Soames on Quine and Davidson

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Quine and Davidson are the topics of, respectively, parts five and six of volume II of <u>Philosophical Analysis in the Twentieth Century</u>.[1] In chapter 10, Soames examines Quine's arguments in <u>Word and Object</u> for the indeterminacy of translation; chapter 11 is devoted to the radical consequences of this thesis and an assessment of it. In chapter 12, Soames turns to Davidson's claim that theories of truth are theories of meaning; and in chapter 13, to his argument against alternative conceptual schemes. Obviously this is to omit much (although Quine receives more attention in Soames's volume I); in compensation we get Soames's characteristically detailed, clear, and penetrating treatment of some central doctrines of both philosophers. Someone who associates analytic philosophy with mind-numbing wrangles about "ordinary language" might suppose that analytic philosophers spurn mind-boggling philosophical theorizing. Soames's chapters on Quine and Davidson will quickly cure this misapprehension.

For reasons of space, I will pass over Soames's instructive discussion of Davidson on theories of meaning, sticking instead to Quine on indeterminacy, and Davidson on conceptual schemes.

1. Quine and the indeterminacy of translation

1.1 The two arguments for indeterminacy

Soames states the thesis of the indeterminacy of translation as follows:

> Translation is not determined by the set N of all truths of nature, known and
> unknown. For any pair of languages and theory of translation T for those
> languages, there are alternative theories of translation, incompatible with T,
> that accord equally well with N. All such theories are equally true to the facts;
> there is no objective matter of fact of which they disagree, and no objective
> sense in which one is true and the other is not. (243)

As Soames says, there is an issue concerning what 'determines' means, let
alone Quine's understanding of it—more of that shortly.

Soames identifies "two main routes in Quine's writings to the
indeterminacy thesis" (244). The first route makes essential use of Quine's
behaviorism, and the argument is basically this:

Argument 1

1. If translation is determinate (i.e., if translation is determined by all truths of
nature), it is determined by the behaviorial truths.

2. Translation is not determined by the behavioral truths.

Hence:

3. Translation is indeterminate.

Responding to this argument, Soames concedes that "publicly available observable behavioral facts—in particular, facts about stimulus meaning…don't determine which translations of our words are correct" (244). That is, premise 2 is true. The culprit, Soames says, is premise 1, which rests on Quine's behaviorism. In the first place:

> In other domains of empirical investigation, we routinely countenance non-observational facts the existence of which is supported, but not logically or necessarily guaranteed, by the observations we make. To rule these out in the case of our theories of mind and language—in advance of establishing his indeterminacy theses—Quine would have to have a compelling **independent** argument that the only facts in these domains of inquiry are behavioral facts (which we may assume to be observable). Since, as far as I can see, he has no such argument, there is reason not to rest his case for the doctrine of the indeterminacy of translation on behaviorism (244).

And in the second place, the appeal to behaviorism creates trouble elsewhere in Quine's system, because his crucial notion of stimulus meaning, which characterizes the evidence for a theory of translation, is "defined in terms of assent and dissent" (244), and it is unclear how assent and dissent can be given behavioristically acceptable explanations. As Soames notes, on the face of it assent to a sentence is explained in terms of one's belief that the sentence is false, which invokes unhygenic mental vocabulary.[2]

Soames is of course right to identify these two problems. The first is well-known, and I will say more about it in the following section. The second is less

familiar—and is an example of how Soames always manages to find something novel to say about discussed-to-death philosophers. But perhaps this second problem is not insuperable (from Quine's perspective, at least). The behaviorist substitute for <u>believing that sentence S is true</u> will be (roughly) this: being disposed to produce S. We may assume this is acceptable, since the second problem does not concern behaviorism in general. Then the behaviorist substitute for <u>assenting to S</u> will presumably be (roughly) this: the subject's behavior (bodily movement) is caused (in part) by the subject's having the disposition to produce S. (Cf. Quine 1974, 47; 1992, 39.) Thus, if the subject waves her tentacles, and this is (in part) caused by her having the disposition to produce S, then the subject assents to S.

If we can help ourselves to the negation of S (not-S), then <u>dissenting to S</u> does not pose an extra problem, since it is (near enough) equivalent to <u>assenting to not-S</u>. Unfortunately not-S is off-limits, because negation (in the subject's language) is supposed to be explained partly in terms of dissent (cf. Quine 1960, 57-8; 1974, 75; see also Soames, 231-4). But even if dissent is junked as behavioristically unacceptable, we can state non-trivial empirical constraints on translation just in terms of the affirmative stimulus meaning of sentences, defined in terms of assent. These constraints can be supplemented with Quine's "partial criterion" of dissent: "a speaker will dissent in no circumstances sufficiently similar to those in which he volunteers the sentence" (1974, 47). Thus, if a translation manual translates expression e of L as meaning the same as <u>not</u> in English, then the speakers of L will not assent to e^S in circumstances

sufficiently similar to those in which they assent to S. If this means that the translation of the truth functional connectives is indeterminate, so be it (cf. Quine 1974, 78).

In any case, I think Soames should have given the first route to the indeterminacy thesis more of a run for its money, because I doubt that the second, "more powerful and more widely influential route" (246), can be extracted from what Quine says. The second route, Soames explains, drops behaviorism entirely, because:

> [w]e can no more read off the contents of a person's words from physiological claims about neurons than we can read off the contents of his words from statements about the noises he makes in certain circumstances. Consequently, it seems that if we cannot deduce a determinate meaning from a non-intentional description of linguistic behavior, adding facts about neurons won't help. (246)

In other words, if premise 2 of Argument 1 is plausible, the stronger premise that translation is not determined by the physical truths (which include, but are not limited to, the behavioral truths), is also plausible. We can now trade the stronger version of premise 2 for a weaker version of the problematic premise 1, yielding the following argument:

Argument 2

1. If translation is determinate (i.e., if translation is determined by all truths of nature), it is determined by the physical truths.

2. Translation is not determined by the physical truths.

Hence:

3. Translation is indeterminate.

Soames's main complaint against Argument 2 is that both premises are true only if the argument equivocates. If 'determines' is read as 'metaphysically necessitates', then premise 1 is plausibly true. However, on that reading of 'determines' there is no evident support for premise 2. On the other hand, if 'determines' is read as 'a priori implies', the situation is reversed. Premise 2 is plausibly true, but now there is no evident support for premise 1. The argument will only seem cogent if one conflates a priority and necessity—the Original Sin of Soames's two volumes.

As Soames notes, Quine would hardly accept this reconstruction of his argument, since 'necessary' and 'a priori' are both on the Quinean Index of Prohibited Words. Accordingly, Quine would not accept either characterization of 'determines'. But, as Soames shows (253-5), a Quine-friendly characterization of 'P determines Q' as 'P together with true bridge principles logically entails Q' is too weak. On that characterization of 'determines', and not begging the question in Quine's favor, translation is determinate.

Although Argument 2 isn't exactly Quine's, does it represent the best reconstruction of "what Quine should have said"? I doubt it, essentially for a reason given by Soames himself. Commenting on the second interpretation of 'determines', "when the determination relation is taken to be a priori consequence", Soames observes that not much of anything appears to be an a

priori consequence of the physical truths (which, for Quine, are the austere truths of fundamental physics):

> Could [the truth 'I own a blue car'] be deduced from the set of truths of an ideal physics? Only if one could define what it is to be me, to be a blue car, and to own something in terms of the theoretical vocabulary of an ideal physics. Needless to say, no one has the faintest idea of how to do this, or any interest in it. The crucial problem here is that the required definitions or bridge principles would have to allow us to formulate conditional statements that were knowable apriori…even though their antecedents were physical truths and their consequents were ordinary English sentences like I exist, A car exists, I own a car, and I own a blue car, with their normal and customary meanings. (250)

A fair point (although, admittedly, not one universally acknowledged[3]). The trouble is that it shows that Argument 2 (with the second epistemic interpretation of 'determines') is just a special case of a more general argument which has nothing to do with translation or meaning. For example, an equally plausible (or implausible) version of the argument threatens to show that everything apart from fundamental physics—automobile ownership, the existence of cars, the colors of things…—is indeterminate. Similar remarks hold if 'determines' is given the first, metaphysical, interpretation (and we assume that Argument 2 is the most perspicuous version of the indeterminacy argument). Surely no reconstruction of Quine's argument for the indeterminacy of translation should exhibit it as a special case of an argument for the indeterminacy of (almost) everything.

Why does Soames think that Argument 2 is Quine's "second route" to the indeterminacy thesis? According to Soames:

> Quine recognized that many philosophers might agree with his claim that the set D of (quasi-behavioral) facts about stimulus meaning does not resolve potential indeterminacies about meaning, while at the same time disagreeing with his contention that these are the only meaning-determining facts. To these philosophers he, in effect, issued a challenge—namely to show how indeterminacies could be resolved by adding to D any other physical facts that one likes. (246)

The footnote appended to this passage suggests that this challenge is to be found in Quine 1969a and 1970. Against this, in both papers we find Quine in effect stressing the first premise of Argument 1:

> A conviction persists, often unacknowledged, that our sentences express ideas, and express these ideas rather than those, <u>even when behavioral criteria can never say which</u>. (1969a, 304, my emphasis)

> In order...to construe the foreigner's theoretical sentences we have to project analytical hypotheses, <u>whose ultimate justification is substantially just that the implied observation sentences match up</u>. (1970, 179, my emphasis)

1.2 Argument 1 again

Quine may not have <u>compelling</u> argument for the behaviorist premise of Argument 1, but he does have <u>an</u> argument:

Critics have said that the [indeterminacy] thesis is a consequence of my behaviorism. Some have said that it is a reductio ad absurdum of my behaviorism. I disagree with this second point, but I agree with the first. I hold further that the behaviorist approach is mandatory. In psychology one may or may not be a behaviorist, but in linguistics one has no choice. Each of us learns his language by observing other people's verbal behavior and having his own faltering verbal behavior observed and reinforced or corrected by others. We depend strictly on overt behavior in observable situations. As long as our command of our own language fits all external checkpoints, where our utterance or our reaction to someone's utterance can be appraised in the light of some shared situation, so long all is well. Our mental life between checkpoints is indifferent to our rating as a master of the language.

There is nothing in linguistic meaning, then, beyond what is to be gleaned from overt behavior in observable circumstances. (1992, 37-8)

Language acquisition is (of course) a complicated empirical matter, and the importance of having one's "faltering verbal behavior…reinforced or corrected by others" is famously controversial. (It is particularly baffling why Quine, of all people, is prone to armchair speculation about language acquisition.) But suppose we grant that the language learner's initial evidence consists solely of "overt behavior in observable situations", without worrying too much about what this means. That hardly shows that what is learnt supervenes on, or is determined by, overt behavior in observable situations, which is what the final sentence of the passage amounts to. For example, one may learn of the

existence of atoms from observable evidence, but that does not imply that the existence of atoms is determined by truths about the observed. Likewise, one might learn that 'rabbit' refers to rabbits by observing verbal behavior even though that fact about linguistic meaning is not determined by verbal behavior.

Perhaps Quine did not mean to stress learning, but if he didn't, then it is hard to find an argument in this passage (which certainly purports to give one). Still, there is <u>something</u> tempting about the conclusion, even if we set aside language acquisition as irrelevant. Davidson, in particular, is persuaded:

> Perhaps the most important thing [Quine] taught me was that there can be no more to the communicative content of words than is conveyed by verbal behavior. This seems obvious to many people: "meaning is use", quoth Wittgenstein. The idea is obvious, but its full force is still mostly unappreciated or misappropriated. (Davidson 1999, 80)[4]

And because Davidson shares Quine's linguistic behaviorism, he also agrees with Quine on the indeterminacy of translation—although Davidson thinks it somewhat less extensive (1999, 81-2).

We may fairly suppose that the slogan that "meaning is use" can be motivated without appeal to language acquisition. If we take talk about how words are "used" as a suggestive but initially unexplained bit of jargon, then the Quinean argument-template for the indeterminacy thesis could be put as follows:

Argument Q

1. If translation is determinate (i.e., if translation is determined by all truths of nature), it is determined by the truths about how expressions are used.

2. Translation is not determined by the truths about how expressions are used.

Hence:

3. Translation is indeterminate.

Argument 1 is an instance of Argument Q, with the "use" jargon explained in austere Quinean terms; this (arguably) trades the truth of premise 2 for the falsity of premise 1. At the other extreme, "use" may be explained in terms of meaning and reference—'rabbit' is used to refer to rabbits—yielding an instance of Argument Q that trades the truth of premise 1 for the falsity of premise 2. But perhaps an account of use somewhere between these two extremes could produce an instance that is (at least) not obviously unsound. For example, McGee argues that a plausible case for indeterminacy can be made out even if use is "understood very broadly, so that it includes a word's employment in silent contemplation…" (2005, 400).[5] There may be more mileage in Quine's indeterminacy argument than Soames allows.

1.3 Elaborating and evaluating Quine's conclusion

In chapter 11, Soames turns to evaluating the indeterminacy thesis itself. He first distinguishes (following Quine) the indeterminacy of translation from the inscrutability of reference. An instance of indeterminacy is:

C1. No claim that the native uses 'gavagai' to mean the same as I mean by α is true (where α is any expression in my language). (260)

And an instance of inscrutability is:

C2. No sentence **The native uses 'gavagai' to refer to** α expresses a truth.
(261)

Soames then draws out an apparent consequence of the reasoning that leads Quine to inscrutability and C2, namely that "we may correctly assert that the native doesn't use 'gavagai' to refer to anything…[and] [s]ince there is nothing special about the native, or the word gavagai, we must conclude that no one ever uses a word to refer to anything" (264).[6]

The argument Soames gives for this eliminativist conclusion does not purport to be Quine's; Soames notes that "Quine never explicitly says anything quite as radical and unequivocal" (264)). Still, Soames thinks the argument is one that Quine ought to accept. Further, in an especially illuminating reconstruction of a reductio ad absurdum argument from Quine's "Ontological Relativity", Soames argues that Quine's way of blocking the conclusion that "Reference…[is] nonsense not just in radical translation but at home" (Quine 1969b, 48; quoted by Soames at 265) must be to "deny that any word refers to rabbits (and only rabbits)" (269).

Now Quine thinks that if we "explicate" reference in "disquotational paradigms" (as he thinks we should), then we can say that "'rabbit' denotes rabbits, whatever they are, and 'Boston' designates Boston" (Quine 1992, 52; quoted by Soames at 272). But here, Soames plausibly argues, Quine is best understood as proposing a substitute for our ordinary notion of reference. If we use 'refers$_Q$' for the Quinean substitute, and 'refers' unsubscripted for "our

ordinary notion of reference" (270), then Quine holds (according to Soames) that 'rabbit' refers$_Q$ to rabbits but does not refer to rabbits.

Soames then argues that "Quine's position has several consequences that are so unpalatable as to make it reasonable to regard it as self-undermining" (282). The last of those consequences is this:

> [T]he very existence of Quine's own assertions, his own beliefs, and his own arguments is sufficient to falsify that which he asserted, believed, and argued for. What he asserted, believed, and argued for has the character that the very act of asserting, believing, or arguing for it is itself sufficient to falsify it. (284-5)

Soames's point is that Quine's (alleged) radical eliminativism—e.g. that no one ever uses a word to refer to anything, "that no one ever says or asserts anything" (284)—is pragmatically self-refuting: if Quine succeeds in stating it, it is false.

This calls, I think, for a slight correction. Is Quine a radical eliminativist, holding that 'rabbit' does not refer to rabbbits, and so on? This interpretation does not fit well with Quine's repeated claim that there is "no fact of the matter". If Quine holds that 'rabbit' does not refer to rabbits, then—despite his protestations to the contrary—there is "an objective matter to be right or wrong about" (Quine 1960, 73).

Further, whether 'determines' means a priori implies, or metaphysically necessitates, if the truth of "Rabbit' refers to rabbits' is not determined by the physical truths (or facts about use), then—it would be natural to hold—neither is the truth of its negation. And if so, then accepting the indeterminacy thesis does

not involve <u>denying</u> that 'rabbit' refers to rabbits, but rather <u>rejecting</u> ''Rabbit' refers to rabbits' (and its negation). Quine may escape the reductio of "Ontological Relativity" in a similar style.[7]

Quine, then, can be seen as adopting something like Soames's "partial definition" model of vague predicates, but taken to extremes. On Quine's view, the "default determinate extension" of a predicate, "the set of things that…the conventions of the language (plus relevant nonlinguistic facts) determine that the predicate applies to" (Soames 1999a, 209) is the empty set.

Needless to say, although this reconstruction of Quine's position might be a hermeneutic improvement, it remains as unpalatable as before. And a version of pragmatic self-refutation is retained. Quine's view, we are supposing, includes the claim that 'Sometimes someone asserts something' is to be rejected, yet if Quine succeeds in asserting this, there is a truth that his own theory enjoins us to reject.

2. Davidson on alternative conceptual schemes

2.1 Davidson's argument

The main thesis of Davidson's "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" (1974) is that every possible language (used by a population) is translatable into English—which is a good candidate for explicating the Tractarian thesis that "*[t]he limits of my language* mean the limits of my world" (Wittgenstein 1961, 5.6).[8] In addition, Davidson argues that—as Soames puts it—"[t]ranslation into English involves fundamental agreement with our world view" (314). Call this additional claim <u>Fundamental Agreement</u>.

Davidson's official topic is not translation, but "conceptual schemes", which he identifies with "sets of intertranslatable languages". Given this identification, Davidson's main thesis is that there are no <u>alien</u> conceptual schemes—schemes that are wholly or partly disjoint from the scheme shared by "all mankind" (1974, 198).[9]

Explaining the plan of his paper, Davidson says:

> In what follows I consider two kinds of case that might be expected to arise: complete, and partial, failures of translatability. There would be complete failure if no significant range of sentences in one language could be translated into the other; there would be partial failure if some range could be translated and some range could not (I shall neglect possible asymmetries.) My strategy will be to argue that we cannot make sense of total failure, and then to examine more briefly cases of partial failure. (187)

Why does Davidson think that there could not be "total failure" of translation? His central argument turns on the connection between truth and translation, which Davidson thinks is illuminated by Tarski's Convention T. At the end of a long passage quoted by Soames (324), Davidson says:

> …Convention T suggests, though it cannot state, an important feature common to all the specialized concepts of truth. It succeeds in doing this by making essential use of the notion of translation into a language we know. Since Convention T embodies our best intuition as to how the concept of truth is used, there does not seem to be much hope for a <u>test</u> that a conceptual scheme is radically different from ours if that <u>test</u> depends on the

assumption that we can divorce the notion of truth from that of translation. (194-5; my emphasis)

Commenting on this passage, Soames says:

[Davidson] seems…to suggest that we **extend** the concept of truth to include sentence of another language L by coming up with translations of sentences of L into English, and then using those translations to construct instances of Tarski's schema T to fix the specialized interpretation of the truth predicate that applies to sentence of L. Having gotten this far, he observes that this makes no room for the idea of true sentences not translatable into English. (325)

Soames then argues that the appeal to Convention T is misplaced. One of his points is that Convention T has no particular connection with English. What is required is that sentences of the object language be translated into the metalanguage, the language in which the definition of truth for the object language is constructed; the metalanguage does not have to be English.[10]

Soames's criticism is effective if the comparison with Tarski's project of defining truth for formal languages is essential to Davidson's argument. Admittedly, the passage can easily be read that way, but this interpretation is in tension with Davidson's subsequent discussion of partial failures of translatability. If the claim that sentence S is true in L only makes sense if S is translatable into English, then it follows immediately that partial failures of translatability are impossible. However, Davidson does not give this argument.

Instead, he approaches the issue of partial failure by arguing for Fundamental Agreement: "if we want to understand others, we must count them right in most matters" (197). (This is the first time that Fundamental Agreement appears in his paper, after the impossibility of total failure has supposedly been established.) From Fundamental Agreement, Davidson concludes

> that the attempt to give a solid meaning to the idea of conceptual relativism, and hence to the idea of a conceptual scheme, fares no better when based on partial failure of translation than when based on total failure. Given the underlying methodology of interpretation, <u>we could not be in a position to judge</u> that others had concepts or beliefs radically different from our own. (197, my emphasis)

As illustrated by this quotation and the previous one from Davidson's paper, he frequently equates the issue of whether there <u>could be</u> failures of translation with the epistemological issue of whether we could <u>find out</u> that there are failures of translation. That sounds like a suspect appeal to verificationism, but there is a more charitable reading. Perhaps Davidson is supposing that the only convincing way of arguing for the possibility of failures of translation is to argue for the possibility of good evidence for such failures. If the latter possibility is elusive, so is the former.

In any event, Davidson's argument against partial failure, and his emphasis on having <u>evidence</u>, suggests a different interpretation of his earlier argument against total failure. How could we find out that there is a complete failure of translation? The Saturnians, suppose, produce strings of symbols in an

apparently systematic way, but these strings defy all our attempts at translation into English. Could we justifiably believe that some Saturnian string S expresses a proposition (i.e. is meaningful), but is not translatable? We can hardly ask the Saturnians—that would only be appropriate for a partial failure of translation. One indirect way would be to find out whether S is true—if S has a truth value at all, it expresses a proposition. However—the argument proceeds—the only way of finding out whether S is true is to appeal to an instance of schema T: S is true iff p, where the English substituend for 'p' translates S. And obviously this method cannot show that S is untranslatable.

This is too sketchy to be convincing—there may well be other ways of confirming the untranslatability hypothesis—but it arguably makes better sense of Davidson's subsequent attack on partial failures of translation.

In any event, the verdict on total failure is not obvious. The allegedly untranslatable Saturnians are (presumably) rational agents with the usual stock of psychological states—if they aren't, then it is obscure how they could be speaking a language at all. Assuming that Saturnian can completely express the Saturnians' conceptual repertoire, the issue of untranslatability amounts to the difficult question of whether rational agents who psychologically resemble ourselves must also share some of our concepts—basic logical concepts, basic physical concepts, or whatever.

Partial failure, on the other hand, is considerably more tractable. Not only is Davidson's step from Fundamental Agreement to the impossibility of partial failure quite unpersuasive, but a passage from Soames (325) suggests an

argument for the opposite conclusion. Let <u>Mini-English</u> be English without a

chunk of vocabulary not definable in terms of the remainder: English minus its

color vocabulary, say, or minus the vocabulary of set theory (which we may

assume to be part of English). The argument (in outline) proceeds in two steps.

The first step should be fairly uncontroversial: there could be speakers of Mini-

English (who, we may suppose, lack the conceptual repertoire to understand

English completely). This shows that there could be conceptual schemes that are

<u>subsets</u> of our scheme. The next step of the argument attempts to show that

there could be a scheme that stands to ours as ours stands to the Mini-English

scheme—a <u>superset</u> of our scheme. That step is not entirely straightforward, but

certainly Davidson's argument to the contrary can't be right—it could be

reproduced by a Mini-English Davidson, and the conclusion would be false.

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One significant omission from Soames's volume 2, especially given the texts of

Quine and Davidson that he selects for examination, is a comparison of the two.

To what extent do they agree on the indeterminacy and inscrutability theses?

(See in particular Davidson 1979.) Does Quine hold, as Davidson claims, the

(allegedly unintelligible) "dualism of scheme and content", the "third dogma" of

empiricism (Davidson 1974, 189)? But that is not really a complaint—after

reading Soames's excellent book, students will be in a position to make the

comparison themselves.[11]

[1] Soames 2003. All page references are to this book unless otherwise noted.

[2] In place of Quine's 'A assents to S', Davidson has 'A holds S true' (1974, 195-6), which Davidson explains in psychological terms. He does not, incidentally, have a counterpart to Quine's 'A dissents to S'.

[3] See Soames 2005, chs. 8, 9.

[4] See also Quine 1960, 77, fn. 2; 1981.

[5] For a qualification, see 402-3.

[6] Soames does not discuss (and neither shall I) one of Quine's arguments for inscrutability, namely the argument from "proxy functions" (see Quine 1969b; 1992, 31-3; and McGee 2005, 404-8).

[7] On rejection, see Soames 1999a, ch. 6. The final section of Soames 1999b contains much material relevant to the present interpretation. If the conclusion of the argument for the indeterminacy of translation is that sentences like ''Lapin' in French) means the same as 'rabbit' (in English)' are to be rejected along with their negations, then Argument Q in the text needs to be slightly reformulated.

[8] Davidson may well wish to qualify his main thesis slightly, but for simplicity let us leave it unqualified. For an interesting example of relevant empirical work, see Gordon 2004.

[9] For an entirely unconvincing reason (see 198), Davidson would disavow this way of putting his main thesis.

[10] See ch. 12 of volume 2, and also Soames 1999a, ch. 4.

[11] Thanks to Vann McGee and Steve Yablo for helpful discussion.

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