

Why bother? The metaphor of organizing in the conceptual schemes literature

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Abstract. Much of the recent philosophy literature on the topic of alternative conceptual schemes responds to Donald Davidson. Davidson makes an argument by applying his system to the question, “Could others have an alternative system of concepts, an alternative conceptual scheme?” But he also remarks on the metaphor of organizing. A number of others have joined in. Why? This material may seem unimportant, but I present some reasons for why, and respond to other remarks, by P.M.S Hacker and Hans-Johann Glock.

In recent decades, a number of articles in philosophy address the question of whether others could have an alternative system of concepts for describing the world, an alternative conceptual scheme for short. Much of this literature responds to Donald Davidson’s well-known paper arguing that others could not, when an alternative scheme is understood as involving a radically different system of concepts. Now Davidson’s paper features criticism of claims that our scheme organizes the world or nature or the data of sensation in one way, and another scheme organizes in another way. But these criticisms may seem unimportant compared to later material within the paper, which applies his philosophical system to the topic: more specifically, his thesis that the meaning of a sentence is the meaning that would be attributed to it by a radical interpreter¹ and his principle of charity (see Morris 1993: 167). “This later material is where the action is,” one might propose. Nevertheless, various others

¹ I anticipate someone posing the question: how can Davidson deny that others have a radically different system of concepts and say that sentence meaning is determined by a radical interpreter, because this interpreter is surely just someone who is interpreting others with such a system?

have engaged with Davidson's remarks on the organizing metaphor (e.g. Child 1994; Hacker 1996; Smith 2006; Glock 2007; Edward 2013). In this paper, I shall identify some reasons for why these remarks are of interest. I shall also respond to two philosophers who add to them.

Why attend to this? There are at least three reasons for why it is worth attending to Davidson's remarks on organizing. *1. A system-evaluation reason.* One of these reasons has to do with Davidson's system as well. Although the material which clearly applies concepts from his system to this topic is later on in his paper, Davidson's system is a large thing. It addresses a number of topics. One such topic is metaphor (1978). It is not obvious that claims of conceptual schemes organizing are metaphorical. There is a question of whether Davidson's treatment of them as metaphorical follows from his system: does consistent application of his system require this? There is also a question of whether his treatment is consistent with what his system entails about how to interpret metaphors.

2. A meaning-evaluation reason. A second reason has to do with the project of evaluating whether a given use of a word is meaningful or not. This is a project in philosophy that dates back to ancient times. Davidson's remarks on the word "organizing" are relevant for this project. 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)

Given its meaning, the notion of organizing makes no sense unless it applies to a plurality, claims Davidson. Is that true?

3. *A history of science reason.* Within the history of science, in a broad sense, there is much interest in how revolutions in theory are often accompanied by new metaphors. New metaphors are needed to describe the world as perceived by pioneers of the new theoretical framework. One might look into the use of “organizing” to describe conceptual schemes as part of contributing to that history of science literature. (Given these reasons, I suspect the reader who dismisses all but the later material has noticed the appearance of the king but not registered this queen on Davidson’s philosophical chessboard, which can move long distances in several directions – if I may be permitted this metaphor!)

Two other commentators. I now wish to respond to two other commentators on the use of the notion of organizing when talking about conceptual schemes. In his response to Davidson’s paper, P.M.S. Hacker writes:

Donald Davidson examines the view that there might be different conceptual schemes. He is rightly critical of the idea that the notion of a conceptual scheme can be elucidated helpfully in terms of such metaphors as ‘a way of organizing experience’, ‘a system of categories that give form to the data of sensation’ or ‘a cultural point of view’. Putting metaphors aside, he argues that in so far as we can try to make sense of the idea of a conceptual scheme, we should associate conceptual schemes with languages. Different languages share the same conceptual scheme if they are intertranslatable. So the hypothesis of the possibility of different conceptual schemes is the hypothesis

of the intelligibility of there being languages that are not intertranslatable.

(1996: 290)

This summary is misleading. It says that Davidson starts by attacking certain attempts to clarify what is involved in others having an alternative conceptual scheme, some of which involve the metaphor of organizing, and then he turns to another way, in terms of language and not being intertranslatable. This is not the order in which he proceeds, and there is no such division of attempts – the organizing way versus the language way – within his paper.

Let us suppose that we are all monolingual speakers of English. We can divide Davidson's argument into two stages: (*stage 1*) speakers of another language only have an alternative conceptual scheme if their language cannot be translated into ours – he argues that this is the best available criterion; but (*stage 2*) he argues that actually any language must be translatable into ours. Contrary to Hacker, Davidson attacks the metaphor of organizing in stage 2 rather than stage 1. What Davidson does in stage 2 is survey attempts to explain what a language is which supposedly allow for a language that cannot be translated to ours, in order to show that none of these actually allow for this. And one such attempt is to say that something is a language if and only if it consists of a vocabulary and a grammar together incorporating a system of concepts, a system which organizes the world or organizes the data of sensation. Davidson argues that this does not work because the notion of organizing only applies to pluralities and if our language and another organize the same plurality, they will both have ways of referring to the items organized, enabling translation (1973-4: 14-15).

I now wish to turn to a remark by Hans Johann-Glock. On Davidson, Glock writes:

He rejects outright the attempt to explain a conceptual scheme either as 'a way of organising' experience, data, or the world, or as a 'cultural point of view'.

Davidson condemns these notions as metaphorical, and so often they are, though not uniformly. In Kant, the idea that the understanding – the faculty of concepts – organises experience – the manifold of empirical intuitions – is part of an elaborate doctrine. (Glock 2007: 386)

So Glock's view is: most people who write of conceptual schemes organizing stuff are making metaphorical claims, furthermore unacceptably metaphorical ones, except Kant (or else Kant is a main exception). There are at least two problems with Glock's view. One problem has to do with how much of this conceptual scheme literature seems as if it is reacting to Kant (see Rorty 1972). It is saying that the concepts that Kant thinks are universal are not. So we can interpret these reactions as taking Kant's doctrine of concepts organizing experience, with its elaboration of what that involves, and saying that there are people with other concepts which play this organizing role.

The other problem is that it is not difficult to understand why the notion of organizing is reached for, although it may be difficult to spell out why very precisely. Let us imagine two researchers working on very different topics. One is working on economic transactions at the time of the 2008 financial crash. Another is working on the moons of Jupiter. What a contrast! Each researcher has their specialist concepts and these concepts are quite different. That is not surprising. But with alternative conceptual schemes we are interested in a situation in which we use some concepts and a person in the same location, focusing in the same direction, with much the same sensory capacities, uses other concepts. For example, when one of us is disposed to say, "That is me and that is my shadow," their description, using their concepts, draws no such distinction. How do we capture this contrast as opposed to the previous contrast? When we speak of another way of organizing the closet or a sports

team or an essay, we seem to be speaking of the same “stuff” being organized differently. There is significant sameness and yet difference too. Sameness and difference! Thus we reach for the notion of organizing, speaking of our conceptual scheme organizing in one way and the other scheme organizing in another, because organizing allows for a combination of sameness and difference. That is my preliminary attempt at spelling out why this word is reached for.²

References

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² I suppose someone might argue that Hacker’s dismissal is pragmatically self-refuting: “What he presents is a different way of organizing some of Davidson’s material, but we cannot say that without making the metaphor of organizing in the conceptual schemes literature appear much more appealing than he depicts it.”

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