

## Conceptual schemes, analytic truths, and organizing the Pacific Ocean

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*Abstract.* I draw attention to how one of Donald Davidson's arguments against the claim that others have an alternative conceptual scheme does not look compatible with his rejection of analytic truths – how his rejection of the third dogma of empiricism depends on accepting the first. The appendix contests Davidson's approach to organizing the Pacific Ocean.

In his paper "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," Donald Davidson attacks the claim that the words and grammar of English incorporate a system of concepts for organizing the data of sensation whereas another language, untranslatable into English, incorporates an alternative system for organizing such data. In other words, the other language, Hopi for example, incorporates an alternative conceptual scheme.

What is Davidson's argument against this claim? He writes:

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. Someone who sets out to organize a closet arranges the things in it. If you are told not to organize the shoes and shirts, but the closet itself, you would be bewildered. How would you organize the Pacific Ocean? Straighten out its shores, perhaps, or relocate its islands, or destroy its fish. (1973-4: 14)

And:

The notion of organization applies only to pluralities. But whatever 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 organizes *such* entities must be a language very like our own. (1973-4: 14-15)

So that is Davidson's argument, or one of them, a strange argument and seemingly disconnected from his philosophical system. It seems disconnected in the sense that it is not derived from the premises of that system. But is it also disconnected in a more troubling way: is it inconsistent with those premises?

Davidson's argument can be reconstructed as follows:

- (1) If our language organizes the data of sensation and so does another language, then both languages organize the same plurality of things.
- (2) If both languages organize the same plurality of things, then both languages must have ways of referring to the things that are parts of that plurality.
- (3) If both languages have ways of referring to the things which are parts of that plurality, then the two languages will be inter-translatable.
- (4) If the two languages are inter-translatable, then they do not incorporate alternative conceptual schemes.

Therefore:

- (5) If our language organizes the data of sensation and so does another language, then they do not incorporate alternative conceptual schemes.

A worry about premise (1) is that it depends on the claim that it is an analytic truth that only pluralities can be organized, but Davidson's system involves denying that there are analytic truths. An analytic truth is a truth which is true by virtue of meaning alone, such as "If he is a bachelor, then he is unmarried." The very meaning of the word "bachelor" makes this statement

true. What about “If a language organizes something, then this something is a plurality”? Davidson seems to think this statement is true by virtue of the very meaning of the word “organizes.” But does not Davidson deny that there are analytic truths? His paper seeks to go beyond empiricist W.V. Quine’s rejection of analytic truths and reduction in order attack a commitment of empiricism that remains after these rejections. Davidson writes:

I want to urge that this... dualism of scheme and content, of organizing system and something waiting to be organized, cannot be made intelligible and defensible. It is itself a dogma of empiricism, the third dogma. The third, and perhaps the last, for if we give it up it is not clear that there is anything distinctive left to call empiricism. (1973-4: 11)

But rather than extending the attack on empiricist dogmas, in the argument we have considered his attack on this third dogma actually depends on an already rejected dogma: that there are analytic truths.<sup>1</sup>

## **Appendix**

Davidson has a solid understanding of what it is to organize the closet and seems to develop an understanding of the task of organizing the Pacific Ocean based on it. He makes no explicit reference to all the water in it, as if the water corresponds to the unoccupied space in the closet – as if the water were the air! There are items one would ordinarily list as in the closet and one organizes those, not the empty space, or at least Davidson does, and analogously one does not organize the water in the ocean. But perhaps a person who works with fluids a lot sometimes thinks of themselves as organizing a fluid substance. And perhaps they do not think of what they

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<sup>1</sup> I wonder whether it also depends on reduction.

are organizing as already divided into some number of objects – a chef organizes some oil ordered with the rice dish but while regarding the oil as a continuous thing. There is nothing obviously meaningless about that.<sup>2</sup> And with this background experience, they would focus on arrangement of the water when trying to understand this gargantuan task, without regarding the water as already divided up into a certain number of parts – numerous droplets say. I cannot see that meaningfully applying the concept of organizing requires a point of view on the thing organized as already containing or consisting of some number of objects to be arranged, including in Davidson’s Pacific Ocean example.

### **Reference**

Davidson, D. 1973-74. On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme. *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 47: 5-20.

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<sup>2</sup> If one takes arranging solid items as one’s paradigm case of organizing, it is nevertheless attractive to extend the notion of organizing to thicker fluids, that are experienced as closer to the world of solids.