In a number of influential papers Donald Davidson has argued that it is a necessary condition of successful interpretation that the interpreter must assume that the objects of interpretation, by and large, believe what (he thinks) is true. He has further claimed that this assumption, known as the principle of charity, has some significant epistemological ramifications (Davidson 1973, 1977, 1981, 1982). According to Davidson the inherently charitable nature of interpretation rules out the possibility that we are radically mistaken about the external world.

The claim has, however, proved to be quite controversial generating a large body of conflicting responses. In particular, some of Davidson’s ideas, like that of an omniscient interpreter playing the role of a field linguist, have largely been greeted with incredulity. In this chapter, I propose to consider the debate in a new light by reconstruing the principle of charity as a supervenience thesis. This would explain, I claim, why Davidson has proposed a set of seemingly unconnected ideas under the rubric of charity, and whether charity per se has the anti-skeptical consequences it is said to have. I will then provide an alternative explanation as to why the principle of charity seems to be forced on us in the circumstances that Davidson envisages. Finally, I shall examine whether the sort of considerations that Davidson adduces as evidence for the necessity of charity can endow it with the required epistemic potentials. The overall conclusion will be that Davidson’s semantical argument fails.

7.1 Charity explained and applied

An adequate semantic theory for a language should, according to Davidson, be such that if a person comes to know the theory, he would,
partially, understand the language. It is well known that for Davidson such a theory should take the form of a Tarski-style truth theory, and, consequently the bulk of his writings on this topic is taken up with enunciating the conditions of adequacy for such theories. Very roughly, he takes the evidence for the semantic theory to consist in the conditions under which speakers hold sentences true. The holding of a sentence to be true by a speaker turns out, however, to be a function of both what she means by that sentence as well as what she believes. This means that belief cannot be inferred without prior knowledge of the meaning, and meaning cannot be deduced without the belief. It is here that the principle of charity enters the scene. We can solve the problem of the interdependence of belief and meaning “by holding belief constant as far as possible while solving for meaning. This is accomplished by assigning truth conditions to alien sentences that make native speakers right when plausibly possible, according, of course, to our own view of what is right” (Davidson 1973, p. 137).

Unlike Quine however who adopts the principle of charity as regulative maxim in choosing between empirically adequate translation manuals without, at the same time, thinking that it would reduce the amount of indeterminacy involved, Davidson takes the principle to be constitutive of intentional ascription (Hookway 1988). A theory of meaning which fails to show that the speakers’ beliefs are largely true is inadequate. The principle entitles the interpreter to take the speaker to believe what he observes to be the case about his environment.

Davidson claims that the charitable nature of radical interpretation has significant epistemological consequences for certain forms of traditional skepticism which recognize the intelligibility of massive error. For if a subject is to be interpreted at all, we must, as just noted, assume that his beliefs are by and large true. So if the skeptic grants that beliefs are interpretable, then it is hard to see how one’s beliefs could fail to be generally correct. The principle of charity, thus, rules out the possibility of global error. However, as Davidson himself recognizes, this argument is too quick. For all that the principle of charity requires is the maximization of truth by the interpreter’s own lights. But, for all we know, the interpreter’s beliefs might very well be mistaken. Mere consistency between the beliefs of the speaker and those of the interpreter fails to ensure their truth. In response, Davidson suggests two, loosely related, arguments both of which have faced stiff resistance. The first argument appeals to the idea of an omniscient interpreter, and the second exploits certain claims about the nature and means of identification of beliefs.3 I shall consider both arguments in turn.