

Applied Relativism and Davidson's Arguments against Conceptual Schemes

Lajos L. Brons
Nihon University

In response to Davidson's 'On the very idea of a conceptual scheme' (1974), Lynch (1997), Wang (2009), and others have argued that Davidson did in fact not attack the *very* idea, but a specific version of the idea, namely Quine's, and that there may be other versions that are (more or less) immune to the attack. Lynch suggests a Wittgensteinian theory, and Wang follows a suggestion by McDowell, but even among the members of the odd band of 'schemers' that Davidson explicitly targeted there may be some that his arrows miss. Surely Whorf and Bergson were not Quineans, and Kuhn expressed his dissatisfaction with Davidson's interpretation on a number of occasions.

Davidson did not intend to just attack Quinean conceptual relativism, but a much broader range of scheme theories, some mentioned explicitly, some suggested by the metaphors he used and borrowed. 'Conceptual schemes, we are told, are ways of organizing experience; they are systems of categories that give form to the data of sensation; they are points of view from which individuals, cultures, or periods survey the passing scene' (p.183). 'Points of view' is the central metaphor of *perspectivism*, which has been ascribed at times to Heraclitus, Leibniz, Nietzsche, Searle, Zhuangzi (莊子), Dôgen (道元), and a few others; and considering the immense differences between (the interpretations of) the apparent relativisms of these philosophers, if there is a doctrine of 'perspectivism', it is a very heterogeneous one. The point of view from 'periods' may be a reference to conceptual relativism in the history of ideas, hermeneutics, philology, and so forth (or could be easily

(mis-) understood as such): Pocock's (1971) *paradigms* or *langues*, Foucault's (1966, 1969) *discourses* and *épistèmes*, Gadamer's (1960) *horizons* (an intentionalist perspectivist metaphor), and so forth. In a similar fashion, (the point of view from) 'cultures' could be (understood as) a reference to conceptual relativisms in (linguistic) anthropology (that mostly derive from Whorf). Furthermore, in (1988) Davidson also mentioned 'ideologies', which is one of the two scheme-like notions in the (early) work of Marx and Engels (e.g. 1846/1932) (the other is 'consciousness'). And of the many still unmentioned theories that more or less fit Davidson's general description of conceptual schemes, Kelly's (1955) *personal constructs* in psychology and Goffman's (1974) theory of *frames* in sociology and communication science, are perhaps two of the most influential.

It is, of course, unlikely that Davidson had all of these in mind, but because of the underspecification of the intended target, they all seem to be under attack. Moreover, although Davidson (1974) suggested in his first sentence that conceptual relativism in philosophy was his prime target, he most explicitly directed his arrows at Whorf and Kuhn, a linguist and a 'historian of science' (rather than a philosopher; p.188).

The scheme-like theories by Whorf (1956), Kuhn (1962), and all of the scientists and philosophers mentioned in the second half of the preceding paragraph are examples of *applied relativism*. Such theories are generally developed or proposed in response to, and in explanation of, observed differences in conceptual conventions and apparent effects thereof on perception, thought and/or interpretation, and can be found in any scholarly field that deals with comparison or interpretation across boundaries of language, time, culture, tradition, or system of beliefs. Contrary to (most) conceptual relativisms in philosophy, applied relativisms are not about metaphysics, but about social explanation. Applied relativisms are very common, which illustrates their explanatory relevance, but tend to be theoretically (and/or philosophically) underdeveloped because of a focus on consequences rather than philosophical foundations. However, notwithstanding that underdevelopment and

the considerable differences between them, none of the applied relativisms mentioned (and perhaps even none of those not mentioned) can be identified with (or even be based on) the Quinean version of conceptual schemes (which Davidson attacked).

Non-identifiability with Quinean schemes is no guarantee for immunity, of course, but reading Davidson from the perspective of applied relativism (or at least from a perspective constructed out of some common themes in those) could make one wonder whether applied relativism even needs immunity. As will be argued in this paper, there are significant differences between Davidson's and the applied schemers' notions of 'non-intertranslatability'; Davidson's understanding of the 'organizing' activity of schemes does not match that of the 'schemers'; and the 'fitting' metaphor does not fit. According to Wang (2009), Davidson's argument against 'scheme - content dualism' threatens conceptual relativism of any kind, but it is not entirely clear what the nature of this dualism is. In (1974) Davidson mentions the dualism as 'the third dogma of empiricism', but seems to identify it with the 'organizing' and 'fitting' metaphors. 'The myth of the subjective' (1988) is considerably clearer about this dualism and what Davidson thinks that is wrong with it, but raises doubt whether the dualism and the associated notion of 'content' make sense outside the context of Quinean empiricism and schemes as sentential languages. However, perhaps Davidson's concern is not so much with the form of the dualism as with the distance it creates between appearances and the (real) world. There is an underlying dualism of phenomena and noumena that Davidson objects to (and not just in the two papers mentioned here), and that dualism, or at least that distinction, does indeed seem to be a necessary element of any conceptual relativism. It is, therefore, Davidson's critique of this latter dualism that (applied) conceptual relativism needs to come to terms with, or disarm.

This paper consists of three sections. The first presents a brief characterization of the (shared) core idea of applied relativism and identifies its key concepts. The second discusses Davidson's (1974 and 1988) arguments against conceptual relativism,

and concludes that the only argument that does not immediately fail because of misunderstanding of (applied) relativism is the argument against ‘subjectivity’ and ‘massive error’. The third and final section takes up this final argument, and shows that applied relativism is not (necessarily) subjective in the sense assumed by Davidson, and does not (necessarily) imply the possibility of ‘massive and systematic deception by the senses’.

(Perhaps, the argument in this paper may seem to be an attempt to win a battle by withdrawing, to refute Davidson by means of a deflationary account of (some forms of) relativism. That would be a misunderstanding of the paper’s main point, however. It was Davidson who attempted to pull applied relativism into a battle where it did not belong, and the ‘deflation’ is merely a correction of a prior inflation that falsified and overextended the applied relativists’ ideas.)

a brief characterization of applied relativism

Applied relativisms are members of a broad family of theories explaining observed differences in conceptual conventions and apparent effects thereof on perception, thought and/or interpretation in scientific fields dealing with comparison or interpretation across boundaries of language, time, culture, tradition, or system of beliefs. Despite the different theoretical contexts and explanatory roles, most of these theories share a small number of central notions that will be identified below, although these are not always explicitly mentioned. The general idea as found in or (implicitly) assumed by such theories can be summarized as follows: *determinate phenomena (or phenomenal reality) are (is) constructed out of the indeterminate appearance we receive through our senses from noumenal reality, and our conceptual scheme provides us with a system of categories used in that construction (and in that sense, a conceptual scheme individuates in and/or classifies the noumenal world). And therefore, different conceptual schemes result in different determinate phenomena (or different phenomenal worlds or realities).*

The aforementioned ‘central notions’, perhaps even necessary elements, of (applied)

relativism are (1) 'determinate phenomena' or 'phenomenal reality', (2) 'indeterminate appearance', (3) 'noumenal reality', (4) 'construction', and (5) 'conceptual scheme'. The noumenal - phenomenal distinction (3 vs. 1) is usually associated with Kant, but the intermediary notion of 'indeterminate appearance' is more rigorously developed by the Buddhist logicians and epistemologists Dignāga and Dharmakīrti (resp. 5-6th and 7th century). In the Kantian framework, noumena are things-for-themselves and phenomena are things-as-they-appear. Noumenal reality is reality independent of our experience and phenomenal reality is reality as we consciously and conceptually experience it. Phenomenal experience (the experience of phenomenal reality) is always and necessarily conceptual(ized) experience – experience *as*. Phenomenal experience requires (prior) conceptualization: 'to have the ability to notice a sort of thing is already to have the concept of that sort of thing' (Sellars 1956, p. 176). Or, as Heidegger (1927) pointed out, we can only experience something *as* something.

In between these two 'levels' of reality, Dignāga and Dharmakīrti posited an intermediary. In *Nyāyabinduṣastra*, Dharmakīrti called this intermediary '*pratibhāsa*', meaning (a.o.) reflection or appearance, and opposed it to '*pratibhāsa-pratīti*', which referred to phenomenal reality (or more commonly 'conventional reality' in Buddhist philosophy). '*Pratīti*' (apprehension, distinction, etc.) here refers to the determinateness of some *pratibhā* (appearances), and the lack of that qualification in the term '*pratibhāsa*' (in opposition to *pratibhāsa-pratīti*) was intended to express the indeterminateness thereof. Consequently, the pair of concepts can perhaps be translated best as 'indeterminate appearance' (*pratibhāsa*) and 'determinate appearance' (*pratibhāsa-pratīti*). Determinate appearances, or determinate phenomena, are (conceptually) constructed (*kalpana*) out of indeterminate appearance (*pratibhāsa*), which was defined by Dignāga as 'free from conceptual construction / nonconceptual (*kalpanāpodha*)' (*Pramāṇasamuccaya* 1.3c). Hence, contrary to necessarily conceptual phenomenal experience, indeterminate appearance is absolutely non- (or pre-) conceptual – it is the 'raw material' out of which determinate

phenomena are constructed. That relation, however, is causal rather than epistemic – given the appropriate conceptual conventions (or schemes), phenomenal experiences are caused by indeterminate appearance, itself caused by noumenal reality. Although indeterminate appearance is non-conceptual, it could be referred to in terms of its phenomenal effects (in the same way that causes can be identified by their effects, without implying that such identification means identity). Those effects neither identify nor (fully, accurately) describe their causes. Indeterminate appearance is *not* ‘given’ sense data (see also Brons 2011). In a naturalistic interpretation, indeterminate appearance could be compared to the nerve signal before processing in the brain, and it does not make much sense to identify that nerve signal with the phenomenal experience it causes or to describe the latter as that nerve signal. Consequently, indeterminate appearance is more *before* than *in* the mind. In applied relativisms, the necessary elements (or central notions) mentioned above are usually confusingly inconsistently referred to by means of rather ambiguous metaphors. As correctly observed by Davidson, all these necessary elements can be found in the following (rather famous) quote from Whorf (1956), which also illustrates the usage of some of the most common metaphors:

We dissect nature^a along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena^d we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world^a is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions^b which has to be organized by our minds – and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds^f. We cut nature^a up, organize^f it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way^f – an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language^f. The agreement is, of course, an implicit and unstated one, *but its terms are absolutely obligatory*; we cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organization and classification^f of data^b which the agree-

ment decrees. (...) no individual is free to describe nature^a with absolute impartiality but is constrained to certain modes of interpretation^f even while he thinks himself most free. The person most nearly free in such respects would be a linguist familiar with very many widely different linguistic systems^f. (...) We are thus introduced to a new principle of relativity, which holds that all observers are not led by the same physical evidence^e to the same picture of the universe^c, unless their linguistic backgrounds^f are similar, or can in some way be calibrated. (p. 213-4; underlining and superscript letters added for reference)

The concepts of 'nature' and 'world' (superscript a) here refer to *noumenal reality*, and 'picture of the universe' (c) refers to reality as we consciously experience it – to *phenomenal reality*. In between those two 'worlds' or 'aspects' or 'levels' of reality (lacking clear definitions these too are metaphors), we find the 'kaleidoscopic flux of impressions' and 'data' (b). The essential difference between phenomenal reality and this intermediary, *indeterminate appearance*, is that the former is conceptual (-ized), while the latter is completely pre-conceptual and formless. Additionally, there are a number of (even) more ambiguous concepts: 'world of phenomena' (d) could be either phenomenal (as c), or another term for indeterminate appearance (as b); and 'physical evidence' (e), could be either noumenal reality (as a) or indeterminate appearance (as b). Finally, the notions of 'linguistic systems (in our minds)', the 'ways of a organization and classification of data codified in the patterns of our language', the 'modes of interpretation', and 'linguistic backgrounds' (f) refer to *conceptual schemes*.

Among the various metaphors used for the central notions of applied relativism, the following are (probably) the most common:

- (1) *determinate phenomena* or *phenomenal reality*: the world, reality, experience, thick experience, conventional reality;
- (2) *indeterminate appearance*: experience, thin experience, surface irritations,

sensory promptings, sensory evidence, sensory experience;

- (3) *noumenal reality*: reality, nature, the universe, the world, ultimate reality;
- (4) *construct/construction*: organization, classification, systematize, divide up;
- (5) *conceptual scheme*: language, perspective, frame.

The list is by no means complete, but even more confusing than the number of metaphors is the overlap in their usage – several metaphors are used for two essentially different notions. ‘Experience’, for example, is used for both (1) and (2); and ‘world’ for both (1) and (3) as in the following (famous) quote from Kuhn (1962): ‘paradigm changes do cause scientists to see the world of their research-engagement differently. In so far as their only recourse to that world is through what they see and do, we may want to say that after a revolution scientists are responding to a different world’ (p. 111; underlining added). The first two usages of ‘world’ refer to noumenal reality (3), the third to phenomenal reality (1). It is such sloppy use of metaphors in theories that, moreover, lack rigorous foundations or elaborations that led to many of the misunderstandings of applied relativism.

Davidson’s arguments against conceptual schemes

There are two main lines of argument in Davidson’s ‘On the very idea of a conceptual scheme’ (1974) and in both the idea of ‘non-intertranslatability’ plays a leading role. In the first line, Davidson suggests that ‘two people have different conceptual schemes if they speak languages that fail of intertranslatability’ (p. 185), and that to be able to tell whether there are alternative conceptual schemes, we must be able to recognize something as a language (rather than meaningless sounds or scribbles) without being able to translate any of it in our own, which is impossible. In the second line of argument, Davidson addresses what he calls ‘scheme - content dualism’ or ‘the third dogma of empiricism’, the idea that conceptual schemes organize, give shape to, or fit sensory evidence, experience, or nature. He distinguishes two types of metaphors: schemes either ‘organize’ or ‘fit’ sensory evidence; and fails to make sense of the first of these. In case of the ‘fitting’ metaphor, a scheme

is like a theory (of reality), and 'for a theory to fit or face up to the totality of possible sensory evidence is for that theory to be true' (p. 193). However, truth cannot be separated from translation (or translatability): if a conceptual scheme is a (largely) true theory, then we can translate it into a language we understand.

Despite the centrality of the notion, Davidson did not specify what exactly he meant with 'translation', and neither was he completely consistent in his terminology. In one place (p. 184) he used 'comparability' rather than 'translatability', and elsewhere (p. 185) he described non-intertranslatability as 'some form of activity could not be *interpreted* in our language' (italics added). Perhaps the best clue about what Davidson meant can be found in his rather uncharitable reading of Whorf and Kuhn:

Whorf, wanting to demonstrate that Hopi incorporates a metaphysics so alien to ours that Hopi and English cannot, as he puts it 'be calibrated', uses English to convey the contents of sample Hopi sentences. Kuhn is brilliant at saying what things were like before the revolution using – what else? – our post-revolutionary idiom. (p. 184)

Davidson's interpretation of Kuhn's, Whorf's and similar conceptual relativisms appears to be approximately the following:

- (1) There are two conceptual schemes A and B which are 'incommensurable' or 'incalibratable'.
- (1a) 'Incommensurable' or 'incalibratable' mean that some things that can be said in A cannot be said in B (and vice versa), hence that A and B are 'non-intertranslatable'.
- (2) It is possible to 'convey the content' of A sentences in B (and vice versa), or to 'say what things were like' in the A-situation in the B-language (and vice versa).

- (2a) 'Convey the contents' or 'saying what things were like' means 'to translate'.
(3) Therefore, (1) and (2) are contradictory.

Of course, (3) only follows if (1a) and (2a) are conceded, and (1a) becomes meaningful only in the light of (2a), which seems to be Davidson's definition (in a loose sense) of 'translation' (in the context of this argument). However, neither Kuhn, nor Whorf believed that 'incommensurability' or 'incalibratability' means untranslatable in the sense implied in (1a) and (2a). The contradiction in (3) is in fact so obvious that if Davidson had applied his own principle of charity, he would have rejected this interpretation.

The ascription of 'incommensurable' or 'incalibratable' to a difference between two conceptual schemes A and B in applied relativisms such as Kuhn's and Whorf's is a metaphor describing that A's way of 'seeing' things is difficult (or unnatural) to express in B and (if symmetrical) *vice versa*, or that there are significant differences in meaning, form, connotations, and/or attributed truth values between seemingly equivalent language fragments in A and B. As some kind of summarizing definition, it can perhaps be said that two conceptual schemes A and B are 'incommensurable', 'incalibratable', or 'non-intertranslatable' if a language fragment in A differs significantly in intended meaning or purpose, in attributed truth value (in A), or in relevant connotations and associations from any single seemingly obvious equivalent in B (and *vice versa* in case of symmetry). In other words, if a correct (and complete) interpretation or understanding is non-obvious and/or requires more or less extensive explanation, and thus depends on background knowledge about A and the uttered/written language fragment (which may be insufficiently available). Hence, non-intertranslatability – in this sense – does not equal non-interexplainability, but points at a kind of difficulty in inter-explanation, and translatability is contingent on the availability of sufficient background knowledge for accurate explanation.

Davidson's second line of argument concerns the rejection of 'scheme - content dualism'. This dualism, and consequently, Davidson's arguments against it, takes two slightly different forms in the two (main) papers that deal with it – in 'On the very idea of a conceptual scheme' (1974) the dualism is the idea that conceptual schemes 'organize' or 'fit' some kind of 'content', while in 'The myth of the subjective' (1988) the focus is on the subjectivity of that 'content' as a source of 'evidence'. A further difference is that the '74 version depends on the same notion of radical or absolute non-intertranslatability that was already rejected above, while the '88 version does not. That alone is sufficient to invalidate the '74 version of the argument, but the two metaphors 'fitting' and 'organizing' deserve some attention.

It should be clear that the Quinean metaphor of 'fitting' (or the related metaphors of 'predicting', 'accounting for', and 'facing') does (do) not fit the above understanding of conceptual schemes – the categories of a scheme do not just passively 'fit' indeterminate appearance, but play a much more active role in the 'construction' of determinate phenomena out of it. Of course, a conceptual category 'fits' that what it conceptually constructs as much as a blue-print fits its built realization, but 'fitting' in that sense misses the point, and does not help Davidson's argument either. As mentioned above, the other leg of this argument is 'non-intertranslatability' – to fit (the evidence) is to be true, and to be true is to be translatable – but this is radical non-intertranslatability again, not the contingent or relative non-intertranslatability intended by the (applied) scheme theorists.

The other metaphor Davidson attacked in his rejection of scheme - content dualism is that of 'organization' – schemes 'organize', 'systematize', or 'divide up'. This is indeed the metaphor that Whorf uses in the quote above, but Davidson interpreted the term insufficiently 'creative' (or constructive). The result of 'organization' is fundamentally different from its raw materials, and in that sense, the process 'creates' or 'constructs' more than that it *re-organizes*, which is more or less Davidson's understanding. Furthermore, Davidson misunderstood the nature of the raw material. He correctly deduced that it is essential to the idea of conceptual schemes 'that

there be something neutral and common that lies outside all schemes' (p.190). This is what was identified above as noumenal reality, although strictly speaking it is not noumenal reality itself that is 'organized' (etc.) but the indeterminate appearance caused by it. While Rorty (1972) argued that this must be the 'subject matter' (Davidson's term) of schemes, and despite the many metaphors ('reality', 'the world', etc.) pointing in that direction, Davidson argued that it cannot be, because then translation would be possible. And the only alternative 'subject matter' of 'organization' he could think of was determinate phenomena, which indeed would make little sense.

In the '88 version of the argument neither the 'fitting' nor the 'organization' metaphor plays an important (explicit) role, and more importantly, Davidson correctly identified indeterminate appearance as the (or a possible) 'subject matter' of 'organization' (the term he used was 'sensory experience'). The focus in this argument, however, shifted to the idea that there is 'an element in the mind untouched by conceptual interpretation' (p. 40), 'an ultimate source of evidence the character of which can be wholly specified without reference to what it is evidence for' (p. 42) and that is, in that sense, subjective; or the notion of 'purely private, subjective "objects of the mind"' (p. 46). This version of the argument is very similar to Sellars's (1956) rejection of the 'myth of the given', the idea that there are non-inferential (pre-conceptual) inner episodes that are conditions (or justifications) of empirical knowledge. Aside from the question whether this idea is necessary for, or even present in, applied conceptual relativism (and many other scheme theories), there is a more fundamental problem in both the '74 and the '88 versions of the argument: the idea of 'content' as a source of 'evidence'.

A scheme does not have content, and neither do the 'concepts' that constitute it; and there is no 'evidence' for a conceptual construction ('fitting', 'organization', etc.). Perhaps a phenomenal analogy is illustrative here. Consider a particular house: the building plans or blueprints are the scheme used in constructing it out of raw material such as bricks and mortar. The scheme (blueprint) does not have content (or at

least not in a here relevant sense), but perhaps the particular house does in the sense that it consists of bricks and mortar. But those raw materials are not 'evidence' for anything; not for the scheme (blueprint), and neither for the particular house.

On the other hand, sentences may have content, and evidence if they describe events or states of affairs. As argued by Lynch (1997) and Wang (2009), it is the Quinean notion of conceptual schemes that Davidson opposes (and mistakes for the 'very idea'), and with that notion come sentential language and Quine's variant of empiricism. However, neither the concept of 'content', nor that of 'evidence' makes much sense outside an empiricist context, and consequently, the argument against scheme - concept dualism is an argument against empiricism, and against Quine, not against conceptual schemes (in general); or so it seems. As mentioned in the previous section, the relationship between indeterminate appearance and phenomenal experience is causal rather than epistemic (as evidence) and Davidson does not object to the latter: 'Of course there are causal intermediaries. What we must guard against are epistemic intermediaries' (1983, p.144).

Although with the rejection of the concept of 'content' the 'scheme - content dualism' evaporates, not all arguments against the latter become automatically invalid. The charge against 'purely private subjective objects of the mind' and against the consequent possibility 'that we are systematically and generally deceived' by our senses (p.42) still stands. There is a dualism of phenomena and noumena underlying the scheme - content dualism, a dualism that disconnects words (or phenomena) from the (noumenal) world, and that introduces subjectivity and the possibility of massive error. It is that dualism that Davidson objects to (in many of his writings, not just in the two papers mentioned thus far); and it is the rejection of this dualism, rather than the misdirected arguments in the '74 paper, that applied conceptual relativism has to address.

the subjectivity of appearances and schemes

If there is a significant discrepancy between the noumenal and phenomenal worlds such that determinate phenomena are nothing like their noumenal grounds or causes, then it could be said that the phenomenal world is nothing but 'illusion', that we are 'systematically and generally deceived', or that we are prey to 'massive error'. In the summary of the basic idea of applied relativism above, such a discrepancy could be the result of subjectivity of either schemes (or the concepts / universals in those), indeterminate appearance, or both. However, most conceptual relativists assume indeterminate appearance to be subjective only in the rather minimal sense of the limitations of perception caused by the senses of the perceiving subject (which may be technologically expanded), and by the subject's location respective to noumena ('point of view' in the literal sense), and according to Davidson, this kind of subjectivity is mere empirical accident without philosophical significance (1988, p.45).

The subjectivity of appearances is related to the identity or non-identity of phenomena and their noumenal grounds or causes. Roughly, four different positions concerning this relationship can be distinguished: (1) direct realism, (2) perspectivism, (3) reflectionism, and (4) subjective idealism or anti-realism. The first of these, direct realism, identifies phenomena with noumena, or more accurately: does not recognize the distinction, and is therefore, incoherent with relativism. The last, subjective idealism or anti-realism, rejects the noumenal grounding (or causing) of phenomena, and is thus indeed radically subjective. This position, however, conflicts with the common sense realism that is generally implicitly assumed in applied relativism, but also clashes with the idea and purpose of science as it is commonly conceived, and it is in the context of scientific explanation that applied relativisms are proposed. (Although some scholars of a post-modernist bend may seem to favor a more radical and anti-realist relativism.) In other words, (1) is too strong and (4) is too weak (or the other way around) for applied relativism, which

leaves (2) perspectivism and (3) reflectionism.

According to *perspectivism* the same object looks different from different perspectives, different points of view (in a quite literal sense), but these different 'looks' are equally true. (Note that this is what Mou (2009) calls 'objective perspectivism', and not Nietzsche's (subjective) 'perspectivism', although there seems to be little agreement about what exactly that entails.) In the perspectivist perspective, concepts, universals, or the categories of a scheme are real noumenal categories; phenomenal properties are real noumenal properties. However, any phenomenal description only captures a 'part of the picture', only some aspects of the real (complete) nature of noumena. Consequence of perspectivism is that increasing perspectives increases knowledge, as in the often overlooked but essential statement in the quote from Whorf above: 'the person most nearly free to describe nature with absolute impartiality would be a linguist familiar with very many widely different linguistic systems' (although the insertion of 'nearly' may imply that Whorf is not a perspectivist in a strict sense).

According to *reflectionism*, which is related to skepticism, a perception, like a reflection, is dependent on both the properties of the object and of the reflecting surface. 'Human understanding is like an uneven mirror that, receiving rays from things, mixes its own nature with the nature of [those] things, and thus distorts and obscures them' (Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum* I.XLI).¹ Consequently, phenomena have noumenal grounds or causes, but are not identical to those; and concepts, universals, or the categories of a scheme are not real noumenal categories, but dependent on some real (but unknowable) characteristics of noumenal reality.

Dharmakīrti extended Dignāga's definition of indeterminate appearance (*pratibhāsa*) as 'non-conceptual' with the qualification 'non-erroneous' (*abhrānta*), and a similar assumption can be found in Davidson's philosophy *and* in applied

1 Estque intellectus humanus instar speculi inaequalis ad radios rerum, qui suam naturam naturae rerum immiscet, eamque distorquet et inficit.

relativism – indeterminate appearance (within its biological and technical limits) does not ‘falsify’ or ‘misrepresent’ noumenal reality (those terms do not even make much sense in this context). Consequently, any subjectivity could only arise in the stage of conceptual construction. In either reflectionism or perspectivism, indeterminate appearance caused by noumena is ‘determined’ (constructively transformed and categorized) by or through conceptual categories, the elements of schemes, and if these schemes would (or could) be subjective, even non-subjective indeterminate appearance would (or could) result in subjective phenomena. However, although (the possibility of) the subjectivity of schemes is rarely (explicitly) considered by applied relativists, an argument against such subjectivity can be found in the common idea of the *relativity of relativity* (or the dependence of dependence) itself. The essence of this idea is that the independent in the conceptual relativism, the conceptual scheme, is the dependent in a further relativism. And the independent in that further relativism is something that is considered to be more fundamental. Schemes may be dependent, for example, on a real economic base (Marx), on the interplay of culture and environment (Whorf), or on experiment and observation (Kuhn). However, economy and culture are themselves phenomenal (and therefore, scheme-constructed), and what is salient in our environment and how experiments and observations are interpreted is also largely dependent on our (prior) conceptual schemes (and, of course, the scholars mentioned were well aware of that). Hence, the dependency seems to lead to circularity – a scheme depends on a scheme – but the latter scheme is *shared*, and so are the constructed phenomena. Economy, culture, salient things in our environment, and interpretations of experiments and observations may be phenomena, but they are shared phenomena. And if phenomenal constructions are shared (and the scheme that constructs them), so must be the material out of which they are constructed – indeterminate appearance; and that in turn can only be shared if it comes from a shared source – the noumenal world. The noumenal dependency is indirect – schemes are dependent on shared phenomenal realities that are constructed by more fundamental shared schemes that are de-

pendent on prior shared phenomenal realities, and so forth; and with each further cycle the noumenal dependency increases.

There is no shortcut to the noumenal world. Davidson argued convincingly that 'words and thoughts (...) are necessarily about the sorts of objects and events that commonly cause them' (1988, p. 45), but those 'objects and events' are phenomenal; hence, themselves constructed by prior schemes. Nevertheless, even if there is no shortcut, that does not mean that the detour through economy, culture, and so forth is necessary for any (kind of) concept(s). As Davidson and others have shown, the simple fact that we have, can use, and can learn words implies that they are about real things (even if that being-about-ness is indirect). Ibn Rushd (Averroes), for example, argued in his fourth proof of the 'eternity of the world' in the *Tahafut al-tahafut* (*Incoherence of the incoherence*) that even though 'universals exist only in the mind, not in the external world' they must have an external (noumenal) basis (van den Bergh 1954, p. 65ff). A universal (concept, word, etc.) is formed by abstracting a 'common nature' from particulars (individuals), but such abstracting cannot take place if there is nothing to abstract, if that common nature, the external (noumenal) basis of the universal, would be unreal (see also Leaman 1988). Somewhat similarly, Davidson argued – most elaborately in his theory of *triangulation* (e.g. 1982) – that concept formation necessarily connects words to their noumenal causes, and the same basic idea can also be found in Dharmakīrti's theory of *apoha* (Dreyfus 1997; Brons 2011), and perhaps in Zhuangzi, often understood as a relativist or a skeptic and mentioned in the introduction as a possible perspectivist, who wrote that 'a path is created by walking it, a thing is (called) as it is by it being called so' (2.6: 道行之而成、物謂之而然).

However, neither the communicative grounding of concepts nor the 'detour' characterized as 'the relativity of relativity' above leads to the *objectivity* of conceptual schemes and/or phenomenal experience (but in the latter cases that was not the purpose of those arguments either). Concepts are conventions originating in communication about shared experiences, and such conventions are necessarily inter-

subjective and noumenal-dependent, but that is insufficient for objectivity. It is – at least in principle – possible that (some) conceptual construction and classification creates arbitrary boundaries, both of ‘things’ and of classes of things, in what is noumenally continuous. Neither the outer boundary of what is recognized as a certain (conceptualized) phenomenon, nor the boundary of the conceptual class it belongs to (as what it is conceptualized) needs to have a noumenal equivalent. If ‘objectivity’ means that phenomenal experiences accurately capture noumenal features (and that seems to be the intended meaning in this context), then such arbitrary boundaries are non-objective (because they are arbitrary and lack noumenal counterparts), and since there seems to be little reason to assume that noumenal reality is necessarily composed out of (nothing but) discrete objects that belong to unambiguously and non-fuzzily bounded classes, the aforementioned inter-subjectivity and noumenal-dependency of schemes and concepts is all we can derive. Such inter-subjectivity and noumenal-dependency, however, is sufficient to preclude ‘massive error’, which was Davidson’s main objection to the dualism of noumena and phenomena – we cannot have conceptual conventions that are necessarily grounded in noumenal reality *and* completely ‘misrepresent’ that noumenal reality at the same time.

Neither of the two positions that cohere with applied relativism, perspectivism and reflectionism, (necessarily) implies the possibility of massive error. According to objective perspectivism, phenomenal experiences (provided that they are not hallucinatory etc.) accurately – albeit only partially – ‘represent’ noumenal reality; and in a reflectionism that recognizes the (necessary) inter-subjectivity and noumenal-dependency of concepts and schemes, the (arbitrarily) constructed nature of at least some phenomenal experiences does not mean that phenomenal reality on the whole is, or even can be, a deception. That, in turn, means that any applied relativism that can be made coherent with either objective perspectivism, or such an inter-subjective reflectionism (or some kind of combination of the two), is not just immune to Davidson’s explicit attack on conceptual schemes, but also to the implicit attack in

his arguments against subjectivity and massive error. Not much charity is needed to read many, if not most of the theories mentioned in the introduction as variants of (objective) perspectivism or (inter-subjective) reflectionism; more likely, many may have even been intended as such, and some of them contain direct clues, such as the aforementioned apparent perspectivism in Whorf's theory.

In conclusion then, as a refutation of (Quinean) empiricism and associated conceptual schemes, Davidson's attack may have been successful, but as a refutation of applied relativism, the attack missed its target. Davidson's attack failed because he identified all forms of conceptual relativism, including applied relativism, with Quinean schemes and empiricism. Interestingly, this misidentification and the consequent failure to make sense of applied relativism illustrate the very idea of (such) conceptual schemes – Davidson read the applied relativists from within his own conceptual scheme, hence as (post-) Quinean analytic philosophers, rather than as thinking and writing from within their own. In other words, the misunderstanding is the result of different conceptual schemes (in the applied relativists' sense), and consequently, Davidson's argument against conceptual schemes ends up proving the applied relativists' point more than refuting it.

references

- Brons, L.L. (2011), *Dharmakīrti, Davidson, and Knowing Reality*, working paper, available from www.lc.dds.nl/wp
- Davidson, D. (1974), 'On the very idea of a conceptual scheme', in: (1984), *Truth and interpretation*, Oxford: Clarendon, pp. 183–198.
- Davidson, D. (1982), 'Rational animals', in: (2001), pp. 95–105.
- Davidson, D. (1983), 'A coherence theory of truth and knowledge', in: (2001), pp. 137–159.
- Davidson, D. (1988), 'The myth of the subjective', in: (2001), pp. 39–52.
- Davidson, D. (2001), *Subjective, intersubjective, objective*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dreyfus, G. (1997), *Recognizing reality: Dharmakīrti's philosophy and its Tibetan interpretations*, Albany, SUNY Press.
- Foucault, M. (1966), *Les mots et les choses : une archéologie des sciences humaines*, Paris: Gallimard.
- Foucault, M. (1969), *L'archéologie du savoir*, Paris: Gallimard.

- Gadamer, H.-G. (1960), *Wahrheit und Methode*, Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr.
- Goffman, E. (1974), *Frame analysis: an essay on the organization of experience*, New York: Harper & Row.
- Heidegger, M. (1927), *Sein und Zeit*, Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 11th unchanged edition, 1967.
- Kelly, G. (1955), *The psychology of personal constructs*, New York: Norton.
- Kuhn, T. (1962), *The structure of scientific revolutions*, International encyclopedia of unified science Vol. 2, Chicago: Chicago University Press, second edition: 1970.
- Leaman, O. (1988), *Averroes and his philosophy*, Richmond: Curzon.
- Lynch, M.P. (1997), 'Three models of conceptual schemes', *Inquiry* 40.4, pp. 407-426.
- Marx, K. & F. Engels (1846/1932), *Die Deutsche Ideologie*, in: (1962-68), *Werke*, vol. 3, Berlin: Dietz, pp. 9-529.
- Mou, Bo (2009), *Substantive perspectivism: an essay on philosophical concern with truth*, Dordrecht: Springer.
- Pocock, J.G.A. (1971), *Politics, language, and time: essays on political thought and history*, New York: Atheneum.
- Rorty, R. (1972), 'The world well lost', in: (1982), *Consequences of pragmatism*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 3-18.
- Sellars, W.S. (1956), 'Empiricism and the philosophy of mind', in: (1963), *Science, perception and reality*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, pp. 127-196.
- van den Bergh, S. (translation), Averroes / Ibn Rushd (1954), *Tahafut al-tahafut* (The incoherence of the incoherence), London, Luzac.
- Wang, X. (2009), 'On Davidson's refutation of conceptual schemes and conceptual relativism', *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 90, pp. 140-164.
- Whorf, B.L. (1956), *Language, thought, and reality: selected writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press