



# Charity Goes Deep

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Received: 16 February 2025 / Accepted: 7 September 2025 / Published online: 23 October 2025  
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## Abstract

In this paper I will trace a possible overlap between the Davidsonian appeal to the principle of charity in connection with the interpretation of a radically different language and an idea that can be found in the writing of Stanley Cavell. While Cavell puts forward his idea as an understanding of the work of the later Wittgenstein, I want to treat these ideas as standing on their own and I shall leave aside any assessment of Wittgenstein scholarship. What we learn from Davidson is that the principle of charity is not optional and that it goes deep. What I find in the work of Cavell is a possible account of why the principle is not optional and a sense of just how deep it goes. What we learn from the work of both of these philosophers is the way in which linguistic competence can be both deeply personal and yet shared.

**Keywords** Donald Davidson · Stanley Cavell · The principle of charity · Convention · Linguistic meaning · The interpersonal

*My ears prick up when someone  
tells me I am operating in  
a Kantian, Wittgensteinian,  
Hegelian...way, but I would never  
conspicuously try to emulate any  
of these worthies.  
(Davidson, 1999: 155)*

## 1 Introduction

While great philosophers tend largely (and in some cases exclusively) to plough their own furrows, it is nonetheless possible to find overlapping themes and continuities in their work. In some cases the continuities are intentional, while in others they simply emerge in the eyes of the reader. In this paper I will trace a possible overlap between the Davidsonian appeal to the principle of charity in connection with the interpretation of a radically different language and an idea that can be found in the writing of Stanley Cavell. In so far as there is any case to be made for this overlap, it is one that should be thought of as emerging in the eyes of this reader. As far as I know, there was little (if any) philosophical

interaction between Cavell and Davidson. I can only hope that Davidson's ears might have "pricked up" at being told that his work was operating in a Cavellian way.

The principle of charity is an idea introduced into philosophy of language through the work of N.L. Wilson in connection with the selection of a reference for a proper name (Wilson 1959).<sup>1</sup> The idea was picked up by Davidson and employed in connection with the business of radical interpretation which, in turn, lies at the heart of his account of linguistic meaning. In an interview with Ernie Lepore, Davidson admitted that the word "charity" in the "principle of charity" was a "misnomer". To talk of charity makes it seem as if one is being kind to those whose language one is attempting to understand. But, Davidson tells Lepore, "[the principle of charity] is not a matter of being kind to people; it's the condition for understanding them at all". And Davidson continues, "charity has two features: one is that you can't understand people if you don't see them as sharing a world with you; the other is that you can't understand people if you don't see them as logical in the way that you are -- up to a point, of course" (Lepore interview with Davidson). We have here a clear statement of the status of the principle and its scope. Both this status and this scope

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<sup>1</sup> Davidson acknowledges that the idea and the phrase 'the principle of charity' both come from Wilson's work in Davidson 1984: xvii. Davidson has also referred to the principle as "the principle of rational accommodation" (see Davidson 2004: 36).

will be important in my discussion of the principle and how I see it as relating to the work of Cavell. What Davidson here reveals in his comments about the principle is that it is not optional. It goes deep. What I find in the work of Cavell is a possible account of why the principle is to be thought of as not optional and a sense of just how deep it goes.

While I find affinities between the work of these two philosophers (three if one includes the philosopher who Cavell claims to follow, i.e. Wittgenstein), I by no means want to say that the overlap here is in any sense complete. There are, for example, important differences in the overall approach that these philosophers take – differences that must not be lost sight of when I point to moments of overlap.<sup>2</sup> And while the differences are important, I do think that the affinity that I espy, and that I shall expose by consideration of Cavell's work in connection with the Davidsonian principle of charity, reflects something that is of fundamental importance. It is something that makes it worth looking past many of the differences.

One difference is clear from the outset. Davidson is well known for his theory of meaning, and his proposal that a Tarskian theory of truth can serve as a theory of meaning. It is understanding precisely how this can be that we encounter the idea of interpretation with its guiding principle of charity. Right from the outset, then, a point of contrast between the work of Wittgenstein and Cavell, on the one hand, and Davidson, on the other, needs to be acknowledged. There is no mention in the work of the former philosophers of theories of truth or meaning. Indeed, Wittgenstein is quite clear that it is therapy and not theory building that is relevant when doing philosophy. It is the fact that Davidson is committed to theory building that may be thought to stand in the way of seeing affinities between the work of these philosophers. Understanding the role of theory in Davidson's overall account of language has been a matter of much controversy, and there is something to be said for accusing Davidson of some unclarity on this matter. If, however, one takes his work as a whole into account (and especially looking at some of his later writing) there is a case for seeing an affinity between it and the work of philosophers such as Wittgenstein and Cavell. In the final section I shall explain how I understand the role that theory plays in Davidson's work. As I read his work, the commitment to theory should not be taken to be a roadblock to seeing affinities between it and the work of philosophers such as Cavell and Wittgenstein.<sup>3</sup> The affinity to which I want to draw attention in this

paper is the following: how we understand a speaker of a language reflects the way in which an individual speaker is deeply bound to others. What Cavell helps us to understand is the way in which language is both deeply personal while at the same time deeply connected to others. It is this that I see reflected in Davidson's use of the principle of charity.

In section 2 I will set out a basic overview of Davidson's account of meaning and the role that the principle of charity plays in it. In section 3 I turn to outline Cavell's defense of ordinary language philosophy against those who insist that language use is governed by impersonal rules. With Cavell's understanding of ordinary language philosophy in mind, I return in section 4 to a consideration of Davidson's work and I suggest that we can understand Davidson to be an ordinary language philosopher in the Cavellian mode.

## 2 Starting with Davidson

Davidson is famous for his use of a Tarskian theory of truth as a starting point for his account of language. What that theory can provide is an account of how sentences are constructed from their parts, which in turn is important because it can help us to account for the (Chomskian) idea that language users are in a position to produce and understand an infinite number of sentences given a finite linguistic base. The theory of truth, then, helps philosophers of language to explain and to understand compositionality, which in turn allows understanding of how language is learned and can be productive of new meaning. The theory also helps to explain and understand the very *structure* of language which helps us to see how sentences relate to one another.<sup>4</sup> In this connection we may recall that one of the things that charity reflects is that we share our logic with those we seek to understand. Sharing our logic is one of the things that makes others *understandable*, and for this structure is essential. Davidson praises the work done by logicians such as Frege and Tarski in uncovering the structure of language. But at the same time that Davidson praises the work of logicians, he points out the difficulties that these same logicians have in marrying up their formal structures with *natural* languages. He writes: “uninterpreted formal systems are not languages through lack of meaning, while interpreted formal systems are best seen as extensions or fragments of the natural languages from which they borrow life” (Davidson 1984: 71). A theory of truth is not a theory of meaning. It was Davidson's insight that the former could be used in the

<sup>2</sup> I mention one possible difference in section 4, below.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the tensions in Davidson's work in connection with the theory building see, for example, Gustafsson (1998). It should be noted, and as will become clear in section 4, below, my view of the place of theory in Davidson's account of meaning differs from that of Gustafsson.

<sup>4</sup> Davidson writes: “To see the structure of a sentence through the eyes of a theory of truth is to see it as built by devices a finite number of which suffice for every sentence; the structure of the sentence thus determines its relations to other sentences” (1984: 61).

service of the latter, but just how this works is where the magic happens.

While Davidson is clear about the need for formal theory, he is also clear about the limitation of it when it comes to understanding natural language. He writes, “we have recognized that a theory of the kind proposed [i.e. of truth] leaves the whole nature of what individual words mean exactly where it was” (1984: 32–33). Davidson is also clear from the outset about the status of this theoretical work. The theory *suffices* for understanding meaning, and he clarifies what he means when he writes: “[C]laims about what would constitute a satisfactory theory are not ... claims about the propositional knowledge of an interpreter, nor are they claims about the details of the inner workings of some part of the brain. They are rather claims about what must be said to give a satisfactory description of the competence of the interpreter. *We* cannot describe what an interpreter can do except by appeal to a recursive theory of a certain sort” (Davidson 2005: 96).<sup>5</sup> Remembering the status of this theoretical work is important when we come to make connections between Davidson’s work and Cavell’s. In what follows I take Davidson at his word when he says that he is not aiming, with his appeal to theory, to describe something either known by the interpreter or about the workings of her brain. The theory is simply a model of the interpreter’s linguistic competence; it is a model of what would suffice for understanding.

While the theory of truth is the starting point for Davidson’s 1963 paper “Truth and Meaning”, the emphasis in his 1973 papers “Radical Interpretation” and “Belief and the Basis of Meaning” is meaning. The connection to the theory of truth is still there, but Davidson is now clearer about what he is doing with Tarski’s work. Tarski, we are told, assumed meaning in order to explain truth; Davidson’s intention is to assume [Tarski’s account of] truth in order to explain meaning (Davidson 1984: 134). The connection between Tarski’s theory of truth with what speakers understand comes at the level of the theory’s T-sentences – the theorems produced by the theory. It is in connection with these T-sentences that meaning enters.<sup>6</sup> While the theory does the formal work and is “beyond the reach of direct verification”, the theory itself is testable at the level of the T-sentence (Davidson 1984: 133).

At this point we should stop and remember that Davidson explicitly rejects any reification of meaning. In this

Davidson is a follower of Quine. When it comes to understanding meaning all we have to go on is behaviour. And he reminds us again and again that utterances are complex behaviours that interact with other behaviours. Davidson is at first a little coy about the extent of this interconnected web of behaviour, but it soon becomes clear that he is committed to what he comes to call a “unified theory” of action or behaviour. And while Davidson is careful to say that he rejects the idea that we can define meaning in terms of intention, he does think that there are complicated and important relations between what a speaker’s words mean and his non-linguistic intentions and beliefs (cf. Davidson 1984: 143).<sup>7</sup>

Behavioural unity here is important, but it also presents the radical interpreter with a problem: unless I know what someone means, I cannot know what they believe and, unless I know what they believe, I cannot know what they mean. The radical interpreter looks to be locked out from understanding others. But Davidson offers a way in: as well as what someone believes and means, there is what she holds true. There is what Quine called “prompted assent”. But prompted assent alone will not suffice. The need for more comes from the thought that the individual before me may hold true a whole raft of sentences in circumstances that I would not. It is in connection with this thought that Davidson introduces the principle of charity. He points out that, if the person I was trying to interpret did hold a vast range of sentences true in circumstances that I would not, I would have to conclude that this individual was so different from me as to be totally incomprehensible, that this individual sees the world in way that is radically differently from me. But Davidson rejects this kind of relativism. It is his claim that, in so far as this individual is speaking a language, they will be interpretable, and to be interpretable charity must be exercised. “My point has always been that understanding can be secured only by interpreting in a way that makes for the right sort of agreement” (Davidson 1984: xvii).<sup>8</sup> And here I return to what I quoted Davidson as saying at the outset of this paper: “[the principle of charity] is not a matter of being kind to people; it’s the condition for understanding them at all”. I turn, in the next section, to an outline of the work of Cavell which I take to provide a deeper understanding of the reason why charity plays the role it does in interpretation.

<sup>5</sup> The quotation continues: “It does not add anything to this thesis to say that if the theory does correctly describe the competence of an interpreter, some mechanism in the interpreter must correspond to the theory”.

<sup>6</sup> Davidson writes, “...a theory of truth is said to be satisfactory if it generates a T-sentence for each sentence of the object language” (1984: 133).

<sup>7</sup> For a good discussion of the unified theory of action or behaviour see the online interview with Donald Davidson by Jim Hopkins. Cf. also, Hopkins 1999.

<sup>8</sup> For an extended discussion of his rejection of relativism, see Davidson 1984: 183–214. The issue of relativism here brings up issues that I do not address in this paper.

### 3 Turning To Cavell

While there has been a fair amount written on the overlap between Davidson's philosophy and that of the later Wittgenstein, I know of very little work that brings Davidson's writing on language together with that of Cavell.<sup>9,10</sup> Much of Cavell's earlier work is written under the influence of Wittgenstein's later philosophy, but we must not lose sight of the impact that Austin's work had on him. Cavell reports that after hearing Austin's William James Lectures at Harvard: "My relation to my language – and my world – as such had been thrown into question. How to proceed in philosophy would never for me be the same. I had heard of conversion experiences, but I think I had never before had anything I would be willing to call such a thing..." (Cavell 2022: 94–95). While I won't be mentioning Austin, his work hovers in the background.

In *Must we mean what we say?* Cavell brings together a collection of essays, the first of which bears the same title as the book as a whole. The essay is a response to a paper by Benson Mates in which Mates puts forward a critique of ordinary language philosophy. The very first sentence of Cavell's response reads as follows: "That what we ordinarily say and mean may have a direct and deep control over what we can philosophically say and mean is an idea which many philosophers find oppressive" (Cavell 1969: 1). Here we have a statement that puts *ordinary* language at the heart of what we philosophically say and mean, and also a recognition that this idea is one that is rejected by many philosophers, among them Benson Mates. Cavell is here making a conscious reference in *his* use of the term "ordinary language" to a kind of philosophy that was being practiced in Oxford at the time of his writing (the 1950's and 60's).<sup>11</sup> Mates begins his critique of ordinary language philosophy by pointing out that ordinary language philosophers often disagree about what it is that we mean (giving examples from the work of Austin and Ryle). According to Mates, what is needed to sort out such disagreement is *evidence* in the form of experimental studies which demonstrate the occurrence of a given statement in the language. What this

evidence amounts to is a system of linguistic principles and rules, linguistic norms if you like, that speakers can appeal to in resolving linguistic disputes. It is in response to this Cavell writes that native speakers of a language

do not, in *general*, need evidence for what is said in the language; they are the source of such evidence. It is from them that the descriptive linguist takes the corpus of utterances on the basis of which he will construct a grammar of that language.... The philosopher who proceeds from ordinary language, in his use of himself as subject in his collection of data, may be more informal than the descriptive linguist...; but there is nothing in that to make the data, in some general way, suspect (Cavell 1969: 4–5).

To understand what Cavell means when he says that speakers are the source of evidence here we need to contrast this with Mates' insistence that the evidence we are looking for is to be found in what words strictly and literally mean in a language, with its attendant – but separate – idea of pragmatics. Cavell's appeal to ordinary language is designed as a challenge to such a division between semantics and pragmatics, between what words mean and what speakers mean. He bases his challenge to this way of thinking about language on his understanding of the later work of Wittgenstein. Cavell not only proffers an understanding of what Wittgenstein writes in this connection, but he also builds upon it. As I have already noted, my interest here is not in Wittgenstein exegesis. While I will have occasion to draw on some things said by Wittgenstein, what mainly interests me is what Cavell does with this work. As Cavell writes in connection with another idea that he connects with Wittgenstein's work and that some Wittgensteinians reject, if what he has to say turns out not to be what Wittgenstein was saying, then he and Wittgenstein "differ on the matter" (Cavell 2004: 287). There is no doubt that appeal to strict and literal meaning – to a system of established rules and principles – as a way of resolving linguistic dispute has a certain appeal. An appeal to literal meaning can seem essential as a way of drawing us away from the personal use of language and setting us on a course of impersonal use that can be shared with others. According to Stephen Mulhall, "[i]t is this notion of impersonality that Cavell wishes to oppose when he talks of linguistic competence as a species of self-knowledge" (Mulhall 1994: 6). What Cavell exposes – and that he claims to have learned from Wittgenstein's later work – is the way in which language can be understood to be at once personal and yet shared, and that we can understand this sharing without recourse to impersonal linguistic rules. The contrast

<sup>9</sup> For a paper that discusses Davidson's work on malapropism in connection with Cavell's idea of projection in language see Gustafsson 2011. It should be noted that my reading of Davidson does not agree with Gustafsson's.

<sup>10</sup> Much of Cavell's work on language purports to be an interpretation of the work of the later Wittgenstein, so any overlap with the latter's work may be thought to carry over to the former. However, not everyone would agree with Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein, and Cavell admittedly builds on what he has learned from Wittgenstein. For the purposes of this paper, I will concentrate largely on Cavell's work.

<sup>11</sup> Cavell himself is careful not to refer to any "school" of philosophy, mindful of the differences that exist between philosophers who extoll the virtue of ordinary language (see Cavell 1969: 2).

here is between sharing that comes about as the result of the interpersonal rather than the impersonal.<sup>12</sup>

What I want to suggest is that what Cavell claims to find in Wittgenstein's writing, and in particular the way he expands upon this, can be helpful when thinking about Davidson's appeal to the principle of charity. Understanding Cavell's idea that speakers are our source of evidence when it comes to understanding meaning, may help us to see just why that principle plays the role that it does for Davidson in radical interpretation. How this Cavellian idea can help us to understand the use of the principle in coming to understand others is something I explain in section 4. But first I will explain how I understand what Cavell means when he says that speakers are the source of evidence when it comes to understanding meaning.

In the Foreword to *Must we mean what we say?* Cavell writes the following: "Meaning what one says becomes a matter of making one's sense present to oneself. This is the way I understand Wittgenstein's having described his later philosophy as an effort to 'bring words back' to their everyday use..., as though the words we use in philosophy ...are away" (Cavell 1969: xix). In connection with this goal of bringing words back Cavell discusses the semantics-pragmatics distinction. According to Cavell, if we separate out implication from literal meaning and relegate it to pragmatics, we lose sight of the fact that "[one] wouldn't (couldn't) say what [one] said without implying what [one] did" (Cavell 1969: 9). Cavell points out that when children learn to speak a language they learn to speak it *implications and all*.<sup>13</sup> And in connection with the learning of a language he writes that in so far as language involves 'following a rule': "'following a rule' is an activity we learn against the background of, and in the course of, learning innumerable other activities – for example obeying orders, taking and giving directions, repeating what is said and done, and so forth" (Cavell 1969: 49). Linguistic activity is also bound up with context, and language learned in one context can be projected into further contexts. In response to a question about what it is to learn or to teach a language, Cavell observes, "We say a word and the child repeats it. What is 'repeating' here? All we know is that the child makes a sound which we accept. (How does the child recognize acceptance? Has

he learned what that is?)" (Cavell 1969: 52). Cavell connects all this with *Philosophical Investigations* 241 where Wittgenstein writes: "So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false? --- It is what human beings *say* that is true or false; and they agree in the *language* they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life". The ordering of things here is crucial: agreement in language rests on agreement in form of life; without the form of life, there would be no shared language. It is in connection with the way we learn language that Cavell writes:

That on the whole we do [project a word into further contexts in a way that is acceptable to others] is a matter of our sharing routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, senses of humour and of significance and of fulfilment, of what is outrageous, and of what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an assertion, when an appeal, when an explanation – all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls 'forms of life'. Human speech and activity, sanity and community, rests upon nothing more, but nothing less, than this. (Cavell 1969: 52)

What we learn from Cavell (and Wittgenstein) is that we share our responses to the world and each other and that without this there would be no community and no communication. The work being done by appeal to our shared responses should not be underestimated.

With this understanding of why Cavell thinks we must not divorce pragmatics from semantics in mind, let us return to consider the ordinary language philosopher's appeal to his or her own sense of what the words in their language mean. Cavell writes, "If it is accepted that 'a language' (a natural language) is what the native speakers of a language speak, and that speaking a language is a matter of practical mastery, then such questions as 'What should we say if...?' ... asked of someone who has mastered the language (for example, oneself) is a request for the person to say something about himself, describe what he does" (Cavell 1969: 66). Notice that in this passage Cavell not only connects speaking a language with describing something about the speaker herself but also connects what she describes about herself with what we in the community of speakers should say. But it is not at all clear what entitles any individual speaker – or ordinary language philosopher – to speak on behalf of others. That we are so entitled is something that lies at the heart of Cavell's understanding of ordinary language philosophy. It is in understanding how it is that we are individually entitled to speak on behalf of others that we come to appreciate how the interpersonal can do the work that philosophers like Mates believe can only be done by

<sup>12</sup> Cf. what Mulhall writes in connection with the ordinary philosopher who appeals to "what we say": "in acquiring and displaying such knowledge about ourselves, we acquire and display knowledge of others; in this region of self-knowledge, to know one's own mind is to know other minds – which does not make such knowledge both subjective and objective, but rather both personal and interpersonal" (Mulhall 1994: 10).

<sup>13</sup> Cavell writes: "*Learning what these implications are is part of learning the language*; no less a part than learning its syntax, or learning what it is to which terms apply: they are an essential part of what we communicate when we talk" (Cavell 1969: 11–12).

appeal to linguistic rules (reflected in literal meaning) and the evidence that these rules provide of linguistic use. Cavell thinks that “the clue” to understanding the entitlement here lies in appreciating that the fact that “we”, while plural, is first personal, it is the first-person plural. He then notes that, while there has been much philosophical attention paid to the first-person singular, relatively little attention has been paid to the first-person plural, and he follows this by writing: “The claim that in general we do not require evidence for statements in the first-person plural does not rest upon a claim that we cannot be wrong about what we are doing or about what we say, but only that it would be extraordinary if we were (often)” (Cavell 1969: 14). He goes on to say that we only sensibly question what a speaker says if we discern some special reason for error. He concludes, “if I am wrong about what I (we) do, that is liable, where it is not comic, to be tragic” (Cavell 1969: 14). It is important that Cavell is not denying the possibility of error. But it is equally important to note that error must occur in the context of general agreement. What Cavell is cautioning against with his mention of tragedy is the possibility of massive error. In another place Cavell considers the question of individual entitlement from another direction. He asks, “How do I know that others speak as I do? (see Cavell 1969: 67). Once again Cavell begins by allowing for difference, for idiosyncrasy, but he also considers the possibility that others may not use a common concept in the way that I do. In connection with the latter possibility he refers us to *Philosophical Investigations*, Pt II, 223, where Wittgenstein writes,

One human being can be a complete enigma to another. We learn this when we come into a strange country with entirely strange traditions.... We do not *understand* the people.... We cannot find our feet with them. [Wir können uns nicht in sie finden.]

Cavell offers his own translation of the last sentence as follows: “We cannot find ourselves in them”. Immediately upon citing this quotation from the *Investigations* Cavell writes, “We, who can speak for one another, find that we cannot speak for them [that is, for these people in this strange country]. In part, of course, we find this out in finding out that we cannot speak *to* them” (Cavell 1969: 67). We discover that we can speak for others when we manage to speak to them.

It may be tempting to read *PI*, Pt II, 223 as suggesting that there may indeed be people existing in a strange county that we cannot speak to. How we understand what Wittgenstein writes here may be thought to connect with our understanding of what Cavell means when he writes concerning “all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls ‘forms of life’” (Cavell 1969: 52). Wittgenstein first refers to “a form of life” in *PI* 19, and he goes on to write of *a* form of

life throughout Part I of the *Investigations*. However, in *PI*, Pt II, 226, he writes: “What has to be accepted, the given, is – so one could say – *forms of life*” (italics in original). While Cavell does not give us a page reference when he quotes Wittgenstein in connection with the whirl of organism, it may be that he has *PI*, Pt II, 226 in mind. And with his references to *forms of life* it may be tempting to read Cavell as allowing that there may be those who view the world differently and with whom we are unable to speak. But it is not entirely clear that this would be a correct reading of Cavell. If we turn to *The Claim of Reason* we find that Cavell writes of “those forms of life which are normal to any group of creatures we call human” (110). Cavell here acknowledges that there are important differences between cultures – differences that reflect individual histories and geography – but he does not take these differences to stand in the way of our appreciating the form of life that we all share. This reading of Wittgenstein is shared by Jonathan Lear who takes the passage not as providing an example of other-mindedness, but rather as providing a way of coming to understand what our form of life is like (cf. Lear 1982). Lear writes, “*The form of life is not one tribe among others. In its deepest use all beings who are possible objects of our interpretations are part of the form of life.* Thus the form of life is not an item with respect to which a philosopher can take an observational stance: for he cannot get outside it in order to observe it” (Lear 1989: 40).<sup>14</sup> By reflecting on a situation where understanding cannot occur, we learn something about the situation in which it does. And what we learn is that understanding involves being able to find ourselves in the other; we come to understand others by understanding ourselves. We can only speak to (or with) those with whom we share a form of life. Absent this sharing, there would be no communication. It is this that the ordinary language philosopher appreciates. The ordinary language philosopher takes the job of philosophy to be to bring words *back* to their ordinary use – and this is a use that we share with others. The ordinary language philosopher thus offers a way of understanding what is shared in language without the need to appeal to systems or linguistic rules, without the need to appeal to what words strictly and literally mean in a language. While the philosopher who appeals to linguistic rules finds a way of understanding what is shared which appeals to impersonal rules and norms, the ordinary language philosopher finds what is shared in the interpersonal.

In the penultimate paragraph of his reply to Mates, Cavell considers one last linguistic phenomenon that some

<sup>14</sup> Issues here may be thought to be connected with how to interpret the “we” in “those with whom we share a form of life”. It is not my aim in this paper is to pick up on these issues but, rather, to understand the way in which the individual is related to the other/others in her use of language.

appeal to when making the case for impersonal rules and norms, that is, linguistic change. However, the undeniable fact that language shifts and alters is something that Cavell finds to be quite natural and he does not see any need to see language as governed by arbitrary rules in order to explain this natural phenomenon. Cavell believes that the ordinary language philosopher can accommodate these linguistic shifts by drawing attention to the fact that language contains culture and that change in language is a quite natural result of changes in culture. He writes: “It is exactly because the language which contains a culture changes with the changes of that culture that philosophical awareness of ordinary language is illuminating” (Cavell 1969: 42–43).

There is one last aspect of Cavell’s work to which I want to draw attention before I move on to compare this work with that of Davidson’s. This last aspect has to do with the fact that, as Cavell sees things, when we do bring words back we not only learn about what we share with others, but we also learn something about our knowledge of the world. In other words, Cavell takes there to be a connection between what we *say* and what *is the case*. However, Cavell acknowledges that, once we recognize this connection, it can look like a problem for the ordinary language philosopher. After all, if one wants to know what something is, it can seem necessary to investigate the world – how else can one know what is the case? In order to help us to see that there is indeed a connection between what we say and what is the case, Cavell points out that “we learn language and we learn about the world *together*... learning is a matter of aligning language and the world” (Cavell 1969: 19–20). He distinguishes two different cases. In the first we come across a word that we don’t know and, in order to come to understand it, we reach for a dictionary. In the second case we come across something and, while we know everything there is to know about it (“everything is in front of our eyes”), yet we don’t know what it is that we have before us (Cavell 1969: 20). While this second situation is not often the case among established language users, it can occur from time to time. When faced with such a situation Cavell thinks what we do is ask ourselves what the most natural thing to say is. He concludes, “And the point of the question is this: answering it is sometimes the only way to tell – tell others and tell for ourselves – what the situation *is*.” (Cavell 1969: 20–21). Indeed, the second situation turns out to be the more basic one, as the situation in which we reach for the dictionary presupposes that we have already aligned language and the world.<sup>15</sup> Some may find in Cavell’s response

to his objector here something that one arguably does not find in the writing of Davidson. I will come back to this towards the end of section 4, below.

The ordinary language philosopher describes what we do, and in so doing, he follows what it is natural for us to do. About this Cavell writes: “To see that ordinary language is natural is to see that (perhaps even see why) it is normative for what can be said. And also to see how it is by searching definitions that Socrates can coax the mind down from self-assertion... and lead it back, through the community, home” (Cavell 1969: 43). Here we see Cavell making a connection between the normative and the natural. And as the reference to Socrates makes clear, what is natural is not just natural to me, but is natural *to us*. Without this *shared* norm, there would be no norm. In consulting what I know, I come to understand what I share with others. So, while it may be the case that I must mean what I say, it is also the case that, in saying what I say and meaning what I mean, I say and mean what *we* say and mean.

#### 4 Back To Davidson

Some years ago I wrote a couple of papers discussing the social aspects of language in which I returned to the division, drawn by Peter Strawson, between philosophers who champion communication-intention and those that champion formal theories in their account of linguistic meaning (Avramides 2013). While Strawson famously placed Davidson on the side of the formal theorists, I argued that Davidson should be placed on the side of the communication-theorists. Indeed, I went so far as to suggest that one can find something of the spirit of ordinary language philosophy still alive in Davidson’s work. I want in the final section of this paper to fine-tune my earlier suggestion and propose that, as there is no *one* understanding of ordinary language philosophy, we can find the spirit of ordinary language philosophy in the Cavellian mode still alive in Davidson’s work.

When one reads Davidson’s work on meaning, one finds at its heart an appeal to *radical* interpretation. Cavell, like Wittgenstein, simply writes of language and linguistic meaning. And while Cavell writes about what individual speakers know and how their use of language relates to another’s use, Davidson concentrates on the how a speaker understands others. But at the heart of both of their work there is an appreciation of the deep connection among speakers of language that drives language use. It is this connection that I

<sup>15</sup> Cavell here writes under the influence of his reading of Wittgenstein. In this connection Cavell quotes *Philosophical Investigations* 89 where Wittgenstein tells us that the problems of philosophy are not solved by “[hunting] out new facts; it is, rather, of the essence of our investigation that we do not seek to learn anything *new* by it. We want

to *understand* something that is already in plain view. For *this* is what we seem in some sense not to understand”. It is in this connection that Cavell uses the term ‘criteria’. For a good discussion of Cavell on criteria see Mulhall (1994), Pt. II.

see as acknowledged in Davidson's appeal to the principle of charity.

What we find in both the work of Davidson and Cavell is a clear rejection of the idea that impersonal linguistic rules (or conventions) guide language use. In Cavell's work the rejection of linguistic rules is clearly bound up with a rejection of a sharp semantics-pragmatics distinction. It is much less clear how Davidson's rejection of impersonal linguistic rules is related to the way in which he sees the relationship between semantics and pragmatics. If, however, one looks closely at some of the things that Davidson writes in connection with his rejection of linguistic rules, one finds observations not unlike those made by Cavell about the connection that exists between speakers of language. In Davidson's work these connections are less to the fore, while in Cavell's they are elaborately worked out. I want to use Cavell's more elaborate story to shed light on some of the things Davidson says in connection with interpretation and the role that the principle of charity plays in this. By doing this I hope to show that what may be thought to lie behind Davidson's use of this principle is an understanding that our capacity to speak a shared language depends not on impersonal rules but on interpersonal norms. To see that this is how Davidson understands language I will draw on what he has to say about understanding in the less radical case of understanding. It is when we consider what Davidson has to say about this case that we can see that he blurs the distinction between semantics and pragmatics. How Davidson understands the relationship between semantics and pragmatics may be thought to be revealed in his discussions of convention or literal meaning.

As we have seen in section 2, the theory of truth plays an important and central role in Davidson's account of linguistic meaning. As I explained, Davidson sees theory as essential for an understanding of the structure of language which, in turn, is important for understanding language learning and creativity in language use. However, if we put too much emphasis on theory, we will be tempted to read Davidson as committed to a separation of literal meaning and speaker meaning, between semantics and pragmatics. And this reading of Davidson will block us from seeing any affinity between his work on meaning and Cavell's. However, taking Davidson to be committed to a sharp divide of semantics from pragmatics looks to be at odds with much of what he writes – especially in his later work. Consider, for example, the first sentence of his paper "Locating Literary Meaning": "Literature poses a problem for philosophy of language, for it directly challenges any theory of meaning that makes the assertorial or truth-seeking uses of language primary and pretends that other linguistic performances are in some sense 'etiolated' or 'parasitical'" (Davidson 2005:

167).<sup>16</sup> And it is not just literary language that is a problem for this way of thinking. Davidson also mentions in this connection "jokes, skits, polite nothings, ironies" – all of which (he tells us) "break the mold of sincere, literal, would-be truth-telling" (Davidson 2005: 167). The idea is familiar to those who had already read "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs" (published in 1986 and included in Davidson 2005). When we read these and other such passages, it can look as if Davidson is on board with the Cavellian idea that learning a language is not just learning how to do one thing but is learning how to do a whole host of things. And when he talks about breaking the mold of literal truth telling, it is tempting to see Davidson as denying any distinction between semantics and pragmatics. The problem here is how to understand the place of theory in Davidson's overall account of meaning. In what follows I want to suggest an understanding of the place of theory that allows us also to see Davidson as an ordinary language philosopher who places speakers at the heart of his account of language.

Let us begin with what Davidson says about the understanding of literary language, malapropisms, and the like. Notice that these phenomena, while not uncommon, occur where the speaker and hearer share a language. While this situation may look to be a far cry from that of the radical interpreter, reflection on what Davidson has to say about this situation can help us to see something important about the more radical one. Notice also that, while Davidson wants to reject the idea that language use is associated with linguistic rules or conventions, he does not altogether give up on the idea of literal meaning. Rather, Davidson thinks we can preserve literal meaning while at the same time "pry [it] apart...from what is conventional or established (Davidson 2005: 91). In order to help us to see how it is possible to pry apart literal meaning and convention Davidson tells the following story about how interpretation proceeds. He tells us that speakers of a language begin by sharing what he calls a "prior theory". The prior theory is understood to be a systematic theory which enables speakers to interpret utterances on the basis of the semantic properties of their parts; that is, the prior theory captures the structure of the utterances. This theory reflects what Davidson calls "first meaning", which is what we might find by consulting a dictionary for that language. While the prior theory is important for understanding language, Davidson points out that it has its limitations. The theory runs into trouble when it comes up against the above-mentioned literary language, malapropism, and the like. It is here that Davidson tell us that "an interpreter of another's words and thoughts must depend on scattered information, fortunate training, and imaginative surmise in coming to understand the other" (Davidson 2001:

<sup>16</sup> In a footnote here Davidson refers us to the work of Austin (Davidson 2005: 167).

37). In other words, in order to understand a speaker's use of literary language, malapropism and the like, we cannot rely on what the prior theory tells us. We may think of the interpreter, when she encounters such linguistic phenomena, as entering a moment of freefall, a moment where the theory must be dropped in favour of something less formal. The interpreter must rely, not on established rules of use (conventions), but on "wit, luck and wisdom" (Davidson 2005: 105). Davidson's story does not conclude here. He tells us that, once the interpreter has employed her wit, luck and wisdom – that is, once the moment of communication has passed – she is in a position to construct what Davidson calls a "passing theory". The passing theory is an altered version of the prior theory – a version fitted to a given speaker at a given time. The passing theory reflects the point at which agreement between speaker and hearer is at its greatest. And it must be remembered that what the passing theory – what any theory – reflects is the structure in the speakers' utterances. Davidson's story about interpretation can help us to understand how he sees the place of theory. While we are able to construct a theory at both the start and the finish of an interpretative process, the weight of interpretation is carried not by what is reflected in the theory. It is carried by our bringing to bear scattered information, wit, fortunate training and the like. Davidson concludes that "convention does not help explain what is basic to linguistic communication" (Davidson 1984: 280).

Convention is not basic to linguistic communication because Davidson believes that the desire to be understood is sufficient to do all the work that we *think* conventions are needed for. In an earlier paper, I compared the use of theory in one's account of meaning to the act utilitarians use of moral rules (Avramides 2013). While the rule utilitarian insists that rules must not be broken, the act utilitarian uses rules just so long as they serve his purpose, and his purpose is to act in such a way as to lead to the greatest happiness of the greatest number. Often this happiness is achieved by acting in accordance with a rule, but this is not always the case. The act utilitarian only uses the rule as a rule of thumb because she takes there to be a higher purpose involved in morality and recognizes that the rules are only there as a guide to this. Davidson makes an observation similar to the act utilitarian's in connection with language. According to Davidson, there is a greater purpose in connection with speech and, while he accepts that it is sometimes the case that that purpose is served by speaking in accordance with linguistic rules, he uses reference to literary language, to jokes, skits, slips of the tongue and the like to show this is not always the case.<sup>17</sup> This greater purpose that Davidson associates with speech is to be understood.

<sup>17</sup> He writes: "The ultimate goal in speaking cannot be to get the language right, but to be understood, for there is no point to language

Once we realize that our greater purpose in using language can be served without reference to rules, we should also realize that rules only serve as a crutch – the real work is being done elsewhere. It is in this connection that Davidson writes of the use of wit, sympathy, scattered information, fortunate training, and the like when interpreting the speech of another. Davidson acknowledges that we often do use the crutch of convention when interpreting others. But he also tells us that it is a crutch "we can in the end throw away, and could in theory have done without from the start" (Davidson 1984: 279–280). Notice that to give up on the idea that language is governed by convention is not to give up on the idea that it is *structured*. It is this structure that is captured by reference to the prior and the passing theories. But it is the fact that we can do away with convention that is revealing of what is essential to understanding. And it is in this move that I see a connection with Cavell's understanding of ordinary philosophy. When we do let go of the theory we have nothing to rely on but our own resources, and it is here that we find what is essential to linguistic communication. That we in fact do use convention only tells us about a contingent fact about language use, not what is fundamental. A deeper understanding of how language works reveals that there is no clear division between semantics and pragmatics.

I mentioned earlier that the situation that the interpreter is faced with in literary language, malapropism, and the like can look like a far cry from the situation of radical interpretation. But I also claimed that what Davidson has to say about the one can help us to see something important about the other. What we find in Davidson's work is a shift from writing about interpretation in the home case to writing about interpretation of a radically alien language.<sup>18</sup> It is in connection with the latter that the principle of charity has a clearer role to play. Nevertheless, what we learn from the home case is also relevant to the case of the radically alien. In both cases we need to draw on resources that are interpersonal. Indeed, in the case of radical interpretation the need is even more urgent, and this is reflected in the use of the principle of charity.

In connection with the home case, Davidson discusses the role of convention. He accuses the philosopher who takes convention to be essential to linguistic practice of having misplaced "the essential social element in linguistic behaviour" (Davidson 2005: 109).<sup>19</sup> Once we remove the crutch of convention, what is revealed to us is a way of understanding others that relies on what we share with them. When we turn to consider the interpretation of an alien language, we

beyond successful communication" (Davidson 2005: 258).

<sup>18</sup> For an interesting discussion of this move, see Heal (1997).

<sup>19</sup> Davidson writes this specifically in connection with the work of Michael Dummett. For an extended discussion of the debate between Davidson and Dummett here, see Avramides 2013.

don't have the crutch of convention to rely on – this is a part of what makes the situation so alien. What we rely on in the case of radical interpretation is the principle of charity.

Unlike convention, charity is not a crutch; it is essential to interpretation. And what the employment of charity in radical interpretation also reveals is the role played by the interpersonal in radical interpretation. It will be recalled that one of the things that the principle of charity tells us is that we must see the other as logical in the way we are. In connection with this Davidson writes, “when we ask where the norms come from that each of us applies in understanding others, the answer is that they cannot be derived from a source outside ourselves, for any attempt to check with others drives us back to the process of interpretation in which we necessarily employ our own norms” (Davidson 2005: 319–320). Notice that Davidson here connects our own norms with that of others. The norms are interpersonal, not impersonal. They are derived, not from a source outside ourselves, but are to be found within each of us. What about the other, more familiar, aspect of the principle of charity which encourages the radical interpreter to see those he seeks to understand as sharing our world. As Davidson writes when he first introduces the principle in “Truth and Meaning”, “we must maximize agreement, or risk not making sense of what the alien is talking about” (1984: 27). And he writes in another place: “The nature of correct interpretation guarantees... that a large number of our simplest beliefs are true...” (Davidson 2005: 213). Many philosophers balk at this idea. Davidson acknowledges that error is possible, but he never tires of telling us that error only makes sense against the background of agreement. For Davidson maximizing agreement is essential to understanding when the difference in language is radical. Finding what the other holds true and aligning it with what we hold true in the same situation is the only way we have to break into the circle of belief and meaning and, thereby, to come to understand the other. What we are doing here is not so different from what we have to do in the home case once we rid ourselves of the crutch of convention. We are relying on what we share with others, only in this case this involves how our words and our beliefs come to have content. In this connection Davidson tells us another story, one which he calls “triangulation”. It is in the telling of this story that we see, once again, the importance of the interpersonal in Davidson's work. As we have just seen, charity requires that an interpreter takes the speaker that she is attempting to understand to agree with her and, by that standard, to have largely true beliefs. In one place Davidson offers an explanation of charity that makes reference to the situation in which a child learns her language. This is a situation that involves two individuals – the teacher and the child – and the world that faces them. Here we find the triangle that is required for our beliefs and our

words to have meaning. But Davidson does not think that it is enough that two creatures find themselves together in an environment. It is essential that the creatures who find themselves in such a situation are connected by their sharing of reactions to common stimuli. Even this is not sufficient for linguistic communication and belief. To understand this, we must also appreciate the way in which triangulation makes room for the concept of error. For my purposes in this paper I will gloss over this further aspect of triangulation and continue to concentrate on the shared responses to stimuli, in the absence of which “thought and speech would have no particular content” (Davidson 2001: 212). It is a connection with the world that makes our beliefs and what we say true or false, and this “can be established only by shared reactions to a shared environment” (Davidson 2005: 275). It is for this reason that Davidson can write, “A community of minds is the measure of all things. It makes no sense to question the adequacy of the measure of all things, or to seek a more ultimate standard” (Davidson 2001: 218). The interpersonal is all we have to go on. It is our shared reactions to the world that makes belief and shared language possible. It is because the content of our beliefs is intimately connected with what our words mean (recall Davidson's unified theory of action or behaviour) that the principle of charity plays the role that it does in radical interpretation.

Once again we see Davidson, like Cavell, drawing us towards the interpersonal in our understanding of linguistic meaning. Just as when we move away from convention and rely on interpersonal resources in the case of understanding in the home case, we find that in the case of radical interpretation we have also to rely on resources that are interpersonal. When speakers are involved in the process of linguistic communication, all that they ultimately have to rely on is something about themselves, something that they share with others. What speakers share is their response to their environment and to each other. Absent this shared response, there would be no communication. It is this shared response that makes communication possible.

This connection that we bear to others also emerges in another of Davidson's papers, one in which he links the principle of charity with the idea of the elenchus method that Plato made much of in his dialogues. Davidson quotes the following from the *Protagoras*: “When Protagoras asks whether he would answer for himself or as ‘the multitude’ would, Socrates replies ‘It makes no difference ... For what I chiefly examine is the proposition. But the consequence may be that I the questioner and you the answerer will also be examined’” (Davidson 2005: 254). Here we may see Davidson as touching on an idea that Cavell makes so much of, that it is possible that I speak for *us*. I am able to speak on behalf of others because of the norms we share – norms that are not conventional and “outside us” but, rather, are to

be found within each of us. At that moment in the interpretation of another when I employ the principle of charity, I am relying on myself and at the same time relying on what I share with others. While Davidson emphasises the way in which I take others to be like me when undertaking radical interpretation, Cavell emphasises the way in which the individual ordinary language philosopher can speak on behalf of others. Both, in their different ways, aim to reveal the role played by interpersonal, shared norms. Both Davidson and Cavell want to move us away from thinking about linguistic meaning as being reliant on impersonal rules, and both emphasize the role of interpersonal norms in accounting for shared meaning.

It is a real question just how Davidson understands content to be determined, and it is here that some may find an important difference between his work and Cavell's. Towards the end of section 3. I considered the following objection to Cavell: in so far as there is a connection between what we say and what is the case, there is a problem for the ordinary language philosopher. In response to this objection I quoted Cavell as writing that "we learn language and we learn about the world *together*", and that "learning is a matter of aligning language and the world" (Cavell 1969: 19–20). It is in this connection that Cavell writes of our "criteria" in using a word. Criteria, for Cavell, "are 'criteria for something's being so' ... [in the sense that they tell us] of something like [something's] identity...of its being *so*" (Cavell 1979: 44–45).<sup>20</sup> When in the basic case we encounter the world, we align ourselves with it. It is a real question how Davidson sees our relation to the world. In one place Davidson writes: "How did I arrive at my false belief that I saw a mouse disappear behind a chair? Presumably I interpreted what I saw, or experienced, as I did because it satisfied my criteria for the presence of a mouse and of a chair (and of disappearing)" (Davidson 2001: 195). It is not at all clear that Davidson is using the term "criteria" in the same sense as Cavell. However, if we consider some things that Davidson writes in his 1997 paper "Seeing Through Language" we might find his views remarkably close to Cavell's. Concept formation, Davidson tells us, is not prior to having thought – and neither is prior to having language. Davidson writes: "...we grasp the concept of truth only when we can communicate the contents – the propositional contents – of the shared experience, and this requires language. The primitive triangle, constituted by two (and typically more than two) creatures reacting in concert to features of the

<sup>20</sup> The entire quotation from Cavell reads as follows: "Criteria are 'criteria for something's being so', not in the sense that they tell us of a thing's existence, but of something like its identity, not of its *being so*, but of its being *so*" (Cavell 1979: 44–45). I want here only to consider what Cavell says about identity. I see no overlap with Davidson on the issue of existence and for this reason truncate the quotation from Cavell in the text, above.

world and to each other's reactions, thus provides the framework in which thought and language can evolve" (Davidson 2005: 141).<sup>21</sup> And a little earlier in the same paper Davidson considers the act of proto-ostension, concerning which he writes: "In this elementary situation we can study some of the necessary conditions for the development of thought and language. These include the fact that all people generalize naturally in much the same ways.... Learning requires ... generalizations.... Before there can be learning there must be unlearned modes of generalization. Before there can be language there must be shared modes of generalization" (Davidson 2005: 140). We find in Davidson a recognition of the idea that our shared nature is a pre-condition for a shared language. It is tempting to read what Davidson writes as in line with what Cavell writes when he writes "learning is a matter of aligning language and the world" (Cavell 1969: 19–20). Matters here are difficult as they are deep and I can do no more than touch upon them here. Whether one takes Davidson and Cavell to agree on this matter, it is still possible to find in their work a shared rejection of impersonal linguistic rules, and a deep commitment to the human in the use of language.

Davidson ploughed his own furrow in philosophy, so any overlaps with other philosophers will never be perfect. However, Davidson was always interested to hear about how his work might be thought to intersect with that of other "worthies". It is inevitably the case that any intersection one might spy can be countermanded with observations of difference. No doubt this is the case with the intersection I propose in this paper between Davidson's work and Cavell's. What I hope to have done by highlighting this potential intersection is to expose the way in which both Davidson and Cavell, in their account of linguistic meaning, see a connection between the individual and others. This connection lies deep and is what makes language possible. Both Davidson and Cavell appreciate this. In Davidson's work this idea is expressed in the principle of charity which the (radical) interpreter employs in coming to understand others.<sup>22</sup>

## Declarations

**Competing Interests** I have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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<sup>21</sup> See Verheggen and Myers's contribution to this collection for more discussion of Davidson's triangulation argument.

<sup>22</sup> I would like to thank Olivia Sultanescu, Julie Jack, Nick Bunnin, and the two anonymous referees for comments which helped me to clarify the connection I see between Davidson's work and Cavell's.

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