

## Interpreting Disturbed Minds: Donald Davidson and *The White Ribbon*

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Michael Haneke's *The White Ribbon* (*Das weisse Band*, 2009) offers an unsettling portrayal of an isolated, rural German community during the months leading up to the First World War. Over the course of a year, a series of calamities occur in the village of Eichwald. The Doctor is unhorsed by a length of wire strung between two trees. A field of crops is destroyed. The Baron's, and then the Midwife's, young sons are tied up and viciously beaten. A barn is set on fire. These events are not accidents; they are malicious acts intended by an unknown agency. The spectator is invited to question—along with the frightened villagers—who within this community of apparently placid, well-mannered, God-fearing Lutherans could be responsible. Does some pattern connect the victims? Are these acts meant to convey a message—Revenge? Anger? Envy?—and to whom might such a message be addressed? Lacking typical narrative closure, the film places the onus upon us by refusing to answer these questions. Yet the villagers' extraordinary public reserve, their terse replies and impassive faces make our investigation difficult. Nor is it easy to reconcile their public personae with the harsh discipline they enact upon their children in private. The unfamiliar manner of these characters casts doubt upon our grasp of their use of familiar words. What are they really saying to each other with a curt greeting or through a silence, or with a quick glance? If we cannot understand them or discern their true intentions how are we to discover who is to blame?

Thomas Elsaesser claims Haneke as a director of 'mind-game' films, the key images of which are 'ghostly' in the sense that they imply that 'the cinema has a *mind* "outside" or in excess of (the narration or the character, the auteur or the spectator) that eludes any fixed positionality' (Elsaesser and Hagener 2010, 155, emphasis mine). But his diagnosis of the appeal of other recent mind-game films, like *The Sixth Sense* (M. Night Shyamalan, 1999) and *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000), or Haneke's own *Code Unknown* (*Code inconnu*, 2000) and *Caché* (2005), fails to account for *The White Ribbon*. To Elsaesser these films insist that, if the spectator wishes to understand them, she must uncover their rules for herself. He argues that this is an entertaining spin on the rule-grasping demands we increasingly experience living 'symbiotically with machines' in our semi-automated and

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technologically-dependent society (Elsaesser 2009, 39). But the residents of Eichwald rely upon candles and carriages, not the Internet. Unlike fantastic stories like *The Sixth Sense*, *The White Ribbon* is essentially a realist film whose story happens within our own world. Moreover, *The White Ribbon*'s chronological narrative exhibits none of the twists or self-corrections seen in other films of this genre, and in which one may plausibly find modelled the trial-and-error experience of learning how to use a new piece of software, before the moment things suddenly fall into place.

I propose that we can nevertheless gain traction upon the sense in which *The White Ribbon* has a 'mind "outside" or in excess of' its components—and moreover see the use of talking in this way—by turning to Donald Davidson's theory of the interpretation of other minds. The focus on charity in Davidson's account of the conditions under which an interpreter is able to find a foreign community intelligible illuminates the discomfort the spectator experiences as she begins to understand the disturbed community portrayed in the film. Using *The White Ribbon*, I will argue that Davidson's theory can be applied not only to individual agents within a community, but to the group agent that *is* a community. In this mind-game film, I want to say, the 'mind' of *The White Ribbon* is the community of Eichwald, and it is this mind that, terribly, we learn how to interpret. My reading of the film also exposes a lacuna in Davidson's transcendental argument that language use is a criterion for mindedness. Minds must not only be interpretable as expressing mostly true beliefs about the shared world, but as being properly sensitive to the moral and emotional norms that govern *how* we say what we say.

### **Radical Interpretation in the Village of Eichwald**

Davidson's theory centres on his 'radical interpreter' thought experiment. Imagine that Laura, an intrepid linguist, is plunged into a foreign community that appears to be using a language with which she is totally unfamiliar (a 'radical' situation). She sets about trying to discover what the foreigners mean by their utterances. Laura, Davidson argues, naturally begins her interpretative project by searching for regularities. For example, having noticed that hunting groups often call out 'Gavagai!' in the presence of rabbits, she tentatively records the connection between the foreign expression 'Gavagai' and the English word 'rabbit,' suspecting that an utterance of 'Gavagai' is reckoned true by the foreigners if, and only if, they have just seen a rabbit. Proceeding in this way, she generates a list of sentences that she believes satisfy the conditions laid out by Alfred Tarski (1956) for giving a theory of truth for a language. Tarski argues that a satisfactory truth theory for a language L would have to entail, for each L-

sentence *s*, a sentence in the theorist's language *ML* of the form "'*s*' is true-in-*L* if and only if *p*.' In cases where *ML* includes the target language, the very same sentence can replace '*s*' and '*p*' in this schema (for instance, "'Snow is white" is true-in-*L* if and only if snow is white'). But in cases where the theorist's language does *not* include the target language, then the expression replacing '*p*' must be synonymous with that replacing '*s*' (for example, "'Schnee ist weiss" is true-in-*L* if and only if snow is white'). Tarski hoped to gain purchase on the concept of truth by relying upon translation—the capacity to capture the meaningfulness of sentences from one language in the sentences of another. Davidson's insight is to invert this dependence. Since 'to give truth conditions is a way of giving the meaning of a sentence' (1984a, 24), he contends that, given the additional empirical constraints of radical interpretation, an interpreter like Laura is entitled to systematically replace each sentence of her truth theory with one satisfying the schema "'*S*" means that *p*,' resulting in a theory of meaning for *L*. In the interesting case where *ML* does not contain *L*, the theory will *interpret* *L* in *ML*: 'Schnee ist weiss' *means that* snow is white.

What 'additional empirical constraints' shape the radical interpreter's project? Suppose that one day while tracking the hunters, Laura witnesses the foreigners excitedly yelling 'Gavagai!' in the presence of a hare. She is now faced with a choice: *either* she ought to refine her hypothesis about 'Gavagai,' supposing it reckoned true in the presence of rabbits *or* hares, *or* she was right about the meaning of 'Gavagai,' and the foreigners erroneously believe that hares *are* rabbits. How is she to decide between these possibilities? Was she wrong about the *meaning* of the foreign word 'Gavagai,' or do the foreigners have a false *belief* about the *world*?

Davidson claims that the interpreter can only 'solve the problem of the interdependence of belief and meaning by holding belief constant as far as possible while solving for meaning' (1984b, 137). In other words, Laura must charitably suppose that the foreigners' beliefs about their shared environment are true, according to her own grasp of the environment. In our case, she must charitably suppose that the foreigners know the difference between rabbits and hares, and revise her tentative interpretation of the meaning of the utterance 'Gavagai.' Davidson claims that charity is not a choice, but a demand of radical interpretation: 'if we cannot find a way to interpret the utterances and other behaviour of a creature as revealing a set of beliefs largely consistent and true by our own standards, we have no reason to count that creature as rational, as having beliefs, or as saying anything' (1984b 137; cf. 2001, 150-151). The objection to uncharitable interpretation is not that it evinces a mean-spirited imperialism, but that it is methodologically unsound. According to Davidson, we are only justified in

attributing cognition to beings whom we interpret. To find meaning in the foreigners' behaviour is the only way to find the foreigners' behaviour *meant*. The eventual result of freely attributing false beliefs to the foreigners is not concluding that they are foolish or irrational, but that they are *non-rational*, and that our impulse to interpret and find *meaning* in their squawks was misguided. So Davidson insists that attributing false beliefs is an interpretative last resort, admissible only if we would be otherwise unable to develop a rational explanation for their behaviour.

This artificial thought experiment sharpens his theory, but Davidson believes that his results are entirely general. Even in everyday communication with those interlocutors whom we typically take to be speaking our own language, he argues, we are engaged in a sophisticated interpretative project. When other people use words in unexpected ways, or behave in a way that gives the lie to their words, we have Laura's choice: either we attribute a false belief to our interlocutor, or we attribute a new meaning to the words she is using. Charity, Davidson insists, must guide our everyday communication whenever possible; otherwise we are not truly *interpreting* each other, in the sense of trying to understand each other's minds, but are only conceitedly and dogmatically enjoying the vista from our own perspective.

There is one last feature of Davidson's philosophy that is relevant to thinking about *The White Ribbon*. In Davidson's view, it is only in the process of interpreting others that we are able to make sense of ourselves as subject to the central normative standard of epistemology: objective truth. It is only through grasping that someone else might be *mistaken* about the world—might think that what we know to be hares are only rabbits, for example—that we acquire the objective/subjective contrast that is recorded by our concepts of 'truth' and 'belief.' Davidson's transcendental conclusion is that prior to acquiring this contrast, there is nothing about a person's cognitive capacities worth calling a 'mind,' and hence nothing such a being 'believes' or 'knows.'

The upshot for epistemology is that the capacity to know is necessarily social. The dominant epistemological model since Descartes has imagined lone inquirers seeking an adequate understanding of the world, with rationalists claiming that inquirers are able to do so by virtue of their innate cognitive capacities, and empiricists claiming that they are able to do so on the basis of their sensory experience. Davidson turns the Cartesian model on its head:

[Cartesians] think that first one knows what's in his own mind, then, with luck, he finds out what is in the outside world, and, with even more luck, he finds out what is in

somebody else's mind. I think differently. First we find out what is in somebody else's mind, and by then we have all the rest. Of course, I really think that it all happens at the same time. (Borradori 1994, 50)

For Davidson, the capacity for thought and the capacity for shared language-use are inseparable. We count as beings with minds only because we can interpret the utterances of other speakers within our community.

Davidson's epistemological framework places a new emphasis upon the community to which individual minds belong, which is especially significant when we turn our attention to *disturbed* communities. In cases of disturbances that at first appear traceable to a disturbed individual mind within the community, such as the devastating crimes of a serial rapist, this framework might call our attention to the community in which that disturbed mind was able to arise. But in some cases the disturbances within a community are symptomatic of the fact that the community is *comprised* of disturbed minds. The distinctive nature of the further disturbance that arises in the young minds of the latter sort of community is the subject of *The White Ribbon*.

The film opens in darkness with a voiceover narration by an old Schoolteacher (Ernst Jacobi), positioning the spectator as a learner. Rather elliptically, the Schoolteacher tells us 'I don't know whether the story I want to tell you is entirely true,' but that he nevertheless wants to relate an account of some dark events that happened when he was a young man because 'they could perhaps clarify some things that happened in this country.' (The significance of this remark will dawn slowly on the spectator during the film.) More important than his potentially unreliable memory is that he was not present at every event; some scenes are reconstructed on the basis of others' testimony. Moreover, upon meeting the narrator as a young man (Christian Friedel), we realize that he was scarcely more than a teenager himself, and more affable than assiduous as an observer. He is awed by the various authority figures populating the village in which he has taken his first job, and becomes personally distracted from investigating the mystery by a love affair. Coupled with the narrator's claim that a lot of the story 'is still obscure' and that 'many questions remain unanswered,' we soon understand that successful interpretation will require our labour. We have been challenged to make sense of events that continue to perplex the narrator.

The village is portrayed starkly in a crisp black and white (an effect achieved by shooting the film in digital colour negative, and draining it post-production [Pollock and Knapp, 2010]), and without a musical score. Its extended shots of the countryside are uncomfortably and ominously still.

The repellent characters we soon meet also seem repelled by each other, becoming increasingly watchful and suspicious with each new disaster. The adults are only identified—and so, defined—by their social position: the Pastor, the Doctor, the Baron, the Steward. In contrast, the children are named; but the uniformity of their sullen and haunted expressions shows that their names do nothing to establish their individuality, but are merely used as convenient tools of reference in lieu of their having a relevant role within the community. Haneke used period photographs by German artist August Sanders as a guide to both the sharp visuals of the film, and the faces of the child actors, who were cast from a pool of over seven thousand (Andrew 2009, 17). At a lecture in Pittsburgh, the film’s distributor Michael Barker reported that Haneke wanted the film’s visual style to match our memory of this period, which comes from such black and white landscapes and portraiture (2009).



‘Farm Girls’ (Sanders, 1928)



‘Middle-Class Children’ (Sanders, 1925/1926)



Still from *The White Ribbon*



Still from *The White Ribbon*

We witness the children being severely punished for even minor infractions. When the Pastor (Burghart Klausner) suspects that his eldest son, Martin (Leonard Proxauf), is masturbating, he scares a confession from him by relating a story about a boy in a neighbouring village who came over in pustules and died six months after touching himself. For the next four

months, Martin is strapped down tightly to his bed each night, his younger brothers afraid to untie him even when they catch sight of a nearby barn on fire. On a different occasion, to punish Martin and his sister Klara (Maria-Victoria Dragus) for staying out late, the Pastor viciously canes them, and then humiliates them by forbidding the entire family to eat dinner. Later, Klara collapses after her father berates her in front of her classmates. Martin and Klara are forced to wear white ribbons—his tied around his arm, hers tied in her hair—to remind them of the ‘innocence and purity’ that they have failed to exemplify (an actual punishment of the time, paradoxically signifying both purity and sin). The Steward (Josef Bierbichler) violently kicks his boy for stealing a flute from the Baron’s son. We also learn, from the point of view of his youngest child, that the Doctor (Rainer Bock) is sexually abusing his daughter. But despite these horrifying scenes, we do not identify with the children. The doctor’s son fails to intercede on his sister’s behalf, or even understand the significance of the event he has witnessed, and Klara furiously stabs her father’s pet bird with a pair of scissors, arranging its impaled corpse as a crucifix on his desk. We feel no justice in her retribution: only further anger and bitterness.

The adults of Eichwald are a group of isolated and unhappy individuals forced into close proximity by socio-economic and religious forces. After a farmer’s wife falls to her death in one of the Baron’s tumbledown barns, the farmer rebukes his son for seeking vengeance, pointing out that without their jobs on the estate, their family cannot survive. The villagers’ treatment of each other is difficult to watch, with initially pleasant encounters quickly becoming disturbing. For example, soon after the Doctor returns to the village from a nearby hospital, we see him rekindling an affair with the Midwife (Susanne Lothar). Perhaps here, we think, there will be genuine affection. They engage in a somewhat frantic, muted sex act at the dining room table, which we actively try to interpret: Is it muted for the sake of the children? Is it frantic because of their acute desire? Afterwards, the pair share a bottle of wine and have a conversation about his children whom she has been looking after. She seems unhappy, and remarks that he did not miss her while he was away. He quietly and ironically replies, ‘Nothing like a nice dose of self-hate,’ and the scene ends with her leaning into him, apparently finding support in his words. We might interpret this as a scene of lovers reunited—certainly a little cold, but marked by the well-worn bickering of a couple who care for one another—but we are rudely jarred from this interpretation when the film next takes up the pair’s story. Having failed to ejaculate despite the Midwife’s oral ministrations, the Doctor, in a devastatingly calm monotone, insults her for her ugliness and her halitosis. The camera lingers on her

empty face while she endures his tirade, before he ends with a bored, ‘My God, why don’t you just die?’

In Davidsonian terms, we sought to find love, or at least affection in their sex, because that is what *we* would mean by performing *their* actions in *this* context. But now the meaning of the earlier event has been eroded; the Doctor—an identity we charitably associated with being caring, and who was initially introduced to us as a victim—is revealed as intensely cruel. Since our initial attempt at understanding has proven inadequate, we seek a more outlandish explanation of these characters’ behaviour. Although we still charitably interpret their actions as intended by minds, we are forced to attribute objectionable attitudes to them. Their sex was not an expression of love, but of—say—hatred, desperation, self-loathing, physical need, or indifference.

In contrast to the adults, the children in the village share a deep, though murky, bond. As the full German title to the film indicates (*‘Das weisse Band: Eine deutsche Kindergeschichte,’* [a German children’s story]), this is really their tale. Seen through the Schoolteacher’s eyes, the children form an exclusive sub-community within the exclusive village community that he—and we—struggle to understand. We rarely hear their conversations or see them playing, but instead understand their closeness through their mutual, protracted silences exemplified by moon-faced Klara who becomes their reluctant, monosyllabic spokeswoman. Gradually, the Schoolteacher notices that a cluster of the children are often nearby when bad things occur, and eventually confronts the Pastor with his suspicions. He is summarily rebuffed, threatened with dismissal, and even prosecution: the notion that children—and *their* children—could be guilty of these acts is too outrageous to be countenanced, and the Pastor tells the Schoolteacher that he must have a ‘sick mind.’ The film ends as reports of Archduke Ferdinand’s assassination arrive in the village, and the Schoolteacher narrates that after he was drafted, he never returned to Eichwald.

The spectator is left in no doubt that the Schoolteacher has always believed that the children perpetrated the vicious acts. They were playing with control in a situation where they were powerless. But can they really be held responsible for their actions, or does the ultimate culpability lie elsewhere? How should *we* interpret the events depicted in this film?

I think that Davidson’s theory is helpful here. There are two distinct registers at which we can try to apply it. The first we have already seen exemplified in the scene between the Doctor and the Midwife. Initially, these characters appeared to speak a familiar language: German, subtitled in English. We tacitly apply a homophonic translation to them, taking them to be saying—to be meaning—what *we* would be saying—and meaning—if we were to use their expressions. But their unexpected behaviour repeatedly

surprises us, leaving us to search for other interpretations, and generating a lingering doubt that we have really understood them, and so, the meaning of the mysterious events in Eichwald.

Understanding the nature of this lingering doubt is crucial for understanding the film. It is not just that the villagers' actions undermine the sense of their words: they are not merely hypocrites. Nor are we witnessing a community of compulsive liars or an insane community of whose actions neither we nor they can make any sense. It is rather that the unusual manner in which members of this community act is so systematic, so resolutely cold and angry, that we wonder whether there is a further layer of meaning that our quick, outlandish hypotheses have failed to grasp: a layer that we will *have* somehow to grapple with if we are ever to understand them. In saying of the Doctor, 'His actions show that he never really loved the Midwife,' and then of the Pastor, 'He (falsely) believes that harshly disciplining his children will make them responsible citizens,' we are in danger of making these figures individually intelligible at the expense of finding the community intelligible. For if we suppose that we have made significant headway in our overall investigation by locating some *individually* disturbed minds within the community, we may think that our case is like that of the serial rapist I mentioned earlier. But although these individual minds are disturbed, they are not the root of the disturbance Eichwald suffers. *All* of Eichwald's minds are disturbed, and the way to realize this is carefully to attend to the shared coldness of each scene in the film. In Davidsonian terms, instead of quickly attributing false beliefs to individual characters, we should endeavour to understand the intended meaning of their actions within this community by revising our interpretive manual. This stance allows us to arrive at the more shocking hypotheses that there is a meaning to 'love' in this community where the Doctor *does* love the Midwife; and a meaning to 'responsible citizens' in this community where the Pastor's draconian measures will successfully turn his children into them. I think that the game which this mind-game film plays with us is a challenge to discover how such a community is possible. But what is the nature of the 'mind' playing with us, and how can we interpret it?

### **The 'Mind' of *The White Ribbon***

As I noted above, Elsaesser writes that the 'mind' of a mind-game film is shown by its key shots, which elude a 'fixed positionality,' and which imply a 'presence' beyond the individual components of the film. It is certainly difficult to find a consistent position for the shots in *The White Ribbon*. Although the existence of a narrator often implies a definite point of view, and we are privy to scenes that the Schoolteacher remembers, there are other

scenes, such as the exchange between the Doctor and the Midwife, that are not told from his perspective. While the film sometimes uses the shared perspective of the children in order to make its depictions more vivid, *it* seems to understand in a way *they* do not what it is that they are seeing; for example, as I mentioned earlier, the Doctor's young son fails to grasp that he is witnessing the sexual abuse of his sister. What can we tell about the 'presence' that is implied by these shots? They often focus our attention on subtle (and disquieting) features of the community, such as the venom in the eyes of a prepubescent child. Many draw out the isolation of belonging to these large families; by quickly cutting from home life in dark, cramped interiors to public life in bright, exposed exteriors, and with creaking wooden floors ever-ready to irritate villagers obsessed with silence, the film presents us with family members unable to find solace. While the choice to film just these shots—and so deliberately—is Haneke's, the presence implied by the film is not Haneke himself, didactically telling us how we should understand these events, as Elsaesser accuses him of doing in earlier films (2010, 58). Haneke says that 'now [he is] trying to find a cinematic language that restores a little freedom to the viewer' (Andrew 2009, 17). *The White Ribbon* starts a conversation by challenging its spectator to undertake an interpretive project, rather than simply unwind with a Whodunnit? whose genre conventions ensure that its answers will all be revealed. Rising to this challenge is, to return to Elsaesser's language, to understand what the presence *means* by the film, which is also to understand what the presence—or *The White Ribbon's* cinematic 'mind'—is.

A clue to the identity of this presence is the narrator's early report of his story that 'some of it I only know by hearsay.' Bringing 'hearsay' together with 'knowledge' is particularly striking. The things that one 'knows' are *true*. Some of the things that one knows are justified on the basis of others' testimony. If I declare that I know it is raining outside because you have told me so, I voice my trust in you and defer the responsibility for my belief. But appealing to 'hearsay' is a way of indefinitely deferring responsibility for one's assertions (and to claim *knowledge* on the basis of hearsay is thus epistemically irresponsible). It is to voice trust in what you have often *heard said* by others, even though those others will typically defer responsibility in turn, so that the original source is left mysterious and the claim is a mere rumour.

The hearsay in a small village distinguishes its members' shared beliefs from those of outsiders. Unlike background *truths* that are known by every member of a community—for example, that it is raining when it is raining—hearsay may be false but widely *held* to be true. The film is partially reconstructed on the basis of hearsay in Eichwald. Its scenes show us *what* was heard said in the village; yet, beyond that, the *tone* of these

scenes—*how* the film is shot—show us *how* the hearsay was heard said. Its long, still gazes at the countryside imply the villagers' isolation and desperation. Its protracted, crisp, and almost beautiful shots of day-to-day suffering, as well as its pervasive coldness, show the villagers' malice. Its dark interior shots expose the villagers' darkness. The presence of this film—*The White Ribbon's* 'mind'—is the community of Eichwald, the group agent that is constituted by its various members.

If *The White Ribbon* is a call to understand the mind of the community of Eichwald, what do we find, and why should this community in particular interest us? One answer is suggested by the narrator's initially obscure remark that the film could 'clarify' some things that happened in Germany: to interpret Eichwald is to learn about the rise of Nazism. On this reading, the film invites contemplation of the harsh social conditions that led a generation to champion National Socialism, and encourages us to blame not just the children who apparently perpetrated the vicious acts—those who would go on to commit some of the worst atrocities of the Twentieth Century—but the authoritarian and religious society in which they grew up. As we grapple to understand Eichwald's rules—and the shocking penalties for *breaking* them—we recognize the culpability of the community in producing children with a desire to take justice into their own hands, a deep sense of duty and loyalty to each other, and an unshakeable belief that their own judgments are beyond reproach.

However, this answer cannot be the whole story. As Roger Ebert wrote in his review of the film, 'It's too simple to say the film is about the origins of Nazism. If that were so, we would all be Nazis' (2010, par 10). Ebert's point is that much of rural Europe was structured around just as authoritarian, religious, and essentially feudal a structure as Eichwald is portrayed as having, with various landowners and religious men acting as the respective economic and moral centres of villagers' lives. Yet Nazism happened *here* in particular. Haneke dropped the subtitle '*Eine deutsche Kindergeschichte*' from the film in translation to avoid the possible implication to non-German audiences that *The White Ribbon* was a film about a uniquely German problem (Andrew 2009, 17).

This all suggests that we can learn something more general from *The White Ribbon*. Haneke thinks that it tells us about ideology: 'The film is about how people are manipulated into following an idea and how people are educated into doing that. It's a film about how a soul or a human spirit can be coerced and led in a certain direction' (Wallenberg 2010, par 5). *The White Ribbon* would then function as a parable, recommending that we be constantly vigilant against indoctrination by the society which educates us. It teaches us to beware our society becoming as disturbed as Eichwald. Ebert finds a different and less uplifting parable: '[Haneke's films teach]

that bad things sometimes happen simply because they...happen. The universe laughs at man's laws and does what it will' (2010, par 11). Perhaps the group agent of a community is beyond the control of the individual minds that comprise it, and we must all simply hope that our culture stays healthy.

Davidson's theory consolidates these parables. To form anything worth calling a community, individuals must *choose* to engage in relationships with each other. But Eichwald's oppressive, authoritarian structure deprives its members of any choice. The villagers who have chosen (and, since they do not leave, who continue to choose) to be deprived of choice have reneged their own agency. The 'mind' of the film is disturbed because its very identity—the communal mind of a non-community—is paradoxical. This disturbance is made manifest by the minds which arise in the village: the children that lack individual identity and who behave so atrociously. They serve as a locus for our interpretative effort, a puzzling product of the film's 'mind' that demands we carefully revise our first attempts at interpretation.

Davidson's theory also gives a reason for *The White Ribbon's* distinctive appeal. He famously deploys his theory of interpretation to argue that once we have rejected a Cartesian epistemology, we must acknowledge our inability to make sense of a conceptual scheme that is radically different from our own, just as we cannot make sense of an uninterpretable language (1984c). The point is not that some languages or schemes are too strange for us to understand. Rather, a being only counts as *having* a conceptual scheme, a mind, or a language, if they are interpreted and understood by us.

The significance of this for *The White Ribbon* is that if we succeed in interpreting the 'mind' of the film, we are forced to confront that the disturbed community of Eichwald is not *unintelligible*. The film's power is to lure us away from a familiar, and too often unreflective, anti-authoritarianism and anti-fascism, which produces facile judgments that 'Nazis were evil people (unlike *us*).' Instead, by placing us in an interpretative position of charity, the film insists that we work to uncover the underlying principles of the community *before* we evaluate it. It is only from this position that meaningful moral judgments about the dangers of authoritarianism and fascism can be made. Such judgments have an emotive power lacking in the quick dismissal of Nazism as an essentially *alien* case study of terrible immorality. In going through the process of interpretation, we discover that such terrible immorality is an ever-present danger in the communities in which we live.

Conversely, the significance of this for Davidson's philosophy is that the emotional and moral norms to which we appeal in identifying *appropriate* language use are also employed when identifying the *capacity*

for language in an interlocutor. Not every disturbed mind is irrational, explicable by attributing to it a constellation of false beliefs about the shared world. Some disturbed minds are wholly rational, instead showing their disturbance in failing to *use* language appropriately: for example, the Doctor's monotonous delivery of his hate-filled speech to his lover. Davidson argues that charitably ascribing true beliefs to our interlocutor is necessary if we are to interpret her as possessing a mind. *The White Ribbon* adds to this transcendental argument that every rational mind relevantly like our own is a language user whose utterances abide by our emotional and moral norms.

I have argued that applying Davidson's theory to *The White Ribbon* shows us that the film is an argument for rethinking our temptation quickly to find some actions, people, or groups 'unintelligible.' It rebukes the laziness in this stance of superiority, insisting that we ought to try to understand those we find abominable before we pass judgment upon them. The film also shows that Davidson's theory of interpretation can be extended beyond understanding individual agents within a community to understanding the group agent that *is* the community. If we follow Davidson in adopting a thoroughly social epistemology, *The White Ribbon* is an argument that the group agent to which individual minds belong acts as an important constraint upon what individual minds mean, and *can* mean, by their utterances.<sup>2</sup>

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