KU Leuven
Humanities and Social Sciences Group
Institute of Philosophy

KU LEUVEN
DOCTORAL SCHOOL
HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

THE HERMENEUTICS OF OBSCURE PRONOUNCEMENTS

Eric Nenkia BIEN

Supervisor:

Prof. dr. Filip Buekens

Dissertation presented in partial
fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

June 2022

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

In April 1981, an encounter took place between Hans-Georg Gadamer and Jacques Derrida during a symposium at the Goethe Institute in Paris. This symposium was organized by Sorbonne professor Philippe Forget, on the topics of "Text and Interpretation," and the very first public academic encounter between Gadamer and Derrida featured the former emphasizing both the unity *of* and *in* meaning, and the latter emphasizing meaning's undecidability and irreducible equivocation.[1] There was no agreement between them, and many commentators thereafter held that no interesting dialogue took place either. They saw the encounter as an "improbable debate."[2] Interestingly, the symposium was about interpretation and meaning, even though it focused on texts, and happened to be a scholarly debate between two people that probably came to represent hermeneutics and deconstruction. This encounter yielded no agreement, quite unlike the purpose of ordinary communicative exchanges, and it also seemingly lacked any mutual effort to attain one. We engage in dialogue in ordinary situations, and we take part in conversations in everyday encounters. Everyday conversations also touch upon the convergence of meaning since only then can a useful conversation take place. Sometimes, however, day-to-day communicative acts, like some written texts, can involve somewhat out-of-the-ordinary pictures or elements, and might be regarded as either obscure or at least unfamiliar. They tend to overwork our imagination because we are not familiar with them. This would be the case if a friend were to assert that rabbits in Montreal, for example, wore suits, or that rattlesnakes wore sunglasses, or that there was an albino gorilla in the zoo,[3] or that the insect which causes malaria bites (only) in the daytime, or, as with Donald Davidson's famous example, that there is a hippopotamus in the refrigerator.[4] These utterances, in ordinary communication, are not only locutions made with words, but they also have auditory (the rise and fall of tones heard), visual (smiles, frowns,

---

[1] Diane Michelfelder and Richard Palmer, 'Introduction.' In *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter* edited by Diane P. Michelfelder and Richard E. Palmer (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989), 1-2. The symposium took place from 25th-27th April.

[2] Chantélle Swartz and Paul Cilliers, 'Dialogue Disrupted: Derrida, Gadamer and the Ethics of Discussion,' *South African Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (2003): 1-18.

[3] The example of rattlesnakes wearing sunglasses is from Daniel T. Gilbert, 'How Mental Systems Believe.' *American Psychologist*. Vol. 46, No. 2 (Feb., 1991): 107- 119. The example of an albino gorilla is from the writings of Jordi Fernandez. See 'The Intentionality of Memory,' *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 84, No. 1 (2006): 39-57.

[4] Donald Davidson, 'On Saying That.' In Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* Oxford: Clarendon Press (1984), Sixth Impression [1991], 93-108. Originally published in a double issue of *Synthèse* that was devoted to W. V. Quine's work - Synthèse. Vol. 19, 130-146.

bulging or contracting eyes, gestures), and cognitive aspects, some of which also play a key role in the comprehension of meaning. When it comes to obscurity in texts, like "Love is just a word," or in religious language like theological reflections on the Trinity, though, these auditory and visual features are absent and therefore not helpful for the processing of meaning. That is to say, whereas spoken words are accompanied with sounds and gestures, written texts are not.

Speaking of 'The Hermeneutics of Obscure Pronouncements,' it is the "obscure pronouncements" that will be the main subject of this dissertation and also that about which clarification is sought. That is why the concept of an "obscure pronouncement" will be discussed prior to hermeneutics.[5] The expression "obscure pronouncements" appears in Albert Anderson's "Philosophical Obscurantism: Prolegomena to Hamann's Views on Language," in which the author discusses the views of the German philosopher Johann Georg Hamann and lists him among the philosophers characterized as obscure.[6] This dissertation is, however, not about Hamann whom Anderson also assesses from a theological standpoint. Frank Cioffi, to give another example, characterizes Ludwig Wittgenstein as an obscure philosopher on account of the limits that the latter places on the explanatory powers of empirical enquiry, the explanatory potential wrongly assigned to reflection, and the epistemic sensibility in his preference for what he calls 'formal relations', 'further description', 'understanding which consists in seeing the connections', and to empirical enquiry.[7] Morton White gives a similar argument against "philosophers of clarity," saying that while Cartesians quantify about minds and Platonists about attributes, they trade one sort of ontological obscurantism for another, and this is true even when anti-Platonists hope to avoid obscurity by resorting to synonymy.[8] The connection of, and difference between, obscurantism and bullshitting has been highlighted by Filip Buekens and Maarten Boudry, who see the former as deliberately creating a game of smoke and mirrors, and the latter as nonchalance towards an utterance's

---

[5] In this title, 'hermeneutics' is used in a general sense to refer to that which pertains to understanding. A specific meaning will be explored in chapter 3.

[6] Albert Anderson, 'Philosophical Obscurantism: Prolegomena to Hamann's Views on Language,' *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 62, No. 3 (Jul., 1969): 247-274 [247].

[7] See Frank Cioffi, 'Wittgenstein and Obscurantism,' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volumes. Vol. 64 (1990): 1-23. Cioffi characterizes these as limits obscurantism, method obscurantism, and sensibility obscurantism respectively.

[8] Morton White, 'Ontological Clarity and Semantic Obscurity,' *The Journal of Philosophy,* Vol. 48, No. 12 (1951): 373-380. Morton says that they do this by substituting the difference between disposition and occurrence for that between Cartesian mind and body. As to synonymy, he seems to submit that while the word itself is not definable, synonymy can always be recognized between two (synonymous) words. Morton actually suggests (p.375) that "is synonymous with" is obscure.

epistemic status. According to them, obscurantism engages an audience or a reader in a hermeneutical task aimed at attaining understanding.[9] The mechanisms employed by obscurantists and bullshitters have been discussed by Viktor Ivanković,[10] and Jon Elster presents different types of obscurantism, describing bullshitting in terms of uncommittedness.[11] However, these authors do not discuss issues that concern the classification and interpretation of obscure statements, and this dissertation hopes to fill this gap.

This dissertation will, therefore, be guided by the following questions: (1) Is obscurantism the same phenomenon as bullshit? If not, where does the difference between them lie? (2) What forms does the obscure take? (3) How can we make sense of obscure pronouncements? (4) Is charity exercised only as an interpreter's rational strategy?

With regard to the first question, I will propose, against the leading view found in the literature, that obscurantism differs from bullshit. Bullshit involves talking with a certain shallowness of style that communicates uncommittedness. The shallowness can be a stylistic feature (although it does not need to be) since the bullshitter can also hide something that she does not intend to communicate while talking with others. It also tends to centre more around speech acts. What obscurantism achieves is, on the one hand, to seduce the audience and take him on an adventure to discover deep truths which may not be there or, on the other, to repel and scare the audience from throwing a challenge at the obscurantist. The obscurantist is apt at this craft, and so she is able to sustain the audience's longing for the perceived depth. I will suggest different forms which the obscure can take, like deepities, opacities, religious language, and so on, in answer to the second question which is about the forms the obscure can take. In some cases, whether some of the forms can be called obscure at all remains a question, such as in poetic utterances for example; and I will argue that poetic utterances are not obscure. As far as interpreting the obscure is concerned, I will propose a two-level account of charity to understand them, in response to the question on making sense of the obscure. Charity instructs the hearer or interpreter to invest the utterer or speaker with reason and mostly true beliefs in order to make sense of her utterance.[12] This is because it is difficult

---

[9] Filip Buekens and Maarten Boudry, 'The Dark Side of the Loon. Explaining the Temptations of Obscurantism,' *Theoria*. Vol. 81 (2015): 126-142.

[10] Viktor Ivanković, 'Steering Clear of Bullshit? The Problem of Obscurantism,' *Philosophia*, Vol. 44: 531-546.

[11] Jon Elster, 'Hard and Soft obscurantism in the Humanities and social Sciences.' *Diogenes*. Vol. 58 (2012): 159–170.

[12] I will use the masculine pronoun for the interpreter or hearer of an utterance, and the feminine for the speaker.

to imagine how precisely to make sense of what someone says without first considering her capable of making a reasonable utterance. In particular, the principle of charity as presented by Donald Davidson, will be fundamental to the discussion. In Davidson, it is not just reason and truth that play an important role in understanding a speaker, but also the attitude of belief. I will argue that mere obscurity can be interpreted or resolved by using the principle of charity, but that it is likely to be unhelpful in the interpretation of obscure texts. Moreover, Davidson's principle of charity and the diverse reactions to it by his students all thrive on an enormous assumption of reasonableness imposed on the speaker by the interpreter. It is about the interpreter's rational strategy, and while I agree with this, it leads me to further question whether or not that exhausts all we experience with regard to the principle of charity. Thus, my research's fourth question delves into a possible role-playing occurrence that takes place before the interpreter's decision to make sense of what a speaker is saying. In other words, I claim that understanding a speaker is not only about the traditional deliberative inference drawn from the speaker's reasonableness, but also about less reason-concentrated occurrences. I argue, in fact, for the role of automaticity in connecting with a speaker's speech act prior to deliberation. Taking reason and reasoning to be high-level processes that are deeply epistemic, the automatic processes have to do with low-level processes which negotiate the senses and then relate them to the higher faculties. Charity, as I argue, is not only a rational inference to the best explanation, but also a natural occurrence. In other words, before the deliberative process of reasoning which is high-level, there is first an instant and pre-reflective connection with a percept which resonates with our natural architecture for communication and understanding. Rational or deliberative charity, with which the entire literature on charity deals, is thus a rational reconstruction of a natural disposition. The natural disposition by which we hear and see a speaker is what provides the material necessary to reason charitably, and may, on the strength of that, be regarded as charity itself. Two strands of charity obviously emerge: the deliberative, reflective, or rational, and the automatic or natural.

What would make this study of charity worthwhile? Obscure utterances strike us as taxing owing to the imagery that is sometimes involved therein, as in, for example, having to think about a hippopotamus as being somewhere else rather than in the zoo (which would have been the easiest to understand), or in the house (which might have been easier to process), but in the refrigerator (completely out of place for the animal, hippopotamus). This

example is one of the least complex since it is possible to find out whether or not it is true by checking the refrigerator. A statement like "God is everywhere" would be a more complex example. It seems, though, that obscurity strikes before you embark on a verification even in less complex cases, that is, one instantly notices an unfamiliar 'item' requiring resolution or explanation before beginning the process of resolving it. This dissertation provides a way around these tasks by advocating for a two-stage principle of charity. In this dissertation, charity is presented not just as a highly demanding principle requiring huge epistemic investments, attainable only by some persons, but also as a simple, low-level capacity that is available to everyone. This implies that a second type of charity, namely "automatic," is suggested in addition to the traditionally known type here designated as "deliberative" or "reflective," and that the automatic is less cognitively demanding than the deliberative. As a matter of fact, this dissertation shows that there is a link between the low-level and the high-level processes. Automatic charity, which is this dissertation's unique contribution, actually seems to account for something which was missing in traditional accounts of the principle of charity. It also makes the discussions that are happening in philosophy chime with theories of action and decision that are being undertaken in other fields of study, which have discovered that there are two processes involved in human decision making; the first, fast and automatic, the second, slow and deliberative. These disciplines have also been able to suggest automaticity through measuring the amount of time that comprehension takes. In this way, this dissertation enables us to account for the role of charity in everyday communication, especially when it comes to non-epistemic conversations in very plain and ordinary situations.

A comprehensive account of how to make sense of an utterance involves an account of the utterance and of its speaker. The various disciplines that study human language and understanding, therefore, contribute to this research project's results: philosophical hermeneutics, epistemology, pragmatics, cognitive linguistics and neuroscience, and social and experimental psychology.

This dissertation consists of five chapters. Each chapter will provide an answer to one research question while the final chapter will provide a synthesis. The first will be a philosophical study of obscurantism, its nature and implications. Like the literature it examines, this chapter will adopt an analytical approach. It will include what obscure assertoric utterances awaken in us, as well as our ability to recognize statements that are obscure. This will be an opportunity to briefly talk about the theory of mind and other

cognitive desiderata which, in my view, function to enable us to identify the obscure as such. This chapter's study of obscure pronouncements traces the emergence of the recent philosophical study of obscurity from studies of bullshit, and then focuses on some of its key aspects while claiming that bullshit and obscurantism do not neatly overlap as presented in the literature.

In the second chapter, we investigate the ways in which obscure pronouncements initially appear. What forms do they take, whether utterances or texts? Here, a Dennettian discussion about what he calls *deepites* is presented as well as a couple of Sperberian references to what is opaque in ordinary conversations as well as religious statements. These provoke a further investigation into the vulnerability of religious language to the critique of obscurantism, an investigation that touches upon logical positivism, the evidential challenge, Wittgenstein, and some recent scholars, but it will approach religious language from a cognitive point of view. Obscurity outside the core philosophical terrain including *poetry*, agnotology (the study of the creation and maintenance of ignorance), and the more recent waves of fakery and post-truth, are also studied. With regard to poetry, though, I argue that it is not obscurantist by virtue of its purpose according to which it triggers aesthetic experience. This is quite different from the aim of the obscurantist. In this way, the chapter helps to concretize the first chapter's results by showing what obscurantism actually is.

The third chapter will study the processes involved in the interpretation of the obscure. Looking at the twentieth century's split of philosophy along continental and analytical lines, we will situate our study of the nature of interpretation against a corresponding background of continental and analytical traditions. This may be helpful when the principal theorists of interpretation, Gadamer and Davidson, are later examined alongside one another. First, hermeneutics will be explored. After a brief look at its origins and meaning, it will be distinguished from analysis, following the work of Jeff Malpas.[13] Then we will hone in on Gadamer's hermeneutics,[14] which will be followed by an investigation of Davidson's account of radical interpretation.[15] That analysis will provide an opportunity to introduce Davidson's principle of charity and its origins will be discussed together with the reactions to it in the literature. While Davidson will be central here, the discussion of truth, rationality, and belief,

---

[13] J. E. Malpas, 'Analysis and Hermeneutics,' *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (1992): 93-123.

[14] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* translation revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald D. Marshall (London-New York: Continuum, 1975 [2006].

[15] Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

which are core to his meaning-fixation theory, will take us to other philosophers as well. This overview will have a dual aim: 1) to show that charity is a veritable principle for understanding everyday communication and certain obscure pronouncements; 2) to show that discussions of the principle of charity are in fact revolving around the issue of reflective or deliberative charity. This traditional view, as I hope to show, is not a comprehensive account of charity because, as I claim, charity also has an automatic dimension.

If charity is more than reflective, though, what evidence is there to show that this is indeed the case? This will be the focus of the fourth chapter. The role played by acceptance, closely linked with belief, will be important here. Cartesian and Spinozan theories of belief fixation will be discussed as presented by Daniel T. Gilbert and Eric Mandelbaum.[16] This engenders a shift in discussion from philosophy and pragmatics to cognitive sciences and experimental psychology. Several theories will be discussed here, including those of belief-fixation, lexical access, the amount of time that comprehension takes, and the nature of automatic processes. These theories will be used to clarify the need for a complementary account of charity. A case will also be made to justify this need by looking at the situation of children with less developed intellectual capabilities who nevertheless communicate successfully with adults who have considerably high or much more developed intellectual capacities. These studies indicate not just that there is a fast automatic process and a slow deliberative one at work in our human capacity to understand others, but also that a good number of our activities are actually characterized by automaticity. Unlike the slow deliberative part, the fast automatic disposition does not rely on reason and upon the cognitive faculties; it relates directly and immediately to an experience or speech act. To relate directly to an experience or a percept (visual, auditory, or touch stimulus) involves an immediate belief in or acceptance of the percept; otherwise, there would be nothing to which to relate. These attitudes of belief and acceptance constitute the link from the automatic dimension to the reflective dimension of charity. In utterance, this *relating* happens once the sound is heard, and the hearer automatically connects with it or makes distinctions. Depending on the percept's 'processory' weight, reason may or may not be invoked to intervene in decision making. Where it is invoked, charity is reflective; where it is not invoked, charity is

---

[16] Daniel T. Gilbert, 'How Mental Systems Believe,' *American Psychologist*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (1991): 107-119; Eric Mandelbaum, "Thinking is Believing," *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 57, No. 1 (2014): 55-96.

automatic. Obviously, then, automatic charity negotiates low-level processes[17] that do not burden reason. This proposal is strengthened in a significant way by the time it takes for comprehension processes to work. In this chapter, the investigation's point will be to show that charity does not just have a deliberative aspect, but also a natural one, and both dimensions are complementary.

The fifth and last chapter's task will be to provide a synthesis of the research and to show that obscure pronouncements that occur in ordinary conversations could be made sense of by means of the principle of charity to some extent. However, charity is not just a rational exercise, but also an automatic process, and both parts function to ensure understanding in communication. The synthesis will be followed by conclusions.

---

[17] I use this terminology following David W. Vinson, Rick Dale, Maryan Tabatabeian, and Nicholas D. Duran. See 'Seeing and Believing: Social Influences on Language Processing.' In *Attention and Vision in Language Processing* edited by Ramesh Kumar Mishra, Narayanan Srinivasan, and Falk Huettig (India: Springer, 2015), 197-213.

CHAPTER ONE

BULLSHIT AND OBSCURITY

Describing something as obscure, or talking about obscurity, is a pretty common occurrence. Writings and various linguistic moves have been described as obscure in science,[1] poetry and playwriting,[2] psychoanalysis,[3] and others. Of the various fields, it is philosophy that has recently begun to study what it takes for something, usually a piece of writing, to be considered obscure. Harry Frankfurt's 1985 paper, "On Bullshit,"[4] was a major step in this regard. Thus, studies in obscurity have always referred to bullshit studies, and while one position has tended to equate obscurity with bullshit,[5] another has classified the obscure as a type of or a subject under bullshit,[6] even as a third has tended to see both as distinct phenomena.[7] Is every instance of obscurity also an instance of bullshit? This chapter's first task will be to investigate the (dis)similarities of bullshit and obscurity. This will help us to hone our focus as we examine obscure pronouncements. We shall then investigate the source of our ability to recognize the obscure, and in what sort of exercise we are engaged when we identify the obscure. That will be followed by a cursory look at the sentence types that will occupy us in our study of obscurity; the last section will explore obscurity's appeal. It should be noted early enough that there is a distinction between being merely obscure and being obscurantist; the latter is a systematic vice.

---

[1] H.G. Townsend, "The Obscurantism of Science," *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 22, No. 20 (Sep. 24, 1925): 548-552.

[2] Adolf Köhnken, "Obscurity and Obscurantism: How to Read Pindar," Review of *Soliciting Darkness: Pindar, Obscurity, and the Classical Tradition, Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature 47* by John T. Hamilton, *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (Spring 2005): 602-606. See also, Linda Hill, "Obscurantism and Verbal Resistance in Handke's Kasper," *Germanic Review*, Vol. 52, No. 4 (Nov., 1977): 304-315.

[3] Murray J. Stern, "A Note on Obscurantism: The Case of Aaron Green," *Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (1982): 646-651.

[4] Harry G. Frankfurt, "On Bullshit." In Harry G. Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988 [2007]), 117-133.

[5] Jon Elster, "Hard and Soft Obscurantism in the Humanities and Social Sciences," *Diogenes*, Vol. 58, Nos. 1-2 (2012):159-170.

[6] Viktor Ivanković, "Steering Clear of Bullshit? The Problem of Obscurantism," *Philosophia*, Vol. 44 (2016): 531-546.

[7] Filip Buekens and Maarten Boudry, "The Dark Side of the Loon. Explaining the Temptations of Obscurantism," *Theoria*. Vol. 81 (2015): 126-142.

1.1 THE CONCEPT AND THE PHENOMENON OF THE OBSCURE

Let us begin with a conceptual remark. On the face of it, it could seem defeatist to try to describe obscurity accurately, for two reasons. First, obscurity seems sufficiently obvious to speakers of the English language, such that they almost immediately recognize it in an utterance or a text. In that case, it might not really require an accurate description or a definition. Secondly, obscurity seems, by simple understanding, to be something blurred or unclear, so that it would be difficult to render anything like a near-accurate description of it, since it is neither open nor entirely penetrable. However, nothing forbids us from offering salient tips by which to understand this concept, no matter its immediate perception. In fact, it does seem that if we can recognize something as obscure, then we can say how obscure it is. Moreover, it seems that x can be crystal clear to S while remaining obscure to P. We will now start setting up indications for recognising obscure pronouncements.

Harry Frankfurt, an American analytic philosopher, defines bullshit as any utterance that is made without caring for the truth. A person who speaks with indifference to truth or falsity is a bullshitter. What she says could, after all, turn out to be true, but that is not her concern. Bullshit is produced whenever circumstances or people require one to speak on something one knows little about, or when people are encouraged to have an opinion about everything, or in politics when a person is expected to speak about the mechanics of governance, or whenever they do not really know what they are talking about.

Frankfurt illustrates his thesis of bullshit with a conversation between Fania Pascal and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Fania Pascal, who knew Wittgenstein in Cambridge in the 1930s, was once in a nursing home when she got a call from Wittgenstein. Here is Pascal's report: "I croaked: 'I feel just like a dog that has been run over.' He (Wittgenstein) was disgusted: 'You don't know what a dog that has been run over feels like.'"[8] According to Frankfurt, Pascal's utterance in this conversation is considered by Wittgenstein to be bullshit. Since Pascal is not a dog, so Wittgenstein must have thought, she (Fania Pascal) cannot know exactly how a dog feels, never mind one that has been run over. To say, therefore, that she feels like a dog that has been run over dodges the true state of her feeling, even though it does not become false in the process. She simply makes up her utterance about her feeling without commitment to truth. Fania Pascal's utterance, thus, lacks any concern for the truth, and that is what provokes

---

[8] Fania Pascal, "Wittgenstein: A Personal Memoir." In *Recollections of Wittgenstein* edited by R. Rhees (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 23-39 [30].

Wittgenstein's stern reaction. Wittgenstein's reaction sounds quite unsympathetic, though, and presumes that he already understands his interlocutor.

In Frankfurt's account, bullshit's essential feature is this lack of concern for the truth. This is not the same as the lack of truth, but is rather an indifference to it. That is, it does not matter to the bullshitter whether or not her utterance is true, and what the bullshitter hides from her audience is precisely this indifference. A liar, conversely, is very concerned about the truth, and works hard to hide this truth from her audience. This makes the liar, according to Frankfurt, less odious than the bullshitter. In society, however, the liar is more detested than the bullshitter. This causes Frankfurt's puzzle to come to the fore: the bullshitter is completely indifferent to the truth of her utterance and so is capable of doing more harm to society than the liar; the liar is at least concerned about the truth of her utterance, even though she makes her audience believe her lie on its behalf. Society tolerates the bullshitter more than the liar!

Frankfurt's puzzle can evoke several musings. Society might just be less tolerant of the liar because the liar presents her lie in order for it to be believed as truth. This is like giving a gift which is received gladly only to be discovered later that it was a bad or spoilt or expired gift, and this was known to the giver at the time they gave it away. If it is officially announced, for example, that the relevant scientists have concluded that covid-19 is nothing more than a fever – which is a lie – it would be different from saying that covid-19 will come and go anyway, or that it cannot do much harm – which might be bullshit. On the basis of the lie, people might relax and cluster in groups only to contract covid-19 because they took a definitive statement that it was only a fever. The impact on society would seem to be more significant than that of the bullshit statement that covid-19 will not have much impact after all, because even though the latter statement might still make people relax, it gave comparatively no definite clue about covid-19's seriousness. The discovery that the previous statement was a lie can stir certain emotions that the latter may not stir. Apart from that, people might just be more tolerant of bullshit because they realize that they also bullshit from time to time. People who weigh their statements alongside Frankfurt's definition might just notice that they talk without measuring the truth of their statements in certain situations, including one like Pascal's which was just devising a way of expressing her tiredness. Frankfurt may, however, have a situation in which the bullshitter is discovered *post factum* in mind, either when it is too late or when irreparable damage has already been done.

Several reactions followed in the wake of Frankfurt's thesis. The first, which gave the study of bullshit another dimension, was Gerald A. Cohen's. In his paper, "Deeper Into Bullshit,"[9] Cohen explores bullshit of a different kind. According to him, whereas Frankfurt dealt with bullshit in ordinary life interactions, he would focus on bullshit in academia; while Frankfurt concentrated on the bullshitter rather than bullshit itself, Cohen would dwell on the latter. In discussing the bullshit found in academic circles, Cohen makes a further distinction from Frankfurt: Frankfurt ties bullshit to the bullshitter's state of mind, that is, her lack of concern for the truth, but bullshit is what it is, not because of the perpetrator's intention, but because of its features after it is uttered or written. What counts as bullshit in academia, then, is caused not by the intention of its writer or speaker, but by its unclarity. By this move, Cohen takes bullshit from the speaker's intention and moves it to the hearer's judgment. An utterance or a piece of writing counts as bullshit when it is nonsense or, as Cohen repeatedly puts it, when it is "by nature unclarifiable." It is "not only obscure but ... cannot be rendered unobscure."[10] This description of bullshit as unclarifiable unclarity could probably equate bullshit with meaninglessness, for an unclarity that cannot be clarified is one which communicates no meaning. That is why, according to Consuelo Preti's interpretation, Cohen's bullshit is characterized by "disregard for meaning."[11] However, Preti's characterization does not seem to capture Cohen's point. Cohen's unclarifiable unclarity seems more serious than "disregard for meaning," because a disregard for meaning does not preclude meaningfulness. That is, something can be quite meaningful and one might simply decide to disregard it; Cohen's bullshit goes beyond that since it cannot be broken down into meaningful parts. As a matter of fact, Cohen seems to touch upon something not merely obscure but also obscurantist, since it seems to be a function of a systematic plan. Cohen also takes the discussion concerning the liar further. Where Frankfurt indicated that the liar's project is to lead her audience from correctly apprehending reality, Cohen differentiates between what he calls the liar's tactic and the liar's goal. The liar's tactic is to tell a lie, but the liar's goal is to make her audience believe something false. Cohen is, of course, aware that the aforementioned goal is only the liar's initial goal, whose ultimate goal for lying may be to

---

[9] G.A. Cohen, "Deeper Into Bullshit." In *Contours of Agency: Essays on Themes from Harry Frankfurt* edited by Sarah Buss and Lee Overton (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002), 321-339.
[10] Ibid., 332.
[11] Consuelo Preti, "A Defense of Common Sense." In *Bullshit and Philosophy: Guaranteed to Get Perfect Results Every Time* edited by Gary L. Hardcastle and George A. Reisch (Illinois: Open Court, 2005), 19-32 [20].

protect her reputation or for another reason. However, the literature contains further philosophical reactions to Frankfurt and Cohen.

In his view, Scott Kimbrough, contra Frankfurt, thinks that it is not possible to bullshit without a concern for truth. One who bullshits has to know not only how to bullshit, but also how not to be taken in by his own bullshit; this requires, as he puts it, a "lively concern" for the truth.[12] A further nuance to this comes in the form of Sara Bernal's disagreement with Frankfurt bullshitter's "lack of concern for" and, instead, proposal of the bullshitter's "paying no attention to" the truth.[13] According to her, effective bullshitting requires concern for the truth. A student who does not know what to write in an essay, for instance, can decide to resort to verbose language. In doing so, she has some concern for the truth, even though she throws it behind a screen of verbiage. This bullshitter is different from a liar, since she only indirectly implicates the contrary of the truth. Moreover, according to Bernal's account, the unconscious plays a role in bullshitting. Thus, her emended version of Frankfurt's description takes the bullshitter to be a person who has to "take note of" a key aspect of the truth, namely, the aspect she wants to hide. The reason for bullshitting, which features in Alan Richardson's definition,[14] has more to do with ensuring that the speaker retains a positive attitude. Yet, it has to be plausibly true and difficult to confirm. For example, a student who fails to hand in her paper on the appointed date bullshits by giving made-up reasons as to why she could not hand it in. Usually, the reasons are not evidently false, according to Richardson, but they are not easy to verify either. As I see it, even if the student's reasons could be verified, the professor does not usually judge it worthwhile to do so. Either bullshit easily gives itself away, such that the bullshittee recognizes that he is being bullshitted, or it manifests itself as weak or warranting further investigation. This overlaps with Cornelis de Waal's[15] point that bullshit lacks the motivation to get things right and that its claims are made with so much lightness as to display a lack of responsibility.

These studies draw our attention to bullshit's different characteristics, even though they revolve principally around Frankfurt's lack of concern for truth and Cohen's unclarifiable unclarity. An attempt to unite both accounts uses Carnapian insight. In his "The Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language," a prototypical attack by

---

[12] Scott Kimbrough, "On Letting it Slide." In *Bullshit and Philosophy*.
[13] Sarah Bernal, "Bullshit and Personality." In *Bullshit and Philosophy*.
[14] Alan Richardson, "Performing Bullshit and the Post-sincere Condition." In *Bullshit and Personality*.
[15] Cornelis de Waal, "The Importance of Being Earnest: A Pragmatic Approach to Bullshitting." In *Bullshit and Philosophy.*

the logical positivists on metaphysics, Rudolf Carnap contested what he called metaphysical pseudo-statements, and particularly Martin Heidegger's *das Nichts selbst nichtet* (the nothing nothings), which are meaningless statements.[16] Drawing on this insight, Gary L. Hardcastle[17] says that Cohen's unclarifiable unclarity is just like the meaninglessness which Carnap attacked, while the effort by metaphysicians to keep juxtaposing words, which they alone or together with their audience believed to be making sense, is like Frankfurt's bullshit. Thus, Hardcastle advocates that Cohen's focus on the shit and Frankfurt's on the bull can be seen as two sides of the same coin. In this way, Hardcastle hopes to unite the major understandings of bullshit.

Perhaps we can begin our search for the relationship of obscurity to bullshit on this note of unity. A number of authors actually present both as related, even though they display no obvious intent to distinguish them. One of Cohen's concluding remarks is that bullshit often aims at obscurity in philosophy,[18] which seems to suggest that obscurity is a product of bullshit. Although this remark does not make obscurity a type of bullshit, it seems fair to interpret Cohen on the strength, not of this remark alone, but of his entire paper. Cohen wrote on academic bullshit, and one of his strategies was to criticize Frankfurt-style bullshit, which is tied to the producer's intention. What he seems to be doing in this remark, therefore, is to go back somewhat to some form of intentional tolerance in bullshitting. Thus, he starts the final paragraph of his essay by saying: "To prevent misunderstanding, let me add that I do believe that there is a lot of *aiming* at obscurity ...." This puts the weight of his dissent with Frankfurt not so much on the place of intention in bullshitting, as on the latter's definition of bullshit based on that intention. In Cohen's view, Frankfurt deals with the bullshitter, not bullshit, and Frankfurt's definition is tied to the bullshitter's intention; Cohen deals with bullshit, not the bullshitter, and his own definition dwells on the characteristics of bullshit. Yet, this does not mean that Cohen totally rejects the diminished role played by intention in bullshitting; he says that he believes that there is a lot of aiming at obscurity in bullshit. Obscurity becomes, then, a product of bullshit in Cohen's account. That is, it results whenever there is unclarifiable unclarity. When viewed from this angle, unclarifiable unclarity can be

---

[16] Rudolf Carnap, "Uberwindung der Metaphysik durch Logische Analyse der Sprache," Erkenntnis, Vol. 11 (1932), translated by Arthur Pap as "The Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language." http://www.calstatela.edu/sites/default/files/dept/phil/pdf/res/Carnap-Elimination-of-Metaphysics.pdf [Retrieved May 1, 2017].
[17] Gary L. Hardcastle, "The Unity of Bullshit." In *Bullshit and Philosophy.*
[18] Cohen, "Deeper Into Bullshit," 335.

likened to what has been referred to as meaninglessness, especially given that Cohen himself confesses his inability to define what unclarity is. This seems to demonstrate that it is characterized by some form of elusiveness that can make it not just accidentally obscure, but actually obscurantist, that is, as a deliberate form of obscurity.

However, in one of the expanded reflections on bullshit, Mark Evans has enumerated five types of bullshit in addition to Frankfurt's and Cohen's, one of which seems close to a general idea of obscurity.[19] According to Evans, bullshit is clarifiable unclarity. Given that an obscure text is unclear, this definition is, at least, optimistic insofar as it holds that what is unclear can ultimately be clarified. Thus, in virtue of the element of clarifiability, it would seem unnecessary to refer to an unclarity as obscurity. There are clarifiable unclarities that are not obscurities. For instance, suppose a child or someone unfamiliar with the idiom overhears a group of people saying, while passing by the king's palace, that the king just kicked the bucket; he is likely to think that the king, while perhaps taking a walk, hit his leg against a pail. Even his observation of their sombre faces might not make him think any deeper about the news, since he might think that the people are simply replicating the pain that the king must have felt after hitting his leg (which might, after all, have been a very hard thud). If that does not convince, seeing some people sob and people standing in groups will make him wonder what might be special about hitting one's leg against a pail, to such an extent as to make other people weep. At that point, there is unclarity that can be clarified, but it is not obscurity, it is an English idiom. Alternatively, take the case of Tony who, while listening to the radio, gets the meteorological forecast that the next day's weather would be clement. Suppose that Tony knows nothing about the weather being clement and only knows his neighbor whose name happens to be Clement, then Tony is likely going to wonder why the weather should be described in terms of his neighbor's name. It is, again, a case of unclarity that is clarifiable, not an obscurity. However, obscurity has been classified explicitly as a type of bullshit,[20] which seems still to pose a challenge. As I see it, neither concept neatly overlaps nor is the former a type of the latter. At this point, we will need to look further at them.

Ivanković has differentiated between obscurantism and obscure philosophy, and between a bullshitter and a bullshit distributer. Even though he himself describes his

---

[19] Mark Evans, "The Republic of Bullshit: On the Dumbing Up of Democracy." In *Bullshit and Philosophy*.
[20] See Ivanković, "Steering Clear of Bullshit."

distinctions as "imperfect for our attempts to identify bullshitters,"[21] we will try to get the gist of his position. According to Ivanković, one qualifies as a bullshitter only under the condition of deliberateness. If one has not chosen or decided to bullshit, then what one does is simply to distribute bullshit without being a bullshitter. When people inadvertently spread bullshit, they are distributers of bullshit. Therefore, we have bullshitters and distributers of bullshit. Similarly, there are people who deliberately write obscure material and they are obscurantists, and others who merely spread obscure philosophy, and are known, in his terms, as obscuria philosophers. His restricted usage of obscurantism makes it possible for only a select group of intellectuals to be obscurantist. While there are many who can distribute obscurity, only a few can be accused of producing it. Its distributers cannot really be accused except on the grounds of their being careless in the presentation of their ideas. According to Ivanković, such persons, through their carelessness, neglect the "principle of clarity"[22] which removes all obscurities, and a philosopher becomes an obscurantist bullshitter only by shying away from this principle.[23] It would seem that if one is simply a distributer of obscurity, then no matter how careful one is, one would still be a distributer. Being careful might be ideal for avoiding the production of obscurity, but not for its distribution since the distributer does not intend to be obscure. Ivanković also seems prepared to tolerate carelessness in philosophical writing, even when it is obscure, on the basis of the excuse of non-deliberateness, a condition which is itself hard to determine.[24] Moreover, Ivanković overturns Cohen completely by saying that the obscurantist aims at bullshitting.[25] Since Ivanković makes the obscurantist who aims at bullshitting a type of bullshitter in his account, could he also have suggested that by aiming at obscurity, as Cohen's account reveals, the bullshitter might be a type of obscurantist?

That is unlikely since he disagrees with Buekens and Boudry who separate the two concepts.[26] According to them, the bullshitter is nonchalant with regard to the epistemic status of her utterance, while the obscurantist presents a highly intellectual discourse with (at least

---

[21] Ibid., 533.

[22] Ibid., 539.

[23] Ivanković seems to imply, by the principle of clarity, a move of careful analysis of texts. It is possible that he formulates this principle based on his departure from and disagreement with Cohen's unclarifiable unclarity. What he leaves unsaid also concerns how much neglect of clarity can be tolerated within the bounds of distribution without stepping into the production of obscurantism.

[24] This is because one can imagine a situation where a distributer distributes obscurity because having realized what it is, this distributer is interested in spreading it.

[25] Ivanković, "Steering Clear of Bullshit," 543.

[26] Ibid., 538.

seemingly) deep contents requiring indirect approaches.[27] This account pays attention to an epistemic distinction between the two concepts, and from that point of view it is easy to see why Ivanković would disagree. According to the latter's account, epistemic status plays no role; what matters, rather, is deliberateness. Thus, while obscurity *does not need* to be deliberate in Buekens and Boudry's account, in Ivanković's account it is possible only when the source is deliberate. Moreover, Ivanković compares the producer and the distributer of bullshit in moral terms, and finds the producer to be guilty of a greater moral fault.[28] One way to characterize the two philosophical accounts, then, might be to say that they differ on epistemic and ethical grounds.

The quest to discover the relationship between bullshit and the obscure would be enhanced by taking a closer look at Ivanković's account. He builds upon Cohen's account, and although their classifications are not exactly the same, a rough comparison can be made. While Cohen focuses on the product alone, Ivanković focuses on both the product and the producer. It can roughly be said that Ivanković's "obscurantist bullshitter" also corresponds to Cohen's aim-bullshitter, while Ivanković's "non-intentional producer of obscurities" corresponds to Cohen's accidental bullshitter. Now, Ivanković claims that bullshit and obscurantism are overlapping terms, yet he uses the expression "obscurantist bullshitter" throughout his paper, suggesting that there is another type of bullshitter, something he never states outright. It can, however, be gleaned from his account that the other type of bullshitter is either the non-intentional producer of obscurities or the mere distributer of obscurities, but this person does not deserve to be called bullshitter in his account. This is because, after describing both ways of being connected with obscurantism, he avers that the designation "bullshitter" is more proper for the former description – the obscurantist bullshitter. Beyond this, Ivanković never explicitly talks about another type of bullshitter, but he would more properly have talked about the bullshitter in that case, rather than about the obscurantist bullshitter. The fact that he clings to both terms together seems to suggest that they do not in fact overlap and that he needs the one to strengthen the other. The position taken by Ivanković and Cohen, which sees bullshit and obscurantism as more or less overlapping terms, has been

---

[27]Buekens and Boudry, "The Dark Side of the Loon," 127.
[28] Ivanković, "Steering Clear of Bullshit," 538-539.

referred to as the "unity view," while the view taken by Buekens and Boudry, which sees them as separable phenomena, has been called the "separation view."[29]

The Cardiff philosopher Nicholas Shackel,[30] discusses certain manoeuvres of postmodernists. Shackel who calls himself a rationalist, argues that postmodernists (which covers, according to him, poststructuralists, deconstructivists, exponents of the Strong Programme in the sociology of knowledge, and feminist anti-rationalists) use what he calls Troll's truisms. Troll's truisms are ambiguous statements that communicate falsehoods through the use of trivial truths. One example given by Shackel is the saying that what is constructed can also be constructed in another way. The general idea seems close to that of hiding the truth of what one wants to say and, instead, saying something else which seems more appealing. If this is right, then it might not be far removed from the conception of bullshit as being concerned with a sense of the truth – that which it wants to hide. In that case, though, it is not obscurity. Furthermore, Shackel describes postmodernism itself as a 'Motte and Bailey' doctrine. Borrowing the terminology from medieval construction industry, Shackel says that a Bailey doctrine is one that its proponents cannot really defend, but which they are happy to hold nonetheless. Motte is the undesirable position of defence to which one is forced when hard pressed. He does not defend this description of postmodernism in his paper, but he gives some examples, one of which is the Humpty Dumpty use of words to mean no more and no less than what the user chooses. This would also, in itself, be different from obscurity.[31] To pursue this end further, we will look a bit beyond philosophy in order to strengthen my view and my ongoing distinction of obscurity from bullshit.

George A. Reisch[32] has argued that the accounts of bullshit given in analytic philosophy are not sufficient in giving a comprehensive view of the phenomenon. Philosophical accounts of bullshit are centred on truth and meaning, to the neglect of various other uses and purposes of language. According to Reisch, getting to the heart of bullshit requires a turn to pragmatics, not semantics. This seems a reasonable move, even though one

---

[29] See Eric Nenkia Bien, "How Obscurantism differs from Bullshit: A Proposal," *Theoria*, Vol. 87, No. 6 (2021): 1497-1526.

[30] Nicholas Shackel, "The Vacuity of Postmodernist Methodology," *Metaphilosophy*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (Apr., 2005): 295-320.

[31] There is a sense, however, in which Motte and Bailey doctrines can lead to obscurity. If one were to consistently use Humpty-Dumpty expressions and meanings, then it could make a text obscure. Shackle gives an example of Michel Foucault's use of truth which can be a test case of how to be obscure. This is a topic to which I will return in chapter 2.

[32] George A. Reisch, "The Pragmatics of Bullshit, Intelligently Designed." In *Bullshit and Philosophy*.

would think that both semantics and pragmatics come into play. A similar view has been voiced by De Waal, whose paper concerns "bullshitting", rather than bullshit or the bullshitter.[33] According to him, Frankfurt's intentionalist school and Cohen's structuralist school both have problems, so we should turn instead to the pragmatic school. Bullshitting, in his account, has to do with making claims, casting judgments, and presenting arguments with uncommitment or with a lightness which depicts a lack of responsibility.

The case beyond semantics has been furthered by the Ohio State University professor of English language and rhetoric, James Fredal, who takes the case into the domain of interaction and conversational analysis.[34] After reviewing various philosophical accounts of bullshit, Fredal explains that bullshit is a function of social encounters, and it results basically when conversational conventions and expectations are broken. In face-to-face encounters, we usually expect to have a say, to have an audience, and to be given respect, relevant information, shown deference, and generally responded to like human beings in specific situations. Even when interactions are not face to face, there are still expectations of politeness, parity, and responsiveness. It is when the "rituals of politeness" are violated that bullshit results, according to him. Thus, it happens when one party in an interaction feels disregarded, unacknowledged, taken for granted, or undeservedly slighted. Taurascatics, which is the name he gives to the study of bullshit, should be concerned with the politics of semiotic interaction, and consider the multiple factors that motivate discourse.

One important contribution of Fredal's account is that it pays attention to the audience. It underlines the audience's need to be viewed as a legitimate participant in interaction, and it is when this is not respected that bullshit results. If this is so, then bullshit without deception is possible. In an example given by Fredal, a highway patrol officer stops a motorist for a "busted tail light." The officer disrespectfully asks the motorist to exit the car while he conducts a check. He also illegally checks the trunk of the car and finally dismisses the motorist with the words: "Be sure and fix that tail light, have a good day now." Fredal hopes to show, with this example, that bullshit takes place in the breach of politeness rituals by the officer. Moreover, he also uses it to support something that he only hints at in passing, but which is very important to this study, that bullshit can "take place without either deception or

---

[33] De Waal, "The Importance of Being Earnest: A Pragmatic Approach to Bullshitting."
[34] James Fredal, "Rhetoric and Bullshit," *College English*, Vol. 73, No. 3 (January 2011): 243-259.

obscurity"[35] – a line which suggests a difference between bullshit and obscurity. Nothing in the encounter between the motorist and the officer is either obscure or unclear, but the officer's disregard certainly amounts to bullshit, at least in his account.

Also important for our purposes is Steven Pinker, the Canadian-born American psychologist's contribution on "the curse of knowledge."[36] It is a term borrowed from behavioural economics. Pinker says that the curse of knowledge is found in all fields of knowledge. It is about the (sometimes unconscious) overestimation by a writer or speaker of her audience's knowledge and skills. According to him, professionals are wont to forget how much it took them to learn when writing to non-professionals. They expect others to know what they know. Thus, they not only use professional terminologies without explaining their meanings, but more seriously, they presume that some words are rather simple words that everybody understands. It is not restricted to academics where someone may, for example, write "simpliciter" instead of "in and of itself," but also in our everyday use of knowledge. For example, a student directing a guest professor coming from Brussels by train to the Institute of Philosophy in Leuven is likely to say something close to this: "When the train gets to Leuven, stop and take the exit by the station building. When you get outside you will see the bus station. Take bus 2 and stop at Rector de Somer bus stop. Then take the street on your left, and go straight until you see Alpha copy on the left-hand side. Alpha copy is a popular copy shop. Then, on the other side you will find the Hoger Instituut voor Wijsbegeerte." All this is clear in the student's head, and she feels that the description would be equally clear to the guest professor. Pinker gives a number of examples to illustrate his point. The curse of knowledge is neither a criticism of bullshit nor is it a criticism of obscurantism, but is instead a tendency to be borne in mind in communication. Taken together with Fredal's emphasis on deference towards the hearer in conversations, Pinker's call for not overestimating the hearer tends to urge a certain constraint which might be beneficial to the communication project. Somehow, it evokes some wonder about what sort of impact (if any) the curse of knowledge might have on a charitable interpretation of a speaker. There seems to be some tension, though, but a discussion in the third chapter of this work will address the issue.

The difference between bullshit and obscurity becomes easier to see after bringing together the various accounts that focus on bullshit, the bullshitter, the bullshittee or audience,

---

[35] Ibid., 256. I am interested, for now, in the obscurity, not the deceitfulness.
[36] Steven Pinker, *Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century* (New York: Penguin, 2014), chapter 3.

the bullshitting process, and the pragmatics of interaction. If bullshit has to do with the lack of concern for truth, lack of meaning, lack of responsibility, disregard for politeness rituals, then what obscurity brings about is a communicative skew, an interactive constraint, and very probably a deliberate art of seduction or repulsion. By etymology it is a darkening (Lat. *obscurans*), and in conversation, a throw or stir of "verbal smoke."[37] What it does is that it paints an unusual picture in communication, and it tends to stretch and even constrain the grasp of what is being said. This is the skew it creates in the flow of interaction, the darkening it affects thereby causes a constraint in communication, or a summons to embark on a search for a depth of meaning. When this is deliberate, as in the case of seduction or even of repulsion, it amounts to obscurantism. Seduction imbues obscurantism with a "keep coming syndrome" in virtue of which the audience is sustained in a hermeneutic inquiry, while repulsion provides it with a "stop right now" caution so that the audience would not dare to inquire further. If a cat were to be described as a thief, for example, the pictures would not immediately fit with each other. The same thing would happen if the description of something stored in the refrigerator were to sound like a whole animal, or if the description of an animal were to sound exactly like that of a human being. In each of the cases, cognitive mechanisms are stretched to get that which is said to fit with the specific object talked about. Consider this case, call it DIEF:

> Gisterennacht heeft een dief bij mijn buren ingebroken. Toen mijn buurman iets hoorde, heeft hij onmiddellijk de politie gebeld. De politie is na 15 minuten gekomen. De agenten hebben in alle kamers gezocht, maar ze hebben niemand gevonden. De dief is waarschijnlijk langs de achterdeur ontsnapt, want die stond open. De dief heeft niet veel gestolen, maar hij had wel honger en dorst! Hij heeft rijst en een stuk salami uit de ijskast meegenomen. Het flesje cola is hij vergeten toen hij snel wegliep. Dat lag nog naast de deur.[38]

Hearing about a thief breaking into the neighborhood at night and a neighbor calling up the police because of the strange experience, one would expect that a human being (thief) is what is being spoken about. That is why one would experience a skew in reasoning if he were to be pre-informed that the story was about a cat. Usually, we do not narrate 'theft' by a cat in terms of a serious misdeed. Moreover, we have never needed to involve the police in this matter. A lofty picture is painted of what exactly happened. Alternatively, take a look at HIPP:

---

[37] See Buekens and Boudry, "The Dark Side of the Loon," 126-127.

[38] Els Mertens *et al*, *Zo Geschreven 2: Nederlands voor Anderstaligen* (België: Pelckmans, 2012), 67. Here is my translation: "Last night, a thief broke into (the house of) my neighbors. Since my neighbor heard something, he immediately called the police. The police came after fifteen minutes. They searched all the rooms, but found nobody. Most probably, the thief escaped through the back door since that was open. The thief did not steal much, but he was really hungry and thirsty. He took rice and a piece of ground meat from the fridge. He forgot a bottle of coke since he quickly ran away. That still lay by the door."

> Let someone say, 'There's a hippopotamus in the refrigerator'; am I necessarily right in reporting   him as having said that there is a hippopotamus in the refrigerator? Perhaps; but under questioning he goes on, 'It's roundish, has a wrinkled skin, does not mind being touched. It has a pleasant taste, at least the juice, and it costs a dime. I squeeze two or three for breakfast.'[39]

Hippopotamus is a large, mostly herbivorous animal, only smaller in size than the elephant and the white and Indian rhinoceros. The refrigerator, conversely, is an electric storage device, but it is never used to store animals except as meat. To hear, therefore, of a hippopotamus in the refrigerator communicates something unusual, and contains something unclear. In this kind of situation, there is a seeming imbalance or haziness in the relation of an utterance and its signification. At the same time, it is an act by means of which the speaker commits the hearer to what is being communicated. However, what is supposedly communicated is not yet clear in that moment. This is what is described about the obscurer as her "firm grip on how to tie (her) audience to (her) pronouncements."[40] This is possible because the expression's unclarity does not, at the same time, make it dismissible; on the contrary, it engages your cognitive system, thereby prompting you to want to uncover its meaning. In this way, it is different from bullshit which strikes one as grasped and (is then found to be) unserious.

While the audience of bullshit often experiences a loss of interest, a condemnation, or indignation, that of obscurity experiences largely a sustained engagement of the mind. The audience notices that something in the utterance is unusual, but he is also spurred on to inquire into the unclarity. The moment that he hears about the hippopotamus in the refrigerator, as in HIPP, he notices the skew, but immediately acts on an energy to want to straighten it. Obscurity, therefore, seems to possess zest for a possible clarification. How this zest may be utilised to bring about clarification is one of our focal points. Much of the preceding discussion is still very much at the level of local obscurity that can eventually be resolved, not the systematic vice of obscurantism which Ivanković has touched upon.

The interest to delve further, which characterizes obscurity, has the appearance of taking the audience hostage. If so, De Waal's connection of bullshit's ubiquity, following Frankfurt's expectation of everyone to say something, to Cartesian individualistic epistemology and the Enlightenment's focus on individual thinking[41] does not apply to

---

[39] Donald Davidson, "On Saying That." In Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (henceforth ITI) Oxford: Clarendon Press (1984), Sixth Impression [1991], 93-108.
[40] Buekens and Boudry, "The Dark Side of the Loon," 127.
[41] De Waal, "The Importance of Being Earnest."

obscurity. Instead, obscurity has the ability to bring people together, or to keep interlocutors together where the discovery of bullshit would otherwise separate them. This characteristic of obscurity makes it more taxing than bullshit, but also less commonplace.

It is different from Fania Pascal's expression, which has the form of a simile. It is equally different, in many cases, from other parts of speech like metaphor, personification, etc, the meanings of which are, so to speak, usually known. The obscurity that is addressed here makes a presumably spontaneous or even premeditated appearance in conversation, and the hearer has no specific understanding of its meaning other than the one that he has to process. It is much like relating to the following assurance given to the Shakespearean Macbeth: "Macbeth shall never vanquish'd be until Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill shall come against him."[42] An earlier prediction by three popular witches in the play, that Macbeth, the chief protagonist, would become king, had come true. He had become king by killing King Duncan, but he had to kill more people, not just to sustain himself in power but also to prevent another one of the witches' predictions that Banquo's children (not Banquo himself) would be kings. Up to the play's last battle, the quoted prediction together with another that none born of woman would be able to kill Macbeth, gave Macbeth courage to fight on even though he was finally killed. The point here is the skew in the witches' prediction. The prediction was that Macbeth would remain undefeated and undefeatable until the forest of Birnam moved itself from there to Dunsinane. It is unthinkable for a tree to move itself from one point to another,[43] much less an entire forest. It is also a different genre from the known personification of a dancing tree. Certain that the aforementioned forest cannot move, Macbeth, who swallowed the prediction hook, line, and sinker, believed that he would never be vanquished.

Furthermore, it has been observed that much of the bullshitting found in advertisements, political campaigns, and even in debates aims primarily at capturing the attention of the audience, not understanding.[44] This is bullshit's attempt to unsuspectingly influence the audience to the bullshitter's advantage. This intent is radicalised in obscurantism

---

[42] William Shakespeare, "Macbeth." In *Shakespeare Complete Works* edited by W.J. Craig (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), Act 4, scene 1, 92.

[43] In the Gospel according to Luke 17:6, Jesus actually tells His disciples that they could, with faith, make a mulberry tree uproot itself from the land and plant itself in the sea. Even here, though, it is clear that He is addressing a context of faith. So, there is the acknowledgement that this is not normal and that it could happen only under a certain condition. This notwithstanding, scripture scholars do not take the expression at face value.

[44] See Robert Gibson, "Bullshit," *Alternatives Journal*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (2011): 40.

where an author devises a particularly darkening style to either glue readers to her text or to repel them. There is, however, always a need to look for coherence both in epistemic evaluation and in the semantic evaluation of texts.

This attractive energy intrinsic to obscurity poses a challenge to the seemingly general but probably mistaken assumption that obscurity is always a negative concept. Calling it negative sounds like a post-assessment judgment; yet, processing obscurity may turn out to be very interesting by virtue of its being energy-packed. I will return to this argument later in this chapter, but hearing about rattlesnakes that wear sunglasses, for example, would evoke questions about how and what exactly that means, and the hearer in whom these questions are sparked seems to immediately experience a rush of energy and attention to process the assertion. This is obscurity's great advantage and it is a reason why it should not be hastily adjudged to be negative. However, negativity may well be discerned in the systematic vice of obscurantism where an author causes a verbose commotion initiating a chaotic attempt at understanding.

Is there relativity in obscurity, that is, can an utterance be obscure to one person and not to another? This is unlikely since the obscurity is a function of the unusualness or something of the utterance in a language or meaning system. However, an utterance may have the tendency to be more obscure in a particular language community than in another. For example, Rama is a philosophy researcher and a Christian. Introducing her research topic to a group of continental philosophers, she mentions the theme of "bad faith," obviously from the thought of Jean-Paul Sartre. She equally mentions her research into "bad faith" when addressing a group of retreatants in the church. Continental philosophers and church retreatants belong to different language communities and, as such, their concepts of the expression will not be the same. In this case, the retreatants are likely to struggle to grasp what her expression might mean, whereas it would be pretty clear to the continental philosophers. Another factor that may matter here again is one's cultural background. Take the case of Sara from Nigeria, who just arrived Leuven for the first time. The day after her arrival, she is directed to go to Van Dale College to iron out issues concerning her housing. She wonders why it is a college, but goes and is shocked to find out that there are various administrative offices and even a clinic in the college, but there are no classrooms where lessons are being given. This, for her, would be a skew because the concept of "college" in Nigeria is a large compound in which students receive higher education, higher than

secondary education and lower than university education. What is important is the fact that lectures take place in the college, so students and professors are found throughout the day. In this case, there is some bit of obscurity occasioned at a level that is tied to cultural understanding.

It can be observed that the discussion thus far has dealt principally with obscurity and only intermittently with obscurantism. This already suggests that there is a distinction between mere obscurity and obscurantism, and between these two ideas and bullshit. It is out of the study of bullshit, however, that the study of obscurantism first arose. As we have seen, bullshit has to do with the totality of ways in which one's speech act or approach betrays trivialness, irresponsibility, disrespect, or a neglect for truth or the meaning of life. This is painted in broad strokes because as it has also been argued, one can bullshit while showing a lot of concern for the truth so that it seems to be more about hiding something which the bullshitter wants to hide, or even involve manipulating one's audience to one's advantage. Obscurity has to do with inadvertent unclarity or ambiguity in expression. Pinker's study of the curse of knowledge illustrates this. Thus, one can be obscure without any deliberate plan so to be. However, when one crafts obscurity in order to seduce readers or to repel their challenge, one is engaged in the systematic vice of obscurantism. This deliberate production of obscurity takes the producer's social image into account. Thus, it seduces in order that the obscurantist may be regarded as wise or insightful, or it repels the reaction of the audience perhaps for fear of the producer's inability to adequately defend her obscure pronouncements.

At this point, a question which might be of interest concerns how it is that we are able to recognize or identify obscurity. It is to this exact topic that we will now turn.

1.2 THE RECOGNITION OF OBSCURITY

The discovery of 1.8 million-year-old stone tools associated with *Homo habilis*, the oldest member of the genus *Homo*, in the Olduwan industry in Tanzania has been an important milestone in proving the connection of stone tools with the evolution of human cognition since the 1960s.[45] While various aspects of human cognition study how we know and

---

[45] Ian Davidson and April Nowell, "Introduction and Overview." In *Stone Tools and the Evolution of Human Cognition* edited by April Nowell and Ian Davidson (USA: University Press of Colorado, 2010), 1-2. Cognitive science has been described as having a short history, but it has a pretty long past since, according to Gardner, its roots go back to classical times, even though it only became a recognized field of study in the late twentieth century; See Howard Gardner, *The Mind's New Science: A History of the Cognitive Revolution* (New York: Basic Books Inc. Publishers, 1985), 9.

understand one another and our environment,[46] our approach in this section will examine the way we get to cognize or recognize obscurities, that is, how we come to be aware of them. The justification for this aspect of the investigation is the simple fact that an unrecognized obscurity would not be a problem to an interlocutor or hearer any more than the lack of physical beauty in a lady would be an obstacle to a blind suitor. In other words, if obscurity is an issue at all, then one first has to notice it as such, and this section is concerned with how this becomes possible. The recognition of obscurity can be understood to address two slightly different concerns: first, how we come to or get to recognize obscurity, and second, the basis on which we are able to, or what makes it possible for us to recognize it. The first is procedural, having to do with the process of recognizing obscurity, while the second is somewhat ontological, having more to do with our ability or entitlement to recognize it. Whereas the process of recognizing obscurity will be touched upon in the following chapter, our focus in this section will remain on the question of what it is about us that makes it possible for us to recognize obscurity. This is important because we seem to have a sense-making device which, in addition to the intentional strategy[47] and a certain teleology in life, gives us reasons to try to make sense of events, artifacts, and people in life.

There are a couple of proposals involved in addressing this concern. We shall consider the three most frequent ones. The first proposal is that the ability comes from our having a theory of mind. This is because, according to Henry M. Wellman, a theory of mind has the advantage of determining our causal-explanatory infrastructure, and it plays a primary role with regard to how we make sense of ourselves and of others.[48] What, then, is meant by the phrase or terminology "theory of mind"? It is used to describe a cognitive structure from which certain abilities emerge, a research area which studies these abilities, and a theoretical explanation of development.[49] This broad characterization covers various areas of emphasis that the theory of mind has received in the literature. We are involved in the activity of accessing the mental states of those we come across daily, sometimes successfully, sometimes not. If we are at the café, for example, and a medical doctor among us, Helen, looks at her

---

[46] For details, see Allen Newell, *Unified Theories of Cognition* (USA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

[47] This is a sort of naturally evolved explanation strategy, so-named perhaps following Dennett's Intentional Stance. See Filip Buekens, "Agentive Thinking and Illusions of Understanding." In *Philosophy of Neuroscience: Reconsidering the Demarcation Problem* edited by Massimo Pigluicci and Maarten Boudry (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 439-458.

[48] See Henry M. Wellman, *The Child's Theory of Mind* (Cambridge MA: MIT press, 1990), 328.

[49] Janet Wilde Astington and Jodie A Baird, "Introduction: Why Language Matters." In *Why Language Matters for Theory of Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3-25 [4-5].

watch and says "I must be on my way now," then we are likely to think that she is on call and needs to leave, or that she has a private patient to whom she needs to attend. Of course, there are other situations that could come to mind, but these will do for now. In making sense of Helen's statement, we try to infer her intention, beliefs, desires, etc. This is something that we do all of the time and it is this everyday psychology that is referred to as the theory of mind.[50] In other words, the theory of mind concerns our ability to both predict and explain behaviour in terms of mental states.[51] The interaction of beliefs, desires, emotions, intentions, etc makes up its key component. In virtue of theory of mind, according to Repacholi *et al*, we are able to not only interact with others on positive terms, like predicting and attributing mental states, but also to deceive, which they illustrate with the practice of Machiavellianism.[52]

Theory of mind, as a terminology, entered the literature when Premack and Woodruff published the article: "Does the Chimpanzee Have a Theory of Mind?" in 1978. They were studying primate cognition, and they asked if humans' predictive and inferential abilities could also be attributed to chimpanzees.[53] In the ensuing discussion, it became difficult to ascribe a theory of mind equally to human adults and infants. While belief and desire were considered basic mental states for interacting with others, the American philosopher, Daniel Dennett, emphasized the importance of belief, and provided the "false belief task" as a test of the possession of a theory of mind. It suggested four years for its possession[54] in contradistinction to Jean Piaget's legacy of seven years. The literature has since been flooded with a lot of discussion about the theory of mind as applied to children.

The Birmingham psychologist, Ian Apperly, has observed that the theory of mind, as presented in the literature, is what people have, rather than what they do. He, thus,

---

[50] Martin J. Doherty, *Theory of Mind: How Children Understand Others' Thoughts and Feelings* (Hove: Psychology Press, 2009), 1-2.

[51] Betty Repacholi et al, " Theory of Mind, Machiavellianism, and Social Functioning in Childhood." In Individual Differences in *Theory of Mind: Implications for Typical and Atypical Development* edited by Betty Repacholi and Virginia Slaughter (Hove: Psychology Press, 2003), 68-98 [69].

[52] Ibid. Machiavellianism has to do with the manipulation and exploitation of people for personal gain. For more on Machiavellianism, see David, Sloan Wilson, David Near, and Ralph R. Miller, "Machiavellianism: A Synthesis of the Evolutionary and Psychological Literatures," *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 119, No. 2 (1996): 285-299; also Daniel N. Jones and Delroy L. Paulhus, "Machiavellianism." In *Handbook of Individual Differences in Social Behavior* edited by Mark R. Leary and Rich H. Hoyle (New York-London: The Guilford Press, 2009), 93-108.

[53] For updates on their findings, see Joseph Call and Michael Tomasello, "Does the Chimpanzee Have a Theory of Mind? 30 Years Later," *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, Vol. 12, No. 5 (2008): 187-192; Andrew Whiten, "Humans are not Alone in Computing How Others See the World," *Animal Behavior*, Vol. 86, No. 2 (Aug., 2013): 213-221.

[54] Daniel C. Dennett, "Beliefs About Beliefs," *The Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, Vol. 4 (1978): 568-570.

reconceptualised it as an activity which he has called *mindreading*, saying that having a theory about how people behave (more on this below) is but one among other possibilities. His second argument against theory of mind is about its linguistic awkwardness. By that he means that it is used as a compound noun for describing psychological processes and as an adjective for describing theory of mind processes or brain regions. It is awkward since one cannot be referred to as a "theory of minder."[55] However, this second argument adds little to his beautiful first point. Of course, one cannot be a theory of minder, but does one need to be that? The linguistic awkwardness seems to emerge not from the phrase "theory of mind" but from the contender. After all, one who specialises in philosophy of mind is not known as a 'philosopher of minder.' Having said that, mindreading seems a good characterization of the activity of making sense of people based on their psychological states, but it does not displace the theory of mind since the latter also refers to a research area, and also some authors believe that the everyday use of theory of mind actually takes the form of a theory.[56] This position is known as theory-theory, a terminology coined by the Canadian philosopher, Adam Morton, in 1980.[57] We will return to this suggestion after introducing the remaining two proposals. Meanwhile, mindreading deals with the interpretation of human behaviour, and we shall be looking, in the third chapter, at hermeneutics, the science of understanding. Is it possible that mindreading plays a role in hermeneutics? The answer would seem to be affirmative in the sense that mindreading would be part of the relevant interpretive architecture that would need to be invoked once a particular, actual situation is pictured, even in a text.

The second proposal is that we have the ability to simulate. 'Simulation' or 'replication' assumes that my cognitive processes work the same way as another person's processes. As such, I can imagine what the other person would do in a particular situation based on my knowledge of what I would do in the same situation. If I would leave the café to go to work at some point while taking coffee, I imagine that another person would behave the same way. The simulation proposal entered the literature through the independent writings of Jane Heal and Robert Gordon, in 1986. According to Heal, a British philosopher, no theory is needed when interacting with the other person. All that one needs is to conduct an experiment on

---

[55] Ian Apperly, *Mindreaders: The Cognitive Basis of "Theory of Mind"* (Hove: Psychology Press, 2011), 3.
[56] Apperly is not alone in this reconceptualisation. Others have called it community of minds, cognitive flexibility, etc. See Katherine Nelson, "Language Pathways Into the Community of Minds." In *Why Language Matters for Theory of Mind,* 26-49; See also Sophie Jacques and Philip David Zelazo, "Language and the Development of Cognitive Flexibility: Implications for Theory of Mind." In same volume, 144-162.
[57] See Adam Morton, *Frames of Mind: Constraints on the Common-sense Conception of the Mental* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980).

oneself and feed what happens in oneself with some pretend beliefs and desires.[58] This is her description of the imagination of another's line of action from one's own point of view. Gordon, the University of Missouri-St. Louis philosopher of mind and cognitive science, takes the case further and calls it putting oneself in another's shoes, but he distinguishes between what one would do in someone else's situation and what the other would do in her's. They are not exactly the same, in his account, so one has to make "adjustments for relevant differences." In simulating others, we anticipate their behaviour at a sub-verbal level. Our reasoning system disengages partially from its natural inputs and is fed with images and suppositions as pretend inputs. This happens offline, so that the system's decision is not carried out, but rather comes as an anticipation of the other's behaviour.[59] It may just be noted here, that Gordon describes, in this process, what he calls a "principle of least pretending" which, he says, is similar to Quine's and Davidson's principle of charity.[60] Both simulation theorists were soon joined by Alvin I. Goldman, American philosopher, who fleshes out the simulation heuristic by saying that one needs to feed pretend states into the target agent's mechanism. If one can accurately feign the target agent's initial states, according to him, then given the equivalent or nearly equivalent functioning of the mental mechanism, the output states are likely to accurately mirror the target agent's states.[61] This seems to be a way of saying that a careful imagination of the likely states of another could actually lead to a successful prediction, but there could be issues with what he calls accuracy, equivalence, and its hypothetical nature. He extends the importance of simulation to the facilitation of "backward inference from behaviour to mental states." By this he means, for example, that after having watched a movie with someone, it is possible to infer the person's enjoyment state based on her subsequent behaviour including her possible remarks like "I loved it" or "I hated it."[62] Goldman seems to be delving into how emotional states like enjoyment, happiness, anger, etc can be simulated. Interestingly, he also develops this simulation of emotions in his later writing. While discussing simulation in low-level (as opposed to high-level) mindreading, he takes facial expressions (not just verbal remarks, as before), or what he

---

[58] Jane Heal, *Mind, Reason and Imagination: Selected Essays in Philosophy of Mind and Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 6.

[59] Robert Gordon, "Folk Psychology as Simulation," *Mind and Language*, Vol. 1 (1986): 158-171 [170].

[60] Ibid., 167.

[61] Alvin I. Goldman, "Simulation and Interpersonal Utility," *Ethics*, Vol. 105, No. 4 (Jul., 1995): 709-726 [718-719].

[62] Ibid., 719.

calls "face-based emotion recognition," as fundamental for its simplicity.[63] Of course, Goldman's simulation of emotion or recognition of face-based emotion has no necessary bearing on the recognition of obscurity; as I will argue, though, low-level processes are very handy tools in the recognition of, and especially in making sense of, obscurity.

It is the opinion of Matthew Ratcliffe, Vienna professor of theoretical philosophy, that a clear understanding of simulation is lacking since, according to him, Heal and Goldman both deal with practical reasoning in their accounts while Gordon focuses on perspectival transformation, and also because they do not agree on whether simulation involves imagination or sub-personal mechanisms.[64] While I would agree with him on his second point, both imagination and sub-personal mechanisms seem to make simulation available for everyday usage and for everyone. In other words, imagination, which is explained by all three theorists in sophisticated terms, like self-experiment, pretend inputs, offline and online, accurate feigning of initial states etc, seems rather demanding for some people; the sub-personal mechanisms which are probably best demonstrated in Goldman's face-based emotional simulation, seem to adapt the effects of simulation for everyone, and this seems fine insofar as simulation is a human capability.

The third proposal that we will mention is modularity. This proposal concerns how we process a theory of mind using a piece of neural architecture. A part of the brain is dedicated to mindreading and is equipped from birth with modules by which to predict and explain behaviour. Thus, concepts of belief and desire are innate in us and come online at a certain stage of maturation or when triggered by specific environmental factors. However, if the modules are there, and are only triggered by maturation and environment, then they probably operate like a theory. This reasoning might have led to modularity theory being described as a hardware version of theory-theory.[65] Jerry A. Fodor, American philosopher, cognitive scientist, and key proponent of modularity theory, has described eight characteristics of our modular cognitive architecture. The Melbourne philosopher, Jay L. Garfield, has not only listed all eight characteristics, but has also classified four characteristics as major, and the

---

[63] Idem., *Simulating Minds: The Philosophy, Psychology, and Neuroscience of Mindreading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 113.
[64] Matthew Ratcliffe, *Rethinking Commonsense Psychology: A Critique of Folk Psychology, Theory of Mind, and Simulation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 14.
[65] Doherty, *Theory of Mind*, 49.

other four as minor,[66] unlike others who just mention some of the characteristics.[67] The characteristics, as mentioned by Garfield, are domain specificity, mandatoriness, informational encapsulation, speed, lack of access by other systems to intermediate representations, shallow output, neural localization, and susceptibility to characteristic breakdowns. I have no intention of discussing his division of these properties into major and minor respectively. I will, however, briefly explain what Fodor means by the Garfield-major characteristics.

Domain specificity is the first characteristic, and it means that input systems represent processes that solve the problems of a particular environment or domain. The mechanisms for perceiving cows, for example, are domain specific for the perception of cows.[68] The second characteristic is mandatoriness, which Fodor explains by saying that when a sentence is uttered in a language you know, you cannot help but hear it, just like a visual array cannot but be seen as a distribution of objects in space. This is to say that you relate to the sounds around you and, according to him, you cannot hear a speech as noise even if you would like to. You relate to a sentence as a sentence, and to music as music. What you can do is to deactivate a transducer, probably by attempting to block your ears with your hands, which may still not be successful. Then, he speaks about informational encapsulation, which could be described as indicating that information access is restricted to the local structures of a particular cognitive process. Fodor says that there is communication between the neural centres in charge of head and eye motions, and the input analyzer that interprets visual stimulations. For this reason, we notice no apparent motion in the flow of images across the retina when we move our head or eyes across a visual scene or when the scene moves in the view of our stationary head or eyes. However, we would notice an apparent motion if we were to push our eye with our finger, because then we would possess the information that it is the eye and not the visual scene that is moving. Now, this information, that it is the eye that is moving and not the visual scene, is not possessed by the input analyzer of the perceptual integration of the stimulations on our retina: it is encapsulated.[69] Garfield claims that while domain specificity deals with the coming into use of a module, encapsulation deals with the mobilisation of information during

---

[66] Jay L. Garfield, *Modularity in Knowledge, Representation and Natural Language Understanding* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1991), 2.
[67] See, for example, Ratcliffe, *Rethinking Commonsense Psychology*, 18; Apperly, *Mindreaders*, 120-121.
[68] Jerry A. Fodor, *The Modularity of Mind* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1983), 48.
[69] Ibid., 67.

that use.[70] The fourth major characteristic is speed, and it results from the three characteristics discussed previously, albeit briefly. Following Descartes, however, as we will find out in the fourth chapter, the process of belief fixation in Fodor is a slow one because it is mostly rational, unencapsulated, and not domain-specific. Nevertheless, I find his quality of mandatoriness congenial to a rather fast theory of belief fixation that I would intend to pursue. Still interesting to my pursuit is Apperly's development of a two-systems account of mindreading based on modular processing.[71]

Other proposals emphasize more of social interaction than the theory of mind or mindreading as important for the ability to predict behaviour and, in our context, for the recognition of obscurity. Apperly's arguments, for example, favour a rather limited use of theory of mind. Instead, "interactive alignment, social scripts, and knowledge of normative conditions for everyday interaction" count for more in knowing about how mindreading actually works.[72] Moreover, York psychologist, Maria Legerstee's constraint constructivism focuses on predispositions that enable infants to perceive others as creatures of their type until language sets in,[73] language being another model preferred by some to the theory of mind. Furthermore, Virginia psychologist, Angeline Lillard, argues for socialization.[74]

Even among the major proposals presented above, there are a number of overlapping details that tend to weave the one into the other, and the literature is typified by this mix.[75] This makes answering the question of how we recognize obscurity complex, rather than simple, especially with the range of options like the theory of mind, simulation, modularity, social scripts, constraint constructivism, and socialization, which we have seen among others. It does seem better to narrow the options in order to gain a fine-grained answer. That seems a

---

[70] Garfield, *Modularity in Knowledge*, 5.

[71] See Apperly, *Mindreaders*, 121ff.

[72] Ibid.

[73] See Maria Legerstee, *Infants' Sense of People: Precursors to a Theory of Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[74] Angeline Lillard, "Theories Behind Theories of Mind," *Human Development*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (Jan/Feb., 1998): 40-46.

[75] For example, Gordon's treatment of belief attribution at some point enters what he calls nomological reasoning, practical simulation, simulation mode, giving the impression that theory-theory and simulation are compatible with modularity; see Gordon, "Folk Psychology as Simulation," 166-167. Also, while discussing the five ways of knowing according to the concept of scientific reasoning, Lillard groups simulation and modularity under intuitive understandings, and theory-theory under rationality since in rationality, if the premise is true, then the conclusion is equally true; see Lillard, "Theories Behind Theories of Mind," 43. According to Joan Lucariello *et al*, modularity and theory-theory combine with sociocultural account to form an integrated account of theory of mind, although the authors favor the Functional-Multilinear Socialization (FMS) model; see Joan Lucariello *et al*, "Social and Intrapersonal Theories of Mind: 'I Interact Therefore I Am.'" In *Theory of Mind and Language in Developmental Contexts* edited by Alessandro Antonietti, Olga Liverta-Sempio, and Antonella Marchetti (New York: Springer Science and Business Media Inc., 2006), 149-171 [152].

less cumbersome task, since the social-related options can be grouped together. These social-related proposals could be associated with the basics of simulation, or so I would suggest. Modularity has, not without good reason, been dubbed a hardware version of theory-theory. The narrowing done so far in no way suggests that the proposals overlap exactly, but perhaps it will be helpful in the search for an answer to our question. Given the narrowing, we can restate our question in the following way: are we theorising or simulating when we recognize obscurity? We will, at this juncture, continue the investigation by focusing on the two-prong approach of theory and simulation.

What does it mean to describe a theory of mind or mindreading as a theory? The Central European University philosopher Tim Crane, has discussed this issue. According to him, a theory is generally taken to be a principle or set of principles that, when put together, explain phenomena. When mindreading (folk psychology) is described as a theory, it would suggest that there is a collection of principles for reading the mind.[76] The principles may be simple truisms, for example, that all other things being equal, people generally try to achieve the objects of their desire; or that other things being equal, someone looking at an orange in front of him usually believes that the orange is in front of him. However, in this case, when mindreading is described as a theory, it is taken to be what philosophers mean when they talk about theoretical entities.[77] That is, the theory about the mind is not just about principles for explaining mental states, but rather contains everything that can be known about mental states the way the atomic theory contains everything that can be known about the atom. So, is it the case that going by theory of mind we do know all that can be known about the mind? Can we completely trust our folk or common sense psychology?

There are two positions here. The first, known as vindication, upholds the truth of the generalisations of folk psychology. That is, what we believe, intend, desire, etc, is largely true. The second position, eliminativism or eliminative materialism, holds that there are good reasons not to trust the generalisations of common sense. In fact, there are no beliefs, desires, memories, and intentions.[78] This follows from the fact that folk psychology is a theory, but it is a false theory. Since, on this view, folk psychology is a theory but the theory is false, it then

---

[76] Tim Crane, *The Mechanical Mind: A Philosophical Introduction to Minds, Machines and Mental Representation* (London-New York: Routledge, 2003), 63.
[77] For details about theoretical entities, see David Lewis, "How to define theoretical terms." In his *Philosophical Papers,* volume I (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1985); and Stephen P. Stich, *From Folk Psychology to Cognitive Science* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press 1983).
[78] For more on eliminative materialism, see Paul M. Churchland, "Eliminative Materialism and the Propositional Attitudes," *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 78, No. 2 (Feb., 1981): 67-90.

follows that the theory's content is false. Since, therefore, the theory makes our beliefs, desires, memories, hopes, and intentions true, the theory's falsity amounts to a falsity within these attitudes. Even though the eliminativist position may run into difficulties sustaining itself in a situation where it is described as the belief that there are no beliefs, it does not mean that the vindicativist position is quite so smooth. Indeed, as a group of scholars have indicated, it is difficult to theorise beyond actual relations with subjects,[79] and relating with subjects is not entirely captured under the meaning intended by the aforementioned theory.

What does simulation theory entail? It works on the assumption of reasoning and states of affairs in the world, such that by imagining the world as it appears to one person, another is able to, in part, access the possible decisions of the first. Simulationism thrives on the claim that without reference to any theory, the ongoing reasoning in one person can be simulated in another.[80] Stich and Nichols fiercely opposed this position, but they seem to have softened a bit.[81] Yet, what seems to remain an issue for simulation is whether the replication of another person's thoughts is actually possible without, at least, some theoretical basis of the workings of the human mind. How can I predict another's thoughts without relying on some theoretical assumptions of how thinking works in the world in which we both live? How do children do the same at a time when they are not yet able to analyse the world?

At this point, we might wonder if the theory of mind and simulation can do without each other and if, in answer to our question, we might say that we are theorising and not simulating when we recognize obscurity, or vice versa. While I would agree with Crane that we need both, it seems to me that a further question can be asked about how we are able to theorise or simulate at all. Concerning the sources of the theories, Lillard has said that theory-theory stems from Piagetian psychology, innate modules from Chomsky, and simulation from a more philosophical and linguistic tradition.[82] To the extent that these sources depend upon a basic conception of how the human mind works, as well as a conception of how the world in which humans live works, it would seem that inferring actions and reactions based on the observation and application of the basic conceptions makes use of both theory and simulation. Moreover, there seems to be an understanding of thinking and acting patterns found in human interaction in the background of theorising and simulating. This is in line with the Irish-

---

[79] See Ivan Leudar and Alan Costall (eds.), *Against Theory of Mind* (United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

[80] Heal, *Mind, Reason and Imagination*, 3 and 46.

[81] See Stephen Stich and Shaun Nichols, "Folk Psychology: Simulation or Tacit Theory?" *Philosophical Issues*, Vol. 3, Science and Knowledge (1993): 225-270; Doherty, *Theory of Mind,* 49.

[82] Lillard, "Theories Behind Theories of Mind," 41.

American philosopher Shaun Gallagher's claim that we do need some pre-theoretical knowledge of people before we can form a theory about or simulate them.[83]

Based on the preceding analysis, we can say that both theory-theory and simulation theory seem to play a role in giving clues on the basis of which we disambiguate and recognize obscurity; theory because we make fast inferences in interaction based on belief, desire, hope, intention, that seem to be independent of imaginative power, and simulation because we put ourselves in the other person's position in order to facilitate our grasp of her communicative intention. Thus, in HIPP, the recognizer of obscurity takes the speaker who sees a hippopotamus in the refrigerator to intend that they are talking about an object or, at least, a content sizeable enough to be contained in the refrigerator. That is, the recognizer takes the speaker to believe that her (the speaker's) hippopotamus is containable in a refrigerator. At the same time, the recognizer considers himself to be in the same world as the speaker, and in that world hippopotamus and refrigerator are the same for both of them. However, if the person imagines that what can be called "a hippopotamus" cannot fit in a refrigerator, then he notices the skew or recognizes the ambiguity.

A second conclusion will follow that this ability to recognize obscurity derives from the social interaction of human beings throughout history. Interacting with people helps us to form beliefs about their intentions and purposes through various means like socialization, social norms and scripts, and verbal and non-verbal communication. It equally enhances our ability to replicate their tacit purposes and, so, to predict them. It is from interacting with people and the world that the recognizer of obscurity in HIPP grasps that in order for the speaker's hippopotamus to be in the refrigerator, it must be containable in the refrigerator. Human beings who live in his world have a similar idea of what a hippopotamus is as they equally do of a refrigerator. As far as the recognizer can see it, "a hippopotamus" cannot be in a refrigerator.

Before leaving this discussion entirely, it will, perhaps, be good to indicate that the issues involved in the theory of mind and simulation or mindreading in general, somewhat overlap with a recurrent philosophical problem concerning our knowledge that there are really people outside of us in the world, and our knowledge that they have mental states and feelings. The problem of other minds, as is well-known, has a conceptual and an epistemological aspect, and while there is no generally accepted solution thereto, we have on

---

[83] Shaun Gallagher, "The Practice of Mind: Theory, Simulation or Primary Interaction?," *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 5-7 (2001): 83-108 [90].

offer, among others, analogical reasoning, common sense and everyday solutions, and abductive inference to the best explanation.[84]

Thus far we have been investigating what it is about us that enables us to recognize obscurity. A lingering worry may concern the scope of such recognizable obscurity. To this end, one might wonder if we are talking about obscurity in declarative statements only (which is usually taken to be the paradigm sentence), or if we also include interrogatives and imperatives. In the following section, we will at least sketch a basic way to understand these different types of sentences.

1.3 ASSERTORICS AND OTHER SENTENCE TYPES

The reason for this section's inclusion is to recognize the fact that it is not only sentences that state, explain, or describe a fact that might need to be made sense of, on account of being obscure. Likewise included are those that ask questions and give orders. There is no pretence involved in solving the issues with the different types of sentences, but even if we do not focus on solving the issues of their structure and meaning here, they remain part of our texts and feature in what we try to make sense of all of the time.

In his first William James Lecture at Harvard University in 1955, the British philosopher who popularised the speech acts theory, J. L. Austin, indicated that sentences are made up not only of statements (as then used by many philosophers) but also of questions, exclamations, commands, wishes, and concessions.[85] Even though Austin focused on the performative role played by words, this indication marked an embrace with English grammar according to which there are four basic types of sentence: declarative, interrogative, imperative, and exclamatory. The declarative, used to state facts, give information, make assertions, describe things and places, etc, has doubtless received more attention in logic and the philosophy of language than the other three. Willard Orman Quine, for example, has what he calls "eternal sentences" – sentences which do not depend on the circumstances of their

---

[84] For a good introduction to the problem, see Hyslop Alec, "Other Minds", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2016/entries/other-minds/>; Idem., *Other Minds* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995),; Bertram F. Malle and Sara D. Hodges, *Other Minds: How Humans Bridge the Divide Between Self and Others* (New York-London: The Guilford Press, 2005); Anita Avramides, Other Minds (London-New York: Routledge, 2001); Peter Lipton, *Inference to the Best Explanation* (London-New York: Routledge, 2004).

[85] J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), 1.

utterance (like time, place, who, etc) for their truth or falsity[86] – and they are declarative. Although we use declarative statements all of the time, philosophers of language have emphasized a specific form of declarative statements known as assertions. Assertions are said to have the quality of being either true or false. Not all declaratives are thought to clearly have this quality, though. For example, there is a difference between the truth conditions of the declarative, "You are promoted," and the assertion, "The weather is cloudy." The assertion can immediately be seen to be either true or false, but the case of one being promoted, even while possibly being a performative speech act, requires a specific person with a specific authority for its declaration. However, the Northwestern University philosophy chair Sanford Goldberg, who has published one of the most recent volumes on assertion, has more to say on the matter. According to Goldberg, declarative sentences that are uttered with pretence lack the force of assertion. Among the characteristics of assertions, in his account, are aptness for communicating knowledge, belief-worthiness, epistemic-challenge susceptibility, interpersonalness, sincerity, retractability, and radical interpretability.[87] While I am not sure how much help this list of characteristics of assertion will render the ordinary conversationalist (especially as I do not delve into providing an individual explanation for each), I do hope that they serve to demonstrate, at the very least, the importance attached to assertions.

The focus on assertion and declaratives has not gone unopposed. American logician and philosopher, Nuel Belnap, has dubbed what he takes to be an unfortunate emphasis 'the declarative fallacy.'[88] In his account, declaratives are neither enough for language, nor are they even primary; interrogatives and imperatives equally have their fundamental content structures. He goes further to state that truth conditions are also not enough. This does not mean that he argues that interrogatives and imperatives are enough. On the contrary, he argues that they are not, but that they help. As a matter of fact, it is imperatives, not declaratives, that bring out the character of agency. For example, the following are declarative sentences:

> *The flood cleared the road*

and

> *Tom cleared the road.*

---

[86] See Thomas D. Perry, *Professional Philosophy: What It Is and Why It Matters* (Dordrecht-Boston: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1986), 118.
[87] Goldberg, *Assertion*, 6-8.
[88] Nuel Belnap, "Declaratives are not Enough," *Philosophical Studies,* Vol. 59 (1990): 1-30.

There is no agentive prominence. But the imperative;

Clear the road

clearly shows agency since it cannot be uttered to 'the flood'. He develops what he calls 'stit-sentences' - those that combine both declaratives and imperatives, e.g., *S sees to it that Q* - and discusses the semantics of both interrogatives and imperatives. His aim is, obviously, to show the importance of other sentence types than the declarative.

Yet, it is not as though the other sentence types were totally neglected; Davidson and Colin McGinn, among others, had discussed them.[89] McGinn suggests paraphrasing imperatives and interrogatives to give them the force of an assertion. If we do so, we arrive at the following: the imperative "Open the door," and the interrogative "Is the door open?" become respectively, "Make it the case that you open the door," and "Is it the case that the door is open?" At this point, all that is needed is their respective fulfilment conditions, that is, for the order to be carried out, and the question to be answered.[90] Davidson urges a paratactic transformation of the imperative and the interrogative such that an imperative becomes an assertoric with an imperative mood-setter, and an interrogative becomes a declarative with an interrogative mood-setter (a mood-setter being an expression - not only verbal though - that makes a sentence a question or a command, e.g. the sentence "He is going to school" becomes a question through a rearrangement of subject and verb or by introducing a certain marker, like "Why is he going to school?" The "why" here sets the mood of the sentence to the interrogative). But in Davidson's case, the transformation results in two sentences. For instance, to use Davidson's own and his Indiana principal commentator, Kirk Ludwig's example, the imperative "Put on your hat" becomes "You will put on your hat." One actually understands this as two speech acts: "You will" and "Put on your hat," one containing an assertoric core and the other a claim about the assertoric core. In a perhaps clearer way, the two sentences which give the original sentence truth conditions are "This is a command: You will put on your hat." Each of the two sentences "This is a command" and "You will put on your hat" has truth conditions, but they are not both uttered as a conjunction. Thus, while

---

[89] See Davidson, "Moods and Performances." In ITI, 109-121; and Colin McGinn, "Semantics for Nonindicative Sentences," *Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (Oct., 1977): 301-311.

[90] "Fulfillment conditions" is borrowed from Kirk Ludwig. According to him, assertorics are either true or false, interrogatives are either answered or unanswered, and imperatives are either carried out or not. All of these are the fulfillment conditions of the various types of sentences. See "The Truth About Moods." In *Concepts of Meaning*, 133-181. My use of "assertoric" together with "assertion" is also in line with his usage.

there are two independent sentences that can be said to be true or false, there is no one thing that can be so described.

Going further, the interrogative, "Are you tired?" can be stated paratactically as "My next utterance is a question. You are tired," and this way, the interrogative is transformed into the assertoric. This was Davidson's way of putting imperatives and interrogatives on the same footing with assertorics. But Ludwig finds problems with Davidson's as well as McGinn's submissions. He, thus, develops what he calls the generalized fulfilment approach for incorporating non-assertoric sentences into a compositional meaning theory. The core of the approach consists in assigning compliance conditions to a directive of the imperative or interrogative sentence. To the imperative "Open the door," for example, an appropriate response is required, and to the interrogative "Is the door open?" an appropriate response is also needed. The response may or may not be verbal, since a gesture would suffice in some cases. What Ludwig seems to emphasize is that the compliance act should be intended to fulfil the directive of the particular non-assertoric sentence.

Does this effort successfully place non-assertoric sentences on an equal footing with assertorics when it comes to making sense of them? Ludwig says that an asymmetry remains, but that it is due to their different functions. While assertorics are used to represent things as they are, imperatives and interrogatives are designed to make things happen by their being used.[91] Our purpose in this section was not so much to extend the debate about the transformation of sentences, so much as it aimed to demonstrate that we usually try to make sense of different types of sentences in our conversations and texts. Thus, if someone can assert, "There is a hippopotamus in the refrigerator," the same one or another can wonder, "Is there" or "Why is there a hippopotamus ...?" or can command, "Put the hippopotamus ...." The merit of this discussion is that even though we use illustrations in the assertoric mood, we do not lose sight of other sentence types.

What happens, therefore, when obscurity is noticed or recognized in our conversation,? We have said that it has some zest for inquiry (it is seductive) into that which seems profound. But how does that zest or energy come about? Or better: how might this claim be strengthened? In the remainder of this chapter, we shall initiate the discussion about this subject. Ultimately, our proposal at this stage is that obscurity often makes an appeal to its audience.

---

[91] Ibid., 161.

1.4 THE APPEAL OF OBSCURITY

Let us return briefly to Frankfurt's illustration of bullshit. According to Frankfurt, Wittgenstein reacts sternly to Fania Pascal's lack of concern for the truth when the latter says; "I feel like a dog that has been run over." As we have seen, there is nothing obscure here since it lacks cognitive skew and some other characteristics, and so Frankfurt's Wittgenstein could afford to be "disgusted." As a matter of fact, everything in Pascal's statement seems familiar, and how a dog that has been run over might feel is imaginable. What Wittgenstein quarrels with is Pascal's description of himself as having that feeling of a run-over dog. If we look at the bullshit of a student that makes up stories for not handing in an assignment, the stories need to be plausibly true, in Richardson's account, but also difficult to verify. A further look at Richardson's remark reveals that it is not just the difficulty that makes the student's professor to dismiss her stories as bullshit. It is also because the stories seem barren, at least for their purposes at that time; they do not promise something new. That is the feature of bullshit described by De Waal as a lack of motivation.

Conversely, a different kind of feeling seems to be evoked when hearing about rattlesnakes that wear sunglasses, or of a hippopotamus in the refrigerator. This time, there is no disgust, no condemnation, no easy dismissal. The pronouncement seems to make an appeal to its hearer; that is, in the hearing of it is a veiled appeal. Obscurity appeals to a finding out (of, say, the skew of sunglasses and snake, or of a hippopotamus and refrigerator), a digging deep. This is in line with Sperber's remarks about the obscure being profound,[92] which we shall explore in the next chapter. The obscure claims to be profound and entices probing, instead of outright dismissal. Thus, it seems that someone who meets with obscurity almost immediately engages in a cognitive activity which could be a form of interpretation.

It seems easy to object to this by stating that the dismissal of bullshit as 'bullshit' is equally an interpretation since Frankfurt's Wittgenstein, for example, can realize that Fania Pascal lacks knowledge about how a run-over dog feels only after somehow processing her statement, but they are not the same. In bullshit, the interpretation is more of a judgement, that is, a concluding statement or action. Hearing about bullshit brings you to a conclusion (so it can be dismissed),[93] but hearing about obscurity launches you into an investigation, the type we described previously as an interactive constraint. The reaction to bullshit is not always an

---

[92]Dan Sperber, "The Guru Effect," *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*, Vol. 1 (2010): 583-592.
[93] This happens, though, in many cases and not necessarily in all.

engaging interpretation, after all, there is usually no depth to be investigated.[94] A two-prong, seemingly obvious strategy emerges in the appeal of obscurity; the first is the acceptance of obscurity, and the second is its interpretation. Both go together. By accepting it we recognize the skew and dispose ourselves to process it, and processing it is interpreting it. Both will occupy us in this study.

That being the case, we can wonder what forms this interpretation might take. The Vienna Circle's approach, particularly Carnap's, to metaphysics, which they took to be the bullshit of their time (1920s-1930s) was, as we have seen, more an attack or condemnation than an interpretation. Then, however, the philosophical study of bullshit was far from mooted. Now, with regard to obscurity, an approach of interpretation is urged, at least in some instances. The Dutch philosopher, Michiel Leezenberg, has outlined semantic, pragmatic, conceptualist, and the Davidsonian approaches as possible interpretive programmes,[95] but his study focuses more on interpreting metaphors. In another study that covers details across diverse cultures, Leuven philosopher Jaap van Brakel and Renmin philosopher, Lin Ma, present interpretive models including Quine's radical translation, Davidson's radical interpretation, Habermas's rational communicative interaction, Gadamer's hermeneutics, and hermeneutics across various traditions.[96] All of these and perhaps more, make up a repertoire of interpretive approaches which an audience of obscurity can adopt.

A seemingly good place to start is to explore the project of interpretation. After this exploration, we will be better placed to adopt the one that seems appropriate for interpreting obscurity. Further searching into the shades and shapes that obscurity takes should, possibly, precede their interpretation. This is because my exploration has made only intermittent mentions of obscurantism. It has clarified that based on the way people talk and write, there can be, on the one hand, an easily noticeable reaction that is often dismissive, and on the other, a reaction depicting the confrontation of ambiguity or a confusing difficulty. The one, known as bullshit, befits a scenario that is more or less carefree to the view of the audience, even though the perpetrator may be careful enough, depending on what she wants to achieve. The other, which is the obscure, brings a dual scenario to mind. The first is mere or

---

[94] This may not be convincing to everyone since the literature does not make the distinction that I am making. As I have argued elsewhere (See Bien, "How Obscurantism differs from Bullshit), bullshit results from a violation of the expectations of relevance and rituals of politeness while obscurantism thrives on crafting profundity in a text even though the crafted profundity may not exist. More so, the obscure consumes a distinctive stretch of processing cost, and this can sometimes remain unresolved.

[95] See Michiel Leezenberg, *Contexts of Metaphor* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2001).

[96] Lin Ma and Jaap van Brakel, *Fundamentals of Comparative and Intercultural Philosophy* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2016), 233-260.

inadvertent obscurity, pointing to an unclarity that the perpetrator may not be aware of, probably because she overestimated her audience or because she lacks a good command of language and has actually expressed herself as best she could. The second is systematic obscurity, known as obscurantism since the perpetrator deliberately crafts ambiguity most probably to paint a high personality for herself. Obscurantism pretends to be profound, but this is often not the case. The possession of certain abilities that can be described in terms of a theory or simply as simulation seems useful for the realisation of bullshit, mere obscurity and obscurantism. Obscurantism, with its high seductive power, invites interpretation. As I shall argue in the third chapter, interpretation of the obscure may be feasible for merely obscure pronouncements, but not really for obscurantist ones. Before then, in chapter 2, we shall find out more about the obscure, whether or not they are just declarative or other sentence types, and will examine religious statements, poetry, and even the raging cases of post-truth.

CHAPTER TWO

SHADES OF THE OBSCURE

The discussion that was broached about the obscure has not yet presented engaging situations and instances of obscurantism. In other words, we are still left with the questions: what are the shades of the obscure? What forms does it take? Our concern in this chapter will be to study at least some shades of the obscure. Some of the various forms in which we shall be investigating if and how obscurity manifests itself include deepities, opacities, religious language, poetry, and agnotology and post-truth. We will look at each in turn.

2.1 DEEPITIES

Deepity is a term coined by the daughter of Daniel Dennett's friend. Dennett uses it to refer to an utterance that, by being ambiguous, actually *seems* to be important, true, and profound.[1] One day, according to Dennett, his friend – Joseph Weizenbaum – who wanted to sound profound, reported his "holding forth with high purpose and furrowed brow at the dinner table," a description which made the friend's daughter – Miriam Weizenbaum – say that her father just uttered a 'deepity.' Dennett does not analyze his friend's utterance; however, he states two characteristics of a deepity: first, a deepity sounds like a stunning truth, but one can actually notice its falsity, and second, it is true but quite trivial. In any case, one who hears an utterance of a deepity has a feeling of 'wow' since it bears an aura of truth and importance. Mr. Weizenbaum's utterance would be momentous if it described a set of manners or an activity connected to a dinner table, but it is actually inconsequential while sounding important.

To give an example of a deepity, Dennett uses the expression

> Love is just a word.

This expression is, according to Dennett, both true and false. It is false because love, as we know it, could be an emotion, a feeling, a state, a relationship, an attainment of the human mind, or whatever, but it is certainly not just a word. Conversely, it is true because it is indeed an English word that can be found in the dictionary. "Love" begins with "L" and is a word of

---

[1] Daniel C. Dennett, *Intuition Pumps and Other Tools for Thinking* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013), 56-57. Italics original.

four letters found among other words in the dictionary. Yet, these two ways of analyzing the expression do not seem satisfactory, it still seems that the utterer of "love is just a word" means to say more, probably to say that love is a word that has misled many people, or that it is an emotion that has deceived many, or even that it is a word that is completely vague and impossible to lay our hands on precisely. Whatever the claim, Dennett concludes, it is obvious; the expression lacks profundity, and is not all that informative.

Although the ambiguity of deepity is repellent, its promise of importance, truth, and profundity, or the likelihood that this is so, is attractive. The evocation of a 'wow' feeling, as well as the promise of depth even though unclear, manifestly depicts deepity as an obscure expression. Thus, it is much like what the University of Fribourg cognitive and neuroscientist, Sebastian Dieguez, describes as a "pleasant lie."[2] It captivates, and the reason for the captivation is a promise of depth, but it is trivial, making the promise a lie.

Dennett gives a second example of deepity, which he notes is not that easily analyzed, and he does not analyze it either. It was uttered by Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, who described his faith as a "silent waiting on the truth, pure sitting and breathing in the presence of the question mark."

This expression looks quite like a deepity, but not entirely. As a deepity, it purports, on one reading, to be profound and important while actually being false, and on another, it is true but trivial. By contesting its classification as a deepity, I suppose that there is a reading of it that is not negligible and on which it can hardly be a deepity. To show this, let us look at the expression that Williams's faith is a

SP   silent waiting on the truth, pure sitting and breathing in the presence of the question
            mark,

in its two parts:

S   silent waiting on the truth,

[and]

P   pure sitting and breathing in the presence of the question mark.

---

[2] Sebastian Dieguez, *Total Bullshit: Au Coeur de la Post-Vérité* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2018), 8.

To begin with **S**, the expression looks like a deepity because of the elements of silence and waiting. It does signal importance or expectation since it anticipates something. What it looks forward to is something truthful, so it also has the element of profundity, although waiting on truth hardly conveys anything ordinarily. Apart from these elements, **S** does not really accomplish anything. It does not contain anything really important, so it is trivial. Yet, upon closer examination, it is something that is being described as **S**, and if we bring in the person who has given the description (a Christian religious believer), its meaning is plain. The individual person notwithstanding, though, let us look at it in such a way that Christian faith is described as **S**. Aware that Christians see their redeemer, Jesus Christ, as the truth, and that they look forward to His coming again into the world,[3] **S** is neither shallow nor trivial. The utterer of **S** says something that is quite important, meaningful, and unproblematic not to himself alone but to all who share his faith. As such, it may not be a legitimate characterization by philosophers to classify **S** as a deepity.

Considered alone, one would be willing to concede that **P** is a deepity. A description of one sitting and breathing barely says anything meaningful, after all, everyone who sits always breathes. That this happens in the presence of the question mark betrays its triviality all the more. What question mark would that be, precisely? Even when faith is brought in as the subject that is being described, it does not vindicate **P** as a non-deepity. Faith is neither pure sitting and breathing, nor is it anything in the presence of an unknown or unnamed question mark. **P** has the aura of profundity, but it is obviously vacuous.

However, **P** was not uttered in a vacuum, and neither was **S**. So, what could be said about the full sentence **SP**? **SP** would be a deepity if it is without a subject. It ought, however, to be remembered that no one would ordinarily utter **SP** without a subject. There must be a subject, substantive, or theme that is being described as **SP**. When viewed in this way, it may have been improper to state that **SP** is a deepity in the first place. **SP** is an incomplete sentence, and taken alone, one might ask the question "What is" **SP**? and only when it is answered can one make good on the description. When the subject is added, we have

CSP   Christian faith is silent waiting on the truth, pure sitting and breathing in the presence of the question mark.

---

[3] Jesus referred to Himself as the truth, and promised His followers that while He was ascending to heaven, He would return to take them with Him (Jn.14:1-6; Acts 1:11).

Does the addition of the subject remove the triviality of **P**? Not really. With **CSP**, the **S** segment which remains modest, tends to weigh upon the triviality of the **P** segment, but it does not validate it. In other words, that we now have a proper subject of the sentence in **CSP** does not make **P** non-trivial. Instead, it tends to exert more force on the "question mark" as in "Is it Christian faith that is described as **P**?" Thus, it tends to further expose the incorrectness of **CSP**. Yet, given that

CS   Christian faith is silent waiting on the truth[4]

remains true, profound, and non-trivial, **CSP** may not be regarded as a deepity. If it were to be so, then it would only be by including qualification.

A case comes to mind concerning pseudo-profound bullshit, that is, factors that facilitate one becoming or not becoming a bullshittee. In an experimental study, Gordon Pennycook *et al* conducted a profundity rating on samples of more profound and less profound bullshit statements.[5] Some of the pseudo-profound bullshit statements studied were "Wholeness quiets infinite phenomena," "Hidden meaning transforms unparalleled abstract beauty," "As you self-actualize, you will enter into infinite empathy that transcends understanding," "Throughout history, humans have been interacting with the dreamscape via bio-electricity," etc. These statements were regarded as bullshit either because they were buzzwords syntactically put together, or because they were meant to convey not meaning and truth, but an impression of profundity. However, a fierce disagreement soon followed.

Reacting to the experimental study, Craig Dalton wrote that what Pennycook *et al* had called pseudo-profound bullshit was actually "transcendent" to another person who heard it,[6] and by that Dalton meant that the person found the words deeply meaningful. According to Dalton, a Tibetan Buddhist analysis of some of the statements, for example, "Wholeness quiets infinite phenomena," reveals their meaningfulness and real profundity. Pennycook *et*

---

[4] The words "is silent waiting on the truth" are original.
[5] Gordon Pennycook *et al*, "On the Reception and Detection of Pseudo-profound Bullshit, *Judgment and Decision Making*, Vol. 10, No. 6 (Nov. 2015): 549-563.
[6] Craig Dalton, "Bullshit for You, Transcendence for Me: A Commentary on 'On the Reception and Detection of Pseudo-profound Bullshit,'" *Judgment and Decision Making,* Vol. 11, No. 1 (Jan., 2016): 121-122.

al, however, insisted that based on the way the statements were formed, they were still bullshit, even though they might be meaningful to some people.[7]

The buzzwords and other statements studied by Pennycook *et al* might be less offensive if they are described as deepities, but from a Buddhist religious point of view, this description might still be far from satisfactory. Perhaps a fundamental question that might pop up in the face of a seeming experimental-analytic and religious conflict in the classification of certain kinds of obscurity is whether or not certain statements are obscure to scientists and philosophers, but not to religious people. This may still not be the best formulation of the question since the proper definition of a scientist or a philosopher would not include one who is opposed to religion. It would probably be better to return to this after we examine religious statements. What we might immediately remark upon, however, is that the problem with the Buddhist statement does not really affect **SP** since, as we have shown, **SP** is stated without a subject. It is different from a case in which a complete sentence is analyzed out of context. Moreover, a statement that touches upon a religious system's body of beliefs or practices (e.g., Buddhism, Christianity) seems different from a personal description from one adherent's (unofficial) point of view.

Consider another example of deepity, that of a journalist who covered a concert rehearsal and comes up with the report:

The theatre room produced a harvest of voices.[8]

This sounds quite spell-binding. The theatre room produced something, and what it produced was a harvest, and the harvest was made of voices. Every other word in the expression is striking, thereby giving it a sense of importance and profundity. Production is a sign of progress even as it promises something new. Harvest, too, involves further production, expansion, and reward of labor. If this is applied to voices, as anyone would imagine, it would probably suggest something profound about voices, but what exactly? It was not precisely a music concert, so as to put one in mind of harmonies, and it was not precisely a choreography which often does not have to do with voicing anyway, or anything of that sort. Instead, being a rehearsal, it could have been a combination of several events: cacophony, vocalization,

---

[7] Pennycook *et al*, "It's Still Bullshit: Reply to Dalton," *Judgment and Decision Making*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Jan., 2016): 13-125. Pennycook *et al* also suggest that people who are vulnerable to bullshit might have low cognitive ability and might easily subscribe to religious and paranormal beliefs.
[8] This example is proposed by me.

audition, recitation, etc. all of which the journalist sums up as a harvest of voices. It is in this sense that it seems true. All she means at the end of the day is that the theatre room was noisy, which is actually not news, given that everyone knows that it can be noisy when practices are taking place in the theatre hall. Thus, it succeeds at the initial depth and importance of the expression.

2.2 OPACITIES

In his article, "The Guru Effect," Dan Sperber,[9] a French social and cognitive scientist, discusses how readers or listeners consume what is said by people they regard as gurus even without understanding it. Given the gurus' authority or intellectual weight, people do not refer to their writings as obscure, even when they are. Instead, people regard the obscure writings as profound. Our immediate remark would be that even if people regard such writings as profound and not obscure, it still does not remove the obscurity, given that profundity is still a characteristic of obscurity. So, if a guru's writing is considered profound, precisely because it is not understood, it still points towards obscurity.

While showing that people may consider an ungraspable statement profound because they believe it is relevant,[10] Sperber touches upon two ways in which writers include profundity in their text. The first way is to use an opaque formulation as a guide to profundity, the second is to be hard to understand so that the reader puts in so much effort to just grasp the relevant information. As an example of the first, Sperber cites the Birmingham-born philosopher, Paul Grice thus:

(a) Miss X sang "Home Sweet Home."

(b) Miss X produced a series of sounds that corresponded closely with the score of "Home Sweet Home."

Following Grice, Sperber says that everything between X and "Home Sweet Home" in (b) is a rigmarole to substitute for *sang*. The implication and reason for the rigmarole is that what Miss X actually sang was not as good as the original "Home Sweet Home." She intended to sing "Home Sweet Home," and might have believed that she performed no less well than the original, but the reviewer believes otherwise, and uses the rigmarole to indicate the difference.

---

[9] Dan Sperber, "The Guru Effect," *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*, Vol. 1 (2010): 583-592.
[10] In Sperber, "relevant" is a technical term for something that is informative for a particular purpose.

In Sperber's account, the rigmarole in (b) is opaque, but it directs the reader to something richer, profound even.

This example, however, does not adequately illustrate our subject even though Grice discusses it under obscurity,[11] because the rigmarole shows the way to the implicature. The language is, of course, not explicit, but it is not totally ambiguous either. On the contrary, it has a direction and it is possible to get at it. All it does is consume greater processing effort, but it does not come at the heavier cost of having to decipher if it has a direction at all.

As an example of the second, Sperber cites the case of little Lucy who is told by her teacher that cucumbers are 95% water, but who is unable to understand this since she is a child. Lucy knows cucumbers and knows water, but she is unable to grasp how cucumbers are 95% water because cucumbers are solid and usually do not drip water. In Sperber's account, though, the lack of understanding on Lucy's part is an indicator of the statement's relevance or depth. But again, this does not illustrate obscurity. The reason why Lucy does not understand is taken to be due to her age, and the yet-to-be understood statement itself is something that can be easily verified. It is a short-term lack of understanding since Lucy is expected to understand it with time as she grows up.

Beyond these, Sperber makes reference to certain philosophical writings that are actually sophisticated and difficult to understand. He does not claim that the writings are meaningless, but rather that they are problematic for most, if not all readers. Examples include:

> "Beauty is a fateful gift of the essence of truth, and here truth means the disclosure of what keeps itself concealed." Martin Heidegger.

> "Consciousness is a being, the nature of which is to be conscious of the nothingness of its being." Jean Paul Sartre.

> "In a culture like ours, long accustomed to splitting and dividing all things as a means of control, it is sometimes a bit of a shock to be reminded that, in operational and practical fact, the medium is the message." Marshall McLuhan.

> "If différance **is** (and I also cross out the 'is') what makes possible the presentation of the   being-present, it is never presented as such. It is never offered to the present. Or to anyone. Reserving itself, not exposing itself, in regular fashion it exceeds the order of truth at a certain precise point, but without

---

[11] Paul Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1989), 36.

dissimulating itself as something, as a mysterious being, in the occult of a nonknowledge or in a hole with indeterminable borders (for example, in a topology of castration)." Jacques Derrida.[12]

Although Sperber does not analyze these texts, it is not difficult to see why he describes them as sophisticated and difficult. Take the passage from Heidegger's *What is Called Thinking* in which Heidegger discusses the beauty of a work of art. The excerpt does not directly explain the key terminologies of beauty and truth. Beauty is "a fateful gift of the essence of truth," while truth itself is the "disclosure of what keeps itself concealed." Neither is explained or defined in a way that one can lay hands on. Worse still, the first part is still dependent upon the second part (which is already unclear) in order to be understood. To know what beauty is, one first needs to know what a fateful gift is. That is fine, but this is a fateful gift not just of truth, but of the essence of truth, which contains its own obscurity.[13] The point is that it has obscure elements that require too much processing cost, and one cannot guarantee greater clarity after this processing work has been undertaken.

Sperber's claims about the guru effect have been subjected to empirical tests. All of the four quotes provided above, taken from Sperber's article, were used in an experiment to see how people would react to texts by gurus and if people generally take what they do not grasp to be profound. According to the experiment's results, source credibility does not have any effect on the attitudes of readers, that is, it is not the case that when a guru writes difficult or obscure text that her credibility biases the interpretation of her readers. The guru effect model, thus, does not have empirical support, according to this report.[14] We should bear in mind that the empirical studies were not about the texts' obscurity or opacity, but rather about the guru effect on the readers. If anything, the empirical studies support the thesis that guruness does not remove the obscure's obscurity. Regardless of who writes it, it is still obscure if it is obscure.

Something that is also mentioned by Sperber while discussing opaque statements is a religious statement or one concerned with religious belief. I will take this up together with similar considerations in the following section.

---

[12] Sperber, "The Guru Effect," 587-588.

[13] For a commentary on this text, see Rivca Gordon and Haim Gordon, *Hobbema and Heidegger: On Truth and Beauty* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 23f.

[14] See Jordan S. Martin, Amy Summerville, and Virginia B. Wickline, "Persuasion and Pragmatics: An Empirical Test of the Guru Effect Model," *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*, Vol. 8 (2017): 219-234.

2.3 RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE

Sperber recalls the case of the child, Lucy, who was told that God is everywhere at about the same time that she was told that cucumbers are 95% water. One major difference between the two statements is that whereas the latter is empirically verifiable, and the child could later find things out for herself, the former is not. It is mysterious not only for the child, but also for theologians. In Sperber's terms, mysteriousness indicates significance. Whatever explanation theologians may give to 'God is everywhere' will remain fragmentary, but whatever is not understood contributes to making it relevant and profound to believers.[15] 'God is everywhere' does not sound like a particularly obscure statement except, of course, that one can neither empirically lay hands on it, nor is it easy to grasp how God (and not many Gods, and still, even if it is many Gods) can be *everywhere*. It is not just the concept of God that is problematic, but also the concept of everywhere, given that it could mean everywhere on earth, but it could also include the seas and the firmament, all imaginable space; but then, not all manner of beings can survive everywhere. That itself would complicate it all the more, having a (one) God that can be *every*where.[16] Even more challenging would be the concept of Trinity, which Sperber also mentions. The Trinity of God is a theological belief that can neither be empirically proven nor intellectually captured. Thus, while discussing the cognitivity of religious language, Mark Owen Webb, Texas Tech University professor of philosophy, distinguishes between claims about religious experience and what he calls abstract theological claims.[17] Although Webb does not give any example of an abstract theological claim, it would seem that the doctrine of the Trinity might fall into this claim, not only because it is not usually talked about as an instance of simple religious experience, but also because it is admittedly abstract. However, to accommodate these, and even more, I would reclassify religious[18] locutions into three types:

i) Statements about religious belief: These are generally accepted by religious people, for example, "God is everywhere."

---

[15] Sperber, "The Guru Effect," 587.

[16] It could be that "every" is used as an idiom of quantification in which case it is restricted. See David Lewis, "Elusive Knowledge," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 74, No. 4 (1996): 549-567 [553].

[17] Mark Owen Webb, *A Comparative Doxastic-Practice Epistemology of Religious Experience* (New York: Springer, 2015), 14.

[18] I would like to draw my examples from Christianity as an example of religions. My discussion will cover only cognitive religious experience.

ii) Dogmatic statements: These are defined by religious authorities and are then believed by all, for example, "God is a Trinity of persons."

iii) Statements from personal religious experience or reflection on it: These may spring from one's personal encounter with God, for example, "Christian faith is silent waiting on the truth, pure sitting and breathing in the presence of the question mark."

Each of these statements is either entirely or partially opaque, and one has been noted to possess an element of deepity. These and others including descriptions of mystical experience and mysterious professions of faith that are not easily graspable by the human mind (if at all), and yet they are declared or pronounced by fully reasonable and logically-minded leaders, sometimes after a series of debates, evoke the question of how the seeming obscurity of religious statements is sustained. To what extent is religious language vulnerable to logic? I will first discuss three kinds of response to this question in the literature, and will then make my own contribution. In so doing, I will borrow from Webb's approach.

2.3.1 LOGICAL ANALYSIS

The first kind of response comes from the logical positivistic label of whatever could not be captured, by the standards of science, as meaningless. According to this model, religious statements would be meaningless precisely because they are not susceptible to verification. A paradigmatic example here would be Rudolf Carnap's arguments in his paper: "The Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language."[19] One of the steps taken by Carnap is first to argue for a gradation of meaninglessness. According to him, a sentence or question can be meaningless in a loose sense if it is sterile in stating or asking what it is about. Consider the interrogative: What is the average Blood Pressure reading of all of the KU Leuven students whose student numbers end with "6"? or the declarative: only 10 inhabitants lived in Leuven in the year 2000; or even an empirically and logically false conjunctive: X and Y are two people that are each older than the other by one year. These sentences are false, but not strictly meaningless since they contain some meaning which makes us able to classify them as true or false. Conversely, a sequence of words is strictly meaningless if it does not

---

[19] Rudolf Carnap, "Uberwindung der Metaphysik durch Logische Analyse der Sprache," Erkenntnis, Vol. 11 (1932), translated by Arthur Pap as "The Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language." http://www.calstatela.edu/sites/default/files/dept/phil/pdf/res/Carnap-Elimination-of-Metaphysics.pdf [Retrieved May 1, 2017].

constitute a statement within a given language. It may happen that the sequence of words only appears to constitute a statement. In that case it is a pseudo-statement. Carnap's argument is that metaphysical statements are pseudo-statements and are meaningless in the strict sense.

Pseudo-statements occupy two main forms, by and large: in the first, a word in the statement is erroneously believed to be meaningful; in the second, the words are quite meaningful but have been assembled without following the rules of syntax. When a word only seems to have a meaning, while it does not in fact have any meaning, it is called a pseudo-concept.[20] Carnap proceeds to claim that metaphysical statements are pseudo-statements. His first example has to do with the "principle" of all things in the metaphysical sense of the "principle of being." According to him, metaphysicians can hold things like water, number, motion, spirit, etc to be the fundamental principle of things, but they are neither able to give the definition of "principle," nor are they able to give the conditions under which x can be said to be the principle of y; it is vague to simply state that x is the principle of y because y is derived from x, or because y exists in virtue of x. This could, in fact, be made clear since a good answer can be that it has been observed over time that things or processes of the kind y usually follow things or processes of the kind x, but the metaphysician would claim that this sort of observable scenario is more physical than it is metaphysical. At this point, the metaphysician refuses the meaning that is understood and still gives no criteria for understanding it in another way. Thus, the aforementioned metaphysical meaning that the word was said to have, in contrast to the observed empirical meaning, does not exist. This issue with the word "principle" is the same with the word "principium" and its Greek equivalent "arche"; instead of taking it to mean "beginning", in terms of temporal priority, it is taken to mean "beginning" in some other (metaphysical) sense, and the criteria for this other sense are not given. In this case, the word has been deprived of its original meaning and has not been given a new one. Such a word is, in Carnap's terms, empty and meaningless since it lacks a method of verification.

---

[20] Carnap gives two criteria regarding the meaning of a word. The first says that the syntax of the word has to be fixed so the simplest form in which it can occur in a sentence can be known. The second gives a set of questions to be answered by the sentence in which the word occurs. The set includes:
(1.) What sentences is S *deducible* from, and what sentences
are deducible from S?
(2.) Under what conditions is S supposed to be true, and under what conditions is it false?
(3.) How is S to be *verified?*
(4.) What is the *meaning* of S?

Carnap gives the word "God" as a second example. According to him, God has been used in three ways linguistically and historically, although there are often overlaps. The three uses of the word are mythological, metaphysical, and theological. In the mythological sense, God is used for physical beings on Mount Olympus, in Heaven, or in Hades. These beings are characterized by wisdom, goodness, power, and happiness. Sometimes the beings are spiritual, but can manifest themselves in physical processes in the world, and are therefore verifiable. Thus, God has a clear meaning in the mythological sense. In the metaphysical sense, the word "God" is divested of this understanding, as a physical or a spiritual being, and it is not given a new meaning. It is simply said to refer to something beyond experience.

Attempts are sometimes made to define the word "God" in metaphysics, but such definitions use an illegitimate cluster of words or metaphysical terms such as "the absolute," "the unconditioned," "the autonomous," etc., without even specifying the meanings of these words. The first logical requirement (of syntax), the one that specifies how the word should occur in an elementary sentence (e.g., x is God), is not even met. Theologically, the word "God" is used in a way that oscillates between the mythological and metaphysical senses, without landing on a particular meaning of its own. Some theologians, thus, speak of God in an empirical (that is, mythological) sense, while others do so in a metaphysical sense, and the rest do so in no definite way at all. It is, therefore, not possible to verify the use of this word.

In Carnap's analysis, metaphysics (and theology) makes pseudo-statements and cannot make meaningful statements insofar as it sets the discovery and formulation of "a kind of knowledge not accessible to empirical science" as its goal. Carnap's paper, however, generalizes from one example in Heidegger's text to say that all metaphysics is meaningless just because it makes claims that are beyond the observational, or uses words without defining them in a particular way.[21] In maintaining this, Carnap neglects non-logical uses of words that we have seen in the previous chapter. He would also classify religious statements as pseudo-statements just because they are not susceptible to his criteria of logical analysis. Yet, religious language is not entirely without experience. Practitioners of religion, at the very least, would lay claim to various kinds of experience that also challenge Carnap's position without being mythological in their formulation. This will become clearer as we proceed.

---

[21] For a logically based response to Carnap's paper, see Jaakko Hintikka, "Overcoming 'Overcoming Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language' Through Logical Analysis of Language," *Dialectica*, Vol. 5, No. 2-3 (1991): 203-218.

Apart from these and the more general and logical difficulties of verificationism which include, according to Moritz Schlick,[22] the rendering of universal generalizations meaningless just as falsifiability renders existential generalizations meaningless, religious statements have been shown to be, in a sense, indefeasible. This is the case not least because they are shown to be down to earth and outright empirically observable, but because religious people are ever alert to the necessity to defend their experiences. There would be religious believers to adduce their own arguments in support of the supposedly flawed statements such as where the statement that "God is everywhere" is objected to because it is difficult to imagine how a being can be everywhere at the same time, and it is also difficult to lay hands on the scale or scope of *everywhere*, or if the Trinitarian dogma is objected to because it is logically unobtainable. At some point, it becomes a Herculean task to maintain the meaningless stance towards religious claims, even if one were not convinced that they are meaningful. The point remains that no matter how meaningless the statements seem to be, there is always a large enough set of people to whom they remain meaningful. Danish-born Calgary philosopher, Kai Nielson, following Antony Flew, demands that Christians show the evidence for a statement such as "My Saviour liveth." According to him, Christians ought to provide the pointers to the truth of the statements as well as the signs that should show the justification of their being denied. Without these, the statement "My Saviour liveth" would be both cognitively and factually insignificant.[23] One might, however, wonder about the effect and reach of such insignificance if people still value the statement and live by it. It would seem that that alone is evidence enough.

2.3.2 INSULATION

The second kind of response has some connection with something that is somewhat Wittgensteinian in spirit, from a cognitive perspective at least. It has two steps: for the first, it finds religious statements meaningful, and for the second, it keeps religious language apart from other kinds of language, thereby protecting it from attack by objectors. This second step might be called an insulation thesis that states that religion belongs to a different realm of discourse than other domains, and is not given to the same logical rigors as other fields of endeavor. Among those who hold the meaningfulness and truth-aptness thesis are the American philosopher, William P. Alston, who has argued for the equal validity of religious

---

[22] See Moritz Schlick, "Causality in Contemporary Physics." In: *Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 2, edited by Henk L. Mulder and Barbara van de Velde-Schlick (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1979), 1925-1936.

[23] Kai Nielsen, *Naturalism and Religion* (Amherst: Prometheus books, 2001), 472.

experience with perceptual experience,[24] and the English philosopher, R.B. Braithwaite, who holds that it is possible to understand such religious assertions as strings of claims that can be verified by relating religious assertions to the stories to which the doctrines of the religion refer.[25] The manner of verification is by looking at the life of the religious person who professes their belief in the stories since, in Braithwaite's account, the religious story is to be understood as empirical propositions that can be tested in line with the religious person's commitment to his religion's requirements. The insulation thesis agrees with a view that sees religious discourse as being a different kind of discourse from others, and which, as such, receives its meaningfulness according to its own standards. This is suggested by Wittgenstein in his *Lectures and Conversations* in the following way:

> Suppose someone were a believer and said: "1 believe in a Last Judgement," and I said: "Well, I'm not so sure. Possibly." You would say that there is an enormous gulf between us. If he said "There is a German aeroplane overhead," and I said "Possibly, I'm not so sure," you'd say we were fairly near.[26]

In this passage, Wittgenstein suggests the difference between religious language and ordinary or scientific language by his use of "gulf between us" and "fairly near." The two statements, though different, receive the same response, as well as different remarks. The response that is the same for both statements is "I'm not sure; possibly," but it is in the remark that Wittgenstein's point comes across clearly. The first statement concerns religion, and when the interlocutor's reply communicates uncertainty, the remark that follows excuses the uncertainty by referring to "an enormous gulf" that exists between them. This is to say that while the one is a believer and the other is not, there is a gulf between them with regard to the belief in a last judgment. The non-believer is extra-religious and so is not on the same faith level as the believer who is intra-religious; the religious subject of a last judgment is also interpreted by standards different from those of other subjects. The second statement concerns a German airplane, and when the interlocutor replies with uncertainty, the remark is that they are both fairly near. This remark communicates the sameness of a state of belief. That is, there is no gulf between two people who speak about ordinary or scientific belief, the gulf only exists between a religious believer and a non-believer over matters of religious belief. By saying the profession of belief in matters of faith rests on a different fact from ordinary

---

[24] William P. Alston, "Religious Experience and Religious Belief," *Noûs*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Mar. 1982): 3-12.
[25] R. B. Braithwaite, "An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief." In: *The Philosophy of Religion* edited by Basil Mitchell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 72-91 [84].
[26] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief* edited by Cyril Barrett (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 53.

everyday beliefs, as Wittgenstein does,[27] he not only distinguishes the language game of religion from others, but also tends to insulate it from extra-religious interpretation.

The Wittgenstein scholar K.C. Pandey, says that Wittgenstein was not the first philosopher to say that religion involves a special language game.[28] Others who acknowledged religion as having a separate domain and language game prior to the publication of *Lectures and Conversations* include Norman Malcolm, Rush Rhees, D.Z. Phillips, Peter Winch, etc. Pandey uses the following statements to show how religious language should have its own interpretation:

1. the belief in 'the existence of love between two individuals';
2. the belief in 'the immortality of soul or existence of God'; and
3. the belief that 'the cat is sitting on the mat'.

According to Pandey, the use of "belief" in the three sentences belongs to three different domains: emotional, religious, and ordinary. While people may understand the meanings of the beliefs, they are not determined in the same way. The belief in 3 is based on empirical experience, that in 2 is clearly not, and that in 1 is a matter that is up for debate. For example, God loving His creatures is not understood in the same way as human parents loving their children. In any case, religious statements are not subject to empirical verification in the same way that other statements are. One might wonder if this entails that the language game of religion is so entirely separate from others that non-religious people should not venture into it. This may, however, not be Wittgenstein's view since he says that the difference between religious language game and others is superficial, and that there is actually a crisscrossing that is possible between various language games. His point seems to be that making sense of it should be spared the rigors of, or does not at all require, empirical verification.

Webb makes a move that still allows religious claims to be interpreted according to rules other than those of ordinary physical-object linguistic frames.[29] However, he notes that Wittgenstein goes farther than Carnap, whose linguistic frames had ontologies, assertions, and also had logical laws and truth all applying equally.[30]

---

[27] Ibid., 54.
[28] K.C. Pandey, *Religious Beliefs, Superstitions and Wittgenstein* (New Delhi: Readworthy, 2009), 157-159.
[29] Webb, *A Comparative Doxastic-Practice Epistemology of Religious Experience, 18.*
[30] We do not have a developed Quinean move or a coordinate system or frame of reference concerning religious language, and we do not need one at this time.

2.3.3 EVIDENTIAL RELATIONS

The third category of response to the treatment of religious language seems to combine elements from the two that have already been discussed above. It seeks to make religious language both subject to and not subject to verifiability. The trigger comes from British philosopher John Hyman, who says that Wittgenstein's insulation of religion is improper. According to him, if religious beliefs are not vulnerable to logic, or are not subject to rational criticism, then there is no need to insulate them. He takes the religious statement: "If Christ be not risen, our faith is vain" implying "Either Christ is risen or our faith is vain" to be on par with the statement "If the weather is not fine, our picnic is ruined," implying "Either the weather is fine or our picnic is ruined."[31] This has to do with the evidential challenge of religious statements.

Hyman sees something important in the logical relationship between religious statements and non-religious ones. It is on account of this relationship or connection that an insulation thesis seems to make sense in the first place. In any case, it seems proper to subject religious statements to scrutiny, just like with any other statement. But is it as simple as that? Webb equally presents a dilemma when faced by those who propose what he calls the language-game picture. According to him, shielding religious discourse from the same basic rules of reasonableness as other kinds of discourse implies that religious discourse will have no impact outside the religious circle, but if religious discourse is subject to the same rules of reasonableness, then the question of shielding it as a distinct language game does not arise.[32] So, either religious discourse is subject to the same logical rules as other kinds of discourse, and it relinquishes insulation, or it is not subject in this way and insulation is not required. One can sense that believers will be divided against non-believers or strictly logically-minded people on the two horns of this dilemma. Webb's position, which involves synthesizing the earlier responses, is that religious experience need not be exempted from evaluation because its life stems from ordinary talk. This means that religious discourse has truth-values and can have *evidential relations* with other kinds of discourse.

Webb's use of evidential relations shows that religious language can be evaluated (that is, they can be verified and falsified), but Webb does not use the word "empirical." On the face of it, it drops the insulation thesis by indicating that religious language can prove its

---

[31] John Hyman, "Wittgenstein." In: *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion* edited by Charles Taliaferro, Paul Draper, and Philip L. Quinn (United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 176-188 [185].

[32] Webb, *A Comparative Doxastic-Practice Epistemology of Religious Experience, 21.*

logicality or soundness through the showing of evidence. However, a closer look reveals that it withdraws from going as far as the empirical, with regards to the evidence. It could be argued that we do not need to go to the extent of the empirical when investigating logical vulnerability, yet this search included the scientific, and the responses reviewed covered that. "Evidential relations", therefore, either stops short of the straight rigor of verification or it shies away from what seems like a strong language of accepting verification. This solution, therefore, seems to vacillate within the dilemma exposed by Webb, and does not take a definitive position regarding either insulation or total vulnerability to logic. It is for this reason that we need not only to take a position but also to have a stronger reason for such position. To this end, I offer two arguments, the first from the object of religion, and the second from the assumptions of religious people.

2.3.4 EVALUATING EVIDENTIAL RELATIONS

Religion is about that which is worshipped by religious people, and contains statements about the supreme being. The supreme being, God or gods as it may apply, is the object of religion. Normally, any religion's supreme being, the God of Christianity for example, is deserving of worship because He is believed to have powers beyond the human, in fact, He possesses infinite power. Thus, He knows, sees, and controls what humans cannot know, see, and control; He can work marvels beyond human imitation and imagination. The additional element is that this holds true not only in the present realm, but also in the transcendent realm. That is, God is transcendent just as He is eternal. What religion deals with is, therefore, beyond the physical. It seems that this fact about religion need not be ignored in its evaluation. A microbiologist, for example, deals with organisms that are not visible to the ordinary eye, and only those trained in that field can tell the behavior or the features of such organisms. Similarly, a marine engineer deals with equipment used within water space, and much as his work is not readily visible to the ordinary eye, his pronouncements are largely undisputed. Yet, a difference still exists between the domain of the biologist, the marine scientist, the astronomer, and the religious person. At the end of the day, samples from these domains can be taken to the laboratory for empirical investigation, but this is not usually the case with religion. A possible first move would be to acknowledge that not all domains are physically tangible. If this basic starting point is accepted, then the nature of the domains needs to be considered. Then it is possible to acknowledge that by its nature, that which religion concerns is not susceptible to the same kind of empirical investigation as the other

domains. The God of Christianity is acknowledged as such because He is not given to finitude or empirical capture – a quality without which He would not be God in the first place. Similarly, pronouncements about Him do not need to be subject to the same kinds of empirical approval as others. Rules of reasonableness apply, but not to the same kind of empirical extent. Religion has always made sense as religion, not as science; everyone knows this and so if religion is to be evaluated, then it should be evaluated as religion, not exactly as science.

The point I have just made tilts more in the direction of insulation. Let us look at it from another angle. What do religious people think about their being deeply engaged in religion? How do they interpret what they are doing? Do they believe that they are engaged in some illogical and insulated venture? Hardly. It is not the case that religious people take themselves to be involved in something illogical. On the contrary, they might believe, and some do, that their involvement in religion is one of the most logical decisions they have ever made. Even when the distinction is made between the logical and the empirical, they also believe that empirical evidence is either not lacking in their religious experience or that it is not necessary. This means that they take their experience of God, which strengthens their resolve to remain religious, as proof enough for their decision. Some also believe that concrete proofs are not even necessary to sustain their religious involvement any more than the rains are necessary for the Atlantic ocean to remain an ocean. What non-religious people lack is this godly experience which is not necessarily empirical, or it may be an inability to recognize that it is empirical. When viewed from this angle, it tends to tilt less towards insulation. Religion does not need insulation, but that does not equate it (or lower its standards?) with science, or it would simply *be* science. Instead, religious people make an effort to grasp as much about religion as is possible, while allowing room for that which they are unable to capture. For example, at the Second Vatican Council's 37th, 38th, and 39th sessions,[33] Vietnamese bishop, Simon Hoa Nguyen-Van Hien, bishop of Dalat, argued that the Pauline image of the church as Body of Christ could not be understood by his flock in line with the nature of the church. "Family of God," he suggested, was more in line with God's plan of salvation and would be better understood by non-Western peoples. After a series of

---

[33] This was the Catholic Church's last worldwide Council. Summoned by Pope John XXIII, it lasted from 1962 to 1965. Bishops, theologians, and the lay faithful from around the world met to chart a path for the Church after the ravages of the twentieth century's two World Wars. At the conclusion of the Council, sixteen documents had been drafted that touched upon the nature of the Church herself, its various components and their activities, relationship with other Christians, other religions, and the contemporary society.

debates at the Council's three sessions, the image of the church as a "family of God" was accepted and it entered into the Council's documents.[34] Today, it is one of the most popular images of the church. This search for simplicity and concreteness at the level of the people on behalf of whom Bishop Hien spoke, could be taken as an attempt to get at an empirical possibility of presenting the faith to a certain set of people. It was a search for proof (and might suffice for a socio-anthropological one), but not of the same kind as the exact sciences.

It seems that the element of "but not of the same kind" tends to preserve a certain element of insulation. That is not necessary though. Religion does not need to be insulated. However, it seems that while everybody might have something to say about religion, it is religious believers themselves that can make statements about their experience. Moreover, religion proves itself satisfactory to believers, and it proves itself to non-believers through them in turn. If one were to go further, one could then talk about reliable evidence about the contents of their religion. The added reasons are expected to strengthen Webb's position concerning how religion can have evidential relations with other domains.

Yet, it can be observed about poetry that it often uses unclear language, but it is hardly described as obscure. Why is that so?

2.4 THE CASE OF POETRY

> Consider what the German word *Gedicht* [poem] means ... *Gedicht* comes from the Latin *dicere* [to say] and also *dictare* [to dictate]. This means a poem is a *Diktat* [something dictated, as in taking dictation, or more strongly, a command]. The poem compels through the way it says what it says ... Nobody would ever object to listening to a recitation by saying that he or she already knew the poem.[35]

While there might be different opinions about the obscurity of poetry, Gadamer's discussion quoted above about the power of poetry from the etymological and psychological points of view, already presents an insight into the reality that unfolds therefrom. According to Gadamer, the origins of the word "poem" denote a saying and a dictation that can be understood as a command. It is a command in the sense that it compels the listener or reader, or captivates him spellbound. Gadamer says that what is special about a poem's captivating

---

[34] Francis Appiah-Kubi, "The Church, Family of God: Relevance and Pastoral Challenges of a Metaphor from an African Perspective." In *The Household of God and Local Households: Revisiting the Domestic Church* edited by Thomas Port-le Roi, Gerard Mannion, and Peter De Mey (Leuven: Peeters, 2013), 67-80.
[35] Gadamer, "From Word to Concept: The Task of Hermeneutics as Philosophy," trans. Richard E. Palmer. In *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of Later Writings* edited by Richard E. Palmer (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 108-120. This was an address delivered by Gadamer for the Hegel Week at Bamberg University in April 1994. It was first published in *Menschliche Endlichkeit und Kompensation: Bamberger Hegelwoche*, 1994. One year later, it appeared in *Die Moderne und die Grenze der Vergegenständlichung*. In 1997, it was added to Gadamer's *Lesebuch*.

power is that a listener usually does not object to further listening to a poem that is already well-known to him. Even though this could sound like an exaggeration of some sort, depending on how often one had really listened to a particular poetical recitation, it nevertheless conveys poetry's strong attractiveness. Given poetry's command, could it still remain obscure, and what might be the reaction with regards to its obscurity? To answer this question, we will take further look at other features of poetry.

The poet is mentioned in association with other artists who exert a certain influence on us. The poet, like the novelist or painter, has a way of winning "the extension of our sympathies," according to George Eliot.[36] This points to the force with which the poet captivates her audience, but it seems more than mere captivation since it also signals a possible drift. This would be a way to understand the indication that our sympathies are "extended," and the fact that it is even about sympathies lends it greater credibility. This is because sympathy has been presented in art, as in real life, as being somewhat unstable.[37] It is possible to form a certain belief about a person and to change the same belief soon thereafter. In poetry, the impact on sympathy and on emotions in general seems to be relatively high. How does the poet achieve his ability to glue people to the words being spoken (without being obscure)?

It has been suggested that poetry uses so much descriptive power that description could even be considered its essence.[38] This power of description glues the poet's audience precisely because of the imageries used. Imagery creates mental pictures that are not only attractive to the audience, but which also sustain their interest in the material. In so doing, description has a way of adding to what is there in the world, or extending our sympathies in Eliot's words. It goes even deeper because the imagery itself can appeal to the audience's taste so that there is a displacement of significance. In other words, an audience that is listening to or reading along with a poem written with epic descriptive abilities can tend to get carried away by the description of x and might lose focus on x. So, where x is being described, one tends to no longer pay attention to x, but rather to the description thereof. Riffaterre has made a similar observation, and has said that descriptive imagery actually

---

[36] George Eliot, July 1856. Quoted in James D. Rust, "The Art of Fiction in George Eliot's Reviews," *The Review of English Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 26 (Apr., 1956): 164-172 [164].

[37] See Howard Sklar, *The Art of Sympathy in Fiction: Forms of Ethical and Emotional Persuasion* (Amsterdam: John Benjamin's Publishing Company, 2013), 1.

[38] Willard Spiegelman, *How Poets See the World: The Art of Description in Contemporary Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3-4.

dictates an interpretation[39] – something similar to Gadamer's concept of poetic command – which demonstrates the poet's ability to divert meaning.

In addition to descriptive power, poets also make use of a rhyming scheme that is sometimes captivating to the audience. The rhyming scheme is unmistakable in *Ash-Wednesday*, T. S. Eliot's famous poem which combines features of the earlier and later Eliot on the nature of poetry.[40] Here is an excerpt:

> If the lost word is lost, if the spent word is spent
> If the unheard, unspoken
> Word is unspoken, unheard;
> Still is the unspoken word, the Word unheard,
> The Word without a word, the Word within
> The world and for the world.[41]

Here, it is not a strict rhyme that is prominent in the last word of each line, but the repetition of certain words and expressions like "lost word is lost ... spent word is spent," is standing out. The same goes for the expressions, namely: unspoken, unheard, Word and word, and Word and world. The use of "Word" and "word" can be striking, and so too can the reference to "the Word without" and "the Word within." These constructions can captivate an audience, thereby producing the powerful effects of poetry.

Sometimes it is the rhythm that captures the audience's attention. Poets compose moving poems with a certain rhythmic regularity that can be attuned to one's steps (if in motion) or simply to one's breathing. It could also be musical which makes it easy to arrest an audience that may be rhythm-sensitive. Here is what it looks like:

> The people along the sand
> All turn and look one way.
> They turn their back on the land.
> They look at the sea all day.[42]

This opening stanza of Frost's "Neither Out Far Nor in Deep" is characterized not only by a rhythmic progression, but also by a regular rhyme scheme. These features can serve as attention wavers and can tend to displace the original message of the poem; alternatively, they

---

[39] Michael Riffaterre, "Descriptive Imagery," *Yale French Studies*, No. 61, Towards a Theory of Description (1981): 107-125.

[40] Harry Puckett, "T.S. Eliot on Knowing: The Word Unheard," *The New England Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (Jun., 1971): 179-196.

[41] T.S. Eliot, "Ash-Wednesday," *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World Inc., 1964), 83 [92].

[42] Robert Frost, "Neither Out Far Nor in Deep." In *A Collection of Poems* (Coradella Collegiate Bookshelf Editions, 2004), 18.

can actually 'edge out' the poem's meaning and can take its place. That is, it could happen that an audience focuses on these features of a poem and might completely forget to wonder about the original meaning that the poem sought to convey. When this happens, the poem's features take the place of the poem's meaning, and the poet has pulled off the dictation of a certain meaning.

At this point, we seem to be considering two kinds of meaning: the meaning of the poem, which hinges on the theme around which the poet originally structured his reflection, and the meaning dictated by the poetic devices employed within the poem. A look at the final stanza of Frost's poem may help us to drive this point home:

> They cannot look out far.
> They cannot look in deep.
> But when was that ever a bar
> To any watch they keep?

This stanza has the same rhyming and rhythmic features as the first stanza, seen above, and like two other stanzas in between.[43] The poem's focus is people standing ashore and looking at the sea with the land behind them. As the title suggests, the people do not see far across the sea, nor do they see deep enough into the sea. Thus, they see enough neither in terms of distance nor in terms of depth. This is what I have referred to as the meaning supposedly conveyed by the poem. However, there seems to be another kind of meaning. This meaning comes from the seduction of the rhyme and rhythm, and it is this device that can overshadow the meaning conveyed. This second meaning is commanded by the poetic devices and could, in any case, even overwhelm the meaning being conveyed. In this sense, it is dictated and etymologically it seems to be the more pronounced poetic meaning (at least in Gadamer's account).

---

[43] Stanzas 2 and 3:

As long as it takes to pass
A ship keeps raising its hull;
The wetter ground like glass
Reflects a standing gull.

The land may vary more;
But wherever the truth may be—
The water comes ashore,
And the people look at the sea.

Furthermore, poets know how to direct attention to a particular sound, and that sound will take the centre stage, rather than the conveyed meaning. Take, for instance, Jacques Prévert's tongue-twister:

La pipe au papa du Papa Pie pue.[44]

Here, the meaning conveyed has to do with the pipe's stinking state, but what seems to catch the fancy of the audience is the rhythmic repetition of the consonant "p," which functions monosyllabically in "pipe," "Pie," and "pue," and bi-syllabically in "au papa" and "du papa."

At other times, a poet may use the mentioned devices only sparingly, and may rather make her audience concentrate on her reflection. Hölderlin's "Out for a Walk" is one of such poems.

A kindly divinity leads us on at first
with blue, then prepares the clouds,
shaped like gray domes, with
searing lightning and rolling thunder,
then comes the loveliness of the fields,
and beauty wells forth from
the source of the primal image.[45]

The descriptive power seems to be more prominent in this part of the poem, but there are other attractive tips in Hölderlin's presentation of someone who goes out to take a walk. This is the role played by "a kindly divinity" whose task it is to lead and to "prepare the clouds." A deep imaginative energy goes into the "preparation of the clouds," for example, giving it a shape, a color, then lightning and thunder. This imaginative investment alone seems to be strong enough to sideline the conveyed meaning of the poem. The subsequent lines speak

---

[44] Jacques Prévert, quoted in William E. Baker, *Jacques Prévert* (New York: Twayne Publishers Inc., 1967), 92. Meaning "The pipe of the father of Pope Pius stinks."

[45] Friedrich Hölderlin, "Out for a Walk," *Poems of Friedrich Hölderlin: The Fire of the Gods Drives us to Set Forth by Day and by night*, Selected and Translated by James Mitchell (San Francisco: Ithuriel's Spear, 2004), 52. Here is the original:

"Die Gottheit freundlich geleitet
Uns erstlich mit Blau,
Hernach mit Wolken bereitet,
Gebildet wölbig und grau,
Mit sengenden Blitzen und Rollen
Des Donners, mit Reiz des Gefilds,
Mit Schönheit, die gequollen
Vom Quell ursprünglichen Bilds." See Hölderlin, "Der Spaziergang," Bergwelten,
https://www.bergwelten.com/a/friedrich-hoelderlin-der-spaziergang

about the fields and the beauty that "wells forth." One's attention, thus, gets diverted from the "walk" to the attractive sites which are also very diverse. This is a characteristic that is common to poetry and is not particular to Hölderlin's poems. According to Arian Del Caro, one of the many who have studied Hölderlin's poems, one can always ask what a poet means, but in Hölderlin's case it would be a better question to ask what the poet is.[46] This is because Hölderlin's poems have the features of poetry itself, and offer a good perspective for understanding what poetry is all about. What this suggests is that poets normally write in such a way that distributes the audience's attention among several striking themes. It is the same with sonnets and other types of poems.

From the previously conducted examination, it would seem that the reader of, or listener to, a poem has a variety of intellectual, mental, geographical, and other stuff which can feed his interpretation. The reader might occasionally be captivated by one of the features at one time and by other features at other times. Thus, there is hardly a time that one reads poetry without getting caught up by a rhyme, a rhythm, a tongue-twister, a description, or the like. That occurrence of one or more of these features tends to downplay any difficulties that may be present in a piece of poetry. In other words, one almost always grasps poetry's conveyed meaning or gets reasonably engaged by a poetic device so that the idea of meaninglessness or total obscurity never really shows up. In such a situation, there is little room to talk about poetry's obscurity.

Works of poetry do not usually aim to state a definitive truth about their themes. They are often reflections that have been inspired by the poet's personal beliefs and experience. The theme of taking a walk, for example, is not meant to state specific facts about that particular walk, and "Neither Out Far Nor Deep In" is equally not supposed to supply a checklist of what to look out for while at the beach. It is not just that the poet does not build these facts into his composition, but also that people do not expect to read such facts when they look at a piece of poetry. In a way, this seems compatible with saying that poetry hardly ever feels that it is necessary to convey the definitive truth about its theme. While it does not lie, it is not a usual port of call when people want to learn about something or when they engage in debates about meaningfulness. Writing core philosophy or other forms of prose, on the contrary, often touches directly on issues of everyday life and meaning. There, one can look for definite information and seek to challenge a poorly presented fact. The latter case is, therefore, more apt to being described as obscure, given that it seems easier to notice the obscure when

---

[46] Arian Del Caro, *Hölderlin: The Poetics of Being* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 11.

anticipating some form of meaning that would be practical in the sense that one can hold on to it in life.

Moreover, the alternative interests of poetry tend to steer it further away from truth. Consider again Prévert's tongue twister. Its aim is not to convey truth, but rather to present a rhythmic consonantal repetition. Filippo Pacelli, Pope Pius XII's father about whom Prévert probably wrote, had died in 1916, more than twenty years before Eugenio Maria Giuseppe Giovanni Pacelli became Pope Pius XII in 1939. We have no idea whether his father smoked a pipe, and even if he did, he was not the father of the pope at the time. We also have no reason to imagine that Prévert intended to convey a truth or a fact about the father of the pope. In any case, it would still not be newsworthy, since anyone's pipe would still stink if they smoked the pipe anyway. Yet, the line is pleasurable to listen to, and that very probably achieves the poet's aim. When a piece of writing has this kind of structure and triggers aesthetic experience in this way, it would usually not be termed obscure.

Obscurantism tends to be deceptive; this is a feature which is absent in poetry. Poetry communicates meaning, albeit sometimes indirectly, by using its own genre and license. Of course, the language could occasionally be unclear, but it hardly happens that the whole piece would seem unclear given the variety of poetic devices that may be at play.[47] It may perhaps be useful to still bear in mind that the poet does not write for too long at one time, and this may be helpful. It might turn out to be difficult to refer to the whole piece as obscure. We have said that poetry triggers aesthetic experience and does not aim at a definite truth, and that it also does not have a tendency to deceive. Might there be some other device for deception that could somehow be connected to obscurantism? This will occupy us in the following section.

2.5 AGNOTOLOGY AND POST-TRUTH

These are key features of contemporary society that show the lengths that people will go to in order to achieve what they care about. We shall take them in turn throughout this section while bearing their relationship in mind.

---

[47] There are occasional accusations of obscurity. See Adolf Köhnken, "Obscurity and Obscurantism: How to Read Pindar," Review of *Soliciting Darkness: Pindar, Obscurity, and the Classical Tradition, Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature 47* by John T. Hamilton, *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (Spring 2005): 602-606.

Agnotology is the term used by the American historian of science, Robert N. Proctor, for the study of ignorance including its production and sustenance.[48] Proctor notes that while epistemology studies knowledge, there is no study of ignorance, and while we now seem to know so much about knowledge, so little is still known about ignorance. This is not the first time that the word "agnotology" has been used. It was an obscure and inharmonious word used to designate the things that we were necessarily ignorant of, in some sense. In Proctor's usage, the idea of necessity disappears so that it becomes more an exercise in the manufacturing of ignorance. It is in this sense that the connection between agnotology and shades of the obscure can be discovered. Whenever ignorance or doubt is created, spread, or prolonged, some bit of confusion results, knowledge is robbed, reality is darkened, and clarity is dimmed. Where this happens, a shade of obscurantism can be said to be at play since the way forward is, at least, temporarily closed and we cannot immediately decipher where to go next. This active or deliberate element makes the Kenyan-born Warwick philosopher, Quassim Cassam, classify agnotology under vice epistemology, the deliberate effort to undermine knowledge.[49]

We shall use two cases to illustrate how agnotology could depict the obscure: first, there is the "tobacco strategy" employed by the Tobacco industry; for the second, we have the corexit issue in the Gulf of Mexico, from the environmental and oil sectors.

Proctor mentions the tobacco industry case in his discussion of agnotology, but the comprehensive story is related by Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conwy in their book *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming.*[50] The story dates back to the 1950s, a time at which many people began to gain an awareness that cigarette smoking caused cancer. This had been shown by German scientists in the 1930s, but somehow did not gain much publicity; now, after the war, American scientists confirmed it and started creating an awareness of the risk. This being terrible news for the tobacco industry, the industry sprang into action with the aim of countering the growing awareness. The industry adopted a subtle strategy; they could neither say that there was no link between tobacco smoking and lung cancer, nor could they agree

---

[48] Robert N. Proctor, "Agnotology: A Missing Term to Describe the Cultural Production of Ignorance (and its Study)." In *Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance* edited by Robert N. Proctor and Londa Schiebinger (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 1-36.

[49] See Quassim Cassam, "Epistemic Insouciance," *Journal of Philosophical Research,* Vol. 43, No. 1 (2018): 1-20.

[50] Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoking to Global Warming* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2010).

that there was a clear link without their industry collapsing. Thus, they decided to negotiate loopholes. They embarked on the creation of doubts in people's minds. In their bid to fight science with science, they set up a "Tobacco Industry Research Committee" with the objective of planting doubts about the scientific reports that were being released. To that end, they conducted polls, organized campaigns, shared pamphlets and books with medical professionals, and via the print and the electronic media. Their point was that there was no scientifically conclusive proof linking lung cancer to cigarette smoking. As Dieguez puts it, they created the impression that there was something to be debated about the issue,[51] that is, there was a gap, something that remained unclear, another part of the story. In this way, they created suspicion and doubt about the true nature of the scientific report. As part of their strategy, they negotiated some details that were unclear to the public, like why some smokers suffered from lung cancer and some did not, why the cancer rates differed widely in cities with similar smoking rates, why the cancer manifested more in men even though more women smoked, why smoking would cause lung cancer without an increase in cancers of the lips, throat, or tongue, etc. While experts knew the answers to these questions, and would have seen no threat or doubt-causing force in them, they actually succeeded in creating doubts in the people, resulting in "one of the greatest triumphs of America's corporate connivance."[52]

The tobacco strategy worked by fomenting ignorance where quite a good level of awareness had existed previously. The creation of doubt attempts to erase or to obscure existing knowledge. It had the impact of people disbelieving the previous (true) scientific report linking cancer with smoking, after the industry employed renowned scientists at the research institute, and they also used the mass media to distribute their "alternative facts." As expected, then, people continued to smoke, not because they were sure that it was harmless, but at least they were told that the counter-story of its being harmful was not well founded, and that something still needed to be confirmed. In the meantime, smoking was probably okay. The spread of this manner of thinking obscures the truth.

The second case concerns the April 2010 BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. After a massive oil spill, the BP oil company knew that there was no way to dodge the spill's obvious impact. They had to try and clean up the pollution, and it is precisely what happened during the clean up that is important to our discussion. As has been observed, on the one hand, there was a disjuncture between the level of sophistication of the technological equipment used in

---

[51] Dieguez, *Total Bullshit*, 271.

[52] Proctor, "Agnotology," 13.

drilling oil and the low-level technological materials used for the cleanup.[53] On the other hand, the approach used in insisting on the cleanup chemical involved agnotology. It is this second point that really interests us.

The dispersant proposed by BP for cleaning the pollution was corexit EC9500A and EC9527A.[54] This dispersant was known to be dangerous to human and marine life to the extent that it had actually been banned in England. It was believed that corexit increased the toxicity of the water when mixed with the oil in the polluted water. As such, it was not a good dispersant for cleaning the gulf. Two things were done to keep using corexit. First, BP went to carry out experiments in order to prove to the people that corexit was not a bad dispersant, but was actually the best. NALCO (National Aluminium Company), the developers of corexit, claimed that it was the best product available for the cleanup, and that it was 25% less toxic than washing detergent. Regarding how the dispersant worked, BP stated that it was composed of detergent-like surfactants that had low toxicity solvents. It functioned by breaking the oil slick into small droplets which were then eventually broken down by nature. They entered the laboratory and emerged with some kind of proof of their point that they then spread, creating doubt in people. Moreover, the government supported BP and claimed that they were good and that their product was trustworthy. As it actually turned out, people died, many had their skin, liver, kidney, and other organs damaged. Toxicologist Riki Ott reports that the BP claim was incorrect and that it only took care of "a public relations nightmare."[55] This is to say that the strategy succeeded in obscuring the knowledge of the dangers posed by corexit. Clearly, then, agnotology succeeds, to some reasonable extent, in obscuring knowledge, especially when it is not firmly established just yet. What can be observed with it is that it succeeds with a fraction of the society, but so too do the other shades of the obscure.

Something that is often mentioned in discussions of post-truth, and which might as well fit into agnotology, concerns climate change. Some people have not only claimed that climate change is a false invention, but have gone so far as to produce their own kind of scientific evidence in support of their claim.[56] This is aimed at creating counter-information to genuine scientific research, and in this way, it tends to dilute truth, possibly wash it away

---

[53] William R. Freudenburg and Robert Gramling, *Blowout in the Gulf: The BP Oil Spill Disaster and the Future of Energy in America* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), 153.
[54] "The Truth About Corexit, Oil Spill Dispersants and BP Oil,"
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hUhmaTAdB1s&t=613s,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vd_0iGgOQK0 [Accessed 20th December 2018].
[55] Ibid.
[56] See Lee McIntyre, *Post-Truth* (Cambridge: MIT, 2018), 10-11.

entirely, planting ignorance in its place. Let us turn now to the understanding of post-truth so that we can see where its emphasis lies compared to agnotology.

According to the American philosopher who published a book on post-truth, Lee McIntyre, the notion arose out of the concern for the feared eclipsing of truth.[57] The expression, "post-truth," hit the public domain officially when, in November 2016, the *Oxford Dictionary* named it the word of the year. This dictionary mentions the fact that objective facts do not make as much impact in the formation of public opinion as emotions and personal beliefs do, as being the core of post-truth. The "post," it says, is not a temporal indicator telling us that we have passed the time of truth, however; rather, truth itself is losing its relevance and it is being eclipsed. This seems compatible with saying that truth does not really matter anymore. Against the complex and heterogeneous discourse of truth by various philosophers in history, which seems to make it difficult to identify the concept of truth that we are now "post,"[58] post-truth as it is used today seems to be more practical and less restricted than the philosophical debate. People always recognize a true representation and always have a way of finding out facts about their transactions. What is observed now is that less value is accorded to this truth, the truth has been swapped out for something else which more easily catches people's attention. After the 2016 Brexit vote in Britain, for example, Arron Banks, one of the pro-Brexit campaigners, said in an interview that their opponents focused on facts, facts, and facts, whereas they connected with the people emotionally.[59] Similarly, Donald Trump made several fact-less statements during the election campaigns and thereafter. He said that if he lost the election, then it would be because it was rigged against him. After he won, he claimed that he indeed had won the popular vote if the millions of people who voted illegally were discounted. Both claims had no basis in fact. But Trump's claims went beyond no-facts to contra-facts; these included, for instance, his claim that his electoral victory was the biggest since Reagan.[60] Thus, in his elaboration of the characteristics of the post-truth era, the American author, Ralph Keyes, notes that whereas lies were told with hesitation, some bit of shame, anxiety, and sheepishness in the past, we now have good

---

[57] Ibid., xiii.

[58] See Steve Fuller, "What Can Philosophy Teach Us About the Post-truth Condition?" In *Post-Truth, Fake News: Viral Modernity and Higher Education* edited by Michael A. Peters, Sharon Rider, Mats Hyvönen, and Tina Besley (Singapore: Springer, 2018), 13-26.

[59] See Cassam, "Epistemic Insouciance," 2.

[60] McIntyre, *Post-truth*, 1-2.

reasons to tinker with the truth and to freely dissemble it.[61] This makes it possible to manipulate the truth, or to present our own posture in place of the truth in such a manner that the truth ceases to matter. Thus, the difference between what is true and what is false becomes less important than the preservation of appearances.[62]

One obvious consequence of using falsehood and "alternative facts" in public discourse is that it will be transmitted to others that way and it will tend to wear the truth or its value out. When this is spread, the fake is also spread in place of the factual and the true. However, the university of Lees media and communication author John Corner, has made an important distinction between post-truth and fake news. According to him, post-truth has more to do with an epochal shift from a once-enjoyed era of truth, while fake news has more to do with a "fraudulent media product." The Trump issue, he says, is more about false tweets or false speeches than it is about fake news.[63] What one might rightly say is that the false tweets and the fake news have still been made salient in the post-truth age. From a rhetorical point of view, Bruce McComiskey discusses the core of post-truth. He sees post-truth as a state in which language is used for what is desired, what works, and without reference to reality, truth, or facts. A statement is good if it achieves the desired result, and it is bad if it fails to do so. Thus, language becomes but a strategic medium.[64] Using Trump's activities again as an instance of post-truth reality, he says that Trump won the 2016 election in an unorthodox way through using unethical rhetorical strategies such as name-calling, attacking media credibility, denial of meaning, vague social media posts, policy reversals, and fake news. McComiskey demonstrates the employment of name-calling, exaggeration, and metaphors as rhetorical strategies by using Trump's presidential candidacy speech, which he made on June 16, 2015. He notes the ethos and pathos of the strategies and the emotions they raised in the audience, which worked like a charm. People use Trump as an example probably because he seems to have an excellent talent in this subversion or manipulation of truth. Thus, it has been said that deception and lying are not additions to his approach to governance, but are instead constitutive thereof.[65] Closely related to fake news is the phenomenon of rumors by means of which we accept unsure information peddled by unsure people. Take the rumor

---

[61] Ralph Keyes, *The Post-Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004), 12-13.
[62] Dieguez, *Total Bullshit*, 305.
[63] John Corner, "Fake News, Post-Truth and Media-Political Change," *Media, Culture and Society*, Vol. 39, No. 7 (2017): 1100-1107.
[64] Bruce McComiskey, *Post-Truth Rhetoric and Composition* (USA: University Press of Colorado, 2017), 6.
[65] Douglas Kellner, "Donald Trump and the Politics of Lying." In *Post-Truth, Fake News*, 89-100.

that Barack Obama is a Muslim, that he was not born in the United States, and that he frequently steps out with terrorists, or the rumor that doctors deliberately manufactured HIV, or that the government orchestrated the murder of Martin Luther King; when we encounter such claims, it is often with insufficient facts, and our attitude is that although we lack adequate grounds to believe it, the fact that it has spread to us indicates that it might have some elements of truth.[66] We spread it further through social cascading and group polarization.[67] Rumors tend to spread at a more grassroots level in the sense that they do not have to appear in the news or newspapers to spread. It is often spread by individuals and groups, and it spreads faster when it concerns a high-profile personality or political stalwart.

How this links up to our discussion of obscurity might be unclear, after all most of those who have discussed post-truth have connected it with bullshit studies. A lot can be said by way of comparison, from the intent to deceive, to the phony attitudes for political gains, and from the confusion sometimes created by these postures to the meaninglessness they tend to establish. What I would like to emphasize first is the post-truth phenomenon itself. By this I mean the very realization or dawning of a post-truth era, the 'truth' of an era in which truth is actually being subverted. It concerns the enigma of imagining how post-truth will succeed after truth. What could be the pivot of a world in which non-facts and non-real claims win the day, instead of being rejected or, at least, generally condemned as they had previously? It becomes really worrisome when it is spearheaded by political and corporate leaders who should have been among those to disallow this seeming erosion of societal values. In my view, the very dawning of a world that revolves around post-truth is obscure. It presents the skew of a new world crafted on an old one. The skew is more pronounced when one understands that the foundation of post-truth is unreal and fake. Where will people end up when leadership is driven by fakery and everyone else is also engulfed by the obliteration of facts?

Indeed, a post-truth society presents an alternative 'reality' to which people surprisingly give in. The experience of people's susceptibility to post-truth has been described by Dieguez, according to whom it signals a post-fiction age.[68] What he means is that a world

---

[66] Cass R. Sunstein, *On Rumors: How Falsehoods Spread, Why We Believe Them, and What Can be Done* (USA: Princeton University Press, 2014).

[67] Social cascades are what happen when we do not have an opinion on an issue and so we accept what others say. If some people believe a rumor, then we are also likely to believe it. Group polarization happens, according to Sunstein, when people who think alike meet to talk about something. He says that they end up with a strong version of what they had in mind before their encounter. See *On Rumors*, 6-7.

[68] Dieguez, *Total Bullshit*, 336.

that gives in to post-truth is one that is unable to distinguish between reality and fiction. He advocates a recovery or, as he puts it, a 'rehabilitation' of fiction. Dieguez's submission seems to predict that the features of post-truth are a lazy, sloppy, and shabby emanation of something deeper, and that these elements could be emboldened by encouraging fictional development. If our fictional talents are put to proper use, he seems to say, then we would be able to tell the fictional from the real, and thus would have no across-the-board post-truth, or at least not the way we have it at present. Dieguez's position is not totally convincing, however. It is not entirely clear how a post-truth age is at the same time a post-fiction age. He does not show how this is the case since all of fiction's usual expressions still seem very much in place whether as drama, prose, poetry, or otherwise. It might be worthwhile to argue that the forceful adoption of post-truth might have an impact on the production of fiction, but to say that a post-fiction age accompanies the post-truth age would be a heavy claim.

Fuller is another author who has made a connection between post-truth and fiction. In Fuller's account, Hans Vaihinger noticed the world's post-truth element about a century ago.[69] Vaihinger himself discusses fiction alongside hypothesis as two states in which there is no reality. Fiction is not real, but one is unaware that one inhabits a false world; hypothesis is also not real, but one is aware that one is not inhabiting a false world. A hypothesis, for example, is always geared towards reality, it looks forward to being and endeavors to establish reality. At the moment, however, it is not reality. Fiction is equally not real, but the fictional figure acts as if he were real. In any case, fiction is supposed to be done with once it has performed its function, just as a hypothesis is supposed to be done with once it has been tested and verified.[70]

The Fuller-Vaihinger connection tends both to narrow and to broaden the promise of the connection of fiction with post-truth. In the narrow view, hypothesis and fiction are known to be non-real situations which existed alongside truth. That seemed quite a better situation than the era of post-truth when truth is trumped. The fact that hypothesis and fiction coexisted with truth, and post-truth now exists without it seems less promising for this era. In the broad view, if hypothesis and fiction coexisted with truth without replacing it, then it seems that the state of post-truth may not replace truth after all. This is not convincing because post-truth means gone-past-the-relevance-of-truth by definition; so how promising could that be? It would seem that a remediating idea is to understand post-truth as a new

---

[69] Fuller, "What Can Philosophy Teach Us," 15.
[70] H. Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of 'As If': A System of the Theoretical, Practical and Religious Fictions of Mankind* translated by C.K. Ogden (London: Percy Lung, Humphries & Co. Ltd, 1935 second ed.), 85-88.

vocabulary – which it just became in 2016 – and to see it separately from truth, which is the case. In this way, it seems possible to distinguish post-truth from truth, the same way it is possible to recognize a speech or move featuring post-truth. At first glance, then, post-truth and truth can be seen in a similar way as hypothesis and truth or fiction and truth. It would mean that post-truth has come to stay, but alongside truth. Are hypothesis and fiction clearly defined and so have their targets differently from truth, while the target of post-truth doctrine seems to be to displace truth? This could be responded to by looking at the scenario more carefully. Is the target of post-truth doctrine to take the place of truth so that truth will cease to exist, or to make its features such that people would believe post-truth as the truth? If it is the second – as I would argue – then there is no plan to do away with truth, the plan is instead to influence the perception of the content of truth. If the content of truth had been 't r u t h', now fakery is presented as the truth. This means that post-truth (the fakery) notwithstanding, there is still truth (the content that is sidelined). In this situation, the remediation requires maintaining the distinction between the truth and the post-truth, which involves unseating the truth. A further step notes that the one who uses post-truth, just like the one who lies, does so for a reason. That is, there is a reason for the adoption of post-truth, and that instance of post-truth ends when that reason is attained. When looked at in this way, it resembles hypothesis or fiction, both of which have reasons for being what they are and upon the attainment of which they cease to be what they were. Ultimately, when post-truth is viewed from this angle, the horizon of promise tends to be broadened. That is, it seems that a broader conception of post-truth offers some promise for conceptualizing the post-truth anxiety of our time when we see it not just as having come to do away with or obliterate truth, but as having come to rob it of its enviable value. Even when viewed from another angle, post-truth is seen as an attitude of connecting with people's emotions, rather than focusing on facts; there is no doubt that the distinction between truth and post-truth remains. Because this is so, post-truth will always be measured against the background of truth, which remains intact. Insofar as the truth remains recognizable, it seems that its promise remains unhindered.

The connection of post-truth with people's emotions brings Moller-Nielsen's presentation of the philosopher Slavoj Žižek to mind. According to Moller-Nielsen, Žižek is arguably (and he does argue) a racist, reactionary, repetitious, academically fraudulent, and a charlatan.[71] At the same time, he has an unbelievable followership and a scandalous level of

---

[71] Thomas Moller-Nielsen, "What is Žižek for?"
https://www.currentaffairs.org/2019/10/what-is-zizek-for [Retrieved 16th June 2020].

popularity. Žižek is always making videos, giving talks, writing books, and he even has a journal dedicated to his activities; he is the only living philosopher who enjoys that. This is the case even though notable philosophers have given voice to the dangers of Žižek's positions, which are not even consistent. Moller-Nielsen further holds that Žižek is celebrated not *in spite of* his negative qualities, but rather *because* of them. The type of media culture that we have, the influence of social media which makes people unable to properly spare their attention patiently, the attraction of outrageous events, and the loss of interest in reading books, have all contributed to the popularity of such a fraudulent figure. People listen to him, Moller-Nielsen adds, because they have been deceived to see him as profound.

A look at this presentation of Žižek shows that he is a figure with which to conclude this chapter that has examined different shades of the obscure. Žižek is sometimes taken to be profound, at least by some people, although he is seen in a completely opposite light by many philosophers. This could characterize Žižek as an obscure figure. Moreover, Moller-Nielsen's argument, together with those of other philosophers, about Žižek's fraudulence and emptiness notwithstanding, Žižek has still written at least one book a year since 1989, and has also given talks, published articles, made videos, etc. In that case, Žižek must have been involved in radical agnotology, and has spread a lot of ignorance, bringing about confusion and obscurity in the process. Yet, despite these traits, Žižek commands a followership, has an incredible audience, and enjoys an uncommon level of popularity. He has a media acquaintance and posture that wants more of him, and in this way he seems adept at the post-truth culture of our time.

The foregoing investigation into the shades and instances of the obscure does not claim to be exhaustive. It has, however, elaborated various scenarios and has tried to show what it is that might be obscure in them. This investigation has raised issues that require answers. Responses were actually provided for some questions raised, but the very question of how to make sense of these obscurities has yet to be answered. Obscure pronouncements have been drawn from various angles of philosophical expertise, that is, from both the continental and the analytical approaches, so the instruments required to make sense of obscurity will be drawn from both sides too. What the two approaches are or stand for, and what contributions they have to make towards understanding obscurity, will be the task of the following chapter.

CHAPTER THREE

HERMENEUTICS AND ANALYSIS OF THE OBSCURE

Having previously discussed the various forms that obscurity can take, the stage is now set to answer another one of this dissertation's questions which concerns how we might make sense of statements that are obscure. Given that obscurity can be noticed in a statement such as "Love's just a word" or "God is everywhere," and also in a larger corpus of text, it is expected that the task of sense-making might involve a number of considerations, which range from what the words say, to what they imply, to the interpreter's cognitive-intellectual apparatus, and some insight outside philosophy proper. We will begin by situating the discussion within 20th (and 21st) century philosophy to demonstrate the comprehensiveness of our answer to the question at the beginning of this paragraph. This concerns two philosophical traditions that both have developed theories of interpretation and sense-making. Once that has been achieved, we shall be in a position to take a further step towards a hermeneutics of the obscure, but now with a focus: we will look for that which will help us to make sense of obscurity. During the process, we will dig further into a question that we have already started investigating, namely: why is it that people seem glued to obscure texts or pronouncements? Since philosophical hermeneutics comes from one tradition, analytical approaches will be studied from the other horn. Other aspects of processing meaning will be considered thereafter.

In his paper, "Analysis and Hermeneutics," the Australian philosopher and Distinguished Tasmani Professor Jeff Malpas,[1] has examined the 'hermeneutic' and the 'analytic' as two approaches to philosophical practice. He takes up Martin Heidegger and Ludwig Wittgenstein as representatives of both traditions, but discusses others as well, including Hans-Georg Gadamer and Donald Davidson. Gadamer and Davidson are known for their contributions to the area of interpretation and understanding, or of making sense of texts and utterances. They will both be explored in our study. It would be good, perhaps, to place both traditions within the broader context of 20th century philosophy, in order to explore them as fruitful approaches to our project. We will then delve into key aspects of Gadamer's hermeneutics that will be useful for our study. Those useful elements will be further examined

---

[1] J.E. Malpas, "Analysis and Hermeneutics," *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (1992): 93-123.

and applied to the hermeneutics of obscure pronouncements. Once this has been achieved, we will look at the analytic tradition of the discussion on interpretation and understanding.

3.1 THE HERMENEUTIC AND THE ANALYTICAL TRADITION

According to the Macquarie philosopher Neil Levy, the early twentieth century saw a division in Western philosophy into 'analytic' and 'continental', and this division naturally engendered mutual incomprehension and hostility.[2] To begin with, there is an apparent terminological imbalance in these two broad characterizations, one that the English philosopher Bernard Williams, viewed as absurd since it involves "cross-classification," much like classifying cars into front wheel drive and Japanese. It also misrepresents the origins of analytic philosophy which is traceable to the European continent.[3] British philosopher Michael Dummett's issue with the terminology hinges upon the prevalent description of analytic philosophy as Anglo-American. He sees it as a distortion since it fails to take Scandinavian and other European philosophers into account who are interested in analytic philosophy. Looking at its origins, analytic philosophy should better have been described as Anglo-Austrian.[4] Agreeing to an imbalance in the designation "continental," which he overcomes by seeing it as a tendency rather than as a location, Durham philosopher David E. Cooper proposes three themes which all have a mood characterized by Cooper as "anti-scientism" and through which continental philosophers can be identified.[5] Levy disagrees with Cooper's three themes,[6] however, and former Boston philosopher Stanley Rosen would only admit to an apparent division, but not a real one. Arguing that the beginnings of both movements can be traced to a rejection of Hegel, Rosen mentions common sense, ordinary language, respect for logic as characteristic of analytic philosophy, and the rejection of ordinary language as characteristic of continental

---

[2] Neil Levy, "Analytic and Continental Philosophy: Explaining the Differences," *Metaphilosophy*, Vol.34, No. 3 (Apr. 2003): 284-304 [284].

[3] Bernard Williams, "Contemporary Philosophy: A Second Look." In *The Blackwell Companion to Philosophy* edited by Nicholas Bunnin and E.P. Tsui-James (USA: Blackwell, 2002), 23-34 [23]. Williams believed that it is especially so when Frege is taken to be analytic philosophy's founding father and Wittgenstein its greatest representative.

[4] Michael Dummett, *Origins of Analytical Philosophy* (London: Duckworth, 1993), 1-2.

[5] David E. Cooper, "Analytic and Continental Philosophy," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society,* Vol. 94 (1994): 1-18. The themes include "cultural critique, concern with the background conditions of enquiry, and ... 'the fall of the self'"(p.4). He takes "anti-scientism" to be an approach which goes against the conviction that the prospects of European Enlightenment can be reached through the use of practices in line with the natural sciences (See p.9).

[6] Levy, "Analytic and Continental Philosophy," 287.

philosophy, especially when dressed in its post-modernist garb.[7] Approaching the issue from various unsuccessful attempts at communication by the two traditions' masters, or what he calls "signposts," Cyprus philosopher Andreas Vrahimis[8] actually doubts the saying that there were two and just two camps in Western philosophy in the 20th century. Vrahimis also holds that while the designation "analytic philosophy" is chosen by philosophers in that camp beginning in Britain and later adopted in the United States, the concept of "continental philosophy" was arrived at following the rise of analytic philosophy. While "Russell's Critique of Bergson and the Divide between 'Analytic' and 'Continental' Philosophy"[9] illustrates one of the attempts to decipher the roots of the divide, contributors to the volume *Analytic and Continental Philosophy: Proceedings of the 37th International Wittgenstein Symposium*,[10] highlight the characteristics of both camps of the divide and identify borderline philosophers whom they call "tricky cases" (Husserl, Rorty, Feyerabend, Wittgenstein). Their proposal is to identify shared topics and to study them in depth, stating the similarities and differences. Advocating the approach of studying shared topics, the South Florida Philosopher Lee Braver[11] also believes in a fruitful interaction between analytic and continental philosophy. He compares the divide to that which existed between empiricism and rationalism in the 18th century, saying that the present divide is worse since philosophers from both sides seldom meet each other on friendly terms. Braver suggests that both camps have common topics for discussion, one of which he takes to be anti-realism, by arguing that Immanuel Kant who resolved the first dispute (rationalism versus empiricism) also holds the key to the solution of the present one. He argues that at the end of the day both analytic and continental philosophers are working on the same thing. Braver negotiates Heidegger's *kehre*, which represents a turning in his thinking, to discuss the usefulness of analytic and continental philosophy to each other. In a similar manner, a volume devoted to the pragmatic turn[12]

---

[7] Stanley Rosen, "The Identity of, and the Difference between Analytic and Continental Philosophy," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies,* Vol. 9, No. 3 (2001): 341-348.

[8] Andreas Vrahimis, *Encounters between Analytic and Continental Philosophy* (England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 1-5. Vrahimis mentions, among failed attempts to engage in dialogue, encounters between Frege and Husserl, Carnap and Heidegger, Sartre and Ayer, Ryle and Merleau-Ponty, and Derrida and Searle.

[9] Idem., "Russell's Critique of Bergson and the Divide between 'Analytic' and 'Continental' Philosophy," *Balkan Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2011).

[10] Sonja Rinofner-Kreidl and Harald A. Wiltsche (eds.), *Analytic and Continental Philosophy: Proceedings of the 37th International Wittgenstein Symposium* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2016).

[11] Lee Braver, *A Thing of this World: A History of Continental Anti-Realism* (Illinois: NorthWestern University Press, 2007).

[12] William Egginton and Mike Sandbothe (eds.), *The Pragmatic Turn in Philosophy: Contemporary Engagements between Analytic and Continental Thought* (USA: State University of New York, 2004).

suggests that the gap between analytic and continental thought is becoming increasingly thin, even going so far as to call it "fabled divisions."

These and many other studies in the literature agree to various degrees and claim that there has been a split of 20th century philosophy along the analytic-continental poles. This is not to say, however, that there is a neat demarcation which makes it easy to identify the philosophers that belong to either side. Sometimes it is very clear on which side a philosopher is located. For example, Nietzsche is not listed among analytic philosophers any more than Carnap is among the continental, yet there is no agreement about Richard Rorty. While the division of areas covered by either designation is helpful, a number of scholars do not see it as an attractive way of classification. Again, saying that analytic philosophy uses descriptions, examples, thought experiments, counterexamples, objections, etc., while continental philosophy uses basically history and commentary, has been proposed by some. Other scholars seem to agree that the primary distinction between analytic and continental philosophy, is a matter of style. This is probably what the French philosopher Pascal Engel, means when he holds that analytical philosophy works in a straight line while continental works around a circle.[13] He also agrees that there are many similarities in the works of certain philosophers from both sides, including those of Davidson and Gadamer, except where style is concerned. As a matter of fact, his association of continental philosophy with the "circle" is more precisely hermeneutical than continental, by and large. This circle or the hermeneutical concerns our investigation here.

We have situated our study of hermeneutics and analysis within the larger horizon of contemporary philosophy in the 20th century. Our goal in undertaking this task of situating hermeneutics and analysis was to demonstrate that the proposal we will eventually derive therefrom, which we will use to penetrate and make sense of obscure pronouncements, will reflect the insights from both traditions and the cognitive sciences. We will now return to a closer exploration of Gadamer's hermeneutics.

---

[13] Pascal Engel, "Analytic Philosophy and Cognitive Norms," *The Monist*, Vol. 82, No. 2, Continental Philosophy: For and Against (Aug. 1999): 218-234 [222].

3.2 GADAMER'S HERMENEUTICS

Gadamer's hermeneutics emerges from a critical reflection on the works of his predecessors. In addition to Fredrich Schleiermacher, with whom modern hermeneutics is taken to have begun alongside the early Romantic movement (1795-1810), others like Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger also influenced Gadamer. Of all of them it is Heidegger's hermeneutical seed that is grown and made to bear fruit in Gadamer.[14] If it is unclear why we have chosen Gadamer's hermeneutics, there are basically two reasons for this: the first is that he is a key figure in philosophical hermeneutics; the second has to do with certain forms of overlap between his hermeneutics and Davidson's theory of interpretation.

Philosophically, Gadamer's hermeneutics goes beyond methodological rules to examine the hermeneutic situation that comprises the background of all human knowledge. By fusing various horizons, the one who understands actually confronts a text or interlocutor in an experience that interrupts his static knowledge.[15] Gadamer's hermeneutics has also been acclaimed the "most sophisticated and persuasive account of the 'interpretive turn,'" and it is also used in the legal, literary, historical, natural, social, and human fields.[16] In a recent work, Dundee philosopher Nicholas Davey developed Gadamer's work further, and has elaborated eleven theses on what is 'philosophical' about philosophical hermeneutics.[17] The overlap of Gadamerian hermeneutics with a Davidsonian theory of interpretation will be considered towards the end of this chapter. For now, we will take a look at Gadamer's hermeneutics, beginning with the origins and meaning of the term, "hermeneutics."

3.2.1 ORIGIN AND MEANING OF 'HERMENEUTICS'

"Hermes" was the name of the messenger god of the Greeks. He conveyed the message of the gods to the humans by repetition, as in Homer. Ordinarily though, the work of the *hermeneus*

---

[14] For a study of the hermeneutical developments, see Kurt Mueller-Vollmer (ed.), *The Hermeneutics Reader: Texts from the German Tradition from the Enlightenment to the Present* (New York: Continuum, 2006).

[15] Francis J. Mootz, *Law, Hermeneutics and Rhetoric* (England: Ashgate, 2010), 268. The statement of what makes philosophical hermeneutics philosophical has been put in another way by Dundee philosopher Nicholas Davey. See his *Unquiet Understanding: Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 1.

[16] Ibid., 266. Also see Richard J. Bernstein, *Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 35.

[17] See Nicholas Davey, *Unquiet Understanding*. Also see Paul Fairfield, *Philosophical Hermeneutics Reinterpreted: Dialogues with Existentialism, Pragmatism, Critical Theory and Post-modernism* (London: Continuum, 2011).

(interpreter) consisted of translating something from a foreign language to a known one. Conveying a message from one world (that of the gods) to another (humans') involved supposed knowledge of the language used in both worlds. Translating from one language to another was bound to have its complications, since it involved reporting what was said and also demanded obedience thereto. This is probably clear in Plato who uses *hermeneia* (meaning "expression of thought") not just for anyone's expression of thought, but only for the king's or herald's knowledge, thereby giving it a status as if commanding compliance.[18] Aristotle uses it, according to Gadamer, "only in the logical sense of an assertion being true or false," giving *hermeneias* a cognitive bent in meaning. This was how, among the Greeks at least, *hermeneia* and *hermeneus* came to refer to one who made a "learned explanation," that is, an explainer or translator. This covers what the Brussels philosopher, Piet Van de Craen, has outlined as the three senses of the verb *hermeneuein*: to express in words or to say, to explain, and to translate.[19] Hermeneutics retained, however, the aura of having something respectable since it explained the unknown, or enlightened the ignorant by bringing home something previously foreign or hidden.

Terms like communication, linguistic competence, discourse, understanding, and interpretation are all used in modern times to convey what hermeneutics is all about.[20] Practiced in the school of Alexandria in late antiquity and continued into the renaissance, hermeneutics assumed a new status and became a discipline of its own in the modern period due to developments in theology, classical philology, jurisprudence, and philosophy.[21] In general, hermeneutics is the theory and practice of interpretation. Gadamer has distinguished between classical hermeneutics, which has to do with text interpretation, and philosophical hermeneutics which deals with the nature and process of understanding. In what follows we

---

[18] Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Classical and Philosophical Hermeneutics," trans. Richard E. Palmer. In *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of Later Writings* edited by Richard E. Palmer (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 41-71. This was first published in 1977 as an encyclopedia article in the Italian encyclopedia, *Encyclopedia del Novecento*. However, it was an expanded version of a 1974 article published under the title "Hermeneutik" in *Historisches Worterbuch der Philosophie*. Gadamer retitled the article and published it in the second volume of his collected works (Gesammelte Werke) as "Klassische und Philosophische Hermeneutik."

[19] Piet Van de Craen, "Hermeneutics." In *Philosophical Perspectives for Hermeneutics* edited by Marina Sbisà, Jan-Ola Ostman, and Jef Verschueren (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2011), 125-130 [125].

[20] Kurt Mueller-Vollmer, "Introduction: Language, Mind and Artifact: An Outline of Hermeneutic Theory since the Enlightenment." In *The Hermeneutics Reader: Texts of the German Tradition from the Enlightenment to the Present* edited by Kurt Mueller-Vollmer (New York: Continuum, 2006), 1-53 [1].

[21] For details about the precise developments that led to modern hermeneutics, see Ibid.

will focus on key elements of Gadamer's hermeneutics which are promising to the prospect of making sense of obscure pronouncements.

3.2.2 THE HERMENEUTIC CIRCLE

The hermeneutical circle had been traced to Neo-Platonism[22] and Friedrich Ast[23] before being popularized by Schleiermacher in the 19th century. It describes the back-and-forth movement of the understanding in the determination of the meaning of a text. Understanding the meaning of a text or an utterance is not a distinctively straightforward act; it requires coming back to what went before and linking them together. The meaning of the whole is, thus, determined by the parts, just like the meaning of the parts is equally determined by the whole. Without the one, the meaning of the other cannot be known. The meaning of the expression, "John is very fast," will be clear when the context in which it appears is known. John can be described as very fast because he won the 100-metre dash, or because he was able to jot all of the important points made by the professor, or because after having fallen down on the road, he got up before an oncoming vehicle reached the spot, etc. The larger unit determines the meaning of the parts and vice versa. That the grasp of the individual parts and the whole determine each other is known as the "hermeneutical principle."[24] In this circular process, we participate in a conversation that precedes us, and we make a contribution that was unforeseen, or as Fairfield puts it, "we catch the ball that is thrown to us, but we also carry it farther."[25]

Discussions of the hermeneutic circle remained at the level of part and whole until Martin Heidegger took it to the next level, saying that the very constitution of *Dasein* has the same circular structure, insofar as attaining meaning is concerned.[26] Our very existence in the world makes us people who are engaged in interpretation and understanding. Thus, Heidegger gives an ontological account of the hermeneutical circle, but this clarifies the fact that the circle is not just about the whole and its parts, but also about someone seeing the whole-part interaction. In Heidegger, then, the interpreter comes to the fore. Another seminal point which

---

[22] Judith N. Shklar, "Squaring the Hermeneutic Circle," *Social Research,* Vol. 71, No. 3 (2004), 655-678 [656].
[23] C. Mantzavinos, "Hermeneutics," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/hermeneutics/>.
[24] John M. Connolly and Thomas Keutner (eds.), *Hermeneutics Versus Science? Three German Views: Wolfgang Stegmuller, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Ernst Konrad Specht* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame, 1988), 10.
[25] Fairfield, *Philosophical Hermeneutics Reinterpreted,* 2.
[26] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 153/195.

comes from Heidegger has to do with fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception, which are worked out with things themselves.[27] These fore-structures provide the basis for Gadamer's theory of preconceptions or prejudices which are useful for the working out of meaning. Gadamer says:

> Whoever wants to understand a text is always carrying out a projection. From the moment a first meaning is apparent in the text he projects the meaning of the whole. On the other hand it is only because one from the start reads the text with certain expectations of a definite meaning that an initial meaning becomes apparent. It is in working out this sort of projection - which of course is constantly being revised in the light of what emerges with deeper penetration into the meaning - that the understanding of what is there consists.[28]

Making projections or reading a text with expectations is, to a large extent, what is meant by having fore-structures according to Heidegger, or preconceptions according to Gadamer. The preconceptions or prejudices are retained or revised to the extent that expected or new meanings emerge as one progresses in reading a text or listening to an utterance. This touches on "the relation between the interpreter and what he or she seeks to understand" which has been identified, as far as the hermeneutic circle is concerned, as the major consequence of Gadamer's articulation.[29] With regard to the task of interpretation, Gadamer has purified "prejudice" of its negative connotations. One's prejudices include one's expectations, background ideas, or whatever strikes upon one's mind concerning the matter at hand. Our experiences are partly constituted by our prejudices. They are "biases of our openness to the world,"[30] suggesting that we never experience without our prejudices in our every encounter with the world. Prejudices are not meant to be discarded in making sense of a text or an utterance, in Gadamer's terms. Instead, they are necessary for a good or fruitful interpretation.

---

[27] Heidegger's words (1985, 153/195) are: "... our first, last, and constant task is never to allow our fore-having, fore-sight and fore-conception to be presented to us by fancies and popular conceptions, but rather to make the scientific theme secure by working out these fore-structures in terms of the things themselves." This seems to give the impression of an active rather than a passive role in interpretation.

[28] Gadamer, "On the Circle of Understanding." In Connolly and Keutner (eds.), *Hermeneutics Versus Science? Three German Views,* 68-78 [71].

[29] Bernstein, *Objectivism and Relativism,* 37.

[30] Gadamer, "The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem" trans. David E. Linge. In *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of Later Writings,* 72-107 [82]. This paper, originally titled *"Die Universalität des hermeneutischen Problems"* was a lecture that Gadamer delivered at the academy in Walberberg on October 12, 1965. It was published the following year in the journal *Philosophisches Jahrbuch*, and it was added to his collection of essays *Kleine Schriften 1* the following year. Gadamer added it to the second volume of his collected works in 1986. To that version he added notes addressing criticisms of his arguments or referring to sources. This version was published in the *Gadamer Lesebuch* in 1997.

In fact, understanding is only possible when one's own presuppositions are brought into play.[31]

Gadamer seems to be saying here that upon reading or hearing about, for example, dozens of witches holding a meeting in a tree, our ideas of witches, trees, and having meetings, are not to be thrown away. Whatever such a obscure story finally means, making sense of it begins with considering witches, whether as Shakespearean magical creatures or as human practitioners of witchcraft, and the possibility of gathering in a tree for a meeting. Our idea of a tree is also relevant, and it introduces the skew of a tree that is able to accommodate dozens of witches, who are not just scattered on parted branches, but are sitting together and are deliberating. Thus, the reader or listener is likely to assume that the tree has to be really big, with strong non-scattered branches, or that the witches have to be magical creatures. This consideration will not emerge without the idea of meetings as gatherings in which participants deliberate on issues of common interest, and which include the taking of minutes and personal notes. Added to these is the possible expectation of how the meeting-venue of a tree might look, perhaps how discomforting it might be, how short it should be, or even why it should be held in a tree at all. The reader might then be able to tilt towards an understanding of witches as magical creatures, or otherwise, as the story continues. In any case, the usual understanding in the reader's culture makes up his prejudices, and it is important to understanding the story. With these prejudices or "pre-opinions", the reader remains open to the opinion of the text. It is difficult to imagine how else one might try to make sense of an expression without falling back, wherever possible, upon previous ideas about the whole or parts of the expression, that is, on one's preconceptions.

In addition to Jurgen Habermas's criticism of Gadamer's position on prejudices that prejudices stand in the way of one's emancipation from social misunderstandings,[32] it has also been suggested that Gadamer's unpacking of prejudices still harbours complexities.[33] Moreover, it does seem that Gadamer undulates in his explanation of what he calls "the first condition of hermeneutics." According to this condition, understanding begins when

---

[31] Idem, "Classical and Philosophical Hermeneutics," 62.

[32] See Richard E. Palmer, Introduction to: Gadamer's "The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem," 76.

[33] See Connolly and Keutner (eds.), *Hermeneutics Versus Science? Three German Views*, 30.

something addresses us, or when something speaks to us.[34] He seems to suggest that that which addresses us has to be given prominence or be made to stand out. In order to let this happen, we need to suspend our own prejudices. He states that suspending prejudices "has the logical structure of a question,"[35] that is to say that prejudices are questioned in line with the content of a text. However, what Gadamer seems to mean by a suspension of prejudices is discomforting. It is precisely because texts are read, or utterances heard amidst one's Gadamerian prejudices, that the hermeneutic circle makes sense. Prejudices are not meant to be suspended for that would mean putting them in a corner outside the circle, albeit temporarily. If this is so, how shall revision be made should such a need arise, given that the prejudices have been suspended? It tends to transform the circle into a polygon, which is not the structure that understanding takes.[36] It would seem to be a better idea if Gadamer were to only call attention to the risks involved in confronting our prejudices with new ideas[37] without having to call for their suspension. The clash of prejudices and new ideas is a context for growth, and it seems to have good prospects which should be emphasized rather than calling for an outright suspension of prejudices.

So far, we have looked at the hermeneutic circle with the hermeneutical principle and condition. In so doing, we have touched upon the circular nature of understanding, the novelty of Heidegger, and its development by Gadamer up to the latter's theory of prejudices. In talking about prejudices, though, we have said nothing about their source and about the possibility of their being revised. These issues touch upon our shared understanding as human beings and what is involved in interpretation. They will occupy us in the following sub-section.

3.2.3 UNDERSTANDING AND INTERPRETATION

Gadamer's "Text and Interpretation," the 1981 paper with which the introduction to this dissertation opened, opens itself with a discussion of *verstehen*, the German word for understanding and its cognates. Among other things, Gadamer writes: "The ability to understand, then, is a fundamental endowment of man, one that sustains his communal life

---

[34] Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 1975 [2006]), 298. See also "On the Circle of Understanding," 77.

[35] Gadamer, *Truth and Methods*, 298.

[36] Recall that the structure of the understanding is a circle, and 'suspension' puts what is suspended outside the circle.

[37] He actually does this. See *Truth and Method*, 299.

with others and that, above all, takes place by way of language and partnership of conversation."[38] The first interesting remark characterizes understanding as a basic endowment of the human being on the basis of which communal life is possible. This states how humans are generally given to understand and how social life is constituted by this ability. It also links it with language and conversation. Even though Gadamer argues that all understanding is linguistic, his description of it here as a fundamental endowment seems to be compatible with making it a natural capability to understand people, situations, and language whether or not the persons involved are themselves aware of it. It could also be an indication that understanding is not just about understanding what is read or said, but also about the writer's or speaker's life and circumstances. Gadamer, however, makes human conversation the most prominent occasion for understanding. Conversational acts are moments for understanding one another, and they sustain social life. He therefore acknowledges a social solidarity which is founded on "shared understandings in language."[39] As a result, an agreement is presupposed in the use of language. By implication, according to the process of understanding, its proper place requires a distinction between the phenomenon of understanding itself and disturbances in understanding. Understanding does not involve, as some hold, doing away with misunderstanding. Disturbances in understanding are meant to be overcome through historical training and a measure of psychological empathy.[40] Gadamer seems to suggest here that what we call misunderstanding is but a disturbance in understanding. The "I" and the "thou" already share a background understanding which is not "mis"understood, but which can be "disturbed." Fixing the disturbance is a hermeneutic task that is usually carried out against a background of shared agreement even when we are unaware of it.

---

[38] Gadamer, "Text and Interpretation" trans. E. Palmer. In *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of Later Writings,* 156-191 [158]. This was the paper presented by Gadamer in April 1981 at the "debate" with Derrida, at the Sorbonne in Paris. In 1984, when the paper was first published in German (the Sorbonne presentation having been in French), a fourteen-page section was added to it in which Gadamer discusses his concept of "eminent text." The first English translation was done by Denis Schmidt in 1986. The present translation by Palmer corrected a previous translation by Schmidt and Palmer in 1989.

[39] Palmer, Introduction to "Language and Understanding." In *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of Later Writings,* 89-107 [91]. This paper was originally recorded for a radio presentation, and was broadcast on Southwest Radio (Sudwestfunk) in two parts on March 22 and March 30, 1970. For this reason, there are no footnotes in the paper. The same year, the record was printed in the Lutheran monthly, *Zeitwende.* In 1971, it was published in a book that Gadamer co-authored. Years later it was included in his *Kleine Schriften,* and 1986 in the second volume of his *Gesammelte Werke.* In 1997, it was included in his *Lesebuch.*
[40] Gadamer, "The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem," 81.

This seems to underline the existence of something like a common ground between speaker and hearer, or a writer and an interpreter such that the latter understands the former on the basis of their shared background. What this may portend for obscurity is that there is a shared understanding between the utterer of an obscure pronouncement and its hearer, and fixing what may be a grave disturbance must exploit that shared background. In spite of how this optimism may be viewed, something seems clear, namely, that something is already understood as being obscure. Making reference to the *atopon* (the placeless) – a Greek expression used to describe the process of understanding coming to a standstill – Gadamer describes an experience that occurs when language breaks down, thereby making understanding strange, challenging, and disorienting.[41] What reinforces Gadamer's optimism is his saying that speaking does not come to an end at this point, but rather gives rise to a new, fresh look at a text. The breakdown in understanding that Gadamer talks about is definitely not the same as obscurity, yet obscurity is discovered because the reader is confronted with something like the *atopon*. I suggest that it might be wise to extend a similar form of optimism to it.

Gadamer's concept of "the anticipation of perfection" is closely linked to shared understanding as necessary for communal life and conversation. This is a presupposition that is formed to guide understanding, and it is basically about the fact that only that which has "a perfect unity of meaning" can be understood. As the label implies, it is an anticipation, something to which the reader or hearer looks forward. When the mind is stirred in a particular direction or around some image, its expectations revolve around some form of meaning thereabout. If the reader expects a talk about flowers, for example, he will expect the mention of a bouquet, a vase, or parts thereof like peduncle, receptacle, sepal, petal, filament, anther, etc., and usually not tissue paper, matchboxes, goalkeepers, bank contact, which may not be immediately related to flowers. According to Gadamer, it is only when the anticipated perfection, or "completeness" as he sometimes calls it, is not met that the text or utterance becomes suspect.[42] The failure to meet the anticipated perfection results from a collapse in the unity of meaning. Insofar as the unity remains, everything flows and no special care is required. To say that the birthday celebrant is given a bouquet of flowers, for example, is quite coherent; however, to say that there is a hippopotamus in the refrigerator suggests a

---

[41] Idem., "Language and Understanding," 93.
[42] Idem., *Truth and Method,* 294.

disruption in unity of meaning and extra care would be required to fix the problem. Another example: talking of scores of witches having a meeting in a tree would also evoke suspicion because it violates the fore-conception of completeness. It violates not only the unity of meaning but also the assumption of truth which the reader or hearer employs. The formal aspects of the unity of meaning and the expectation of truth are, according to Gadamer, two implications of the anticipation of perfection. One concern that may arise from Gadamer's 'crash of the anticipation of perfection' touches upon obscurantism. According to him, the crash raises the suspicion of the reader and requires a more careful look at the text. So far, obscurity is not in question since consulting the text may be all that would be needed to fix the loss of coherence. But suppose the crash is not fixed? It often happens that people may not readily give up, but may instead remain glued to the text even when it can be described as obscure. What is the reason for this? We will return to this question, but first let us dig further into Gadamer's hermeneutics.

Connolly and Keutner have argued that Gadamer has accorded truth (in the anticipation of perfection) a place similar to that which Davidson accords to it in his theory of translation, even though they both have different views of truth.[43] They are correct, and more can still be said. Gadamer discusses truth as a fore-conception or prejudice that the reader or hearer expects to get from the text and which, if absent, occasions suspicion. Davidson considers truth, beyond translation, as a key ingredient of the principle of charity, which the interpreter assumes and on the basis of which he invests the speaker with a lot of true beliefs about the subject matter of the conversation. This will be explored in greater detail below. Meanwhile, the very experience of anticipating perfection, its possible suspicion when it crashes, and the subsequent effort to fix it, comprise the core of what is involved in interpretation and understanding; these have been identified as the two sides of any hermeneutical act.[44] Conceiving them as two separate sides in the hermeneutic act was not Gadamer's objective, however, and this is something to which we must turn our attention.

According to Heidegger, with whom Gadamer agrees, a background of understanding is basic to an interpretation of a particular text,[45] and one can only interpret on the basis of a background understanding. Heidegger would probably agree that interpretation can contribute

---

[43] Connolly and Keutner, "Introduction." In Connolly and Keutner (eds.), *Hermeneutics Versus Science? Three German Views,* 32.
[44] Van de Craen, "Hermeneutics," 127.
[45] Heidegger, *Being and Time,* 153/195.

to understanding (in Davidson it actually leads to understanding), but on the whole, interpretation emerges from the treasury of understanding.[46] This position is Heideggerian and is different from Davidson's. Understanding, for Gadamer, involves a fusion of horizons. Ordinarily, a horizon contains the sense of the fusion or meeting point of the earth and the sky. For Gadamer, a horizon has to do with a looking beyond the immediate point of interest in order to see it in a broader view.[47] For understanding to occur, there are two horizons: that of the reader and that of the text. The reader's horizon consists of his prejudices or the perfection that he anticipates. This horizon is constantly adjusted as one confronts it with the horizon of the text, which concerns what the text is actually saying. In other words, the background or world of the text contains material that is examined in light of the culture of the present. The world of the text and the world of the reader are fused to produce understanding. Interpretation, for him, involves making one's preconceptions active while reading a text such that the text is really made to speak.[48] Coming originally from a relation of mediation between speakers of two different languages, interpretation had to do with negotiating the meaning of texts which were difficult to understand.[49] In Gadamer's usage, it mediates between the horizon of the present and that of the past. It is in interpretation that the preconceptions of the present are made to face the horizon of the text and this is how the text actually speaks. What does Gadamer mean by the text?

"Text" is used in modern discourse, according to Gadamer, in two different ways: the text of scripture and the text of music. Both ways recall an ancient use of the word by Roman jurists after Justinian's codification of laws. At that time, the text was the point of reference whenever disputes or disagreements arose in matters of the law. The text was consulted for clarification. If I were to say, for example, that Gadamer maintained that interpretation as an act is impossible outside texts of jurisprudence, and my reader or listener were familiar with Gadamer, then he would intuitively want to see where Gadamer wrote that in order to settle the crash of his preconception which must have occurred in my presentation of Gadamer. Thus, the text is used for correcting an unclear part of a document. Gadamer recognizes other types of text as falling under his concept of hermeneutics. Transcripts and contracts, for example, are texts in his sense since they have meaning built into them and for which they are

---

[46] Ibid., 152/194.
[47] Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* 304.
[48] Ibid., 398.
[49] Idem., "Text and Interpretation," 167.

also given the special mark of a signature.[50] This means that they can be referred to should the need arise to clarify any point. One implication of his view is that writing something down is not the same thing as writing a text, for some documents are not texts. The word 'text' seems to be used by Gadamer in an idiosyncratic way such that 'text' refers to a document that can be consulted for clarification. Gadamer mentions that notes, scientific papers, and personal letters are writings that cannot be regarded as texts. Notes are taken for one's memory, scientific papers are meant for specialized readers, not everybody, and personal letters are directed to people and take the form of normal conversation.[51] The seeming reason for not classifying this set of writings as text is the presumption of clarity. They are supposed to be addressed to recipients that are expected to be familiar with the genre or content. Gadamer also admits that text can include oral discourse to the extent that one needs more than the meaning-content of what is said to understand it.[52]

Although there is a difference between oral and written discourse, Gadamer says that the hermeneutical problem is basically the same for both. Apart from the good will to understand each other, and to see the other as sharing the same presuppositions with oneself and on whose understanding one depends – features which should characterize both oral and written discourse – living conversation has the advantage of offering the immediate opportunity to explain an unclear point or to defend one where asked for. In addition, the give-and-take of discussion in oral conversations is enhanced by intonation, gestures, and so forth. These are absent in texts, so texts require, according to Gadamer, a "virtual" horizon of interpretation and understanding.[53] By this he may be advocating a special quality of bearing the reader in mind and making one's point as clearly as possible. However, this may also include the writer's awareness that the interpretation of a text may go beyond what was originally intended. In any case, Gadamer's acknowledgement of, among other things, "a great many circumstances that do not appear in the text as such [which] play a role in one's grasp of the text,"[54] suggests the intricacies that may be involved in the acts of interpretation and understanding. It may even be that Gadamer's use of the concepts, "interpretation" and "understanding," is already itself sufficiently intricate.

---

[50] Ibid., 173.
[51] Ibid., 171.
[52] Ibid. He also discusses what he calls antitexts, pseudotexts, and pretexts, see pp.176-177.
[53] Ibid., 172-173.
[54] Ibid., 170.

Mueller-Vollmer has argued that Gadamer seems to equivocate in his use of interpretation and understanding based on his translation of *Wahrheit und Methode*, and for saying that "understanding and interpretation are one and the same."[55] The inseparability of both concepts is clear in Gadamer, but whether it is true that they are the same is not that clear. Heidegger had maintained that understanding is the basis for interpretation, and that understanding must understand what it interprets for interpretation to contribute to understanding. For his part, Gadamer says both that "understanding is already interpretation" and that "interpretation makes understanding explicit."[56] Both statements show the intertwinement of interpretation and understanding. If understanding is already interpretation, then in order to have understanding, one will have done some interpretation, and this seems compatible with saying that understanding is made explicit by interpretation. The upshot is that interpretation is embedded within (the process of) understanding, and one understands only what is interpreted, while interpretation can shed light on understanding. In either case, interpretation enhances or improves understanding. Moreover, that interpretation makes understanding explicit does not rule out the more Heideggerian phrasing that interpretation is founded on understanding since "making explicit" is compatible with clarifying or improving, in this case. Thus, to interpret can mean to interpret what one already has, or seems to have, an idea of. It means putting one's idea of the subject to the test, or in Gadamer's terms, bringing one's preconceptions on the subject out into the open. When this happens, understanding is confirmed or corrected. It is interpretation that serves to keep understanding in order in all this, but Gadamer would put it more concisely by arguing that interpretation enters into the content of what is understood.[57]

Now that we have elaborated key aspects of Gadamer's hermeneutics like the hermeneutic circle, the anticipation of perfection, and the process of interpretation and understanding – aspects that may be useful in making sense of obscure pronouncements – we are in a position to return to a question posed previously about what it is that tends to keep people glued to obscure texts. The following sub-section is dedicated to this exact topic.

---

[55] Mueller-Vollmer, "Introduction: Language, Mind and Artifact: An Outline of Hermeneutic Theory since the Enlightenment," 40.
[56] Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* 397, 399.
[57] Ibid., 399.

3.3 THE HERMENEUTIC SITUATION AND OBSCURITY

> The very idea of a definitive interpretation seems to be intrinsically contradictory. Interpretation is always on the way ... there are always both conscious and unconscious interests at play determining us; it will always be the case that we have to ask ourselves *why a text stirs our interest.* The answer will never be that it communicates some neutral fact to us. On the contrary, we have to get behind such putative facts in order to awaken our interest in them or to make ourselves expressly aware of such interests.[58]

In this passage, Gadamer reveals more about what happens when we get involved in interpretation. According to him, we are not usually in full control of the entire process, the question of what stirs our interest is very normal and will continue to be relevant. We have to go behind the facts of the text to awaken our interest; even when we succeed, whatever interpretation we give is not final. This is the reality surrounding interpretation, what Gadamer calls the "hermeneutic situation." What this means is that getting involved in interpretation amounts to contributing our understanding which, though definite, is not definitive; that is, it does not close the case. A text that has been interpreted remains open to further interpretation and this will still not mark an end point to the process. This is not to say that an interpreter never gets a satisfactory interpretation of a text, but rather that he or another can take the interpretation further thereafter. Thus, interpretation is interminable or, to use Gadamer's expression, it is "never finished."[59] Gadamer goes deeper to say that not everything concerning interpretation is within our control. There are also unconscious interests in addition to our conscious involvement. This suggests that the interpreter is somewhat seduced to dig deeper into the text or to keep engaging with its content. If the text is obscure, then this quality of the text might be well pronounced since, as we saw in the first chapter, obscurity has an intrinsic zest for digging deeply in order to make sense of a skew. Furthermore, while acknowledging that the question of what stirs our interest is an important one, Gadamer does not discuss it; this is perhaps because that is not the question he wishes to answer. However, he gives a clue by pointing to something behind the facts of the text.

This indicates that there is something that is not in the text and that glues us to texts when they are obscure. We can tease it out from the discussion conducted thus far. Gadamer

---

[58] Idem., "Hermeneutics as Practical Philosophy" trans. Frederick G. Lawrence. In *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of Later Writings,* 227-246 [240-41]. Emphasis mine. This essay was first published in a volume *Rehabilitierung der praktischen Philosophie* edited by Manfred Riedel (Freiburg: Verlag Rombach). In 1976, it was included in *Vernunft im Zeitalter der Wissenschaft*, a volume of Gadamer's essays that were later translated into English, among other languages, as *Reason in the Age of Science*, in 1981.
[59] Idem., *Truth and Method,* 298.

says that an interpreter comes with a prejudice or anticipation of perfection. He expects the text to contain true or complete information. This is also what he means when he talks of intelligibility coming from unity of meaning,[60] that is, the text is expected to provide the reader with something meaningful along the lines anticipated (this can also be understood in terms of themes). The absence of this unity of meaning causes a loss of connection with the reader's anticipation, but does not necessarily cause a diminution of effort or in their interest in the text. Instead, this experience urges a return to the text and requires a careful look at it. When the text is obscure, this careful look is surely invoked. In going back to the text, the reader or interpreter is trying to lay hands on the unity of meaning. This is necessary because of the way understanding is achieved. It is a movement from the whole to the parts and back. If a loss of connection occurs at some point, then the bits and pieces are picked, and an effort is made to reconnect them with the others. This circular movement accounts for the seemingly tireless search for meaning.

Why might one embark on such a search? We have a shared understanding that enables us to communicate or at least talk about issues in a coordinated manner. We are not only able to do this, but we are always inclined to make sense of life and the world around us. Beginning to read in the first place is an exercise that involves one in this experience of sense-making. A disconnect would occur if, for example, by the expression "human" a text were to suggest a meaning like "an object in space," or if by a "conference centre" it were to suggest "the top of a mulberry tree." When an obscure text is read, there is a stir of energy that goes into locating or discovering the point of shared understanding. Sometimes there might be, as Gadamer implies, an unconscious tweak to this interest, so that one keeps reading a text in view of the discovery. This is a familiar procedure when we find ourselves reading a text several times in order to get the point of the text.

In what looks like a test case of obscurantism which is demonstrated by Shackel,[61] Foucault constantly shifts grounds in his use of "truth." Shackel, who argues that Foucault's Humpty-Dumpty definition of truth denies the possibility of knowledge, sees it as an absurdity that promises depth and profundity while being a 'Motte and Bailey' doctrine. A 'Motte' doctrine is one that is desirable but only lightly defensible, while a 'Bailey' doctrine is

---

[60] Ibid., 294.
[61] Nicholas Shackel, "The Vacuity of Postmodernist Methodology," *Metaphilosophy*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (Apr., 2005): 295-320.

one that is defensible but undesirable.[62] Foucault, who sees truth as "a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements,"[63] proceeds by using it in several other ways that signal an incongruence not only with our normal understanding of truth, but also with his own definition. As a Humpty-Dumpty definition (in which the meaning is decided by the speaker), Foucault's use of truth does not coincide with its usual application; it disrupts the coherence of shared understanding. It exemplifies a form of obscurity, but the point is that even if that is the case, then one would likely continue reading the text the very same way people still read Foucault on truth. While admitting that there are "several different" and "multifaceted" ways in which Foucault uses "truth," C.G. Prado has tried to make sense of them by saying that Foucault has a pluralist view of truth.[64] This indicates the instability of his employment of the word. In spite of this unstable usage, a reader may find himself challenged to determine what Foucault probably means. What glues one to an obscure text involves a yearning to make connections, reconnections, repairs, or to fix unity in meaning.

Talking about verbal conversation, Gadamer mentions something more that happens besides the fixing of meaning – there is a "recurring temptation" to be involved with someone.[65] This seems to include the element of seduction or the yearning to continue. There is always a compelling urge to make sense of what is said or read. Thus, it is not only in written texts, but also in verbal conversation that one becomes seemingly lost in rapt attention to the unity of meaning.

At this juncture, we have explored the main points that Gadamer talks about when it comes to making sense of obscure pronouncements. In line with our objective of seeking solutions from both the continental and the analytic approaches to 20th (and 21st) century philosophy, we will now turn to the analytic approach. As indicated at the beginning of this chapter, Davidson's theory of interpretation is one of the most promising, not only because it sometimes deals with similar themes to Gadamer's hermeneutics, but also because its core

---

[62] This doctrine brings to mind our discussion of deepities.

[63] Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977* translated by Colin Gordon, Leo Marshal, John Mepham, and Kate Soper, edited by Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 133.

[64] C.G. Prado, *Searle and Foucault on Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 82.

[65] Gadamer, "Text and Interpretation," 163.

principle involves a natural and seemingly unavoidable step in every act of making sense of people. Davidson's theory is that of "radical interpretation."

3.4 RADICAL INTERPRETATION

Radical interpretation modifies another theory developed previously by Davidson's famous teacher, Willard Van Orman Quine, known as "radical translation."

Quine proposes the scenario of a field linguist who happens to be with a native. The linguist is a foreigner who arrives at an unknown place and meets the native. They both do not understand each other and have no interpreter either. The native speaks a language that is totally unknown to the linguist, call it Junglese. Suppose that they both see a rabbit scurry by, and the native says in Junglese: "Gavagai;" what could it mean to the linguist? According to Quine, it is possible for the linguist to set different translation manuals for the sentence Gavagai. The translation manuals will be compatible with different speech dispositions, but these are not compatible with one another. In other words, Gavagai can be translated using different theories that will all be correct according to different speech dispositions, but which do not have to be the same line or form of translation. Accordingly, "Gavagai" could mean something like "Lo, that is a rabbit," but it could also mean a rabbit part, rabbit stage, or rabbit fusion.[66] All translations would be correct, according to Quine. What this means is that the translation of 'Gavagai' is indeterminate.

From there, Quine takes another step. According to him, since translation is indeterminate, meaning itself is also indeterminate. Thus, we cannot say exactly what the native speaker means when she utters "Gavagai" for she could mean that they just saw a rabbit, or a part of a rabbit, or that they saw a rabbit stage.[67] We cannot know if she means to talk about a part of the rabbit like its tail or its hair, and we do not know if she is talking about its size or appearance. The possibilities are many, and would all be correct. This is the theory of the indeterminacy of meaning, but do all of these thoughts have to go on in the linguist's mind? Of course not, but Quine says that although the linguist may be sensible enough to pick "Rabbit" as the meaning of the sentence "Gavagai," this does not remove the problem of

---

[66] See Willard van Orman Quine, *Word and Object* (USA: The Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1960), 51-52.
[67] Nothing still removes the possibility that the native could be asking the linguist a question like "Gavagai?" which could mean, in Quine's terms, "Was that a rabbit?" She could equally be (who knows?) addressing the rabbit by saying "Stop scurrying around here" or merely soliloquizing thus, "I don't really like rabbits."

indeterminacy. It is no more than a maxim that settles something objectively indeterminate. From the indeterminacy of meaning, Quine moved to the inscrutability of reference. Quine came to this doctrine on the basis of the fact that our scientific theories are underdetermined by empirical data.[68] This underdetermination thesis holds that the evidence available to us is usually insufficient for us to be able to determine the beliefs that we need to hold concerning a specific scientific theory. In a popular example, I may know that you have 15 euros, and that you went to buy pears and kiwis. Since a pear costs 2 euros and a kiwi 3 euros, I know that you could not have bought 6 kiwis, but I do not know whether you bought 3 kiwis and 3 pears, or 1 kiwi and 5 pears or so. Thus the theory is underdetermined by the data.[69] What happens here is that my knowledge is underdetermined by the facts available, thereby making me unable to capture all of the possible options, or as Quine puts it, the observational conditionals are infinite, so I am unable to capture them in a finite formulation.[70] Although these doctrines greatly influenced Quine's student, what Davidson undertook was a different task since he did not set out to investigate the determination of meaning by empirical data, but rather the a priori requirements for interpreting (not merely translating) the meaning of another language. Their methodologies (Quine's and Davidson's), though, are similar, and both are radical since they start with unknown languages.[71]

Davidson was not the only one who wrote about radical interpretation. The year after Davidson's article "Radical Interpretation" was published, David Lewis also wrote an article with the same title.[72] Lewis's account has to do with knowing the meaning of an utterance by someone, Karl, who speaks her language when we, the interpreter, have no knowledge not only of Karl's language, but also of Karl's beliefs, desires, and intentions, so we start from scratch. Lewis discusses six principles that constrain the interpreter in making sense of Karl's

---

[68] I have discussed this and other reasons in the paper: "Referential Inscrutability: Pointing as a Cognitive Scientific Response," presented to the Centre for Logic and Philosophy of Science, Institute of Philosophy, KU Leuven, supervised by Professor Jan Heylen, June 2016.

[69] See A.W. Moore, "The Underdetermination/Indeterminacy Distinction and the Analytic/Synthetic Distinction," *Erkenntnis*, Vol. 46, No. 1 (Jan., 1997): 5-32. See also Ian McDiarmid, "Underdetermination and Meaning Indeterminacy: What is the Difference?" *Erkenntnis,* Vol. 69, No. 3 (Nov. 2008): 279-93.

[70] Quine, "On Empirically Equivalent Systems of the World," *Erkenntnis,* Vol. 9, No. 3 (Nov., 1975): 313-328 [324].

[71] Quine and Davidson both start with unknown languages, but they both somehow include known languages too. While discussing the inscrutability of reference, Quine says at some point that it applies to speakers of the same language, and even to ourselves. See Quine, "Ontological Relativity," *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 65, No. 7 (Apr. 4, 1968): 185-212 [199-200]. Similarly, Davidson, after talking about interpreting from one language to another, suggests that all sorts of communicative exchange, even between speakers of the same language, involve radical interpretation, see "Radical Interpretation," 125.

[72] David Lewis, "Radical Interpretation," *Synthese*, Vol. 27, No. 3/4 (1974): 331-344.

utterance. Among the principles is also the main principle that was mentioned by Davidson previously – the principle of charity.

In addition to the article entitled "Radical Interpretation," Davidson has a number of other articles grouped together under the same title in his collection of articles on interpretation. The one thread that runs through all of those articles and which seems to be at the core of his entire theory of interpretation is the principle of charity. Thus, the principle of charity seems to emerge as the kernel of interpretation in Davidson's terms. He says that every successful interpretation is enabled by this principle, and that rather than the other way round, it is radical interpretation which depends on charity.[73] This principle, thus, seems quite promising for interpretation and understanding, and deserves to be explored further. Before saying any more about this principle, however, we will take a closer look at Davidson's theory of meaning, focusing on its novelty and underlying motivations.

3.4.1 DAVIDSON'S THEORY OF MEANING

The question for which Davidson sought an answer, and which therefore motivates his radical interpretation project, is stated in the introduction to his *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*: "What is it for words to mean what they do?"[74] Thus, his project investigates how to account for the meaning of an utterance, or better, how to interpret an utterance. Take it that we knew, for example, that:

(1) The words "It's raining" mean that it is raining.

If it is a sincere piece of knowledge, then we could add something to it. We could say:

(2) 'It's raining' is true.

At this point, we have two important elements – meaning in (1) and truth in (2). How might they be combined? This principle will certainly help:

(3) If a sentence S is true and S means that p, then p.

The belief that it is raining is justified by the knowledge that (1) - (3). Here, it is not so much the reliability of the speaker as the information available to the hearer and how the world

---

[73] Davidson, "Radical Interpretation Interpreted," *Philosophical Perspectives*, Vol. 8 Logic and Language (1994): 121-128 [122].
[74] Idem., *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984*),* xiii. Hereafter ITI.

impinges upon him that matters. Knowledge of meaning also plays little or no role. Instead, what seems important is knowing the conditions under which the utterance "It's raining" is true. These conditions enable the hearer to move from the utterance to the belief that it is raining. But if that is the case, then (1) and (3) could be replaced with (1'):

(1') The words "It's raining" are true in English (when uttered to me) if and only if it is raining around me at the time of utterance.

Thus, without appealing to meanings, one can believe that it is raining based on the knowledge that (1') - (2).[75] What the Davidsonian position rather appeals to is truth conditions. If we know the conditions under which an utterance is true, then we can understand the utterance. Davidson's novelty consists in developing a theory of meaning by making use of truth conditions instead of meanings. He states that what he calls a theory of meaning happens to make no use of meanings.[76] Perhaps a relevant question at this time would have to do with why Davidson prefers truth to meaning.

Davidson prefers truth to meaning because meaning is intentional. Redescribing an utterance by using the words "means that" enmeshes us in the speaker's intentional springs,[77] that is, it makes understanding simply a discovery of what a speaker has in mind. Davidson classifies not only Mead and Dewey, but also Wittgenstein and Grice as examples of people who have explained linguistic meaning in terms of intentions,[78] and Davidson insists that any interpretation of speech that is done on the basis of "a prior identification of non-linguistic purposes or intensions" would be grossly inadequate.[79] What it amounts to is that an interpreter cannot understand an utterance without knowing a speaker's intentions and beliefs. In Davidson's terms, a good theory of meaning or interpretation should be based on evidence that can be described in non-semantic terms. This would be the way to achieve the

---

[75] I have adapted a variant of Ernest LePore's presentation here. See "Introduction." In *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the philosophy of Donald Davidson* edited by Ernest LePore (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1986), 6.
[76] Davidson, "Truth and Meaning." In ITI, 19-36 [24].
[77] Ibid., 22.
[78] Idem., "Belief and the Basis of Meaning." In ITI, 141-154 [143].
[79] Idem., "The Structure and Content of Truth," *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 87, No. 6 (Jun., 1990): 297-328 [315-316].

interpretation of intentions, beliefs, and words (utterance) as one project, no part of which can be achieved without the others.[80]

The sketch so far has neither given details about why Davidson prefers truth, nor has it shown how he conceives the simultaneous delivery of the various attitudes. We will look at these and his other underlying considerations with regard to interpretation in the following sub-section.

3.4.2 UNDERLYING CONSIDERATIONS REGARDING RADICAL INTERPRETATION

One leading characteristic of Davidson's philosophy of language is the idea of language being compositional in structure. Compositionality, according to which the meaning of a complex expression is determined by the meanings of its parts and its mode of composition,[81] demonstrates Davidson's commitment to the position that language can be systematically analyzed, which links us with an ancient philosophical reflection on language. Consider the expression "Theaetetus sits," for example. It can be understood to express the fact that Theaetetus sits, but what would "Theaetetus flies" express, since he does not fly? For Plato, there is no fact meant since what "Theaetetus flies" expresses does not exist. From a Parmenidean point of view, also, whatever 'is not' does not exist. In that case, it can only be said that "Theaetetus flies" expresses nothing. Yet, in uttering those words, one really seems to be saying something. This is the paradox of false propositions that Plato discussed.[82] According to Plato, there is a difference between a sentence's being meaningful and its being true. "Theaetetus flies" is meaningful, but false. There is also a difference between a complex sentence like "Theaetetus flies" and a simple semantic primitive like "Theaetetus" or "flies." As a semantic primitive, "flies," for example, is meaningful, but its parts: "f", "l", "s" etc., are not; they have only a phonic value by representing sounds. Next, Plato matches the semantic primitives with objects, which facilitates proper analysis and clarifies how a sentence can be both meaningful and false. Thus, the noun "Theaetetus" is identified with the man Theaetetus and the verb "flies" with the property of flying.

Plato's analysis of complex expressions was clarified by Frege who described the structure of language by showing how the rules of composition enable us to compose a

---

[80] Idem., "Radical Interpretation." In ITI, 125-139 [127].
[81] Kathrin Glüer, *Donald Davidson: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 35.
[82] Plato, *Sophist*, 259d-261c; *Theaetetus*, 187c-189b. In *The Being of the Beautiful: Plato's Theaetetus, Sophist and Statesman* translated and with commentary by Seth Benardete (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

complex expression by affixing a numeral to a simple numeral.[83] Stringing the simple numerals "4" and "1" together by affixing "4" to the left of "1," for example, generates "41" which is complex. Similarly, "Theaetetus" and "sits" are used to compose "Theaetetus sits" just as "Socrates" and "stands" compose "Socrates stands." Knowing that the structure of the sentence "Theaetetus sits or Socrates stands" is a disjunction, and knowing the meanings of the disjuncts (Theaetetus sits, Socrates stands) guarantees the meaning of the disjunction.[84] Thus, Davidson holds that if we know the structure of a sentence and the meaning of its parts, then we can understand the sentence.[85]

Extension, or the need for external justification, is also important to Davidson's project. We have already noted above that Davidson finds meaning less attractive for a theory of interpretation than truth, the reason being that meaning is intentional. Therefore, he chooses extension over and against intention. To show how he develops this position, it would be useful to analyze his switch from meaning sentences to T-sentences. An example of a meaning or an M-sentence is the following:

(4) "Sneeuw is wit" means that snow is white.

When this is stated to show the relation between a Dutch sentence and its truth-conditions, we have a T-sentence:

(5) "Sneeuw is wit" is true$_{DUTCH}$ if and only if snow is white.

T-sentences were used by Alfred Tarski in his article *The Concept of Truth in Formalized Languages.* There, T-sentences were taken to be true because the right-hand side of the biconditional was a translation of the left-hand side, whose truth conditions were given.[86] Davidson adopted Tarski's recursive T-sentences with certain adjustments.[87] First, while Tarski set out to achieve a definition of truth, Davidson wants a theory and not a definition of truth. Second, Tarski worked with formal languages, but Davidson deals with natural language and so makes his theory relative to times and speakers in order to accommodate

---

[83] Actually, the rule states that affixing a simple numeral to the left of a numeral is a numeral. See Marc Joseph, *Donald Davidson: Philosophy Now* (Chesham: Acumen Publishing Limited, 2004), 13ff.

[84] See Ibid. for further explanation.

[85] Davidson, "Radical Interpretation," 130; "Theories of Meaning and Learnable Languages." In ITI, 3-15 [8].

[86] Idem, "Radical Interpretation," 134. For Tarski's work, see Alfred Tarski, *Logic, Semantics, Mathematics: Papers from 1923-1938* translated by J.H. Woodger (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), 152-278.

[87] See Idem, "Belief and the Basis of Meaning," 149-150.

natural language elements. Third, Tarski's T-sentences were tested by their syntax, but Davidson's theory is tested by the evidence of holding true. Moreover, Davidson's theory accounts for the indexicals of natural languages (tenses, for example) by relativising to time and speaker. Thus, Davidson announces his inversion of Tarski by saying that whereas Tarski assumed the notion of translation in order to throw light on that of truth, he assumes a partial understanding of truth in order to throw light on the notion of translation.[88] This further confirms Davidson's involvement in exploring interpretation rather than truth. Some of these points will be clearer as we proceed with the analysis of (5).

Our T-sentence, (5), contains description of a sentence in the object language which is translated into a sentence in the metalanguage, and the connective "if and only if," which creates a biconditional statement which is true just in case the two sentences flanking the biconditional are extensionally equivalent, that is, both true or both false. In (5) our object language is made clear by adding 'Dutch' as a subscript to the truth predicate "is true." It, therefore, reads that "Sneeuw is wit" is true (in Dutch) if and only if snow is white. The subscript is not a variable, so it must be part of the truth predicate. The reason for this is that there has to be a truth predicate for every language since a sentence can be true in one language and not in another. As an example, let us consider the sequence of words:

(6) em.ped.ə.klēz lēpt,

a sentence which has different truth conditions in different languages. On the one hand, it could be a sentence that is true in English if and only if Empedocles leapt, as he is said to have done on the top of Mount Etna when he died. On the other hand, (6) could also be a sentence that is true in German (given the sound of the German word *liebt*) if and only if Empedocles loves.[89] Clearly, if the languages are switched, (6) will cease to be true. The metalanguage is, according to the theory, a translation of the object language, and is written without quotation marks. Furthermore, the biconditional connective "if and only if" allows that in a situation where p is true if and only if q, and q is true if and only if r, then p is true if and only if r. This is extensional, but it also has issues associated with transitivity, issues to which we will return. Meanwhile, in making sense of (5), for example, the interpreter neither

---

[88] Idem, "Reply to Foster." In ITI, 171-179 [173]. What Davidson does by applying the notion of "is true" to natural language is something that Tarski never dared investigating because he saw it to be marked by "insuperable difficulties." See Tarski, *Logic, Semantics, Mathematics*, 164.

[89] Idem, "On Saying That." In ITI, 93-108 [98].

mentions the intentions of the speaker of "Sneeuw is wit," nor of his own intention. All he does is state the conditions under which it is true. This means that he relates it to the world, not to the intention or meaning supposed by the speaker.

While the relationship to the world which in this case involves stating the conditions under which a statement is true, demonstrates that the agent is engaged in interpretation and not mere translation, the fact that he has no knowledge of what the speaker of "Sneeuw is wit" means makes it *radical*. He interprets the utterance with no knowledge of meanings, beliefs, and desires of the speaker, and even with no knowledge of the speaker's language. How is this possible? According to Davidson, the interpreter holds a speaker's sentence to be true or accepts it as true. The interpreter does this just when the speaker holds her sentence to be true.[90] The evidence is that he is able to decipher that the speaker wants to convey information or to make an honest assertion. In these cases, the speaker utters true sentences,[91] thereby holding that "It's raining" is true when and only when it is raining. Holding-true is the major but not the only attitude used while interpreting radically; wishing true, wanting to make true, etc., are attitudes the evidence of which "may be summed up in terms of holding [the] sentences to be true," according to Davidson.[92] However, the attitude is non-individuative[93] in the sense that the interpreter holds the speaker's utterance to be true without knowing either what the words mean or what the speaker's intention and beliefs are.

A hitherto unmentioned element of Davidson's theory of interpretation is rationality. In his book, *What is this thing Called Knowledge?* Duncan Pritchard illustrates rationality with a man who is being pursued by an angry mob, and whose only available means of escape is by jumping over a ravine. If he does not jump over the ravine, then he will be caught by the angry mob, but in making up his mind to jump, he does not have to dwell on the dangers (for example, he could fall while making the leap) since that might affect his successfully jumping the ravine. Instead, he has to believe that he can make it, and must convince himself to

---

[90] A corollary line of argument insists that truth-conditional semantics does not go without non-truth-conditional semantics. That is to say that in talking about linguistic meaning, some expressions are meaningful thanks to their truth-conditions, but in the same expressions there are elements which remain meaningful independent of truth conditions. See Corinne Iten, *Linguistic Meaning, Truth Conditions and Relevance: The Case of Concessives* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 2ff. This was, however, not Davidson's project whose focus here is to develop a semantics anchored on truth-conditions.
[91] Idem, "Thought and Talk." In ITI, 155-170 [161].
[92] Idem, "Radical Interpretation," 135.
[93] Joseph, *Donald Davidson: Philosophy Now,* 56.

embark on the jump. Though non-epistemic, this is rationality, according to Pritchard,[94] since the man considers various elements like the furious mob, the ravine, his abilities, etc., and finally convinces himself. Davidson's emphasis on rationality probably takes its influence from decision theory, especially as articulated by Frank Ramsey.[95] According to Ramsey, while someone can feel certain about certain statements (that the sun will rise in the morning, for example), one feels less certain about the right route to one's destination when one is at the crossroads in an unfamiliar terrain. The way the person is prepared to act demonstrates the degree to which she believes or doubts the option she makes up her mind to take. That is, the extent to which the person asks questions shows her degree of doubt, while the extent to which she moves confidently ahead without asking questions shows her degree of belief that she is on the right path. It follows, thus, that the degree of an agent's belief that p is the measure of the agent's disposition so that were it the case that p, the agent's desires would be realized. What shows rationality here is the extent to which an agent's choices or preferences consistently work towards the possible realization of her desires. In order to find an intelligible pattern in an agent's utterance and behavior, we *presuppose* that the agent acts rationally, a presupposition that constrains our interpretation of the agent. To this Davidson adds an influence from Quine who says that when it comes to linguistics one cannot but be a behaviorist.[96] Thus, for Davidson, an interpreter makes use of a speaker's utterance, observable circumstances, and the speaker's holding-true attitude.

Davidson is a holist when it comes to beliefs. That is, he holds that there are no isolated beliefs; instead, beliefs are linked to and justified by other beliefs. For example, one who believes that it is raining will also believe that rain pours downwards from the sky, that it wets the ground and, if there is a lot of it the ground will be flooded, that someone who wants to go outside while it is raining will need an umbrella, and so on. When belief is held true, the meaning can be solved for. Belief and meaning are so interlocked that they must be investigated together. While being sure of neither, one is held true and the other is worked out.[97] As a matter of fact, all three concepts: belief, meaning, and truth are interconnected. Davidson states: "I assume that there are inescapable and obvious ties among the concepts of

---

[94] Duncan Pritchard, *What is this thing called Knowledge?* (London-New York: Routledge, 2006), 47.

[95] See Frank Plumpton Ramsey, *Foundations of Mathematics and other Logical Essays* edited by R.B. Braithwaite (London-New York: Routledge, 1931 [2001]).

[96] Quine, *Pursuit of Truth* (USA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 38.

[97] Davidson, "Belief and the Basis of Meaning," 134.

truth, belief and meaning. If a sentence s of mine means that P, and I believe that P, then I believe that s is true. What gives my belief its content, and my sentence its meaning, is my knowledge of what is required for the belief or the sentence to be true. Since belief and truth are related in this way, belief can serve as the human attitude that connects a theory of truth to human concerns."[98] This relation of truth to the concepts of belief and meaning also represents Davidson's difference from Ramsey's *redundancy theory of truth.*[99] Since meaning is worked out and not inserted in an utterance by a speaker, it becomes clearly intersubjective in Davidson's terms.[100] This brings us to the principle that makes interpretation possible according to Davidson: *the principle of charity*.

Davidson does not specifically define the principle of charity in his writings, but he does sufficiently explain it. In his later writings, he presents it as a twofold principle made up of coherence and correspondence. The principle of coherence enables an interpreter to notice logical consistency in a speaker's thought patterns, what Davidson terms "a modicum of logic."[101] This assumes that the speaker is reasonable, and speaks according to the basic laws of logic. The speaker does not have to be aware of this, it is expected in any normal conversation. Logical consistency requires, for example, that one does not, at the same time, assent to a statement like "*p* and not-*p*," while knowing that such is the case. It is only against this background of rationality, Davidson insists, that irrationality can be made sense of.[102] Irrationality is itself a perturbation, rather than the absence of reason.[103] In addition to coherence is the principle of correspondence which assumes that the speaker is responding to

---

[98] Idem., "Epistemology and Truth." In *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001),177-191 [189].

[99] Before Tarski's "Concept of Truth in Formalized Languages", Frank Ramsey wrote his "Facts and Propositions" in which he argued that "It is true that Caesar was murdered" means the same as "Caesar was murdered," and "It is true that Caesar was not murdered" means the same as "Caesar was not murdered." Thus, the sentence "s is true" is equivalent to "s". It is therefore more economical to say "s" than to say "s is true." See Ramsey, "Facts and Propositions." In *Foundations of Mathematics and other Logical Essays,* 138-155. That is the sense in which the truth predicate is described as being redundant. Tarski kept the truth predicate in his definition of truth. What Davidson does is keep "is true" in his theory of interpretation and also to link it with other concepts. The redundancy theory is also termed by Quine "the disappearance theory of truth." See Quine, "Where do we Disagree?" In *The Philosophy of Donald Davidson* edited by Lewis Edwin Hahn (USA: Open Court Publishing Company, 1999), 73-79 [77]. In a recent publication, however, it has been argued that Ramsey personally rejected the so-called redundancy theory of truth; See María José Frápoli*, The Nature of Truth: An Updated Approach to the Meaning of Truth Ascriptions* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013), 112ff.

[100] Glüer, *Donald Davidson: A Short Introduction,* 18.

[101] Davidson, "Three Varieties of Knowledge." In *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 205-220 [211].

[102] Idem., "Incoherence and Irrationality," *Dialectica*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (1985): 345-354.

[103] Ernest Lepore and Kirk Ludwig, "Donald Davidson," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy,* Vol. XXVIII (2004): 309-333 [315]. Christopher Gauker, "The Principle of Charity," *Synthese*, Vol. 69, No. 1 (Oct.1986): 1-25 [3].

features in the world that the interpreter, were he the speaker, would be responding to in much the same way. This is to say that the interpreter invests the speaker with mostly true beliefs about her environment, true beliefs that correspond to what he (the interpreter) knows about the world. A speaker who while about taking a walk, steps out and makes the utterance "It's raining," for example, would be expected to take an umbrella along if she would continue with her plan of taking a walk in the neighborhood. The interpreter assumes that the speaker's world is like his, where one who goes out in the rain without an umbrella gets drenched, thus he invests the speaker with this presupposition. All of the speaker's beliefs need not correspond to the interpreter's, and they do not all need to be true beliefs, but there has to be a basic agreement to enhance getting along with the world.[104] So the principle of charity is about reason and true beliefs that an interpreter assigns to a speaker while working out the meaning of an utterance, in order to arrive at understanding.

Having touched upon the major components of Davidson's theory of radical interpretation, we can now take a further look at some of its implications as well as some of the reactions thereto.

3.4.3 FURTHER REFLECTION ON RADICAL INTERPRETATION

We will begin with the explanation of Davidson's use of T-sentences, which we indicated previously. Recall

(5) "Sneeuw is wit" is true$_{DUTCH}$ if and only if snow is white.

We stated that given that p is true if and only if q, and q is true if and only if r, then p is true if and only if r. This can be fleshed out thus: given that "Sneeuw is wit" is true$_{DUTCH}$ if and only if snow is white; and snow is white if and only if grass is green, then "Sneeuw is wit" is true$_{DUTCH}$ if and only if grass is green. In this case,

(7) "Sneeuw is wit" is true$_{DUTCH}$ if and only if grass is green

would be true because "Grass is green" is materially equivalent to "Snow is white"; logically, they are both true. This has been used to discredit aspects of Davidson's theory of radical

---

[104] See Robert Sinclair, "A Less Radical Interpretation of Davidson and Quine," *Dialogue,* Vol. 45, No. 1 (Dec.2006): 107-124 [109].

interpretation,[105] but Davidson was not oblivious to this situation. In fact, he made the conditions of interpretation clear. According to Davidson, an entailment of a truth theorem has to be interpretive. (7) is not interpretive since "grass is green" is not a translation of "Sneeuw is wit." Normally, it is required that the metalanguage translate the object language, that is, that it state its truth conditions in such a way that can be taken to specify its meaning. It should meet the schema's demands

(8) s is $true_L$ if and only if p

where *p* is the metalanguage translation of *s*. In (7), the metalanguage does not translate the object language, as such it cannot support counterfactual claims. Recall also that an interpreter makes sense of a speaker on the basis of the evidence available to him, so he holds the speaker to be true because the speaker first holds herself to be true. Moreover, looking to the world is important in Davidson's account.

Related to this is Jane Heal's reference to unacceptable claims about the indeterminacy of meaning entailed by Davidson's theory. According to Heal, radical interpretation depicts one as knowing many non-semantic facts with no semantic facts, whereas thinking begins in a world of both semantic and non-semantic facts.[106] Heal's dissatisfaction with the indeterminacy of meaning is not much different from the Norwegian philosopher Olav Gjelsvik's reservations about what he calls Davidson's quite standard conception of the evidence available to the third person perspective, a conception that allows for an underdetermination of content.[107] Davidson acknowledges the indeterminacy issue and states that it does not pose serious objections given that each possible interpretation functions like a measurement scale, and the interpreter chooses a particular interpretation the way we choose between the Fahrenheit and Centigrade scales. If anything, it shows how certain distinctions are more significant than others.[108] In Davidson's terms, meaning is not a determinate object to be identified without an agent's attitudes and action. This is why radical interpretation

---

[105] Among others, see Glüer, *Donald Davidson: A Short Introduction;* Peter Pagin, "Radical Interpretation and the Principle of Charity." In *A Companion to Donald Davidson* edited by Ernie Lepore and Kirk Ludwig (UK: Willey Blackwell, 2013), 225-246.

[106] Jane Heal, "Radical Interpretation." In *A Companion to the Philosophy of Language* edited by Bob Hale and Crispin Wright (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 175-196 [178]. Heal's other criticism that radical interpretation starts where it is not radical, together with her proposal that it be applied to giant octopuses and superbeings, has been responded to by Marc Joseph. See Joseph, *Donald Davidson Philosophy Now*, 54.

[107] Olav Gjelsvik, "Knowledge and Error: A New Approach to Radical Interpretation." In *Donald Davidson on Truth and the Mental* edited by Gerhard Preyer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 167-191.

[108] Davidson, "Belief and the Basis of Meaning," 154; "Radical Interpretation," 139.

delivers a unified theory of belief and meaning, in which one can hardly be certain of the one without the other. Meaning is not something that a speaker determines but is instead a result of an interaction between speaker and interpreter. In this sense, some degree of indeterminacy is understandable, and that is the reason for trade-offs.

Several other observations have been made about aspects of Davidson's theory, and while Davidson has personally responded to some of them, others have received responses in a huge body of other literature.[109] I will proceed by taking a first step towards characterizing Davidson's theory quite in line with how we make sense of others, after which we will take a look at Gadamer and Davidson together.

The agreements and disagreements with Davidson's theory are quite understandable, but a good grasp of how charity works might help his readers to appreciate it better. Davidson's point is that the statement "Snow is white" has both truth value and content. An interpreter needs to grasp these two features, but in order to know the content or meaning, Davidson allows a bias for truth. At the same time, he is mindful of what might have prompted the assertion and how things are in the world. The bias for truth allows the interpreter to take the speaker to hold her utterance to be true. That is, the interpreter takes the utterance to express the speaker's true belief, which the interpreter checks alongside his own beliefs about the world (whether snow is normally white, for example). This deciphering rests on the presupposition that there cannot be a huge discrepancy between what the speaker and the interpreter take to be the case. The interpreter's point of view both sheds light on and

---

[109] Davidson has responded to concerns raised by individual scholars in *The Philosophy of Donald Davidson* edited by Hahn. A fierce exchange took place following Davidson scholars Ernie Lepore and Kirk Ludwig's publication of *Donald Davidson: Meaning, Truth, Language and Reality* in 2005, and Frederick Stoutland's description of their position as a misinterpretation of Davidson. Stoutland's disagreements with Lepore and Ludwig, as well as the duo's responses, are collected in *Donald Davidson: Life and Works* edited by Maria Baghramian (USA-Canada: Routledge, 2013). For other reactions to Davidson's theory, see Jonathan Ellis, "The Relevance of Radical Interpretation." Forthcoming in *The Hermeneutic Davidson* edited by J. Malpas (MIT Press), https://philpapers.org/rec/ELLTRO-2 [Retrieved March 21, 2019]; Colin McGinn, "Charity, Interpretation, and Belief," *The Journal of Philosophy* Vol. 74, No. 9 (Sept., 1977): 521-535; Bruce Vermazen, "General Beliefs and the Principle of Charity," *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition,* Vol. 42, No. 1 (Jul., 1982):111-118; Richard Grandy, "Reference, Meaning and Belief," *The Journal of Philosophy* Vol. 70, No. 14 On Reference (Aug. 16, 1973): 439-452; Gareth Fitzgerald, "Charity and Humanity in the Philosophy of Language," *Praxis,* Vol. 1, No. 2 (Autumn 2008): 17-29; Stephen Mulhall, "Davidson on Interpretation and Understanding," *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 148 (Jul., 1987): 319-322; William Taschek, "Making Sense of Others: Donald Davidson on Interpretation," *The Harvard Review of Philosophy*, Vol. 10 (2002): 27-40; Rita Manning, "A More Charitable Principle of Charity" *Journal of Informal Logic*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (1983): 20-21; Kevin J. Porter, "A Pedagogy of Charity: Donald Davidson and a Student-Negotiated Composition Classroom," *Composition and Communication*, Vol. 52, No. 4 (Jun., 2001): 574-611.

serves as evidence for knowing what the speaker's words mean. Ultimately, the interpreter forms the hypothesis that "Snow is white" is true if and only if (that is, 'means that') snow is white. This hypothesis is revisable in the course of interlocution, should the need arise.

A look at Davidson's theory seems to reveal that what he lays out is, in fact, what usually happens in life. We take speakers, our interlocutors to be saying the truth, and only later do we start becoming critical. Thus, Davidson's theory is a rational reconstruction of a very natural disposition. In reconstructing the principles that guide this natural disposition, Davidson focuses more on the rational aspect, thereby losing sight of the more natural part, as I will suggest in the following chapter. All in all, radical interpretation is not a blueprint of how interpretation should be carried out and it does not claim to describe how we usually interpret. Davidson says: "The point of the theory is not to describe how we actually interpret, but to speculate on what it is about thought and language that makes them interpretable."[110]

3.5 UNIFYING GADAMER AND DAVIDSON ON INTERPRETATION

Two main tasks will occupy us in this section. The first will be an attempt to highlight important elements in the theories of Gadamer and Davidson while the second will be to touch upon some other elements that have not yet been discussed. At the end of this examination, a model will be adopted for the interpretation of obscure pronouncements.

3.5.1 GADAMER AND DAVIDSON

The "hermeneutic principle" captures a key point of the hermeneutic circle, viz. that the meaning of the parts of what is to be interpreted is determined by the meaning of the whole, and vice versa. Appropriating this, Gadamer says that once an initial meaning becomes apparent, a reader anticipates what the content of the entire text might be. This is the standard way of making sense of a text. For Davidson, an interpreter must not have such anticipation. On the contrary, he has no knowledge of meanings and beliefs, and these have to be worked out. These 'unknowns' compel the interpreter to start from scratch thereby making interpretation 'radical.'

Something that is also related to the attainment of meaning is what Gadamer calls the anticipation of perfection or the perfect unity of meaning, which concerns the fact that

---

[110] Davidson, "Could There be a Science of Rationality?" *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (1995): 1-16 [10].

understanding is only possible where there is a unity of meaning. In making sense of a piece of writing, one expects or anticipates certain elements related to the subject or scheme in question. This does not seem far removed from his assumption that we need to approach the new text while retaining our prejudices, *i.e.* our antecedent beliefs. If something not in line with the expected data is found, then one must take time to crosscheck this in the text. In Davidson, an interpreter does not have any specific expectations other than that the speaker's beliefs are mostly true. The interpreter invests the speaker with rationality and truth, and then solves for meaning. In this sense, Davidson's theory could also be seen as one of meaning-fixation. Gadamer's theory would then be a disturbance-fixation theory since he says in "The Universality of the Hermeneutic Problem" that an "I" and a "Thou" cannot have a misunderstanding but only a disturbance of understanding. Interestingly, Gadamer says that the key to solving this disturbance is through a method of *psychological empathy*, which though not unpacked, sounds quite close to what Davidson calls the *principle of charity*, the very principle that makes radical interpretation possible and which advises the interpreter to invest the speaker with the aforementioned attitudes. They must be different, though, since Gadamer does not dwell on this method of psychological empathy, unlike Davidson who writes several articles discussing the principle of charity.

While Gadamer allows that interpretation is an exercise applied to something which is already somehow understood, Davidson takes it to be an exercise that consists of making sense of a series of utterances that one does not yet understand. While the process of interpretation is itself interminable in Gadamer, Davidson suggests in the introduction to *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* that it leads to understanding. According to Gadamer, interpretation involves the fusion of two horizons: that of the reader and that of the text. As an interpretation that focuses principally on texts, Gadamer may be understood as suggesting that the important elements include what the text says and what sense the reader or interpreter is able to make of it. It is basically an effort at relating the text to one's antecedent beliefs. The text's language, culture, and time as well as those of the reader interact to produce genuine interpretation. Of course, the horizon of the text touches upon the author, but this is hardly really emphasized beyond indicating that interpretation is a fundamental human endowment. In Davidson's account (and this focuses principally on interlocution), it is reason, truth, and belief that interact to make sense of an utterance. This, however, includes both the speaker and the interpreter, since the interpreter holds beliefs to be true because the speaker does

likewise. Davidson's project centers around the meaning of words, and it is an exploration of what it takes to understand others.

They both agree about truth's importance, just as they do about the fact that meaning does not depend on one person alone. For Gadamer, meaning does not depend only on the author's intention since the horizon of the text also has to be confronted with that of the reader. For Davidson, meaning does not depend solely on what the speaker says since the hearer has to check the attitudes and the world. Since, therefore, both theories acknowledge the role of the audience in the art of sense-making, it can be said that there is something social in them. Furthermore, human nature is the basis of agreement in Gadamer, while in Davidson there is an agreement about the principles on which speaker and interpreter come to understand each other. In both cases, meaning is more than personal. Even though Gadamer dwells on the text, not its author, he says that the author's intention (traceable in the text) is not all that is needed. Davidson, for his part, treats sense-making as attainable in the course of conversation between speaker and interpreter.

As we saw earlier, Gadamer and Davidson come from two different traditions, and though they write about the same thing, they use different styles. It, therefore, seems difficult to merge them together. Moreover, Gadamer and Davidson had quite different projects. Gadamer was concerned with what goes wrong when we think between objectivism and relativism and when we fashion a way of understanding that reveals that using the concepts of objectivism and relativism distorts our being-in-the-world.[111] Gadamer's hermeneutics seems to prioritize the message, that is, the result of fusing the world of the text and that of the reader. It seems concerned with finding the deeper meaning of a text. This may offer some insight into its wide application in biblical theology where the author pens down God's word and where the speaker is God, undoubtedly. Conversely, Davidson's theory, which had to do with the meaning of words in everyday communication,[112] requires interaction between the speaker and the interpreter. The speaker's beliefs guide those of the interpreter who has to weigh the speaker's own beliefs alongside his and the world. Of course, the speaker is invested with reason and truth, but also with the possibility for error. A question to which we will return is whether this verbal communication strategy can be applied to texts or not.

---

[111] See Richard I. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 115.

[112] See Glüer, *Donald Davidson: A Short Introduction,* 17.

Meanwhile, we will turn our attention to some other elements that play a key role in interpretation.

3.5.2 LOW-LEVEL PROCESSES AND EPISTEMIC VIGILANCE

Apart from deep epistemic and metaphysical elements like knowledge, belief, rationality, truth and the like, interpretation is usually aided by certain low-level elements. 'Level' refers to how cognitively simple or complex an inference or agent is, and what epistemological standards are brought to bear upon it.[113] Some low-level elements are discussed in philosophy, but most of them are examined in psychology. Since they are not totally absent in the materials reviewed, we will begin with their role in radical interpretation. Gjelsvik argues that radical interpretation is interested in the fact that a speaker S sees, hears, smells, etc. because they not only impact on assent and dissent, but also play a role in the formation of interpretive hypothesis.[114] These instances, which Gjelsvik calls "simple attributions," seem to touch on not only what is basic to utterances (hearing), but also what could be linked to the behavioral in Davidson. Gadamer also makes reference to tone of voice, gestures, and the social situation, but he sees them as indicators pointing to the fact that a face-to-face discussion is a joke.[115] This falls within his discussion of antitexts (that is, "forms of discourse that oppose or resist being a text in the usual sense ..."[116]) and has no core place in his discussion of interpretation. The sweeping away of voice, tone and gestures as joke indicators, however, sounds too simplistic because they indeed seem to contribute to the success of interlocution. Low-level elements in text interpretation do not emerge directly; they may be located among "a great many circumstances that do not appear in the text as such," but which play a role in its grasp.[117] As studies in language processing reveal, factors like turn-taking and rhythms, prosody or pauses, facial expression, eye-gaze, use of gestures, other bodily variables, and of

---

[113] See Hannes Leitgeb, *Inference on the Low Level: An Investigation into Deduction, Nonmonotonic Reasoning and the Philosophy of Cognition* (Dordrecht: Springer Science and Business Media, 2004), 1.

[114] Gjelsvik, "Knowledge and Error: A New Approach to Radical Interpretation," 174.

[115] Gadamer, "Text and Interpretation," 176.

[116] Ibid.

[117] Ibid., 170. A great many circumstances which do not appear in the text, but which play a role in our ability to grasp it, tend to pertain mainly to the reader's circumstances, but of course, there should be similar circumstances determining or constraining the writer. To stay with Gadamer, the circumstances that can affect the grasp of the text are varied. They might include emotional states like anger, excitement, shock or circumstances of reading like having to read hurriedly in search of an argument or criticism or because one has to meet a deadline, as against reading at a regular pace because one is enjoying it or really considers its content useful. Other circumstance may be more physical, having to do with the serenity of one's reading environment such as whether people are making a noise, or doing construction work and tractors are making noise, or whether the weather is very hot and discomforting; this also includes the position of the person reading, etc.

particular words and phrases influence the interpretation of a message.[118] Particularly, low-level processes like gaze and gaze-tracking complement high-level processes like knowledge and belief in language comprehension.[119] In the first chapter we observed the role played by low-level mindreading in the simulation theory as indicated by Goldman. We did refer to his theory as that of "face-based emotional recognition."[120] In social psychology and in the cognitive sciences, tone of voice, for example, has been said to indicate deception, but also dominance and submission.[121] In these, tone of voice seems more efficient than facial expression. Furthermore, our emotional tone of voice can bias the selection of word meaning, thereby having an impact on the processing of lexically ambiguous words.[122]

Harvey Sarles, University of Minnesota anthropologist, even widens the elements that we attend to in *vis-à-vis* (face-to-face) interactions. According to Sarles, many things happen at the same time in interlocution. We not only see and hear what the other says, we also notice changes in the dynamics of the mouth and eyes, we take note of skin, clothes, and the opening and closing of eyes and mouths, and even notice muscular changes.[123] Searles's insight is quite suggestive, since interlocutors do actually watch physical appearances and biological dynamics alongside locutionary progress. These factors may not all play an equal role in the processing of information, but they are not totally negligible either. If anything, the smile or frown on the face of an interlocutor, the coarseness or softness in the voice, and the change from one to the other of these may help to substantiate the pragmatic bent of hearers, as suggested by the University of Reading philosopher of language, Emma Borg.[124]

---

[118] David W. Vinson, Rick Dale, Maryam Tabatabaeian, and Nicholas D. Duran, "Seeing and Believing: Social Influences on Language Processing." In Attention and Vision in Language Processing edited by Ramesh Kumar Mishra, Narayanan Srinivasan, and Falk Huettig (India: Springer, 2015), 197-213 [209].

[119] Ibid., 198.

[120] Alvin I. Goldman, *Simulating Minds: The Philosophy, Psychology, and Neuroscience of Mindreading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 113.

[121] Miron Zuckerman, Mary D. Amidon, Shawn E. Bishop and Scott D. Formerantz, "Face and Tone of Voice in the communication of Deception," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (1982): 347-357.

[122] Lynne C. Nygaard and Erin R. Lunders, "Resolution of Lexical Ambiguity by Emotional Tone of Voice," *Memory and Cognition*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (2002): 583-593.

[123] Harvey B. Sarles, *Language and Human Nature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 201.

[124] Emma Borg, "Minimalism Versus Contextualism in Semantics." In *Context-Sensitivity and Semantic Minimalism: New Essays on Semantics and Pragmatics* edited by Gerhard Preyer and Georg Peter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 339-359 [353]. See also Marcelo Dascal, "Models of Interpretation." In *Current Advances in Semantic Theory* edited by Maxim I. Stamenov (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1992), 109-127 [113].

Apart from the low-level processes[125] which have an impact on our comprehension of other people, attention has also been drawn to the need for vigilance in processing information. According to Dan Sperber *et al* in the article "Epistemic Vigilance," the fact that we need to trust our interlocutors does not detract from our remaining vigilant. As a matter of fact, they both go together. They have the following analogy:

> When we walk down a street through a crowd of people, many at very close quarters, there is a constant risk of inadvertent or even intentional collision. Still, we trust people in the street, and have no hesitation about walking among them. Nor is it just a matter of expecting others to take care while we ourselves walk carelessly. We monitor the trajectory of others, and keep an eye out for the occasional absentminded or aggressive individual, automatically adjusting our level of vigilance to the surroundings. Most of the time, it is low enough to be unconscious and not to detract, say, from the pleasure of a stroll, but it rises when the situation requires. Our mutual trust in the street is largely based on our mutual vigilance. Similarly, in communication, it is not that we can generally be trustful and therefore need to be vigilant only in rare and special circumstances. We could not be mutually trustful *unless* we were mutually vigilant.[126]

Sperber *et al*'s street-walk analogy demonstrates what we do naturally, how we know that the street is busy but still trust that each street user is going about their lawful business, and while others are busy with their own concerns nothing stops us from going about ours. Not every possible collision deters us from using the street – say a market street or a park – but for this reason we watch our steps and body movements depending on how crowded the street is. In communication, according to Sperber *et al*, we always need to be vigilant especially because the interests of others do not always coincide with ours. Instead, there are clear cases in which certain people fulfill their interests by deceiving us. Among the key areas that require vigilance are the sources of information (speaker's competence, honesty, etc.) and its content. Thus, vigilance is always required to help us keep an eye on our interlocutors and on what they say.

So far, we have surveyed some similarities and differences between Gadamer and Davidson, and have enumerated key components of their theories of interpretation. We have also gone beyond their discourses to fetch further interpretive desiderata, by examining low-level processes. The need for vigilance has also been highlighted to forestall vulnerability to error and deception. What remains to be done is to specify how this whole discussion can be applied to making sense of obscure pronouncements, and that will be our next step.

---

[125] Henceforth, 'low-level processes' is used according to the foregoing description, that is, to refer to gaze tracking, tone of voice, facial expression, use of gestures, and other non-verbal means of communication.

[126] Dan Sperber *et al*, "Epistemic Vigilance," *Mind and Language*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Sept., 2010): 359-393 [364].

3.6 MAKING SENSE OF THE OBSCURE

The quest here is for a method of interpretation that can be applied to both texts and utterances. Since we, in principle, have a guide for the interpretation of texts according to Gadamer and for interpreting utterances according to Davidson, it seems that a method that combined both approaches would be ideal, but such a method would be difficult to come by since both theories approach the task of interpretation quite differently. For example, while the interpreter in Gadamer has to begin with his antecedent beliefs, the interpreter in Davidson has no presuppositions other than assuming that the speaker has mostly true beliefs in virtue of which the speaker and interpreter can both solve for meaning which, as yet, is unknown. Approaching interpretation with one's antecedent beliefs demonstrates one's participation in a cultural background, whereas approaching it with no knowledge of attitudes points to one's malleability or readiness to make necessary adjustments in the process. Both approaches tend to reveal something about the traditions of the two philosophers: that while Gadamer comes from the continental tradition, Davidson comes from analytic philosophy. The differences in style would, therefore, work against using them together. Perhaps it would be helpful to examine each theory to see how they can possibly be applied to texts and utterances.

Gadamer's antecedent beliefs (prejudices), hermeneutical circle, anticipation of perfection, fusion of horizons, hermeneutic situation, conscious and unconscious determinants of interpretation, etc. guarantee the back-and-forth movement that takes place during interpretation. Thus, the interpreter's antecedent beliefs are confronted with what the text is saying as well as with one's anticipated meaning. The horizon of the past is confronted with that of the present, and meaning is worked out in this process. A challenge may arise to this theory, however, when it comes to its application to non-textual communication. The past and present horizons reflect a separation and distance that does not usually obtain in ordinary conversations. Moreover, approaching an interlocutor with heightened prejudice or antecedent beliefs gives the impression of a burden with regard to processing the information to be discussed. That is, the interpreter's antecedent beliefs are likely to persist or may only slowly be adjusted, and this might slow down the assimilation of information in interlocution. Even though Gadamer warns against locking oneself in the circle of one's prejudices,[127] it is obvious that it could remain a challenge, and cognitive science has shown how long it can

---

[127] Gadamer, "Classical and Philosophical Hermeneutics," 70.

take to wipe off or abandon deeply held beliefs.[128] Furthermore, Gadamer's hermeneutics seems to envision a detailed preoccupation with texts. Its provisions for a text that does not allow "transformation into understandability,"[129] suggests this preoccupation. However, such preoccupation, while it seems fitting for deciphering obscure texts, seems ill-equipped for ordinary interpersonal interpretation. Moreover, Gadamer states that hermeneutical issues are the same for both written and oral discourses,[130] but it is not as easy as he claims, and he does not unpack how his approach would apply to ordinary conversations. The pragmatic disposition of hearers to also take into account gestures and other non-verbal signals, which we examined previously, defies this preoccupation. The great merit of Gadamer's hermeneutics with regard to obscurantism, the foregoing remarks notwithstanding, is that it tells us why we become 'glued to the text'. It tells us why we go back to the text in order to reconcile our antecedent beliefs with it. Also attractive is Gadamer's recommendation of a method of "psychological empathy" that allows us to return to understanding after it has been "disturbed."

The method of "psychological empathy" that Gadamer does not elaborate would seem to be something that is applicable to the interpretation of both texts and utterances. It also appears to be connected with the principle of charity which is constitutive for Davidson's approach to interpretation. Granted that Davidson's principle of charity focuses on interlocution, are there elements of it that are incongruent with textual interpretation, or are there specific requirements of the interpretation of texts that are lacking in Davidson's approach? The principle of charity provides for truth, rationality, belief, and meaning. It does not emphasize a horizon of the past, but it certainly reflects what could be called the horizon of the speaker and the speech. Actually, certain texts that need interpretation may not be texts from the past like texts of scripture, codes of law, and the like. In those cases, the principle of charity would instruct the assumption of reason and truth in the author of the text while meaning is being solved for.

---

[128] See for example, Daniel T. Gilbert, "How Mental Systems Believe," *American Psychologist* (Feb., 1991): 107-119. More will be written on this in the next chapter. By held beliefs here I mean antecedent beliefs. These beliefs are already possessed by the one who has them. This is quite different from the Davidsonian strategy of holding a belief to be true in order to make sense of a speaker.
[129] See Gadamer, "Text and Interpretation," 170.
[130] Ibid., 174

Whether interpreting a text or verbal communication, charity seems to be a principle that is useful in both cases. It accommodates not only important epistemic components, but also relies on low-level processes that play a role in interpretation. Reading what Davidson writes about a hippopotamus in the refrigerator, for example, actually excites sentiments of surprise which come from a recalling of what is known about the animal (hippopotamus) and the appliance (refrigerator). Of course, a refrigerator may just be near the reader. With regard to vigilance, Sperber *et al* do not endorse the principle of charity as reflecting the exact requirement for interpretation. They seem to prefer a "stance of trust" which is "less miserly than that required by the principle of charity."[131] However, whatever deficiencies they may find with the principle of charity, they do not weigh heavily enough to disqualify it completely. On the contrary, the main targets of vigilance (vigilance towards source of information, towards content) which they mention are captured by the principle of charity. In the hippopotamus example, the interpreter notices that hippopotamuses are not kept in the refrigerator, so his own idea of hippopotamus does not chime with the speaker's. This illustrates vigilance as the interpreter compares his idea of the animal "hippopotamus" with what can be contained in the refrigerator. The speaker must mean something different from what he knows. He soon realises that the word "orange" translates the speaker's "hippopotamus." At that point, the issue is resolved.

This seems to be quite in line with Jeffrey Stout's "relativity of interpretation." According to Stout,[132] an interpretation can be described as good relative to the interpreter's interests and purposes. An interpretation is relative in the sense that it responds to a set of objectives that are in line with the interpreter's background beliefs. It is different from a relativism in which any interpretation at all is considered good. On the contrary, what makes an interpretation good is that it coincides with the interpreter's interest in coming to understand the other person. In the aforementioned case, interpreting hippopotamus as "orange" settles the unclarity of a hippopotamus in the refrigerator. The issue with Stout's concept of relativity, however, is that it considers only the perspective of the interpreter, forgetting the speaker.

---

[131] Sperber *et al*, "Epistemic Vigilance," 368.

[132] Jeffrey Stout, "The Relativity of Interpretation." *The Monist, An International Journal of General Philosophical Inquiry*. Vol. 69, No. 1 (Jan., 1986): 103-118.

What about obscure cases? Charity would approach an obscure case in the very same way that it approaches any other case, since it comes with no presumptions about meaning. By assigning rationality to the speaker and by considering the utterance to be true, it would proceed to figure out the meaning. It might, however, consume more processing time in arriving at a halting point. When an interpreter realizes that "orange" translates "hippopotamus," a halting point is clearly attained. This is what tends to elude communicators in an obscure scenario. Even then, the principle of charity presses for the halting point by, simultaneously, carefully analyzing the words, checking what the beliefs of the speaker might be, and looking at the world. This is what happens, for example, in deciphering the meaning of the deepity "Love is just a word." It could be saying that love is an English word, and nothing more. So, it does not refer to a feeling, a relationship, a state, or anything of the kind. It could also mean that love has been abused. No one is committed to love any longer, people claim to love but do not really demonstrate it; all that is left of love is the word. Furthermore, it could be saying that many people have been led to perdition in the name of love, or that it is difficult to really know when exactly one falls in love. In verbal communication, the interpreter can ask a question for clarification, or might be able to know which interpretation is appropriate by looking at the previous or subsequent statements, or at gestures, etc. These give him access to the speaker's beliefs on the basis of which he can work out the meaning. In a text, the interpreter would, in a similar manner, look at the context of the statement, and might try to figure out which interpretation the author seems to be communicating, weigh it with his own experience of the world, and work it out.

The upshot is that the principle of charity seems play a significant role in making sense of obscure pronouncements although with more processing cost. The question that might still be asked concerns how far charity can be stretched. Is there a limit to the exercise of charity with regard to obscure statements?

3.7 CHARITY'S LIMITS

According to Davidson, charity is to be exercised across the board,[133] that is, each time one engages in conversation. There is no segment of interlocution that can do without charity. By recommending the exercise of charity on an across-the-board basis, Davidson suggests nothing like an infinite process of interpretation. On the contrary, he highlights the importance

---

[133] Davidson, "Belief and the Basis of Meaning," 153.

of charity for the free flow of every conversation. In the case of a hippopotamus in the refrigerator, for example, charity helps the interpreter to understand the speaker so that they come to a point of agreement at the end of the day. The exercise of charity does not antecedently dismiss speakers or authors as obscure. However, one who talks or writes quite clearly can sometimes be vague, or may leave a number of questions open. Charity approaches a pronouncement with an intent to accept it as true, but in the process certain adjustments may be necessary. Confronted with a pronouncement that is obscure, therefore, the urge to understand hardly disappears. Faced with isolated vague material – isolated in the sense that someone who normally writes clearly can become vague or obscure at some point – charity carefully checks between the vagueness or the possible instance(s) of obscurantism and what is obvious or clear in order to make sense of the text. Heidegger's concept of *Dasein* or Sartre's saying that "consciousness is a being, the nature of which is to be conscious of the nothingness of its being," may be quite elusive, but the interpreter must keep up the effort at sense making.

We might wonder if there could not be a situation in which this sort of interpretive charity can be abused by the speaker or author. In such a situation, an author riding on the interpreter's charitable disposition, would change grounds or become indirect, vague, or outright obscure. By using profundity as bait, she deludes the reader who has sunk a great deal of cost into her material in order to grasp its supposedly intriguing depth. It appears that a point could be reached at which an obscurantist is found to have bewitched an interpreter's charitable commitments. At this point, the reader does not seem to know the author's direction or even what she is talking about. He comes to realize that the cost sunk into reading the material may, after all, be in vain. The withdrawal of charity in such a situation could be seen as inevitable.

One further observation that can be made about Davidson's principle of charity is that it is reason-centred. Rationality, truth, belief, and its main desiderata are all highly epistemic concepts. It requires a lot of the interpreter's epistemic architecture. One has to be thinking and placing constraints all of the time, and this makes interpretation an exercise that can only be undertaken by people who are capable of complex logical reasoning, or so it seems. Yet, there is hardly any doubt that children and people with limitations (sufferers from autism, for example) do seem to communicate quite well not only among themselves but also with

normal adults with complex reasoning abilities. If this is true, we might wonder whether or not Davidson's charity, though a rational reconstruction of a natural phenomenon, really captures all of interlocution's natural dimensions. I claim that Davidson's charity and, indeed, all of the voluminous reactions thereto in the literature, focus on deliberative charity, that is, on charity as a rational strategy. However, there also seems to be a more natural aspect to charity. This will occupy our discussion in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

NEW INSIGHT ON CHARITY

As indicated previously, an issue that comes to the fore with regard to the comprehensiveness of Davidson's principle of charity, given that it is intellectually packed, is the impression that it seems accessible to only people with sophisticated reasoning capacities. However, the principle is by definition at work in every normal ordinary conversation. Conversation takes place, by common observation, not only among persons with fully developed intellectual capacities, but also with (and among) children and people whose reasoning competences are somewhat impaired, such as people with autism. If people with impaired intellectual capacities can communicate with others who have unimpaired and complex reasoning capacities, then one might confidently hypothesize that interpreting charitably might have features that may not have been captured by Davidson's elaboration of the principle of charity. It would entail an account of charity that takes steps or processes of lesser complexity into consideration, and which still work to guarantee the success of human, verbal communication. We will explore this hypothesis throughout this chapter by examining a recent body of work that concerns the way in which understanding takes place through belief-fixation and lexical access, as well as the speed with which understanding can take place. Prior to that, however, we will examine how Davidson's principle may not have captured everything about the mechanics of mutual understanding.

4.1 ACCESSING MEANING BY AGENTS WITH LESS COMPLEX INTELLECTUAL CAPACITIES

We have suggested above that common observation shows that children and people with intellectual impairments do communicate with normal adults at a rate that ought to be considered successful. However, perhaps some scholarly evidence first needs to be explored to corroborate this. To this end, we will provide examples. In his study of how children learn the meanings of words, Paul Bloom[1] has argued against what he calls the "constraints view" of word learning. According to Bloom, several studies in the literature have suggested that a number of assumptions or principles constrain word learning by a child, assumptions like the

---

[1] Paul Bloom, *How Children Learn the Meanings of Words* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), 10ff.

whole-object bias, the taxonomic bias, the noun-category linkage, the principles of contrast and conventionality,[2] etc. The idea here is that a child needs to understand these principles or distinguish their contents before it can know the meanings of the words associated with them. Proponents have stated that these principles are developed or that they emerge in children and facilitate word learning. Bloom's argument contends that the aforementioned constraints do not exist as far as word learning in children is concerned. In other words, children do not require a complex mental capacity to know the meanings of words and so to communicate. Bloom's argument does not entail that children might not know a lot about words, but rather that there are no constraints of the sort described by the aforementioned principles which are meant to facilitate learning the meanings of words. While Bloom's study does not suggest that no amount of reasoning is involved in word learning, his position seems tantamount with saying that there may not be many constraints needed for word meaning or understanding, and that there may also not be many complex processes required for ordinary conversation. Thus, children may not need complex computations in order to have a successful conversation.

Furthermore, it has been suggested that Davidson's principle of charity expects that each interlocutor is able to reason about the beliefs of the other, and that this requirement cannot be met by some children. Children who fail the "false belief task," for example, expect that Sally who had placed a bar of chocolate in a basket and gone out, would look for the bar of chocolate in a box (where Anne placed it in Sally's absence) upon her return, instead of looking for it in the basket in which she had originally placed it. This shows that the child who fails the false belief task attributes its own belief to Sally, and is unable to determine Sally's own belief. This suggests that such a child cannot be a good interpreter in the Davidsonian sense.[3]

Apart from issues concerning children's incapacity to attribute belief properly, it has also been suggested that people with intellectual and interactional impairing conditions like autism would also prove to be a challenge to Davidson's proposal because they do not possess an adequate theory of mind.[4] The same suggestion has, however, been countered by another argument that people with autism have a more robust theory of mind than has commonly been

---

[2] The details of these assumptions and principles are not necessary for the argument here.

[3] See Kristin Andrews, "Interpreting Autism: A Critique of Davidson on Thought and Language," *Philosophical Psychology*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (2002): 317-332 [22-23].

[4] Ibid.

acknowledged.[5] Both positions agree that people with autism do in fact communicate well with people, and that this happens in spite of the impairment from which they suffer. How, then, could they engage in communication with other people regardless of their intellectual impairments? Without attempting to participate in the debate, what interests us here is the similarity between children whose intellectual capacities have not yet fully developed, and people with impairments who are able to communicate with 'normal' adults without having to engage in complex hypotheses and assessments. If so, communication could be possible without necessarily requiring the complex epistemological inferences enumerated by Davidson. My interest here is not to show that these are not necessary conditions for successful communication; rather, I am interested in actually suggesting that they are not sufficient.

4.2 THEORIES OF BELIEF-FIXATION

What is the relationship between understanding or comprehending something, and accepting or believing it? A common sense answer, one probably consistent with human ordinary way of thinking, might be that one first understands a proposition, then considers it in order to accept and believe it or not. This kind of question has been studied by the American social psychologist Daniel Gilbert.[6] Gilbert has investigated the mechanisms involved in coming to say that one believes a proposition, for example, in believing that bald men are licentious, or that sharks can swim backwards, or that armadillos have four legs. The discussions among philosophers and psychologists have pointed out that at least two things are involved here: the formation of a mental representation of the proposition and a positive assessment of the proposition that is believed. The mental representation has to do with the existence of the information in the mental system, while assessment has to do with the relationship between the information that is being represented and other information in the system. Thus, to say that a proposition is believed is to say that its meaning is represented, coded, or symbolized in a mental system, and that one acts as though the information represented were taken to be true. In analyzing this, Gilbert was particularly interested in studying whether comprehending and believing are distinct or overlapping operations. He resorted to two philosophical accounts of belief-fixation in order to account for this.

---

[5] Hanni K. Bouma, "Radical Interpretation and High-Functioning Autistic Speakers: A Defense of Davidson on Thought and Language," *Philosophical Psychology*, Vol. 19, No. 5 (2006): 639-662.

[6] Daniel T. Gilbert, "How Mental Systems Believe." *American Psychologist*. Vol. 46, No. 2 (Feb., 1991): 107-119.

4.2.1 CARTESIAN THEORY

The structure of the mind, according to Descartes, has two compartments: one active and one passive. Comprehension belongs to the passive domain, that is, a person does not make any effort to comprehend an idea; ideas simply impress themselves on the mind. Assessment, on the other hand, belongs to the active domain. Here, the mental system considers the idea, assesses it, and decides whether to accept (believe) it or not. Assessing the idea is a process that is carried out by the conscious and willful part of the psyche that Descartes refers to as the *voluntas*. Now, what this sketch means for our investigation is that, for Descartes, there are three steps involved in the process of accepting or not accepting an idea: entertaining the idea, contemplating its truth, and deciding to accept or not to accept it.[7] This means that the mental system first comprehends an idea passively, then it weighs the idea to see the next line of action to take, and finally, it takes that step which is either to accept or to reject it. Assessment comes at the point of weighing or contemplating the idea and when deciding on what to do. Eric Mandelbaum refers to this Cartesian theory as a "serial" model since it allows for each of these steps to follow the other.[8] In the Cartesian theory, therefore, comprehension is passive or automatic, and precedes acceptance or rejection which is active. Acceptance and rejection are symmetrical actions that should take place at the same time in the sense that one either accepts or rejects the idea that is comprehended.

The Cartesian theory tends to agree with our intuition. Intuitively, we may not easily object to a theory which says that we need to deliberate on an idea before making our decision to believe or not believe it. We would even think that that is what we do all the time. The contrary would not seem to make sense; that is, we can hardly imagine that we might accept an idea before deliberating about it. Thus, Gilbert says that Descartes' theory has reigned unchallenged. Even though scholars often disagreed with aspects of Descartes' metaphysics and epistemology, philosophers generally assumed that his theory of how beliefs are fixed was in order. Even the manufacturing of computers is influenced by this serial model of comprehension preceding assessment.[9] However, there is a competing theory of belief-fixation.

---

[7] Eric Mandelbaum, "Thinking is Believing." *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy*. Vol. 57, No. 1 (2014): 55-96.

[8] Ibid., 59.

[9] Gilbert, "How Mental Systems Believe," 108.

4.2.2 SPINOZAN THEORY

Baruch Spinoza does not have a Cartesian-style compartmentalization of the mental system; he does, however, have a passive and an active part to the processing of information. Spinoza does not accept the proposal of a mental system that comprehends an idea and then assesses it thereafter. According to Spinoza, it is not possible for a mental system to comprehend an idea that it has not accepted. In other words, comprehending an idea means accepting the idea. Comprehension and acceptance are, therefore, one and the same operation, and it is passive and automatic. What comes later is either unacceptance in a situation in which the mental system sees the need to change its stance on the accepted proposition, or certification when the mental system chooses to retain it. With regard to our discussion, Spinozan theory states that there is no distinction between comprehending a proposition and believing it. One does not need to deliberate and then decide to accept a proposition, for one believes it the very moment that one comprehends it. Later on, one can certify what one has believed, or one can decide to not accept it; it is this later stage that requires the most effort. Acceptance and unacceptance or rejection are, therefore, asymmetrically related in the Spinozan system. It is quite easy and effortless to believe something, but rather difficult to reject it. In spite of the difficulty, the very possibility to reject a proposition that is believed shows that the Spinozan system does not preclude the possibility of error.

The Spinozan theory seems counterintuitive because, as rational beings, we take it for granted that believing a proposition is a function of rational deliberation. As we observed previously, it would seem irrational for someone to suppose that one believes something that one has not considered and weighed properly. Scholars have, therefore, not really seen any need to argue for the Spinozan position, but that is exactly what Gilbert takes up.

Before looking at some of Gilbert's arguments, let us clearly state the provisions of the two theories examined thus far. The Cartesian system provides for comprehension as a passive stage, and assessment as an active or effortful stage, resulting in either acceptance or rejection of a given idea. The system predicts that acceptance and rejection should happen at the same speed which is what makes it symmetrical. According to this theory, a human being has the ability to reflect upon an idea checking if it is true and acceptable, and then believe or reject it thereafter. Conversely, the Spinozan system has no provision for reflecting on an idea before believing it. Entertaining the idea is the same as believing it, that is, any idea that pops

up in the mind is believed at the same time that it pops up. That is the passive comprehension stage. A human being does not have the ability to make any decision before believing an idea, but after believing it, a human being can reject it. That would be the active stage. Since acceptance and rejection or unacceptance do not happen at the same time in the Spinozan system, as they do in the Cartesian, the Spinozan system is said to be asymmetrical. Now, the question is: What sort of a system are human beings, are they Cartesian or Spinozan?

4.3 CONSIDERING THE SPINOZAN MODEL

Gilbert actually argues for the Spinozan system. One of his first arguments has to do with whether credulity is a product of reason and experience or a gift from nature. In Gilbert's terms, credulity does not develop from reason and experience because reason and experience develop over time and with age, and adults have comparatively greater reason and experience than children. If credulity were a product of reason and experience, therefore, it would be undoubtedly in greater abundance in adulthood than in infancy, but that is not how it is. On the contrary, credulity seems more manifest in children than it is in adults. For example, take a look at suggestibility. Children are generally more suggestible than adults, that is, children tend to uncritically accept whatever you tell them, and younger children are usually more suggestible than older children. This demonstrates, in Gilbert's terms, that acceptance is not only easier, but also probably takes place prior to rejection, otherwise both acceptance and rejection would have featured equally in children. It suggests, finally, that children are not likely to be Cartesian systems because acceptance and rejection do not work symmetrically as they do in Cartesian systems, but rather asymmetrically as in Spinozan systems.

We might wonder whether Gilbert notes the suggestibility of children but forgets about their inquisitiveness. While children are suggestible, they are equally very inquisitive, asking curious questions and some that can really put the adults they talk with to task. The issue of the level of criticality from which children pose their question, can also be debated because the questions really seem to come from a quite critical mindset. This issue can, however, be settled by noting that while children are actually inquisitive, they nonetheless remain suggestible. If a child is told, for example, that spitting cobras in Montreal wear sunglasses, the child can ask inquisitively whether it is only the cobras in Montreal that wear sunglasses, or the child may seek to know why the cobras wear sunglasses. At that point, the

child would still most likely accept the answers that are provided by the adult. Children's inquisitiveness, therefore, does not foreclose their suggestibility.

Gilbert's second example for the argument that credulity is a natural phenomenon in greater abundance in children than in more reasonable and experienced adults has to do with the power of the negation "no". According to Gilbert, children generally do not grasp the concept of "no" easily. It is not that children do not use "no" to communicate disagreement, but rather that they usually do not master the word's negating function until late childhood. Rather than "no," one who converses with a child would expect to hear more of "yes" when he asks the child a question. In any case, this phenomenon would suggest that believing a proposition is a much easier act, or that rejecting or disbelieving a proposition is something more demanding. Again, this lends support to the Spinozan system.

Gilbert takes his argument further by looking beyond the case of children. First, he considers the issue of resource depletion, that is, the cognitive composition of a person who is fatigued or deprived of sleep or under stress. From the perspective of a Cartesian system, such a person should have an equal elaboration of acceptance and rejection in response to questions, that is, the rate at which a cognitively depleted person rejects a proposition should be the same as the rate at which he accepts it. However, this is not really what happens. According to Gilbert, governments deliberately deprive political prisoners of sleep, and this treatment works by making the prisoners vulnerable to the whims of the governments. That is to say, in a situation of fatigue, tiredness, weakness, etc., when one's cognitive resources are depleted, one easily accepts what one is told including what one might ordinarily have refused. This signals that believing is more natural to the human mind than rejecting. Moreover, such prisoners and anybody with depleted cognitive resources, are often told to write down and recite something, and the experience has been that the persons usually tend to believe whatever they wrote down and recited, or they at least find it difficult to deny it.[10] This argument does not support the Cartesian model, according to Gilbert, because in the Cartesian model, people with depleted cognitive resources would have had an equal likelihood to accept or to reject propositions, but on the contrary, they exhibit more leaning towards acceptance.

---

[10] Gilbert, 111.

Next, Gilbert talks about autobiographical propositions. Here, he considers how people generally react to declarations or assertions about oneself. He assumes, for example, that when I say "Ants are a good source of protein," I'm saying: "I believe that ants are a good source of protein." This would be an autobiographical proposition, and it includes not just verbal states of belief but also those that touch upon psychology and behaviour, like "I am happy," or "I'm in support of the domestication of lizards." Now, the point is that when people hear me make an autobiographical assertion, they usually accept what I say, even when what I say sounds bizarre. Most other people may not support the domestication of lizards, but they will believe that I do at the very least since I made the assertion myself.[11] This is what a Spinozan system predicts, that one is likely to believe what one is told as part of the process of comprehending the speaker, and that it takes a lot more effort to disbelieve what one has believed. It even sounds radical to say that people do not just accept what they are told affirmatively, but they process negative propositions as true before denying them. Processing the statement "Homer's armadillo is not male" would, therefore, be different from processing "Homer's armadillo is female." The "not" in the previous statement operates as a metalinguistic instruction for the audience to reject what follows. Indeed, what people do in comprehending negative propositions is to accept the affirmative as true and deny it thereafter. Negative propositions, it would seem, actually presuppose affirmative propositions. This, in itself, would testify to the effortlessness of belief and the difficulty of rejection.

Leslie Downing has argued, in reaction to Gilbert's paper, that neither Descartes nor Spinoza is right in their elaboration of how we come to believe. According to Downing, comprehension and belief (acceptance) are neither two separable parts of the same coin (as in Descartes' theory) nor merely coincidental acts (as in Spinoza's), but are totally independent acts. He says that when it comes to belief, one can believe something from a trusted source, not just during comprehension but even prior to comprehension. Using one of Gilbert's examples, Downing maintains that a child can accept the religious ideology of its parents uncritically, neither while actually comprehending the propositions (as in Spinoza's model) nor after reflecting upon it (as in Descartes'), but before both. As a matter of fact, it is not just that the child accepts what it has not yet comprehended, but that it may never even get to

---

[11] This phenomenon has been given various names, viz, fundamental attribution error, the correspondence bias, and the truthfulness bias. See L. Ross, "The Intuitive Psychologist and His Shortcomings: Distortions in the Attribution Process," *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 10 (1977): 173-220.

comprehend that which it accepts.[12] Downing's point is more daring than Gilbert's especially with respect to the fact that Downing affirms the possibility of believing before comprehending. It sounds disturbing, however, to come to terms with Downing's position because one would still wonder how it can be that a person would believe something that they have not experienced in any direct way[13] unless of course, by comprehending Downing means understanding. In that case, Downing's argument would be that one can believe a proposition that one has not really understood, but which one has heard about. This would make sense and would be compatible with a number of religious beliefs. It would also work for adults, not just for children as Downing supposes.

Gilbert has a reply to Downing: Gilbert says that Downing not only misunderstands the concept of belief, but also tends to confuse various levels of analysis. Accepting or believing a proposition, Gilbert insists, implies a readiness to act as though the proposition were true. He formulates a rebuttal to Downing's argument thus: Imagine that a "credible source" is expected to come and deliver a talk to an audience on a topic asserting that God does not exist. However, we are not really sure because he might also decide to talk about dental floss. Now imagine that the credible guest speaker arrives for the talk, and just before the talk he suffers a terrible heart attack and dies. What would be the relationship between the audience and the talk that the credible source would have given? Going by Downing's account, Gilbert continues, belief precedes comprehension, so the speaker's sudden death should not have any impact on the audience's beliefs. Now, can Downing maintain that the audience has accepted both the religious message and the dental message which they never comprehended? Are they less likely to see their pastor and more likely to see their dentist after the 60-second duration of time that they spent in the hall before the speaker died? How many points would the speaker have made, and do members of the audience now believe everything?[14] Thus, Gilbert says that Downing does not distinguish between statements of belief and beliefs proper. Additionally, Downing confuses the sense of the words "comprehension" and "acceptance" forgetting that Gilbert's own account has to do with the mental representation of propositions.

---

[12] Leslie L. Downing, "Comment of Gilbert's 'How Mental Systems Believe'," *American Psychologist*, Vol. 47 (1991): 669-670.

[13] The situation of believing what one has not even heard would be weird because it would suppose that the content of such belief is empty. At best, it would mean that belief involves no particular proposition, but rather resides within the source. This might just be another way of talking about the guru's authority.

[14] Gilbert, "Reply to Downing," *American Psychologist*, Vo. 47 (1991): 670-671.

This helps us to have a better grasp of Gilbert's point. Gilbert admits that there might be a sense of the words "comprehension" and "acceptance" in which the former actually comes before the latter, but he says that that is different from his usage. In Gilbert's account, comprehension has to do with the representation of an idea (or information) to the mind. This has a threefold implication: (1) The information has to be represented to the mind before the mind can deliberate on it; the system cannot have a way of deliberating or reflecting on information that has not yet been represented. (2) Representation of the information to the mind includes acceptance of that information, for what is not accepted cannot be represented. (3) The information coming to the mind cannot be rejected because it is prior to deliberation. This means that the sense of the word "acceptance" can be misleading since it colloquially connotes an act of will, which it definitely is not in Gilbert's account. Gilbert's use of "belief" would, therefore, seem appropriate. Needless to say, Gilbert's use of belief is passive, not deliberate, and not an act of will. Thus, it is not possible, in Gilbert's terms, to comprehend information without first accepting it. In other words, it is impossible to have information represented to the mind without believing it.

The overlap of comprehension and belief in Gilbert might seem, at first glance, to echo Davidson's interlocking of meaning and belief because just as one cannot comprehend an information without believing it on Gilbert's terms, so too one cannot understand the meaning of a sentence in a foreign language (or not in one's idiolect) without, at least for the time being, deciding to hold her beliefs to be true, in Davidson. In Gilbert, the audience would not have any possibility to "hold" belief or to "solve for" meaning; the entire phenomenon is automatic and passive. Davidson's understanding, therefore, does not coincide with, and is in fact posterior to, Gilbert's comprehension.

Another element that seems to be common to both Gilbert's and Davidson's accounts is belief's active *effect*. In Davidson, you believe the speaker, and hold that belief (usually its content) to be true, which implies assuming and acting as though the speaker said something that were true. In Gilbert, belief issues in action, not stopping at utterance; to use his words: "Belief is the propensity to behave, not the tendency to swear up and down."[15] This pro-practical reading can be regarded as an overlap in their concepts of belief, but it is only a partial overlap. It is partial in the sense that belief in Davidson has at least two characteristics that are different from Gilbert's concept. First, belief is *held* to be true. This attitude of

---

[15] Ibid., 670.

holding a belief gives the impression that that the belief is as yet not-fully-assented-to, or not-surrendered-to because one is not yet confident enough, especially because it is held while the meanings of the words are still being deciphered. The attitude seems to instruct the interpreter to hold a belief in the meantime while he deciphers meaning. Second, belief in Davidson is activated in the interpreter on the assumption that the speaker first holds her utterance to be true. Gilbert's concept of belief, on the other hand, is dependent neither on the speaker's own belief nor on the audience's own assumptions. This belief can be said to simply *happen* to the audience on account of its passivity. The only thing that causes it is the information that is being represented, and in this sense Mandelbaum's description that it is caused by perception[16] would be fitting.

More so, there is asymmetry in both Davidson's and Gilbert's accounts, but they are very different kinds of asymmetry. Davidson, on the one hand, has what can be called an asymmetry of beliefs. According to his account, the interpreter assumes that the speaker has mostly true beliefs, thus there is an asymmetry of true and false beliefs. On the other hand, Gilbert has an asymmetry of acceptance and rejection since acceptance always comes before eventual rejection as we have explained above. The foregoing discussion shows that in addition to the partial overlap, and of course the possibility of error and of revision which is common to both accounts, Gilbert has something which is not in Davidson and which precedes Davidson's strategy.

Are we suggesting in this overview that while Gilbert holds the point that humans seem to be more Spinozan, Davidson's point can be said to tally with the Cartesian model? Not at all. Placing Davidson alongside Gilbert highlights interesting similarities between their views. We already know that Davidson's principle of charity says that one must ascribe true beliefs at the time of making sense or formulating hypotheses which would eventually lead to the grasp of the meaning of the words used by the speaker, whereas Descartes' model is a serial model in which belief is withheld until such a time that the assessment is completed. The Cartesian model is totally bereft of the strategy of charity and its desiderata.

Even though we have claimed that Davidson's principle is charged with deliberate moves, and that Gilbert's is not, it does seem that Davidson somehow touches upon something non-deliberate or pre-deliberate in his account. He says at one point: "Charity is

---

[16] Mandelbaum, "Thinking is Believing," 58.

forced on us; whether we like it or not, if we want to understand others, we must count them right in most matters."[17] This claim is important since it highlights both the indispensability and rational character of the principle. There are several ways in which it can be understood. The clause "we must count them right ..." can be read in the broader context of ascribing attitudes.[18] Counting a speaker right indicates the ascription of truth to her utterances (at least in the stage of interpretation), but then, it says we are forced to do so, and that is why "we must" count them right. The "force" precedes the ascription of truth or other attitudes. The force alone, when examined separately, would hardly be charity, but charity being forced can be read as saying that the ascription of attitudes is forced upon us in the sense that we have no option than to ascribe attitudes. It seems, however, that charity cannot be forced in the sense of being non-deliberate, given that charity is always freely given to the recipient, in this case through a deliberate ascription.[19] That is to say, *our wanting to understand* others provides the ground for the force. In other words, by wanting to understand others, we ascribe the requisite attitudes to them.[20] If, on the other hand, we do not want to understand others, we are not under the force of charity.

What might be the source of the 'force of charity'? It might come from reason, given that reason tells us that *if we want* to understand others we must count them right in most cases, but it also implies the possibility that we can as well choose *not to want* to understand others. The only way to choose not to want to understand a person seems to be to not engage in conversation. That seems to be the way reason can release us from the force, since our choice to want to understand others[21] would invariably fall under the force. If it is from reason, then it would be merely logical and we would just ascribe the requisite attitudes. What if the force is external to reason? One possible option could be the structure of language, but that would not really be likely since Davidson's strategy leverages on semantics and not

---

[17] Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme." In ITI, 197.

[18] "Counting them right" does not actually cover all that is required for charity. The broader picture can, therefore, consider taking the ascription of rationality, belief, and truth into account.

[19] This claim seems to tally with non-philosophical understandings of charity like social charity organisations and caritas in theology. They all have the element of deliberate ascription.

[20] In this sense charity truly is not an option. Since we want to understand others, we have to ascribe attitudes (i.e. assuming that they are reasonable, they have mostly true beliefs, etc) to them. But this is not the same as being automatic.

[21] Given the intricate nature of this analysis, we cannot talk about our choice to understand, only our choice to want to understand. The latter choice can be made by engaging in interlocution, the former cannot be made because we would already fall under the "force" of charity.

syntax. We also cannot suppose that Davidson has something dispositional in mind since his conception of charity is deliberative. While we could still shop around for options, we can make a preliminary suggestion based on the discussion thus far, that although Davidson has no intention of initiating a discussion about a non-deliberative principle, he highlights an attribute of charity that can be connected to the architecture of comprehension, which includes belief. In the end, he may simply be signaling the 'constitutiveness' of charity for interpretation.

4.4 LEXICAL ACCESS AND THE TIMING OF COMPREHENSION

Lexical access studies the processes involved in retrieving representations in one's mental lexicon when sounds are heard. In one of the studies designed to check the impact of ambiguity and context on lexical access, reported by David Swinney, groups of participants were made to sit in front of a cathode ray tube screen and to listen to pairs of binaurally presented sentences. They were instructed to listen to, and understand the sentences because their comprehension would be tested. Some letters also appeared on the screen, and participants were tasked with deciding whether or not those letters formed words. In the course of the experiment, participants were each handed a sheet of paper containing some sentences, and they were required to state if the sentences on the paper were similar or identical to the sentences that they heard, or whether there was no relationship at all between them. The results provided support for a view of sentence processing according to which lexical access features as an autonomous operation.[22] This is because whereas word ambiguity activated immediate access to all meanings of the word during comprehension, semantic context only made its impact in the post-access decision situation. The autonomy of lexical access in the face of ambiguity about word meaning suggests its rapidity, and this supports its independence from a slower process that deciphers word meaning and then gets access. Furthermore, a series of lexical access experiments carried out in contexts that favoured neither semantic nor syntactic information (that is, there were ambiguities of the kind atypical of natural languages) supported the view that lexical access operated in an invariant manner.[23] That is to say that processing a word is not dependent on one's knowledge or on the nature of

---

[22] David A Swinney, "Lexical Access During Sentence Comprehension: (Re)Consideration of Context Effects." *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior*. Vol.18 (1979): 645-659.

[23] Mark S. Seidenberg, Michael K. Tanenhaus, James M. Leiman, and Marie Bienkowski, "Automatic Access of the Meanings of Ambiguous Words in Context: Some Limitations of Knowledge-Based Processing," *Cognitive Psychology*, Vol. 14 (1982): 489-537.

the context. The suggestion is that accessing meaning is rapid and non-contingent, and that that is a normal processing mode.[24] This invariant or non-contingent or independent operation of lexical access would be consistent with Gilbert's Spinozan model.[25]

More studies have been conducted by neuroscientists, not just to determine the brain processes involved in word processing and comprehension but also to measure the duration that can be associated with comprehension. Meanwhile, there are two contending views on the timing of comprehension in linguistic communication: these are the grounded view and the symbolic view. The grounded view holds that two things happen simultaneously: a reactivation of dominant sensorimotor (embodied) experiences that given words denote, and a firing of a multimodal (conceptual) hub that brings in information from various sensory streams.[26] This is all to say that the cortical systems for language and action are reciprocally connected and that this makes it possible to comprehend words at the same time that their motor systems are activated. There is a rapid somatotopic activation of the sensory motor cortex in a manner independent of attention, at least with regard to words involving the face, arm, and leg.[27] The symbolic view, conversely, pivots semantic processing on multimodal mechanisms, while sensorimotor systems act epiphenomenally following word comprehension. A network of "amodal" brain regions interact to represent the conceptual and grammatical properties of words leading to comprehension.[28] Both views, therefore, feature the coincidence of comprehension and the activation of motor systems (grounded view), as well as the activation of motor system occurring after comprehension (symbolic view).

According to a group of scholars, the two contending views in the literature would not be required if there were a reliable means of measuring the duration of comprehension.[29]

---

[24] Ibid., 533.

[25] For more studies following this one, see Patrizia Tabossi, Lucia Colombo, and Remo Job, "Accessing Lexical Ambiguity: Effects of Context and Dominance," *Psychological Research*, Vol. 49 (1987): 161-167; Greg B. Simpson, "Context and the Processing of Ambiguous Words." In *Handbook of Psycholinguistics* edited by M. A. Gernsbacher (London: Academic Press, 1994), 359-374.

[26] Adolfo M, Garcia *et al.* "How Meaning Unfolds in Neural Time: Embodied Reactivations can Precede Multimodal Semantic Effects during Language Processing." *Neuroimage.* Vol. 197 (2019): 439-449.

[27] See Friedemann Pulvermüller, "Brain Mechanisms Linking Language and Action." *Nature Reviews Neuroscience.* Vol. 6 (2005): 576-582. Examples of words used in this experiment include the Finnish words 'hotki' (eat) and 'potki' (kick), p. 579.

[28] See Marina Bedny and Alfonso Caramazza, "Perception, Action and Word Meanings in the Human Brain: The Case from Action Verbs," *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, Vol. 1224 (2011): 81-95.

[29] Garcia *et al.* "How Meaning Unfolds in Neural Time: Embodied Reactivations can Precede Multimodal Semantic Effects during Language Processing," *Neuroimage.* Vol. 197 (2019): 439-449.

Thus, Garcia *et al* came up with a way of determining how long the comprehension of an action word takes, in a magnetoencephalography (MEG) study. What was new in their technique was the involvement of large stimulus sets over which robust trial-by-trial methods were applied. Thus, aiming to achieve a good approximation of how understanding unfolds in neural time, this MEG study combined inferential and machine learning analyses to test the processing of action verbs (AVs) and non-action verbs (nAVs) and their classification in sensorimotor and multimodal semantic networks. Action verbs that denote bodily motions are usually activated in the primary motor cortex (MI), and their comprehension together with that of other word types also relies on the anterior temporal lobe (ATL) among other regions. The participants were healthy young people who performed a lexical decision task and a localizer task. After hundreds of trials, sensor- and source-level results indicated that differential modulations for the verbs appeared earlier in the MI hubs (<190ms) than in particular ATL hubs (>250ms). Similarly, trial-by-trial classification indicated faster peaks in MI (<175ms) than in ATL (>340ms) sites. The interpretation of the results shows that the primary semantic effects are sensorimotor reactivations, not epiphenomenal modulations, that follow conceptual discrimination, at least for words denoting bodily movements. That is to say that the time-course study results indicate that comprehension is suggested by bodily reactivations that happen faster than the conceptual discrimination between words. This provides support for the grounded view against the symbolic view.

The time-course investigation results cast some light on the tenets of the two views regarding the comprehension of words. We might wonder whether it could also be taken as an assessment for sentences especially given the fact that only action verbs and non-action verbs were sampled, whereas sentences also have other parts and particles. This may, however, not prove to be problematic for us now since we should be able to meaningfully speak according to the current state of research. In that case, the grounded and symbolic views strikingly resemble an empirical investigation of the Spinozan and Cartesian theories of belief-fixation. Like the Spinozan theory, the grounded view predicts a rapid or automatic processing (more like a 'happening') of meaning, whereas the symbolic view predicts a post-conceptual or deliberative processing, much like the Cartesian theory.

The latest study by Garcia *et al* lends further support to certain studies previously done with regard to automatic processing of words. It provides support, for example, for the contribution of mismatch negativity (MMN) – a neurophysiological brain response, and its

magnetic equivalent, to speech processing.[30] By MMN, we mean the brain response that follows the disruption of a stimulus sequence by an odd stimulus; this can happen when there is a repetitive sound and one odd sound pops up in-between regular sounds. What Näätänen's study revealed was that the MMN was elicited even in the absence of attention. That is, one is able to notice the odd stimulus even while not paying attention to the repetitive stimulus; this provides some evidence for automaticity in the perception of MMN sounds. Equally borne out is the study by Pulvermüller and Shtyrov, of how MMN recorded in electro- and magnetoencephalography (EEG and MEG) is elicited.[31] Their investigation indicated that lexical, semantic, and syntactical information is processed by the central nervous system outside the focus of attention and in a largely automatic manner. Thus, they took the results as evidence of MMN being an automatic brain process.

At least some measure of automaticity is possible in the way we receive and comprehend information as evidenced in the aforementioned neuroscientific studies of lexical access and time course of comprehension, and this automaticity is such that it can definitely not be described in metaphysico-epistemological or highly intellectualized vocabulary of the kind we have come across. In other words, the autonomy of lexical access operation matches the automaticity of comprehension and sensorimotor reactivation in MEG and with the automaticity of MMN processing. The suggestion would then be that neuroscience gives evidence of automaticity in lexical access and word comprehension at the most empirical level. The evidence instantiates rigorous psychological studies carried out by Gilbert on automaticity in both comprehension and belief, which itself gave a rather practical dimension to Spinoza's philosophical patrimony of an overlap or sort of automaticity to both comprehension and acceptance.

Further support for the automatic processing of information could come from dual-process or dual-system theories which, though used in computational sciences and philosophy, are most popular in cognitive science and psychology where they explain people's behaviors as unconsciously influenced by certain stereotypes which may have emerged from people's cultural lifestyle even without those people's approval or conviction. Generally, dual-process theories present two types of explanation of behavior that comprise a

---

[30] Risto Näätänen, "The perception of speech sounds by the human brain as reflected by the mismatch negativity ~MMN! and its magnetic equivalent ~MMNm!" *Psychophysiology*, Vol. 38 (2001): 1-21.

[31] Friedmann Pulvermüller & Yury.Shtyrov, "Language outside the focus of attention: The mismatch negativity as a tool for studying higher cognitive processes." *Progress in Neurobiology*, Vol. 76 (2006): 49-71.

rapid-automatic intuition (Type 1) and a slow-deliberative reasoning (Type 2). A crystallized version of the theories which Evans and Stanovich call "default-interventionist" describes type 1 processes as characterized primarily by autonomy while type 2 processes are characterized by cognitive decoupling.[32] Type 1 processes are both rapid and autonomous in the sense that they are independent of, and prior to, deliberation; type 2 processes are slow and do decouple information in the sense of being controlled and deliberative. Dual-process theories may, however, not fit in well with the ongoing discussion,[33] but they do at least indicate one more possibility and evidence of automaticity in either behavior or meaning processing.

4.5 WHY WE NEED AN ACCOUNT OF AUTOMATIC CHARITY

To get to our point, we can examine how the neuroscientific findings relate to the Davidsonian project. On the one hand, we recall that Davidson is only too happy to tell us what is needed in order to make sense of a speaker. According to him, the interpreter needs to presuppose, hypothesize, or make assumptions which include both trusting that the speaker speaks the truth and making assumptions about the speaker's beliefs. As should already be obvious, these steps both constrain and control the interpreter in a lot of ways and the conversation itself is by hypothesis deliberative and slow. On the other hand, we notice that the psychological and neuroscientific studies tell us what happens at *the instant of relating to stimulus*, particularly with an auricular stimulus. The studies reveal that comprehending a stimulus includes accepting or implicitly believing it in a way that the agent or believer plays no active role in the process at all. That is, comprehension happens in an automatic manner. If this is so, then the whole issue of automaticity precedes Davidson's reconstruction of interpretation as a rational and rationalizable process. Moreover, the former still remains unaccounted for. Such an account is needed given that Davidson's writings, and the numerous volumes written in reaction to his account, all ruminate on the *deliberative* account.

The foregoing discussion sketches the need for an account of automatic charity which should fill the gap in the literature. We seem to have evidence for it based on empirical

---

[32] Jonathan B.T. Evans and Keith E. Stanovich, "Dual-Process Theories of Higher Cognition: Advancing the Debate," *Perspectives on Psychological Science,* Vol. 8 (2013): 223-241.

[33] Dual-process theories may not fit with Gilbert's analysis because while the latter talks about two steps in the same process (comprehension and unacceptance/certification), the former involves two parallel processes (type 1 which are different from type 2). Type 2 processes intervene on type 1 processes only in some peculiar cases. Moreover, there is a lot of disagreement in the literature about dual-process theories.

studies. However, at this juncture we are faced with a problem of semantic incongruence. The linguistic association – automatic charity – is problematic, based on the explanations thereof that have been given thus far. What is automatic is passive, probably preconscious, and precedes decoupling and deliberation. What is 'charity-able,' that is, what can be called charity, is active, conscious, and deliberative. How can one talk about automatic charity?

4.6 AUTOMATIC CHARITY

Automaticity has been studied in various fields of psychology in terms of perception, memory, social cognition, emotion, learning, and motivation. This makes it one of psychology's core concepts, but in spite of the important place that it occupies, there is no consensus over its definition,[34] and so there are also many different accounts thereof. One account, for example, presents automatic processes as operating according to either a modal or a memory view. According to the modal view, automaticity involves processing without attention, but it is qualified since the modal view allows for the employment of some attention for initial performance, which gradually diminishes with subsequent practice. That is, our attention diminishes with time while automaticity remains. Thus, while automaticity is seen to be preattentive, it is not strictly so, given that it also allows for attention.[35] Gordon Logan, who finds the modal view to be problematic, endorses instead the memory view of processing according to which automaticity has to do with the fast and effortless retrieval of solutions from memory. On this view, novice performers would attend to on-the-task stimuli in order to provide solutions, but automatic performers would simply use solutions retrieved from memory. This means that automaticity is dependent on attention, rather than being independent thereof. This account of automaticity hardly fits with our concept because while the modal view predicts a gradual withdrawal of initial-performance attention, the memory view recommends a retrieval from memory. Both views lack the kind of spontaneity that we have examined in the afore-mentioned considerations.[36]

---

[34] Agnes Moors and Jan De Houwer, "Automaticity: a Theoretical and Conceptual Analysis," *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 132 (2006): 297-326.

[35] Gordon D. Logan, "Attention and Preattention in Theories of Automaticity." *The American Journal of Psychology*. Vol. 105, Views and Varieties of Automaticity (1992): 317-339.

[36] See Spinozan theory as distinguished from Cartesian theory in 4.2 above.

Another account classifies automaticity as preconscious, postconscious, or goal-dependent.[37] Preconscious automatic processes require only the proximal stimulus to trigger the process; the person does not need to be either aware or conscious. Postconscious automatic processing requires recent experience or thoughts in the relevant stimulus domain, for example, a 'priming' event. Goal-dependent automatic processing requires a processing goal that is intentional and specific. Preconscious automaticity would probably work for our concept of automaticity, but would be found wanting in the conditions for charity since on the terms of preconscious automaticity, the individual is not required to have an awareness of the automatic process. Postconscious automatic processing does not meet this requirement, since it is akin to retrieving something from the recent past. Goal-dependent automaticity sounds relevant, but perhaps it is not completely fitting since the goal has to be specific. In the domain of communication, which is our topic here, for example, one does not need to have any specific goal other than comprehension or the desire to understand a speaker. This seems to be not entirely compatible with Bargh's account, especially with regard to what he calls a "specific" goal, given the fact that someone who is engaged in communication has to decipher and this can result in "trade-offs". That is, partners in communication expect to understand each other and this could involve adjustments of an initial understanding. This characteristic of communicative practices seems to allow for a range of options, and thus, can hardly be called a specific goal.[38]

Nevertheless, what Bargh considers to be the "fundamental characteristic of automatic information processing" seems a good illustration. According to him, a car owner, Otto, takes a ride to familiarize himself with his new work environment. Driving along a picturesque river road and distracted by the scenery, he suddenly realizes that he was at an intersection and there was a stop sign. Immediately, his foot stomped on the brake, and a semitrailer that might otherwise have crushed him swung past.[39] In Bargh's interpretation, the movement of Otto's foot to the brake is automatic and without deliberation. He also terms it goal-dependent because, on another occasion when Otto takes a walk and gets to the same point, he does not

---

[37] John A. Bargh, "The Ecology of Automaticity: Towards Establishing the Conditions Needed   to Produce Automatic Processing Effects." *The American Journal of Psychology*. Vol. 105, Views and Varieties of Automaticity (1992): 181-199.

[38] We communicate ideas, decisions, approaches, technical applications, and so forth. This range is not a specific goal.

[39] Ibid., 181.

make the same foot movement. That sounds plausible because, as a pedestrian, Otto may not have the same level of suddenness that he had the first time he reached that spot in his car. Moreover, Otto would be likely to act as a pedestrian, which has to be different from the car driver's. The issue is whether both scenarios – both the driver's and the pedestrian's – are best described in terms of goal-directedness or as being relative to the nature of the individual's (Otto's) means of transport. A second issue that has to do with our discussion touches upon the fact that the example involves Otto, without the involvement of anyone else. It does not, therefore, apply to communicative interaction. A good take-home from it, however, seems to be that we can learn something about automatic processing of a visual stimulus.

It also seems that the automaticity that we are conceptualizing should be characterized less by its teleology, and more by its etiology. We are concerned with an automaticity that captures what happens when we comprehend information, particularly in communication. However, psychological studies consistently show that every form of automaticity comes with some measure of conscious attention.[40] To that end, a reconceptualization of automaticity should take account of intentional, consciously-controlled processing.[41] At this point, we could conclude that the automaticity of comprehension which is being described is conscious, but perhaps we should look a little further.

Meanwhile, it should not be forgotten that one reason for our near-total inability to find a suitable account of automaticity is that the needed automaticity has to be compatible with charity. That is, automaticity must meet the conditions for complementing deliberative charity which requires awareness and knowledge. Thus far, we can say that it is probably difficult to find an account of automaticity that has no connection to awareness whatsoever.

To solve this problem, we should revisit something that we analyzed previously with respect to our discussion of low-level processes in chapter 3. There, we investigated the role played by low-level processes (what someone sees, hears, etc.) or "simple attributions"[42] in language comprehension. We stated that the low-level processes were needed, not only for

---

[40] See Joseph Tzelgov and Ziv Porat and Avishai Henik, "Automaticity and Consciousness: Is Perceiving the Word Necessary for Reading it?" *The American Journal of Psychology*, Vol. 110 (1997): 429-448.

[41] Larry L. Jacoby, Diane Ste-Marie, and Jeffrey P. Toth, "Redefining Automaticity: Unconscious Influences, Awareness, and Control." In A. D. Baddeley and L. Weiskrantz (Eds.), *Attention: Selection, Awareness, and Control: A Tribute to Donald Broadbent* (Oxford: Clarendon Press , 1993), 261-282.

[42] Olav Gjelsvik, "Knowledge and Error: A New Approach to Radical Interpretation." In *Donald Davidson on Truth, and the Mental.* Edited by Gerhard Preyer. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, 167-191.

assent and dissent from information, but also that they were needed when formulating a hypothesis. To illustrate how a person automatically processes an auricular stimulus, imagine a spectator who chooses to go and watch a football match in a stadium. This spectator knows that going to the football stadium entails not only seeing other spectators, but also hearing shouts as the soccer players dribble, make passes, and score goals. However, should the spectator anticipate irritancy at the sight of other people or at their sound, it is expected that he would refrain from making his way to the stadium. Should he make his way to the stadium, though, he would be unable to make up his mind regarding the yells of the spectators. This is to say that before he would ever be able to decide to hear the sound, the sound will have been heard anyway.

Recourse to the way in which low-level processes take place is helpful in determining the notion of automaticity, that is, as a concept for comprehension, according to our study. These processes happen independently of our decision, and they happen through the level of the senses – sight, hearing, etc. Otto's abrupt response at the stop sign demonstrates an aspect of this automaticity, as does the market street walk example provided by Sperber *et al*[43] seen in the third chapter, and so too does the case of the spectator at the stadium provided above. To focus on the last one, the spectator at the stadium has no way of making up his mind about whether or not to hear the sounds in the stadium. He simply relates with the sound that he comprehends automatically; that is the element of automaticity. Looking at that instant of automatic comprehension of the sound, it is difficult to notice an aspect or feature of charity in it since he makes no rational decision in that instant. Yet, it should not be forgotten that he was aware, before even going to the stadium, that going to the stadium would entail hearing the noisy stimuli from the stadium, and that he had the opportunity to refrain from making his way to the stadium if he found the prospect of being assaulted with such stimuli to be irritating. The fact that he was aware of this and still proceeded to the stadium provides the charitable element of the illustration. It means that finding oneself within the vicinity of an occurrence would be all that is required to experience the automaticity. In other words, presence within or exposure to the locality of an information 'disposes' one to an automatic comprehension and acceptance of the information.

Low-level processes are automatic, therefore, thanks to their rapidity and independence from deliberation and, in our case, they are also charitable thanks to the

---

[43] Dan Sperber *et al*, "Epistemic Vigilance," *Mind and Language*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Sept., 2010): 359-393.

awareness of their enabling conditions. To talk of automatic charity, therefore, is to present the way in which one immediately comprehends information without having an alternate choice, except that one could have placed oneself in such a position as to avoid encountering the information. One exercises automatic charity simply by being exposed to an occurrence that one perceives at the low-level, and this seems to resonate with the simultaneity of comprehension and acceptance in both Gilbert's analysis and with the MMN grounded-view as it obtains in sensorimotor reactivations of comprehension processes.

Gjelsvik also holds that low-level processes are helpful on our way towards making interpretive hypotheses. This is relevant to our discussion for at least two reasons. First, regarding automaticity, it tells us that low-level processes are helpful while we are on our way to, that is prior to, making interpretive hypotheses. That they function "on the way towards," points out the prior role of low-level processes. Second, with regard to charity, "making interpretive hypotheses" belongs to the core of Davidson's rational reconstruction, and what it tells us is that we can only get to that core if we make hypotheses. It equally strengthens the fact that making hypotheses is preceded by something. What this portends is that Davidson's account of charity takes care of the second part, the part dealing with interpretive hypotheses, but it does not take care of the first part, the automatic part. The indication would then be that while Davidson's account does actually focus on what charity is about, it does so by covering only one aspect thereof, i.e., the rational or deliberative aspect. Davidson's account omits the automatic, more natural aspect, thereby omitting the other and previously examined component of charity.

An objection might be raised against the argument for automatic charity because it uses psychological theories that concern the intrapersonal situation in order to illuminate a communicative scenario that is typically interpersonal; how does Gilbert's intrapersonal analysis compare to Davidson's interpersonal strategy? Gilbert's presentation of the process of comprehension and certification or unacceptance is intrapersonal since it aims to provide an analysis of how the human mind works when it comes to comprehending an idea. It seems that it should be fine for Gilbert to describe the intrapersonal case as a basis for the interpersonal case. In other words, Gilbert presents how human beings naturally represent an idea and believe it, but it seems proper and might be more intelligible to do so using intrapersonal vocabulary, as he has done. This is attested by the fact that although Gilbert's description of the process is intrapersonal, he cashes it out in interpersonal terms; that is, his

examples are all interpersonal. Thus, he makes use of interpersonal examples when examining suggestibility, cognitive decoupling, autobiographical assertions, etc. The intrapersonal case is, therefore, presented as a model for the interpersonal, while the latter illustrates the former. What is also interesting is that the naturalness of Gilbert's presentation emerges from the fact that the intrapersonal should precede the interpersonal. Davidson's strategy demonstrates a 'jump' to interpersonal communication without stating its precedence; that is, Davidson discusses the process of understanding or making sense of another person without first giving, in the same description, how understanding takes place within oneself. Perhaps, this exposition strengthens the need for a pre-Davidsonian or pre-deliberative account of understanding.

Another element that can be observed in the interpersonal situation is increased cognitive involvement. One has to invest a speaker with the relevant desiderata that would normally lead to understanding. Making all of the relevant assumptions is intellectually taxing, unlike the intrapersonal situation in which comprehension is automatic. Moreover, interpersonal communication requires one to be vigilant with regards to one's interlocutor. The act of listening to a speaker commits one not only to deciphering the meanings of the words by making presuppositions and hypotheses, but also to manage the truth and belief constraints. This is to say that one watches out for error and makes adjustments as necessary. The hippopotamus example once again illustrates this point, because even as we absorb the news of the giant animal in the refrigerator, we keep weighing and matching the words to the known items only to discover, soon enough, that there might be an error in the use of words. The same techniques would apply were there to be a more serious error, such as saying that the international community has agreed to scrap immigration laws for all countries because the laws violate human rights. In the intrapersonal situation, one is spared this rigor before comprehension, and that is where automaticity comes in. In other words, comprehension is not effortful in the intrapersonal situation as described here, thus, one would not need to weigh and match words.

It seems, therefore, that the interpersonal case gives the intrapersonal model a wider scope. The relevance of Gilbert's Spinozan model of comprehension concerns the emphasis he places on the simultaneity of comprehension and acceptance which shows that it is easier to believe than to postpone belief. This theory tends to resonate with the interpreter's experience. It calls to mind what Fodor calls "mandatoriness", which we came across while

discussing the characteristics of our modular cognitive architecture in chapter 1. According to Fodor, you cannot help hearing a sentence made in a language known to you as a sentence in that language[44] because it comes to you automatically. You cannot choose to hear it as noise instead of the language that is known to you, even if you wished to do so.

In revisiting Fodor's point, though, we meet with another potential problem in the adumbration of the charitability of automaticity, especially in a situation where the 'awareness' element of automatic charity is not as obvious as it is in the stadium case. It is pretty easy to follow the description of awareness of one's presence in the stimulus environment, as providing the charitable component of automatic comprehension in the stadium case and even in the market street case. Now, in a typical Fodorian environment, one may be taking a walk in a city outside one's country and language zone. Suppose that one unexpectedly overhears one's language (say Gaulish language – a minority language spoken by only 200,000 people the world over) being spoken from inside a house as one passes by, or that one hears a song in Gaulish being played, would charity be involved in that act of hearing Gaulish? This can be approached from different angles. On the one hand, charity would seem to be lacking since one was not aware, and so could not have expected to hear Gaulish while in a foreign land. In this case, the hearing of Gaulish would typically exemplify what the empirical studies have called a mismatch negativity (MMN).[45] On the other hand, however, the Gaulish speaker who has traveled abroad knows already that other foreign nationals can be found abroad, and he would hardly have a way of claiming to be the first Gaulish speaker to travel abroad unless, of course, he was sure that he was the manufacturer of the first airplane to fly abroad – which would be untrue of course. Moreover, in our internet age, it is possible to learn a foreign language from the comfort of one's room, and Gaulish might just be very accessible. Even if Gaulish is not, it is only natural for one to expect the possibility of hearing Gaulish spoken abroad the way Kurdish might be spoken in a foreign land.

---

[44] Fodor, *The Modularity of Mind* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1983), 52.

[45] Mismatch negativity obtains when there is disruption of a certain stimulus sequence. For example, suppose that two native speakers of Dutch are conversing in their language. Suppose, too, that one of them understands English in addition to Dutch. Now, suppose that as their conversation continues, a passer-by says in English, "Fire outbreak!" the Dutch speaker who understands English is likely to relate to that English expression even while having a conversion in Dutch. In this scenario, the English expression causes a disruption of the stimulus sequence (the conversion in Dutch).

Assuming, then, that the expectation to hear Gaulish spoken abroad can be counted as awareness (and therefore as fulfilling the condition for charity), would it not be a very remote exercise of charity, given that Gaulish might have been one of the languages least expected to be heard in that foreign land? It might seem a remote exercise of charity because the expectation was minimal, and for that reason hearing things said in Gaulish might still come as a surprise. It should be noted, though, that the knowledge of Gaulish disposes the speaker of Gaulish to understand it anywhere it is being spoken. What matters for automatic charity is that the hearing is automatic and being in the vicinity of such speakers positions one to make an automatic connection. Charity functions here as a disposition because automatic charity, as we have seen, is not an intellectual activity, but rather a "happening" in virtue of one's availability at a particular place. This is not the same as saying that believing automatically is inactive in the sense that it cannot cause action. One believes automatically when relating to information, thereby making the architecture of belief passive, but its teleology remains active. Thus, belief as it is conceived in our account, is not incapable of causing behavior.[46] Instead, it is caused by perception, and can be used as a premise for an inference while also interacting with desires to cause behavior.[47] One's disposition to information reception, therefore, counts as charity even when the possibilities are minimal.

The reason for this is that there is no way to turn off this disposition. Fodor mentions an attempt that touches upon our case when he states that a hearer could choose to deactivate a transducer. In our case, this would mean covering one's ears in order not to hear the information.[48] That is not what the speaker of Gaulish can do since he was not really expecting to hear Gaulish being spoken in his current country of domicile. Another attempt would be a very tortuous strategy, according to Fodor. He would need to avoid hearing the words in Gaulish by concentrating on other sounds or on another language. This would seem to work if the speaker of Gaulish had a companion while taking his walk. He would then continue discussing or would initiate a new discussion with his non-Gaulish speaking companion and ignore the Gaulish. It can sometimes work this way because he would take advantage of the impossibility of attending to many things at the same time. Even in this case, though, one would imagine that Gaulish was already comprehended and that this was because

---

[46] See Eric Schwitzgebel, "A Phenomenal Dispositional Account of Belief," *Nous*, Vo. 36 (2002): 249-275.

[47] Mandelbaum, "Thinking is Believing," 58.

[48] Fodor, *The Modularity of Mind,* 53.

the native speaker of Gaulish was already disposed by being in the environment of the stimulus.

Postulating automatic charity seems helpful when it comes to explaining how children, whose mental capabilities are not yet fully developed, and people with some measure of mental incapacity are able to communicate with people who do not have these forms of incapacity. While the only available account of charity to this point – the deliberative one – would have claimed that these people make use of rationality, assign truth to the speaker's sentences, test her belief, and make hypotheses so as to be able to decipher the meanings of the speaker's words, automatic charity tells us that it is at least possible for them to relate to the speaker's words and that they can believe them without the need for cumbersome computations. It is a way of describing charity that caters to people with an incapacity without painting deep structures that set too high a pedestal for daily communication.

Based on the example of the speaker of Gaulish, the following points can be made. First, at the level of automatic charity, the disposition for hearing Gaulish should be able to guarantee the charitableness, since no deliberation is required. Second, it would seem proper to state what should have become obvious by now: that automatic charity is *one part* of charity, while deliberative charity is another. Thus, we can say that automatic charity is incomprehensive in itself, just as (and this has been the reason for my arguments) deliberative charity alone is incomprehensive. Any comprehensive account of the principle of charity needs to incorporate both Davidson's traditional account and this automatic account. What this means is that Davidson's account of charity, together with the many reactions thereto in the literature, has focused on deliberative charity. It has been a discussion of cumbersome computations that take place in the mind of a rational interpreter, without touching on the more natural component of automatic charity. While Davidson is not to be blamed for focusing on deliberative charity, it seems only proper and timely for us to make this proposal precisely given that we now know more about the human mind and have access to empirical evidence that supports our hypothesis.

The suggestion of both automatic and deliberative charity as complementary also seems to tally with the reality of human beings who are made up of a physical and a mental-psychological component. Davidson's account of charity can be seen to be dealing with the rational mechanisms that function for the attainment of meaning, whereas our account of

automatic charity takes care of this venture's more physical, perceptive or sensual components. The senses receive the stimuli, which may be words, visuals, or physical objects of touch, before reason comes in, or before the exercises of deliberative charity are set in motion.

The question might be raised about whether or not there would be any way of applying automatic charity to *texts*. The answer to this question would already be preempted in the foregoing paragraphs, for it has been stated that automatic charity negotiates or approaches information by making connections through the senses. That would be tantamount to saying that a reader would see the words of a text and would relate to them automatically. With regard to obscure texts, automatic charity functions with the reader's hope for understanding. He relates automatically to the words of the text, and at this automatic stage, charity seems to be successful. The problem arises at the deliberative stage when the reader tries to make sense of the obscure text. As we saw in chapter 3, the reader discovers at some point, that he is unable to lay hands on what the author of the text means by her words. The failure of charity to make sense of obscure texts is at the level of the reflective exercise of deliberative charity, not at the level of automatic charity.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

We have investigated responses to questions that have occupied us throughout this dissertation, including the meaning and types of obscurity, how and to what extent it can be made sense of, as well as role of the principle of charity in human understanding. Human beings tend to be knowledge enthusiasts and are therefore receptive, broadly speaking, to a wide range of information. The normal way of going about this involves taking people at face value, be they communicators, instructors, or teachers. This seems to be one of the basic ways to learn something new and to go along with other people, including strangers. Such would be the case if (a), (b), or (c) were to be uttered:

(a) The capital of Colombia is Bogota;

(b) Dogs have been found to be good domestic animals for centuries;

(c) Scientific activities, as well as ecological irresponsibility, have contributed to the scourge of global warming.

The audience of any of these statements at a lecture or in conversation is likely to understand them without difficulty because they are plain and straightforward; the audience is also likely to relate to the plain statement as though it were true. In this way, our manner of adapting to the world, our experience, and the maturity of our intellectual composition all function to provide guidance as we make sense of ideas and information to which we are exposed in conversations. It could happen sometimes, though, that we hear expressions that we do not understand or that do not really match the ordinary pattern that reason and experience predict for us. In other words, it can happen that a statement somehow contains words or phrases that, when combined with the other words, fail to produce a natural and unified thought pattern or meaningfulness. Such would be the case if someone were to hear:

(d) Reopening Flemish schools in full scale in the summer of 2020 would be an absolutely good decision[1];

(e) "I feel just like a dog that [is] run over."[2]

Sentence (d) concerns the state of Flemish schools in the summer of 2020. At that time, some form of school activity was going on in Flanders. The proposition of the sentence is, however, that school activities that are carried out, not on skeletal basis but rather in full scale, would be the right thing to do. However, the summer of 2020 was still characterized by skeletal activities in schools and other workplaces because of the impact of covid-19, which was dwindling at the time after the first lockdown. Moreover, bubbles of over 50 were not allowed in Belgium and in some other European countries because the government and health sector thought it better to restrict physical contact in lieu of the pandemic. Suggesting, therefore, that school activities should be fully resumed does not seem to take the prevailing circumstances into consideration. One could just have easily responded that that suggestion was bullshit since it did not fulfill the ordinary expectation of relevance at the time. An utterance of (e) would be Harry Frankfurt's typical example of that which constitutes bullshit. In Frankfurt's account, (e) is bullshit because when a human being utters (e) she does not show any concern for truth, for a human being cannot know how a dog feels after it has been run over. However, to say that (e) is bullshit is not the same as saying that (e) is a lie; what makes (e) bullshit is simply its indifference to truth.

Other studies of bullshit have identified bullshit's further features. Bullshit manifests itself mainly in speech act and consists of various ways in which deference, responsibility, commitment, politeness, and other usual expectations of communicative exchange are absent. Furthermore, empirical studies suggest that vulnerability to bullshit might indicate a comparatively less complex intellectual capacity and subscription to religious and superstitious beliefs.[3] One striking definition of bullshit is that by G.A. Cohen who studied

---

[1] For a similar example, see Eric Nenkia Bien, "How Obscurantism differs from Bullshit: A Proposal," *Theoria*, Vol. 87, No. 6 (2021): 1497-1526 [1499].

[2] Fania Pascal, "Wittgenstein: A Personal Memoir." In *Recollections of Wittgenstein* edited by R. Rhees (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 23-39 [30].

[3] Gordon Pennycook *et al*, "On the Reception and Detection of Pseudo-profound Bullshit, *Judgment and Decision Making*, Vol. 10, No. 6 (Nov. 2015): 549-563.

bullshit not in everyday conversation like Frankfurt but rather in academia. Cohen defines bullshit as unclarifiable unclarity, a definition that introduces the concept of "unclarity" into the discussion of bullshit.[4] An important question at this point concerns what it is that makes a statement unclear. Granted that the syntactical requirements are fulfilled, unclarity may have to do with lack of meaningfulness. According to a study by Pennycook *et al*, some bullshit statements are "pseudo-profound" in the sense that they appear profound at first sight, but actually lack profundity upon further reflection.[5] For example:

(f) "Wholeness quiets infinite phenomena"

is a pseudo-profound bullshit statement, according to Pennycook *et al* even though a Tibetan Buddhist may find no element of bullshit but rather discover evidence of transcendence in it (see Dalton in chapter 2). Pseudo-profound bullshit might require more cognitive engagement than mere bullshit statements. It seems to be the case, however, that pseudo-profound bullshit is different from a systematically crafted unclarity. Take the case of (g):

(g) "[I]'m holding forth with high purpose and furrowed brow at the dinner table."[6]

This statement sounds important and promises to convey deep content, but it is trivial at the end of the day. One difference between (f) and (g) is that, on the one hand, (f) can seemingly be made sense of, albeit with a high cognitive effort. The "phenomena" may be vague, but there could be some sense of "wholeness" that might resonate with "quieting" infinite phenomena. Even if this does not appear clear enough, Dalton has raised a rebuttal against (f) as an example of pseudo-profound bullshit. On the other hand, someone who reads (g) will find it difficult to figure out what the writer means. While the words may be familiar, they do not convey any kind of meaning in this context. While sounding overwhelmingly attractive, they may just be trivial. Dennett has referred to this as a *deepity*.[7] Moreover, it can also

---

[4] G.A. Cohen, "Deeper Into Bullshit." In *Contours of Agency: Essays on Themes from Harry Frankfurt* edited by Sarah Buss and Lee Overton (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002), 321-339.

[5] Gordon Pennycook *et al*, "On the Reception and Detection of Pseudo-profound Bullshit, *Judgment and Decision Making*, Vol. 10, No. 6 (Nov. 2015): 549-563.

[6] Daniel C. Dennett, *Intuition Pumps and Other Tools for Thinking* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013), 56-57.

[7] Ibid. It may also be borne in mind that distinguishing between folk concepts is sometimes tricky and there could be borderline examples.

happen that even without the stylistic features that evoke a "wow-feeling," a statement becomes extremely difficult to understand or may be outright impenetrable. An example is (h):

(h) "Beauty is a fateful gift of the essence of truth, and here truth means the disclosure of what keeps itself concealed."[8]

Dan Sperber has cited (h) as an opaque statement that is difficult to make sense of even though Heideggerian experts will be able to explain it. According to Sperber, the opacity of a statement has a certain psychological effect on the audience. That is to say that when an audience reads a difficult text and is unable to understand it, the audience takes the difficulty to be an indication of profundity, and the more difficult a text is, the more profound the audience regards it to be. This has been developed in chapter 2.

Deepity and opacity are among the manifestations of what has been referred to as obscurantism. As Buekens and Boudry have argued, we do not seem to know what the obscurantist means by his words.[9] We keep reading in the hopes of grasping what we take to be an important meaning, and this keeps us glued to the text. The more we read, the more the meaning seems to elude us, and the more cost we tend to invest into understanding it. This is what Sperber calls the "guru effect," and it is very effective when we have a certain positive construal of the author. However, we may just discover at some point that we have been deluded by the guru and that our efforts were futile. At that juncture, the viciousness of obscurantism comes to the fore. Thus, its description by Buekens and Boudry as setting up a game of verbal smoke and mirrors that obfuscates meaningfulness is apposite. An obscurantist is an expert seducer who is accomplished in verboseness or ambiguousness. Another example, (i), may clarify this.

(i) Dribbling as a football skill is an unwise strategy for inexperienced players who are presented for emulation by their coach.

In (i), dribbling is an unwise strategy in footballing, yet dribbling is presented to be emulated, and the presenter is the coach of the team. Could a coach who knows that dribbling is an

---

[8] See Dan Sperber, "The Guru Effect," *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*, Vol. 1 (2010): 583-592 [587].

[9] Filip Buekens and Maarten Boudry, "The Dark Side of the Loon. Explaining the Temptations of Obscurantism," *Theoria*. Vol. 81 (2015): 126-142.

unwise skill recommend it? Could it be that it is unwise only for inexperienced players, but can be used by experienced players? In any case, its being presented for emulation does not specify a group that may wisely use it as a skill. While the coach may have something particular in mind, it is difficult to pin it down by the reader. This illustration may not have captured the real confusion of meaningfulness that occurs in obscurantist cases, but it definitely points to the problem.

As (g), (h), and (i) indicate, the problem of obscurantism concerns the text's meaningfulness, and it is mainly the meaning intended by the speaker that is elusive. Obscurantism promises deep meaning that the reader can access through indirect means. That is, the author mostly seduces the reader to continue reading her text, and the author never plainly discloses her plan to the reader. The reader only comes to discover this plot after sinking in a great deal of cost. In other cases, the strategy of the author may be to repel rather than seduce the reader. This could happen when an author is unable to provide rational grounds for her position.[10] A particular presentation has been reported to be so obscure that members of the audience were like "dogs watching TV."[11]

While obscurantism is deliberate obscurity, there can also be a mere or inadvertent obscurity. The "curse of knowledge" does explain this as it describes an overestimation of an audience by a speaker who uses technical vocabulary unknown to the audience, or who approaches her subject in a way she presumes to be understandable to her audience, but which is, in fact, unclear.

Obscurantism is conceptually different from bullshit, for while the former is so-called because of our inability to lay hands on the speaker's meaning, the latter has to do with the disconnect of a speech act from the requirements of relevance. The bullshitter may be well understood, but what she says lacks the expected connection of relevance to the occasion or the truth. In the case of the obscurantist, it is difficult to know what she is talking about because we are unable to lay hands on what she intends to communicate. This has been developed in chapter 1.

---

[10] See Viktor Ivanković, "Steering Clear of Bullshit? The Problem of Obscurantism," *Philosophia*, Vol. 44 (2016): 531-546 [535], quoted in E. N. Bien (2021, p. 1519).

[11] See Bien, "How Obscurantism differs from Bullshit," 1519.

In poetry, the experience is a little different probably because of what has been described as its commanding impact.[12] Poetry has a way of winning the sympathies of its audience probably because of its descriptive power according to which an audience listening to, or reading a description of x can focus on the artful description and can forget x. In other words, poetry has a strong and alluring artistic dimension that can easily fascinate and captivate an audience. Moreover, poetry is equipped with rhyme, rhythm, repetition, tongue-twisters, onomatopoeia and more, that an audience can scarcely ignore, as in (j);

(j) "If the lost word is lost, if the spent word is spent."

Over and above these devices and techniques, poetry usually provides compelling reflection on its subject or theme. At other times, it adopts a style of repetition and onomatopoeia. These characteristics of poetry make it difficult for an audience to notice its possible obscure elements, if there were any. Poetry does not consist of a deliberate plot to keep the audience searching for its deeper meaning. On the contrary, it is just the poem's business to be fascinating and fantastic.

This raises the question of making sense of obscure pronouncements. Usually, we do take people at face value, as illustrated in (a):

(a) The capital of Colombia is Bogota.

This is to say that we assume that the speaker is reasonable and has mostly true beliefs. Donald Davidson has developed this strategy from an intellectualist point of view. According to Davidson, in order to be able to understand a speaker at all, we must presuppose rationality, belief, and truth. Meaning is worked out in the course of communication and with the help of these desiderata. The principle by means of which this happens is called the principle of charity. For example, when (k) is uttered:

(k) "There is a hippopotamus in the refrigerator,"

it is somewhat strange to hear, but the strangeness can be resolved in the course of communication. The interpreter of (k) assumes that the speaker has true beliefs and wants to

---

[12] See Gadamer, "From Word to Concept: The Task of Hermeneutics as Philosophy," trans. Richard E. Palmer. In *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of Later Writings* edited by Richard E. Palmer (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 108-120.

communicate something even though hippopotamuses cannot be found in the refrigerator according to the interpreter's concept of the word. The speaker must mean something else by the word "hippopotamus," and that's what the interpreter solves for. Eventually, the interpreter realizes that the word "orange" translates the word "hippopotamus," and the problem is resolved.

More so, it seems that the principle of charity can be helpful for understanding a text by carefully deciphering, as in (k) above, how to make sense of it. It would probably be less helpful for the understanding of deliberate obscurity, however, since the reader does not seem to know what the author aims to communicate with her words. The audience's charitable disposition comes to naught when the audience notices that they have been bewitched by the obscurantist and that their earnest search for meaning was in vain. The verdict on obscurantism, then, would be a vice more dangerous than bullshit.

Does the argument that shows charity's failure to make sense of obscurantism confirm everything that Davidson says about the principle? Is charity only a *rational* strategy of the interpreter? There are certain cases in life that warrant a more careful look at the principle of charity as it has been elaborated. For instance, adults do seem to communicate quite successfully with little children who may not have developed the capacity for the highly intellectualistic requirements of charity. Moreover, normal people also seem to communicate effectively with people with intellectual impairments, for example, people with autism. The people with impairments, and little children, would be taken to be probably incapable of the sophisticated requirements of presupposing, assuming beliefs, assigning truth, and weighing everything up in order to arrive at meaning. In light of these considerations, another look at Davidson's elaboration of charity seemed imperative. Again, we seem to have much more information at our disposal than Davidson did concerning the workings of the mind in terms of belief and comprehension. Thus, the dissertation ventured to explore what Davidson's principle of charity might have overlooked or left unconsidered in the process of sense making. The investigation revealed that Davidson concentrated on the process of meaning-fixation, but that a theory of belief-fixation would have been equally helpful for his project. This gap had to be filled using philosophical and cognitive scientific approaches.

Both Descartes and Spinoza have elements in their philosophy that touch on belief-fixation (this has been discussed in chapter 4). According to Descartes, there are two steps in

the process of accepting or rejecting an idea, and they correspond to two compartments of the mind. The first step is to comprehend an idea, which belongs to the passive compartment. In other words, any novel idea impresses itself automatically upon the mind so that the mind is unable to choose whether or not to entertain the idea. In the second step, the mind assesses the idea as comprehended, deciding whether to accept it or to reject it. Assessing the idea belongs to the active compartment that is a function of the will (*voluntas*). That is, one can decide to accept or to reject an idea. Accepting and rejecting are symmetrical. Believing an idea is located in acceptance, thus, the Cartesian theory allows the mind to assess an idea and to decide whether or not to believe it. According to Spinoza, there are two steps also in the fixation of belief, but each takes a different course. In Spinoza's account, acceptance of an idea coincides with comprehending it, and it is passive. In the second step, a person either confirms the automatic acceptance or refuses to accept it. In this model, acceptance and rejection or 'un-acceptance' are asymmetrical since acceptance is automatic and rejection is active.

Daniel Gilbert evaluated both the Cartesian and the Spinozan theories in a study that focused on the architecture of the mind with regard to belief, and he argued for the Spinozan model. In Gilbert's account, humans tend to be more Spinozan than Cartesian, that is, they tend to accept a novel idea automatically or to believe an information before considering a revision. This seems to be counter-intuitive, but he argues for it not only from the suggestibility and credulity of children, but also from more general perspectives. For example, the way we relate to autobiographical propositions like:

(l) Ants are a good source of protein,

(m) I believe that ants are a good source of protein, or

(n) I'm in support of the domestication of lizards,

is simply to accept them. Similarly, negative propositions like

(o) Homer's armadillo is not male

seem to require more processing effort than positive propositions like

(p) Homer's armadillo is female

because what we literally do is process the affirmative form of a negative statement and then deny it, thus,

(q) Homer's armadillo is male; not.

In other words, the default position of our processing instruction with regard to accepting or rejecting a proposition is set to "true." We accept it to be true and we can subsequently revise it. Rejecting or unaccepting a proposition is also an effortful process, according to Gilbert's study, and this shows that the view that we believe automatically might be more in tune with our mental architecture. This position tilts in favour of an automatic etiology of belief.

Gilbert's conclusion seems to be receiving support from certain studies of cognitive neuro-science. Lexical access studies, for example, provide evidence of an autonomous and independent retrieval of representations of sounds that have been heard over and against a slow process in which representation takes place only after deciphering word meaning. That is to say that lexical access operates in an invariant manner, thereby making access to meaning a rapid process that is independent of one's knowledge or nature of context. Thus, one would generally be more likely to rapidly process the meaning of the expression:

(r) "Break the ice"

without knowing that the aforementioned expression can be used both literally and idiomatically. Moreover, studies of the time-course of comprehension indicate faster reactivations in the primary motor cortex than in the anterior temporal lobe, which is interpreted as suggesting a more rapid demonstration of comprehension via bodily reaction than via conceptual deliberation.

What the rapidity of lexical access and comprehension suggests is that we seem to be quicker to believe and deliberate than we are to deliberate and then believe. If that is the case, then it follows that believing is more automatic and is not a product of deliberation. This might seem to provide some explanation for the seemingly smooth communication with children and people with a measure of intellectual incapacity. It may just be that they have a way of believing their interlocutor without having to make sophisticated presuppositions, and this works for the communication process.

We would willingly have announced something in addition to Davidson's account of charity but we cannot, given that we encounter an incompatibility between what is automatic

and what is charitable. While charity requires some form of decision making or awareness in terms of its involving an *exercise* of ascribing attitudes, automaticity seems to exclude that possibility. It is, therefore, impossible to provide an account of 'charity' that is 'automatic' without first resolving the problem regarding the compatibility of both concepts. This calls to mind a discussion of charity in which Olav Gjelsvik mentions the role played by low-level processes which he describes as "simple attributions."[13] These processes utilize the power of sight and hearing with no complex cognitive involvement in sense making. That is to say that sight and hearing are not epistemic processes that require highly rational exercises. On the contrary, all that is required for one to see or to hear is to be exposed to the view or to the perceptible stimulus. As such, their major characteristic is that they take place without deliberation; that is, one does not choose to see or to hear a sound within one's vicinity, provided that one's sense organs are in good shape. That means that the low-level processes mentioned previously are automatic in their operation. If someone chooses to watch a football tournament at the stadium, for example, then the person cannot help seeing other spectators or hearing their sporadic shouts throughout the course of the tournament. He hears them automatically. At the same time, it can be noticed that even though the spectator at the stadium has no immediate control over what he hears or sees, it does not mean that he is also unaware of that possibility, given that he knew that going to the stadium meant exposure to the sight of people and to noise, in which case he might well have chosen not to proceed to the stadium. Thus, in this example, the spectator is both "aware" and "not in control."

By means of low-level processes, therefore, it seems possible to talk about an exercise that is charitable in the sense of one being aware, and automatic in the sense of one having no control over it *at the instant* of its occurrence. This would rightly be called "automatic charity." Granted that charity is intrinsic to communication across the board, as it is in Davidson's account, automatic charity would be the concept used to explain the workings of charity in children with little epistemological and metaphysical construals, as well as in people with impaired intellectual capacities. Automatic charity does not pertain to these persons only, it only helps to explain their communicative successes better. Automatic charity contributes to a comprehensive account of the principle of charity, thereby making it speak to all types of people of all ages.

---

[13] See Olav Gjelsvik, "Knowledge and Error: A New Approach to Radical Interpretation,"

Thus, this dissertation has argued that:

(1) Studies of bullshit have given rise to recent philosophical studies of obscurantism. It was in reaction to Harry Frankfurt's paper, "On Bullshit," that the concepts of "unclarifiable unclarity" and "obscurity" were introduced. Further analysis of these led to the concepts of "profundity," "pseudo-profundity," and "obscurantism."

(2) Obscurantism is different from bullshit. While bullshit results from violation of the expectations of relevance in a speech act, obscurantism typifies the blurring of meaning in a text such that the reader is required to search for the author's meaning through indirect means. The author's strategy either seduces the audience to "keep coming" or repels him to "stop so far." Thus, the reader either continues reading in search of promised profundity or is made to give up without laying hands on the meaning of the text. While obscurantism is deliberate obscurity in the sense that it is crafted by an author, there is also inadvertent obscurity where an author or a speaker overestimates her audience and communicates in a way that is unclear to the audience. (This has been developed in the paper, "How Obscurantism differs from Bullshit," published in *Theoria*).

(3) The principle of charity often fails to demystify an obscure text. The ascription of rationality and true beliefs so as to be able to make sense of the text fails at the point where the reader has put in much concentration and effort and remains unable to decipher what the author was driving at. This characteristic makes the disposition for obscurantism a systematic epistemic vice.

(4) Davidson's principle of charity does not account for the charitable commitments of children and people with less complex intellectual capacities. Davidson's principle requires an interpreter to be able to ascribe rationality and true beliefs in line with the interpreter's knowledge of the world. There has been a discussion over the ability of certain persons (including children and persons with autism) to properly utilize the desiderata required by Davidson's principle[14]; yet there seems to be agreement that those persons communicate quite well with other persons that have presumably no intellectual incapacities. This suggests that

---

[14] See Paul Bloom, *How Children Learn the Meanings of Words* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000); Kristin Andrews, "Interpreting Autism: A Critique of Davidson on Thought and Language," *Philosophical Psychology*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (2002): 317-332; and Hanni K. Bouma, "Radical Interpretation and High-Functioning Autistic Speakers: A Defense of Davidson on Thought and Language," *Philosophical Psychology*, Vol. 19, No. 5 (2006): 639-662.

Davidson's principle of charity is elaborated in a highly intellectualistic way, in the sense that while it captures the rational requirements for making sense of people, it omits something more natural about it, namely, that making sense of people does not necessarily depend on the *intellectualistic* attitude of charity. Instead, an interpreter relates instantly to a communicative act and by accepting and believing it at that *instant* (rather than holding true as Davidson stipulates), he comes to understand the speaker.

While an interpreter needs to exercise charity in order to make sense of a speaker, there seems to be a natural disposition by means of which the 'comprehension' of a speaker coincides with believing her, and this precedes the rational exercise of charity. This natural disposition constitutes an automatic component, and therefore comes prior to the rational presuppositions of the Davidsonian principle of charity. This automatic dimension of charity was lacking in Davidson's elaboration of charity and that of his students. Automatic charity is thus a key concept that supplements Davidson's account of charity.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Alec, Hyslop. *Other Minds.* Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995.

_____. "Other Minds", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2016/entries/other-minds/>

Alston, William P. "Religious Experience and Religious Belief." *Noûs* 16, no. 1 (Mar. 1982): 3-12.

Anderson, Albert. "Philosophical Obscurantism: Prolegomena to Hamann's Views on Language." *The Harvard Theological Review* 62, no. 3 (Jul., 1969): 247-274.

Andrews, Kristin. "Interpreting Autism: A Critique of Davidson on Thought and Language." *Philosophical Psychology* 15, no. 3 (2002): 317-332.

Apperly, Ian. *Mindreaders: The Cognitive Basis of "Theory of Mind."* Hove: Psychology Press, 2011.

Appiah-Kubi, Francis. "The Church, Family of God: Relevance and Pastoral Challenges of a Metaphor from an African Perspective." In *The Household of God and Local Households: Revisiting the Domestic Church,* edited by Thomas Port-le Roi, Gerard Mannion and Peter De Mey, 67-80. Leuven: Peeters, 2013.

Astington, Janet Wilde., & Jodie A Baird. "Introduction: Why Language Matters." In *Why Language Matters for Theory of Mind,* 3-25. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Austin, J. L. *How to Do Things with Words.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962.

Baghramian, Maria. (ed.). *Donald Davidson: Life and Works.* USA-Canada: Routledge, 2013.

Bargh, John A. "The Ecology of Automaticity: Towards Establishing the Conditions Needed to Produce Automatic Processing Effects." *The American Journal of Psychology,* 105, Views and Varieties of Automaticity (1992): 181-199.

Bedny, Marina & Alfonso Caramazza. "Perception, Action and Word Meanings in the Human Brain: The Case from Action Verbs." *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1224 (2011): 81-95.

Belnap, Nuel. "Declaratives are not Enough." *Philosophical Studies* 59 (1990): 1-30.

Bernal, Sara. "Bullshit and Personality." In *Bullshit and Philosophy: Guaranteed to get Perfect Results Every Time,* edited by Gary L. Hardcastle and George A. Reisch, 151-170. Illinois: Open Court, 2005.

Bernstein, Richard I. *Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics and Praxis.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983.

Bien, Eric Nenkia. "Referential Inscrutability: Pointing as a Cognitive Scientific Response," presented to the Centre for Logic and Philosophy of Science, Institute of Philosophy, KU Leuven, supervised by Professor Jan Heylen, June 2016.

_____. "How Obscurantism differs from Bullshit: A Proposal." *Theoria* 87, no. 6 (2021): 1497-1526.

Bloom, Paul. *How Children Learn the Meanings of Words.* Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000.

Borg, Emma. "Minimalism Versus Contextualism in Semantics." In *Context-Sensitivity and Semantic Minimalism: New Essays on Semantics and Pragmatics,* edited by Gerhard Preyer and Georg Peter, 339-359. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Bouma, Hanni K. "Radical Interpretation and High-Functioning Autistic Speakers: A Defense of Davidson on Thought and Language." *Philosophical Psychology* 19, no. 5 (2006): 639-662.

Braithwaite, R. B. "An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief." In *The Philosophy of Religion,* edited by Basil Mitchell, 72-91. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.

Braver, Lee. *A Thing of this World: A History of Continental Anti-Realism.* Illinois: NorthWestern University Press, 2007.

Buekens, Filip. "Agentive Thinking and Illusions of Understanding." In *Philosophy of Neuroscience: Reconsidering the Demarcation Problem,* edited by Massimo Pigluicci and Maarten Boudry, 439-458. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013.

Buekens, Filip., & Maarten Boudry, "The Dark Side of the Loon. Explaining the Temptations of Obscurantism." *Theoria* 81 (2015): 126-142.

Call, Joseph & Michael Tomasello, "Does the Chimpanzee Have a Theory of Mind? 30 Years Later." *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 12, no. 5 (2008): 187-192.

Carnap, Rudolf. "Uberwindung der Metaphysik durch Logische Analyse der Sprache," *Erkenntnis* 11 (1932), translated by Arthur Pap as "The Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language." http://www.calstatela.edu/sites/default/files/dept/phil/pdf/res/Carnap-Elimination-of-Metaphysics.pdf [Accessed May 1, 2017].

Cassam, Quassim. "Epistemic Insouciance." *Journal of Philosophical Research* 43, no. 1 (2018): 1-20.

Cioffi, Frank. "Wittgenstein and Obscurantism." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volumes 64 (1990): 1-23.

Cohen, G. A. "Deeper Into Bullshit." In *Contours of Agency: Essays on Themes from Harry Frankfurt* edited by Sarah Buss and Lee Overton, 321-339. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002.

Connolly, John M. & Thomas Keutner, eds. *Hermeneutics Versus Science? Three German Views: Wolfgang Stegmuller, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Ernst Konrad Specht.* Indiana: University of Notre Dame, 1988.

Cooper, David E. "Analytic and Continental Philosophy." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 94 (1994): 1-18.

Corner, John. "Fake News, Post-Truth and Media-Political Change." *Media, Culture and Society* 39, no. 7 (2017): 1100-1107.

Crane, Tim. *The Mechanical Mind: A Philosophical Introduction to Minds, Machines and Mental Representation.* London-New York: Routledge, 2003.

Dalton, Craig. "Bullshit for You, Transcendence for Me: A Commentary on 'On the Reception and Detection of Pseudo-profound Bullshit.'" *Judgment and Decision Making* 11, no. 1 (Jan., 2016): 121-122.

Davey, Nicholas. *Unquiet Understanding: Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006.

Davidson, Donald. *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* Oxford: Clarendon Press,1984.

_____. "Theories of Meaning and Learnable Languages." In Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation,* 3-15. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984.

_____. "Truth and Meaning." In Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation,* 19-36.

_____. "On Saying That." In Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation,* 93-108. Originally published in a double issue of *Synthèse* devoted to the work of W. V. Quine - *Synthèse* 19 (1968): 130-146.

_____. "Moods and Performances." In Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation,* 109-121.

_____. "Radical Interpretation." In Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation,* 125-139. Originally published in *Dialectica* 27 (1973): 313-328.

_____. "Belief and the Basis of Meaning." In Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* 141-154.

_____. "Thought and Thought." In Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* 155-170.

_____. "Reply to Foster." In Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, 171-179.

_____. "On the Very Idea of A Conceptual Scheme." In *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation,* 183-198.

_____. "Incoherence and Irrationality." *Dialectica* 39, no. 4 (1985): 345-354.

_____. "The Structure and Content of Truth." *The Journal of Philosophy* 87, no. 6 (Jun., 1990): 297-328.

_____. "Radical Interpretation Interpreted." *Philosophical Perspectives* 8 (1994): 121-128.

_____. "Could There be a Science of Rationality?" *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 3, no. 1 (1995): 1-16.

_____. "Three Varieties of Knowledge." In *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective,* 205-220. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001.

Davidson, Ian., & April Nowell, "Introduction and Overview." In *Stone Tools and the Evolution of Human Cognition* edited by April Nowell and Ian Davidson, 1-11. USA: University Press of Colorado, 2010.

De Waal, Cornelis. "The Importance of Being Earnest: A Pragmatic Approach to Bullshitting." In *Bullshit and Philosophy,* 99-113.

Del Caro, Arian. *Hölderlin: The Poetics of Being.* Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991.

Dennett, Daniel C. "Beliefs About Beliefs." *The Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 4 (1978): 568-570.

_____. *Intuition Pumps and Other Tools for Thinking.* New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013.

Dieguez, Sebastian. *Total Bullshit: Au Coeur de la Post-Vérité.* Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2018.

Doherty, Martin J. *Theory of Mind: How Children Understand Others' Thoughts and Feelings.* Hove: Psychology Press, 2009.

Downing, Leslie L. "Comment of Gilbert's 'How Mental Systems Believe'." *American Psychologist* 47 (1991): 669-670.

Dummett, Michael. *Origins of Analytical Philosophy.* London: Duckworth, 1993.

Egginton, WIlliam., & Mike Sandbothe, eds. *The Pragmatic Turn in Philosophy: Contemporary Engagements between Analytic and Continental Thought.* USA: State University of New York, 2004.

Eliot, George. July 1856. Quoted in James D. Rust, "The Art of Fiction in George Eliot's Reviews." *The Review of English Studies* 7, no. 26 (Apr., 1956): 164-172.

Eliot, T. S. *Collected Poems 1909-1962.* New York: Harcourt, Brace & World Inc., 1964.

Elster, Jon. "Hard and Soft obscurantism in the Humanities and social Sciences." *Diogenes* 58 (2012): 159–170.

Engel, Pascal. "Analytic Philosophy and Cognitive Norms," *The Monist* 82, no. 2, Continental Philosophy: For and Against (Aug. 1999): 218-234.

Evans, Jonathan B. T. & Keith E. Stanovich. "Dual-Process Theories of Higher Cognition: Advancing the Debate." *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 8 (2013): 223- 241.

Evans, Mark. "The Republic of Bullshit: On the Dumbing Up of Democracy." In *Bullshit and Philosophy,* 185-202.

Fairfield, Paul. *Philosophical Hermeneutics Reinterpreted: Dialogues with Existentialism, Pragmatism, Critical Theory and Post-modernism.* London: Continuum, 2011.

Fernandez, Jordi. "The Intentionality of Memory," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 84, no. 1 (2006): 39-57.

Fodor, Jerry A. *The Modularity of Mind.* Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1983.

Foucault, Michel. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977.* Translated by Colin Gordon, Leo Marshal, John Mepham, and Kate Soper, edited by Colin Gordon. New York: Pantheon Books, 1980.

Frankfurt, Harry G. "On Bullshit." In Harry G. Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About: Philosophical Essays,* 117-133. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988 [2007].

Frápoli, María José. *The Nature of Truth: An Updated Approach to the Meaning of Truth Ascriptions.* Dordrecht: Springer, 2013.

Fredal, James. "Rhetoric and Bullshit." *College English* 73, no. 3 (January 2011): 243- 259.

Freudenburg, William R. & Robert Gramling. *Blowout in the Gulf: The BP Oil Spill Disaster and the Future of Energy in America.* Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011.

Frost, Robert. "Neither Out Far Nor in Deep." In *A Collection of Poems.* Coradella Collegiate Bookshelf Editions, 2004.

Fuller, Steve. "What Can Philosophy Teach Us About the Post-truth Condition?" In *Post-Truth, Fake News: Viral Modernity and Higher Education,* edited by Michael A. Peters, Sharon Rider, Mats Hyvönen, and Tina Besley, 13-26. Singapore: Springer, 2018.

Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method,* translation revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald D. Marshall, London-New York: Continuum, 1975.

_____. "Classical and Philosophical Hermeneutics." Translated by Richard E. Palmer. In *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of Later Writings,* edited by Richard E. Palmer, 41-71 Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2007. This was first published in 1977 as an encyclopedia article in the Italian encyclopedia, *Enciclopedia del Novecento.* But it was an expanded version of a 1974 article published with the title "Hermeneutik" in *Historisches Worterbuch der Philosophie.* Gadamer retitled the article and published it in the second volume of his collected works (Gesammelte Werke) as "Klassische und Philosophische Hermeneutik."

_____. "The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem." Translated by David E. Linge. In *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of Later Writings,* 72-107. This paper, originally titled *"Die Universalität des hermeneutischen Problems"* was a lecture Gadamer delivered at the academy in Walberberg on October 12, 1965. It was published the next year in the journal *Philosophisches Jahrbuch*, and the year after it was added to his collection of essays *Kleine Schriften 1.* Gadamer added it to the second volume of his collected works in 1986. To that version he added notes addressing criticisms of his arguments or referring to sources. This version was published in the *Gadamer Lesebuch* in 1997.

_____. "From Word to Concept: The Task of Hermeneutics as Philosophy," translated by Richard E. Palmer. In *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of Later Writings,* 108-120. This was an address delivered by Gadamer for the Hegel Week at Bamberg University in April 1994. It was first published in *Menschliche Endlichkeit und Kompensation: Bamberger Hegelwoche*, 1994. One year later, it appeared in *Die Moderne und die Grenze der Vergegenständlichung.* In 1997, it was added to the Gadamer *Lesebuch.*

_____. "Text and Interpretation." Translated by E. Palmer. In *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of Later Writings,* 156-191. This was the paper presented by Gadamer in April 1981 at the "debate" with Derrida, at the Sorbonne in Paris. In 1984 when the paper was first published in German (the Sorbonne presentation having been in French), a fourteen-page section was added to it in which Gadamer discusses his

concept of "eminent text." The first English translation was by Denis Schmidt in 1986. The present translation by Palmer corrects a previous translation by Schmidt and Palmer in 1989.

_____. "Hermeneutics as Practical Philosophy." Translated by Frederick G. Lawrence. In *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of Later Writings,* 227-246. This essay was first published in the volume *Rehabilitierung der praktischen Philosophie* edited by Manfred Riedel (Freiburg: Verlag Rombach). In 1976 it was included in *Vernunft im Zeitalter der Wissenschaft*, a volume of Gadamer's essays later translated into English, among other languages, as *Reason in the Age of Science*, in 1981.

_____. "On the Circle of Understanding." In *Hermeneutics Versus Science? Three German Views,* edited by John M. Connolly & Thomas Keutner, 68-78.

Gallagher, Shaun. "The Practice of Mind: Theory, Simulation or Primary Interaction?" *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 8, no. 5-7 (2001): 83-108.

Garcia *et al*. "How Meaning Unfolds in Neural Time: Embodied Reactivations can Precede Multimodal Semantic Effects during Language Processing." *Neuroimage* 197 (2019): 439-449.

Gardner, Howard. *The Mind's New Science: A History of the Cognitive Revolution.* New York: Basic Books Inc. Publishers, 1985.

Garfield, Jay L. *Modularity in Knowledge, Representation and Natural Language Understanding*. Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1991.

Gauker, Christopher. "The Principle of Charity." *Synthese* 69, no. 1 (Oct.1986): 1-25.

Gibson, Robert. "Bullshit." *Alternatives Journal* 31, no. 1 (2011): 40.

Gilbert, Daniel, T. "How Mental Systems Believe." *American Psychologist* 46, no. 2 (Feb., 1991): 107-119.

_____. "Reply to Downing." *American Psychologist*, Vol. 47 (1991): 670-671.

Gjelsvik, Olav. "Knowledge and Error: A New Approach to Radical Interpretation." In *Donald Davidson on Truth and the Mental,* edited by Gerhard Preyer, 167-191. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Glüer, Kathrin. *Donald Davidson: A Short Introduction.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Goldberg, Sanford C. *Assertion: On the Philosophical Significance of Assertoric Speech.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Goldman, AlvinI. "Simulation and Interpersonal Utility," *Ethics* 105, no. 4 (Jul., 1995): 709-726.

_____. *Simulating Minds: The Philosophy, Psychology, and Neuroscience of Mindreading.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Gordon, Robert. "Folk Psychology as Simulation." *Mind and Language* 1 (1986): 158- 171.

Grice, Paul. *Studies in the Way of Words.* Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1989.

Hardcastle, Gary L. & George A. Reisch. *Bullshit and Philosophy: Guaranteed to Get Perfect Results Every Time,* edited by Gary L. Illinois: Open Court, 2006.

Heal, Jane. "Radical Interpretation." In *A Companion to the Philosophy of Language,* edited by Bob Hale and Crispin Wright, 175-196. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998.

_____. *Mind, Reason and Imagination: Selected Essays in Philosophy of Mind and Language.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time.* Translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985.

Hintikka, Jaakko. "Overcoming 'Overcoming Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language' Through Logical Analysis of Language," *Dialectica* 5, no. 2-3 (1991): 203-218.

Hölderlin, Friedrich. "Out for a Walk," *Poems of Friedrich Hölderlin: The Fire of the Gods Drives us to Set Forth by Day and by night*, Selected and Translated by James Mitchell, 52. San Francisco: Ithuriel's Spear, 2004.

_____. "Der Spaziergang." *Bergwelten*, Historisches 25 April 2018. https://www.bergwelten.com/a/friedrich-hoelderlin-der-spaziergang

Hyman, John. "Wittgenstein." In *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion* edited by Charles Taliaferro, Paul Draper, and Philip L. Quinn,176-188. United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.

Iten, Corinne. *Linguistic Meaning, Truth Conditions and Relevance: The Case of Concessives.* Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

Ivanković, Viktor. "Steering Clear of Bullshit? The Problem of Obscurantism." *Philosophia*, Vol. 44 (2016): 531-546.

Jacoby, Larry L., Diane Ste-Marie, & Jeffrey P. Toth, "Redefining Automaticity: Unconscious Influences, Awareness, and Control." In *Attention: Selection, Awareness, and Control: A Tribute to Donald Broadbent,* edited by A. D. Baddeley and L. Weiskrantz, 261-282. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993.

Joseph, Marc. *Donald Davidson: Philosophy Now.* Chesham: Acumen Publishing Limited, 2004.

Kellner, Douglas. "Donald Trump and the Politics of Lying." In *Post-Truth, Fake News, Viral Modernity and Higher Education,* edited by Michael A. Peters, Sharon Rider, Mats Hyvönen, and Tina Besley, 89-100. Singapore: Springer, 2018.

Keyes, Ralph. *The Post-Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004.

Kimbrough, Scott. "On Letting it Slide." In *Bullshit and Philosophy*, 3-18.

Köhnken, Adolf. "Obscurity and Obscurantism: How to Read Pindar." Review of *Soliciting Darkness: Pindar, Obscurity, and the Classical Tradition, Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature 47* by John T. Hamilton, *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 11, no. 4 (Spring 2005): 602-606.

Leezenberg, Michiel. *Contexts of Metaphor.* Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2001.

Legerstee, Maria. *Infants' Sense of People: Precursors to a Theory of Mind.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Leitgeb, Hannes. *Inference on the Low Level: An Investigation into Deduction, Nonmonotonic Reasoning and the Philosophy of Cognition.* Dordrecht: Springer Science and Business Media, 2004.

LePore, Ernest. "Introduction." In *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the philosophy of Donald Davidson,* edited by Ernest LePore. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1986.

Lepore, Ernest & Kirk Ludwig, "Donald Davidson." *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* XXVIII (2004): 309-333.

Leudar, Ivan., & Alan Costall, eds. *Against Theory of Mind.* United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

Levy, Neil. "Analytic and Continental Philosophy: Explaining the Differences," *Metaphilosophy* 34, no. 3 (Apr. 2003): 284-304.

Lewis, David. "Radical Interpretation." *Synthese* 27, no. 3/4 (1974): 331-344.

_____. "How to define theoretical terms." In his *Philosophical Papers,* volume I. Oxford: Oxford University Press 1985.

_____. "Elusive Knowledge." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 74, no. 4 (1996): 549-567.

Lillard, Angeline. "Theories Behind Theories of Mind." *Human Development* 41, no. 1 (Jan/Feb., 1998): 40-46.

Logan, Gordon D. "Attention and Preattention in Theories of Automaticity." *The American Journal of Psychology* 105 (1992): 317-339.

Ludwig, Kirk. "The Truth About Moods." In *Concepts of Meaning: Framing an Integrated Theory of Linguistic Behaviour,* edited by Gerhard Preyer, Georg Peter and Maria Ulkan, 133-181. Dordrecht: Springer-Science and Business Media, 2003.

_____. "The Truth About Moods." In *Concepts of Meaning*, 133-181.

Ma, Lin., & Jaap van Brakel. *Fundamentals of Comparative and Intercultural Philosophy.* New York: State University of New York Press, 2016.

Malpas, J. E. "Analysis and Hermeneutics." *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 25, no. 2 (1992):   93-123.

Mandelbaum, Eric. "Thinking is Believing." *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 57, no. 1 (2014): 55-96.

Mantzavinos, C. "Hermeneutics." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition),   Edward   N.   Zalta (ed.),   URL   = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/hermeneutics/>.

McComiskey, Bruce. *Post-Truth Rhetoric and Composition.* USA: University Press of Colorado, 2017.

McDiarmid, Ian. "Underdetermination and Meaning Indeterminacy: What is the Difference?" *Erkenntnis* 69, no. 3 (Nov. 2008): 279-93.

Martin, Jordan S., Amy Summerville, & Virginia B. Wickline. "Persuasion and Pragmatics: An Empirical Test of the Guru Effect Model." *Review of Philosophy and Psychology* 8 (2017): 219-234.

McGinn, Colin. "Semantics for Nonindicative Sentences." *Philosophical Studies* 32, no. 3 (Oct., 1977): 301-311.

McIntyre, Lee. *Post-Truth.* Cambridge: MIT, 2018.

Mertens, Els. *et al*, *Zo Geschreven 2: Nederlands voor Anderstaligen.* België: Pelckmans, 2012.

Michelfelder, Diane., & Richard Palmer. "Introduction." In *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter,* edited by Diane P. Michelfelder and Richard E. Palmer, 1-2. New York: State University of New York Press, 1989.

Moller-Nielsen, Thomas. "What is Žižek for?" https://www.currentaffairs.org/2019/10/what-is-zizek-for [Retrieved 16th June 2020].

Moore, A. W. "The Underdetermination/Indeterminacy Distinction and the Analytic/Synthetic Distinction," *Erkenntnis* 46, no. 1 (Jan., 1997): 5-32.

Moors, Agnes & Jan De Houwer. "Automaticity: a Theoretical and Conceptual Analysis." *Psychological Bulletin* 132 (2006): 297-326.

Mootz, Francis J. *Law, Hermeneutics and Rhetoric.* England: Ashgate, 2010.

Morton, Adam. *Frames of Mind: Constraints on the Common-sense Conception of the Mental.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980.

Mueller-Vollmer, Kurt, ed. *The Hermeneutics Reader: Texts from the German Tradition from the Enlightenment to the Present.* New York: Continuum, 2006.

Näätänen, Risto. "The perception of speech sounds by the human brain as reflected by the mismatch negativity ~MMN! and its magnetic equivalent ~MMNm!" *Psychophysiology* 38 (2001): 1-21.

Nelson, Katherine. "Language Pathways Into the Community of Minds." In *Why Language Matters for Theory of Mind,* 26-49.

Newell, Allen. *Unified Theories of Cognition.* USA: Harvard University Press, 1994.

Nielsen, Kai. *Naturalism and Religion.* Amherst: Prometheus books, 2001.

Nygaard, Lynne C. & Erin R. Lunders. "Resolution of Lexical Ambiguity by Emotional Tone of Voice," *Memory and Cognition* 30, no. 4 (2002): 583-593.

Oreskes, Naomi., & Erik M. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoking to Global Warming.* New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2010.

Palmer, Richard E. Introduction to Gadamer's "The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem." In *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of Later Writings* edited by Richard E. Palmer, 72-77. Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2007.

_____. Introduction to Gadamer's "Language and Understanding." In *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of Later Writings,* 89-107. This paper was originally recorded for a radio presentation, and was broadcast on Southwest Radio (Sudwestfunk) in two parts on March 22 and March 30, 1970. For this reason there are no footnotes in the paper. The same year, the record was printed in the Lutheran monthly, *Zeitwende.* In 1971 it was published in a book Gadamer co-authored. Years later it was included in his *Kleine Schriften,* and 1986 in the second volume of his *Gesammelte Werke.* In 1997 it was included in his *Lesebuch.*

Pagin, Peter. "Radical Interpretation and the Principle of Charity." In *A Companion to Donald Davidson,* edited by Ernie Lepore and Kirk Ludwig. UK: Willey Blackwell, 2013.

Pandey, K. C. *Religious Beliefs, Superstitions and Wittgenstein.* New Delhi: Readworthy, 2009.

Pascal, Fania. "Wittgenstein: A Personal Memoir." In *Recollections of Wittgenstein,* edited by R. Rhees, 23-39. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984.

Pennycook, Gordon., James Allan Cheyne, Nathaniel Barr, Derek J. Koehler, & Jonathan A. Fugelsang. "On the Reception and Detection of Pseudo-profound Bullshit, *Judgment and Decision Making* 10, no. 6 (Nov. 2015): 549-563.

_____."It's Still Bullshit: Reply to Dalton." *Judgment and Decision Making* 11, no. 1 (Jan., 2016): 13-125.

Perry, Thomas D. *Professional Philosophy: What It Is and Why It Matters.* Dordrecht-Boston: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1986.

Pinker, Steven. *Sense of Style: The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century.* New York: Penguin, 2014.

Plato. *The Being of the Beautiful: Plato's Theaetetus, Sophist and Statesman.* Translated and with commentary by Seth Benardete Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.

Prado, C. G. *Searle and Foucault on Truth.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Preti, Consuelo. "A Defense of Common Sense." In *Bullshit and Philosophy: Guaranteed to Get Perfect Results Every Time,* edited by Gary L. Hardcastle and George A. Reisch, 19-32. Illinois: Open Court, 2006.

Prévert, Jacques. Quoted in William E. Baker, *Jacques Prévert.* New York: Twayne Publishers Inc., 1967.

Pritchard, Duncan. *What is this thing called Knowledge?* London-New York: Routledge, 2006.

Proctor, Robert N. "Agnotology: A Missing Term to Describe the Cultural Production of Ignorance (and its Study)." In *Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance,* edited by Robert N. Proctor and Londa Schiebinger, 1-36. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008.

Puckett, Harry. "T.S. Eliot on Knowing: The Word Unheard." *The New England Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (Jun., 1971): 179-196.

Pulvermüller, Friedmann. "Brain Mechanisms Linking Language and Action." *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* 6 (2005): 576-582.

Pulvermüller, Friedmann & Yury.Shtyrov. "Language outside the focus of attention: The mismatch negativity as a tool for studying higher cognitive processes." *Progress in Neurobiology* 76 (2006): 49-71.

Quine, Willard van Orman. *Word and Object.* USA: The Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1960.

_____. "Ontological Relativity." *The Journal of Philosophy* 65, no. 7 (Apr. 4, 1968): 185-212.

_____. "On Empirically Equivalent Systems of the World." <u>Erkenntnis</u> 9, no. 3 (Nov., 1975): 313-328.

_____. *Pursuit of Truth.* USA: Harvard University Press, 1992.

_____. "Where do we Disagree?" In *The Philosophy of Donald Davidson,* edited by Lewis Edwin Hahn, 73-79. USA: Open Court Publishing Company, 1999.

Ramsey, Frank Plumpton. *Foundations of Mathematics and other Logical Essays,* edited by R.B. Braithwaite. London-New York: Routledge, 1931 [2001].

Ratcliffe, Matthew. *Rethinking Commonsense Psychology: A Critique of Folk Psychology, Theory of Mind, and Simulation.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

Reisch, George A. "The Pragmatics of Bullshit, Intelligently Designed." In *Bullshit and Philosophy,* 33-47.

Repacholi, Betty., Virginia Slaughter, Michelle Pritchard, & Vicki Gibbs. "Theory of Mind, Machiavellianism, and Social Functioning in Childhood." In *Individual Differences in Theory of Mind: Implications for Typical and Atypical Development,* edited by Betty Repacholi and Virginia Slaughter, 68-98. Hove: Psychology Press, 2003.

Richardson, Alan. "Performing Bullshit and the Post-sincere Condition." In *Bullshit and Philosophy,* 83-96.

Riffaterre, Michael. "Descriptive Imagery," *Yale French Studies* 61, Towards a Theory of Description (1981): 107-125.

Rinofner-Kreidl, Sonja., & Harald A. Wiltsche, eds. *Analytic and Continental Philosophy: Proceedings of the 37th International Wittgenstein Symposium.* Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2016.

Rosen, Stanley. "The Identity of, and the Difference between Analytic and Continental Philosophy," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies,* 9, 3o. 3 (2001): 341-348.

Ross, L. "The Intuitive Psychologist and His Shortcomings: Distortions in the Attribution Process," *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 10 (1977): 173-220.

Rust, James D. "The Art of Fiction in George Eliot's Reviews." *The Review of English Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 26 (Apr., 1956): 164-172.

Sarles, Harvey B. *Language and Human Nature.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985.

Schlick, Moritz. "Causality in Contemporary Physics." In: *Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 2, edited by Henk L. Mulder and Barbara van de Velde-Schlick, 1925-1936. Dordrecht: Reidel, 1979.

Schwitzgebel, Eric. "A Phenomenal Dispositional Account of Belief." *Nous*, Vo. 36 (2002): 249-275.

Seidenberg, Mark S., Michael K. Tanenhaus, James M. Leiman, & Marie Bienkowski. "Automatic Access of the Meanings of Ambiguous Words in Context: Some Limitations of Knowledge-Based Processing." *Cognitive Psychology* 14 (1982): 489-537.

Shackel, Nicholas. "The Vacuity of Postmodernist Methodology." *Metaphilosophy* 36, no. 3 (Apr., 2005): 295-320.

Shakespeare, William. "Macbeth." In *Shakespeare Complete Works,* edited by W.J. Craig. London: Oxford University Press, 1966.

Shieber, Joseph. "Understanding Assertion." *Language and Communication* 29 (2009): 47-60.

Shklar, Judith N. "Squaring the Hermeneutic Circle." *Social Research* 71, no. 3 (2004), 655-678.

Sinclair, Robert. "A Less Radical Interpretation of Davidson and Quine. "*Dialogue* 45, no. 1 (Dec.2006): 107-124.

Sklar, Howard. *The Art of Sympathy in Fiction: Forms of Ethical and Emotional Persuasion.* Amsterdam: John Benjamin's Publishing Company, 2013.

Soames, Scott. "Understanding Assertion." In *Content and Modality: Themes from the Philosophy of Robert Stalnaker,* edited by Judith Thomson and Alex Byrne, 222-250. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Sperber, Dan. "The Guru Effect." *Review of Philosophy and Psychology* 1 (2010): 583- 592.

Sperber, Dan., Fabrice Clément, Christophe Heintz, Olivier Mascaro, Hugo Mercier, Gloria Origgi, & Deidre Wilson. "Epistemic Vigilance." *Mind and Language* 25, no. 4 (Sept., 2010): 359-393.

Spiegelman, Willard. *How Poets See the World: The Art of Description in Contemporary Fiction.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Stalnaker, Robert C. "Assertion." In *Context and Content: Essays on Intentionality in Speech and Thought,* edited by Robert C. Stalnaker, 78-95. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Stern, Murray J. "A Note on Obscurantism: The Case of Aaron Green." *Contemporary Psychoanalysis* 18, no. 2 (1982): 646-651.

Stich, Stephen., & Shaun Nichols, "Folk Psychology: Simulation or Tacit Theory?" *Philosophical Issues* 3, Science and Knowledge (1993): 225-270.

Stich, Stephen P. *From Folk Psychology to Cognitive Science.* Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press 1983.

Stout, Jeffrey. "The Relativity of Interpretation." *The Monist, An International Journal of General Philosophical Inquiry* 69, no. 1 (Jan., 1986): 103-118.

Sunstein, CassR. *On Rumors: How Falsehoods Spread, Why We Believe Them, and What Can be Done.* USA: Princeton University Press, 2014.

Swartz, Chantélle., & Paul Cilliers. "Dialogue Disrupted: Derrida, Gadamer and the Ethics of Discussion." *South African Journal of Philosophy* 22, no. 1 (2003): 1-18.

Swinney, David A. "Lexical Access During Sentence Comprehension: (Re)Consideration of Context Effects." *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior* 18 (1979): 645-659.

Tabossi, Patrizia., Lucia Colombo, & Remo Job. "Accessing Lexical Ambiguity: Effects of Context and Dominance." *Psychological Research* 49 (1987): 161-167.

Tarski, Alfred. *Logic, Semantics, Mathematics: Papers from 1923-1938.* Translated by J.H. Woodger. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956.

The Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version containing the Old and New Testaments with the Apocrypha/Deuterocanonical books. Ibadan: St Pauls, 1973.

Townsend, H. G. "The Obscurantism of Science," *The Journal of Philosophy* 22, no. 20 (Sep. 24, 1925): 548-552.

Tzelgov, Joseph & Ziv Porat and Avishai Henik. "Automaticity and Consciousness: Is Perceiving the Word Necessary for Reading it?" *The American Journal of Psychology* 110 (1997): 429-448.

Vaihinger, H. *The Philosophy of 'As If': A System of the Theoretical, Practical and Religious Fictions of Mankind.* Translated by C.K. Ogden. London: Percy Lung, Humphries & Co. Ltd, 1935 second ed.

Van de Craen, Piet. "Hermeneutics." In *Philosophical Perspectives for Hermeneutics,* edited by Marina Sbisà, Jan-Ola Ostman, and Jef Verschueren, 125-130. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2011.

Vinson, David W., Rick Dale, Maryam Tabatabaeian, & Nicholas D. Duran, "Seeing and Believing: Social Influences on Language Processing." In *Attention and Vision in*

Language Processing edited by Ramesh Kumar Mishra, Narayanan Srinivasan, and Falk Huettig, 197-213. India: Springer, 2015.

Vrahimis, Andreas. "Russell's Critique of Bergson and the Divide between 'Analytic' and 'Continental' Philosophy." *Balkan Journal of Philosophy* 3, no. 1 (2011).

_____. *Encounters between Analytic and Continental Philosophy.* England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Webb, Mark Owen. *A Comparative Doxastic-Practice Epistemology of Religious Experience.* New York: Springer, 2015.

Wellman, Henry M. *The Child's Theory of Mind.* Cambridge MA: MIT press, 1990.

White, Morton. "Ontological Clarity and Semantic Obscurity." *The Journal of Philosophy* 48, no. 12 (1951): 373-380.

Whiten, Andrew. "Humans are not Alone in Computing How Others See the World." *Animal Behavior* 86, no. 2 (Aug., 2013): 213-221.

Williams, Bernard. "Contemporary Philosophy: A Second Look." In *The Blackwell Companion to Philosophy,* edited by Nicholas Bunnin and E.P. Tsui-James, 23-34. USA: Blackwell, 2002.

Wittgenstein, L. *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief,* edited by Cyril Barrett. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967.

Zuckerman, Miron., Mary D. Amidon, Shawn E. Bishop & Scott D. Formerantz, "Face and Tone of Voice in the communication of Deception." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 43, no. 2 (1982): 347-357.