

Relativism and conceptual schemes: Davidson

RELATIVISM RECAST. Davidson begins by observing that the idiom of ‘different points of view’ is only intelligible if we assume a coordinate system common to them. This previews Davidson’s main argument, that relativism is only intelligible when there is a sufficiently large agreement between the putatively incompatible conceptual schemes. Relativism, for this reason, is self-defeating. 184

Davidson follows the relativists’ lead (see references to Whorf and Kuhn, in particular) and aligns the possession of conceptual schemes with languages. Note that he allows for the possibility that the same language is associated with more than one scheme. In a brief, but instructive, passage he also considers the possibility that language, any conceptual scheme, distorts reality as it is. This means either that we never grasp reality (Goodman’s mystic’s option), or that the mind can grasp in some pure meditation divorced from concepts. Neither alternative is palatable. The latter is bad, since the mind is very much constituted by its abilities, including linguistic abilities. 185

Davidson then reformulates the problem of incompatible conceptual schemes: 185


Can we say that two people have different conceptual schemes if they speak languages that fail intertranslatability? 185

He considers two possibilities: total failure and partial failure.

TOTAL FAILURE. Davidson first considers the ‘very short line’ of argument: we may have no evidence of any activity that may be classified as ‘speech’ unless we are able to interpret it *as* speech. And this means that we must be able to translate it into our language. Notice too that Davidson previously claimed that we can’t ‘shed’ our language when deciding this question. That is why the issue turns on the ability to translate the alien speech into *our* language. 185–86

But this short line requires the following premiss: we associate possession of mental states (in any case, of complex mental states) with the ability to express these states in speech. The latter expression, to repeat, is attributable on the assumption that we translate this alien speech into our language. 186

Davidson then makes an interesting remark about Strawson and Kuhn. Strawson speaks of ‘imagining’ worlds unlike our own. This metaphor suggests that *we*, from the same vantage point, imagine different worlds. Kuhn speaks of ‘incommensurable’ theories and schemes of the *same* world. Kuhn’s position is more properly characterised as relativist. 187

Remark 1. I take it that Strawson was making a Kantian point. But Kant’s own question is the same as Kuhn’s when he speaks of a possibility of beings with different sensibility and different understanding-categories that operate on the same things in themselves. And it’s not clear to me now that Kuhn’s and Strawson’s projects are different, as far as Kant is concerned.  187–88

A recipe for creating incompatible schemes was sketched by Feyerabend and Kuhn. Meaning is ‘contaminated’ by theory. We change the theory by changing the truth values of a sufficiently large number of sentences in an ‘important’ area of discourse. So this latter change in fact amounts to more than the change of truth values: it is a change of meaning. 187–88

But, Davidson asks, would such a change be indeed a change of meaning? Well, in the last resort it’s impossible to say. For all we know, the change is nothing more than a change in a spoken language, like a transition from English to German. Kuhn’s scientists inhabiting different paradigms may be speaking different languages, indeed, but no evidence is thereby obtained that they have incompatible conceptual schemes. 188

THE THIRD DOGMA. The thesis of the meaning contamination was driven by the rejection of the analytic-synthetic distinction. Davidson has argued that this rejection does nothing to advance the relativist cause. Perhaps, however, there is another assumption—that a raw empirical content is worked on by conceptual schemes. The schemes are used to ‘organise’ the content. This is the third dogma of empiricism that Davidson proposes to get rid of. 190

Davidson’s initial quarrel with this idea is that it can’t be put in coherent terms. The authors who defended the scheme/content dualism used two kinds of metaphors: using conceptual schemes to 190ff 191

‘organise’ something and ‘fitting’ these schemes to something. As for ‘something’, it was also of two kinds: reality/world or stimuli/experience/the given.

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I won’t detail Davidson’s complaint here, except noting, with Davidson, that the metaphor of organising corresponds to the talk about the referential apparatus of the language. By contrast, the metaphors of fitting and predicting correspond to the talk about whole sentences being of the kind that fit or not fit the world, are or aren’t useful in predictions. The latter talk is characteristic of Quine’s views.

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What, then, is the special problem of fitting schemes to experience? It is that we are better off speaking simply of evidence in support of our theories. To say that these theories must, in addition, ‘fit’ experience adds nothing useful. Davidson actually objects here exactly to the idea of truthmaking, like Merricks’ Truism we saw earlier. Formulations like:

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- (11-1) a. ‘Snow is white’ is true *because* there is a fact that snow is white.
 b. ‘Snow is white’ is true only if (?) ‘snow is white’ is a fact.
 c. ‘Snow is white’ is made true by the fact that snow is white.

are all unhelpful and confused. We must stick to Tarski’s T-sentences:

- (11-2) ‘Snow is white’ is true iff snow is white.

No mention of world, being, facts, truthmakers is required to make sense of ‘true’.

Davidson concludes that the truthmaking complaint comes down to the ‘simple thought’ that a conceptual scheme is acceptable if it is true. Can we then have true schemes that are untranslatable? This means that we must be able to understand truth—their putative truth—independently of translatability. This we can’t do. So this is the unpacked reason why the thesis of complete failure of translation fails.

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PARTIAL FAILURE. We are left with the possibility of a partial failure. Some meanings and beliefs are shared across different schemes, but not all. Also, with regard to shared beliefs a meaningful disagreement is possible. But with regard to the incompatible beliefs, i.e. some of the beliefs held by alien speakers, no such disagreement is possible. Instead, we are supposed to throw our hands in the air and say:

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- (11-3) Well, that’s what they believe, they are right in their own way, though I can’t understand why they are right, nor of course are their beliefs true according to *me*.

Davidson insists that this kind of reaction violates the principle of charity that is ‘forced on us’. Also with these putatively inscrutable beliefs—namely, the beliefs that vitiate translation—my maxim must be to grant their truth for the purposes of interpretation.

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So the putative difference in schemes, if we are charitable enough, will be indistinguishable from a familiar difference of opinion. We may indeed be tempted to talk in terms of ‘conceptual’ differences, but this would indicate nothing more than that we disagree, meaningfully, on some fundamental matters. At a sufficiently advanced stage of our interpretation—when we learn more and more the alien speakers, their culture, behaviour etc.—no principled distinction between conceptual disagreement and factual disagreement can be maintained.

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Davidson concludes that we haven’t established the uniformity of conceptual schemes. We have rather dismissed the category of conceptual scheme altogether.

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His cryptic parting shot sounds deliciously Heideggerian (and ironically inconsistent?) when he says that we gave up the dualism of scheme and world, and with it, established the ‘unmediated touch with the familiar objects whose antics make (!) our sentences and opinions true or false.’ Seems natural after this to delve into Dasein and ready-to-hand, but we won’t do that here.

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