides not (just) in the negotiation over the determination of the meaning of utterances but first and foremost in a negotiation over who gets to be considered a speaker (a language user); it is not, as Nancy explains, about "multiple wills competing to define a Sense, but of each one who makes sense."[232] As Davidson's discussion of first language acquisition demonstrates as well, the question of sense or charity is not about who determines the meaning of words and how, because meanings that have been determined belong to the realm of signification (or convention), rather it is a question of who has the means to participate in the process of making sense. The question of how sense is congealed into conventions (into signs) is necessarily secondary because no one can take part in this process without being allowed into the network of sense in the first place. The conventional approach to language, while holding language to be necessarily social, in fact conceals, under the coat of the set of conventions we call language, the actual sociality that makes meaning happen.

The sociality that Nancy and Davidson point to does not produce conventional meaning but interrupts it. Nancy writes: "dialogue is the rhythmic interruption of the

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[232] Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 115.

logos, the space between the replies, each reply apart from itself retaining for itself an access to sense that is only its own."[233] Logos is reified meaning, meaning that has been turned into a set of conventions, into a rule that serves to distinguish between what makes sense (what is true and correct) and what does not make sense. Where the logos resides interpretation becomes superfluous because there is already an agreement, so there is no need to interact. But more importantly, by making interlocutors follow the same routine the logos eliminates the differences between them, thus making interpretation impossible for it is by acknowledging that each speaker makes its own sense (i.e. that there are differences between what makes sense to me and what makes sense for someone else, and that both these senses may be different from the way things are) that we leave an opening for a resaid, thus allowing for a dialogue between us. This is in fact what having a concept of truth means, it is having a concept of the potential differences between beliefs and reality, and it is these differences that drive interpretation by inciting us to construct and reconstruct truth theories that will articulate and possibly bridge those gaps.

While Davidson and Nancy do not deny that conventions (or signs) do in fact partake in the way we communicate, they see that form of communication as secondary and derivative. Conventions are a shortcut that allows us to work in synchronization while bypassing the need to interact interpretatively and actually labor to understand one another. Such conventional cooperation, no matter how elaborate and widely accepted it is, can never trump interpretation because the uniqueness of speakers cannot be coded and contained within a finite number of conventions. By concealing the fact that communication and meaning are grounded in a negotiation of differences and not in

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[233] Ibid., 165.

similarity or harmony the conventional approach to language makes idiosyncratic uses of language derivative, thus turning them into a sign of communicative failure when in fact they are primary and what yields interpretation and communication.

The essence of dialogue and communication therefore lies not in language as a set of conventions or a shared routine that is accepted by the linguistic community but rather in the places where this structure is cracked, thus letting us glimpse at what lies beneath it and mostly remains concealed by it – the differences and gaps that leave room for relationships and communication. Nancy writes: "in a paradoxical way, it is precisely when the symbolic order is interrupted that it arrives at its own essence. … The supreme law of the symbolic is not the constitution of a consistent link and a continuous circulation. It lies further back, in a more withdrawn place, in that which gives the condition of possibility of a link or exchange, an interlacing, a communication in general…that which always involves, and cannot but involve, the sharing out [*partage*] of the secret of communicability itself."[234] What is shared in communication is therefore not a smooth correspondence that facilitates a consistent link or medium, but the differences, idiosyncrasies and misunderstandings that interrupt that medium, that remain at the limit of signification and are mostly obscured by it: "difference takes place in this sharing out, at once a distribution of meaning into all significations and a withdrawal of meaning from all significations – a withdrawal that each signification indicates, at the limit."[235] So for Nancy and Davidson, while conventions definitely serve us in our everyday struggle to communicate with one another, they are only a superficial and dispensable aid, and it is

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[234] Ibid., 136.
[235] Nancy, *The Gravity of Thought*, 64.

their fundamental insufficiency to produce meaning that indicates the locus of meaning production.

If the sociality that produces meaning and makes conventional use of language possible is as envisioned by Nancy and Davidson, then meaning production is not a matter of intention or agency in any ordinary use of the term. As explained, charity and sense are not a matter of choice but an a priori demand or a condition of possibility, and we can therefore ask if there is any way to refuse this demand. I find Nancy and Davidson's insistence that the question of the limits of charity pertains to the conditions of possibility of speakerhood both correct and insightful. However, as far as providing theoretical vocabulary for articulating the actual limits of speakerhood, whatever they are, Davidson and Nancy both fall short. Davidson puts a decisive, yet arbitrary end to the demand of charity when he excludes all nonhumans from the realm of making sense. On the other hand, Nancy's overly permissive approach obscures crucial distinctions between the linguistic and communicative abilities of inanimate objects, plants, animals and humans. The last chapter attempts to find a midway; through the question of nonhumans' participation in linguistic communication it examines the nature of the boundaries of the community of language users and inquires about the constraints (material, cognitive or political) that can prevent a being from participating in the network of the makers of sense. Addressing such questions is crucial because otherwise we relegate miscommunications to the level of signification and convention, which leaves us with an unsatisfactory ethics of communication that does not recognize moments in which sense or charity are breached, and does not provide means for thinking the kinds of

violence that expel beings (whether human or not) from the community of those whose utterances are worthy of interpretation.

V. Humans and Other Animals:

Liminal speakers and the boundaries of the interpretive community

In this final chapter I use a prominent example of liminal speakers – nonhuman animals,[236] to examine the limits of charity and some of the ethical aspects of the delineation of the boundaries of the community of language users. In a sense, nonhuman animals are the ultimate example of radical interpretation; Davidson's formulation of radical interpretation takes after Quine's thought experiment which examines a field linguist who, upon encountering an utterly foreign language, is faced with the challenge of constructing a translation manual from scratch. Quine's and Davidson's respective methods of radical translation and radical interpretation are meant to address this challenge. However, there is another option that none of them considers explicitly: what if upon initial contact the linguist did not recognize the natives as human animals, would she still labor to construct a translation manual for their utterances or dismiss them as meaningless? Davidson's notion of charity as a principle of speakerhood lets us contemplate this option, and ask what it is about the natives' observable behavior that prompts the field linguist to identify their utterances as linguistic in the first place. It is important to keep in mind that in the present context nonhuman animals serve as an example of a broader category of liminal speakers, which also includes humans with limited linguistic abilities; the question therefore is what makes one recognize another

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[236] One of the aims of this chapter is to examine without prejudice the role of nonhuman animals in the community of language users. Remaining true to this goal requires using less discriminative terms such as "human animals" and "nonhuman animals," however, since these terms repeat a lot in this chapter, and despite my better judgment, I have on occasion resigned to using "humans" and "animals" for the sake of brevity.

creature as a language user, despite what might sometimes be very significant differences in their observable behavior.

While the question of the limits of speakerhood is at the heart of Nancy's and Davidson's works, and although I find their writings immensely helpful for demonstrating the relevance of nonhuman animals to any discussion of speakerhood, as a resource for actually examining the speakerhood of nonhuman animals I find their works lacking. By drawing a sharp line between humans and all other animals, and insisting that it is only the former that deserve charitable interpretation, Davidson impedes our ability to explore borderline cases and the reasons behind the ways in which charity is actually exercised. Nancy on the other hand advocates a notion of sense that is so indiscriminative, it risks becoming meaningless, because it provides no means for articulating the different degrees to which different beings are able to partake in, or are being excluded from, the linguistic and ethical community. However, while Nancy's and Davidson's works lack the adequate tools for working out the question of nonhuman animals as speakers, they still help frame the question in an insightful way. So while I do not presume to have even the beginning of an answer to the question of what makes one a speaker, I do hope in this chapter to highlight some aspects of this question, which I feel are greatly missing from the current discussion, which focuses on the cognitive abilities of nonhuman animals. While it is certainly important to consider the question of nonhuman speakers from the cognitive perspective, and while such considerations might inform our everyday conduct (at least over time), it is necessary to also look at this question from an ordinary perspective. When viewed from the perspective of ordinary interpreters and their everyday linguistic conduct, the speakerhood of nonhuman animals

cannot be so easily dismissed, because we do in fact approach animals as intentional and linguistic all the time, and from an ordinary perspective this fact ought to be explained and not explained away as mere anthropomorphism.

Davidson's argument against animal rationality

For Davidson the question of animal language is intermingled with the question of animal thought; since for Davidson beliefs and meanings are both attributed in the context of interpretation, by conditioning interpretation charity also conditions rationality in general (the attribution of thought and language to a creature). Examining Davidson's position on animal language therefore requires looking at his argument against the attribution of thought to nonhuman animals. Davidson presents what many consider to be the most prominent contemporary defense of the philosophical position that rationality requires a certain degree of linguistic ability that nonhuman animals lack. His argument proceeds in two steps:

1. To have a belief, one must have the concept of belief.

2. To have the concept of belief, one must have language.[237]

Since it was first introduced, Davidson's argument has been criticized by philosophers and non-philosophers alike, who have all argued in various ways that his conception of thought is overly intellectualized, consequently causing him to overlook simpler ways of thinking that do not require language, and are therefore available to nonhuman animals.

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[237] Davidson, "Rational Animals," 102. On Davidson's view it is safe to assume that "belief is central to all kinds of thought" because at the background of every possible thought there is a system of beliefs that is necessary for having that thought. For example, thinking that the cat is on the mat requires a web of beliefs about what a cat is, what a mat is, and so forth. (Davidson, "Radical Interpretation," 156).

Some of these criticisms will be discussed shortly, but it should first be noted that strictly speaking there is nothing in the above argument that excludes the attribution of thought (or language) to nonhuman animals (although this is the spirit in which it has always been taken). As formulated above, the argument only advocates the exclusion of nonhuman animals from the rational realm if we accept the hidden premise that only humans have language. Davidson takes this to be a self evident fact that requires no further justification, he simply states that "only creatures with a language can think. I happen to believe, however, that men and women are alone in having language, or anything enough like a language to justify attributing propositional thoughts to them."[238] Davidson has always been upfront and unwavering in his contention that language is a singularly human trait, and perhaps that is the reason why no one thus far has bothered to examine whether his philosophy of language actually supports such claim. Since it never occurred to any of Davidson's critics to contest the assumption that only humans have language, his argument is taken to be asserting that man is the only rational animal, because rationality requires a certain degree of linguistic ability.

As conveyed by this particular argument, as well as by his work as a whole, for Davidson the question of thought hinges on the question of language, on what qualifies a creature as a speaker of language. However, the use of the term "language" in the above argument is problematic considering Davidson's radical transformation of traditional conceptions of language and linguistic competence. Critics of the argument have concentrated on Davidson's conception of thought and on the role that language plays in thought, without evaluating the possible consequences of Davidson's transformation of

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[238] Davidson, "Rational Animals," 96, n. 1.

the concept of language for his position regarding animal rationality; as a result Davidson's position on the role that language plays in the attribution of rationality has been misrepresented. As previously explained, on Davidson's view one enters the community of interpreters, which effectively means entering the rational realm, not by virtue of speaking like others do (by virtue of speaking a language per se), but by virtue of engaging in radical interpretation with others. The second step of the argument should therefore read: "to have the concept of belief, one must be an interpreter of the speech of others."[239] In this section I will defend Davidson's argument against some of its critics, and assert that their objections stem from a misunderstanding of the connection between language and thought as portrayed in Davidson's work. I will also argue that the seemingly minor change I have introduced to the second step of the argument goes a long way toward reversing Davidson's position on animal rationality.

Davidson's rejection of a priori linguistic standards, and his argument that such standards are produced and negotiated between interlocutors in the course of conversation, collapse any a priori distinction between linguistic and nonlinguistic behavior, thus making the question whether a behavior is linguistic or not itself a matter of interpretation, which makes his argument against the attribution of thought to nonlinguistic animals circular. On Davidson's view what transmutes meaningless sounds uttered at appropriate moments into speech is that the utterer has a concept of error (an understanding of how the utterances are connected to truth conditions). In short, speakerhood is constituted by the possession of a concept of error, which effectively

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[239] See: "A creature must be a member of a speech community if it is to have the concept of belief … only a creature that can interpret speech can have the concept of thought." (Davidson, "Thought and Talk," 170). And: "to belong to a speech community [is] to be an interpreter of the speech of others." (Davidson, "Thought and Talk," 161).

means a concept of belief.[240] The argument is therefore circular, because it states that to have a concept of belief one must be a speaker, which one becomes by virtue of having a concept of belief. However, when considered within the overall context of Davidson's work the circularity is not a fault, but an unavoidable consequence of the interdependence of meaning and belief, which stipulates that the attribution of beliefs to a speaker and the attribution of meaning to his utterances must happen simultaneously. The two steps of the argument therefore cannot be separated, and the argument should be viewed as an analysis of the role of communication in attributing mental concepts. What the argument ultimately asserts is that who we take to be a thinker cannot be separated from who we take to be a speaker, because both are grounded in interpretation.

Most critics of Davidson's argument challenge the linkage between thought and speech, and argue instead for some form of wordless thought that is available to nonhuman animals. Criticisms along these lines usually misfire, for they fail to recognize Davidson's aim, which is to highlight the necessary role of communication in making the fine observations required for distinguishing between automatic (meaningless) and purposive (meaningful) behavior. My approach to the argument advocates holding on to the association between language and thought as entailed by the interdependence of meaning and belief, which I find to be one of Davidson's most insightful ideas, while questioning what counts as linguistic behavior.

For most critics, the main source of discomfort lies in the first step of Davidson's argument, i.e. in the claim that a thinking creature must be aware of some of its beliefs *as beliefs*. Davidson relies on the experience of surprise to support this claim; we experience

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[240] C.f.: Davidson, "Seeing Through Language," 139.

surprise when a former belief turns out to be false, so having beliefs entails the possibility of surprise, and it is impossible to be surprised without having beliefs in the first place. Davidson thus concludes that ascribing beliefs to a creature requires that we be able to describe it as being surprised; however, since for him the recognition that a former belief is false requires awareness of one's own beliefs, he concludes that surprise indicates the existence not only of beliefs, but of higher order beliefs as well.[241] A number of critics find fault with this line of reasoning, arguing that for a creature to believe that p it is enough that it responds adaptively to its environment, it need not also be able to represent to itself that it has this belief. On this view, surprise can be a purely first order phenomenon, because an adaptive response suffices to show that a creature has the experience of surprise upon encountering a situation that conflicts with its beliefs.[242]

I agree that Davidson's analysis of surprise is problematic, and that while the experience of surprise *could* make one aware of her own beliefs this is not a necessary outcome. However, I believe that on this point the critics are missing the bigger picture, which is Davidson's claim that adaptive response is not enough to justify the attribution of belief. Davidson explains that we can imagine a bird that learns to distinguish between ripe and unripe fruit based on color, and we might be tempted to use reasons to describe such behavior (the bird chooses to eat only the red fruit because it knows they are ripe). However, that a creature's behavior can be explained or even predicted by ascribing beliefs to it is not enough to assume that the creature actually possesses beliefs, otherwise

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[241] Davidson, "Rational Animals," 103–104.
[242] For objections along these lines see: Peter Smith, "On Animal Beliefs," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 20 (1982): 503–512; Michael Tye, "The Problem of Simple Minds: Is There Anything It Is Like to Be a Honey Bee?," *Philosophical Studies* 88 (1997): 289–317; Peter Carruthers, "Meta-Cognition in Animals: A Skeptical Look," *Mind & Language* 23 (2008): 58–89.

we would have no choice but to ascribe thought to butterflies and trees just because they can discriminate between red and green or moist and dry.[243]

Still, positing a concept of belief as a prerequisite for rationality might seem excessive, and perhaps we can avoid it by employing pragmatic distinctions. On this view, the reason we do not attribute beliefs to a heat seeking missile is because our understanding of its mechanics provides a better alternative explanation for why it works the way it does, this is also why most of us will object to the idea that computers think, no matter how well they play chess. Since we do not always have such an alternative explanation in regards to animals, most of us (laymen and experts alike) are tempted to sometimes attribute them with thought in order to explain what seems like purposive behavior.[244] Davidson is unsatisfied with this answer, for while such pragmatic considerations might be enough to justify treating some animals *as if* they are capable of acting intentionally, such explanations for animal behavior are nothing more than a useful fiction, they do not suffice to support the claim that animals *actually have* beliefs and desires.

By making the concept of belief inseparable from having beliefs Davidson adds an essential normative dimension to thought. As mentioned earlier, having the concept of belief means having a concept of error, because having a concept of belief means being

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[243] "We may be inclined to think that concept formation is more primitive than entering the world of propositional attitudes, the world, in particular, of beliefs. But this is a mistake. Unless we want to attribute concepts to butterflies and olive trees, we should not count mere ability to discriminate between red and green or moist and dry as having a concept, not even if such selective behavior is learned." (Davidson, "Seeing Through Language," 139).

[244] For a clear account of various animal behaviors, and the difficulties of distinguishing between seemingly purposive and actually purposive behavior in those cases, see: Gordon G. Brittan Jr, "The Secrets of Antelope," *Erkenntnis* 51, no. 1 (1999): 59–77.

aware of the possibility of my belief being wrong.[245] But, a belief can only be wrong in contrast to an objective reality (my belief that the grass is green is true or false relative to the actual state of the grass). According to Davidson, such objective measure can only emerge in the context of participating in a public language, thus making thought necessarily normative and necessarily tied to language.[246] The crux of the argument is therefore located in the second step, where Davidson considers the relationship between language and thought.

Being the linguistic and thinking creatures that we are, it seems plainly apparent to us that linguistic animals necessarily think.[247] However, to support his argument Davidson needs to demonstrate that thinking animals are necessarily linguistic, and some critics ascertain that he fails to accomplish this far more difficult task. John Bishop asserts that while Davidson successfully shows that being an interpreter of language entails having a concept of belief, he fails to prove that language is *necessary* for the

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[245] "The concept of belief is … the concept of a state of an organism which can be true or false, correct or incorrect." (Davidson, "Rational Animals," 104).

[246] See for example: "The source of the concept of objective truth is interpersonal communication." (Davidson, "Three Varieties of Knowledge," 209). This aspect of Davidson's argument is criticized by Robert Lurz, who argues that it trades on a confusion between the act and object sense of belief. Lurz explains that it is only the object of belief that is true or false, but that the act or state of believing is not subject to such distinction (while "the grass is green" may be true or false, my believing something about the grass is a state or an act, and as such not a matter of truth or falsity). Lurz therefore concludes that there is nothing preventing nonlinguistic animals from having beliefs in the act sense and even from attributing beliefs to others (from having beliefs about the beliefs of others). See: Robert W. Lurz, "Belief Attribution in Animals: On How to Move Forward Conceptually and Empirically," *Springer Science and Business* (2010): 3–5, <http://faculty.lagcc.cuny.edu/rbrown/Animal%20minds%20-Robert%20Lurz.pdf>. I will not treat Lurz's argument separately, because while his point is correct it is immaterial to Davidson's broader argument, which is my present topic.

[247] Although I am not going to contest this commonly accepted supposition, I think that it is complicated by the evolution of AI, as well as by certain cases of autism; for the argument that Davidson's argument is undermined by the existence of persons with autism who are speakers yet lack the ability to read minds or have higher order thoughts see: Kathrin Glüer and Peter Pagin, "Meaning Theory and Autistic Speakers," *Mind and Language* 18 (2003): 23–51; Kristin Andrews and Ljiljana Radenovic, "Speaking Without Interpreting: a Reply to Bouma on Autism and Davidsonian Interpretation," *Philosophical Psychology* 19 (2006): 663–678. It should also be noted that the use of "we" in sentences like "the linguistic and thinking creatures that we are" is not unproblematic, since the overlap between the category of linguistic animals and the category of human animals is not complete due to the existence of humans who do not use language (infants, people with certain disabilities).

concept of belief, i.e. that it is the only way to acquire the concept of belief.[248] Hans-Johann Glock presses this point further; he agrees with Davidson that it is only by contrasting different perspectives on the same object that a creature can come to realize that (at least) one of these perspectives is wrong, thus acquiring the concept of belief and objective truth. He is even willing to concede that perhaps "the idea of a different perspective can only be explained by reference to the idea of taking the role of the other," in which case the concept of objective truth requires a social context and the ability to have beliefs about the beliefs of others.[249] But even if the concept of objective truth requires the recognition of error in others, it remains unclear why this recognition must be communicated to the wayward individual in addition to being observed.[250]

Davidson is not oblivious to this problem, in fact he admits that he cannot prove that the only way to acquire a concept of belief (the contrast between belief and objective truth) is through language, and that without this proof his argument remains susceptible to the objection that there might be another way to acquire a concept of belief, a way that is available to nonlinguistic animals. However, he also contends that he has no idea how else one can arrive at the concept of objective truth, and instead of an argument offers the analogy of triangulation to portray how a concept of error emerges through language. In the third and final section of this chapter I will present a preliminary analysis of triangulation and its contribution to establishing the role of interpretation in developing a concept of belief, but first let us pause shortly and contemplate the fact that an otherwise

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[248] John Bishop, "More Thought on Thought and Talk," *Mind* 89 (1980): 8.
[249] Hans-Johann Glock, "Animals, Thoughts and Concepts," *Synthese* 123, no. 1 (2000): 58–59. C.f.: Davidson's assertion that comparing observations by oneself does not yet involve propositional content (Davidson, "Seeing Through Language," 136). If Glock is right then demonstrating that a creature can have beliefs about the beliefs of others suffices for attributing that creature with thought. For a discussion of higher order thoughts in nonhuman animals see: Lurz, "Belief Attribution in Animals."
[250] Glock, "Animals, Thoughts and Concepts," 58.

vigilant philosopher like Davidson moves so swiftly from admitting that he cannot prove that language is the only way to acquire a concept of belief to declaring without any reservations that man is the only rational animal because humans are alone in having language. I find this uncharacteristic move revealing, and think that Davidson is so quick to draw such a decisive yet arbitrary line between humans and nonhumans because he realizes that given his theory of meaning the alternative is counting a cat's meowing as meaningful speech.[251]

Davidson's choice to draw the limit of the interpretive community at nonhuman animals suggests that counting the meowing of a cat as meaningful is preposterous; however, he never actually gives reasons for why he believes this to be the case, moreover, such reasons cannot be given from within his theoretical framework. If the decision who is a speaker is a matter of charity, then there is no grounds for an a priori and categorical exclusion of any group of creatures from the interpretive community, because this decision cannot be completely dictated by pre-established rules or conventions, and must be made on a case by case basis, in the course of actually engaging with a particular creature. In other words, Davidson puts the decision of what counts as linguistic behavior in the hands of individual interpreters, and when actually faced with this decision (as we all do from time to time) different interpreters draw the line at different places – while most of us do not attempt to interpret sounds made by trees,

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[251] Davidson, "Seeing Through Language," 139. In fact the alternative is much more extreme than this, because on Davidson's view, there is no a priori ground for drawing the line anywhere, hence it is not only animals but also plants and machines that become intentional. For a detailed account of a version of interpretivism that proceeds along similar lines see: Daniel Dennett, "Intentional Systems," in *Brainstorms* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1978), 3–22; and: Daniel Dennett, *The Intentional Stance* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1987). Dennett rightly counts Davidson as being on his side of the intentional debate, despite the fact that Davidson's "official" position denies any attribution of intentionality to nonhumans.

many pet enthusiasts are offended by the suggestion that their communications with their beloved animal-companions are naïve anthropomorphism. The crucial point is that none of these discriminations, as well as Davidson's discrimination between human and nonhuman animals, has any grounding in Davidson's theory. This is not to say that such discriminations have no practical basis, in fact this is the only basis they can rightly have a claim for as far as Davidson's theory is concerned. Still, Davidson's choice to draw the line of language and thought at humans is not just an imprudent prejudice, it is also a choice that he makes precisely because his theory of interpretation offers no justification for doing so. Since his philosophy gives no a priori grounds for drawing the line anywhere, reserving language just for humans is Davidson's way of avoiding an infinitely permissive position on which butterflies and stones make sense, i.e. it is his way of setting up a decisive barrier between his position and a position such as Nancy's.

Nancy on animal language

Unlike Davidson, Nancy does not address the issue of animal thought or language directly, but he is very concerned with the place of nonhumans in the world and in relation to man. His view on linguistic animals must therefore be considered against the broader background of his attempt to articulate a non-anthropocentric philosophical position that understands man within the context of his environment. The world for Nancy is not "the world of humans" but the world of all beings, in which animals are not "a sort of subexistence" but the condition of man, for "we would not be 'humans' if there

were not 'dogs' and 'stones.'"[252] Accordingly, his treatment of nonhumans is usually specific, he does not refer to plants or animals or stones in general, but mentions a particular kind of animal or flower, thus highlighting their singularity, in the same way that other philosophers use "John" or "Pierre" in their examples rather than referring to "humans" in general.[253]

Evidence of this approach are scattered throughout Nancy's work, and they produce the distinct impression that he does not envision the world as a mute background against which man, the crown of creation, appears and operates, but rather as a complex environment in which all beings partake, each in its unique, incomparable way. Humans for Nancy do not enjoy a privileged position, but even more importantly, they cannot be completely distinguished from other beings, thus diffusing the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman; he writes: "I would no longer be a 'human' if I did not have this exteriority [of a stone] 'in me,' in the form of the quasi-minerality of bone."[254] By describing the world in this fashion Nancy distances himself from all forms of humanism, in favor of an evolutionary approach on which man does not stand out from his material environment but is continuous with it. More specifically, he is rejecting Heidegger's view that the existence of Dasein is radically different from that of other beings. He writes:

> "Heidegger, in the period of *Being and Time*, means to distinguish the factuality of *Dasein* from the factuality of, for example, the 'stone' (see §27 of *Being and Time*). It seems to me that this cannot be so simple. There cannot be…several factualities. *There is* the factuality of the world. … Factuality as factuality is also (I would

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[252] Nancy, "Of Being Singular Plural," 18.
[253] See for example: "[the rose] grows along with the reseda, the eglantine, and the thistle – as well as with crystals, seahorses, humans, and their inventions." (Ibid., 86). The mentioning of human inventions in this quote is particularly interesting for it implies that Nancy's philosophy is not restricted to natural things but includes manmade objects (perhaps creatures) as well.
[254] Ibid., 18.

almost say 'and first of all,' were it not preferable not to introduce any order here) the factuality of the stone, the mineral, as well as that of the vegetal, animal, cosmic, and rational."[255]

Nancy's insistence that the factuality of the world is equally shared by all beings resonates with Davidson's externalism in that it gives primacy to the physical, public aspects of existence, and takes internal, mental states to be the product (and not the cause) of a relation to the environment. Much of man's privileged position in the world is lost when factual materiality is taken as the condition for mental states and intentionality, for the factual materiality of humans is not radically different from that of all other beings (human bones are partially made of minerals, all living creatures share the same DNA molecule, etc).

This view of the world as a facticity of semi-differentiated bodies shapes Nancy's notion of language and meaning, and translates into a conception of sense as pervasive and shared by all: "all bodies, each outside the others, make up the inorganic body of sense. The stone does not 'have' any sense. But sense touches the stone."[256] If thought and meaning are conditioned by the facticity of the body, and since the human body cannot be completely distinguished from its environment and from other bodies, then human rationality cannot be completely separated from the facticity of other animals. Nancy is taking Davidson's semantic externalism to its final conclusion: if sense is the product of relations between bodies, then it is not only humans who partake in its production; moreover, since it consists in the being-with-one-another of bodies, sense

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[255] Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Experience of Freedom*, trans. Bridget McDonald (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993 [1988]), 157–158.

[256] Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 62–63. This quote is the conclusion of a short chapter aimed at rejecting Heidegger's (in)famous claim that the stone is without world.

itself is material and not spiritual. By defining sense in this way Nancy seems to be suggesting that charity is boundless and ought to be extended evenly even to trees and stones, which is precisely the kind of slippage that Davidson tries to avoid by uncompromisingly restricting meaning to the human domain. However, Nancy explicitly rejects such interpretation of his position: "am I in the process of suggesting that something of 'comprehension' can be attributed to the stone itself? One need not fear that I am proposing here an animism or a panpsychism. It is not a matter of endowing the stone with an interiority."[257] In order to reconcile Nancy's rejection of animism with his claim that all bodies partake in sense we need to take a closer look at the range of bodies that stretches between stones and humans and work out where and how he draws the line that prevents the slippage into animism. For that I will examine the essay "Vox Clamans in Deserto," which is Nancy's most explicit treatment of questions pertaining to animals and language.

"Vox Clamans in Deserto" is written as a scene from a play, in which two (supposedly human) characters[258] discuss the nature of language and specifically the role of the voice in language and speech. The discussion is prompted by the question whether the barking of a dog can be mistaken for a human voice, which leads the characters to distinguish between voice and speech: "[Character B:] a dog's barking or the sounds of other animals are not merely noises. Each animal has a voice, one that we can recognize. [Character A:] Do you mean to say that animals have a way of talking? [Character B:] No. … Voice has nothing to do with speech. Obviously there is no speech without voice,

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[257] Ibid., 62.
[258] Since the characters are nameless I will refer to them as character A and character B. In the course of the dialogue it becomes fairly apparent that Nancy's position is represented by character B.

but there can be voice without speech."[259] The characters proceed to examine what turns

voice into speech, and character A suggests that voice is the physical aspect of speech,

which acquires meaning only through the spiritual aspect. The distinction between the

physical and spiritual aspects of language is reminiscent of Ferdinand de Saussure's

separation of language (langue), which he defines as a system of signs, from its physical

and individual manifestation in speech (parole). Speech is described by Saussure as

connected to language only accidentally, for while the vocal organs are the means by

which individual speakers execute signs, the meaning of these signs is both social and

nonmaterial, and so cannot be affected by their physical manifestation by individuals.[260]

Character B argues against this separation that voice should not be confused with mere

performance of signs, and is therefore distinct from both langue and parole: "the voice is

not mere performance, it is something else, it is anterior to the distinction between an

available language and a chosen speech…"[261] Nancy (via character B) uses the term

"voice" to designate something that exceeds language in the Saussurian sense, for it

precedes both the system of signs (available language) and the application of those signs

by actual speakers in concrete occasions of speech (chosen speech). This portrayal of

voice is very much analogous to Davidson's notion of charity as the precondition of

interpretation, and consequently of linguistic conventions. If this analogy holds, then

Nancy is effectively saying that nonhuman animals cannot be excluded from the

community of language users, not because they speak a language (in the conventional

sense), but because they solicit charity, because for animals as well as for humans a

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[259] Jean-Luc Nancy, "Vox Clamans in Deserto," in *The Birth to Presence*, trans. Brian Holmes (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 234.

[260] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 14, 18.

[261] Nancy, "Vox Clamans in Deserto," 235.

potentially interpretable voice can be recognized even before particular meanings are discerned: "[Character B:] for animals, but for us, too. Because I know you, I could recognize your voice before I could make out what you are saying, as you came toward me."[262]

In his attempt to further explicate his notion of voice, Nancy distinguishes it not only from conventional language but also from an individual voice. He writes:

> "[character B]: it is not voice that is the actuality of speech. That is rather always only a voice, your voice or mine, talking or singing, a different one each time. Voice is always shared, it is in a sense sharing itself. Voice begins where the retrenchment of the singular being begins. Later, with speech, he will recreate his ties to the world and he will give meaning to his own retrenchment. But to begin with, with his voice, he cries out in pure disparity, which has no distinct meaning."[263]

Here Nancy distinguishes between *a voice*, which is the individual voice of a particular person, what he earlier referred to as the performance of signs (or phonation), and *voice*, which he defines as sharing. This latter notion of voice allows Nancy to examine the being-in-common that is shared by all singulars and makes up community, this time in relation to language. In chapter two I suggested that for Nancy communication starts with interpellation, which is an appeal or a demand for attention that relates interlocutors and opens up the channels of communication. The voice is a form of interpellation that consists in the initial, perhaps habitual, recognition that a certain sound is actually a voice, i.e. that it is not an empty noise but a meaningful sound that merits interpretation. What, according to Nancy, must be added to a meaningless sound to transmute it into a voice? Nancy describes the voice as a retrenchment, as the space where a singular is

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[262] Ibid., 234.
[263] Ibid., 237.

differentiated from the world. The recognition that a sound is actually a voice therefore consists of an acknowledgment that there is a distance between the speaker and the world. Using Davidson's terms it can be said that a sound is transformed into a voice when it is accompanied by a concept of error – by the recognition that there is a gap between one's beliefs and the world.

Davidson argues that we can say that a child thinks (or speaks) only when "it appreciates the distinction between the judgment and the truth for itself."[264] Before a child acquires his first language he does not recognize voices, all he recognizes are sounds; the path to language starts with the realization that certain sounds can produce results, and a significant further step is taken with the realization that others also make distinctive sounds.[265] As these sounds start acquiring meaning they turn into voices – into sounds that warrant interpretation. On this account, when a child acquires her first language she gradually learns to distinguish her thoughts (and the thoughts of others) from reality: "the interaction between adult and child [that takes place in first language acquisition] provides the necessary conditions for the emergence of language and propositional thought, by creating a *space* in which there can be success and failure."[266] Acquiring language is therefore a process of differentiation, in which the child learns to differentiate himself from the world and the people around him, and every act of interpretation is a reiteration of this difference. By acknowledging that a sound is actually a voice one initiates an occasion of interpretation, therefore reenacting the gap, however

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[264] Davidson, "Truth Rehabilitated," 14.
[265] Ibid., 13.
[266] Ibid., 13–14 (my italics).

slight, between one's own thoughts, the thoughts of the other, and the truth for itself (the world).

Recognizing someone's voice is therefore the first act of interpretation: speech never starts with conventional meaning, because before I can make out what someone is saying I must first detect that there is a saying that ought to be interpreted and understood. The voice does not precede the decision to interpret but is constituted by it, it is where charity first makes its demand and opens up interpretation, it is where the interpreter decides that she is faced with an intentional and linguistic behavior and starts devising a theory of interpretation for the speaker (thus designating him as a speaker). In the process of devising this theory, truth conditions will be specified for the speaker's utterances, thus "recreat[ing] his ties to the world." The truth theory devised by the conversationalists reties the speaker to the world because it articulates the connections between the speaker's behavior and the observable circumstances; the meaning of the speaker's utterances resides in this recreation of ties because meaning *is* these connections (meaning is the truth conditions of utterances). If the meaning of an utterance is nothing more than its truth conditions, then interpretation, the articulation of these truth conditions, gives meaning to the speaker's retrenchment by articulating it, by explicating the relations between her utterances and the world, thus making these relations meaningful rather than arbitrary. But before such retying can take place there must first be charity, the initial recognition that such tying is called for: "voice [i]s the outer limit of signification, not like a simple sound deprived of meaning, but 'as a pure indication of the event of language.'"[267] Voice is the prompter of interpretation, it indicates the

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[267] Nancy, "Vox Clamans in Deserto," 243 (Nancy is quoting Giorgio Agamben here).

existence of language, i.e. that there is something to interpret. Put another way: the first act of interpretation is the decision to interpret.

Relating Nancy's discussion of voice to Davidson's conception of charity highlights the fact that as a principle of correspondence or speakerhood charity embodies a transcendental principle: it connects one's ability to think and speak with the existence of other thinking and speaking creatures and through them with the world, thus embodying Davidson's transcendental claim that the world is always shared, and that it is from this sharing of the world that thought and language commence, thus making it impossible to be a lone speaker and thinker.[268] In exploring the transcendental aspect of Davidson's theory of communication it is important to first dispel the notion that the transcendental nature of charity entails that interpretation surpasses the domain of observable behavior. Nancy's notion of the voice underscores the physicality and materiality of meaning, which consist in the sharing of a (material) world; conceiving meaning in material terms allows us to examine the relation of nonhumans to language through their participation in the material existence of the world that is shared by all beings. However, the opening of this new horizon carries a risk: if meaning is physical and not spiritual, and since the materiality of the world is shared by all beings, how are we to distinguish between the different ways in which different beings partake in meaning?

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[268] On the difference between principles of actual interpretation and charity as a transcendental principle (a condition of possibility of interpretation and communication) see: Ramberg, *Donald Davidson's Philosophy of Language*, 74–75. On the transcendental aspects of Davidson's philosophy see: Andrew N. Carpenter, "Davidson's Transcendental Argumentation," in *From Kant to Davidson: Philosophy and the Idea of the Transcendental*, ed. Jeff E. Malpas (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 219–237.

Keeping true to his assertion that a stone is also touched by sense on the one hand, and to his rejection of animism on the other, Nancy distinguishes between inanimate bodies, animals (that are on the limits of language) and humans (who have speech), while also pointing out the physical continuity between them in that they are all sound producing bodies; he writes: "*voice* begins with sound. Sound is a *state of trembling* … In the resonant trembling of an inanimate body there is already soul, a kind of mechanical aptitude for soul. … But voice arises first in the animal."[269] But while Nancy maintains that there are differences (and continuities) between bodies, he does not provide conceptual tools for discerning those differences; he distinguishes between humans, animals and inanimate bodies but gives no reasons for his decision to carve up being in this particular way and not another; he also does not address the nature of the distinctions he makes: can all animals be grouped together in the same category? What counts as an inanimate body (is a heat seeking missile more like a stone or like a dog)? Without addressing such questions Nancy's position remains abstract, for it ignores (and therefore takes for granted rather than explain) some of the basic sensibilities that guide our communicative practices (for example the fact that it seems natural for most humans to converse with other humans, perhaps with their pets, but rarely if ever with trees).

In the previous chapter I have argued that the primacy given to conventional language conceals the (not necessarily conscious) decision to interpret, which makes conventional language possible to begin with. By creating the false impression that such

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[269] Nancy, "Vox Clamans in Deserto," 242 (this quote is presented as part of a conversation between Hegel, Schelling and Hölderlin). The focus on sound can be misleading at this point, for a body does not have to produce sounds to participate in sense. For Nancy a stone is touched by sense even if it makes no sound, simply by the fact that it touches the earth, and is being warmed by the sun. So it would be more accurate to say that there is a continuity between all beings by virtue of their shared materiality that enables them to partake in the sharing of sense.

decision never took place, conventional language makes its outcomes seem self-evident; in a similar fashion, the distinction between humans, animals and inanimate bodies appears natural rather than socially constructed, and the decision to interpret the former but not the latter seems like a response to a self evident, objective difference rather than the reproduction and solidification of that difference. This is not to say that there are no significant differences between the sounds produced by human and nonhuman bodies, but, as Davidson remarks, interpretation is about negotiating and deciding whether a certain difference makes a difference or not.[270] The habitual nature of charity makes this interpretive negotiation transparent by making us take its outcomes for granted; pointing out that one is never simply born a speaker-interpreter but rather becomes one, and examining the broad and rich domain of influences that go into creating a speaker-interpreter, highlights again the negotiation that is involved in this process. Upholding this initial and irreducible element of negotiation, and recognizing that the distinction between different bodies and behaviors is not as firm and unequivocal as it seems, reconstitutes interpretation as an essentially relational capacity, since a creature's linguistic competence resides not in its ability to construct grammatically acceptable sentences, but more profoundly in its ability to make others take it to be a speaker, in its ability to solicit a particular response from a listener. Charity is therefore both extended and solicited, and these two aspects are inseparable and interdependent.

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[270] See: "Indeterminacy of meaning or translation does not represent a failure to capture significant distinctions; it marks the fact that certain apparent distinctions are not significant." (Davidson, "Belief and the Basis of Meaning," 154).

Nancy's notion of voice, while insufficiently fleshed out, captures this relational nature of charity: "voice calls the other to come out in his own voice."[271] A voice is a voice only in so far as it solicits interpretation, in so far as it calls on the other to interpret and speak back. Analyzing the correctness of one's speech remains within the conventional domain of language (in signification), and while this domain is important in and of itself, it is also important to remember that we can only inquire about the correctness of the speech of those who, to begin with, are taken to be language users (even incredibly flawed or limited ones). Focusing on the role of convention in language silences the voices of those who do not make the cut; rejecting this exclusion and stepping out of the conventional domain brings to the fore new questions: what is it about the manifest behavior of certain bodies that prompts interpretation? What is it about another body that invokes in me the feeling that there are intentions behind the sounds it produces? The next section uses Davidson's analogy of triangulation to explore the relational nature of charity and what it means for language to be not just a question of individual capacity or competence, but first and foremost a question of response and relationship.

Triangulation and community

The relational nature of charity (and consequently of rationality) comes across most noticeably in the analogy of triangulation, where Davidson explicates what it means to share a world, and how this sharing is connected to interpretation. The analogy of triangulation is introduced for the first time at the end of the essay "Rational Animals,"

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[271] Nancy, "Vox Clamans in Deserto," 245.

which is Davidson's earliest and most explicit attempt to argue that man is the only rational animal. It is in that essay that Davidson admits that he has no way of demonstrating that language is the only way to develop a concept of truth; instead he uses the analogy of triangulation to illustrate how a concept of truth emerges in linguistic interaction. Triangulation has been the subject of considerable debate since its introduction, and it has been honed and refined by Davidson in later essays.[272] For my current purpose I will focus on a very specific aspect of this analogy: the distinction Davidson makes between *primitive triangulation* (exists between nonlinguistic animals as well) and *full blown triangulation* (unique to linguistic animals). This distinction allows Davidson to examine the conditions for the emergence of thought and the role of communication in this process.

Primitive triangulation is a threefold interaction, in which two creatures correlate their reactions to a shared environment; the result is a triangle: the apex of the triangle is a shared stimuli, the two sides represent the creatures' reactions to the stimuli (to the world), and the baseline is the interaction between the creatures that enables them to correlate their reactions. This basic social interaction allows even a primitive creature like a fish "to correlate the reactions of other creatures [other fish] with changes or objects in the world to which it also reacts," thus making it possible for a school of fish to swim together in formation.[273] Although primitive triangulation does not suffice to facilitate thought and language it is a necessary condition; Davidson explains that this "prelinguistic, precognitive situation…constitute[s] a necessary condition for thought and

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[272] For more advanced portrayals of triangulation see: Davidson, "The Second Person"; Davidson, "Seeing Through Language"; Donald Davidson, "The Emergence of Thought," in *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001 [1997]), 123–134.
[273] Davidson, "The Emergence of Thought," 128.

language, a condition that can exist independent of thought, and can therefore precede it."[274]

The reaction that enables the coordinated social interaction in primitive triangulation does not have to be simple and wired in as in fish, it can also be learned, as in the case of Vervet monkeys that use different sounds to warn against different predators. Davidson is adamant that despite its apparent complexity, and even though it is learned, the behavior of Vervet monkeys differs from human action not in degree but in kind, and is more like the instinctual reaction of fish, in that both do not involve propositional attitudes.[275] So what needs to be added to the primitive triangle to make thought possible? Davidson's answer is simple – language. He explains that language is essential for thought because "unless the baseline of the triangle, the line between the two agents, is strengthened to the point where it can implement the communication of propositional contents, there is no way the agents can make use of the triangular situation to form judgments about the world. Only when language is in place can creatures appreciate the concept of objective truth."[276] Here the circularity of the argument is likely to leave the reader deeply unsatisfied because Davidson posits the very thing he had set out to demonstrate (that language is necessary for the concepts of truth and for having beliefs). Glock provides a typical example for the response of such a frustrated reader: "[Davidson is] right to hold that we pick up the notion of objective truth through communication: the distinction between believing that p and it being true that p is learnt through linguistic interaction. But this does not provide the kind of conceptual argument

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[274] Ibid.
[275] Ibid.
[276] Ibid., 129.

Davidson is after, an argument which shows that it is *impossible* to acquire or explain the concept of truth other than through communication."[277] To save Davidson's argument we must show that the communication at the baseline of the triangle is *necessary* for the emergence of thought, for bringing about the significant shift from primitive triangulation to the full blown triangulation of rational animals. I think that Davidson's position can be partially defended once we take under advisement his notion of communication as distinct from conventional language.

If we accept Davidson's claim that language does not exist and all that exists are observable physical behaviors, then communication becomes a matter of distinguishing patterns of behavior and determining when a pattern of behavior is complex enough to warrant the attribution of rationality to a creature. Accordingly, for communication to commence there must be something about the observable behavior of a creature that justifies appealing to intentions (i.e. to reasons) in order to explain the behavior. On this view, the crucial question I must ask myself before I start interpreting is how do I know that I am not projecting my own thoughts on the other creature but am actually engaged in an interpretive interaction with it. Because there are no a priori criteria for determining whether a certain behavior is rational, the key to answering this question (an answer that is always provisional and situated) lies in assessing the responsiveness of the other creature, for example by observing whether it ever corrects my interpretations. Making such assessments involves a fairly elaborate exchange, and while such exchange does not have to include linguistic conventions, the case can be made that it would qualify as

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[277] Glock, "Animals, Thoughts and Concepts," 58.

radical interpretation, hence the necessary role of communication between the agents at the baseline of the triangle.

When the communication between the agents at the baseline of the triangle is understood as radical interpretation we lose the sharp distinction between primitive and full blown triangulation. Triangulation therefore has no explanatory power as far as the emergence of thought and language is concerned, but it can shed some light on the transcendental role of charity as a principle of correspondence. Triangulation is significant in that it reiterates Davidson's rejection of empiricism, and illustrates his alternative epistemological position which he describes as perceptual externalism with a social factor. In what follows I will show how Davidson's epistemology is grounded in the "sharedness" of the world (i.e. in charity as a principle of correspondence), which is the condition of possibility of perception and interpretation.

In his late writings Davidson describes himself as subscribing to perceptual externalism but with a necessary social aspect, and he makes a few remarks about this necessary social aspect. He explains that when a solitary creature reacts to things in the world there is no way of determining what it is reacting to (stimulation of nerve endings, something on the surface of its skin, etc); it is only by triangulating with another creature that the cause of the reaction can be determined. So in a sense it is misleading to say that creatures triangulate about objects in the world, because it is by triangulating that a world of objects is constituted. Put another way, the object of triangulation is not perceived by the triangulating agents prior to their interaction, because it is only through triangulation that perceptions get their content. The model of triangulation therefore demonstrates why it is not just the representation of the world in thought and language that is shared, but the

world itself: since the content of perception is already social (i.e. interpreted) there is no such thing as a world that is not shared (there is no world without "sharedness" so to speak).[278] Davidson concludes accordingly that a solitary person has no world: "the solipsist's world can be any size; which is to say, from the solipsist's point of view it has no size, *it is not a world*."[279]

The social aspect is therefore interwoven into our perception of the world, thus "locating the role of society within the causal nexus that includes the interplay between persons and the rest of nature."[280] As a result, even the simplest observation sentences such as "here is a cow" and the simple thoughts that they express get their content from what has typically caused them.[281] And since the question "what *has* typically caused them?" has many possible answers (from stimulation of nerve endings to evolution), in the end it is "we" who determine causes: "it is *we* who class cow appearances together, more or less naturally, or with minimal learning."[282] The world for Davidson is therefore not a given, because our perception is already laden with interpretive social interaction. It is in this way that charity as a principle of correspondence is a transcendental principle,

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[278] This is also the reasoning behind Davidson's rejection of the idea of conceptual scheme. Davidson's rejection of the third dogma of empiricism is sometimes taken as an anti-relativist stance, which argues against the idea that there can be radically incommensurable conceptual schemes. But Davidson is not arguing for the existence of one universal conceptual scheme, nor that there is a significant overlap between conceptual schemes, rather he is denying the very idea of a conceptual scheme. Davidson's objection to the very idea of a conceptual scheme stems from his externalism, which dictates that there are no objective facts of the matter independently of actual interpretations. In other words, we cannot have conceptual schemes and consequently test which one fits best with the facts, because the content of thought and language is determined by the typical causes of beliefs and meanings. Davidson explains: "we cannot 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." (Davidson, "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge," 150). For Davidson's argument against the very idea of a conceptual scheme see his appropriately titled essay: Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme."

[279] Davidson, "The Second Person," 119 (my italics).

[280] Donald Davidson, "Epistemology Externalized," in *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001 [1990]), 201.

[281] "The contents of our earliest learned and most basic sentences ('Mama', 'Doggie', 'Red', 'Fire', 'Gavagai') must be determined by what it is in the world that causes us to hold them true." (Ibid., 200).

[282] Ibid., 202 (my italics).

because without charity we can have no world; Davidson concludes: "a community of minds is the basis of knowledge; it provides the measure of all things."[283]

While Davidson consistently asserts that a world is always and necessarily a shared world, on occasion he still slips into treating this shared world as if it exists prior to communication, consequently portraying communication as dependent on the preexistence of a world; for example: "communication depends on each communicator having, and correctly thinking that the other has, the concept of a shared world, an intersubjective world. But the concept of an intersubjective world is the concept of an objective world, a world about which each communicator can have beliefs. I suggest, then, that, the concept of intersubjective truth suffices as a basis for belief and hence for thoughts generally."[284] But to truly get away from an empiricist notion on which the world is a given which only subsequently becomes the subject of interpretation (or a conceptual scheme), the world must be shared already at the perceptual level, which means that interpretation precedes and conditions both perception and the individuation of perceivers. It is therefore charity in the sense articulated in chapter four, as a relation which precedes the agents it relates, which anchors not just the attribution of meanings and beliefs but the world. Charity in the sense of being-with is therefore the condition of possibility of Davidson's entire philosophy.

In his essay "Theories of Rationality and Principles of Charity" Robert Wachbroit explains that unlike criteria-based theories of rationality, charity-based theories of

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[283] Davidson, "Three Varieties of Knowledge," 218.

[284] Davidson, "Rational Animals," 105. See also: "belief, intention, and the other prepositional attitudes are all social in that they are states a creature cannot be in without having the concept of intersubjective truth, and this is a concept one cannot have without sharing, and knowing that one shares, a world, and a way of thinking about the world, with someone else." (Davidson, "The Second Person," 121).

rationality cannot distinguish between what is rational (as defined by a set of universal criteria) and what is rational for *me*. In a charity-based theory what is rational for me *is* rational, since our ascriptions of rationality depend on what *we* judge to be rational;[285] consequently, a charity-based theory of rationality depends on a certain conception of "we." Wachbroit writes: "the principle of charity assumes as a natural fact about us that we *agree* for the most part on what is rational. Without that fact, there is no *us* for that principle to appeal to."[286] Here we see again that despite the fact that Davidson rejects the idea that linguistic meaning requires a standard that is shared by the linguistic community, his philosophy is profoundly communal, for it replaces a set of rules (criteria for rationality, language as a set of conventions) with a sense of community. However, as far as Davidson's theory of rationality is concerned, we do not simple agree on what is rational, but we radically interpret what is rational (which is why Davidson contends that the intersubjective world *is* the objective world).

Triangulation is usually taken to be based on a similarity of response between the triangulating agents (which is what allows them to interact over a shared cause); this similarity of response is usually conceived by both Davidson and his interpreters as a biological or physiological (or perhaps sometimes cognitive) fact.[287] Pointing out the necessary role of radical interpretation between the agents at the baseline of the triangle reveals that the "us" to which the principle of charity appeals and on which triangulation

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[285] Robert Wachbroit, "Theories of Rationality and Principles of Charity," *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 38, no. 1 (1987): 43–44.

[286] Ibid., 45 (my italics).

[287] See for example: "Davidson's conclusions tell us much about the possibility of communicating with other types of creatures: those creatures can interpret each other only if they possess the appropriate kinds of shared similarity responses, and we can interpret or communicate with them not at all if their similarity responses diverge from ours too greatly." (Carpenter, "Davidson's Transcendental Argumentation," 232).

relies is not a natural fact, but subject to constant negotiation through interpretation.[288] Since no observable behavior is meaningful in and of itself, but must be recognized by others as such, charity contains a profound demand for interpretation and a corresponding responsibility to interpret. Ramberg criticizes Davidson's choice of words, and deems "charity" an inadequate term because of its Christian and ethical undertones;[289] this is perhaps part of the reason why in his later writings Davidson opts instead for "policy of rational accommodation." But, Davidson's original choice of words is more appropriate than he himself would have liked to admit, because his theory of meaning has an inescapable ethical element, that persists in the principle of charity and the community it necessitates, despite his best efforts to repress it.

But the ethical aspect of Davidson's theory of interpretation runs even deeper, because the sense of community invoked by his philosophy calls for a new understanding of what a community is. Wachbroit contends that charity employs a unique sense of "we," whose notion of "agreement does not mean consensus nor does it imply anything about the judgment of any particular individual or about the judgments of the majority of individuals."[290] In other words, a community of radical interpreters is not a communion of individuals who come together by virtue of an agreement, because in a community of radical interpreters the first person plural precedes the first person singular. Wachbroit explains:

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[288] It is interesting to note in this context that Davidson starts off his discussion of similarity of response by talking about "we humans" but later remarks that "it may be that not even plants could survive in our world if they did not to some extent react in ways we find similar to events and objects that we find similar. This clearly is true of animals; and of course it becomes more obvious the more like us the animal is." (Davidson, "Epistemology Externalized," 202).

[289] Ramberg, "Charity and Ideology," 644.

[290] Wachbroit, "Theories of Rationality and Principles of Charity," 45.

"this is a 'we' that cannot be understood as a quantification over individuals nor as a royal or editorial "we". It is the "we" found in such statements as 'We now know the solution to Hilbert's Tenth Problem'. Its striking feature is that this 'we' does not entail an 'I': although I can correctly assert that *we* now know the solution to Hilbert's Tenth Problem, it does not follow that I can correctly assert that *I* know the solution to Hilbert's Tenth Problem. A more precise understanding of charity-based theories of rationality will require a more detailed study of this use of the third person plural."[291]

Nancy's notion of the singular-plural is an attempt to develop a more detailed understanding of this first person plural that is not grounded in an I, by thinking the shared exposure that precedes any delineation of boundaries between "us" and "them" or between "me" and "you" (or perhaps by thinking the boundaries between "us" and "them" or "me" and "you" as exposure). The irreducibility of this shared exposure dictates that any designation of a "them" as completely separated from "us" denies this fundamental sharing, thus effectively denying a demand for interpretation. It is such a demand for interpretation that Davidson denies when he reserves the ability to respond for humans and withholds it from animals and machines (which he takes to be merely reacting).[292]

Nancy's claim that the entire world is liable to sense is an ethically motivated attempt to get away from a humanistic-anthropocentric view on which man is the measure of things (so things can only make sense for man or in relation to man); Davidson's view on language on the other hand is admittedly anthropocentric. In defense of his position Davidson argues that this anthropocentrism is not a fault of his, but a

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[291] Ibid., 45–46.
[292] On the ethical implications of the distinction between response and reaction see: Kelly Oliver, *Animal Lessons* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 47–48.

necessary characteristic of language, which is an inherently human phenomenon. He writes:

> "to make the distinction so strong, and to make it depend on language, invites an accusation of anthropocentrism. The complaint is just, but it ought not to be leveled against me. I merely describe a feature of certain concepts. After all, it is not surprising that our human language is rich in resources for distinguishing men and women from other creatures, just as the Inuit are said to have a vocabulary convenient for picking out varieties of snow (this is now said to be a myth). We connive with our language to make it, and us, seem special."[293]

Davidson attempts to pass this position as fairly obvious and inconsequential, but it is not, and it is important to distinguish between a few different points that get thrown together in it. Davidson is right to point out that language, since it is invented by humans, contains a human bias, the question is whether that is a necessary feature. Here again it is helpful to keep in mind the distinction between language and interpretation: while all the conventional languages we are currently familiar with are human, the same does not follow for interpretation. So while language might be inherently anthropocentric, meaning, which is ultimately what Davidson is talking about, does not have to be, and this fact is obscured when the two are conflated.[294]

Nancy is troubled by the fact that the limits of the linguistic community are often the limits of the ethical community. He points out that by conceiving sense as something that can only exist in relation to man we permit the instrumental treatment of all other beings, for we perceive things as significant only in as much as they serve man, only to

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[293] Davidson, "Rational Animals," 96.

[294] It is curious in this context to note that in his attempt to shirk his responsibility to the anthropocentrism of language Davidson is appealing to a certain customary notion of language, arguing that the anthropocentric bias already and necessarily consists in this notion. However, since Davidson is venturing to radically transform any accepted notion of language, it is unclear why his new conception of language has to retain the anthropocentric bias of existing concepts of language.

the extent that man can use them toward his own ends. Davidson is not oblivious to this problem, but he thinks that the linkage between language and ethics can be undone with a simple disclaimer: "on the moral issue how we should treat dumb creatures, I see no reason to be less kind to those without thoughts or language than to those with, on the contrary."[295] Here Davidson is either playing dumb or being devastatingly naïve, for we do in fact treat dumb animals (at least most of them) very different than we do humans,[296] so while the ethical concern by itself does not land any support to the claim that language is not a singularly human trait, it also cannot be dispensed with as easily as Davidson would have liked to. Furthermore, we do in fact interpret nonhumans all the time based on their observable behavior, and this prevalent phenomenon ought to be explained rather than explained away. The challenge is to open up the gates of the interpretive community without drifting into an indiscriminative conception of sense which is also ethically blind (or at least visually impaired) because it does not allow for much needed ethical distinctions. It is important then, for ethical reasons as well, to develop conceptual tools that will enable us to contemplate and cultivate the way we interpret the different beings that populate our environment.

Simply put, interpretation delineates the domain of meaning, which is closely tied to the way we draw the line between humans and nonhumans. Such questions regarding the definition of the human are already implicated in the debate over the principle of humanity, mentioned in chapter three. The attempt to replace the principle of charity with the principle of humanity stems from a concern regarding the supposedly imperialistic

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[295] Davidson, "Rational Animals," 96, n. 1.
[296] For the time being I am overlooking the countless number of historical as well as more recent examples of humans who were treated like, if not worse than, animals. This is of courses one of the main motivations behind Nancy's work, as well as the approach to language that I have attempted to develop here.

nature of the former. Here for example is Ian Hacking's remarks on the potentially colonial nature of charity (mistakenly understood as maximization of agreement): "linguistic imperialism is better armed than the military for perhaps it can be proved, by a transcendental argument, that if the native [the interpretee] does not share most of our beliefs and wants, he is just not engaged in human discourse, and is at best sub-human."[297] As Hacking sarcastically points out, determining who is a speaker, i.e. who makes sense, cannot be separated from determining who is human. However, the danger he reveals is not unique to charity-based theories of rationality, but plagues criteria-based theories as well, for defining universal criteria, as the latter attempts to do, does not get around the problem of delineating the boundaries of the community (or universe) to which the rules apply. The only way to counter this danger is by rethinking and reinterpreting the workings of such boundaries, and consequently of community, because, as Davidson states, and Nancy would probably concur – "there are no definite limits to how far dialogue can or will take us."[298]

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[297] Hacking, *Why Does Language Matter to Philosophy?*, 149.
[298] Davidson, "Three Varieties of Knowledge," 219.

Conclusion

This dissertation started with the impression, shared by Davidson and Nancy, that meaning cannot be determined by convention. While both thinkers acknowledge the existence of conventions, Davidson questions whether linguistic conventions are fundamental to the nature of meaning and communication, and Nancy challenges the role of convention (for example in the form of a social contract) in the constitution of community. Davidson's uneasiness with linguistic conventions stems from the observation that the infinite ingenuity of speakers and the generative nature of language make it impossible to definitively distinguish between standard (and therefore paradigmatic) and nonstandard (hence derivative) communicative interactions. Nancy expresses a similar unease regarding what he sees as a nostalgic tendency to distinguish between an ideal community, which is cohesive and harmonious, and today's fragmented society. While the impression that social bonds nowadays are weak and instrumental, like the impression that kids today hold observance of linguistic norms in contempt, leads some to champion the need to strengthen and reinforce conventions (linguistic and otherwise), Nancy and Davidson take a different route, and argue that the need for conventions is false to begin with. Their rejection of convention is grounded in alternative models that explain the production of meaning and community without appealing to conventions. Davidson's model of radical interpretation, like Nancy's notion of being-in-common, are offered as alternative explanations for successful communication and the being of community (respectively), which do not resort to (but also do not exclude the use of) conventions. The first two chapters of this dissertation are devoted to the examination of Davidson's and Nancy's critiques of convention, and to the

presentation of their alternative explications of linguistic communication and the building of community.

Before I proceed, I would like to make a comment on the choice to pair together Davidson and Nancy for a study of the role of convention in language. Beyond the somewhat unusual decision to bring together a so called "analytic" philosopher with a so called "continental" philosopher, there are more obvious choices than Nancy for a discussion of linguistic conventions within the domain of continental philosophy. As demonstrated in chapter four, beyond the (not insignificant) differences in style and terminology, Davidson's critique of the role of convention in language is almost identical to Derrida's, who would have therefore been a more readily apparent choice for this dissertation. However, I find the combination of Davidson and Nancy to be particularly illuminating, precisely because Nancy's work is not directly related to language. Bringing together Nancy and Davidson highlights the necessary connection between the role of convention in communication and the role of convention in the constitution of community, consequently revealing that a reformulation of the notion of community is required for an explication of meaning (or mental content) as a social phenomenon that does not appeal to convention. While I realize that in today's philosophical world Davidson and Nancy make an odd couple, and I would be lying if I did not admit that that was part of the initial draw, in the course of writing this dissertation this fact has become less significant for me. This is not to say that I do not see the bridging of the analytic-continental gap as an important goal, which I am committed to pursuing in my future research, but if all I have accomplished in this dissertation is the revealing of some interesting overlaps between the works of Nancy and Davidson I have failed to achieve

my prime objective. While I derive a lot of pleasure from the ability to put Davidson and Nancy in conversation, my ultimate goal was to articulate the question of the normativity of meaning in a new way, by bringing out a dimension of the conversation that, in my opinion, has been gravely overlooked until now. This new dimension is the focus of the third and fourth chapters, which compose the heart of this project.

Chapters three and four show that when linguistic conventions are rejected, speakerhood becomes a decisive factor in making communication possible. Davidson's theory of meaning is an attempt to have the cake and eat it too: to hold on to the explanatory role of intentions but also make meaning public; to naturalize the study of meaning while underscoring the social aspect of meaning production; to get away from speaker intention while also rejecting convention. I find the results of Davidson's attempt enlightening and promising, but also in need of further development. The key to advancing Davidson's theory of meaning lies in explicating its social aspect (the social interaction that takes place between radical speaker-interpreters) in a way that sidesteps both speaker intention and convention. Nancy's work has been invaluable for revealing just how crucial the social aspect is for Davidson's theory of interpretation, as well as the need to rethink our understanding of the sociality of meaning and what it takes to constitute a linguistic community. Nancy's philosophy has helped me envision Davidson's work on language in a new light, consequently demonstrating that some of the objections raised against it (most importantly that it falls back into an individual conception of meaning) are resolved once its social aspect is properly understood. Dismissing the concerns regarding the sociality of Davidson's theory of meaning cleared

the way for an investigation of the real sticking point in his theory – the question of speakerhood, its social context and its ethical significance.

My chief conclusion is that when maintaining a social conception of meaning while also rejecting convention we lose Grice's distinction between natural and non-natural meaning.[299] Davidson's theory of meaning provides no grounds for distinguishing between a thunder *meaning* that it is going to rain, a dog's barking *meaning* that it wants to go outside and play, and a friend's utterance "I need to get up early tomorrow" *meaning* that she is bored and wants to leave the party. A similar issue afflicts Nancy's conception of sense: if stones, seahorses and humans all partake in it, how do we keep the notion of sense form losing its explanatory power? Put another way, if meaning is completely determined by observable behavior, how do we avoid turning it into an all encompassing causal nexus, thus evacuating the notion of meaning from its normative force? The answer proposed in this dissertation is that what makes linguistic meaning distinct, and in a certain sense normative, is not its conventional nature, but that it gets attributed based on behavior that justifies the attribution of intentions (behavior that an interpreter deems to be best explained by an appeal to reasons), which effectively means taking the agent of the behavior to be a speaker. This is why the question of speakerhood takes on a prominent role for both Nancy and Davidson. So in the end we cannot really get around speaker intention, because intentions are an inseparable part of interpreting behavior, but we can get around some of the traditional problems that relying on speaker intention generate in regard to communication, subjectivity and community, by reformulating both intentionality and speakerhood as primordially shared. On Davidson's

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[299] See: Paul Grice, "Meaning," in *Studies in the Ways of Words* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989), 213–223.

and Nancy's view, intentions are the product of communication rather than the other way around, which dictates that speakers must already be related in order to be speakers (i.e. there are no individual speakers because speakerhood is shared from the outset).

As I was exploring the issue of speakerhood I gradually came to realize the gravity of the challenge posed by nonhuman animals, especially with regards to the ethical implications of speakerhood. Nonhuman animals make an excellent case study for speakerhood because on the one hand it seems so patently obvious to so many philosophers that speakers are tantamount to humans, yet many laypersons (even ones that, like me, are not animal enthusiasts) harbor the sense that animals can be interpreted, and that such interpretation, while perhaps more limited, is not different in principle from the interpretation of humans (especially when taking into consideration liminal human speakers such as infants and people with disabilities). The question of nonhuman speakers opened the door to an area of research that extends well beyond the original scope of this dissertation, which is why the last chapter raises more questions than it answers. To be honest, I never thought that I will find myself interested in nonhuman animals, either from a philosophical, and even more so from an empirical, point of view. But I see a great need for a philosophical examination of the possibility of nonhuman speakers, as such investigation would complement the fairly recent and growing willingness among philosophers to recognize that humans are not alone in having thought.

The interdependence of meaning and belief dictates that taking a creature to be a thinker is inseparable from taking it to be a speaker and vice versa. Davidson takes this to be a proof that only humans can think, but as we become more amenable to the

possibility of thought being a matter of degree it is only fair that we consider the possibility of treating language in a similar manner. The "cognitive turn" of the last few decades has produced an abundance of empirical evidence that suggests the existence of thought in nonhuman animals, and persuaded many philosophers to develop accounts of thought that can accommodate ways of thinking that are available to nonlinguistic creatures. But while the effort to come to terms with the relevant empirical research has helped philosophers produce a more refined and nuanced conception of thought, I find that the focus on exploring the possibility of wordless thought has come at the expense of language. While the separation of thought from language made it easier to attribute thought to nonhuman animals, it has also caused philosophers to take for granted that language is a singularly human trait, consequently overlooking important continuities between human language and animal communication. Drawing a sharp line between human language and animal communication distorts our understanding of language, because it overemphasizes features of human language that distinguish it from ways in which animals communicate, while neglecting important aspects of language that evolved from animal communication. While this dissertation does not offer a full-fledged account of language that can mend this problem, its conclusion suggests that we ought to develop a more flexible account of language, one that complements our current understanding of thought, and sees both language and thought as spectrums that extend beyond the human realm.

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