

XIV*—WHY CONCEPTUAL SCHEMES?

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ABSTRACT According to Donald Davidson, the very idea of a conceptual scheme is the third dogma of empiricism. In this paper I examine the ways in which this claim may be interpreted. I conclude by arguing that there remains an innocent version of the scheme–content distinction which is not motivated by empiricism and does not commit us to the pernicious type of dualism that Davidson rejects.

Schemes, conceptual or otherwise, have a tendency to come unstuck when least expected. Kant, who more than anyone else is responsible for establishing the scheme/content distinction (henceforth S.C.) into our philosophical vocabulary, saw S.C. as a corrective measure to Leibniz's intellectualisation of sensations and Locke's sensualisation of concepts¹ and a crucial step in establishing a comprehensive account of how objective and universal knowledge is possible. However, once it was accepted that there was a distinction to be drawn between the data of experience and the conceptual principles for organising and conceptualising them, it was easy to accept that there could be more than one system or scheme of organisation. Kant's grand scheme was turned on its head and conceptual relativism became the commonly accepted by-product of S.C. This turn of events did not deter philosophers from adopting one of the many versions of the distinction in their explanations of the mind/world relationship. C.I. Lewis, for instance, believed S.C. to be an almost self-evident philosophical truth and Quine embraced it wholeheartedly.

In recent years, however, S.C. has fallen out of favour. For one thing, conceptual relativism, primarily through the work of Kuhn, Feyerabend and the linguistic theories of Whorf, has become identified with more pernicious types of cognitive relativism. Furthermore, S.C. has been seen as yet one more instance of the various unhelpful dualisms that are part of the Cartesian and empiricist philosophical legacy.

1. Kant, (1929), A 21/B 327

The onslaught on the very idea of conceptual schemes has been spearheaded by Davidson with Richard Rorty bringing up the rear. Davidson develops two main lines of attack on the idea of S.C. Firstly, there is the charge of incoherence. According to Davidson, the very idea of a conceptual scheme is incoherent because we can entertain the possibility of there being an alternative conceptual scheme only if such a scheme is untranslatable into our language. However, translatability into a familiar tongue is a criterion of languagehood. So

if translation succeeds, we have shown there is no need to speak of two conceptual schemes, while if translation fails, there is no ground for speaking of two. If I am right then there never can be a situation in which we can intelligibly compare or contrast divergent schemes, and in that case we do better not to say that there is one scheme, as if we understood what it would be like for there to be more.²

If we cannot speak of alternative conceptual schemes then we cannot make sense of S.C. either.

Secondly, he offers the charge of dogmatism, making the claim that the very idea of a conceptual scheme is ‘a dogma of empiricism, the third dogma of empiricism. 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.’³

Davidson is not explicit on why the idea of a conceptual scheme should be seen as a dogma of empiricism and not just a philosophical error. Most commentators have focused on the argument from incoherence and have ignored the second aspect of Davidson’s attack on S.C. In this paper I explore the question of the sense(s) in which the dualism of scheme and content can be construed as a dogma of empiricism, within a Davidsonian framework. A reply to this question can also help us to find a version of S.C. which may be immune from Davidson’s criticism. The paper falls into three sections. Section I outlines some of the ways in which the dualism of scheme/content can be set out. Section II utilises the results obtained in I to explore the connections between S.C. and empiricism and argues that two versions of S.C. are linked with aspects of empiricism. Section III argues that there is a third

2. Davidson, (1980), p. 243

3. Davidson, (1974), p. 189

version of S.C. that cannot in any interesting sense be seen as a ‘dogma of empiricism’ and can act as ‘the innocent version’ of S.C. that John McDowell has recently exhorted us to adopt.

I

What is a conceptual scheme? S.C. distinguishes between two elements in our thinking: the conceptual apparatus or scheme, and that which we think about—that is, the content. However, this seemingly simple distinction has been formulated in a variety of ways.

What is a scheme? According to Davidson, conceptual schemes are languages which do either or both of two things. Conceptual schemes (S1) organise something—that is, systematise and divide up content. They are the categories we use for identifying and classifying objects, and the principles of classification which we use to group things together. They also provide us with criteria for the individuation of what there is. Alternatively, conceptual schemes (S2) may be construed as the means of fitting, that is facing, predicting and accounting for content.⁴ In this sense, they are systems of representation⁵ or alternative ways of describing reality. They are the set of central beliefs, the basic assumptions or fundamental principles⁶ that people hold.⁷ These formulations are not mutually exclusive. In particular S2 can, and often does, include certain elements of S1 because representing or fitting reality is not incompatible with ordering, individuating and categorising it.

The linguistic tools used by S1 are the referential apparatus of language, such as predicates, while in the case of S2 the linguistic unit is the set of whole sentences that a speaker holds true. A variety of metaphors has been used to convey the role that conceptual schemes play in shaping the content of our thoughts. Conceptual schemes, it has been claimed, are like the principles we might use in order to organise and rearrange a closet.⁸ They are the cookie

4. Davidson, (1974), p. 191

5. Searle, (1995), p. 151

6. Popper, (1994), p. 34

7. This interpretation has been proposed by Quine and echoed by Rorty.

8. This is Davidson’s favourite metaphor.

cutter we use to cut and shape the malleable dough of the content. Or even more graphically, they 'carve up nature at its joints'. The carving may be done with 'a rapier' or a 'blunt instrument'.⁹ In case of S2 it has been claimed that conceptual schemes provide a framework for our pictures of reality, a framework which also gives structure to the ways in which reality is conceptualised.¹⁰

What is content? We can find four accounts of content in Davidson:¹¹

(C1) The content of a conceptual scheme may be something neutral, common, but unnameable, which lies outside all schemes: the Kantian 'thing in itself' or alternatively what William James calls the 'absolutely dumb and evanescent, the merely ideal limit of our minds'; that which we 'may glimpse...but never grasp...'.¹²

(C2) The content is the world, reality, nature or universe which is either unorganised or open to reorganisation. The world is found and not made, but it is, in Schiller's words, 'plastic'; that is, it has a certain degree of malleability.

(C3) The content may be sense data, surface irritations, sensory promptings, the 'sensuous', or what in the seventeenth and eighteenth century vocabulary was known as 'ideas' or 'impressions'. In other words it is the stuff that falls under the by now pejorative term 'the given'.

(C4) The content is our experiences, broadly conceived: what C.I. Lewis, following James, has called the 'thick experience of every-day life' rather than the 'thin experience of immediate sensations'.¹³

These formulations of 'content' are not equivalent. It is tempting to identify C1 with either C2 or C3. William Child, for instance, thinks that the neutral content could be seen as the uninterpreted, theory-neutral reality or alternatively as the uncategorized content

9. Quine (1960) and Whorf (1956), respectively, have used these particular metaphors.

10. Popper, (1994), p. 33

11. Most commentators distinguish between C2 and C3 only which are more explicit in Davidson's work. However, both C1 and C4 also are present in Davidson's discussion of S.C.

12. James, (1909), p. 68

13. Lewis, (1929), p. 30

of experience.¹⁴ But this is clearly wrong. The world is not the unnameable, nor are our sense-data, since we have already named them. As Rorty in his defence and elaboration of Davidson has pointed out

The notion of ‘the world’ as used in a phrase like ‘different conceptual schemes carve up the world differently’ must be the notion of something *completely* unspecified and unspecifiable—the thing in itself, in fact. As soon as we start thinking of ‘the world’ as atoms and the void, or sense data and awareness of them, or ‘stimuli’ of a certain sort brought to bear upon organs of a certain sort, we have changed the name of the game. For we are now well within some particular theory about how the world is.¹⁵

So, C1 should be seen as an independent account of content and for Davidson, as for Rorty, probably an incoherent one.

C3 and C4 are not equivalent. C4 is the ‘thick experience of the world of things’,¹⁶ it is the world of trees and houses, it is the experiences of love and hate and disappointment. C3 is the ‘thin given of immediacy’; it is the patch of colour, the indescribable sound, the fleeting sensation, ‘the buzzing, blooming confusion on which the infant first opens his eyes’.¹⁷ The difference between C2 and C4 can be expressed as the distinction between the world and the world as it is experienced by us, the view from nowhere versus the perspectival view of the world. William Child has ably shown that C2 and C3 are not equivalent either, and the scheme/world dualism does not necessitate the acceptance of scheme/sense data dualism.¹⁸

Davidson has something to say on all four versions of content. In his earlier work he had argued that ‘the entities that can count as the content of our schemes are either reality (the universe, the world, nature) or experience’.¹⁹ In more recent work, on the other hand, the emphasis has been on ‘the unsullied stream of experience being variously reworked by various minds or cultures’.²⁰

14. Child, (1994)

15. Rorty, (1982), p. 14

16. Lewis, (1929), p. 54

17. Lewis, (1929), p. 30

18. Child, (1994)

19. Davidson, (1974), p. 192

20. Davidson, (1989), p. 161

According to this version, the uninterpreted given, sense-data, precepts, impressions, sensations, appearances and adverbial modifications of experience are the content of conceptual schemes. Consequently, various commentators have argued that the real target of Davidson's attack is the dualism between concepts and experiential intake or the 'dualism of scheme and Given'²¹ and that only recently has Davidson 'realized more fully the purely epistemological character of the dualism he wishes to reject'.²²

A closer look at the relevant texts sheds a different light on Davidson's position. In 'The Myth of the Subjective' Davidson argues that conceptual relativism rests on a mistaken analogy with having an individual perspective or position on the world; a direct parallel with scheme/world distinction. He refers the reader to his earlier article 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme' and his argument about the incoherence of this position presented there. The remainder of 'The Myth of the Subjective' is then devoted to the discussion of scheme/sense data distinction. In what follows I will proceed on the assumption that Davidson allows for both C2 and C3. The role of C4 will be discussed in Section III.

II

In what sense could scheme/content dualism be seen as a dogma of empiricism? Empiricism, simply put, posits that our knowledge of the world is obtained through our sense experiences. But this rather minimal claim has had far reaching consequences, both historically and conceptually. The most notorious of these is the analytic/synthetic distinction, or the first dogma of empiricism. Two other philosophical by-products of empiricism are also of importance to discussions of S.C. Empiricism can be formulated either as a theory about mental content—in this sense it is also presented as a theory of truth—or it may be seen as a theory of knowledge, justification and evidence. Each of these formulations carries a philosophical baggage that has proved unpopular with a variety of contemporary philosophers, including Putnam, Rorty and McDowell, as well as Davidson.

21. McDowell, (1994)

22. Levine, (1993), p. 197

Empiricism, when formulated as a theory of how the mind acquires its content, has been associated with representational theories of mind, whereby the human mind is seen as a vehicle for mirroring or picturing reality. Our ideas, to use Locke's idiom, or our mental states, in more modern terminology, represent, stand for, or picture, aspects of reality. The correspondence theory of truth, with its ontology of facts and states of affairs and the metaphor of mirroring or picturing, and the copy theory of reference, have been used to explain how the content of our mental states can represent, or fit the world. Empiricism as a theory of justification, on the other hand, was shaped by its encounter with scepticism. The empiricist reaction to scepticism was to result in the claim that sense data can act as the ultimate evidence for our knowledge of the world, and hence as the foundation of empirical knowledge. In doing so, empiricism gave rise to the notorious problem of explaining how the mind can transcend beyond the veil of ideas or senses and gain access to the external world. S.C. may be seen as a dogma of empiricism either if it is a direct consequence of one or of more of the above three philosophical by-products of empiricism, or if it acquires its philosophical motivation and justification from them. I shall examine each in turn.

S.C. and the analytic/synthetic distinction. It has been suggested that S.C. relies on, and is also motivated by, the suspect notion of apriori truth and hence that the third dogma of empiricism should be seen as a variant of the first dogma. Robert Kraut, for instance, has argued that S.C. is intimately related to the

dichotomy between analytic and synthetic truths; sentences guaranteed true by the structure of the scheme are true purely on the basis of meaning, rather than on the basis of empirical fact. But this is an untenable dualism, and thus any other dualisms which embraces it is thereby tainted.²³

Rorty also links the scheme/content dualism to the analytic/synthetic distinction.²⁴

23. Kraut, (1983), p. 401

24. According to Rorty: 'The notion of a choice among "meaning postulates" is the latest version of the notion of a choice among alternative conceptual schemes. Once the necessary is identified with the analytic and the analytic is explicated in terms of meaning, an attack on the notion of what Harman has called the "philosophical" sense of "meaning" becomes an attack on the notion of "conceptual framework" in any sense that assumes a distinction of kind between this notion and that of empirical theory'. Rorty, (1982), p. 5

There is some historical justification for this view. The origins of the idea of conceptual schemes can be traced to Kant's distinction between spontaneity and receptivity, on the one hand, and necessary and contingent truths on the other. Together with these distinctions we also have inherited the view that the mind is divided into active and passive faculties. The world imposes its impressions on the passive faculties and these impressions are in turn interpreted by the active, concept-forming faculty.²⁵ Further support for this position can be mustered from the fact that one of the direct targets of Davidson's criticism, C.I. Lewis, constructs his version of S.C. on the back of the dualism of *apriori/aposteriori*, and in that sense the analytic/synthetic distinction. According to Lewis

The two elements to be distinguished in knowledge are the concept, which is the product of the activity of thought, and the sensuously given, which is independent of such activity....The concept gives rise to the *a priori*; all *a priori* truth is definitive, or explicative of concepts....The pure concept and the content of the given are mutually independent; neither limits the other.²⁶

Conceptual schemes, then, are truths by definition while their contents are the empirical data of senses. Thus, the very idea of S.C. seems to presuppose the analytic/synthetic distinction.

Despite its initial plausibility this cannot be the correct account of the third dogma. Davidson allows that the 'analytic/synthetic distinction is explained in terms of something that may serve to buttress conceptual relativism, namely the idea of empirical content',²⁷ but in his subsequent article adds: 'the scheme-content division can survive even in an environment that shuns the analytic-synthetic distinction'.²⁸ The reason for this view becomes clear once we bear in mind that Davidson's main target when rejecting S.C. was Quine. Quine explicitly identifies conceptual schemes with languages but famously rejects the suggestion that we can ever draw a clear boundary between the *apriori* and non-*apriori* elements in language. S.C., for Quine, is part of the holistic story he tells about our attempts to give an account of what there is.

25. Rorty, (1982), p. 3

26. Lewis, (1929), p. 37

27. Davidson, (1974), p. 189

28. Davidson, (1989), p. 161

Quine's holism disallows the sharp contrast between the synthetic sentences with their purely empirical content and the analytic sentences which are supposed to have no empirical content. The organising role that was attributed to analytic sentences and the empirical content that was supposedly peculiar to synthetic sentence are now seen as shared and diffused by all sentences of the system. But this diffusion does not obliterate the distinction between the scheme elements and the content elements of the system. According to Quine

The interlocked conceptual scheme of physical objects, identity, and divided reference is part of the ship which, in Neurath's figure, we cannot remodel save as we stay afloat in it. The ontology of abstract objects is part of the ship too, if only a less fundamental part. The ship may owe its structure partly to blundering predecessors who missed scuttling it only by fools' luck. But we are not in a position to jettison any part of it, except as we have substitute devices ready to hand that will serve the same essential purposes.²⁹

Thus, at least within a Quinean framework, we can retain the dualism of scheme and content even when we have abandoned the analytic/synthetic distinction. And in so far as Davidson's arguments are conducted within this framework, then the third dogma of empiricism cannot simply be a variant of the first dogma.³⁰

Empiricism as a theory of content and S.C. Conceptual relativism, as Davidson has noted, is often expressed in terms of scheme/world or scheme/reality distinction. Searle, for instance, has argued that conceptual schemes are the different ways and the different vocabularies and sets of concepts used to carve up a language-independent reality. Conceptual schemes, he argues, are a subspecies of 'systems of representation'. Representations are the variety of interconnected ways in which human beings have access to and represent features of the world to themselves. It is possible to have any number of different, and even incommensurable, systems of representations for representing the same reality. Furthermore, systems of representation are influenced by cultural,

29. Quine, (1960), p. 123–124

30. And if the first and the second dogmas are in essence one, then the same considerations would apply to the latter as well.

economic, historical and psychological factors; they are human creations and to that extent they are also arbitrary.

In what sense could this conception of S.C. be seen as a dogma of empiricism? Different replies can be given depending on which version we are examining. One possible reply can be found when we look at empiricism as a theory of content, and the version of S.C. that emphasises the role of conceptual schemes as the medium or framework for facing, fitting or representing reality or the totality of evidence. (S2/C2 or C1).

The seeds of one response can be found in Quine's reaction to Davidson's criticisms.³¹ Quine distinguishes between empiricism construed as a theory of truth and empiricism as a theory of evidence, a division that parallels the distinction drawn in the first part of this section. According to Quine, S.C. is a useful theory when taken in its epistemological sense, as a theory of evidence and justification. But he agrees with Davidson that the duality of sentences that fit facts is pernicious. According to him 'if empiricism is construed as a theory of truth, then what Davidson imputes to it as a third dogma is rightly imputed and rightly renounced. Empiricism as a theory of truth thereupon goes by the board, and good riddance.'³²

Davidson, as part of his overall philosophical project, wishes to do away with the legacy of empiricism which imposes intermediaries such as facts, conceptual schemes, paradigms, or world-views between us and the world. Searle's 'system of representation' is yet another example of such intermediaries. For Davidson the attempt to characterise conceptual schemes in terms of the notion of fitting or representing the world or the totality of our experiences comes down to the idea that something is an acceptable conceptual scheme if it is true. However, he adds, 'the truth of an utterance depends on just two things: what the words as spoken mean, and how the world is arranged. There is no further relativism to a conceptual scheme, a way of viewing things, a perspective.'³³ Searle's defence of conceptual relativism depends on postulating systems of representation that also act as ways of viewing things. But if Davidson is right, we do not need to

31. Quine, (1981)

32. Quine (1981), p. 39

33. Davidson, (1990), p. 122

introduce a distinction between reality and our conceptual scheme which would fit or face that reality. We should do away with such intermediaries for two reasons. Firstly, no satisfactory account of what these entities are supposed to be is available to us; and secondly, the introduction of intermediaries threatens our hold on the world and reality. Consequently, Davidson's preferred account of the determinants of the content of our thought is causal and holistic, where the link between the world and mind is direct and unmediated.

A different set of considerations come into play when we look at S1/C2. Once again Searle can act as a handy foil. He argues

Any system of classification or individuation of objects, any set of categories for describing the world, indeed, any system of representation at all is conventional, and to that extent arbitrary. The world divides up the way we divide it, and if we are ever inclined to think that our present way of dividing it is the right one, or is somehow inevitable, we can always imagine alternative systems of classification.³⁴

But he goes on to add that 'From the fact that a *description* can only be made relative to a set of linguistic categories, it does not follow that the *facts/objects/states of affairs/etc.*, *described* can only *exist* relative to a set of categories.'³⁵

The problems with Searle's argument is that if there is any truth to conceptual relativity or scheme/world distinction then facts, objects or a state of affairs would have to be individuated by the conceptual tools available within that conceptual scheme. It simply does not make sense to talk about different conceptual schemes representing the same fact or object differently when what counts as the same object or fact cannot be decided prior to and independently of the way in which it is to be defined or individuated by a conceptual scheme. To speak of a scheme/world or a scheme/reality distinction, in the manner that Searle does, is to presuppose that we can understand, and hence individuate, the already existing world or reality and then impose our conceptual schemes on it. If 'the world' is a name for the objects that our world view or conceptual scheme individuates, then it cannot play the role which Searle assigns it in his defence of scheme/content dualism.

34. Searle, (1995), p. 60

35. Searle, (1995), p. 66, emphasis in the original

This is the lesson learned from Putnam's 'mereological sum' example of conceptual relativity. Putnam proposes a scenario where one and the same situation can be described as involving different numbers and kinds of objects'.³⁶ He asks: faced with a world with three individuals, does the question 'how many objects are there in this world?' have a determinate reply? The answer is no, because any reply would depend on how we interpret the word 'object'. From an atomist perspective there would be three independent, unrelated objects in this world, while from a mereological stand-point the reply is seven objects (or eight, if we include the null object as a part of every object). The point is that if we are to take conceptual relativity seriously then we have to accept that what counts as an object or a fact or even existence will be decided internally, only by the criteria available within the given conceptual scheme.

It might be argued, as Thomas Nagel and William Child have done (in a slightly different context) that even if we may not be able to 'form a *detailed conception* of the world without using our concepts...it does not follow from this that we cannot form the *bare idea* of the world as it is in itself without reading a structure into it, [and] we just do understand the idea of the world as it is in itself'.³⁷ Similarly, we can have the bare idea of what counts as the same world or the same object across various conceptual schemes, and so we can speak of different schemes representing them in different ways. It's not at all clear what 'the bare idea of the world' in this context can be. I have the bare idea of chemistry in so far as I know what the subject matter of chemistry is, and also a vague notion of what sort of experiments and formulae are used in that field and a minimum amount of knowledge of the entities involved in these experiments and formulae. But what does it mean to say that I have a bare idea of the world? If the world is the totality of what there is, then a bare idea of the world would be a bare idea of the totality of what there is and not of something else. But the problem was to give some meaning to the suggestion that we can talk about the world, to give meaning to 'world', outside all conceptual schemes. To suggest that we can have a bare or a vague

36. Putnam, (1989), p. 180

37. Child, (1994) p. 57, emphasis in the original

idea of that world, rather than a detailed one does not in any way help us to solve the original problem.

We might be able to make sense of the Nagel/Child suggestion if we think that the world presents itself to us pre-labelled, so to speak; that is, the world has an intrinsic structure which makes itself manifest to us. In so far as empiricism, at least in some versions of it, relies on the idea of the world possessing certain inherent features, we can detect a connection between S.C. and the empiricist conception of the world. Davidson is not explicit on this point, but I think the rejection of such a position will be in line with his anti-empiricist sentiments.

Alternatively we might wish to resort to James and claim that the unconceptualised world is what we may glimpse, but never grasp.³⁸ But the question ‘what entitles us to call that which we glimpse “the world”?’ remains intact. If there is any truth to conceptual relativity then both what we glimpse and what we grasp are mediated by the conceptual tools available to us. It might be argued that the world is **that** (whatever it might be) which we glimpse. But this tautological reply is more applicable to the infamous thing in itself rather than to the world in any intelligible sense of ‘world’. To take this route is to plunge back into the habit of talking about what cannot be talked about, and the incoherence of it all looms large.

Empiricism as a theory of content, then, introduces a pernicious form of S.C. by turning schemes into intermediaries between us and the world. The dualism also relies on an incoherent notion of ‘same world’ and ‘same object’ which cannot sustain the type of conceptual relativity envisaged by its defenders.

Empiricism as a theory of justification and S.C. S.C. has frequently been presented as a response to the epistemological worries about the relationship between the mind and the world. If we approach the mind/world relationship by privileging the contribution of the human mind, then, in order to secure our grip on the world, we need to introduce some empirical constraints on what is conceptually warranted. The sceptical challenge intensifies the worries about our ability to retain our hold on the world and underlines the need to have some unassailable source for justifying our claims about

38. James, (1909), p. 68

the connections between our minds, with their conceptual apparatus, and the external world. As John McDowell has argued 'The point of the dualism is that it allows us to acknowledge an external constraint on our freedom to deploy our empirical concepts....The putatively reassuring idea is that empirical justifications have an ultimate foundation in impingements on the conceptual realm from outside.'³⁹

The target of the accusation of dogmatism, in this instance, is specifically the scheme/sense data distinction within the context of empiricism as a theory of justification, or evidence (*pace* Quine). According to Davidson, 'the idea that there is a basic division between uninterpreted experience and an organizing conceptual scheme is a deep mistake born of the essentially incoherent picture of the mind as a passive but critical spectator of an inner show'.⁴⁰ Davidson feels the need to pursue the issue of scheme/given dualism further because, as we saw, although Quine accepts Davidson's criticisms of scheme/world dualism he continues to support a version of scheme/sense data dualism.

Empiricism, as an epistemological theory, Davidson argues, is based on the view that the subjective is the foundation of objective empirical knowledge. However, he denies that empirical knowledge either has an epistemological foundation or needs one. What motivates foundationalism is the thought that it is 'necessary to insulate the ultimate sources of evidence from the outside world in order to guarantee the authority of the evidence for the subject'.⁴¹ McDowell, who lends his voice to the rejection of the scheme/sense data distinction, has pointed out that one main problem with this approach is that 'even as it tries to make out that sensory impressions are our avenue of access to the empirical world, empiricism conceives impressions in such a way that they could only close us off from the world, disrupting our 'unmediated touch' with ordinary objects'.⁴² Once we begin characterising the mind/world relationship in terms of the distinction between conceptual schemes and unsullied streams of experience or the given then the next, almost inevitable, step is the claim that all we can have access

39. McDowell, (1994), p. 6

40. Davidson, (1989), p. 171

41. Davidson, (1989), p. 162

42. McDowell, (1994), p. 155

to through our experiences of the world are the immediate contents of our senses, our impressions, or ideas. Thus, instead of finding any solace for our epistemological anxieties, this particular version of empiricism saddles us with further philosophical worries about our hold on reality.

Once again, what Davidson objects to is the view that construes conceptual schemes as intermediaries between the human mind and the world. The aim is to find ways in which we can be directly in touch with the world, without requiring any incorrigible or otherwise privileged or foundational epistemic items at our disposal. A naturalistic account of knowledge, Davidson argues, that makes no appeal to such epistemological intermediaries as sense-data, qualia, or raw feels, would give us that unmediated hold.⁴³ Once we accept that sensations do not play an epistemological role in determining the content of our beliefs about the world then we are giving up the third dogma of empiricism.⁴⁴

Empiricism as a theory of justification, as well as empiricism as a theory of content, motivate versions of S.C. that distance us from reality and prevent us from having an unmediated contact with the world. The scheme/sense data distinction imposes elements from the content side of dualism as intermediaries between us and the world. The tertiary entities introduced by the scheme/world distinction, on the other hand, are the unwelcome contributions of the scheme side of dualism. To think that these intermediaries are either necessary or desirable in our account of the relationship between our mind and the world is to fall prey to the third dogma of empiricism.

III

S.C. and the thick experiences of the world. The scheme/world dichotomy is often introduced in order to account for the different ways in which the mind can mediate reality. The intuition behind this move is that although we can assume that there exists, at most, one world, we can give various and at times not wholly compatible accounts, both true and false, of what that world is like. The scheme/world distinction helps to explain how we can maintain our belief in the uniqueness of the world while allowing that there

43. Davidson, (1989), p. 171

44. Davidson, (1989), p. 166

can be different representations of it. It is an attempt to find a place for the contributions of the human conceptual apparatus and the restrictions put on those contributions by the world or 'how things are anyway'. To deny the role of the world in our conceptualising is to fall prey to the greatest excesses of idealism. To deny a role to human conceptualisation, to overplay the idea of direct unmediated contact with the world, on the other hand, leaves us unable to account for error and false belief. If the mind/world relationship was not mediated by conceptual schemes, the story goes, if the world had a direct impact on our minds, then we would be unable to explain how error is possible. C.I. Lewis, for instance, defends the idea of S.C. by arguing that '...if there be no interpretation or construction which the mind itself imposes, then thought is rendered superfluous, the possibility of error becomes inexplicable, and the distinction of true and false is in danger of becoming meaningless'.⁴⁵

S.C., then, can also be formulated to solve specific philosophical problems which are independent from empiricist considerations. The scheme/world distinction, in particular, is motivated by the need to explain the prevalence of differing conceptions of the world, including the erroneous ones. Davidson does admit that his approach to the question of the relationship between the mind and the world poses problems for explaining the nature of error, how to identify it or explain it.⁴⁶ The wholesale dismissal of S.C. as the third dogma leaves us with the problem of finding an account for the variability of the ways the world is understood and conceptualised by different cultures, epochs, and languages.

If we accept that there is use for some version of S.C., the scheme/world division, even shorn of its representationalist presuppositions, would be incapable of helping us. For, as we saw, we cannot make sense of the suggestion that the world, as the content of our conceptual apparatus, is not already contaminated by our concepts. Furthermore, to entertain the idea of an uncontaminated reality is to invite the type of alienating dualism that was the target of Davidson.

McDowell has suggested that there might be an 'innocent' version of S.C. that does not commit us to dualism. According to

45. Lewis, (1929) p. 39

46. Davidson, (1989) p. 166

him, 'Conceptual schemes or perspectives need not be one side of the exploded dualism of scheme and world. Thus innocently conceived, schemes or perspectives can be seen as embodied in languages or cultural traditions.'⁴⁷ In this approach, languages and traditions can figure as constitutive of what he calls 'our unproblematic openness to the world'. If the third dogma of empiricism is indeed located in the empiricist's attempt to introduce various intermediaries between us and the world, be it on the side of scheme or content, then an innocent version of the S.C. would be one that does not prevent us from having a direct contact with the world or reality.

The making of such an innocent version is present in Davidson. C4, or the version where the content of the conceptual scheme is the thick experience of our lives, the rich variety of lived experiences and encounters with the world that constitute the very fabric of our existence, may provide us with an approach to S.C. which avoids the pernicious dualism under attack. Davidson himself introduces this possibility only to dismiss it with other varieties of S.C. He says

The notion of organisation applies only to pluralities. But what every plurality we take experience to consist in—events like losing a button or stubbing a toe, having a sensation of warmth or hearing an oboe—we will have to individuate according to familiar principles. A language that organises such entities must be a language very like our own.⁴⁸

Stubbing a toe or hearing an oboe are instances of what I have called 'thick experiences' rather than the thin, contentless sensations of pain or sound. As this passage shows, Davidson allows for the abstract possibility of scheme/thick experience distinction but blocks it by recourse to his incoherence argument. I am not going to rehearse the arguments against Davidson's position on translatability.⁴⁹ The relevant point is that Davidson believes that conceptual relativity rests on the assumption that 'conceptual schemes and moral systems, or that languages associated with them, can differ massively—to the extent of being mutually

47. McDowell, (1994), p.155

48. Davidson, (1974), p. 192

49. I have argued this point in chapter 7 of my *The Problem of Relativism* (Routledge, forthcoming).

unintelligible or incommensurable, or forever beyond rational resolve'.⁵⁰ But my suggestion here is neutral on the question of the limits on how removed from ours an alternative conceptual scheme can be. Rather, the view towards which I am gesturing gives us the means of talking about different ways of conceptualising our lived experience in the world. It is a way of permitting space for the intuition, shared by some philosophers, that there are no non-perspectival and unconceptualised view of things. It is one with the view that our dealings with the world, whether through our perceptual experiences, thoughts or feelings, are always from within a perspective and are permeated by our concepts, by our interests and are informed by our location within a specific culture, history and language. This approach does not prevent us from having direct access to the real world, so we are not ending up with intermediaries between us and the world. With McDowell, we can deny that there can be a purely unconceptualized content to our experience. Experience itself, as McDowell has argued, is already equipped with conceptual content. For instance, to experience colour we must be equipped with the concept of visible surfaces of objects, and the concepts of suitable conditions for telling what a thing's colour is by looking at it.⁵¹ But the experience of colour can be conceptualised in widely different ways, as the literature on colour amply demonstrates. What is being emphasised is that all our life-experiences are from a standpoint and each standpoint is richly endowed with conceptual inputs. These standpoints are also the means of making sense of experiences and coping with the world (in the broadest sense possible) by conceptualising them in different ways.

The scheme/thick content distinction receives its philosophical justification not from empiricism, but from the common-or-garden observation that our life-experiences can be variously described and to that extent, one could even say, 'variously experienced'. The different modes of conceptualisation also have consequences for the ways in which people act and conduct their lives. So conceptual 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. The presence of different conceptual

50. Davidson, (1989), p. 160

51. McDowell, (1994), p. 27

schemes manifests itself most dramatically when we come across unfamiliar ways of conceptualising what, in a rough and ready fashion, can be called ‘the same experience’. To take just one example, in Dyrabil, an aboriginal language of Australia, all objects and experiences in the universe are classified into four groups:

1. *Bayi*: Chiefly classifies human males and animals; but also the moon, storms, rainbows and boomerangs.
2. *Balan*: Classifies human females; but also water, fire, fighting, most birds, some trees, etc.
3. *Balam*: classifies nonflesh food, but also cigarettes.
4. *Bala*: Everything not in the other categories including noises and language, wind, some spears, etc.⁵²

This fourfold classification provides us with a rather striking instance of how familiar experiences such as noises, as well as pre-individuated objects such as food and animals, can further be conceptualised in ways that make them seem strange and unfamiliar to non-Dyrabil thinking. Furthermore, this alternative way of conceptualising and categorising their lived world also has consequences for how Dyrabil-speaking people conduct their lives and react to various events and experiences involving these categories. In this sense then, alternative conceptual schemes are also alternative ways of life.

With McDowell we can reassure Davidson that there is no gap between thought and the world and hence avoid the myth of the Given, without renouncing the claim that experience can act as a rational constraint on thinking or the claim that our content-full experiences can be made sense of in differing ways. I’m not sure with how much of this Davidson would disagree. But by his sweeping dismissal of S.C. Davidson disregards one important role played by S.C. We know, both intuitively and on empirical evidence, that there are different possible views of the world and

52. The case study originally analysed by R.M. Dixon can be found in Lakoff, (1987), p. 92. Similar examples are plentiful in anthropological literature and are often employed in discussions of conceptual schemes by psychologists and cognitive scientists. To take an example from a somewhat different domain, Levy reports that Tahitians categorise sadness with sickness, fatigue or the attack of an evil spirit and do not have a separate word, or an independent concept for it. He does not claim that the Tahitians do not experience sadness; rather, they conceptualise their experiences differently from the way Europeans do.

our place within it. The above account of a rough idea of a conceptual scheme, shorn of any empiricist presuppositions, attempts to accommodate this intuition.⁵³

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