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The Principle of Charity and Intercultural Communication

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This article argues that the principle of "charity" and the debate over it in contemporary philosophy of language are of interest and importance for communication scholars in general, and for those interested in intercultural communication in particular. In support of this claim, I present in the first section of the paper an overview of "radical interpretation," a notion used by Donald Davidson in order to account for linguistic communication. In the second section, I discuss the principle of charity (as it arises in radical interpretation), according to which interpreters must construe the beliefs and utterances of others as largely rational and true. In the third section, I begin to explore the ramifications the principle of charity holds for intercultural communication.

The principle of charity has been the subject of heated philosophical debate during the past several decades. The principle in question is not concerned with ethics (although, as will be elaborated below, it may have some ethical consequences). Rather, it states a hypothetical condition on linguistic interpretation. Roughly put, it says that interpretation must be charitable, in the sense of imputing to the utterances and beliefs of the person being interpreted contents that are largely both rational and true—rational and true, that is, by the lights of the interpreter.

This principle, as just stated, raises many questions. In what sense is it claimed that interpretation *must* be charitable? Some hold that linguistic interaction requires substantial agreement in worldview by conceptual necessity, while others reject this position altogether, or accept only weakened versions of it. And what is the scope of the principle? Does it only bear upon intra-linguistic communication, or also upon intercultural communication? Does it have any practical ramifications for the way we approach people or texts, be they foreign or familiar? And what are the moral implications of always construing the other as looking at the world the same way that you do? These issues and others have been given varied degrees of attention in the literature.

However, it is noteworthy that the debate over the principle of charity has remained almost completely within the confines of analytic philosophy, and in particular, that it has not involved communication scholars. Thus, for example, no mention of the principle of charity appears in such databases as "communication abstracts," nor can there be found contributions of, say, intercultural communication scholars to the discussion of the plausibility of charity as a working hypothesis in

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intercultural contact. I argue that this state of affairs is lamentable: Communication scholars can benefit from acquaintance with the considerations raised in the philosophical debate over charity, and for philosophers, it would be similarly worthwhile to be aware of the ways charity arises in both theoretical and practical discussions of communication.

This paper consists of a first attempt to remedy this situation. In its first section, I present the philosophical context in which the principle of charity has been given most scrutiny and attention—the philosophy of Donald Davidson, and, in particular, his discussion of the notion of radical interpretation. Then, in the second section of the paper, I present the principle of charity, the way it is argued for in this context, and the debate over several of its aspects. Finally, in the third section, I begin exploring the ways in which the discussion of the principle of charity bears upon several issues in communication over cultural and political divides.

Davidson's Radical Interpretation

The term “principle of charity” was coined by Wilson (1959), and later appealed to, redefined, and developed by several prominent 20th century philosophers. Among these are Lewis (1974), who invokes the principle in his account of radical interpretation (construed as an idealized assignment of content to linguistic utterances, independent of the limitations of inter-subjective communication); Dennett (1982), for whom a corollary of the principle of charity is part of the intentional stance (that is, our stance toward those things to which we propose to ascribe intentionality and thought); and Quine (1960), who views charity as a constraint on translation. However, charity has been given most attention as a central tenet in Donald Davidson's widely influential philosophy of language, where it plays the role of a constraint on his own notion of radical interpretation (Davidson, 1984a, 1984c, 1990).

As elaborated in Dresner (2006), Davidson can be described as a constructivist philosopher of communication, or (and this amounts to the same thing) as an inter-subjectivist regarding linguistic meaning. This is to say that Davidson views linguistic meaning as arising from linguistic communication: It does not merely get expressed, but rather, it is constituted in interaction. Thus, following Quine, Davidson holds that, in order to better understand what meaning amounts to, we should consider a hypothetical situation in which one language speaker is faced with a speaker of another language with whom she shares no linguistic or cultural background whatsoever. (In this way, all misleading intuitions about thoughts and ideas that are shared prior to interaction are put aside, and we are forced to account for meaning and understanding in terms of what is available in the context of the interaction itself.) Davidson calls such a situation "radical interpretation"—again following Quine, who labeled his own thought experiment “radical translation.”

Davidson's interpreter, then, is faced with a foreigner, and on the basis of his observable behavior (both linguistic and otherwise) must assign content to this foreigner's utterances. In a sense, this is a realization of Wittgenstein's (1953) general suggestion to understand meaning in terms of use—i.e., in terms of inter-subjectively available practice. But how should this practice be conceptualized? One of the key components of Davidson's answer to this question, which is highly relevant to the discussion of the principle of charity that is to follow, is that interpretation consists of a systematic application of the notion

of truth. That is, for the interpreter to understand the (literal, core) meaning of the other's utterances, she must be able to assign truth conditions to the sentences the other utters, using her own language for this purpose and taking into account, in a systematic way, the syntactic structure of the sentences in the other's language. Thus, Davidson incorporates truth-functional semantics with communicative constructivism: According to his view, truth plays a basic role in the way language is hooked up with the world through the process of interpretation. (It is beyond the scope of this article to get into a discussion of various objections that were raised against this view. See Dresner [2006] for a summary of several major such objections.)

Another major feature of Davidson's view of radical interpretation (which, like the previous one, will be of importance below) is that he construes interpretation as an assignment of content not only to linguistic utterances, but also to propositional mental states, such as beliefs and desires. As opposed to behaviorist philosophers (such as Quine), Davidson does not eschew talk about what people think and want. However, he also rejects the widely held view that content flows somehow from its prior location in thought to language—this view goes against his position that communicative linguistic interaction constitutes linguistic meaning. Rather, Davidson maintains that the process of radical interpretation, that was argued above to constitute linguistic meaning, also gives rise to propositional thought. That is, radical interpretation is a single and elaborate process through which an interpreter concomitantly assigns content to the other's linguistic utterances *and* propositional mental states, whereby such content is established. Communicative interaction is thus construed as giving rise not only to linguistic meaning, but also, then, to propositional thought itself. (This aspect of Davidson's position has been subjected to substantial criticism and opposition as well, of course [Dresner, 2006]. The debate over it will be touched upon below, in the context of our discussion of charity.)

It should be remarked here that all he says about the extreme situation of radical interpretation is supposed by Davidson to apply also to mundane, everyday cases of linguistic interaction. As noted above, his objective in considering the far-from-ordinary case is not to analyze the distinctive aspects of communication across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Rather, Davidson's point is that the consequences of radical interpretation—as he conceives them—apply all over the board. Thus, in intra-linguistic, intra-cultural communication, too, there is no access to a common store of concepts and ideas that exists prior to communication and underlies its success. Here, too, all that is relevant to meaning and propositional thought is out there, in the inter-subjectively accessible space between the interlocutors. In tune with Peters' (1999) convincing analysis, according to Davidson's outlook, the thought that there is more than this—i.e., that, while communicating, we engage in a (hopefully frictionless) transfer of ideas from one mind to another—is a myth of our times that lacks justification.

The Principle of Charity

We see that, for Davidson, linguistic meaning is the product of interpretation, and that interpretation proceeds on the basis of publicly available linguistic behavior. However, this relative leanness of the data makes interpretation too “loose”; there are many (too many) distinct interpretations that may be consistent with the data as described so far. What further constraints are there, then, that make radical interpretation feasible?

The principle of charity is one central such constraint (Davidson, 1984a). Roughly put, it says that, when interpreting someone, you have no choice but to ascribe to her (1) overall logicality and rationality, and (2) beliefs and utterances which are mostly true. The justification of this principle is directly derived from the conditions of radical interpretation: In order to have meaningful language (and thought), one has to be interpretable, says Davidson, and being interpretable consists of manifesting the above-mentioned features (logicality, rationality, and truthfulness).

Thus, for example, you cannot decide to interpret a certain word in the other's language as your English "and" (or "not"), and then make her use of the word completely illogical: The main consideration that supports the decision to interpret her word as "and" is that she turns out logical this way. We therefore have no choice but to ascribe to the other our logic. Similarly, when we fix interpretations to the referring expressions in the other's language, we have to make him truthful much of the time. For example, when we decide that a certain word of the speaker's means "table" or "rabbit," we do so by associating the word with whatever there is in the environment that seems perceptually available to her (and relevant to her interests). Therefore, we have no choice but to ascribe to the other our view of the world—e.g., that there is now a rabbit or a table near us—and in so choosing, we must make her truthful by our lights (for example, by uttering her word for rabbit when there is, indeed, a rabbit around).

Note that the justification of the principle of charity does not rely on any real charity. (For this reason, Davidson [Fara, 1997] acknowledged in later years that the term is somewhat misleading.) That is, one does not do any favor to the person across from her by interpreting this person in the above-mentioned charitable way. Rather, on the basis of Davidson's account of meaning, it is logically impossible (rather than simply uncharitable) for the interpreter to ascribe to the speaker false or unreasonable beliefs without there being a large substratum of agreement between them on truth and reasonability. In this respect, the principle of charity (as Davidson views it) differs from Grice's cooperation maxims, for example: Although Grice (1975) tells us that we should expect others to be cooperative in conversation, he does *not* claim, like Davidson, that the ascription of content to their words and mental states depends on their being (conceived of as) cooperative. Similarly, the principle of charity goes beyond advice that can be found, in critical thinking textbooks, for example, that people and texts should be interpreted charitably: The latter is described as a recommended strategy that is nevertheless optional, while the former is presented as a necessary condition for meaningfulness.

Also, note that Davidson does not make the (absurd) claim that no one can ever be illogical, irrational, or just wrong. Rather, his point is only that illogicality and mistake must always have a large background of logicality and truth. This background may consist of many "trivialities"—the countless cases where the other seems to us to speak truthfully and coherently about the simple and basic aspects of the world around her (e.g., "this is a cat," "this is a table," "the cat is on the table," etc.). However, this background must exist and must be (albeit implicitly) acknowledged, because without it, interpretation is impossible. Another way to put the point is this: Any disagreement I have with you must have a substantial background of agreement—otherwise, I cannot be said to understand you, in which case disagreement is impossible.

One major ramification of the principle of charity has to do with the possibility of extensive incommensurability between worldviews. Davidson addresses this issue in one of his most well-known articles, “On the Very idea of a Conceptual Scheme” (Davidson, 1984b). The idea he considers is that there actually are (or can be) distinct conceptual systems that cannot be translated, one into the other. There are many who make extensive use of this idea—from Kuhn (1962), who argues that there are incommensurable scientific theories that represent the world differently, to Whorf (1956), who argues that the distinct linguistic systems of alien cultures give rise to conceptual systems that cannot be matched with each other. Davidson rejects this idea, for the reasons reviewed above. In order for a conceptual system to be diagnosed as incommensurable with my own, it must be acknowledged as a conceptual system, i.e., it must be acknowledged as interpretable. However, interpretation requires a large degree of agreement and understanding. Therefore, any alleged overarching incommensurability must be much more restricted or superficial than it seems: Either the disagreement is surrounded by areas of agreement that are left unnoticed, or the differences in, say, terminology, may not be as deep as it may seem, and they might be bridged by a sufficiently thorough interpretive effort.

Davidson argues in the above-mentioned article that the reason why many thinkers find conceptual incommensurability attractive is what he calls the “third dogma of empiricism”—the view that language acquires content by organizing “raw” sense experience. According to this view, each language cuts raw perceptual experience differently, and there is no reason why different ways of cutting experience will match each other. However, says Davidson, if it is conceded (as it should be, by his lights) that the notion of raw, non-conceptualized experience does not make sense, and that language must acquire content through communication in a shared world, we realize that the idea of incommensurable conceptual schemes is ill-founded.

We see, then, that the principle of charity is closely tied to Davidson's constructivist outlook on communication: It is because meaning is constituted through communicative interaction that charity is forced upon us. If it were the case (as many hold that it is) that internal mental states are meaningful independently of communication, and that language merely expresses such self-standing mental content, then charity would be much less plausible. Surely, it would be reasonable to expect in this case that other people's mentalities are different from mine, and that this would be manifested in speech that is not amenable to charitable interpretation. However, if it is held that meaning arises from successful interaction of a certain kind (i.e., interpretation), then it makes more sense to claim that it is impossible for meaning to be constituted without the success conditions of the interaction being met—in particular, without there being wide agreement in worldview. So, one of the grounds for disagreement with charity is an even deeper disagreement on the nature of linguistic meaning, which we will not pursue any further here.

A related set of objections and counter arguments has to do with the epistemic status of charity. Davidson, as elaborated above, views charity as constitutive of linguistic meaning, and thus a-priori and (ipso facto) necessary. Quine (1960, p. 59), on the other hand, describes charity only as the most probable course of translation. It is not clear whether he has any real disagreement with Davidson (who, as we will discuss below, allows local disagreement as well). Pagin (2006) argues explicitly that charity should not be thought of as a foundational principle. How can it be justified as such, he asks? Surely the

things which must be appealed to for such justification are our intuitions about interpretation, but if the principle is supposed to underlie and justify these intuitions, we have here vicious circularity. Instead, Pagin suggests that we conceive of charity as an empirical generalization based upon our acquaintance with everyday facts of meaning. This outlook allows charity to be necessary (in the same ways that physical laws are, which we discover empirically) without being a-priori.

Another objection to charity (Fuller, 1988) is that quantitative talk of "falsity requiring a large background of truth" or "maximizing agreement" is incoherent. How can truths or agreements be counted? Davidson's (1999) answer to this challenge is that the admittedly loose quantitative talk must be infused with content in concrete interpretation contexts: One can (and has to) make so-called charitable interpretive decisions without counting beliefs. This practical implication of the principle of charity, though, requires clarification and elaboration. Should agreement be preferred over disagreement in all contexts, even the most local and restricted ones? Surely, this does not seem reasonable, nor does it seem to follow from the principle, as stated above. If one interpretive option accommodates the principle of charity by incorporating substantial agreement between the interpreter and the interpreted, then a close variant of it would do so as well. So, it remains to be articulated how the general position applies to concrete cases. We return to this point below.

Finally, another criticism that can be raised against the principle of charity (Hurley, 1992; Krebs, 2008; Wachbroit, 1987) is that it consists in intellectual imperialism, or hubris. Does not the principle reduce all foreign outlooks on the world to the interpreter's own, by presupposing that they are in large agreement with it? Does it not block the possibility of real, substantial multiculturalism, according to which cultures differ (and legitimately so) in worldview and methods of thinking, and this in major, rather than only minor, ways?

One response to this challenge that can be made on Davidson's behalf is to stress the mundane character of those large areas of agreement that he stipulates. According to his view, there *can* be disagreement on major—e.g., metaphysical or ethical—issues, but it can be made sense of only when there is a background of agreement on minor issues, such as those having to do with everyday life in the world that we all share. So the principle of charity does not rule out disagreement among cultures on issues that loom large when we think about whole cultures and the ways in which they compare and interact. Rather, as the principle is embedded in Davidson's philosophy, it is accompanied (albeit implicitly) by the idea that (1) first and foremost, communication is not among cultures but rather among individuals; that (2) when individuals communicate in everyday life contexts, there must be a great deal of agreement and understanding among them; and that (3) these easily forgotten commonalities are necessary background to the differences that we usually focus on when we think of intercultural dialogue.

Another answer to the challenge that charity entails imperialism is that it does not require the other(s) to view the world in a way that is similar to the interpreter's outlook on it. Rather, the requirement is for their outlook to be sufficiently similar to the way the interpreter would have viewed the world *had she been in their shoes* (Wachbroit, 1987). Thus, the principle of charity does encourage us to acknowledge that (1) people in other places and times have access to different bodies of knowledge than ours (or live within different cultural frameworks than ours), and that (2) this should give rise to many

differences between what they think and what we do. Charity only requires that we try (and should be able to succeed) to make sense of these differences on the background of common rationality principles and common agreement about various mundane truths.

Yet another defense of charity against the accusation of imperialism is that it only entails that understanding and intelligibility are *possible* (Hurley, 1992). The principle of charity does not guarantee the immediate communicative success of all intercultural exchanges (or of all interpersonal communicative exchanges, for that matter), nor does it hold the promise that all such exchanges will eventuate in interpretive success. Rather, charity requires only that substantial (though not complete) understanding is feasible—i.e., that it could be achieved if sufficient interpretive competence were to be applied. Admittedly, no clear and precise algorithm for interpretation is presented by Davidson (nor by anyone else)—such an algorithm does not exist. However, this is not to say that we cannot discern between sincere and ingenious attempts at interpretation and understanding, and inferior such attempts. The principle of charity encourages attempts of the first kind, and on this count, too, it cannot be blamed for fostering cognitive imperialism and cultural chauvinism (see the applications of this point in the next section).

However, it should also be acknowledged that the constructivist outlook on linguistic and mental content (which Davidson exemplifies) does indeed construe the other—be it a person or a culture—as essentially open to the interpreter's understanding, and in this sense, similar to the interpreter. If subjectivity is dependent on intersubjective contact, things cannot be otherwise. Thus, if the principle of charity is considered within this communication-dependent conception of personhood, the charges of imperialism raised against it are misplaced. If, on the other hand, the principle is looked at from a different perspective, then, indeed, it may seem problematic. For example, if we consider the radically different perspective on the other and our relations with her that is suggested by Levinas, then the principle of charity may seem outrageous. According to Levinas (1991), when the interpreter faces the other and treats her as a person, she acknowledges her as being infinitely beyond the reach of the interpreter's understanding. Hence, the claim that the interpreter's understanding of her must be substantial and far-reaching would seem, in this context, to be false or even unethical—it reduces the other to an object that is completely under the control of the interpreter's understanding. The lesson, then, is that the principle of charity must be evaluated from within an explicitly stated conceptual framework.

Charity and Intercultural Communication

As suggested several times above, the discussion of the principle of charity is of particular relevance to questions and issues that arise in the study (and teaching) of intercultural communication. Here are three examples:

1. *The status of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis.* In many textbooks of intercultural communication, there is allocated a prominent place within the chapter(s) dealing with language to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis—the idea that there is a radical language-induced intercultural conceptual disparity (See, for example, Jandt, 2001, pp. 135–141; Rogers & Steinfatt, 1999, pp. 135–142; and Samovar & Porter,

1994, pp. 194–200, though, in later editions of Samovar & Porter, the hypothesis receives less attention). The foregoing discussion suggests that this prominent place should be questioned, even if we put aside the dubious status of the linguistic data on the basis of which the hypothesis was first formed (which is acknowledged by some of the texts mentioned above). As Davidson tells us, if the Hopi (or the people of any other culture) share our world and learn language the way we do, then the differences between their (linguistically-couched) concepts and ours must be enveloped by large areas of agreement. Therefore, the focus on dissimilarity, rather than on agreement and the potential for interpretability, is misleading.

2. *The significance of concrete intercultural linguistic differences*. One lesson yielded by the previous, general point is that we need to be cautious in our interpretations of differences in linguistic expression as unbridgeable differences in world-view. Davidson warns us against saying that ideas couched in different languages (or even opposing intellectual jargons) are non-translatable. Of course, other people may have ideas and values that are quite different from ours, and there might be nuances that are hard, or even impossible to capture, but large areas of essential misunderstanding, that cannot be remedied, are improbable. So, we must not take lexical differences as indicating incommensurability: We may need a whole paragraph to explain the meaning of a single expression in a different language, but overall interpretation must be possible. It is a prerequisite for meaning.

As an example, consider the claim that there is no translation in Arabic for the English word "compromise" (Heggy, 2002). This claim has been circulating in discussions of the Arab-Israeli conflict, being used to support obvious political agendas on one side, and rejected or downplayed by the other side. Now, the truth or falsity of this claim need not concern us here; rather, it is the question of what to make of it *if* it is true. And here, Davidson's answer would be: *In terms of interpretability and understandability*, not too much. There might be, indeed, cultural, social, or historical significance to the existence of some words in a language, or lack thereof.[1] However, even if we acknowledge this significance, we should not make a jump and draw far-reaching conclusions from it with respect to the possibility of understanding: A contextual interpretive effort and negotiation of meaning may yield local understanding, which, according to Davidson, is what matters. In some cases, this might be easier, as in the case of "kiwi," where one must only show the new fruit and say its name. In other cases, like "compromise," a longer process of negotiation may be needed for adequate understanding. And as for the complaint that such a process can never result in a complete match of concepts, Davidson has his answer ready: The applicability of the radical interpretation scenario to intra-linguistic communication entails that complete conceptual matches, seamless transmissions of internal mental content, can never be attained. More exactly, it is incoherent to hope to attain such seamless communication, because "meaning is not in the head"—it is the product of interpretation.

3. *Charity in the interpretation of values and actions*. A third, more general application of the foregoing discussion has to do with overall communication (rather than concrete translation efforts) across political and cultural boundaries, and even across walls of national or ethnic hatred (Baldwin & Hecht, 1995). Davidson's principle of charity entails that, possibly contrary to nationalistic feelings and short-

[1] A crude example: There is certainly a connection between the fact that there is no word for kiwis in, say, 19th century Italian, and the fact that 19th century Italians did not know kiwis.

sighted political interests, we have to make the alien (both as a single human being and as a society) as rational and realistic as possible—as understandable as possible. We are not doing the other(s) any favor by so interpreting them; rather, in a manner of speaking, we are doing ourselves a favor, in that we gain better insight into what they say and think. The option of proclaiming cultural or national adversaries as having an altogether different view of the world or a deviant (and inferior) type of rationality may be tempting. However, if *they* are construed as speaking, thinking human beings (as they supposedly are, if they are ascribed agency as our *enemies*), then *they* must be interpretable, and therefore, the large areas of understanding and agreement between us and them must be acknowledged. Furthermore, among distinct interpretive options, we should choose the one(s) that maximize these areas.

Due to the conceptual interconnections that Davidson makes between linguistic meaning, intentional belief, and intentionally motivated action, the above stated principles apply not only to the interpretation of the alien's speech, but also to the beliefs ascribed to her, and to the interpretation of her actions.

As an illustration and application of the principle of charity, let us take up again the current Israeli-Palestinian confrontation, and consider two interpretive issues that arise in it. One is the phenomenon of Palestinian suicide attacks, or, more exactly, the variety of explanations given by the Israeli public for the support for such attacks within the Palestinian public. Some explanations invoke an incomprehensible, deep-seated desire to slaughter Jews. Others talk of a more general lack of appreciation of human life among the Palestinians. Still other accounts focus on religious indoctrination or nationalistic propaganda. Finally, there are also those who are willing to talk about socio-economic hopelessness and personal despair.

Now, it is not the aim of this paper to argue for any one of these explanations. Rather, the Davidsonian point is that the first choice should be an interpretation that maximizes coherence, understandability, and agreement, and this not because of some whim or illusion. It is inconsistent, Davidson tells us, to ascribe to the other meaningful thoughts and intentions—in particular, evil such thoughts and intentions—and at the same time, to make her completely (or even largely) incomprehensible: In order to have thoughts and intentions, she has to be interpretable. So, in interpreting the Palestinian view of suicide attacks, we need to acknowledge as much as possible of their beliefs and values (as expressed in both political and everyday life contexts), and make them coherent. And of course, the same goes for interpretive dilemmas in the opposite direction.

The second interpretive issue, another major locus of disagreement, misunderstanding, and hate between the Israeli and Palestinian publics, is their extremely disparate conceptions of the year 1948. For Israelis, this is their year of *independence*, and of the successful struggle against Arab forces that tried to extinguish this independence. For Palestinians, it is the year of the *Nakba*—the expulsion of great numbers of people, the loss of national aspirations and hopes, and the beginning of life under yet another alien regime.

Now, the distance between these two conceptions seems to block any possibility of dialogue. However, the foregoing discussion of charity tells us that disagreement is possible only in the context of large areas of agreement, and that acknowledging these areas promotes interpretability and

understanding. As may be recalled from the previous section, the principle of charity encourages us to interpret the others as if we were standing in their shoes. Hence, it is reasonable to expect that an interpretive effort that is based on agreed-upon facts will result not only in more understanding in the limited sense of acknowledging what the other side thinks and wants, but also in more understanding in a wider, moral sense—being able to acknowledge the beliefs and desires of the other side as things that need to be taken into consideration by us and affect our future actions.

Thus, according to the principle of charity, the way to start negotiating a common conception of 1948 is by attempting to reconstruct as detailed an account as possible of the bare facts of that year, the multitudes of facts that Davidson says are often left unnoticed, or deemed unimportant, but that are necessary for understanding. People from which regions and villages ran away, and which were deported? Which statements urging Palestinian population to run away were made, and by whom? What is required is a thorough historiographic effort on the basis of which there may be constituted commonly acceptable local evaluative assessments, and consequently, maybe even a narrowing of the gap between the opposing overall points of view. In recent years, some moves in this direction were made in the Israeli academic and political arena. Among these can be found, most notably, Benny Morris's research into the 1948 war (Morris, 1988, 2004, 2008), as well activities of such organizations as Zochrot (Remembering), the goal of which is to raise Israeli awareness of the Palestinian narrative of the 1948 war (Zochrot, 2011). On the other hand, there are also actions being taken in the opposite direction, the objectives of which are to suppress Palestinian memory of 1948, such as the so-called “Nakba Law” passed in the Israeli Knesset (Ha’aretz, 2011). According to the outlook presented here, this law, which cuts government funding for organizations that promote the memory of the Nakba, is counterproductive. (A more thorough examination of developments of these two kinds on both sides, the Israeli and the Palestinian, is of value and interest, but it is beyond the scope of this paper.)

A recent example where this outlook has been operative is the formation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in post-Apartheid South Africa (Cole, 2010; Moon, 2008; Shea, 2000). As attested by its name, the goal of the commission, which operated between 1995 and 1998, was to uncover and expose violations of human rights performed by the Apartheid regime, and to thereby contribute to reconciliation in South Africa. The truths that the commission was aiming to expose were mainly "forensic/factual" and "personal/narrative" truths (Cole, 2010, p. 163)—in tune with the principle of charity, the idea here is that agreement in interpretation should be based on agreement over basic facts (as reflected in documents, and in people's memory). And how is such a truth-finding effort supposed to lead to reconciliation? As stated in Shea (2000, p. 5), this can happen only if the commission produces “concrete results in terms of establishing as complete an account as possible about past abuses, restoring dignity to those who were victims of the abuses, and charting a credible course for moving beyond those abuses as a society.” Thus, the underlying hope motivating the commission's constitution was that, indeed, an agreement over (and a reckoning with) as large a factual basis as possible may foster understanding, thereby paving the way for reconciliation and cooperation (rather than inciting more hatred, as one could possibly expect). Davidson’s philosophy provides some theoretical support to this hope.

Conclusion

I claim to have shown that the debate over the principle of charity is of interest and relevance to the study of communication. The principle upgrades charity from an optional interpretational tactic to a necessary feature of communicative interaction, and in so doing, it ties charity to key questions concerning communication. How are communication and agreement related to each other? How does the choice between the transmission and constructivist models of communication bear upon the requirement for charity, and, more generally, upon our conception of personhood and the relations between communicants? And how are calls for charity bearing upon actual interpretational practice? These questions and others were raised and begun to be discussed in this paper, and, I believe, were shown to be worth pursuit by communication scholars.

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