PHIL 470: *Seminar: Metaphysics & Epistemology*
Truth and Reality

Handout (22)
Donald Davidson: On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme

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§ Main Theses:

1. **There is no conceptual scheme/empirical content dichotomy. This dualism is the third dogma of empiricism.**
2. **Between different conceptual schemes, things are *largely similar* rather than largely different.**
3. **There cannot be "incommensurable" systems.**
4. **Translation is possible only on the basis of a common ground on which we compare similarities and differences.**
5. **Conceptual relativism is not a feasible or even intelligible theory.**

§ Conceptual Schemes and Conceptual Relativism

1. Conceptual schemes are ways of organizing experience; they are systems of categories that give form to the data of sensation; they are points of view from which individuals, cultures, or periods survey the passing scene.
2. There may be no translating from one scheme to another, in which case the beliefs, desires, hopes, and bits of knowledge that characterize one person have no true counterparts for the subscriber to another scheme.
3. Reality itself is relative to a scheme: what counts as real in one system may not in another.
4. It is possible to have massive conceptual change, or profound theoretical revisions that the new theory and the old theory don't even share the same vocabulary.
5. Languages that have evolved in distant times or places may differ extensively in their resources for dealing with one or another range of phenomena.
6.

§ Davidson's Argument against Radical Conceptual Relativism

1. Different points of view makes sense, but only if there is a common coordinate system on which to plot them.
2. But if there is a common coordinate system, then different points of view can be compared and contrasted.
3. Therefore, the existence of a common system belies the claim of dramatic incomparability.

§ Thought and Talk

Languages we will not think of as separable from souls; speaking a language is not a trait a man can lose while retaining the power of thought. So there is no chance that someone can take up a vantage point for comparing conceptual schemes by temporarily shedding his own.

[Davidson thinks that thought and language are inseparable; hence, translation (of another's sentences) and interpretation (of another's mind) go hand in hand.]
___ On the one hand, it is clear that speech requires a multitude of finely discriminated intentions and beliefs.
___ On the other hand, it seems unlikely that we can intelligibly attribute attitudes as complex as these to a speaker unless we can translate his words into ours.

§ Failure of Translatability: complete vs. partial failure
___ Davidson: Neither claim can be validated.

* [Complete failure of translatability]
___ There would be complete failure if no significant range of sentences in one language could be translated into the other.

We get a new out of an old scheme when the speakers of a language come to accept as true an important range of sentences they previously took to be false (and vice versa). We must not describe this change simply as a matter of their coming to view old falsehoods as truths, for a truth is a proposition, and what they come to accept, in accepting a sentence as true, is not the same thing that they rejected when formerly they held the sentence to be false. A change has come over the meaning of the sentence because it now belongs to a new language.

Kuhn:
___ Successive theories are thus, we say, **incommensurable**.

The failure of intertranslatability is a necessary condition for difference of conceptual schemes; the common relation to experience or the evidence is what is supposed to help us make sense of the claim that it is language or schemes that are under consideration when translation fails. It is essential to this idea that there be something neutral and common that lies outside all schemes. This common something cannot, of course, be the *subject matter* of contrasting languages, or translation would be possible.

[Davidson's Argument against complete failure of translatability]:
1. We can be clear about breakdowns in translation when they are local enough, for a background of generally successful translation provides what is needed to make the failures intelligible.

2. If there is no such background, then we cannot even make sense of failure of translation.
3. Therefore, translation between different languages must be generally successful.

* The Dichotomy of Scheme vs. Content

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 (predicting, organizing, facing, or fitting) experience (nature, reality, sensory promptings). **The problem is to say what the relation is, and to be clearer about the entities related.**

The images and metaphors fall into two main groups: conceptual schemes (languages) either *organize* something, or they *fit* it.
___ The first group contains also *systematize*, *divide up* (the stream of consciousness);
___ examples of the second group are *predict*, *account for*, *face* (the tribunal of experience).

[Davidson's Argument against the Dichotomy of Scheme vs. Content]
1. The entities that get organized by our conceptual scheme are either (i) reality itself, or (ii) experience.
2. But if it is (i), we cannot attach a clear meaning to the notion of organizing a single object (the world, nature, etc.) unless that object is understood to contain or consist in other objects. → *Q*: How on earth do we organize the whole *reality*?
3. And if it is (ii), we cannot say that our scheme only organizes our experiences, for how could something count as a language that organizes *only* experiences, sensations, surface irritations, or sense-data? Surely knives and forks, railroads and mountains, cabbages and kingdoms also need organizing.
4. Therefore, the claim that our conceptual scheme *organizes* its empirical content does not make sense.

[He runs a similar argument against the "fitting" claim.]

* [partial failure of translatability]
___ there would be partial failure if some range could be translated and some range could not.

The point is to find out which areas constitute the *common part*.

[Davidson's argument against partial failure of translatability]
1. If we merely know that someone holds a certain sentence to be true, we know neither what he means by the sentence nor what belief his holding it true represents.
2. His holding the sentence true is thus the vector of two forces: the problem of interpretation is to be abstract from the evidence a workable theory of meaning and an acceptable theory of belief.

3. We do *charitable* interpretation all the time, deciding in favor of reinterpretation of words in order to preserve a reasonable theory of belief.
4. What matters is this: if all we know is what sentences a speaker holds true, and we cannot assume that his language is our own, then we cannot take even a first step towards interpretation without knowing or assuming a great deal about the speaker's beliefs.
5. The method is not designed to eliminate disagreement, not can it; its purpose is to make meaningful disagreement possible, and this depends entirely on a foundation – *some* foundation – in agreement.
6. Therefore, our interpretation of others' speech depends on our general agreement in beliefs.

* Principle of Charity
___ In cases of translation of someone's malapropism, for example, we should decide in favor of reinterpretation of words in order to preserve a reasonable theory of belief (rather than using a literal translation which makes him a fool).

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.

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.

§ Conclusion

1. **The truth of a sentence is relative to (among other things) the language to which it belongs. But this does not mean that there will be multiple truths.**

2. **We recognize sentences like '"Snow is white" is true iff snow is white' to be trivially true. Yet the totality of such English sentences uniquely determines the extension of the concept of truth for English.**

3. **Since Convention T embodies our best intuition as to how the concept of truth is used, there does not seem to be much hope for a test that a conceptual scheme is radically different from ours if that test depends on the assumption that we can divorce the notion of truth from that of translation.**

4. **We make maximum sense of the words and thoughts of others when we interpret in a way that optimizes agreement (this includes room for explicable error, i.e., differences of opinion).**

5. **Where does this leave the case for conceptual relativism? The answer is, I think, 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*.

6. We must conclude, I think, that the attempt to give a solid meaning to the idea of conceptual relativism, and hence to the idea of a conceptual scheme, fares no better when based on partial failure of translation than when based on total failure. Given the underlying methodology of interpretation, we could not be in a position to judge that others had concepts or beliefs radically different from our own.

7. In giving up dependence on the concept of an uninterpreted reality, something outside all schemes and science, we do not relinquish the notion of objective truth – quite the contrary. Of course truth of sentences remains relative to language, but that is as objective as can be.

8. In giving up the dualism of scheme and world, we do not give up the world, but re-establish unmediated touch with the familiar objects whose antics make our sentences and opinions true or false.