

# On the Very Good Idea of a Conceptual Scheme

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RICHARD RORTY HAS ARGUED that Donald Davidson can be classified as a neopragmatist. To this end, Rorty has tried to show that Davidson's views share important similarities with those of Peirce, James, and Dewey. Davidson, for his part, has tended to resist Rorty's attempts to classify his views in this way. Interestingly, the reasons for Rorty's classification and the reasons for Davidson's resistance share a common trait: an appeal to the elimination of the dualism of conceptual scheme and experiential content on the basis of an assumed background of shared beliefs. According to Rorty, Davidson's background of shared beliefs is closely related to the notion of funded experience found in those thinkers often classified as Classic American Philosophers or pragmatists (13). But Davidson rejects pragmatism along with the relativisms and empiricisms that fall when the scheme-content dualism is eliminated (Davidson, *Inquiries* xviii).

It is my contention that Rorty errs in including Davidson with Classic American Philosophers in virtue of his assumed background of shared beliefs, and Davidson is wrong to flatly reject the scheme-content distinction as the third and final dogma of empiricism. I intend to show that Davidson's background of shared belief differs significantly from the corresponding notion in the works of John Dewey, and that Dewey's position provides resources for eliminating the incoherence that Davidson finds in the scheme-content distinction without the outright rejection of a helpful tool of inquiry. This contributes to a defense of Dewey's empirical philosophy against Davidson's supposed defeat of empiricism.

## Background of Beliefs and Apparatus of Habits

Conceptual schemes are supposed to be perspectives belonging to individuals or cultures by means of which sensory content is organized. The dualism

of scheme-content seems to entail the possibility that different individuals or different cultures may have utterly different understandings of the world to the point of incommensurability. Davidson denies such a possibility and contends that the very notion of a conceptual scheme is incoherent. This is because to recognize a conceptual scheme as completely incommensurable would entail either going beyond one's own conceptual scheme, which would show the superfluity of a conceptual scheme, or else recognizing the supposedly incommensurable conceptual scheme *as* a conceptual scheme, which would indicate a significant similarity to one's own conceptual scheme and hence a contradiction of the claim of utter incommensurability. In this latter case, the point is that recognizing something as a conceptual scheme requires a shared background of agreement or beliefs. And as this background is not itself a conceptual scheme but rather a basic requirement of reasoning, the notion of a conceptual scheme again becomes superfluous.

This background of agreement can be understood by examining Davidson's use of the Principle of Charity, which is employed when trying to understand what a speaker means. According to Davidson, in order to understand the meaning of a speaker's utterances, one must know what the speaker believes because "a speaker who holds a sentence to be true on an occasion does so in part because of what he means, or would mean, by an utterance of that sentence, and in part because of what he believes" (*Inquiries* 142). But this "interdependence of belief and meaning" (*Inquiries* 137) presents a problem: beliefs cannot be determined without interpreting the meaning of a speaker's words. Thus, the interpreter appears trapped in a circle of the speaker's beliefs and the meanings of a speaker's utterances. The Principle of Charity allows the interpreter to escape the circle of unknown beliefs and uncomprehended meanings by assuming that most of the beliefs of the speaker are true. Without the assumption of shared understanding or shared truths, no further understanding is possible.

Davidson thinks one is not only justified but also compelled to adopt the Principle of Charity because genuine disagreements and misunderstandings make sense only against a background of what is understood in common. Genuine misunderstandings stand in contrast to cases in which there is *nothing*—no language, nothing rational—to understand and so nothing to *mis*-understand. Hence, an interpreter's initial inability to understand a speaker of an unknown language (given an actual speaker of a genuine language) presupposes a background of agreement about truths. Davidson writes that "[M]aking sense of the utterances and behavior of others, even their most aberrant behavior, requires us to find a great deal of reason and truth

in them" (*Inquiries* 153). The other option is to write them off as irrational and their so-called utterances as nonlinguistic noises (*Inquiries* 137).<sup>1</sup>

So, to assume that another person is operating with another conceptual scheme different from one's own is to already assume a shared background of agreement that makes possible the disagreement in particular beliefs about the world or in meanings of utterances. Because the shared background of agreement rules out complete variance in beliefs, the idea of incommensurable conceptual schemes disappears. Indeed, the notion of a conceptual scheme itself disappears, because there would be no way to make sense of a scheme at variance with its content. That is, the very idea of a conceptual scheme assumes the idea of some neutral content open to interpretation, but this idea is eliminated by the background of shared beliefs because the background of beliefs is a basic condition of reasoning.

The background of beliefs is not a scheme that interprets or organizes the world or reality. According to Davidson, the relationship of beliefs to the world is causal. Things cause sensations, and sensations cause beliefs (*Subjective* 305, 143). But he warns that the causes of beliefs are not to be confused with reasons for or justifications of beliefs (*Subjective* 143). If one attempts to justify beliefs by means of sensations, one faces the difficulty of accounting for how the belief refers to something beyond the immediate sensation that supposedly justifies it.<sup>2</sup> This extra content, by means of which a belief refers to an objective world, is elusive, but without it, skepticism threatens. Davidson's response is to reject the idea that knowledge has an ultimate evidential basis (*Subjective* 146). In other words, he appears to take an anti-foundationalist position. He holds that knowledge does indeed depend on experience and experience depends on sensation, but this dependence is not evidentiary or justificatory—it is causal (*Subjective* 146). Nothing but another belief could count as evidence for the truth of a belief (*Subjective* 141).

Rorty picks out Davidson's assumed background of beliefs as comparable to the idea of funded experience found in Classic American Philosophers (Rorty 13). At first glance, the comparison seems apt: Dewey employs what he calls an apparatus of habits that performs much as Davidson's background of beliefs. Dewey follows Peirce in understanding belief as a habit—that is, as a predisposition to act in a particular way given particular circumstances. This conception of habit can be understood as sensitivity to certain kinds of stimulating events, and it contrasts with the traditional and narrower conception of habit as recurring act (MW 14:32).<sup>3</sup> On Dewey's view, habit is influenced by prior activity and hence acquired. Funded by prior activity, habit organizes

present activity, it is projective and dynamic in the sense of actively directing behavior, and habit is operative even when not dominating present activity (MW 14:31). According to Dewey, “[T]here is a body of residual undisturbed habits” upon which thinking and discrimination depend (MW 14:128). This “complex apparatus of habits” is the background required for inquiry, and without it, “observation is the blankest of stares” (LW 1:170). It allows one to make sense of unknown objects and, in the case of interpretation, of foreign utterances, on the basis of established and unquestioned habits.

Without an apparatus of habits as a means to discrimination and judgment, neither disagreement nor agreement could be assessed. Acknowledging this body of habits has many of the same practical consequences as Davidson’s Principle of Charity. Meeting a speaker of an unknown foreign language presents immediate doubts about the meaning of the utterance, but the interpreter handles the doubts rationally only by relying on established habits of interaction and interpretation that regard the speaker as rational and as attempting to communicate. Without such assumptions, neither interpretation nor misinterpretation—that is, neither agreement nor disagreement—is possible. Furthermore, like Davidson’s assumed background of beliefs, the body of habits supports one in trying to be charitable toward fellow inquirers. Aberrations and inconsistencies need not be taken as marks of absolute irrationality precisely because they can be aberrations only in relation to the larger, shared body of habits.

## Experience

Despite the similarities, Dewey’s apparatus of habits and Davidson’s background of beliefs differ greatly in their underlying conceptions of experience, and this is the key to rejecting both Rorty’s classification of Davidson as a pragmatist and Davidson’s rejection of the scheme-content distinction. Rorty has neglected the difference because he dismisses Dewey’s notion of experience (Rorty 16). But I contend that the difference results in Davidson’s position reinstating a dualism and being what Joseph Margolis has characterized as Cartesianism (Margolis 38).

In an essay critical of Davidson’s attack on the scheme-content distinction, John McDowell points out that what is needed is precisely a new conception of experience. Davidson neglects this because, according to McDowell, he mistakes the motivation for the scheme-content dualism. Davidson regards the motivation as a desire to locate an ultimate source of evidence. This makes the dualism attractive because it makes subjective experience (content) a foundation for conceptual knowledge (scheme). McDowell, though, thinks

the dualism is motivated by a deeper concern with understanding how one may have a set of beliefs or a worldview in the first place. Thinking about the possibility of worldviews gives rise to the notion of experience as a tribunal or as that which legitimates judgments about how the world actually is. The distinction, then, explains worldviews as resulting from the interaction of a purely formal scheme and sensory content. McDowell's point is that the dualism arises from a concern with not simply justification but with how we actually make our way through the world.

McDowell acknowledges the incoherence in the dualism, which he understands as the result of a flaw in a conception of empiricism, "one that makes it seem as if intuitions as such are 'without concepts'" (qtd. in Hahn 99). According to McDowell, in order to eliminate the incoherence, "[W]e need to find a way to resist the idea that the impacts of the world on our senses are 'intuitions without concepts.' And for that we need a more radical counter to the underlying dualism of reason and nature than the one that Davidson supplies" (qtd. in Hahn 102). Dewey provides such a counter with his understanding of experience.

Dewey is concerned to resist traditional conceptions of experience that separate it from thinking or render thinking irrelevant to the world of experience, and so he looks to biological science rather than philosophical tradition. On his view, experience is living, and living is an interaction of creature and environment. He emphasizes that the interaction is not merely *in* an environment but *because* of an environment. In other words, the live creature is not a self-contained unit injected into an environment; rather, the live creature is part of its environment, it is vitally interconnected with its environment, and it is what it is because of its environment. Experience, then, is an affair of interconnections and relations. It is not completely antithetical to reason because the concrete relations in experience are the material that further experiential interaction may refine into the rational linkages of logic. Reasoning and systematic logical thinking are specialized experiences that develop out of experience more broadly.

Dewey's notion of experience allows for a more thoroughgoing antifoundationalism than that of Davidson's position. Davidson's anti-foundationalism denies an ultimate experiential justification of belief; but his position employs a background of beliefs as an evidential basis. This is the foundation of justification, even if ultimately, beliefs are simply caused by sensory stimuli. In contrast, Dewey's antifoundationalism denies not only the ultimate evidential basis of belief, but also the idea that philosophy is primarily concerned with foundations of any kind.

In his essay "Dewey on Experience: Foundation or Reconstruction?"

Richard Shusterman contends that Dewey is not interested primarily in justification, and his emphasis on experience is, hence, not a reinstatement of a foundationalist epistemology. Responding to Rorty's claim that Dewey seems to run "together the vocabularies in which we describe the causal antecedents of knowledge with those in which we offer justifications of our claims to knowledge" (Rorty 81), Shusterman contends that there is no argument about how Dewey grounds justification because on his account, philosophy is concerned with transformation of experience rather than justification of belief (Shusterman 194). For Dewey, experience is not a foundation for philosophical doctrine; it is the context in which all human activity, including philosophizing, occurs. Dewey's emphasis on experience serves not epistemology but the enrichment of experience itself.

Dewey's account of experience effects a deeper reconstruction of philosophy than Davidson's rejection of traditional empiricism. Dewey's conception of philosophy as concerned with transformation rather than justification follows from his claim that knowing is one mode of experiencing, among others (MW 3:159). It happens to be among the most deeply transformative modes of experiencing, but knowing does not exhaust the character of experience. Any concerns about belief and how it may be accounted for must be answered in a specific experiential context; the answers serve the larger purpose of making experience richer, more meaningful, and more secure. The concern is with living well. On Davidson's view, justification retains its primary importance, though its realm is limited to the linguistic. The ability to reason is isolated in its influence and utterly beholden to causal conditions; a split is retained between human thinking and actual human living. The result is the abandonment of concern with experience beyond the cognitive, and shrinkage of the rational and philosophic context.

On Dewey's view, philosophical activity goes beyond the confines of justification and legitimation. Causes can be modified intelligently, thereby bettering human experience. This can be seen in Dewey's notion of inquiry in terms of habit. Dewey's notion of habit makes explicit the kind of connection human thinking has to the world. It is a connection that shows reasoning to be continuous with experience, without grounding justification on some experiential foundation. In other words, it shows how thinking transforms experience.

## Habit

Habit is an established mode of interaction that arises from prior experience and influences present experience. It can be understood only when

considered in relation to impulse or unstructured native activity. According to Dewey, impulse comes first in time and first in the life of the individual, but habit comes first in fact. This can be seen when one considers the impulses of the infant. The unstructured native activity of the infant comes to nothing without the context of a background of habits found in a social context. The infant cannot survive without support; impulse cannot survive without habit. Impulse is the starting point for the assimilation of those established modes of making one's way through the world, which is to say, impulse is the means by which the creature establishes relations with an environment—habits are environment embodied. Dewey also calls impulse the agency for reforming established habits. Impulse has plasticity and, potentially, many avenues of discharge. So, even as it is directed by established habits, it brings with it the possibility of reforming those established habits. This gives rise to the possibility of inquiry and the intelligent transformation of experience.

Habitual activity may run into novel conditions that obstruct it. When this occurs, impulse is released from the established mode of response, and the course of action becomes uncertain. Released impulse seeks other means of outlet and often issues in unrefined responses or wild outbursts of emotion. This is especially true when established habits are exceptionally rigid and ill suited to novel conditions. There is, however, another possible response, namely inquiry and the establishment of a new habit that permits activity to resume. The habit of inquiry uses released impulse in surveying subsidiary habits. These old habits, which are in conflict, are reformed, and a course of action is determined that resolves the blocked situation. It is neither the habit of inquiry nor the impulse that inquires. According to Dewey, thinking is a delicate combination of habit and impulse (MW 14:124).

For example, I act according to well-established habits when I ride my bicycle, and I do not typically inquire into its operation. But when my forward motion is unexpectedly impeded and my habits of transportation obstructed, I become conscious of a problem. Impulse animating habits of balancing, pedaling, and attending to traffic is diverted from these channels. If I have established safe habits (and fate has not yet sent me sprawling), I continue to attend to traffic but now with the aim of pulling off the road. Diverted impulse may animate habits of feeling and expressing frustration; I may curse or throw my bicycle. But if I have well-established habits of inquiry, impulse is diverted to a feeling of puzzlement and a survey of the situation. Subordinated habits of inspection come to the fore, and instead of making a simple emotional response, I attend to the complexity of my feeling and search for a course of action that resolves the conflicted situation. Out of the problematic situation,

I may discriminate a feeling of resistance that suggests an impaired drivetrain more than an obstructed wheel; or perhaps my habits are too coarse to detect the problem, and I need to see a bicycle mechanic. Habits of learning could combine with impulse in attending to the mechanic's actions and words, thereby refining my ability to detect and resolve problems with my bicycle.

In the midst of such conflicts, the situation is one of confusion and uncertainty. One's way is blocked, the next step is unknown, and the direction of activity is unknown. Dewey writes that when a habit is obstructed, "a new impulse is stirred which becomes the starting point of an investigation, a looking into things, a trying to see them, to find out what is going on" (MW 14:127). Released impulse is active and seeks outlet among unobstructed habits; it points toward possible directions of activity. Impulse defines the search for a new direction. In the preceding example, I try to figure out how to repair my bicycle by surveying established habits such as inspecting my chain, investigating my rear wheel for debris, or taking my bike to a mechanic. In turning toward subsidiary habits, impulse indicates possibilities among what was formerly vague. In the process of searching for a new direction of activity, the confused and conflicted situation becomes clearer as these habits that remained in the background as I pedaled unproblematically come to the fore and gain definition.

Dewey summarizes the process by describing the inquirer as one who "recollects, observes and plans" (MW 14:127). He writes, "[T]he trinity of these forecasts, perceptions, and remembrances form a subject matter of discriminated and identified objects. These objects represent habits turned inside out. They exhibit the onward tendency of habit and the objective conditions which have been incorporated within it" (MW 14:127). Habits turned inside out are activities regarded as themselves something to act on, that is, to reflect on, to deliberate, and decide on. Habits so regarded give meaning to the otherwise meaningless immediate shocks in a conflicted situation. In other words, established courses of action prevent sensations from enveloping the situation in blank immediacy; they make thinking possible in uncertain situations by presenting familiar activities as options. Offering these options is the work of "a body of residual and undisturbed habits" (MW 14:127).

Here is the apparatus of habits required for thinking. It serves to make the unknown recognizable, or the foreign domestic. In this way, it translates the incomprehensible into something the inquirer may begin to understand. When these subsidiary habits become definite, some are seen to *object* to a proposed course of action; others indicate *objectives* of the blocked activity (MW 14:143). The former are the real factors of the situation and set the



terms of the problem. The latter contribute to the ideal that guides inquiry in seeking a resolution, and in this way, the apparatus of habits furnishes established modes of response as possible courses of action that may contribute to a novel resolution. In both cases, habits stand out in the conflicted situation as objects.

Resolution is achieved when a viable course of action is indeed established. This is achieved through experiment, and experiment in imagination is called deliberation; this is the dramatic rehearsal of possible course of action. In inquiry, overt activity is turned inward as modes of response are tested in imagination (MW 14:133). Deliberation ends when a choice is made; that is, when competing preferences are unified in a course of action that acts as a stimulus to overt activity. The chosen course of action is that which overcomes the inhibition brought about by the original perplexity and confusion. If the chosen course of action allows activity to continue, then a resolving habit has been established.

Unlike beliefs on Davidson's view, a resolving habit is not established by a purely causal influence. It is the result of a reciprocal and ongoing interaction between impulse and habit, or between the native activity of the live creature and the environment as embodied in habits. In other words, it is the result of experience. Furthermore, the chosen course of action as stimulus is not merely a cause (and certainly not in Davidson's sense as the cause of a belief, since it is a candidate for a belief itself). The stimulus is already involved in a complex interaction with the apparatus of habits. To characterize it as a simple cause is to neglect its vital context of relations. But the big difference here is that, on Dewey's view, the main concern is not justification of a belief, but resolution of a conflicted situation.

### The Scheme-Content Distinction

Dewey understands his account of inquiry as the interaction of habit and impulse to resolve an opposition between unity and difference—that is, between a synthesizing factor and that which is separate and disconnected. He takes such a distinction in epistemology to be a commonplace, and combining these opposite factors has resulted in what he calls a standing paradox of the theory of knowledge (MW 14:128). The opposition of unity and difference corresponds to that of scheme and content: a conceptual scheme imposes a unified order on the diverse deliverances of the senses. The scheme is the related categories, the coherent ideas that make up a single system. Content is the different and unrelated sensations that lack reason, that make no sense.

Like Davidson, Dewey characterizes the distinction as incoherent. Also, similarly to Davidson, Dewey sees the incoherence as a result of confusion regarding the establishment of belief. But on Davidson's account, the supposed confusion is one in which causes are taken as justifying reasons for belief. Dewey, on the other hand, has an opposite view of the source of confusion: reason, in the sense of systematic concepts and justifications, is substituted for physiology in characterizing thinking.

For Dewey, the problems regarding the opposition of unity and difference are due to "a confusion of logic with physiological psychology [resulting] in a hybrid epistemology" (MW 10:37). In other words, the main problem is looking to logic instead of physiological psychology in formulating a theory of knowledge. The result is "that the technique of effective inquiry is rendered irrelevant to the theory of knowing, and those physical events involved in the occurrence of data for knowing are treated as if they constituted the act of knowing" (MW 10:38). The standing paradox of unity and difference or scheme and content is the result of isolating the theory of knowledge from the empirical behavior of knowers (MW 14:128). Davidson attempts to eliminate the confusion by holding causation and justification apart and then giving an account of the relation of beliefs to the world that is strictly causal. This eliminates one kind of split between beliefs and the world, but at the cost of rational inquiry, which now seems to lose relevance to the establishment of belief.

Dewey, rather than instituting a further distinction in order to resolve the incoherence, holds that unity and difference are not fundamentally isolated. He sees the forward movement of impulse as a drive to synthesis, to unified action. The movement aims to remove an obstruction to activity by introducing old habits in new situations, relating old habits in new ways, and thereby establishing new ways of acting—that is, new habits. The unifying relations aimed at are prospective; they are ideal in the sense of being a goal instituted in active engagement with problematic conditions. This corresponds to an organizing scheme imposed on a confused and conflicted situation.

There is also the retrospective character of the activity of knowing, that is, what is presented and taken with definiteness and assurance: the objects of the conflicted situation. These are most assured and definite insofar as they are most closely related to the undoubted fact that there is a problem, a conflict, or an obstructed activity. They are the discriminated factors in this situation. Dewey writes, "[T]hey are the conditions which have been mastered, incorporated in the past. They are elements, discriminated, analytic just because old habits so far as they are checked are also broken into objects

which define the obstruction of ongoing activity. They are ‘real,’ not ideal” (MW 14:128–29). This aspect corresponds to content, to sensory deliverances, to the certainty of traditional empiricism’s sensations, and to the diversity and chaos of idealism’s unreality.

The distinction of scheme and content does not correspond to Dewey’s distinctions of habit and impulse, and certainly not to knowing and experiencing. Rather, the distinction of scheme and content is best understood on Dewey’s view as a distinction among phases of experience—that is, among interactions of habit and impulse in situations of conflict. Dewey writes, “[U]nity is something sought; split, division is something given, at hand” (MW 14:129). The conflicted situation that calls out inquiry is what is at hand, and organized activity is what is aimed at. A conceptual scheme arises in a resolved situation, and content is understood in terms of the matter or issue that needed resolving in the first place. This distinction of scheme and content, on Dewey’s view, has a temporal character.<sup>4</sup> This temporal character explains why habit and impulse do not fit neatly into the distinction of scheme and content. In some phases of experience, habits are beliefs: they are unified means to thinking. In other phases of experience, beliefs are content: they are a definite conflicting collection of objectified activities. The role of habit is fluid precisely because experience is fluid; the role depends on the situation.

The resolution of the paradox of unity and difference, or scheme and content, grows out of Dewey’s position that “all knowing, judgment, belief represent an acquired result of the workings of natural impulses in connection with environment” (MW 14:130). Presumably Davidson would agree with this view, and this seems to suggest another similarity between Davidson’s and Dewey’s attempts to eliminate the dualism of scheme and content. For example, Davidson aims to restore unmediated touch with the familiar objects that give meaning to what is said and believed, which suggests a naturalistic approach to the issue. And yet Davidson’s account does not seem to go far enough, and so it retains the dualism in a different form. Dewey’s complaint that “isolating intellectual disposition from concrete empirical facts of biological impulse and habit-formation entails a denial of the continuity of mind with nature” (MW 14:130) applies to Davidson’s account in its isolation of reasons from causes. Davidson’s account, in spite of its apparent naturalism, leaves knowing and doing disconnected in its neglect of intelligent inquiry.

On Dewey’s view, causation and justification are not separate and irreconcilable bases for belief, but rather phases of experience, of the interaction of creature and environment. Impulse may lead to certain responses to stimuli,

and habit may supply justification for certain ways of acting; however, Dewey takes great pains to demonstrate how the notions of isolated impulse and isolated habit are fictions. There is no such isolation of factors in the process of knowing; habit and impulse are what they are because of their interaction. Any isolation of habit and impulse is the product of analysis and not a description of the conditions of experience. Such analysis may be helpful in certain circumstances, but such analysis requires a disclaimer and a statement of purpose for the distortion. This is not part of Davidson's analysis. He is explicit throughout his work about his interest in "the purely formal properties of the system" that make belief acquisition possible (qtd. in Hahn 330). Without an acknowledgement of experience, a dualism remains, and this is apparent in Davidson's account. His neglect of experience leaves his account ultimately committed to a complete description of the universe as the paradigm of reason that is atemporal in character. This, in turn, renders actual thinking inexplicable and ineffective. His elimination of the scheme-content dualism is not worth the cost.

### Reconstructing the Scheme-Content Distinction

The Deweyan account of the scheme-content distinction is similar to what Maria Baghramian calls an "innocent version" of the distinction "that would not hamper our direct contact with the world or reality" (57). Baghramian sketches an innocent version that, like the Deweyan account, relies on a richer conception of experience to counter both the incoherence of the distinction and Davidson's rejection. She understands experience, following C. I. Lewis and William James, in a thick, everyday sense rather than a thin sense of immediate sensation.

Baghramian's rehabilitation of the scheme-content distinction aims to give "us the means of talking about different ways of conceptualising our lived experience in the world. [The distinction] is a way of permitting space for the intuition, shared by some philosophers, that there are no non-perspectival and unconceptualised view of things" (Baghramian 58). She maintains that the view she is suggesting is not justified by argument as much as encouraged by experience, namely the experiential connection between our experiences of differing perspectival descriptions and their consequences. She writes, "[C]onceptual schemes are individuated by looking at their consequences on how people engage with the world in their day to day lives, as well as on purely abstract grounds" (Baghramian 58), and this is most apparent when the same experience is described in various ways.

Baghramian's understanding of the scheme-content distinction suggests not only how it can be recovered but that it may be fruitfully employed. Similarly, Dewey eliminates the dualism and the incoherence of scheme and content, but he retains the distinction as a helpful tool in resolving misunderstandings and disagreements. It allows for recognition of genuine differences among disagreeing parties. This is in contrast to Davidson's outright rejection of the distinction, which betrays a neglect of the concrete situation of disagreement and misunderstanding. Rejection of the distinction indicates a retreat from actual conflict into the formal realm of an assumed background of agreement. On Dewey's view, there is an apparatus of habits; however, in contrast to Davidson's background of beliefs, it is hardly something to recline on, content with the defeat of skepticism. Rather, the apparatus of habits is a springboard for inquiry, for an activity that aims at transforming experience. It is not a guarantee of the nature of rationality and agreement ahead of time, and it is not the basis for justification. Rationality and agreement are concrete achievements that may in time become resources for future attempts at reasoning.

The value of the popular idea of a conceptual scheme as that with which one makes one's way through the world is that it keeps before us the idea that inquiry is an activity—often a tedious and discouraging one—with successes and failures that have actual effects in the world. Dewey's account of inquiry in terms of habit allows the scheme-content distinction to be reconceived in a way that eliminates the incoherence lurking in the popular notion but takes seriously the motivation identified by McDowell of wanting to understand how to make one's way through the world.

On Dewey's view, a conceptual scheme denotes a phase of experience in which conflicting habits have been unified in a course of action. Content corresponds to the conflicting habits or objecting factors that are the facts of the problematic situation. A conceptual scheme unifies the conflicting content by establishing a way of carrying on. As activity proceeds and interaction continues, it may, and most likely will, come into conflict with other courses of action. Then inquiry may again occur, and a new resolution may be sought. This does not mean that every conflict may be resolved; in fact, it is as certain as anything that an organized course of activity will come to an end—this is the fact of death. But Dewey's account shows how to proceed intelligently as far as we are able; by contrast, Davidson's account dismisses from the beginning the very possibility of an *intelligent* response to concrete conflict. The point is not so much that one approach guarantees a solution or even makes a solution more likely than the other; rather, Dewey's approach is more intelligent and more honest about the values and conflicts in human experience.

To understand how the idea of a conceptual scheme might be helpful in inquiry, consider a famous example of conflict: the Melian dialogue from Thucydides's *History of the Peloponnesian War*. Melos was a small island colony of Sparta that had remained neutral throughout the conflict between Athens and Sparta. In 416 BC, Athens sent a force to Melos to demand that they join the empire. The leaders of Melos refused to give up their freedom, and the colony was subsequently destroyed by Athens, who then recolonized the island. Before Athens destroyed Melos, the two sides held talks. The Athenians spoke plainly about their overwhelming power and its requirement that they subjugate weaker powers or else risk appearing weak themselves. The Melians spoke of their trust in divine support and assistance from Sparta, and of the values of justice and freedom. No compromise could be reached between the Athenian view of the necessity of power and the Melian view of the value of morality. Each side had incommensurable conceptual schemes: the power of the Athenians did not register on the Melians' moral scale, and the moral values of the Melians had no measure of power detectable by the Athenians.

In an insightful essay about the dialogue, Robert Tordoff examines opinions about the conflict between the Melians and the Athenians. Traditional readings take Thucydides's work as a condemnation of Athenian cruelty. Recently, more scholars have read the work as a criticism of Melian folly—a view with some antecedents in the literature. Instead of choosing a side, Tordoff wants to read the dialogue in a way that does not assume Thucydides was condemning either the Athenians or the Melians. He wants to see the situation in its complexity, and my claim is that Davidson's elimination of the scheme-content distinction jettisons resources for engaging in this sort of inquiry into human conflict. Dewey, by contrast, maintains the legitimacy of a distinction between scheme and content for just the sort of project here considered.

Noting that the authenticity of the detailed account has been doubted since antiquity, Tordoff begins rereading the dialogue by imagining the source for Thucydides's account. Thucydides was not present at the talks; there is no evidence he knew or used as informants the Athenian generals or envoys that landed on Melos, and the number of people actually present for the exchange was very small. Since, according to Thucydides, the Athenians killed all the adult males of Melos, Tordoff speculates that an educated and socially well-placed Melian woman with connections to the ruling faction could have been Thucydides's informant.

Despite Tordoff's admittedly "anti-historical" methods, he does offer some dubious evidence for his conjecture. But his point was never to establish the identity of the informant. The mere possibility of such an informant, whom he

names M, is enough for his purpose, which is to reinterpret Thucydides's work such that it need not be understood as condemning either Athens or Melos. Imagining M as the informant is helpful because she would favor neither the conquering Athenians who sold her into slavery nor the Melian leaders who precipitated the dramatic reversal of her fortunes. Imagining the dialogue from her point of view makes it appear, in Tordoff's words, a "subtly but painfully ironic account" (4-5), rather than a resounding denouncement of either side.

Tordoff's claim is that both sides were right and at the same time terribly wrong: "What the dialogue documents is a collision of tragic circumstance which led to the atrocity on Melos that the critics I have mentioned would like to think was avoidable" (5) if, for example, the Athenians had been more merciful or moral or the Melians more practical and realistic. He reads Thucydides as presenting two irreconcilable views, two incommensurable schemes of how to make one's way through the world. The Melians can claim moral rectitude but are politically wrong; the Athenians are morally wrong but politically right. The imagined informant "offers a reflection on the circumstances of the dialogue, the appalling result of the conflict and asks the tragic question 'How can things like this happen?'" (Tordoff 7).

On Davidson's view, there is no place for intelligent reflection on the matter, because intelligence or inquiry are detached in any rational way from the world of concrete conflict. The concrete disagreements or conflicts are relatively small compared to the mass of shared beliefs, and nothing could be said about the particular conflicts. Reasoning appears to have no relation to some proposed course of action such as submitting to Athens or resisting Athens. And then tragic questions would seem especially out of place—that is, even if one is convinced that the conflict on Melos was, at that time, intractable, there is nothing intelligent to do in the wake of the disaster and no rational way to live honestly with tragedy.

On Dewey's view, the two different conceptual schemes, since they are in conflict themselves, present an opportunity for further inquiry, and one can inquire into whether they are incommensurable—that is, whether there is a common standard of value that permits comparison and decision between the two views. In the context in question, incommensurability could mean at least two things: First, it could mean that the two different conceptual schemes are, in this given situation, in genuine conflict; that is, the two proposed courses of action are not compatible. As courses of concrete action, they exclude each other. They are incommensurable in the sense of being incomparable in value or worth for the actors themselves (this, and not the view of a removed observer, real or imagined, is what counts in an actual conflict). That there is

such a conflict seems to be an undeniable fact. If there were no conflict, there would be no need for inquiry. Second, it could mean that no resolution of the two conflicted conceptual schemes is possible. That is, the obstacles to mutual understanding or agreement may not be surmounted for want of good will, courage, strength, or time. This is something that cannot be determined ahead of time. The second sense of “incommensurable” cannot be applied before a proposed resolution has been attempted. In fact, it cannot be applied with intellectual integrity before all attempts have been exhausted.<sup>5</sup>

“Incommensurable” seems to be a legitimate word to use in describing an actual situation. It describes the fact of present conflict, and its second sense suggests the uncertainty of an attempt at resolution. Certainly there are some disagreements that seem so intransigent as to suggest some imagined encounter with an alien being whose conceptual scheme seems utterly incommensurable. On Dewey’s account, we can take the image of an alien encounter seriously as an indication of anxiety or fear at the prospect of continued engagement, but we can eliminate the implied fatalism. That is, on Dewey’s account, we need not be initially overwhelmed by the idea of alien conceptual schemes as if the pronouncement of incommensurability could be applied *a priori*. We can, with Baghramian, suspend judgment on the question of how unlike differing conceptual schemes could be in principle (Baghramian 57).

There is a way to test the extent of actual incommensurability. If the conflict can in fact be resolved, then there are steps to take to accomplish this. If there are no steps to take, then the situation remains irresolvable. Dewey, by giving an analysis of inquiry, offers a helpful way to think about the conflicted situation. This seems more conducive to the exercise of reason than complete rejection of the idea of a conceptual scheme and incommensurability in favor of a formal defense against skepticism. “Incommensurable conceptual schemes” indicate actual conflicts, misunderstandings, and problems. Formal dismissal of the means by which such conflicts are indicated, that is, rejection of the very idea of a conceptual scheme, does not increase wisdom. Reconstruction of the idea so as to eliminate its incoherence and fatalistic connotations makes possible the pursuit of wisdom. Analyzing the factors of the conflicted situation makes possible the experiment that will determine incommensurability. It also indicates that certain conceptual schemes really may be incommensurable if time runs out, if conditions change, if people die—all of which are more than theoretical possibilities.

The conceptual schemes of Davidson and Dewey are different and appear to come into conflict. But incommensurability has not yet been established.



As long as there are people who share the habit of inquiry and an interest in these ideas, the possibility of some kind of resolution exists. The result, one way or the other, remains to be determined in the further pursuit of wisdom.

## NOTES

1. Davidson points out that the Principle of Charity is not a charitable assumption about the level of actual human intelligence (*Inquiries* 137). And invoking the Principle of Charity does not eliminate disagreement; rather, it makes explicit the shared understanding that makes “meaningful disagreement possible” (Davidson, *Inquiries* 196). He thinks that if this background of agreement is overlooked, it is because it consists of a vast number of ordinary and typically dull truths; it is the novel or the disputed that attracts attention (*Inquiries* 153).

2. The idea is that a belief justified by a sensation has no resources to justify any belief beyond a belief in the immediate sensation. So, if one has the sensation of seeing a flashing green light, the question is how this ever justifies a belief in an actual flashing green light existing beyond the immediate sensation. This further belief in an actual flashing green light would require for justification some content beyond the immediate sensation (Davidson, *Subjective* 142).

3. Standard references to John Dewey’s works are to the critical edition, *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882–1953*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1969–1991), and published as *The Early Works: 1882–1898* [EW], *The Middle Works: 1899–1924* [MW], and *The Later Works: 1925–1953* [LW]. In the text of this article, the bracketed designations above are followed by volume and page number. For example, page 32 of volume 14 of the *Middle Works* is cited in the text as “MW 14:32.”

4. The distinction is temporal because it marks *phases* of experience. I think the temporality of Dewey’s conception of experience sets a Deweyan account of the scheme-content distinction apart from Davidson’s. It is worth noting that this aspect of Dewey’s conception of experience is also emphasized by Colin Koopman in his attempt to develop pragmatism beyond foundationalist tendencies found in the works of James and Dewey and beyond the linguisticism of the neopragmatists like Rorty (Koopman). The present essay agrees with the work of Koopman and of Margolis in emphasizing the importance of temporality or historicity in Dewey’s conception of experience.

5. There is another sense of “incommensurable” that is not consistent with Dewey’s position. Larry A. Hickman points out that Dewey is not in agreement with the view that “the varieties of human experience are at their most fundamental levels ungrounded and incommensurable” (Hickman 18). Hickman explains that such a view, often characterized as postmodern, shares with positivism an inability to address ethical issues. Positivism excludes the noncognitive and this sort of postmodernism, which Hickman associates with Rorty, denies any commonality to human experience. In contrast, Dewey’s conception of experience, which is based on the empirical work of biologists and anthropologists, acknowledges commonality in human experience, including communication and inquiry. On this view, human experience is as objective as the subject matter of biology and anthropology, and it is also as historical and variable as that subject matter. It is just such a view that I take in this essay and believe helpful in reconstructing the scheme-content distinction.

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