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Davidson and Humpty Dumpty

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I

In what way, if any, do individuals other than the speaker himself constitute a constraint on what an utterance can mean literally? How one answers this question will depend, quite obviously, on how one thinks utterances come to have their literal meanings. One fairly common view is that the literal meaning of a sentence as uttered by a particular speaker is in fact determined by how the sentence is used by most of the members of the speaker's linguistic community. If one accepts this view, then one will answer the opening question by claiming that an utterance can mean literally only what it means conventionally, and in doing so one will be committing oneself to the existence of a social constraint on literal meaning that is both strong and direct.

Donald Davidson believes that this answer is incorrect. In 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs', he argues that the literal meaning of an utterance (which he takes to be identical to what he calls its 'first meaning') is determined not by the conventions of the speaker's linguistic community but rather by the speaker's 'first intention'. As an explanation of what he means by this term, he gives the following example:

Suppose Diogenes utters the words 'I would have you stand from between me and the sun' (or their Greek equivalent) with the intention of uttering words that will be interpreted by Alexander as true if and only if Diogenes would have him stand from between Diogenes and the sun, and this with the intention of getting Alexander to move from between him and the sun, and this with the intention of leaving a good anecdote to posterity. Of course these are not the only intentions involved; there will also be the Gricean intentions to achieve certain ends through Alexander's recognition of some of the intentions involved. Diogenes' intention to be interpreted in a certain way requires such a

self-referring intention, as does his intention to ask Alexander to move. In general, the first intention in the sequence to require this feature specifies the first meaning.¹

So Diogenes' first intention is to utter words that will be interpreted by Alexander as true if and only if Diogenes would have him stand from between Diogenes and the sun; and the first meaning of Diogenes' utterance of 'I would have you stand from between me and the sun' is that Diogenes would have Alexander stand from between Diogenes and the sun. In this example, first meaning and conventional meaning coincide. This, however, is not generally the case. Consider malapropisms, for instance. The conventional meaning of Mrs. Malaprop's utterance of 'This is a nice derangement of epitaphs' is, of course, that this is a nice derangement of epitaphs. But what is the first meaning of this utterance? Presumably, Mrs. Malaprop's first intention was to utter words that would be interpreted by her hearer as true if and only if this is a nice arrangement of epithets. Hence the first meaning of her utterance of 'This is a nice derangement of epitaphs' is that this is a nice arrangement of epithets. So if, as Davidson claims, it is correct simply to identify the notion of literal meaning with that of first meaning, then this example makes it clear that it is a mistake to identify the notion of literal meaning with that of conventional meaning.

Davidson holds, then, that literal meaning and conventional meaning are conceptually distinct and, hence, that it is possible for an utterance to mean literally something other than what it means conventionally. Hence he is committed to rejecting the view that what a speaker's utterance can mean literally is constrained in a direct way by the conventions of his linguistic community. This, however, may well be taken to be a sufficient reason for rejecting Davidson's account of literal meaning. For how, it may be asked, can one possibly deny that literal meanings are determined by conventional usage without thereby endorsing an utterly—and absurdly—individualistic conception of language? Recall Lewis Carroll's Humpty Dumpty, who responded to Alice's complaint that 'glory' doesn't mean a nice knockdown argument by proclaiming that when *he* uses a word it means just what he chooses it to mean. If Davidson denies that literal meanings are determined by conventional usage, then how, it may be asked, can he possibly defend himself against the charge that he is just another Humpty Dumpty?

Davidson has an answer to this question. He notes that one cannot intend to accomplish something by a certain means unless one believes that the means will, or at least could, lead to the desired outcome.² Hence a speaker cannot, he points out, intend his utterance to be interpreted by his hearer as having a certain literal meaning unless he believes that the hearer will, or at least might, interpret the utterance in this way. But, Davidson

observes, there is no doubt that Humpty Dumpty was perfectly aware that Alice would fail to interpret his utterance of ‘There’s glory for you’ as meaning there’s a nice knockdown argument for you, for when Alice says to him, ‘I don’t know what you mean by “glory”’, he retorts, ‘Of course you don’t—til I tell you’. Davidson concludes that his account of literal meaning actually implies that Humpty Dumpty’s utterance *cannot* mean what he says it means.

In giving this answer, Davidson is committing himself to the view that there is a sense in which other individuals do constitute a constraint on what a speaker’s utterances can mean literally. This is not, of course, to say that he is committing himself to the view that other individuals directly determine literal meanings. According to his account, an utterance can have a certain literal meaning only if the speaker believes that his hearer will, or at least might, interpret it as having this literal meaning. So it is Davidson’s view that while it is perfectly possible for a speaker to produce an utterance that means literally something other than what it means conventionally, this can happen only if the speaker believes that he has provided the hearer with enough clues to enable him to figure out that a certain nonstandard interpretation is called for. The constraint that Davidson believes exists is thus an indirect one, one that is substantially weaker than the one commonly believed to exist. But although it is comparatively weak, the constraint Davidson believes exists is nonetheless a significant one. In the remainder of this paper, I will consider whether it is correct to uphold the existence of even this weaker constraint.

II

One concern about Davidson’s account of literal meaning is, as noted above, that it appears to make language absurdly individualistic. Davidson’s response to this concern consists, as we have seen, in arguing that a necessary condition for a speaker’s having a first intention (and hence, according to Davidson, for an utterance’s having a literal meaning) has been overlooked and that once this is remedied it becomes clear that a speaker cannot mean by his words whatever he chooses. There is, however, a more basic concern that must be dealt with, namely, that it is far from obvious that Davidson is correct in holding that the speaker’s having a first intention is a necessary condition for an utterance’s having a literal meaning. Michael Dummett raises this concern in his comments on ‘A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs’. To make the point vivid, he gives the following example:

In *Top Hat*, the character played by Eric Blore addresses a string of insults in English to an Italian policeman, and is dismayed to find that he has been understood.³

The utterance in this example clearly has a literal meaning—it means literally whatever it means in English—even though the speaker does not intend his hearer to interpret it. Thus it would seem that the utterance has a literal meaning even though it does not have a first meaning. From this, Dummett draws the conclusion that the utterance has a literal meaning just because it has a conventional meaning. He holds that sentences have literal meanings in virtue of belonging to conventional languages and, hence, that particular speakers need not form any express intentions in order to make them meaningful but need only utter them.

Dummett's view is, of course, the very one Davidson rejects in 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs'. If Davidson is to defend his own account, he must therefore find some other way of accounting for the fact that the utterance in Dummett's example does have a literal meaning. In 'The Structure and Content of Truth', Davidson makes a remark that seems to have been intended as a response to Dummett's example. He says:

Someone may say something that would normally be offensive or insulting in a language he believes his hearers do not understand; but in this case his audience for the purpose of interpretation is obviously just the speaker himself.⁴

Presumably, then, it is Davidson's view that the utterance in Dummett's example has the particular literal meaning it does because this is the literal meaning the speaker intended *himself* to interpret it as having. That is, Davidson would, it seems, argue that the speaker in this example does have a first intention—he intends to utter words that will be interpreted by his 'audience' (i.e., himself) as having a particular meaning—and, hence, that the utterance does have a first meaning. So it would seem that Davidson thinks that by simply allowing that the speaker himself can be his own intended interpreter, he can account for Dummett's example without having to invoke the notion of conventional meaning.

The problem cannot, however, be dealt with as easily as Davidson seems to think. What Davidson apparently does not realize is that this response to Dummett's example appears to undermine his own defence against the charge that his account of literal meaning makes language absurdly individualistic. Davidson claims that Humpty Dumpty's utterance cannot mean what he says it means because he knew that Alice would fail to interpret it in that way. But if it is possible for a speaker to be his own intended interpreter, then the fact that Humpty Dumpty knew that *Alice* would not interpret his utterance of 'There's glory for you' as meaning there's a nice knockdown argument for you is not sufficient to establish that this utterance cannot have this meaning. Moreover, since there is no reason to doubt either that Humpty Dumpty would have been able to interpret his utterance as meaning there's a nice knockdown argument for you, or that he

would have known that he would have been able to do this, it can now be argued that Humpty Dumpty's utterance *can* mean what he says it means. It would seem, then, that by dealing with Dummett's example in the way he did, Davidson is no longer entitled to claim that in order to produce a meaningful utterance a speaker must be concerned with providing his hearer with clues sufficient for interpretation. And this makes him once again open to the charge that he is committed to an absurdly individualistic conception of language.

III

Davidson's treatment of Dummett's example creates a serious problem for the account of literal meaning he gives in 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs'. But if Davidson were to abandon the approach of taking the speaker to be his own intended interpreter, would he have any option but to accept Dummett's view that the utterance in the example is literally meaningful just because it has a conventional meaning? In fact, there does seem to be an option and, interestingly enough, it is one that those familiar with Davidson's work might well have expected him to have proposed in the first place. Rather than accepting Dummett's own account of the example, one may, it seems, claim that the utterance has the literal meaning it does just because this is the literal meaning that would be assigned to it by someone applying the methodology of radical interpretation. Moreover, it would seem that this approach can be taken in all cases in which one needs to account for the fact that an utterance has a certain literal meaning. Consider Mrs. Malaprop, for example. Davidson suggests that her utterance of 'This is a nice derangement of epitaphs' means literally that this is a nice arrangement of epithets because this is the meaning she intends her hearer to assign. But one can, it seems, hold that her utterance has this literal meaning because a radical interpreter who had her as his subject would discover correlations between the word 'derangement' and arrangements and the word 'epitaph' and epithets and thus conclude that in her language 'derangement' means arrangement and 'epitaph' means epithet. This example makes it clear that the option being proposed is very different from Dummett's approach, for in the case of Mrs. Malaprop, unlike the *Top Hat* case, the literal meaning yielded by the methodology of radical interpretation does *not* coincide with the conventional meaning. Moreover, despite the fact that it is strikingly Davidsonian, this option is very different from the approach Davidson takes in 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs', for it in no way implies that what determines the literal meaning of an utterance is the speaker's intention that it be interpreted in a particular way.⁵

It would seem, then, that if Davidson were to abandon the account of

literal meaning he gives in 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs' in favour of the one implicit in his writings on radical interpretation, he could account for Dummett's example without accepting the identification of the notions of literal meaning and conventional meaning. Obviously, though, it would be premature to recommend that Davidson take this option without considering whether, by giving up the idea that for an utterance to be meaningful the speaker must have a first intention, he would be committing himself to an absurdly individualistic conception of language. Now it would seem that if the literal meaning of an utterance is the literal meaning that would be assigned by someone applying the methodology of radical interpretation, then an utterance can have a particular literal meaning only if the speaker has given enough clues to enable a radical interpreter to assign that literal meaning to the utterance. So it may seem that this view of literal meaning does imply the existence of a significant social constraint on what an utterance can mean literally. For consider Humpty Dumpty once again. Since (as seems obvious from his remarks to Alice) he has not regularly used the word 'glory' as competent English speakers regularly use the phrase 'a nice knockdown argument', it seems that a radical interpreter might well be incapable of interpreting his utterance of 'There's glory for you' as meaning there's a nice knockdown argument for you. Hence it may seem that Davidson could endorse this account of literal meaning and still maintain that Humpty Dumpty's utterance cannot mean what he says it means.

This matter is not quite as straightforward as it may first appear, however. In the preceding discussion, it was assumed that we were concerned with an *actual* radical interpreter, that is, with an individual who knows only how the subject has in fact applied his words. But in 'The Method of Truth in Metaphysics' and 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge', Davidson himself employs the notion of an *omniscient* radical interpreter, that is, of an individual who knows not only how the subject has in fact applied his words but also how he is *disposed* to apply them; and having introduced this notion, Davidson must, it seems, allow that if an omniscient interpreter would assign a literal meaning to an utterance, then that utterance does have that literal meaning. So in assessing the case of Humpty Dumpty, what one really needs to consider is, it would seem, whether his utterance of 'There's glory for you' would be interpreted by an omniscient interpreter as meaning there's a nice knockdown argument for you. And if this is right, then the crucial question would seem to be this: Was Humpty Dumpty, at the time of his utterance, disposed to use the word 'glory' in the way in which competent English speakers are disposed to use the phrase 'a nice knockdown argument'? That Humpty Dumpty was so disposed seems unlikely; but it does not seem *impossible*. Certainly it is not enough for Humpty Dumpty simply to declare that his linguistic dispositions have changed in this way; but there does not seem to be any

reason in principle why he could not, with some effort, have effected such a change. If this is a possibility, then it must be admitted that an omniscient interpreter might conclude that Humpty Dumpty's utterance does mean just what he says it means. Thus it would seem that taking this approach does not, after all, entitle one to dismiss Humpty Dumpty outright.

What is the significance of the foregoing conclusion? Is the fact that the view that the literal meaning of an utterance is the literal meaning that would be assigned by an omniscient interpreter apparently fails to rule out the possibility that Humpty Dumpty's utterance means just what he says it means sufficient grounds for rejecting it? It was assumed originally that to allow for this possibility is to commit oneself to an absurdly individualistic conception of language; but it is in fact far from clear that this assumption is right. What clearly *would* commit one to an absurdly individualistic conception of language is allowing for the possibility of an utterance that is literally meaningful despite the fact that it is in principle uninterpretable by others. For example, the view that an utterance means literally whatever the speaker intends himself to interpret it as meaning (i.e., the view to which Davidson appears to be committed in virtue of his response to Dummett's example) does seem to be absurdly individualistic since a speaker could, it seems, intend himself to assign to some utterance of his an interpretation that had absolutely no connection with how he applies, or is disposed to apply, his words and which was therefore in principle inaccessible to other individuals. But the view presently under consideration does not have this consequence. What is implied by it is that if Humpty Dumpty's utterance of 'There's glory for you' does mean there's a nice knockdown argument, then this is just because it *is* in principle interpretable by others as having this meaning. In other words, to endorse this view is actually to uphold the idea that language is essentially public.

What is here being maintained is, then, that the view that the literal meaning of an utterance is the literal meaning that would be assigned by an omniscient interpreter does imply the existence of a social constraint, for it implies that an utterance can have a literal meaning only if the speaker is (in basic cases) disposed to apply his words in a regular way to objects and events that are publicly observable. Now this constraint may appear too weak, for doesn't it amount to nothing more than the requirement that for an utterance to be meaningful, the speaker must, in making it, be speaking a language? But, then again, isn't this just what it *should* amount to? Though there are undoubtedly good reasons for encouraging speakers to conform to linguistic conventions, and to care about whether their hearers will understand, and about whether they have given enough clues to enable an actual radical interpreter to understand, these things are not *required* for their utterances to be meaningful. This point is implicit in the methodology of radical interpretation, for while it yields literal meanings, it makes no

mention of either conventions or first intentions, and could in principle be adopted by an omniscient interpreter (who has access also to linguistic dispositions). Thus if Davidson were wholeheartedly to endorse the account of literal meaning implicit in his own writings on radical interpretation, he would have to admit that there exists only a relatively weak constraint on what an utterance can mean literally and, indeed, that Humpty Dumpty's utterance just might mean what he says it means. But he might also come to the realization that this relatively weak constraint is nonetheless strong enough that he could have allowed that it is possible that Humpty Dumpty's utterance means what he says it means without thereby committing himself to an absurdly individualistic conception of language.

Notes

¹Donald Davidson, 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs', in *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, ed. E. LePore (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 435.

²Ibid., p. 439.

³Michael Dummett, 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs: Some Comments on Davidson and Hacking', in *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, ed. E. LePore (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 472.

⁴Donald Davidson, 'The Structure and Content of Truth', *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. LXXXVII, No. 6, June 1990, p. 310.

⁵I give a fuller account of the differences between the view of literal meaning Davidson presents in 'Radical Interpretation' and the one he defends in 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs' in 'Literal Meaning, Conventional Meaning and First Meaning', *Erkenntnis*, Vol. 40, 1994, pp. 213–225.