

THE LOVE OF INVENTION: AUGUSTINE, DAVIDSON, AND THE DISCOURSE OF UNIFYING BELIEF

By: [Stephen R. Yarbrough](#)

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Abstract:

Postmodernism typically questions metaphysical foundations and then assumes that because no common ground beyond linguistic and cultural codes can be discovered, discursive agreement is necessarily contingent. Questioning the efficacy of such codes, causal theories erase the distinction between words and the worlds, and so invent strategies to direct interlocutors' attention toward causal conditions they can share rather than find codes they already share. A comparison of two proponents of causal meaning, St. Augustine and Donald Davidson, reveals a common set of logical and attitudinal constraints to interpretive understanding that rejects linguistic and cultural incommensurability and therefore inventive contingency.

Article:

What happens to the rhetorical canon of invention if in a postmodern gesture we discount the force of founding distinctions such as those between mind and world, the ideal and the real, the subject and the object, and appearance and reality? The usual answer, shared by thinkers as diverse as deconstructionists and social constructionists, is that as the distinctions begin to blur (as, for instance, all signified come to be regarded themselves as signifiers) theoretical faith in our ability to methodically induce change (of mind, etc.) becomes lost—lost because unless we believe our significations represent a stable and independent reality, we cannot hope to discover a common ground upon which to build subsequent agreements. In such postmodern thinking, the traditional rhetorical mappings of common ground, the *topoi*, cease to be regarded as effective persuasive strategies.

Thus, Stanley Fish, a social constructionist, argues that successful persuasion to a position that cannot be inferred from a current set of beliefs is always a matter of chance. We cannot step outside the circle of our current beliefs, Fish argues: if it is so that "questions of fact, truth, correctness, validity, and clarity can neither be posed nor answered in reference to some extracontextual, ahistorical, nonsituational reality, or rule, or law, or value" (*Doing* 344), it is more so that becoming aware of "the circumstantiality of everything we know" does not "afford us a perspective on our circumstantial knowledge and enable us to change it" (350). Each of us is enmeshed in a web of beliefs from which we can gain no outside perspective, and because "the degree of constraint" this structure exerts "is always the same and always total" (459), predicting the effect our arguments might have upon another's structure of beliefs is impossible. "One simply cannot tell in advance what will work a change in someone's views," Fish claims, so however much one must rely upon rhetorical "rules of thumb" when inventing one's arguments, ultimately any agreement will be a result of sheer contingency.

Similarly, Gregory Uhner, a deconstructionist, will replace the traditional *topoi* with a completely different notion of grounds, premises, or space that he calls *chora*. "Chorography," as Ulmer calls his inventive process, "is a method of chance" (201) designed to throw previously unrelated topics into association with one another. Such a method does not assure us useful, or even interesting results, although it may allow us to escape the mere recapitulation of our habitual mode of thought and articulate some desires and needs that may be covered over by the topical maps of current knowledge.

As the Fish and Ulmer examples indicate, most postmodern thought urges us to give up on the hope of rationally and progressively achieving agreement, much less the truth. To many postmodernists, little we do can improve and nothing can ensure our chances of knowing the world except by the terms with which we already know the world. If the world is a text, what we get out of that text is what we read into it, unless chance or force intervene (c.f. Fish 503-24; Yarbrough 344-58).

Although I count myself as a postmodernist and subscribe to the dissolution of founding dichotomies like mind and world, appearance and reality, etc., I doubt very much if discursive change relies as heavily upon contingency as many of my fellow postmodernists insist. Imagining that innovation through chance explains the physical evolution of species over millions of years may be easy, but imagining our being gifted with the degree of serendipity necessary to explain the multitudinous discursive transformations that take place over a human lifetime—or even within the course of a single intense conversation—is very hard. Common sense and professional experience both testify that discursive contingency of the sort that many postmodernists believe in is—just as the word "serendipity" reminds us—only a fairy tale.

However, with the weight of so much contemporary theory against our common sense and experience, we clearly need to investigate the requirements of a mode of discursive invention that is neither (a) a mere recapitulation or transformation of previous beliefs nor (b) a mere throw of the dice in hopes of discovering a useful association of previously unrelated beliefs, and (c) that leads inevitably to a more complete and truer understanding of the way things are. Only after we have described the requirements of such an inventive process can we intelligibly ask whether human beings actually engage in such invention, and then consider how we might promote such occasions and enhance their effectiveness.

Probably the best way to begin such an investigation is to examine past similar inquiries. In this paper I will look at two students of discourse, Augustine of Hippo and Donald Davidson, whose work is separated by nearly two millennia, who lived in very different societies, who were influenced by very different intellectual traditions, and who subscribed to nearly antithetical ideologies. Undoubtedly, a comparison of two such historically disparate figures will be termed an "apples and oranges" issue not only by historicists who subscribe to the notion that the meanings of utterances are locked within their (recoverable or unrecoverable) socio-historical contexts or discursive situations but also by formalists and constructionists who subscribe to the apparently opposite notion that meanings can only be constituted through the media of (recoverable or unrecoverable) linguistic conventions. Even the suggestion that Augustine and Davidson could be writing about "the same things" will be discounted in advance both by realists and idealists.

Nevertheless, I will suggest that Augustine and Davidson share much more than the above conceptions of discourse will allow us to imagine. I hope to show here that we can put this apple and this orange fruitfully into conversation with one another, for if, as Augustine and Davidson claim, in order to communicate at all we must assume that there is but one world and that our beliefs about it are ultimately unifiable through discursive invention, then the assumption of linguistic incommensurability that underlies the "apples and orange" charge must be false.

"ALIEN" INTERLOCUTERS

Augustine of Hippo (354-430), a Christian bishop and theologian strongly influenced by neo-Platonism and Ciceronian rhetoric seems at first glance to be the very last writer one would consult when investigating the prerequisites of a postmodern mode of discursive invention. As one who believes in the existence of an atemporal, eternal universe transcending this one, and in an omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient God of all, Augustine seems worlds away from the likes of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, or Richard Rorty.

But if we take another look at Augustine's problem, at least as he conceives it in *De doctrina christiana*, it appears remarkably similar to that of Derrida's *differance*, the forever deferring signifier that can never reach its transcendental signified. Of course, Augustine does not see this as a problem of *language*. Augustine's problem is not with how we communicate but with whom and about what he wants to communicate—with a divine being,

inconceivable and utterly alien, whose experience is beyond human experience, and who speaks from the perspective of an eternal, perfect universe.

Augustine's sense of the absolute difference between divinity and humanity is very strong. For instance, after a discussion in Book One about the Trinity he says,

Have I spoken something, have I uttered something, worthy of God? No, . . . because God is unspeakable. But what I have spoken would not have been spoken if it were unspeakable. For this reason God should not even be called unspeakable, because even when this word is spoken, some-thing is spoken. (1.13)

Yet despite the unspeakableness of God, speaking God's word is precisely the problem posed by *De doctrina christiana*. This book is conceived as a guide to teaching scripture, which in the first instance requires understanding it, and although in some respects understanding it requires no more than the skills needed to understand the books of other human authors, in other respects what is required is very special because the canonized books of the Bible, although liter-ally written by individual men, were ultimately written by "the spirit of God who worked through the author" (3.85).

The theory of discourse set forward by *De doctrina christiana* is therefore a theory of extraordinary discourse—this because it is supernatural and divine, not merely a practical rhetoric with a religious twist. This is important to our own inquiry for several reasons. First, because Augustine is attempting to interpret and teach *divine* discourse, he does not presume that its words mean what he would mean by them if he had spoken them. Second, because Augustine does presume that the difference between the reader's discursive expectations and the actual scriptural discourse can result from a difference between the scriptural *res* and the *res* of ordinary human experience, he is free to question the presumed role of linguistic and cultural conventions in hermeneutic understanding. Third, because the ultimate writer is divine, Augustine presumes that the scriptures neither lie nor err, and readers who presume this truth must alter their beliefs about language or reality in order to accomodate them. And filially, because both the temporal and atemporal worlds as well as the scriptures are authored by the same God, the scriptures themselves and the worlds they describe are coherent. Because of this coherence, Augustine believes, we can understand the alien, divine words.

Augustine's book is therefore addressing what can be considered a postmodern problem, the problem of apparent incommensurability, or what Jean-Francois Lyotard has called "the differend." As Simon During has explained, the differend is a consequence of "discursive heterogeneity," itself the necessary result of "the groundlessness of language." Because of postmodernism's recognition of differends, "no hope of a bridge between heterogeneous discourses survives" (456-57). Augustine's problem is even more extreme because the incommensurability he addresses arises not simply in the confrontation of alien languages or cultures or ideologies, but in the confrontation of the human with the nonhuman divine. Still, while his problem is similar, Augustine does not give us the usual postmodern solutions (or, rather, despair of finding solutions). In part his answers are different because his view of language, pre-modern and non-structural as it is, does not fall prey to the same impasses of modern language theory that postmodernism tends to exploit. They also are different because his view of "truth" is pre-modern, neither an idealism nor a realism in the modern senses.

These answers anticipate the reasons that Donald Davidson's theory of discourse, despite its being thoroughly postmodern in its erasure of founding binomial oppositions, is nevertheless able to overcome postmodernism's usual despair when confronted with apparent incommensurability.

Of course, Donald Davidson did not design his method of "radical interpretation" as an attempt to communicate with the transcendent God of an eternal universe—or any other potential speaker. As a twentieth-century philosopher working within the analytic tradition, he was simply trying to solve a philosophical problem. In Davidson's continuing argument against what he has called the "third dogma" of empiricism, the assertion of a

"dualism of scheme and content, of organizing system and something waiting to be organized" (*Inquiries* 189), he has in effect waged intellectual war against the very idea of linguistic and cultural incommensurability.

Davidson found his way into the theory of radical interpretation by beginning with the question, "How do we know that a particular interpretation is correct?" (*Inquiries* 142), a very different question from "How do we go about interpreting?" The formulation of the initial question is crucial. Davidson argues that any theory of interpretation we may have must exist prior to our finding evidence for it; an uninterpreted utterance cannot even be claimed to be a meaningful utterance except in the light of a theory about it, a theory that accounts for both the speaker's meaning (his intention to affect others) and his beliefs. This is because meaning and belief are interdependent: "A speaker who holds a sentence to be true on an occasion does so in part because of what he means, or would mean, by an utterance of that sentence, and in part because of what he believes" (*Inquiries* 142). We are thus in a circle: "we cannot infer the belief without knowing the meaning, and have no chance of inferring the meaning without the belief" (142).

In order to escape the circle, Davidson will construct a theory of interpretation that does not rely upon a presumed sharing of linguistic conventions by the speaker and the interpreter—in other words, a theory that does not assume the interpreter can know what the speaker's *words* mean without knowing what *she* intends and believes. In order to do so, Davidson must devise a theory of *radical* interpretation—interpretation of a speaker's utterances "from scratch"—and to do that he "must simultaneously deliver a theory of belief and a theory of meaning" about the speaker's utterances (144). This is what radical interpretation attempts to do.

Early on in his career, Davidson realized that although in one sense radical interpretation is a special case (How often, after all, do we encounter speakers with whom we cannot presume to share at least some conventional meanings, speakers we cannot presume to have meant what we would have had we said the same in the same circumstance?), in another sense radical interpretation is the general case. As he says in a 1973 essay, "The problem of interpretation is domestic as well as foreign: it surfaces for speakers of the same language in the form of the question, how can it be determined that the language is the same?" (*Inquiries* 125). Later, the idea of a "shared language" that exists prior to the discursive event will itself become problematic for Davidson, and his doubts will culminate in his now famous assertion of 1986, "there is no such thing as a language" ("Nice" 446).

What Davidson offers instead of "language" as a description of linguistic ability is a characterization of the adjustments speakers and interpreters make to particular circumstances. A description of linguistic ability requires a distinction between our "prior theories" about how the other will take our utterances, and our "passing theories"—our revisions which account for the other's actual response ("Nice" 442). For communication to succeed, we must share *passing* theories, since "the passing theory is the one the interpreter actually uses to interpret an utterance, and it is the theory the speaker intends the interpreter to use" (442). Because the passing theory is good only for "a particular utterance on a particular occasion" (443), "linguistic competence" cannot be explained by learned conventions. According to Davidson, there are no conventions, no "basic framework of categories and rules," no "language" that could be *learned in advance* of discourse that describes what speakers and interpreters share when they communicate successfully.

What we can learn, just as we learn to predict the behavior of non-speaking organisms and inorganic things through our guessings and testings, are the causes of the other's utterances. "Communication begins," Davidson says, "where causes converge: your utterance means what mine does if belief in its truth is systematically caused by the same events and objects" ("Coherence" 318). Discourse is not the instantiation of already fixed codes and rules, but the teaching and learning of the conditions affecting particular, changing circumstances.

TRUTH, MEANING, AND BELIEF

Augustine also views discourse as essentially a process of teaching and learning. In Augustine's work, the belief that all things find their meaning in the love of one God is expressed by Augustine's identification of communication with teaching and learning. In the *Confessions*, for instance, he declares, "I hear your voice, O

Lord, telling me that only a master who really teaches us speaks to us; if he does not teach us, even though he may be speaking, it is not to us that he speaks" (11.8).

By "teaching" Augustine means "saying the truth," and of course for him the primary source of truth is scripture (*De doctrina* 2.17). But what is scriptural truth about? This, of course, is the more difficult question. The answer is, as he tells us, *things*: "All teaching is of either signs or things" (1.4). He goes on to say that all signs are things through which we learn about other things, but not every thing is a sign. Then in a parallel manner he defines our relationship to things (including those things that are signs) and outlines a hierarchy: "There are some things which are to be enjoyed, some which are to be used, and some whose function is both to enjoy and use" (1.7). ' By "enjoy" he means "to hold fast to it in love for its own sake," while by "use" he means "to apply whatever it may be to the purpose of attaining what you love" (1.8). Ultimately, the only "thing" that should be loved for its own sake is God. Not other people, not even one's self, should be loved for their own sakes.

But what does Augustine mean by "love"? Love is, as R. A. Markus has explained, a "driving force" to understand others (101). To love is to want to comprehend unfamiliar utterances, instead of merely attributing ignorance or deception to their authors: "Knowing it to be a sign and not a brute noise, he [the loving interpreter] will wish to know it perfectly" (*De trinitate* 10.1.2, qtd. in Markus 101). To know something perfectly means to understand it in relation to the rest of Being, to grasp how it is coherent with the rest of life. Thus, inherently, discourse is moral action:

To "enjoy" something that is less than the ultimate, infinite satisfaction, that is to say, to allow the will to rest in its possession; or to wish to "enjoy" it, that is to say, to limit desire to its attainment, without pointing to further horizons, is a perversion of the natural and rational order of willing. (Markus 101)

To love is to want to understand, to desire the greatest possible coherence.

Underscoring the inherently ethical character of discourse is the parallelism of the relationships between signs and things and between use and enjoyment. For Augustine, "a sign is a thing which of itself makes some other thing come to mind, besides the impression that it presents to the senses" (2.1). When a thing causes or is a sufficient condition for the appearance to mind of some other thing, it signifies. In the same way, a thing is useful insofar as it contributes to our enjoyment of another thing--if it causes or is the sufficient condition for us to enjoy some other thing. Thus, things are meaningful as they are useful. Moreover, just as the meaning of a thing that is a sign may not be literal but "transferred" (*signa translata*, usually and unfortunately translated as "metaphorical" or "figurative"), so, too, may one's love for a thing be transferred: "If you go beyond this pleasure [of loving another person] and relate it to your permanent goal, you are using it, and are said to enjoy it not in the literal sense but in a transferred sense" (1.80).

Much as in Plato's *Phaedrus*, therefore, in *De doctrina christiana* to talk of signification and to talk of desire are to talk of the same process. However, Augustine never discusses meaning or desire as if they were things; they are acts of relating to other things. To signify or "transfer" in Augustine's sense is not to "represent" or stand for a thing or substitute one reified meaning for another; nor is to love to substitute the form of one beloved object for another. Because Augustine's theory does not rely upon substitution to account for how meaning occurs, he does not need to discuss codes and systems, and in fact he can dismiss as trivial the study of grammar itself (*De doctrina* 2.46).

Another way to put this is to say that Augustine does not need a methodological dualism—one set of laws to account for how the world works and another set to account for how language works. Signs *are* things: he recognizes no ontological difference, and therefore no epistemological difference between something used as a sign and something not so used. In fact, everything (except God) should be used. To not use something as a sign of further things that ultimately relate to God is an error, just as it is a sin to not use something for something else that ultimately brings the enjoyment of God. Every "thing" in the very broad sense in which Augustine uses

this term, relates, or rather should relate, to everything else and ultimately to God, that final end which encompasses everything and beyond which there is no further signification.

If Augustine's theory can be said to take its start from his belief in the existence of one God, Davidson's can be said to begin with his belief that "there is at most one world" (*Inquiries* 187). As for Augustine, for Davidson knowledge is a question of the coherence of belief. Instead of a god whose will is to be known, however, what serves as the focus of all inquiry for Davidson is a world whose conditions are to be known. Yet for both men, the first principle is that one must believe that everything can hang together, that everything ultimately can connect with everything else. In Davidson's version, if there is but one world, for anything to make sense, it will make sense in terms of other things that make sense. This is epistemological holism.

Epistemological holism asserts that no object of our attention can be understood in isolation from the rest. One of Davidson's commentators, J. E. Malpas, describes holism as follows:

Belief, desire, action—these only make sense within a framework of other beliefs, desires, and actions, and within a wider framework of person-hood, community and world. . . . The notion of world provides the over-all framework within which all these concepts are organized. (191)

Superficially, this looks like a social constructionist or "cultural" epistemology, but it is not. Davidson is an "externalist." This means that he "maintains there are factors external to the person which are determinants of the contents of our thought, and not just causal determinants—because that's obvious—but, so to speak, logical determinants as well" (qtd. in Kent 14). The question is, since Davidson is not an empiricist or any other kind of foundationalist, how is it possible to relate things to others if the things we perceive are constituted by our "conceptual schemes"—our language and culture—unless those others share those schemes?

The answer, in the first place, is that language doesn't "constitute" or "construct" anything anymore than it "represents" a reality. "Meaning" is causal. Both constructionist (idealist) and representational (realist) theories assume that the signs we use to speak or write are logically and ontologically different from what we are speaking about; the former assumes that the order of things is as it is to us as a consequence of the conceptual or linguistic order through which we perceive it, while the latter assumes that the order of things is completely unaffected by any discourse we use to discuss it. But Davidson argues that both views are incorrect—that both our habits of utterance and the things our utterances are about conform to causal laws, and that both are learned the same way, and at the same time, through inference.

Davidson sometimes refers to this inferential process as "triangulation." In an important essay, "The Second Person," he explains why "language is necessarily a social affair" (262). Here he concludes that in order "to establish that a creature has a concept of a particular object or kind of object" we cannot consider only that creature's behavior. We need at least three "patterns of similarity": we have to find the object in question similar to other objects we know; another person or creature has to find the same object similar to other objects she or he knows, and we have to find the other person's responses to the object similar to our own. Put most simply, we have to be able to pick out the "common cause" of our and the other person's response (263). Davidson insists that triangulation "does not depend upon two or more speakers speaking in the same way; it merely requires that the speaker intentionally make himself interpret-able to a hearer. . ." (260). But if the two interlocutors do not need to share the same language, they do need to share "the concept of intersubjective truth, and this is a concept one cannot have without sharing, and knowing that one shares, a world and a way of thinking about the world with someone else" (265).

Thus, to Davidson, discursive competence does not require knowledge of a "language" in the sense of a system operating according to one set of laws in contrast with a "reality" operating according to another set of laws. "To mean something," Davidson reminds us, "a speaker must intend to have a certain effect on a specific hearer or hearers" ("Second" 258). To mean is to cause something to happen, something that one intended to have happen as a result of one's speaking. Moreover, the interpreter can be said to understand the speaker only if she

knows what the speaker is getting at—that is, if the interpreter is able to predict what the speaker will say (or do) next to achieve her aim ("Second" 260), and for such an expectation to be fulfilled the interpreter must have inferred, more or less, what caused the speaker to speak as he did.

The other reason we can relate to things not ourselves is that, whereas meaning and belief are interdependent, belief and truth are independent. Truth, in Davidson's view, is a "correspondence [of belief] with the way things are" ("Coherence" 309); it is not defined in terms of belief and coherence. Put most simply, just because we believe something does not make it true. If we are to avoid skepticism, then, we must find some way to achieve "correspondence without confrontation" between what we believe and reality (317). Davidson has argued extensively why "such a confrontation is absurd" (317), and for now I rest content with those arguments. The more interesting question for my immediate purpose—describing a postmodern mode of discursive invention—is how Davidson can maintain that "coherence" of belief "yields correspondence" of belief with reality (307).

THE RULE OF CHARITY

That question can be asked of Augustine as well. In part, the answer lies in what R. A. Markus has called the "triadic relation of signification," which he says is "the key to Augustine's hermeneutic theory" (103). Because a sign is "a thing standing within the signifying relation between a subject, the sign-thing itself, and the signified object," and because "the latter in its turn can be, or become, a sign when drawn into a further relationship of signification" (103), any linguistic understanding beyond the literal requires a knowledge of the way things are. In fact, the difference between knowing language and knowing the world generally becomes quite blurred in Augustine's theory. As Markus puts it, "How can [the exegete] appreciate the scriptural symbolism of the serpent if he does not know what snakes are really like?" (103). Thus, as in Davidson's triangulations, Augustine's triadic signification assumes a coherence among what the author says about things, what the reader knows about things, and the world in which knowledge of those things is there to be shared. For this triadic relation to work, however, the exegete must first believe that what the author says is true.

Augustine says, basically, that if you know the spirit of what the Bible says before you read it, then you can know the letter of what it means when you read it (see Tracy 263 and Babcock 147). That spirit, or overarching purpose, or defining desire, is as follows:

The chief purpose of all that we have been saying in our discussion of things is to make it understood that the fulfillment and end of the law and all the divine scripture is to love the thing which must be enjoyed and the thing which together with us can enjoy that thing (since there is no need for a commandment to love oneself). (*De doctrina* 1.84)

Believing this enables one to know the truth—because it *is* the truth in its most general terms; or perhaps a better way to say it is that this double love of God and the neighbor who seeks God characterizes the truth. With this characterization in hand, the interpreter of scripture—which the interpreter believes to be revealing the truth—is able to tell when her initial (literal) reading must be wrong and so know to keep her mind open for another (transferred) meaning that will correspond with the truth as she already believes it to be characterized.

The "rule of charity" therefore makes it possible to understand the alien-because-divine discourse of scripture by virtue of its providing a measure against error. It is a measure of coherence. The truth is that there is truth to be found: to love is to seek the truth is to seek coherence. If everything in scripture conforms to the rule of charity, and scripture speaks about the temporal and eternal worlds and their relationship, then everything within scripture must be coherent and everything between scripture and what it is about must be coherent. The appearance of contradiction is the signal to the interpreter that his or her interpretation must be incorrect. The interpreter must somehow *make* the sign-things of scripture cohere with one another and with the things they signify.

The interpreter makes them signify by dealing with them as transferred signs. Instead of "tropes" understood as formal deviations from conventional language, the various classifications of transferred signs become

understood as *topoi*, or known strategies for making true sense of utterances that seem on first hearing false or incoherent. Making things-as-signs coherent and making sense are, in effect, the same.

Most of the second and third books of *De doctrina christiana* is concerned with explaining how properly to go about making sense of scripture. His instruction to regard as transferred (figurative) whatever in scripture that does not appear to conform to the rule of charity is, of course, the most well-known and important. Also important, however, is Augustine's distinction between natural signs (*signa naturalia*) and given signs (*signa data*). He distinguishes them as follows: "Some signs are natural, others given. Natural signs are those which without a wish or any urge to signify cause something else besides themselves to be known from them, like smoke, which signifies fire." (1.2) As Babcock explains, with natural signs "we learn the pattern of association between sign and thing by observing (*animadversione*) and taking note of (*notatione*) the things that we experience (*rerum expertum*)" (149). In other words, we infer the association. Unfortunately, "Augustine says nothing to indicate how the association between sign and thing is established in *signa data*" (149). Babcock argues, correctly, that "Augustine actually envisages at least two ways in which given signs and things come to be associated" (149). Augustine addresses these two ways during his discussion of unknown transferred signs in Book Two, where he distinguishes two kinds of *doctrinae*, which Babcock defines as "the wider systems or patterns of significations in which individual signs inhere" (150). Augustine draws a very sharp line between *doctrinae* which "have been established by human institution" and those "that have simply been recognized—rather than instituted—by human beings as they take note of (*animaadverterunt*) signifying relationships between things that are already in place (*iamperactas*) or that were instituted by God (*divinitus institutas*)" (151). The first type are the result of convention, of social construction, only; the second result from agreements about causal inferences from natural or divine signs. The first produce the imaginary signs (*imaginariis signis* [2.23]) of false knowledge systems such as astrology, divination, and non-Christian cults, as well as some practical conventional systems, such as weights and measures, coin-age, etc. The second type, which are "modelled on natural ones or [are] at any rate similar to them" (2.102), produce truth in the form of inferential disciplines. Here he lists history, logic, rhetoric, astronomy, topography, zoology, and other studies.

Augustine maintains that the socially constructed *doctrinae* which have no practical use are superstitious: "Something instituted by humans is superstitious if it concerns the making and worshipping of idols, or the worshipping of the created order or part of it as if it were God, or if it involves certain kinds of consultations or contracts about meaning arranged and ratified with demons" (2.74). What power such institutions have depends upon "the extent of the agreement achieved with demons by presumptuous minds through such kinds of common language" (2.92). Demonic *doctrinae* differ from their "natural" counterparts by the way they achieve their power and meaning:

All these [conventional] meanings, then, derive their effects on the mind from each individual's agreement with a particular convention. As this agreement varies in extent, so do their effects. People did not agree to use them because they were already meaningful; rather they became meaningful because people agreed to use them. (2.94)

The meaning of such signs is therefore limited to the groups of people who have accepted the conventions. Such meanings are content with their limitations and so set themselves against those meanings inferred from nature and scripture which cohere with one another and the totality of being. In effect, socially constructed—what we would call today "cultural" meanings—are "demonic" because they set themselves in opposition to belief in a coherent totality, or God. To remain within such meanings is to be, as Kierkegaard would say much later, *Indesluttede*—"closed up" or "locked up"—his definition of the demonic (118-19).

Augustine's attitude toward social or cultural conventions seems to be that, although they obscure the truth, they are inevitable parts of human life. Even scripture, which is ultimately authored by God, is immediately the writings of human beings and consequently imbued with the conventionally instituted meanings of its own times and places. Only *caritas* can unlock the truth from the cage of convention.

Thus, *caritas* is not only the message of scripture, it is the proper orientation of the reader toward scripture: "ponder and believe that what is written there, even if obscure, is better and truer than any insights we can gain by our own efforts" (2.17). Augustine explains at great length in Book Three that differences in social conventions and historical circumstances make it likely for the scriptures to be misunderstood. Because "people generally regard as culpable only such actions as men of their own time and place tend to blame and condemn, and regard as commendable and praiseworthy only such actions as are acceptable within the conventions of their society" (3.36), they are very likely to misread those actions described in the Bible that are at variance with their own practices. When, for instance, the Bible commends polygamy—which in Augustine's time was a great sin—the reader must remember that during the historical conditions and by the social conventions of scriptural times, polygamy "was a perfectly blameless practice" (3.47). Such passages are to be "interpreted according to the aim of love, whether it be love of God or love of one's neighbor, or both" (3.48). When the reader offers such charity to scripture, the meaning of polygamy to the "righteous men of long ago" who "visualized the kingdom of heaven as an earthly kingdom" and took several wives "in the interests of perpetuating the race" (3.47) can then become clear. "Given such social conditions," Augustine says, "things that the saints of those ages could do with-out any lust—although they were doing something which cannot be done without lust nowadays—are not censured by scripture" (3.48).

Charity, then, must be directed toward scripture itself, and the form charity takes is of assuming that what scripture says is itself said through charity. Note that Augustine is definitely *not* promoting a moral or cultural relativism. He specifically warns that "the enormous diversity of social practices" should not lead one to conclude "that justice has no absolute existence" (3.52). People who so conclude "have not realized that the injunction 'do not do to another what you would not wish to be done to yourself' [Tobit 4:16] can in no way be modified by racial [cultural] differences" (3.52).

Thus, despite the cultural differences between reader and author of scripture, the reader should assume that both apply the *same* standard—the standard of charity. However, by applying that standard and granting that scripture applies it as well, the reader is able to recognize when what acts and words mean to her differs from what they mean in the scriptures. If everything false and cruel that scripture says is actually true and good, then the scriptural causal conditions must have been quite different from the reader's own—and it is the reader's responsibility to discover them.

In *De doctrina christiana* Augustine does not discuss whether we should extend charity to others in order to understand them as he wants us to extend it to scripture, although by his own reading the very message of scripture is that we should. Even so, the focus in his book is on how to help others understand the Bible, not on how to understand others. He certainly wants others to extend charity to himself. In the *Confessions* he says, for instance, "Although I cannot prove to [my readers] that my confessions are true, at least I shall be believed by those whose ears are opened to me by charity" (10.3). Whether he thinks he will be understood by those who don't believe him is not clear.

It is clear that Davidson thinks we cannot understand anyone we do not, at least initially, believe. "Charity is forced upon us," he says; "whether we like it or not, if we want to understand others, we must count them right in most matters" (*Inquiries* 197). More important, it is also clear that Davidson, unlike Augustine, thinks that understanding others (besides canonical authors) is necessary to understanding reality. As I have explained, for Davidson the requirement of charity is by no means a religious credo but a methodological necessity resulting from the causal interdependence of meaning, belief, and reference. If one wishes to understand the world one must communicate with others. If one wishes to communicate with another starting from scratch—that is, without sharing any language or social conventions and without having access to a translation manual, the only way to get started is by believing that what the other says is mostly true. Only if we believe that the utterances of others are, by and large, logically related to the same world in the same or a similar way as our own discourse is related can we begin to understand them.

In other words, as Davidson has put it in a recent interview, "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" (qtd. in Kent 15). Thus by extending charity to others, we are presuming that what they say, if we were to understand it, could be as true for us as it is for them. We are presuming, that is, that communication with others is teaching in much the same way that Augustine presumes holy scripture is teaching: through interpretation we learn; we enable our discourse to be affected by the causes of the other's discourse. Augustine assumes, of course, that scripture is totally true, while to Davidson "the general presumption [of truthfulness] applied to others does not make them globally right . . . but provides the background against which to accuse them of error" ("Coherence" 319). People are not gods, so we need not assume that they understand things within the total context of reality, only within a (for them) coherent context of beliefs that are mostly true. Even so, as we saw when we discussed triangulation, only *with others* can we know anything at all.

In addition, like Augustine, Davidson apparently believes that interpretive charity demands that we regard a speaker's utterances not only as being (mostly) true, but also as being (mostly) good. In "Mental Events" he says that when interpreting we must "try for a theory that finds him [the speaker] consistent, a believer of truths, and a lover of the good (all by our own lights, it goes without saying)" (*Essays* 222). In much the same way that Augustine's *caritas* is a drive to know, Davidson's "inquiry" is a drive to love. Malpas has argued that the theory of holism rules out moral relativism just as it does epistemological relativism, and he suggests that in Davidson's theory, because "discourse is governed by a requirement of consistency and rationality, and by a presupposition of a common world and community," holism must "operate as a constraint on moral beliefs, and on evaluative decisions and the actions that flow from those decisions, as much as it does the rest of our beliefs and actions" (186). If that is the case, then just as Augustine's rule of charity insists that the reader extend charity to scripture by believing that what scripture says is (always) charitable (true and good), Davidson's principle implies something similar—that we must believe that the speech of others (for the most part) furthers the common world, making possible a more coherent understanding of truth and a more comprehensive binding of community. We can expect, then, that Davidson's interpretive theory, like Augustine's, will explain how to understand another's words to be true and good when they do not seem true or good.

Augustine, as you recall, said that when in reading scripture we run across a passage that is literally false or cruel we should apply charity and consider whether one of two things may have happened: (1) either that the language is unknown (the writer is using a sign in an unfamiliar way), which requires us to learn more about the writer's habits of speech, or (2) the signs are being used in a transferred (figurative) sense, which requires us to learn more about the sign's (literal) object (2.59-61). In much the same way, Davidson notes that "generally it is only when a sentence is taken to be false that we accept it as a metaphor and start to hunt out the hidden implications" (*Inquiries* 258).

His argument in "What Metaphors Mean" is that there are no "metaphoric meanings" in addition to literal meanings because what a metaphor *does* is direct "attention to the same sorts of similarity, if not the same similarities, as the corresponding simile" (*Inquiries* 256). "In the case of simile," Davidson says, "we note what it literally says, that two things resemble another; then we regard the objects and consider what similarity would, in the context, be to the point" (255). "We might then say," he goes on, that "the author of the simile intended us—that is, meant us—to notice the similarity" (255). To explain simile, we have to attend to the things involved; the "supposed figurative meaning . . . explains nothing . . . , and it rests upon no linguistic customs except those that govern ordinary meaning" (255). The case of metaphor is similar, except that it is harder to claim that the similarities the reader is, as Davidson puts it, *invited* to discover, are, once found, the same similarities the author meant for the reader to find. Metaphors are literally false, but the truth they direct us to may not be that intended by the author. That is because metaphor does not direct our attention to language, but "to what language is about" (252)—that is, to things. If we don't understand what the metaphor is about, we cannot understand the metaphor. That is why Davidson says that a metaphor *means* nothing beyond its literal meaning: without the literal meaning—which is false, we cannot know what it is falsely about and so cannot be nudged into seeking a comparison or similitude that does ring true.

Similarly, Augustine said that the human authors of scripture could not fore-see all that their words would come to mean (reveal about reality) because they could not foresee the contexts in which they would be read. Although "some-times not just one meaning but two or more meanings" may be perceived in the author's words because of the different possible contexts, it does not matter, "provided that it can be shown . . . that each of these is consistent with the truth" (3.84). The particular truths scripture reveals may change or grow, therefore, as readers learn more about scripture and the world. The same is so for Davidson, who says that "in fact there is no limit to what a metaphor calls to our attention . . . When we try to say what a metaphor 'means' [that is, what it calls our attention to], we soon realize there is no end to what we want to mention" (263).

Thus, as Davidson explains how metaphors work, we cannot interpret a metaphor if (1) we don't share a similar understanding of the same world with the speaker (or else we will never "get" the literal meaning), and (2) we don't believe that what the speaker says must be (metaphorically) true when it is (literally) false (or else we won't seek out similitudes that would make the metaphor make sense). Once again, understanding language and understanding the world turn out to be the same, discursive, process.

THE LOVE OF INVENTION

In order to research this essay, I had to take Davidson and Augustine at their word. I had to assume that the two men, so different in their social, economic, historical and personal situations, nevertheless shared the same world—with me—and spoke, more or less, the truth about that world. Since they had set out to solve similar problems, it was reasonable to suppose that their solutions would converge at certain points of agreement, and that it might be possible for me to join them in that agreement. If they are right, then understanding them and understanding how they are right are the same.

Here are some of the points on which they seem to agree: First, both Augustine and Davidson see their theories of discourse as needing to address the problem of an "alien" interlocutor, although for very different reasons, and the recognition of the interlocutor's alien character forces them to devise modes of reading that do not simply recapitulate the reader's already held discursive beliefs; that is, an Augustinian or Davidsonian reader does not simply understand the alien's words to mean what they would have meant had the reader him- or herself said it. Second, both men see that questions of meaning are bound up with questions of truth, and that questions of truth are bound up with questions of belief: understanding what someone says cannot be separated from the causes for their saying it. Third, because of the interdependence of meaning and belief, both men devise methods of interpretation that require holding belief constant while solving for meaning. This requires the interpreter to assume that the speaker or writer believes that there is truth, that his or her discourse aims for the truth, and that the truth is that everything coheres with everything within the world they share. Whether by accident or influence, both men refer to this act of faith as the principle or rule of "charity." Fourth, both Augustine and Davidson are strongly suspicious of interpretive methods that rely upon belief in socially constructed language systems. Neither denies that such systems exist, but for both men interpretive practices that rely upon such systems are missing the point of interpretation because they miss all opportunity for discursive invention, for learning and teaching anything not already within the web of one's already held beliefs. Finally, neither Augustine nor Davidson understand "meaning" as representation. In fact, both Augustine implicitly and Davidson explicitly subscribe to non-reifying, causal theories of meaning.

The causal theory of meaning that Davidson and Augustine apparently share requires us to erase the distinction between signs and things that is typical of structural thinking. Just as we understand that the environment in which plants and animals live would not be the same if they were not part of it, we must understand that words cannot be separated from the world they describe. When, like Davidson and Augustine, we think of discourse as being real—when we think of a word's "meaning" as the effect it has upon the situation in which it is being interpreted by affecting the person who is interpreting it—then when we hear a person articulate the world differently than we would, when we believe that person and seek out the causes of those different articulations, we are *discovering* something new about the world by *inventing* new meanings.

The motive to invent now differs both from the traditional heuristic motive of seeking a previously determined, socially common ground from which to manipulate the other person toward an end we have previously determined, and from the postmodern, heurctic motive to randomly shake up the common ground in order to produce a new ground which, if luck is with us, might enable us to articulate some needs we might not otherwise be able to. To traditional rhetoricians, others' beliefs are something we must change in order to satisfy the needs we already have. To postmodern rhetoricians, others' beliefs are just a resistance to our altering the linguistic prison that traps us. But to Augustine and Davidson, others' beliefs are something we need in order to change ourselves—in order to alter our discursive habits to accommodate those conditions which, without the others' difference from ourselves, we could not know were, or should be, affecting our lives.

Augustine and Davidson both, therefore, tend to erase not only the distinction between understanding others' discourse and understanding the world, but they also tend to erase the distinction between seeking the truth and seeking the right. Ethics is intimately bound up with epistemology by the common discursive requirement that we believe others do make sense about a world that can make sense to us all.

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