

DAVIDSON AND CONCEPTUAL SCHEMES

by

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ABSTRACT

In the paper “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme” Donald Davidson argues that we cannot make sense of the claim that there could be conceptual schemes which are different from our own. He argues that conceptual schemes different to our own must be untranslatable into our own language, and further that the idea of untranslatable languages does not make sense. By considering three variants of conceptual relativism which can be developed using the work of Kant, Quine, and Kuhn I aim to make three criticisms of Davidson’s arguments: firstly I will argue that Davidson is unable to respond to the claim that the reality which schemes must fit is unknowable; secondly I will argue that Davidson is wrong to represent his opponents as all claiming that distinct conceptual schemes must be untranslatable, and that in fact we can make sense of the idea of distinct conceptual schemes which can be translated; finally, I will argue that Davidson fails to acknowledge the central role interpretivism plays in his arguments, and that this hidden interpretivism both makes much of his argument redundant, and robs them of any power to convince someone who rejects the controversial thesis of interpretivism.

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INTRODUCTION

Conceptual relativism is the claim that we do not have direct understanding of reality itself, but that our view of the world is mediated by a conceptual scheme. It seems reasonable to claim that different cultures, and different intelligent species, could have radically different relationships with the world, and that because of this they would conceptualise, and even experience, the world radically differently from how we do. If there were aliens living on a planet orbiting the stars of Alpha Centauri then why should we presume that how they thought about reality would be similar to how we do, or even that we would be able to translate their language?

The idea of conceptual schemes is typically understood by drawing a distinction between the conceptual scheme, and the scheme-neutral content. The relation between scheme and content is often clarified using the metaphor of differing points of view: different conceptual schemes provide different points of view of the same scheme-neutral content. The scheme-neutral content is shared by all speakers, but, according to conceptual relativism, different speech communities could use different conceptual schemes to shape their experience of the content. This means that members of different schemes will experience the world differently, and this difference is so significant their views of reality, and even truth, can vary from scheme to scheme:

Reality itself is relative to a scheme: what counts as real in one system may not in another. (Davidson 1974, p. 183).

There is a strong relation between conceptual schemes and language, we can “[associate] having a language with having a conceptual scheme” (Davidson 1974, p. 184).

Despite this, it is possible for two different languages to share a conceptual scheme, and Davidson claims that we can tell if this has occurred by whether we can translate between the two languages; two languages belong to the same scheme if one can be translated in terms of the other, and it is impossible to translate between the languages of distinct schemes. This means that for there to be a conceptual scheme which is distinct from own it would need to be associated with a language which cannot be translated into our own.

In the paper “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme” (Davidson 1974) Davidson argues that we cannot make sense of conceptual relativism or conceptual schemes. According to Davidson we cannot make sense of the idea of a language which cannot be translated into our own, because that would require a criterion of languagehood which does not depend on translation into our own language, but no such criterion can be found. From this it follows that we cannot make sense of the claim that there could be conceptual schemes distinct from our own, since that would require us to make sense of untranslatable languages. He also considers the possibility of there being conceptual schemes which use languages that only partially fail to be translatable into our own, but argues that we can’t make sense of that either, because where translation fails we cannot get enough of a grip on the other conceptual scheme in order to justifiably claim that we actually disagree and use different concepts.

My response to Davidson’s arguments against conceptual schemes will start by showing that he depends on the assumption that the content which conceptual schemes fit is something which we must have epistemic access to, and that if we reject this claim then that undermines an important aspect of one of Davidson’s central arguments. However, this fails to respond to Davidson’s central claim, that it is impossible to translate between distinct conceptual schemes, and that we therefore need a criterion of languagehood which does not depend on translation in order to make sense of the possibility of alternative conceptual schemes. I make two distinct responses to this, firstly I argue that Davidson misrepresents his opponents by claiming that all supporters of conceptual relativism claim that it must be impossible to translate between languages which use distinct conceptual

schemes. In fact, Kuhn, one of Davidson's explicit targets in the paper, argues that translation is not only possible between schemes, but that translation is an important tool when comparing schemes, and choosing between them. However, that only enables us to argue for conceptual schemes which are similar enough for translation to be possible. I respond to Davidson's arguments against conceptual schemes which would be expressed in untranslatable languages by showing that they are completely dependent on support from his controversial thesis of interpretivism. Once this dependence upon interpretivism is made explicit, this reveals that most of his arguments are redundant.

I will begin the thesis by going over the positions of Kant, Quine, and Kuhn, and will argue that each of them appears to provide the foundations required to develop some form of conceptual relativism, helping us to understand some of the various forms conceptual relativism can take. In the second chapter I will give an overview of Davidson's general position in philosophy of language, paying particular attention to his use of the principle of charity, and his interpretivism, both of which are particularly important in his argument against conceptual schemes. The third chapter will go over the various arguments Davidson presents in "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" against conceptual relativism. And then the final chapter will evaluate these arguments, eventually concluding that Davidson is wrong to claim that we cannot make sense of the idea of conceptual schemes, because there are some conceptual schemes which we can understand by translating them into our own language, and also because Davidson's arguments against untranslatable languages are entirely dependent on assuming interpretivism.

CHAPTER 1

THREE ROUTES TO CONCEPTUAL SCHEMES

1.1 Introduction

As I said above, this chapter will go over Kant, Quine and Kuhn's general positions and explain how they can be used to argue for various forms of conceptual relativism. Although Kant, unlike Quine and Kuhn, is not explicitly mentioned in Davidson's paper "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme", his distinction between the noumenal and phenomenal worlds will help us understand the distinction between scheme and content which much of Davidson's attack focuses on, and because of this Kant's position will be of great value when evaluating the success of Davidson's arguments.

In contrast to Kant, Quine is arguably Davidson's primary target in "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme". Davidson's attack on the scheme-content distinction of empiricism is clearly targeted at Quine, and can be seen as a development of Quine's work in the paper "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" — Davidson even names the distinction the third dogma of empiricism, in honour of Quine's famous paper.

Kuhn is another explicit target of Davidson's arguments in "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme", but, as we shall see later, Davidson is guilty of significantly misrep-

resenting Kuhn’s position, particularly when it comes to what Kuhn means when he says that distinct conceptual schemes are “incommensurable”.

Before I look at Kant and Quine’s positions it will be useful to take a brief look at the work of Hume. Hume, one of the three British empiricists, argued that all knowledge derives from experience, and challenged many traditional philosophical beliefs. His work had a great influence on Kant, waking him from his “dogmatic slumber”, and one of central aims of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* (Kant 1934) was to respond to the problems which Hume was the first to clearly recognise. In addition, the empiricist tradition which Hume helped lay the foundations of had a very significant impact upon Quine’s work, and upon Quine’s radical development of empiricism by rejecting the two dogmas of empiricism.

1.2 Hume’s empiricism

Central to Hume’s position is his notion of perceptions, these are the mental items which we are aware of whenever any kind of mental activity occurs. He distinguishes between perceptions which correspond to thought — ideas — and those which correspond to experience and emotions — impressions (Hume 1975, p. 18). He also draws a distinction between simple and complex perceptions, complex perceptions are those which can be broken down into other perceptions which make them up, and simple perceptions are those which cannot be broken down any further.

Hume holds that all knowledge is derived from experience, this is what defines him as an empiricist. This is most clearly manifested in his Copy Principle, which is the claim that every simple idea is a copy of a simple impression¹ (Hume 1975, p. 19). Because complex ideas are made up of simple ideas, this means that every idea, complex or simple, is ultimately derived from impressions. And not only does he hold that all ideas are derived from impressions, but he also holds that there is no difference in kind between ideas and

¹It is important to note that Hume’s Copy Principle can be understood in different ways: either as an epistemological principle which claims that the *content* of ideas is derived from experience; or as the claim that experience is the ultimate *causal source* of all ideas (Miller 2009, p. 132). For the purposes of this thesis I shall assume the epistemological view.

impressions whatsoever, the difference is only one of the degree of their vividness. So, for Hume, the only difference between the perception of seeing a tree and the perception of thinking about that tree is that the perception of seeing it will be more vivid.

One of the most influential aspects of Hume's work is his attack on widely held views on causation. Hume claims that our idea of causation is based on three relations between objects that have a causal connection: that they are contiguous; that the cause is prior in time to the effect; and that there is a necessary connection between the cause and the effect (Hume 1969, pp. 121–125). It is clear that we can derive the ideas of contiguity and priority from our impressions of causal interactions, and so those relations are unproblematic. However, the idea of a necessary connection between the two events is more difficult to explain.

Hume argues that the idea of a necessary connection between two events cannot be derived from our impressions of the causal interaction. If this were possible then we would expect that we would be able to know that there is a necessary connection between two events after only observing one case of their causal interaction. Instead, we only infer that there is a necessary connection between two events after seeing a particular event consistently following another on a number of separate occasion. And so, Hume concludes, our impressions of causal interaction do not give us the idea of a necessary connection between the two events:

When I cast my eye on the *known qualities* of objects, I immediately discover that the relation of cause and effect depends not in the least on *them*. (Hume 1969, p. 125).

However, this conflicts with the Copy Principle, since if we do not get the idea of necessary connection from impressions then how do we arrive at it? There are a number of conflicting interpretations of what Hume's response to this question is. The traditional interpretation of Hume's response to this question is that he is advancing a form of error theory, and is claiming that our causal judgements express beliefs in necessary connections, but that our beliefs in necessary connections are mistaken. For example, Stroud claims that "Hume argues that there is no necessity residing in objects—our belief that there is is actually

false” (Stround 1977, p. 83). Another popular interpretation is that he is advancing a non-cognitivist position, and holds that casual judgements do not express beliefs with truth-evaluable propositional content, but that we are instead merely projecting our feeling of confidence that one event will follow another onto the world. Blackburn advances this interpretation, claiming that Hume thinks that “the causal connection between events is something of which we have no impression, hence no idea, so a Humean theory of causation instead sees us projecting onto events our own tendency to infer one from another” (Blackburn 1994, p. 180). However, it doesn’t matter which interpretation we hold for the purposes of this introduction, since the central point here is simply that Hume has difficulty accounting for the idea that there is a necessary connection between events.

Closely related to the problems surrounding the idea of necessary connection are those of the Causal Maxim, the claim “that whatever begins to exist, must have a cause of existence” (Hume 1969, p. 126). The Causal Maxim is problematic because it cannot be demonstrated using sensory evidence, since our finite experience can never be enough to support an apparently universal truth, but neither is it intuitively certain, since it is not contradictory to deny it. And so we have no justification for believing this maxim, which appears to state a necessary truth.

1.3 Kant’s sophisticated empiricism

1.3.1 Kant’s Copernican revolution

Kant claims that Hume’s difficulty in finding justification for the Causal Maxim, and for the necessary connection of causal laws, is just one symptom of a much wider problem for the entirety of all metaphysical thought, one which has prevented metaphysics from achieving any sure progress, and which is the reason why, so far, metaphysics has been:

a field in which no combatant ever yet succeeded in gaining an inch of ground, in which, at least, no victory was ever yet crowned with permanent possession. (Kant 1934, p. 11).

Kant hopes that by responding to this problem he will enable the development of a sure method for metaphysics, which will guide metaphysical thought and enable us to understand what kind of metaphysical knowledge is, and isn't, available to human reason. And at the same time he aims to respond to Hume's worries, and show why we are justified in believing in propositions like the Causal Maxim, which will in turn enable him to show how we are able to learn of particular causal laws.

The key to Kant's solution is the radical suggestion that we must reject the assumption that our cognition conforms to the objects of thought. He instead holds that those objects of thought themselves must conform to the nature of our own cognition:

If the intuition must conform to the nature of the objects, I do not see how we can know anything of them *a priori*. If, on the other hand, the object conforms to the nature of our faculty of intuition I can then easily conceive the possibility of such *a priori* knowledge. (Kant 1934, p. 12).

Kant argues that there are necessary characteristics of our rational, and perceptual, apparatus, and that these characteristics force our thought, and perception, of reality to be structured in certain ways. This means that we can learn about the ways reality, as we perceive it, must be structured simply by examining our own rational apparatus. And by recognising the effect our rational apparatus has on our perception of reality we can understand the limits of our understanding, and our inability to conceive of reality as it is in-itself. As we shall see below, Kant claims that one of these necessary characteristics of our rational, and perceptual, apparatus is that our experience must conform to the proposition "Everything that happens has a cause" (Kant 1934, p. 31) (Kant's equivalent of Hume's Causal Maxim). Kant argues that by recognising that this is a necessary characteristic of our experience he can respond to Hume's worries about the lack of justification for the Causal Maxim, and from this he attempts to explain how we can learn about the necessary connection involved in particular causal laws.

Kant compares this move to the Copernican revolution (Kant 1934, p. 12), which involved "looking for the observed movements [of the heavenly bodies] not in the heavenly bodies, but in the spectator" (Kant 1934, p. 14), recognising the contribution our own

planet's movement makes to the appearance of the movement of the heavenly bodies. Similarly, Kant's suggested change in perspective for metaphysics is a rejection of the assumption that the world as we know it is independent from us, and instead attempts to recognise the contribution made by our own cognition on our experience of the world.

It could be argued that Kant's claim that the way we experience the world is partially dependent on the nature of our cognition opens for door for a form of conceptual relativism because it seems to make room for the possibility that radically different minds from our own would experience the world differently than we do. Kant himself did not claim that other minds could experience reality differently, but, as we shall see, his work is very useful when thinking about certain sorts of conceptual relativism, because it provides a clear framework within which to structure the discussion.

However, before I can explain the significance of Kant's move it will be helpful to explain two distinctions Kant uses to help us understand different kind of judgements: the distinction between a priori and a posteriori judgements, and the distinction between analytic and synthetic judgements. This will enable me to explain what Kant means when he claims that certain propositions are be both a priori and synthetic, which will in turn lead to an explanation of the distinction he draws between the noumenal and phenomenal worlds, and why this appears to open the door to conceptual relativism.

1.3.2 The two distinctions

A priori and a posteriori

A priori judgements are those which can be known independently of any experience, while a posteriori judgements can only be learnt from experience. For example, the judgement that:

Red is a colour.

is a priori, because it can be known without any experience, in this case simply by understanding the meaning of the words. In contrast, the judgement that:

Water is H₂O.

is a posteriori, because it can only be known from experience, such as scientific investigating into the chemical composition of water. (Kant 1934, pp. 25–26).

The a priori / a posteriori distinction is an epistemological distinction, because it relates to how we can know certain propositions, rather than the reason why those propositions are true. However, it is important to note that whether a proposition is a priori or a posteriori is not dependent on how we actually come to know it, but on whether it is possible to know without any experience. For example, you could discover that the proposition:

$$218 + 468 = 686.$$

is true from experience of entering the sum into a calculator, but that doesn't make the proposition a posteriori. It a priori because we *could* have learnt it without any experience.

Kant claims that all a priori judgements must be necessary, and that all necessary judgements must be knowable a priori. Any judgement “which contains the idea of necessity in its very conception” (Kant 1934, p. 26), or which is absolutely universal, must be a priori. Because of this, necessity and absolute universality are tests for whether a judgement is a priori. A posteriori knowledge, on the other hand, must be contingent; all that experience can show us is how things happen to be on a finite number of different occasions, it cannot show us that things will be that way on all occasions, or that they must be that way. (Kant 1934, pp. 26–28).

Analytic and synthetic

Analytic judgements are those which are true in virtue of only the content of the concepts which make them up, and the laws of logic. These are judgements which are true by definition. For example, the judgement that:

All bachelors are unmarried.

is analytic, since being unmarried is part of the content of the concept of a bachelor. Synthetic judgements are those which go beyond the facts that are inherent in the concepts which make them up. As an example of a synthetic judgement, Kant uses the judgement that:

All bodies have weight.

which is synthetic because the conception of a physical body doesn't require it to have weight, instead it is a fact about the nature of the world which makes it true. (Kant 1934, pp. 30–32).

Unlike the distinction between a priori and a posteriori propositions, the analytic-synthetic distinction is metaphysical. It is a distinction based on *why* certain propositions are true (or what makes certain propositions true), rather than a distinction based on how we could come to learn that they are true.

1.3.3 The synthetic a priori

Kant claims that certain propositions, such as the causal principle, are both synthetic and a priori. Such propositions are often central to how we experience, and think about, the world, and by developing an understanding of what it means for a propositions to be both synthetic and a priori, and explaining how such propositions are possible, Kant aims to not only solve the problem of providing justification for the causal principle, but also understand the nature, and limits, of metaphysical enquiry.

The causal principle, the proposition that “Everything that happens has a cause” (Kant 1934, p. 31) is one example of a synthetic a priori proposition. Kant argues that this must be synthetic because:

In the conception of *something that happens*, I indeed think an existence which a certain time antecedes, and from this I can derive analytical judgements. But the conception of a cause lies quite out of the above conception, and indicates something entirely different from ‘that which happens,’ and is consequently not contained in the conception. (Kant 1934, pp. 31–32).

The proposition cannot be analytic since it is not true due to the nature of the concepts involved, the concepts of a cause and of an event (“something that happens”), and so it must be synthetic. But, at the same time, it must be known a priori because it is necessary, and it could not be justified by any amount of experience.

Similarly, Kant argues that many propositions of geometry related to the nature of space must be synthetic a priori. For example, the proposition “A straight line between two points is the shortest” (Kant 1934, p. 33) must be synthetic because:

my conception of *straight* contains no notion of *quantity*, but is merely *qualitative*. The conception of the *shortest* is therefore wholly an addition, and by no analysis can it be extracted from our conception of a straight line. (Kant 1934, p. 33).

Kant is arguing here that this proposition must be synthetic because it is not due to the conception of what it is to be a line, or a straight line, that it is true, but it is instead true because of the nature of the world. But such propositions are also a priori “because they carry along with them the conception of necessity, which cannot be given by experience” (Kant 1934, p. 32). For similar reasons, Kant also argues that many propositions related to time, such as the proposition “time has only one dimension”, are synthetic a priori.

But how can Kant explain how such propositions can be synthetic, and yet knowable a priori? His answer is that they accord with how our minds structure experience. In the case of the propositions about the nature of space and time, he argues¹ that space and time are the forms of all our intuitions — all our experience of objects must, necessarily, represent objects within space and time. Because space and time are the necessary form of all our experience that explains why propositions about the nature of space and time are knowable a priori, despite being synthetic.

As for the proposition “Everything that happens has a cause” (Kant 1934, p. 31) Kant attempts to show that it is synthetic a priori because “Experience is possible only through the representation of a necessary connection of perceptions.” (Kant 1934, p. 140). It is

¹Kant has many arguments for the claim that space and time are the pure forms of our intuitions, but they are complicated, and it is beyond the scope of this thesis to go into them.

beyond the scope of this thesis to explain Kant's arguments for this, but his conclusion is that:

If, then, my perception is to contain the cognition of an event, that is, of something which really happens, it must be an empirical judgement, wherein we think that the succession is determined; that is, presupposes another phenomenon, upon which this event follows necessarily, or in conformity with a rule. (Kant 1934, p. 155).

In other words, he concludes that we can only hold that we are able to have experience of events if we also presuppose that our experience is structured in a way that corresponds to causal laws which describe necessary connections between events. In response to Hume's concerns he argues that, although our knowledge of particular causal laws is not a necessary characteristic of our rational, and perceptual, apparatus, the Causal Maxim is, and it is that which enables us to learn about the necessary connection involved in particular causal laws.

1.3.4 The noumenal and phenomenal worlds

To clarify the significance of his claim that our perceptual and rational apparatus play a role in constituting the form of our experience, Kant draws a distinction (Kant 1934, pp. 180–191) between “phenomena” — things as we experience them — and “noumena” — things as they are in-themselves, independently of human minds. Kant claims that noumena are the root cause of all phenomena, and yet we can only know the phenomenal world, since that is reality as it is presented to us by our perceptual and rational apparatus, and that it is impossible to understand the world as it is in-itself, independently of how we think about it. Because of this there is no reason to think that our representations of reality are really ‘like’ reality as it is in-itself.

The consequence of this is that the true nature of reality is unknowable to us. It could be argued that this opens the door to a type of conceptual relativism, since it may be possible for there to be minds which are radically different to our own. There could be minds which are constituted in such a way so that they structure experience

radically differently from how we do, this would mean that radically different synthetic a priori principles would be true for their experience of reality. For example, although it is a synthetic a priori truth for us that all objects must be located in space and time, they could represent reality in entirely different ways, and so an entirely different set of synthetic a priori propositions would be true for them.

One way of putting this would be by saying that such a mind would have a different phenomenal world from our own. The noumenal world, which is the root cause of all phenomena for all minds is the same, but because their experience is shaped in radically different ways, then the world as they experience it would also be radically different. This would mean that many sentences in our language, such as:

The chair is next to the table.

would have no translation in their language, since, lacking an understanding of space, they would have no understanding of what it means for something to be “next to” something else. In addition, it is also likely that it would be very difficult, if not impossible, for them to understand what we mean by “chair” or “table”, since, as objects, an essential part of our understanding of them is that they are necessarily located in space.

And so, by considering the possibility of minds which structure experience in different ways, and for which different synthetic a priori propositions are true, we have all the aspects of the conceptual relativism which Davidson attacks. The distinction between scheme and theory-neutral content which Davidson attacks can be provided by this Kant-inspired view by equating the theory-neutral content with the noumena, and the conceptual scheme with the way we structure our experience into the forms of space, time and causality. Also, given this Kant-inspired view of conceptual schemes, it makes sense to follow Davidson and say that conceptual schemes differ where languages cannot be translated. The minds of all human beings are constituted in similar enough ways so that the same synthetic a priori propositions are true for them, and so we all think in the same conceptual scheme, which explains why all our languages can be translated. If there were creatures for whom different propositions were synthetic and a priori then

their phenomenal world would be radically different to our own and, as we saw above, it makes sense to claim that because of this their language may not be translatable into our own.

1.4 Quine and the two dogmas

As we saw above, central to Hume's position is the Copy Principle, the claim that every idea must be a copy of, or derived from, an impression. This principle expresses the view, central to all variants of empiricism, that experience is the ultimate source of all ideas. Many empiricists have taken this to imply that there is a reductive relation between experience and ideas. Quine, in his famous paper "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" (Quine 1951), attacked reductionism, and argued in support of a new view of empiricism, free from the dogma of reductionism.

Quine's sophisticated empiricism also denies the analytic-synthetic distinction, which plays an important part in the argument for conceptual schemes I suggested above, inspired by Kant's position, but in doing so opens up a new way of drawing a distinction between our scheme and content, and making sense of the possibility of alternative conceptual schemes. Quine held a variety of positions throughout his career, so, in order to evaluate Davidson's attack on conceptual schemes and the third dogma, I shall limit my focus to Quine's position as presented in "Two Dogmas of Empiricism", and will also make occasional use of *Word and Object* (Quine 1960) to fill in a few of the gaps.

1.4.1 Reductionism

Quine defines reductionism as:

the belief that each meaningful statement is equivalent to some logical construct upon terms which refer to immediate experience (Quine 1951, p. 20).

Early empiricists held that there was a term-by-term reductionism, they thought that there was a direct link between every term in our language, and an experience. Russell

showed that this could not be done, and that we are better off looking for a link between experience and whole statements, or sentences. Despite these differences, as far as Quine's attack is concerned these two views are fundamentally the same since they both depend upon the claim that it is possible to isolate the links between particular experiences and individual parts of our belief system (or scientific theory) in isolation from the system as a whole.

Despite the longstanding support for this view it wasn't until Carnap that anyone actually attempted to undertake the project of formally exploring this connection. He did this by attempting to provide a formal theory which would explain the link between statements about the world and those about experience. Central to his attempt was the assignment of truth values to statements of the form "Quality q is at point-instant $x; y; z; t$ " (Quine 1951, p. 37), but Quine argues (Quine 1951, pp. 37–38) that such an attempt is doomed to fail because of its dependence on the connective 'is at'. According to Quine, there is no way that this connective could be translated into the language of experience and logic, and so does not help to show that all statements can be reduced into experience and logic, in the way required by reductionists.

1.4.2 The analytic-synthetic distinction

The other dogma which Quine attacks in "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" is that of the analytic-synthetic distinction, which he defines as:

a belief in some fundamental cleavage between truths which are *analytic*, or grounded in meanings independently of matters of fact, and truths which are *synthetic*, or grounded in fact. (Quine 1951, p. 20).

Over the first half of "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" Quine uses a number of specific arguments to attack various attempts to give a clear definition of analyticity, but his general attack on the analytic-synthetic distinction doesn't come until later in the paper, when he is able to build on his attack on reductionism.

Quine argues that if we reject reductionism, then we must also conclude that no statement is purely analytic, and therefore reject the analytic-synthetic distinction. By rejecting the reductionist claim that we can isolate the experiential support for particular statements we are committing ourselves to also rejecting the claim that we can say to what extent any particular statement is made true by our experience of the world. And if we cannot say how much any particular statement is made true by experience, then it follows that we also cannot isolate statements which are true, independent of any experience. And if we cannot isolate statements which do not depend on any experiential support, then we cannot isolate analytic statements, and so, Quine concludes, we should reject the dogma of the analytic-synthetic distinction:

My present suggestion is that it is nonsense, and the root of much nonsense, to speak of a linguistic component and a factual component in the truth of any individual statement. Taken collectively, science has its double dependence upon language and experience; but this duality is not significantly traceable into the statements of science taken one by one. (Quine 1951, p. 39).

1.4.3 Quine's empiricism, and its consequences for conceptual relativism

But what's left of empiricism in this view? If there is not a reductive relation between experience and individual statements, then what role is experience playing? Quine's answer to this question is that experience still plays the role it does in all empiricist views — that of the ultimate source and justification for all statements — only for Quine it is the system of statements as a whole which is justified by experience:

My countersuggestion . . . is that our statements about the external world face the tribunal of sense experience not individually but only as a corporate body. (Quine 1951, p. 38).

So, instead of individual statements, or beliefs, being justified by particular experiences, Quine's view is that the entire system of statements is justified by the entirety of our experience; "The unit of empirical significance is the whole of science." (Quine 1951, p. 39).

One major consequence of this view is the extent to which it leaves our system of beliefs underdetermined by experience:

Any statement can be held true come what may, if we make drastic enough adjustments elsewhere in the system. Even a statement very close to the periphery can be held true in the face of recalcitrant experience by pleading hallucination or by amending certain statements of the kind called logical laws. Conversely, by the same token, no statement is immune to revision. Revision even of the logical law of the excluded middle has been proposed as a means of simplifying quantum mechanics; and what difference is there in principle between such a shift and the shift whereby Kepler superseded Ptolemy, or Einstein Newton, or Darwin Aristotle? (Quine 1951, p. 40).

Quine's argument here is that when we have an experience which conflicts with our current beliefs we have a choice which beliefs to modify in order to accommodate this new experience; if we wanted to we could choose to hold onto any particular statement, come what may, and modify our other beliefs in order to cope with experience which may at first seem to conflict with it. But if we do not arbitrarily decide to hold onto a particular statement, come what may, then no statement is totally immune to revision. The only restriction upon our system of beliefs is that it, as a whole, must continue to account for our experience, and so if we wish to change a statement whose acceptance is strongly connected to our acceptance of many other statements in the system, such as a law of logic, then we will also have to change many others to maintain the system's coherence, and compatibility with our experience.

An interesting upshot of this view is its effect on ontology. Quine claims that our belief in physical objects is nothing other than a posit, with no difference in kind from belief in the gods of Homer. The difference between our belief in physical objects and belief in Homer's gods is that belief in the myth of physical objects is epistemologically superior, because it is "more efficacious than other myths as a device for working a manageable structure into the flux of experience" (Quine 1951, p. 41).

Why would one myth be epistemologically superior to another? why would one myth produce a better structure of beliefs? In *Word and Object* Quine claims (Quine 1960, pp. 19–20) that we are likely to prefer the simplest explanation of our experience, and also

prefer explanations which have greater “familiarity of principle” (Quine 1960, pp. 19–20) — those which explain matters in similar ways to our other explanations.

But if our beliefs in things such as physical objects are nothing but myths, or posits, chosen on the basis of pragmatic concerns like simplicity, where does that leave the notion of truth? Quine’s answer is to keep hold onto the importance of truth, claiming that scientific method — the empiricist method of attempting to develop theories which account for, and predict, experience — is “the last arbiter of truth” (Quine 1960, p. 23), but to deny that there is only one correct true theory, and that even if there were just one best scientific theory that would not show us which sentences are true in our present theory:

We could not say derivatively, that any single sentence S is true if it or a translation belongs to θ [the unique best scientific theory], for there is in general no sense in equating a sentence of a theory θ with a sentence S given apart from θ . Unless pretty firmly and directly conditioned to sensory stimulation, a sentence S is meaningless except relative to its own theory; meaningless intertheoretically. (Quine 1960, p. 24).

In other words, we cannot use the best scientific theory to evaluate sentences of our present theory, since it is only within the theory to which they belong that sentences are meaningful. Instead, we must just rely on the standards of a sentences own theory in order to evaluate its truth:

Where it makes sense to apply ‘true’ is to a sentence couched in the terms of a given theory and seen from within the theory, complete with its posited reality. (Quine 1960, p. 24)

But does this leave us just with a relativism which loses everything that is important for our intuitive notion of truth? Quine argues not:

Have we now so far lowered our sights as to settle for a relativistic doctrine of truth—rating the statements of each theory as true for that theory, and brooking no higher criticism? Not so. The saving consideration is that we continue to take seriously our own particular aggregate science, our own particular world-theory or loose total fabric of quasi-theories, whatever it may be. Unlike Descartes, we own and use our beliefs of the moment, even in the midst of philosophizing, until by what is vaguely called scientific method we change them here and there for the better. Within our own total evolving

doctrine, we can judge truth as earnestly and absolutely as can be; subject to correction, but that goes without saying. (Quine 1960, pp. 24–25).

So, because we take seriously our own theory, and are committed to improving and correcting it in the light of new experience, we are left judging truth as absolutely as is possible. We have no need for, nor can we make any sense of, a notion of truth independently from any theory, since statements only have meaning within a theory.

This view appears to open up the possibility of conceptual relativism, since many different theories can account for the same experience. Unlike the form of conceptual relativism we developed from the foundations provided by Kant's position, which relied on the distinction between a priori analytic and a priori synthetic truths and claimed that alternative conceptual schemes would be those that correspond to different a priori synthetic truths, Quinean conceptual relativism does not depend on drawing a distinction between analytic and synthetic truths. Instead, Quine holds that "no statement is immune to revision" (Quine 1951, p. 40), and any proposition could be changed, and if enough changed then a distinct conceptual scheme would be generated. The only restriction Quine places upon conceptual schemes is that they are able to account for our experience, and that they are rational. And, although some conceptual schemes can be better than others, that does not mean that sentences belonging to other conceptual schemes are not true, since the truth of a sentence can only be judged from within its own conceptual scheme; sentences are "meaningless intertheoretically" (Quine 1960, p. 24).

And so Quine leaves us with all the significant traits of the conceptual relativism which Davidson attacks. Conceptual schemes are made sense of by drawing a distinction between scheme and content, which is in this case our theory-neutral experience, and the truth of sentences is relative to the scheme to which they belong.

1.5 Kuhn

Kuhn was one of the most influential philosophers of science of the twentieth century, he argued that scientific development is not simply a steady development towards increasingly

true theories, but that it is interrupted by revolutionary changes in paradigm (Kuhn's word for conceptual scheme). According to Kuhn, all scientific work takes place within a paradigm which determines a broad array of factors that affect our views on what science is, how it may be done, and even affect how we see the world itself and the notions of existence and truth. Sometimes the current scientific paradigm is brought into question by the discovery of natural occurrences which the paradigm has trouble accounting for, and because of this the old paradigm may be replaced by a new, which is able to respond to the problems of the earlier by using a different conception of science. Different paradigms can be different in a number of significant ways, including their conception of science, the values they use to guide theory choice, their terms and concepts which are available to them, and even the worlds they work in. Because of this Kuhn claims that different paradigms are incommensurable¹.

1.5.1 Paradigms

Central to Kuhn's theory is the notion of a paradigm². Paradigms individuate groups of scientists, depending on many factors which determine their general approach to science. Most of the time paradigms are stable, scientists do not generally question their approach to science, but instead just focus with getting on with the job, and solving the problems suggested by their paradigm. But sometimes anomalies are discovered and nature violates the expectations of the paradigm³, and so scientists are led to question their entire approach, leading to what Kuhn calls a time of "crisis". After a time, a scientist may

¹It is important to note that, despite saying that different paradigms are incommensurable, Kuhn does not think that it is not possible to translate between different paradigms. This is significant, because Davidson's attack on Kuhn is built upon a misrepresentation of Kuhn which claims that Kuhn thinks translation is not possible between paradigms, but I'll go into this more later.

²Kuhn notes in the Postscript (added in 1969) that in the book he actually makes two significantly different uses of the word "paradigm": firstly to describe the entire "disciplinary matrix" of group of scientists for a period of time (in the Postscript he often uses the word "theory" in place of "paradigm" to refer to this meaning, and he could have also used "conceptual scheme"); and secondly to talk about the "paradigmatic examples" which are used when teaching a particular paradigm / theory, and central for determining the nature of the paradigm / theory (Kuhn 1970, pp. 175, 182, 187). I shall primarily use the word to refer to the first meaning.

³Kuhn does not think that paradigm change is exclusively triggered by the discovery of anomalies, but I can safely ignore that detail for the purposes of this introduction.

come up with a radically new way of thinking about science and the world, which is able to get around the anomaly. Because of the new paradigm's strengths a revolution may occur, and eventually the new paradigm will be accepted by the vast majority of scientists, leaving them back in a period of stability until another anomaly arises.

To explain paradigm shifts Kuhn uses a number of famous examples, including the Copernican, Newtonian, chemical, and Einsteinian revolutions. However, it is important to note that Kuhn is not only talking of such dramatic changes, which affect huge regions of scientific discourse. Far more common are the paradigm changes which affect small scientific communities, sometimes with less than twenty-five active researchers. Even at this scale he claims that paradigm changes are best described as revolutionary, with the new incommensurable with the old (Kuhn 1970, pp. 180–181).

Kuhn attributes to paradigms the power to determine many factors in scientific work, including: what facts are seen to be relevant to scientific work; what problems are worthy of being worked on, and which are mere word games or metaphysical speculation; the methods available for solving problems; what scientific terms mean; how the world is seen; the values which determine the acceptability of solutions; and, the classical examples and problems used to teach new scientists.

An important characteristic of Kuhn's view of paradigms is that, even during a time of stability, there does not need to be a generally agreed upon interpretation of the paradigm for it to guide scientific research. Kuhn claims that the scientists' understanding of the paradigm is primarily generated by the understanding of shared classical examples of the paradigm's use, which are used when teaching new scientists. When scientists are trained they are not generally taught the concepts which govern the paradigm in isolation, but instead by their historical application to particular problems. This use of shared examples enables them to learn how to work, despite the fact that they cannot formally articulate what they know. This means that, in periods of stability, there is no need to attempt to reduce the paradigm into a specific set of rules, since the scientist's shared tacit knowledge is enough to enable them to work together. However, during a period of crisis scientists

become interested in the rules of their current paradigm, and then discover that when they attempt to reduce their scientific methods into strict rules that different scientists do this in different ways (Kuhn 1970, pp. 43–51).

A surprising feature of Kuhn’s description of paradigm change is that he equates it with a change in world, saying things such as, “when paradigms change, the world itself changes with them” (Kuhn 1970, p. 111), and:

It is rather as if the professional community had been suddenly transported to another planet where familiar objects are seen in a different light and are joined by unfamiliar ones as well. (Kuhn 1970, p. 111).

But it is important not to misunderstand this kind of talk. Kuhn does not think that when changing paradigm scientists are actually moving to a different world, the outside world and the sensory stimuli provided by it stay very much the same (Kuhn 1970, pp. 192–193). What does change is how the scientists *see* the world, because Kuhn believes that their very perception of the world is dependent on their paradigm.

To explain this Kuhn draws a parallel with the changes in perceptual experiences when viewing gestalt images, such as the duck-rabbit illusion (Kuhn 1970, pp. 114–115). When looking at the duck-rabbit image the viewer can switch between perceiving either of the two animals, despite the fact that the image itself hasn’t changed, and is stimulating their eyes in the same way. In the same way, Kuhn claims, a change in scientific paradigm can lead to seeing the world in a different way, seeing a different world¹. To support this claim he gives the example of bubble-chamber photographs: “Looking at a bubble-chamber photograph, the student sees confused and broken lines, the physicist a record of familiar subnuclear events” (Kuhn 1970, p. 111).

Although Kuhn’s talk of the world changing when paradigms change is intended to mean that how scientists see the world changes, rather than there being a change in the world itself, it is important to note that Kuhn is not just talking about a change in the

¹Kuhn notes (Kuhn 1970, pp. 114–115) a significant difference between gestalt illusions like the duck-rabbit, and scientific gestalt switches: a scientific gestalt switch cannot be stimulated by a mere act of will, and is in fact often irreversible. This means that the effect of paradigms upon perception cannot be so easily verified as the changes experienced when viewing gestalt illusions.

scientist's interpretation¹ of their observations (Kuhn 1970, pp. 120–123). The perceptual data available to scientists working in different paradigms is different, scientists do not all share access to the same paradigm-neutral raw sense data, which they then add their own interpretation to, and Kuhn even goes as far as speculating that perhaps “something like a paradigm is prerequisite to perception itself” (Kuhn 1970, p. 113). A change in paradigm leads to a change in the data itself, and consequently certain interpretations of the world are unavailable to certain paradigms²; even though we know that after a paradigm change we are still looking at the same objects we still find that paradigm change leaves them “transformed through and through in many of their details” (Kuhn 1970, p. 122).

1.5.2 Paradigm change

As was said earlier, a change of paradigm is often brought on by a crisis in the old paradigm, such as anomalous discoveries about the world which violate the predictions of the old paradigm. Kuhn calls such changes “revolutions”, so as to draw a parallel with political revolutions, this is because “Political revolutions aim to change political institutions in ways that [the previous] institutions themselves prohibit.” (Kuhn 1970, p. 93). Changes of paradigm are “revolutionary” because the two paradigms are incommensurable — they have values and world-views which are so radically different that there is no straightforward way to compare them. From either paradigm's perspective it is impossible to clearly evaluate the other paradigm, because it does things which don't make sense from that perspective, and violate that paradigm's values.

When paradigms enter, as they must, into a debate about paradigm choice, their role is necessarily circular. Each group uses its own paradigm to argue in that paradigm's defense. (Kuhn 1970, p. 94).

¹It is also important to note that Kuhn does not claim that scientists *never* interpret what they see. Instead he is just claiming interpretation is not required for all scientific vision, and that instead seeing itself is already partially determined by the paradigm; there is no such thing as paradigm-neutral raw data. (Kuhn 1970, p. 122)

²He supports this claim using an example comparing how Aristotle and Galileo saw pendulums (Kuhn 1970, pp. 121–122), but there isn't space to go into that example here.

And outside the available paradigms we have nowhere to turn to help us decide which is best, there is no “supra-institutional framework” in which we can compare two different paradigms.

Kuhn gives a number of reasons why paradigms are incommensurable, and therefore difficult to compare:

Problem-field: Different paradigms classify different types of problems and solutions as scientific (instead of mere word-play, or metaphysical speculation). What is an interesting problem, or acceptable solution, varies between paradigms (Kuhn 1970, p. 103).

Values: Different paradigms have differing values, which govern aspects of acceptable solutions such as the range of permissible error, or the importance of consistency of theories (Kuhn 1970, pp. 184–186). They also disagree over the relative importance of values like “accuracy, simplicity, [and] fruitfulness” (Kuhn 1970, p. 199).

Terms and concepts: Different paradigms often use the same terms, but in different ways. This is because they are defined using different paradigmatic examples and equations (Kuhn 1970, pp. 183–184), and because the concepts are related to each other differently (for example, both Einstein and Newton talked about ‘space’, but they had radically different conceptions of what it was (Kuhn 1970, p. 149)).

Worlds: Members of different paradigms work in different worlds, and see the world differently (Kuhn 1970, pp. 148–150). There is no shared, paradigm-neutral raw data (Kuhn 1970, p. 122).

However, in the 1969 Postscript, Kuhn adds that he doesn’t want to say there can’t be good reasons for choice of paradigm, there just can’t be *definitive* reasons for paradigm choice:

Debates over theory-choice cannot be cast in a form that fully resembles logical or mathematical proof. . . . [Where, when] there is disagreement about conclusions, . . . one or the other must conclude that he has made a mistake, violated a previously accepted rule. (Kuhn 1970, p. 199).

The problem is that, when attempting to discuss which is the best of two competing paradigms the rules which would govern such a discussion would themselves belong to one or the other paradigms; the two paradigms lack a shared foundation which one or the other can be proved to violate. This deep conflict between the paradigms means that there cannot be a step-by-step logical proof of one paradigm's superiority, or at least not one which supporters of both paradigms would find acceptable.

Despite this, Kuhn claims that the lack of straightforward logical proofs of a paradigm's superiority doesn't preclude there being good reasons for paradigm choice, we can still compare their "accuracy of prediction, particularly of quantitative prediction; the balance between esoteric and everyday subject matter and the number of different problems solved" (Kuhn 1970, p. 206). Also important, but less so, are "such values as simplicity, scope, and compatibility with other specialities" (Kuhn 1970, p. 206). Although there is no paradigm-neutral application of these values, they can still be used to compare different paradigms, just not in a strict, indisputable, law-governed way.

Kuhn points out that, despite their deep differences, speakers of two different paradigms have much in common: they share the same stimuli; they have the same neural apparatus; and their neural programming only differs in a small area of experience, since much of their history will be shared. These commonalities lead Kuhn to conclude that much of their world and language will be the same. Because of this, one way which speakers can attempt to overcome, and eventually understand, their differences is by becoming translators:

Each may, that is, try to discover what the other would see and say when presented with a stimulus to which his own verbal response would be different. . . . they may in time become very good predictors of each other's behaviour. Each will have learned to translate the other's theory and its consequences into his own language and simultaneously to describe in his language the world to which that theory applies. (Kuhn 1970, p. 202).

Although such a process is difficult, Kuhn claims it is possible, and that once completed it will enable the speakers of the different paradigms "to experience vicariously something of the merits and defects of each other's points of view" (Kuhn 1970, p. 202), which will

aid them in choosing between paradigms.

1.5.3 Truth

Because of this talk of gestalt switches, the lack of paradigm-neutral raw data, and the conflict in values between paradigms Kuhn has been criticised for having a relativistic view of science. Kuhn responds (Kuhn 1970, pp. 205–206) by arguing that, despite the deep differences between paradigms, there is a sense in which newer paradigms can be said to be better than the old: they enable scientists to have more detailed understanding of scientifically interesting puzzles and solutions. This is because, according to Kuhn, scientists are ultimately puzzle solvers, and as such will choose paradigms which are better at solving puzzles.

He notes that this view of scientific progress is significantly different from that held by most philosophers of science — it does not claim that newer theories are closer to describing what is “really there”, or that they are closer to “the truth”. This is because:

There is, I think, no theory-independent way to reconstruct phrases like ‘really there’; the notion of a match between the ontology of a theory and its “real” counterpart in nature now seems to me illusive in principle. (Kuhn 1970, p. 206).

All notions of what is “really there” depend upon their place within a paradigm, they lack any paradigm-neutral application, and because of this he urges that we should:

relinquish the notion, explicit or implicit, that changes of paradigm carry scientists and those who learn from them closer and closer to the truth. (Kuhn 1970, p. 170).

But, without the idea that scientific progress brings us closer to the fixed and stable goal of the single true description of reality, how are we to make sense of the idea of scientific progress? Kuhn’s solution is to draw a parallel with Darwinian evolution:

The developmental process described in this essay has been a process of evolution *from* primitive beginnings—a process whose successive stages are characterized by an increasingly detailed and refined understanding of nature. But

nothing that has been or will be said makes it a process of evolution *toward* anything. (Kuhn 1970, pp. 170–171).

And so, even though scientific development cannot be said to have a goal — ‘truth’ — which is determined by the nature of the world, we can still see it as progressing, because it leads to the development of frameworks that are better for the scientist’s goal of solving puzzles:

Later scientific theories are better than earlier ones for solving puzzles (Kuhn 1970, p. 206)

Successive theories cannot be said to be more true, since truth is not theory-neutral, but instead they are better at satisfying the goals of scientists as puzzle solvers, those of: “accuracy of prediction . . . ; the balance between esoteric and everyday subject matter; and the number of problems solved” (Kuhn 1970, p 206).

We can equate Kuhn’s talk of paradigms with the idea of conceptual schemes which are Davidson’s target in “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme”. Like the conceptual schemes which Davidson attacks, truth is relative to paradigms. Also, by associating paradigm change with a change in world, Kuhn is using something very similar to the metaphor of differing points of view which Davidson attacks, since the world itself does not change when we change paradigms, but instead only our experience of the world does. However, Kuhn and Davidson do significantly disagree over the possibility of translating the languages which different paradigms use. Davidson claims that if there were conceptual schemes which were distinct from our own then they would use languages which we are unable to translate, indeed, according to Davidson, it is impossibility of translation which individuates conceptual schemes. In contrast, Kuhn claims that languages which are used by different paradigms can be translated, and that translation is an important part of making sense of differing paradigms in order to choose between them. I shall return to this conflict between Davidson and Kuhn’s views in the final chapter, when evaluating Davidson’s arguments.

1.6 Summary

And so, we have three different pictures of conceptual schemes with which to evaluate Davidson's arguments in "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme". All understand conceptual schemes by drawing a distinction between scheme and content: the Kant-inspired view does so by drawing distinction between the phenomenal and noumenal worlds; Quine does so by using a distinction between alternative possible conceptual schemes and the theory-neutral experience which supports them all; and Kuhn does so by distinguishing between the world itself, which does not change with paradigm change, and the world as we experience it, which is determined by our paradigm.

However, despite this similarity there is a significant difference between Quine's scheme-content distinction, and that of the other two. According to Quine, members of all conceptual schemes have the same experience, and just structure it differently, and explain it using different theoretical posits. In contrast, according to Kuhn's position, and the Kant-inspired view I sketched above, we do not have epistemic access to that which is common to all schemes. For Kant, the noumenal world is unknowable, and all we can know is the phenomenal world — the world as we experience it, which is structured by the nature of our scheme. And for Kuhn our perception of the world is dependent on our scheme, although Kuhn unfortunately fails to use different words for the world as we experience it, and the world as it is in itself, it is clear that when he makes statements like "though the world does not change with a change of paradigm, the scientist afterward works in a very different world" (Kuhn 1970, p. 121) that he is making use of two very different meanings of the word 'world', in a way which is not dissimilar to Kant. As we shall see later in this thesis, this distinction between the Quinean view, and the view shared by Kant and Kuhn is very significant, because Davidson's arguments against conceptual schemes only successfully engage with the Quinean view, leaving Kuhn and the Kant-inspired positions untouched.

CHAPTER 2

INTRODUCTION TO DAVIDSON

Donald Davidson was one of most significant philosophers of the twentieth century, whose work had a profound influence on philosophy of language, mind and action. In this chapter I shall briefly go over the areas of his thought which are most important for understanding his arguments against conceptual schemes in “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme” (Davidson 1974), looking at his work on theories of meaning for natural languages, the role the principle of charity plays in his work on theories of meaning, and interpretivism¹.

2.1 Davidson’s adequacy conditions for theories of meaning

I shall start by exploring Davidson’s work on theories of meaning. For Davidson a theory of meaning is a formal theory which is able to generate a theorem for each sentence in a language, which gives that sentence’s meaning. Davidson claims that there are three conditions which any adequate theory of meaning must satisfy:

The Extensional Adequacy Condition: an adequate theory of meaning for a language must generate theorems which give the meaning of every possible sentence in

¹It is worth noting that the chapter “Sense and Truth: Tarski and Davidson” in Alex Miller’s *Philosophy of Language* (Miller 2007) has been very useful in providing the foundations for much of the work in this chapter.

that language (Davidson 1970, pp. 55–56).

The Compositionality Condition: an adequate theory of meaning for a language must be compositional, i.e. reveal how the meaning of sentences depends on their semantic structure and the meanings of the words that appear in them.

The Interpretation Condition: an adequate theory of meaning for a language must enable someone who doesn't know that language to interpret speakers of that language, by translating that language into their own. Davidson claims that the notion of correct interpretation is governed by a number of principles, such as the principle of charity, which are constitutive of that very notion. Because of this, any theory of meaning which is to correctly interpret speakers must accord with these principles, and is also free to make use of these principles in the development of the theory. As we shall see in a couple of pages, this condition is very important for Davidson, since it justifies the use of principles, like the principle of charity, which are essential in enabling attempts to develop theories of meaning for completely unknown languages to get off the ground.

2.2 Intensional and extensional theories of meaning

The Extensional Adequacy Condition requires that theories of meaning must give the meaning of every sentence in the language, but what does it mean to “give the meaning” of a sentence? To explore this Davidson looks at a number of different attempts to develop theories of meaning for natural languages which fail, because they do not “give the meaning” in an acceptable way.

Davidson first considers Frege's theory of meaning (Davidson 1969*b*, pp. 17–18). Frege starts “by assigning some entity as meaning to each word (or significant syntactical feature) of the sentence” (Davidson 1969*b*, p. 17). This seems to make sense for words which refer to something in a clear way, such as names, but what about predicates or quantifiers? Frege's answer is that such words stand for “unsaturated” entities, such as

functions, which need to be combined with other semantic entities, such as those which names stand for, in order to be completed. Davidson attacks Frege's solution, saying that it "seems to label a difficulty rather than solve it" (Davidson 1969*b*, p. 17).

To demonstrate this, Davidson considers the expression 'the father of Annette' and asks what the role is played by the unsaturated entity which the 'the father of' stands for? His answer is that "All we can think to say is that this entity 'yields' or 'gives' the father of x as a value when the argument is x , or perhaps that this entity maps people onto their fathers." (Davidson 1969*b*, p. 18). Postulating the existence of an entity to which the predicate 'the father of' refers does no work in helping a theory of meaning explain what the predicate means, or who it will map people onto.

Davidson next looks at theories of meaning which produce theorems of the form ' s means m ' (where ' s ' is the name of a sentence, and ' m ' is a term which refers to its meaning) (Davidson 1969*b*, pp. 20–21). Such theories do not need to claim that each semantically significant part of a sentence refers to a meaning entity, they instead just map whole sentences to meaning entities. Davidson claims that introducing meanings as entities in this way doesn't help us explain anything:

Paradoxically, the one thing meanings do not seem to do is oil the wheels of a theory of meaning—at least as long as we require of such a theory that it non-trivially give the meaning of every sentence in the language. My objection to meanings in the theory of meaning is not that they are abstract or that their identity conditions are obscure, but that they have no demonstrated use. (Davidson 1969*b*, pp. 20–21)

Using meanings as entities in this way could give us a theory of meaning which satisfied the extensional adequacy condition by simply providing an axiom which paired every sentence up with its meaning entity. But the theory of meaning provided by using meanings as entities in this way would be trivial, and is no help in satisfying the compositionality condition and showing us how the meaning of sentences depends on their structure. However, it is not clear that meanings as entities could be used in any other, less trivial, way, and so Davidson dismisses them.

What about theories which produce theorems of the form ' s means that p ' (where ' s '

is the name of a sentence, and ‘ p ’ is a sentence which gives its meaning)? Such theories have the advantage that they have no need to make use of meanings as entities, since the meaning has been replaced with a sentence which gives the meaning. However, Davidson attacks them because the phrase ‘means that’ creates an intensional context which is no easier to explain than the notion of meaning itself.

Davidson concludes that neither the postulation of intensional entities, nor the use of intensional contexts aid us in developing a theory of meaning. Instead, he argues that we should develop extensional theories of meaning, which are capable of “giving the meaning” of every sentence in the language, without the use of such entities, or by presuming an understanding of the notion of meaning.

2.3 Tarski

Davidson claims (Davidson 1969*b*, pp. 22–24) that a theory of meaning is extensionally adequate if it yields theorems of the form:

s is true if and only if p ¹

‘ s ’ being replaced by the name of a sentence, of the object-language (the language being explained by the theory), and ‘ p ’ by a sentence in the meta-language (the language which the theory is being stated in). For example, if both the object-language and the meta-language are English, then the theory will generate theorems such as:

‘Snow is white’ is true if and only if snow is white.

In cases where the object-language is different from the meta-language then ‘ p ’ will be a translation of ‘ s ’. For example, if the object-language is German and the meta-language is English then the theory will generate theorems such as:

¹Davidson later develops his position (Davidson 1969*a*, p. 45) to take into account sentences in natural language which contain indexical expressions, such as “It is raining here, now”. Because of this he ends up with the requirement that the theorems produced by a theory of meaning be of the form “ s is true for speaker u at time t if and only if p ”. However, these additional details for his theory have little significance for my analysis of his position, so from now on I will simply ignore them.

‘Schnee ist weiss’ is true-in-German if and only if snow is white.

A fortunate feature of Davidson’s requirement that an adequate theory of meaning for a language produce theorems of this form is that the form he demands is identical to that imposed by Tarski, on theorems, which Tarski uses to define truth for formal languages. Tarski has already shown how, in a way which respects the compositionality restraint, theorems of this form can be generated for every sentence of Frege’s predicate logic. This means that, if Davidson can find a way to formalise all of a natural language into predicate logic, then he can then use Tarski’s work to generate T-theorems for every sentence in that language. However, as Davidson himself is well aware, we currently only know how to formalise certain parts of natural language into predicate logic, and it is not even known if it is possible to do it for an entire natural language. At the end of “Truth and Meaning” (Davidson 1969*b*) he lists some of the most problematic areas of language:

To name a few: we do not know the logical form of counterfactual or subjunctive sentences; nor of sentences about probabilities and about causal relations; we have no good idea what the logical role of adverbs is, nor the role of attributive adjectives; we have no theory for mass terms like ‘fire’, ‘water’, and ‘snow’, nor for sentences about belief, perception, and intention, nor for verbs of action that imply purpose. And finally, there are all the sentences that seem not to have truth values at all: the imperatives, optatives, interrogatives, and a host more. (Davidson 1969*b*, p. 35–36)

2.4 The principle of charity

Tarski’s aim in his use of Convention T is to give a definition of truth, and in order to do this he stipulates an understanding of correct translation between the object-language and the meta-language. In contrast, Davidson is after a theory of meaning, and so can’t presume an understanding of the notion of correct translation because a correct translation is nothing other than a meaning preserving translation. But without presuming an understanding of the notion of correct translation how does Davidson expect to be able to test whether the theorems produced by the theory of meaning are correct? How would

he know whether the sentences on the right hand side of a T-theorem are translations of the sentences on the left?

The solution to this problem comes from the third condition which Davidson places on adequate theories of meaning, the Interpretation Condition. This requires that theories of meaning enable us to interpret speakers, and do so in a way which accords with the principles that are constitutive of interpretation, most importantly, the principle of charity. Davidson claims that if this condition is met then *that* will guarantee that the sentence on the right hand side of a T-theorem is a translation of the sentence on the left, and that this condition can be specified without making use of the notion of correct translation.

The principle of charity is a principle, originally developed by Quine, which Davidson claims must guide any attempt to interpret the speech of someone speaking a language which we do not yet understand.

Since knowledge of beliefs comes only with the ability to interpret words, the only possibility at the start is to assume general agreement on beliefs. We get a first approximation to a finished theory by assigning to sentences of a speaker conditions of truth that actually obtain (in our own opinion) just when the speaker holds those sentences true. The guiding policy is to do this as far as possible, subject to considerations of simplicity, hunches about the effects of social conditioning, and of course our common-sense, or scientific, knowledge of explicable error. (Davidson 1974, p. 196).

Davidson claims that it is impossible to construct an interpretation of a speaker's speech without knowing what sentences they hold to be true, since if we did not know that then we wouldn't any have useful information whatsoever to start the process of interpretation off with. The principle of charity frees us from this difficulty, by requiring that we assume that a speaker's beliefs agree with our own, and aim for an interpretation of speech which maximises agreement between us.

Assuming the speaker's beliefs does provide us with some semantic information, but that's OK, Davidson is not trying to give a purely non-semantic account of meaning (and in fact he would claim that a purely non-semantic account would be impossible, since semantic notions, like those required by the principle of charity, are constitutive of the

very notion of interpretation). Alex Miller points out (Miller 2007, p. 295) that what's important to note is that such semantic information is *thinner* than knowing what those sentences mean — knowing that a speaker holds that a particular sentence true does not tell us what that sentence means.

At first sight it may appear that Davidson is cheating here, how are we justified in simply assuming that the speaker believes the same things as us? Davidson's response is that we are justified in this assumption because it is a requirement of the very possibility of interpretation, and as such is constitutive of the notion of interpretation:

The methodological advice to interpret in a way that optimizes agreement should not be conceived as resting on a charitable assumption about human intelligence that might turn out to be false. 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, or having beliefs, or as saying anything. (Davidson 1973, p. 137).

Since the principle of charity is constitutive of interpretation, any theory of meaning which aims to enable us to interpret speakers is justified in making use of it, and can therefore show us how we can derive correct sentences of the form:

s is true if and only if p

without presuming the notion of correct translation.

2.4.1 The *ceteris paribus* clause

Lepore & Ludwig suggest the following formalisation of the principle of charity:

For any speaker S , time t , belief b , *ceteris paribus*: b is a belief of S 's at t about and prompted by S 's environment iff b is true. (Lepore & Ludwig 2005, p. 189).

The *ceteris paribus* clause in their definition of the principle of charity is important because it saves us from being forced to take every single assertion made by a speaker at face value, preventing the occasional false belief from distorting our theory of meaning.

In the paper “Reference, Meaning and Belief” (Grandy 1973) Grandy explores related issues¹ using the following example:

Suppose Paul has just arrived at a party and asserts “The man with the martini is a philosopher.” And suppose the facts are that there is a man in plain view who is drinking water from a martini glass and that he is not a philosopher. Suppose also that in fact there is one man at the party drinking a martini, that he is a philosopher, and that he is out of sight in the garden. (Grandy 1973, p. 445).

If we interpret Paul using a version of the principle of charity which ignores the *ceteris paribus* clause then we would take his remark at face value, and hold that Paul is making a remark about the man drinking a martini, because that is what makes his assertion true. In contrast, if we remember to take into account the *ceteris paribus* clause then we are likely to interpret Paul as stating a falsehood, and as having a false belief about the man in plain view, drinking water from the martini glass. This will lead us to having a better overall theory of meaning for Paul, because we have no reason to think that he has any knowledge about the unseen philosopher in the garden, and “it is better to attribute to him an explicable falsehood than a mysterious truth” (Grandy 1973, p. 445).

2.5 Interpretivism

One very important aspect of Davidson’s philosophical position is his support of interpretivism. Alex Byrne, in his paper on the subject, defines interpretivism as the claim that:

it is an a priori truth that there is no gap between our *best judgements* of a subject’s beliefs and desires and the *truth* about the subject’s beliefs and desires. Under ideal conditions a subject’s belief-box and desire-box become transparent. (Byrne 1998, p. 199).

¹In “Reference, Meaning and Belief” Grandy argues that we should reject the principle of charity and instead adopt a new principle — the “principle of humanity” — which aims at maximising agreement rather than understanding. However, this move is problematic because bringing in understanding may conflict with Davidson’s extensional requirements on a theory of meaning. Rather than endorsing this move, in this thesis I am merely making use of Grandy’s example to bring out the significance of the *ceteris paribus* clause, and hoping to do so in a way which is compatible with Davidson’s extensional requirements.

According to interpretivism, beliefs, desires and meanings are like secondary qualities, such as colour. Colour is a secondary quality because all that it is for something to be a particular colour is for it to appear to be that colour to an observer in ideal conditions. For example, what it is for an object to be red is the fact that an observer with good vision in a well lit environment would perceive it to be red; there is nothing more to redness other than what would be perceived by an observer in ideal conditions. Similarly, Davidson claims that all there is to beliefs, desires, and meanings are what would be judged by a fully informed interpreter:

What a fully informed interpreter could know about what a speaker means is all there is to learn; the same goes for what the speaker believes (Davidson 1983, p. 148).

This fully informed interpreter is fully informed about all of a speaker's behaviour, speech behaviour, and which sentences the speaker holds to be true. There is no need for them to be a member of the speaker's speech community, or for them to start their attempts at interpretation with an understanding of a theory of meaning for the speaker's language. Also, the interpreter begins the process of interpretation with no knowledge of the speaker's beliefs, although they can use the principle of charity and start off by assuming that the speaker has true beliefs, and then proceed by interpreting the speaker in a way which maximises the speaker's intelligibility. Davidson claims that from this position what an interpreter will be able to work out matches perfectly what there is to know about a speaker's meanings and beliefs.

CHAPTER 3

DAVIDSON'S ARGUMENT AGAINST CONCEPTUAL RELATIVISM

In the paper “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme” (Davidson 1974) Davidson attacks the general idea of conceptual schemes, and the relativity which apparently comes with them. Davidson starts by giving a number of examples of different ways conceptual schemes have been understood by various philosophers, including: “ways of organizing experience”; “systems of categories that give form to the data of sensation”; and, “points of view from which individuals, cultures, or periods survey the passing scene” (Davidson 1974, p. 183). In this paper Davidson aims to attack all possible variants of the conceptual scheme idea, explicitly including Kuhn and Quine among his targets, by arguing that we cannot make sense of the idea that there could be alternative conceptual schemes to our own.

Davidson claims that we can associate having a conceptual scheme with having a language (Davidson 1974, pp. 184–185); if two people speak the same language then they must be using the same conceptual scheme. However, it is also possible for different languages to share a conceptual scheme, and he claims that we can know if this has occurred if we are able to translate between the two languages. If, on the other hand, there are two languages which cannot be translated into each other, then this means that

they belong to distinct conceptual schemes¹. The general shape of Davidson’s argument against conceptual schemes is that we can’t make sense of the idea of a language which we are unable to translate into our own, and so we are also unable to make sense of the idea that there could be conceptual schemes different to our own. If there was a community which appeared to use a different conceptual scheme from us (because they used a language which could not be translated into our own) then we would not be justified in claiming that they are speaking a language, or using a conceptual scheme, at all, since we cannot make any sense of their apparent speech behaviour.

3.1 The third dogma of empiricism

As we saw above, part of Quine’s attack on the two dogmas of empiricism is an attack on the view that we can isolate the empirical content which would justify particular sentences. However, his attack on the two dogmas does not discard the idea of empirical content completely, instead he says that “our statements about the external world face the tribunal of sense experience not individually but only as a corporate body” (Quine 1951, p. 38). Quine rejects the analytic-synthetic distinction, but keeps a distinction between conceptual scheme and content, a dualism of “organising system of and something waiting to be organised” (Davidson 1974, p. 189). Davidson claims that in doing so Quine is holding onto a third dogma of empiricism.

Davidson argues (Davidson 1974, p. 198) that the third dogma of empiricism and the idea of conceptual schemes are interdependent; we cannot make sense of one without the other. The idea of alternative conceptual schemes is dependent on the claim that there is “something neutral and common that lies outside all schemes” (Davidson 1974, p. 190), all conceptual schemes provide an account of this common something, but do so in distinct, incommensurable, ways:

¹Davidson fails to notice that Kuhn, one of the apparent targets of this paper, claims it can be possible to translate between different conceptual schemes, or “paradigms”. For now I shall ignore that oversight, and come back to it when evaluating Davidson’s response to Kuhn.

The idea is then that something is a language, and associated with a conceptual scheme, whether we can translate it or not, if it stands in a certain relation [to] (predicting, organizing, facing, or fitting) experience (nature, reality, sensory promptings). (Davidson 1974, p. 191).

This dualism of a neutral something and a conceptual scheme which accounts for it is precisely the dualism of the third dogma, and by arguing that it doesn't make sense to claim that there could be conceptual schemes different to our own Davidson aims to undermine the third dogma, and in so doing reject all that is left which makes empiricism distinctive:

I want to urge that this second dualism of scheme and content, of organizing system and something waiting to be organized, cannot be made intelligible and defensible. It is itself a dogma of empiricism, the third dogma. The third, and perhaps the last, for if we give it up it is not clear that there is anything distinctive left to call empiricism. (Davidson 1974, p. 189).

Davidson's attack on conceptual schemes focuses on two different ways distinct conceptual schemes could fail to be translated: completely and partially. A complete failure of translation occurs when there is a language which is so different from our own that there is no significant range of sentences which we can translate. A partial failure of translation occurs when some of the language's sentences can be translated, but a significant subset cannot. He argues that we cannot make sense of either possibility, and therefore concludes that we can't make sense of the claim that there could be a conceptual scheme which is incommensurable with our own.

3.2 Complete failures of translation

When he first looks at complete failures of translation Davidson is initially tempted to dismiss the possibility immediately, simply by arguing that if we cannot translate some purported speech behaviour then we would not be able to develop any evidence to support the claim that it is in fact speech behaviour (Davidson 1974, pp. 185–186). But he notes

that fundamental to this argument is the assumption that “translatability into a familiar tongue [is] a criterion of languagehood” (Davidson 1974, p. 186), which he has not yet provided any justification for. So instead of simply making this assumption, Davidson continues by evaluating a number of attempts to make sense of the idea that there could “[be] a language we could not translate at all” (Davidson 1974, p. 192). He claims that in order to make sense of the possibility of there being untranslatable languages we need to find “a criterion of languagehood that [does] not depend on, or entail, translatability into a familiar idiom” (Davidson 1974, p. 192).

But why should we need a criterion of languagehood for untranslatable languages in order to merely claim that they are possible? Why would the fact that if we came across such a language we could not test if it was actually a language at all show that there cannot be untranslatable languages? Davidson can respond to this question using interpretivism, if interpretivism is true then what it is for a statement made by a speaker to be meaningful is given by what an ideal interpreter is capable of understanding of it. If we cannot even test if a purported language contains meaningful speech behaviour, then that shows that it isn’t actually a language at all.

Davidson starts his search for a criterion for languagehood which does not rely on translation into our own by looking at how the supporters of conceptual schemes have formulated their positions, so as to make sense of untranslatable languages. After looking at the work of Whorf, Kuhn, Feyerabend and Quine (Davidson 1974, pp. 190–192) he concludes that the various images of the role of conceptual schemes can be split up into two groups: those which talk of the scheme organising, systematising, and dividing up content; and those which talk of the scheme fitting, predicting, accounting for, and facing content. Similarly, the various views of content can be split up into two groups: those which talk of the scheme’s relation to reality, the universe, the world, or nature; and those which talk of the scheme’s relation to experience, the passing show, surface irritations, sensory promptings, sense-data, or the given. To attack these various views he goes through each of the various combinations, arguing that none enable us to make sense of

the idea of completely incommensurable conceptual schemes.

3.2.1 Organising

Davidson starts by asking whether the claim that conceptual schemes organise reality can provide a criterion for languagehood which doesn't depend on translatability into our own language (Davidson 1974, pp. 192–193). He claims that it doesn't make sense to organise a single object, and that the very notion of organisation requires multiple objects to be organised. This means that if we want to say that our conceptual scheme organises reality then we must hold that reality is already divided into objects, ready to be organised.

So, what of the idea that different languages organise the objects of reality in different ways? One way we could make sense of this idea is if one language has predicates for certain things which another language does not. Surely then translation between the two languages would not be possible, since one language would simply lack the required predicates? Davidson agrees, but argues that this conclusion is insufficient for showing that we can make sense of the idea of a language which cannot be translated into our own, since we could only coherently make the claim that a particular language has predicates for things which another lacks if our own ontology contains predicates for all the objects of both languages. And so, Davidson concludes, this argument fails to provide “a criterion of languagehood that [does] not depend on, or entail, translatability into a familiar idiom” (Davidson 1974, p. 192); it fails to justify the claim that we can make sense of the idea of languages which are incommensurable with our own.

Davidson next turns to look at the view that the content which conceptual schemes organise is experience, instead of reality. He argues that this view faces the exactly same problems as the view that conceptual schemes organise reality, because “The notion of organization applies only to pluralities” (Davidson 1974, p. 192). In order to make sense of the idea of organising experience we need to split experience down into multiple experiences to be organised. We can claim that one language could have predicates for experiences which another language lacks, but only by using a language which contains

predicates for all the various experiences. This doesn't help us make sense of the idea that there could be languages which cannot be translated into our own, or provide a criterion of languagehood which is independent of translation.

3.2.2 Fitting

As we saw above, Quine argues that we cannot pair up individual statements with the particular experience whose occurrence would justify them, instead we can only talk about the relationship between experience and our statements at the level of whole theories; it is whole theories, or conceptual schemes, which must account for the entire body of our experience. Alternative conceptual schemes are possible because there are alternative ways in which we can account for the same body of experience. All conceptual schemes must fit the same theory-neutral body of experience (so that they then can explain it, and predict future experience) but they are free to do so in various different ways, by making use of different theoretical posits and rules to describe how these posited entities will behave.

When Davidson describes the target of this section of the paper — the view that conceptual schemes fit, rather than organise experience — it is clear that he is aiming at positions very much like Quine's:

The general position is that sensory experience provides all the evidence for the acceptance of sentences (where sentences may include whole theories). A sentence or theory fits our sensory promptings, successfully faces the tribunal of experience, predicts future experience, or copes with the pattern of our surface irritations, provided it is borne out by the evidence. (Davidson 1974, p. 193)

As we saw in Chapter 1, Quine, at least in “Two Dogmas of Empiricism” and *Word and Object*, claims that what it is for a sentence to be true is dependent on the theory in which it is couched, and that we cannot ask if a sentence is true independent of its own theory because sentences are “meaningless intertheoretically” (Quine 1960, p. 24). Quine is careful only to talk about the truth of sentences within theories, and not to talk

about whole theories being true or false, but Davidson tries to talk about the truth, or acceptability, of whole theories, claiming “that for a theory to fit or face up to the totality of possible sensory experience is for that theory to be true” (Davidson 1974, p. 193). And this seems a reasonable move to make, since any theory which did not fit all experience is in clear need of modification, and could be said to be false.

Davidson argues that because this account requires all theories to be true, in the sense of fitting all possible experience, it fails to add anything significant to our intuitive understanding of truth:

the notion of fitting the totality of experience . . . adds nothing intelligible to the simple concept of being true. To speak of sensory experience rather than the evidence, or just the facts, expresses a view about the source or nature of evidence, but it does not add a new entity to the universe against which to test conceptual schemes. (Davidson 1974, pp. 193–194)

Because of this, he claims that:

Our attempt to characterize languages or conceptual schemes in terms of the notion of fitting some entity has come down, then, to the simple thought that something is an acceptable conceptual scheme or theory if it is true. Perhaps we better say *largely* true in order to allow sharers of a scheme to differ on details. (Davidson 1974, p. 194).

And because Davidson claims that what it takes for conceptual schemes to be distinct is for it to be impossible to translate between them he concludes that in order to make sense of alternative conceptual schemes fitting reality we must be able to make sense of alternative conceptual schemes which are “largely true but not translatable” (Davidson 1974, p. 194).

But can we understand the notion of a language which expresses truths, but cannot be translated? Davidson argues that we cannot. According to Davidson our best understanding of truth is provided by Tarski’s Convention T¹, which is the claim that:

¹It is important not to confuse Davidson’s use of Tarski’s Convention T here, with Davidson’s use of Tarski-style T-theorems to develop a theory of meaning. When using Tarski’s T-theorems to develop a theory of meaning Davidson was prohibited from presuming notion of correct translation, because a correct translation is nothing other than a meaning preserving translation. In contrast, here we are concerned with understanding the notion of truth, not meaning, and Davidson claims that Tarski’s own work shows that truth and translation are so intimately related that we cannot understand truth independently of translation.

a satisfactory theory of truth for a language L must entail, for every sentence s of L, a theorem of the form ‘ s is true if and only if p ’ where ‘ s ’ is replaced by a description of s and ‘ p ’ by s itself if L is English, and by a translation of s into English if L is not English (Davidson 1974, p. 194).

If Tarski’s work does indeed represent the best available understanding truth then Davidson has shown that the notions of truth and translation are interdependent to such an extent that we cannot understand what it would mean for a conceptual scheme to be “largely true but not translatable”. Davidson concludes that the claim that conceptual schemes fit experience is unable to provide an account of how there could be a criterion to test whether an apparent conceptual scheme is indeed an acceptable conceptual scheme — because it is largely true — and yet is distinct from our own — because it cannot be translated into our own.

Davidson has argued that neither the view that conceptual schemes organise the world or experience, nor the view that conceptual schemes fit experience enable us to find a criterion for languagehood which can apply to languages that we are unable to translate. He concludes that we cannot make sense of the idea of an untranslatable language, and because he holds that conceptual schemes which are distinct from our own must make use of untranslatable languages, this means that we also cannot make sense of the claim that there could be conceptual schemes which are different to our own.

3.3 Partial failures of translation

Now that he has shown that we cannot make sense of the idea that there could be a language which we are completely unable to translate into our own, Davidson next turns to attack the claim that we can make sense of the possibility of conceptual schemes whose languages we can partially translate into our own. The hope is that if there is a significant number of sentences which can be translated then we may be able to “[make]

changes and contrasts in conceptual schemes intelligible by reference to the common part” (Davidson 1974, p. 195).

As we saw in Chapter 3, Davidson holds that the principle of charity is constitutive of interpretation:

Since charity is not an option, but a condition of having a workable theory, it is meaningless to suggest that we might fall into massive error by endorsing it. Until we have successfully established a systematic correlation of sentences held true with sentences held true, there are no mistakes to make. Charity is forced on us; whether we like it or not, if we want to understand others, we must count them right in most matters. (Davidson 1974, p. 197).

When interpreting a speaker of a language which we do not yet understand we must presume that they hold the same beliefs as us, and aim to maximise agreement, otherwise we will be unable to interpret them. Interpreting according to the principle of charity is not something which can lead us astray, because if we don’t succeed in developing a foundation of agreement between us and the speaker we are attempting to understand then we haven’t even understood them enough to be able to successfully disagree with them:

This method is not designed to eliminate disagreement, nor can it; its purpose is to make meaningful disagreement possible, and this depends entirely on a foundation—*some* foundation—in agreement. (Davidson 1974, pp. 196–197).

Davidson argues that this shows that when interpreting a speaker we can never be justified in interpreting them as believing something radically different from us, because such a conflict in beliefs will mean that we will not even have understood them enough to be able to meaningfully assert that we disagree.

So, what about cases of partial conflict of conceptual scheme? These are cases where speakers are using a language of which we can translate some sentences, but, because of the difference in the concepts used by their scheme, there are also sentences which completely fail to be translated. Davidson’s response is that:

we must say much the same thing about differences in conceptual scheme as we say about differences in belief: we improve the clarity and bite of declarations

of difference, whether of scheme or opinion, by enlarging the basis of shared (translatable) language or of shared opinion. (Davidson 1974, p. 197).

If our interpretation of someone concludes that they are making use of radically different concepts then that does not show that we disagree, but simply that we have failed to interpret them. And so, Davidson concludes that:

Given the underlying methodology of interpretation, we could not be in a position to judge that others had concepts or beliefs radically different from our own. (Davidson 1974, p. 197).

Cases of partial failure of translation cannot provide evidence that someone is using a different conceptual scheme from us, and that they are have alternative concepts and beliefs to our own, but instead prevent us from having enough understanding of our differences to have reason to believe that we disagree. We would have no justification for claiming that the sentences which we cannot translate are indeed expressing concepts, and constitute meaningful speech behaviour at all.

But why should the fact that we cannot be justified in claiming that the sentences which we cannot translate express concepts different to our own mean that they do not use such concepts? Isn't it at least possible that they are using concepts which our conceptual scheme lacks, even though we can never know? Once again, Davidson is likely to respond to this worry using interpretivism. If interpretivism is true then all there is to the meaning of a speaker's use of a sentence is what the ideal interpreter can know of its meaning. If there is a set of sentences in a language which we cannot translate then that shows that they are not meaningful.

3.4 Summary

Davidson claims to have shown that we cannot make sense of the idea of alternative conceptual schemes to our own, both those which we are completely unable to translate, and those which we are partially unable to translate. We cannot make sense of total failures of translation because we lack a criterion for languagehood which doesn't depend

on translation, and so we could never be justified in claiming that any case of purported speech behaviour which we cannot translate is in fact speech behaviour. We cannot make sense of partial failures of translation because where the other language is untranslatable we cannot get enough of a grip on it in order to conclude that we do in fact differ. Because of this, Davidson urges that we should reject the third dogma of empiricism, and “[give] up the dualism of scheme and world” (Davidson 1974, p. 198), since if we cannot make sense of the idea of alternative conceptual schemes to our own then we have no need for the idea of an “uninterpreted reality” (Davidson 1974, p. 198) which is independent of all conceptual schemes.

CHAPTER 4

EVALUATION OF DAVIDSON'S ARGUMENTS

In this chapter I'm going to present three responses to Davidson's arguments against conceptual schemes. Firstly I will argue that Davidson's attack of the view that conceptual schemes fit (rather than organise) content is dependent on presuming that the content is that of Quine's theory-neutral experience. If we instead turn to the view of content suggested by Kant and Kuhn then Davidson's argument fails, because it depends on the presumption that we can understand the relation to content which all different schemes share. I will next attempt to show how we can make more sense of Kuhn's position by showing that Davidson is wrong to claim that the languages of all other conceptual schemes must not be translatable into our own. Instead, I will argue that what makes conceptual schemes distinct is the difference between the phenomenal worlds they work in, and this enables me to argue that it can sometimes be possible to translate between distinct conceptual schemes. Finally I will examine Davidson's arguments against untranslatable conceptual schemes, arguing that Davidson's arguments are completely dependent on assuming interpretivism, which makes many of his arguments redundant, and robs them of any power to convince someone who rejects the controversial thesis of interpretivism.

4.1 Conceptual schemes fitting reality

As we saw in the last chapter, Davidson structures his argument against conceptual schemes which we are completely unable to translate by drawing two distinctions between various ways conceptual schemes, and the content which they share, are understood. He claims that there are two distinct views of the role of conceptual schemes: that of the scheme organising, systematising, and dividing up content; and that of the scheme fitting, predicting, accounting for, and facing content. Similarly, he claims that the various views of content can be split up into two groups: those which talk of the scheme's relation to reality, the universe, the world, or nature; and those which talk of the scheme's relation to experience, the passing show, surface irritations, sensory promptings, sense-data, or the given.

When attacking the claim that conceptual schemes *organise* content Davidson goes through both of the two views of content — content as reality, and content as experience — and shows why neither help us make sense of the idea of alternative conceptual schemes. However, Davidson's attack on the claim that conceptual schemes *fit* content only looks at one of the two views of content — the view that content is the theory-neutral experience which is shared by all members of all schemes. I'm going to argue that this is a significant oversight on Davidson's part, and by clarifying the distinction between the two views of the content which schemes must fit I hope to reveal a way which we can make sense of the idea that there could be alternative conceptual schemes.

So, what is the difference between these two views on how conceptual schemes fit the theory-neutral content? On the one hand we have views like Quine's, which Davidson attacks in the paper: all conceptual schemes share, and must fit, the same theory-neutral *experience*, and the only difference between schemes is how they choose to build upon this common experiential-content, using various different theoretical posits and rules to describe and predict it. On the other hand we have views like the Kant-inspired position I detailed in the first chapter, which Davidson neglects to argue against: all conceptual schemes share, and must fit, the same *reality* — Kant's noumenal world. In contrast to

Quine's view, this view holds that experience of reality is not common to members of all schemes, but is instead a result of each schemes' conceptualisation of the theory-neutral reality (the noumenal world). Like Kant, Kuhn claims that our experience of reality is shaped by our scheme, and that "something like a paradigm is prerequisite to perception itself" (Kuhn 1970, p. 113), and so it make sense say that he also thinks that what is common to all schemes, and which they must fit, is *reality*, rather than *experience*, since members of different schemes will have different experience. This makes the fact that Davidson has neglected to respond this view all the more serious, because Kuhn is one of Davidson's explicit targets in "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme".

A central feature of the view that schemes fit *reality* is that the scheme-neutral content, which is common to all schemes, is something which is ultimately unknowable — we only have epistemic access to our experience of reality, which is shaped by our scheme. As we shall soon see, it is this difference between the two views of content which causes Davidson's argument against the view that conceptual schemes fit *experience* fail to apply to the view that conceptual schemes fit *reality*.

Davidson starts his argument against the view that conceptual schemes fit *experience* by arguing that the idea of schemes fitting experience is pretty much just that of their being true:

the notion of fitting the totality of experience . . . adds nothing intelligible to the simple concept of being true. To speak of sensory experience rather than the evidence, or just the facts, expresses a view about the source or nature of evidence, but it does not add a new entity to the universe against which to test conceptual schemes. (Davidson 1974, pp. 193–194)

Because of this, and because he holds that it must be impossible to translate between schemes, he argues that this view commits us to the claim that alternatives conceptual schemes are "largely true but not translatable" (Davidson 1974, p. 194). But, because Tarski's work has shown truth and translatability to be so intimately related, he concludes that we are unable to make sense of this idea.

However, when we switch to looking at the view which Davidson neglects to argue

against, the view that what difference conceptual schemes have in common is *reality* (rather than experience) this argument no longer works. This is because, unlike the notion of fitting experience, the notion of conceptual schemes fitting reality is significantly different from that of being true. When supporters of this view talk about reality (what is common to all schemes), they are talking about the noumenal world, which we do not have epistemic access to. Our use of the word ‘true’ can only apply to the relationship between our beliefs and the phenomenal world, because that is all that we have experience of. Because of this, if different schemes do indeed work in different phenomenal worlds, then this means that their use of ‘true’ will also be different, because it is a relation between their beliefs and the world *as they experience it*. Members of different schemes will work in different phenomenal worlds, and will have a truth predicate unique to that scheme. One consequence of this is that Tarski’s work on understanding truth in other languages, which Davidson used to attack the view that schemes fit *experience*, is not relevant because members of different schemes will have radically different uses of ‘true’. Because of this Tarski’s work gives us no reason to believe that we could even understand what it means for something to be true in a language which uses a different scheme from our own, and therefore no reason to believe that we must be able to translate them.

I have shown that Davidson’s argument against the view that conceptual schemes fit reality (rather than experience) fails to engage with the view that the content which is shared by all schemes is something which we do not have epistemic access to. However, it is important to remember that Davidson’s analysis of the various different views of the relation between schemes and content was based around a search for a test that something is a scheme or language, despite the fact that are unable to translate it. And even after exploring this alternative view of the content of schemes we are no closer to such a test. It is clear that according to the Kant-inspired view of conceptual schemes such a test will be impossible, since alternative conceptual schemes are so radically different to each

other that it is unlikely that we would be able to tell that a language using them is speech-behaviour at all.

However, things start to look better when we turn to Kuhn's view of alternative conceptual schemes. Kuhn claims that it is possible for us to understand, and in fact translate conceptual schemes different to our own, and if this is possible then we would be able to test that users of such a conceptual scheme are using a language, and not just making random noises, by translating them. However, Davidson claims that it is not possible to translate between distinct conceptual schemes, indeed failure of translation is his test that conceptual schemes are distinct, so there is a serious conflict between their positions here. In the next section I will contrast Kuhn and Davidson's views on the relationship between schemes and translation, and then argue that Davidson is wrong to claim that translation must be impossible between distinct schemes, and that we can instead make sense of the fact that schemes are different because they work in different phenomenal worlds.

4.2 Kuhn and translation

As we saw in Chapter 3, Davidson claims that "We may identify conceptual schemes with ... sets of intertranslatable languages" (Davidson 1974, p. 185); different languages can share the same scheme, and we can tell that different languages share a scheme if we can translate between them. According to his view "The failure of intertranslatability is a necessary condition for difference of conceptual schemes" (Davidson 1974, p. 190), and so two schemes are only distinct if the languages which use them cannot be translated. Davidson claims that this view is uncontroversial, and is shared by all the supporters of conceptual relativism which he aims to attack, including Kuhn. Indeed, immediately after quoting Kuhn's claim that different conceptual schemes are 'incommensurable' he claims that:

'Incommensurable' is, of course, Kuhn and Feyerabend's word for 'not inter-translatable'. (Davidson 1974, p. 190).

But in the postscript to the second edition of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* Kuhn makes it clear that not only does he believe translation to be possible between different schemes, but that sometimes it is an essential tool in overcoming the differences between two schemes, and working out which is superior for the pursuit of science:

Briefly put, what the participants in a communication breakdown can do is recognize each other as members of different language communities and then become translators. (Kuhn 1970, p. 202).

Further down the page he adds that:

Since translation, if pursued, allows the participants in a communication breakdown to experience vicariously something of the merits and defects of each other's points of view, it is a potent too both for persuasion and for conversion. (Kuhn 1970, p. 202).

But how are we to make sense of this? If translation is possible between distinct conceptual schemes then what is the difference between cases where there is a mere difference in language, without a genuine conflict in scheme, and cases where the difference between two different languages is a result of their use of distinct schemes?

As we saw above, Kuhn claims that members of different schemes work in different worlds — they experience the world differently. This is because Kuhn denies that there is scheme-neutral raw sense data which members of all schemes have access to, that our only experience of reality is that given by our scheme's conceptualisation of world. And, not only does experience vary between schemes, but also what is said to exist depends on the scheme, and because of this so does the notion of truth. This talk of “working in different worlds” is best explained using the Kantian terminology of phenomenal and noumenal worlds. So when Kuhn says:

though the world does not change with a change of paradigm, the scientist afterward works in a very different world (Kuhn 1970, p. 121).

we should interpret him as saying that:

though the *noumenal* world does not change with a change of paradigm, the scientist afterward works in a very different *phenomenal* world.

When we change scheme (/ paradigm) this changes the way we conceptualise our experience, and so the world-as-we-experience-it changes — our phenomenal world changes.

This claim that different schemes work in different phenomenal worlds enables us to state clearly when schemes are distinct, without depending on Davidson’s claim that schemes are distinct when it is impossible to translate between different languages which use them. Instead we can say that schemes are distinct if they work in different phenomenal worlds, and that despite the difference in phenomenal world there is no reason to claim that it may not sometimes be possible to translate between languages belonging to different schemes.

Even though different schemes are translatable, this view constitutes a form of relativism which Davidson would object to because it holds that a change in conceptual scheme leads to a change in our experience of the world. As I pointed out in §1.5.1, Kuhn is not just talking about a change in our interpretation of our observations, but instead claims that the perceptual data available to members of different schemes is different. He holds that members of different schemes experience different phenomenal worlds, and the noumenal world which is common to all schemes is not something which we have epistemic access to. This view can only be made sense of if we accept that there is a distinction between scheme and content, which Davidson labels as the third dogma of empiricism and is a primary target of “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme”. And this means that this view constitutes a form of relativism which Davidson would object to.

4.3 Translatable, but distinct, conceptual schemes

As we saw in Chapter 3, towards the end of “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme” Davidson argues that if we are unable to translate a significant number of sentences of a speaker’s language then that does not give us justification to claim that there is a difference in beliefs or scheme, but instead just shows that our interpretation of them has failed to such an extent that meaningful disagreement is impossible. He argues that if our

interpretation of someone concludes that we are making use of radically different beliefs or concepts then that does not show that we disagree, but simply that we have failed to interpret them. Because of this he concludes that we can only translate languages which share most of our beliefs and concepts:

Given the underlying methodology of interpretation, we could not be in a position to judge that others had concepts or beliefs radically different from our own. (Davidson 1974, p. 197).

At first sight, this conclusion appears to conflict with Kuhn's view, detailed in the previous section, that some alternative conceptual schemes can be translated into to our own. It seems that Davidson will simply respond by claiming that wherever the schemes appear to differ, we have simply failed to adequately understand them enough to be justified in claiming that there is a disagreement.

However, it's important to remember that Davidson does not think that we can never be justified in claiming that there is a disagreement between our beliefs. As we saw in §2.4.1, a full description of the principle of charity should include a *ceteris paribus* clause which enables us to sometimes conclude that a speaker has different beliefs to our own. If our interpretation of a speaker can take into account occasional differences in beliefs, then why cannot it also take into account occasional differences in concepts?

Consider the case where the speaker we are attempting to interpret is a member of different conceptual scheme from our own, which is similar enough to our own to make translation possible. Kuhn claims that if we can isolate the area of speech where we differ by talking to members of the other scheme, then we can eventually "discover what the other would see and say when presented with a stimulus different to which his own verbal response would be different" (Kuhn 1970, p. 202). If we can learn to understand the differences in our phenomenal worlds in this way then it seems that we could work out how their experience, beliefs and concepts would be different to our own, and compensate for this when translating. This seems directly analogous to what we do when taking into account differences in beliefs, such as we did in Grandy's example where Paul has a false belief about the philosopher's drink. And so, as long as the difference in concepts

is minor enough to make translation possible, then we can be justified in claiming that someone uses different concepts from us, and therefore experiences a different phenomenal world, and therefore possesses a different conceptual scheme. Even though the difference in concepts may be minor, this doesn't mean that there isn't a difference in scheme, because, as I argued in the previous section, the differences between the schemes will lead them to experience a different phenomenal world. And this can only be made sense of by drawing a distinction between scheme and content, which is what Davidson is attempting to undermine in "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme".

4.4 Untranslatable conceptual schemes and interpretivism

The above argument shows that we can use translation to make sense of some conceptual schemes which are distinct from our own, despite the fact that they work within different phenomenal worlds. However, this only helps us make sense of conceptual schemes which are sufficiently similar to our own for translation to be possible, but what about schemes which are more radically different. For example, what about those (which I originally mentioned when introducing the Kant-inspired view in Chapter 1) that are committed to alternative a priori synthetic propositions than our own propositions involving the concepts of space and time? Such schemes would use a language which is untranslatable into our own, and so if we came across one we would be unable to test whether it is indeed an actual conceptual scheme. But should that stop us saying that such schemes could not be at least possible?

Davidson starts his argument against the possibility of conceptual schemes which we are completely unable to translate as follows:

It is tempting to take a very short line indeed: nothing, it may be said, could count as evidence that some form of activity could not be interpreted in our language that was not at the same time evidence that that form of activity was not speech behaviour. If this were right, we probably ought to hold that a form

of activity that cannot be interpreted as language in our language is not speech behaviour. Putting matters this way is unsatisfactory, however, for it comes to little more than making translatability into a familiar tongue a criterion of languagehood. As fiat, the thesis lacks the appeal of self-evidence; if it is a truth, as I think it is, it should emerge as the conclusion of an argument. (Davidson 1974, p. 185–186)

Davidson does not want to just assume that all languages must be translatable into our own, so he instead goes on to look at the various ways of thinking about conceptual schemes to see if that will help to provide “a criterion of languagehood that [does] not depend on, or entail, translatability into a familiar idiom” (Davidson 1974, p. 192). He concludes that there is no such criterion, and so concludes that untranslatable languages are impossible, and so are conceptual schemes which use untranslatable languages.

But why should the failure to find a criterion of languagehood, or even the conclusion that there could not be such a criterion, support the claim that untranslatable languages are not at least possible? Couldn't it be possible that there are untranslatable languages, even though if we came across one being spoken we would have no way of knowing that there was speech behaviour going on at all? The only way I can see that Davidson could justify the claim that if there isn't a criterion for languagehood which is independent of translation then untranslatable languages must be impossible is by depending on interpretivism. Interpretivism, as we saw in Chapter 2, is the claim that:

What a fully informed interpreter could know about what a speaker means is all there is to learn; the same goes for what the speaker believes (Davidson 1983, p. 148).

Davidson claims that an ideal interpreter (“fully informed interpreter”) could learn all there is to know about any speaker's beliefs and meanings, even if the interpreter is not a member of that speaker's speech community. This means that, if interpretivism is true, then we should expect it to be possible for the ideal interpreter to be able to work out the beliefs of any speaker, and the meaning of all their speech acts. If the interpreter is unable to ascribe any meanings whatsoever to the utterances of an apparent speaker, then that means that the utterances are meaningless, and that they are not actually a speaker

at all. From this it is clear that it follows that if it were impossible to find a “criterion of languagehood” for any particular language, then it would not be a language at all. And so, it follows that if there cannot be a “criterion of languagehood” for untranslatable languages, then they are impossible.

However, if Davidson’s arguments against untranslatable conceptual schemes are dependent on assuming interpretivism, then all the other steps in his arguments are redundant, since the impossibility of untranslatable conceptual schemes follows trivially from interpretivism alone. If interpretivism is true, then it follows that an ideal interpreter could learn to understand any language, and therefore all languages must be translatable¹. Davidson’s argument is in no better position than it would have been if he’d just stuck with the assumption that “translatability into a familiar tongue [is] a criteria of languagehood” (Davidson 1974, p. 186), there is no need for his arguments attempting to show that there could not be a “criterion of languagehood” for untranslatable languages, since the lack of such a criterion is only significant if he presumes interpretivism, but presuming interpretivism alone is enough to show that there can’t be untranslatable languages.

This is not only a problem for Davidson’s argument against conceptual schemes which completely fail to be translated, but also a problem for his argument against partial failures of translation. In the argument against partial failures of translation, Davidson argues that where we fail to translate a language we fail to get enough of a grip on it to be justified in claiming that we disagree, and that our languages are actually different. But

¹It could be argued that, just because it follows from interpretivism that it must be possible for the ideal interpreter to *understand* every language, it doesn’t necessarily follow that the ideal interpreter must be able to *translate* between every language, and so the impossibility of untranslatable languages does not follow trivially from interpretivism. For example, it could be possible for the ideal interpreter to learn to understand both English and German, but not be able to translate between them. However, in this case we might respond by arguing that if an interpreter does not know that ‘snow’ and ‘schnee’ have the same meaning, then they must not fully understand both languages. However, the objection appears more reasonable when we consider the case where the two languages belong to different conceptual schemes. For example, if Martians thought using a different conceptual scheme from ours, and experienced a different phenomenal world, then it seems reasonable to claim that an ideal interpreter could fully understand both Martian and English, and yet not be able to translate between them. However, these sorts of examples are confusing and unclear, so for the purposes of this thesis I shall ignore this possible objection, and simply assume that from interpretivism it follows that not only must it be possible for the ideal interpreter to understand all languages, but also that they must be able to translate between them all.

just because for any specific case we cannot be justified in claiming that we disagree, that does not show that it is not at least possible for there to be conceptual schemes which partially fail to be translated into our own, and that where translation fails that is due to a significant difference in schemes. Only if we presume interpretivism does it follow that the failure to justifiably claim that there is a difference between schemes show that there is not actually a difference, but if we presume interpretivism then no further argument is needed, and the rest of this argument is redundant.

4.5 Conclusion

I have shown that we can still make sense of the idea of there being alternative conceptual schemes, even if we don't reject Davidson's controversial thesis of interpretivism, because it can be possible to translate between the languages of distinct conceptual schemes. We should reject Davidson's claim that what makes conceptual schemes distinct is failure of translation, and instead focus on the differences in phenomenal world which is experienced by their members — two people are operating with distinct conceptual schemes if their schemes cause them to have significantly different experiences of the world. If two conceptual schemes are similar enough for members of different schemes can learn to understand the differences in how they experience the world, then they can use this to be able to translate each other, and then justifiably claim that their schemes are distinct.

However, if we want to claim that there could be conceptual schemes more radically different to our own, which use languages that we cannot even translate, then we need to reject interpretivism. Davidson's arguments against conceptual schemes depend on interpretivism, because it enables him to maintain that if we could never make sense of an untranslatable language, then we can't even make sense of the claim that such a language is even possible. By rejecting interpretivism we open the door for the possibility of untranslatable languages, and from that it follows that there could be radically different conceptual schemes from our own. However, this is not a fully satisfying conclu-

sion, since it relies on simply denying a central premise of Davidson's arguments. To be able to conclusively show that Davidson's arguments have failed to show that radically different conceptual schemes are not possible we would need an argument to show that interpretivism is false and to provide an alternative view of what it is to be a language.

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