Conceptual schemes and truth, by J*oseph R*z

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Abstract. This paper pays tribute to the distinguished legal and political philosopher Joseph Raz, who recently passed away. I present a response to Donald Davidson on conceptual schemes which tries to imitate Raz’s writing style, which attracts me despite the difficulties it poses. The response includes a definition.


The term “conceptual scheme” refers to a system of concepts that organizes sensory data and also to a system of propositions. It is in this way ambiguous. The propositions form a totality of believed propositions, as is envisioned by W.V. Quine, or else they are together a set of foundational propositions, or axioms, and a repertoire of terms is used in a way that presupposes these. For example, the term “a law” is part of a repertoire of terms, including “a legal right,” “a contract” and “a constitution,” which presupposes legal axioms, e.g. that no law can exist in isolation and must be part of a whole legal framework. If something is said to be a law, an implication of this statement is that the law is part of a larger framework, such as Roman law or English law.

A conceptual scheme as a system of foundational propositions provides a point of view on the world. A reason for adopting the conceptual scheme is that taking up that point of view serves some valuable end, such as understanding Roman culture. We can more exactly specify this sense of “conceptual scheme” as follows. Something is a conceptual scheme in this sense if and only if:
1. It consists of a set of propositions.

2. These propositions provide a point of view on the world, or some aspect of it, which there is a reason to take up.

3. A repertoire of terms, when used to identify features of the world, presupposes these propositions.

Conceptual schemes, in this sense, are sometimes said to fit or cope with reality.

The description of conceptual schemes as fitting reality has been characterized as a metaphor, which gives rise to a question of interpretation: how in more literal language to cash it out? A proposed answer is that it means no more than “is true,” this interpretation being offered as a stage towards concluding that there cannot be alternative conceptual schemes (Davidson 1973-4: 16). Truth, it is held, must be translatable and alternative conceptual schemes are not. The argument suffers from a number of weaknesses. One is that conceptual schemes, in this sense, are not necessarily judged to be true, as achieving a correspondence with reality, rather as valuable for some end. Examples of ends served by conceptual schemes include understanding an unfamiliar culture, engineering a bridge, or predicting a country’s economic fortunes as it meets climate change protocols. To judge that a conceptual scheme is valuable for one of these ends is distinct from judging that the propositions of the scheme are true, and no assumption need be made that the desired value could only be achieved by means of truth.
