Section 39: Philosophy of Language

Alternative Conceptual Schemes and a Non-Kantian Scheme-Content Dualism

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Abstract

D. Davidson argues that the existence of alternative conceptual schemes presupposes the Kantian scheme-content dualism, which requires a scheme-neutral empirical content and a fixed, sharp scheme-content distinction. The dismantlement of such a Kantian scheme-content dualism, which Davidson calls "the third dogma of empiricism", would render the notion of alternative conceptual schemes groundless. To counter Davidson's attack on the notion of alternative conceptual schemes, I argue that alternative conceptual schemes neither entail nor presuppose the Kantian scheme-content dualism. On the contrary, it is exactly the abandonment of the concept-neutral content and the denial of a fixed, absolute scheme-content distinction that turns the Kantian conceptual absolutism upside down and thus makes alternative conceptual schemes possible. Proposing common-sense experience as the empirical content of alternative schemes, I construct and defend a non-Kantian scheme-content dualism based on a non-fixed, relative scheme-content distinction. The proposed non-Kantian scheme-content dualism is not only "innocent" enough to be immune from Davidson's charge of the third dogma of empiricism, but also "solid" enough to be able to sustain alternative conceptual schemes. I conclude that in terms of our conceptual schemes, we are connected to the world as closely as possible; only through conceptual schemes can we be connected to the world.

Alternative Conceptual Schemes and A Non-Kantian Scheme-Content Dualism

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The existence of alternative conceptual schemes makes sense only if there is some empirical content to schematize. This means that *some kind* of scheme-content dualism is necessary for alternative conceptual schemes. This seems not in controversial. However, D. Davidson is convinced that the only workable scheme-content dualism that can support alternative conceptual schemes is the Kantian scheme-content dualism. First, the empirical content to be schematized has to be "something neutral and common that lies outside all schemes. … The neutral content waiting to be organized is supplied by nature…" (Davidson 1984, pp. 190-91). Second, if such a content is "the scheme-neutral input" "untouched by conceptual interpretation," then the scheme-content distinction has to be fixed and sharp; not any overlapping or intertwine between them is possible. Based on those two doctrines of the Kantian scheme-content dualism, the only legitimate empirical contents, if any, shared by alternative conceptual schemes have to be either "the sensuous given" (E1) or "the world-as-it-is" (W1).

Davidson urges us that such a Kantian scheme-content dualism, which he calls 'the third dogma of empiricism', is actually one more instance of various harmful dualisms. By imposing some epistemological intermediaries—no matter whether they are sense data / the given to be organized or schemes doing the organizing—between the mind and the world, the dualism creates an ontological gap between the mind and the world and prevents us from holding directly unto the world (Davidson 2001, p. 43). Davidson further believes that dismantlement of the Kantian scheme-content dualism would dismiss the possibility of alternative conceptual schemes (Davidson 1984, p. 192; 2001, pp. 41, 140-44).

However, to claim a victory, Davidson needs to convince us that no non-Kantian scheme-content distinction of a certain sort can be drawn that can be immune from the charge of the third dogma of empiricism. Davidson has not done so. I will argue that, following the suggestions from John McDowell (1994) and Maria Baghramian (1998), there is at least one kind of *non-Kantian* scheme-content dualism that can sustain alternative conceptual schemes.

Put the forms of a scheme aside, whether we can work out a non-Kantian scheme-content dualism depends upon whether there is other kind of empirical contents, neither E1 nor W1, which can not only escape the charge of the third dogma of empiricism, but also can sustain alternative conceptual schemes. How about (E2) our common-sense experience, that is, William James and C.I. Lewis called "the thick experience of everyday life" or (W2) the world as it is experienced by us, i.e. the world that the unquestioned vast majority of our beliefs are thought to be about? Common-sense experience is not scheme-neutral, and therefore is not subjected to the charge of the third dogma of empiricism. The question remains whether it can sustain alternative conceptual schemes. To make E2/W2 the empirical contents of alternative conceptual schemes, we immediately face two challenges from the Davidsonians. First, if there is no scheme-neutral content and fixed scheme-content distinction, how can we meaningfully separate a scheme from its empirical content? Second, how can two competing schemes share a common empirical content if the content itself could be the very making of the schemes involved?

I will argue below that it is exactly due to the abandonment of the concept-neutral content and the denial of a fixed and absolute scheme-content distinction that turns the Kantian conceptual absolutism upside down and thus makes alternative conceptual schemes possible. To see why, we need to work out a non-fixed, relative scheme-content distinction. For this purpose, we had better consider the scheme-content distinction along with another closely related distinction, i.e., the analytic-synthetic distinction between sentences being true in virtue of their meanings/concepts involved alone and sentences being true in virtue of both their meanings/concepts and their empirical content. To illustrate, imagine that a scheme (meaning, concepts, the analytical) functions as a conceptual filter between the world/experience (the empirical content of a scheme) and the beliefs/theories (the cognitive content of a scheme, the synthetic) in the way that a scheme organizes its empirical content to form its cognitive content. We have realized that, following Quine's rejection of the analytic-synthetic distinction, concepts we deploy upon experience are themselves the products of empirical inquires; in some sense, concepts are theory-laden, fact-committal, and change with theories. Accordingly, conceptual schemes change and evolve with corresponding theories. Thus, the Kantian absolute conceptual scheme gives away to relative, alternative conceptual schemes.

However, if a scheme is defined as a conceptual / linguistic framework to form its cognitive content by organizing its empirical content, we must be able to distinguish somehow a scheme from its cognitive content as well as from its empirical content. This in turn implies a distinction between the language used to describe a scheme and the theory used to describe experience. Furthermore, without some kind of analytic-synthetic distinction and scheme-content distinction in place, there is no way to tell whether two alleged conceptual schemes contain different concepts or simply embody different beliefs. Therefore, complete abandonment of the analytic-synthetic distinction and the scheme-content distinction would lead to the downfall of the very notion of alternative conceptual schemes.

It may be true that the meanings of expressions used in the formulation of a theory are introduced and modified by the theory itself, but it does not follow that no distinction can be made between the language used to formulate a theory and the theory couched within the language. After we abandon the fixed, sharp analytic-synthetic distinction, the organizing role that was exclusively attributed to analytic sentences and the empirical content that was supposedly peculiar to synthetic sentences are now seen as shared and diffused by all sentences of a language. However, it does not mean that all sentences play equal roles in forming our beliefs. Illustrate in terms of Quine's metaphor of "a web of beliefs": Sentences in the center of the web are those we are most reluctant to give up and are primarily used to describe the scheme of concepts. Those sentences play primarily the organizing role in the formation of beliefs. Confronted with the conflict of experience, we would prefer to keep those sentences fixed by comparison to the sentences on the fringes that we would more easily revise in the light of experience. We can still call the former "analytic sentences" in a modified sense that the truths of those sentences are widely accepted within the scheme although they are subject to revision too. Similarly, Wittgenstein (1969, p. 15e) asks us to imagine that a "riverbed" consists of the essential conceptual core of our worldview, and "the river" running on the riverbed represents the mass of our ever-changing belief systems. Like the riverbed, our conceptual schemes are relatively fixed and firm over a certain period of time within a certain context. They form and guide our beliefs. Our beliefs, as the rushing waters of the river could slowly change the shape of the riverbed and alter the course of the river, could change our schemes over time. Therefore, the distinction between the scheme/language and its cognitive content (belief/theory) can be drawn relatively: There is a non-fixed, fuzzy distinction between the statements about the scheme of concepts (the language) on the one hand and the statements expressing beliefs of reality/experience (the

theory) on the other. Meanings and concepts are both bearers and the products of our factual beliefs; concepts are not only the tools of inquiry but also its products.

A similar dialectical interaction exists between a scheme and its empirical content. Our concepts are products of our past experience in the form of an unquestioned vast majority of our beliefs about nature. But our experience itself is richly endowed with conceptual inputs. We will never encounter situations with a conceptual *tabula rasa*. There can be no rigid, sharp distinction between a scheme and its empirical contents, for example, between the Kantian *a priori* scheme and preschematic experiential input. Nevertheless, it does not mean that no meaningful distinction between certain schemes and experience can be drawn at all. In fact, our conceptual framework consists of multiple layers of schemes. At the bottom is our most fundamental set of concepts, dispositions, pre-judgments, or presuppositions, which I call basic experiential concepts. Like P. F. Strawson's basic concepts, these experiential concepts may constitute "a certain minimal conceptual structure" "essential to any conception (comprehensible to us) of the experience of self-conscious beings" (Strawson 1992, p. 26). They are highly general and pervasive, permeate every facet of our sensory experience, and presupposed by our experience in general. In this sense, the basic experiential concepts can be plausibly said to "structure" or "schematize" experiential input from nature, whatever it may be.

However, unlike the Kantian categorical concepts that are *a priori*, independent of any experience, the scheme of our basic experiential concepts is *globally a posteriori* as a product of our experiences. They evolve through human interaction with the natural and social environment during millions of years of human evolution. Unlike the Kantian concepts that are absolutely basic, i.e., having a fixed and invariant structure, basic experiential concepts are not categorically basic in a Kantian sense. Instead, they are *hypothetically* basic in the sense that based on our past evolutionary history and current structure of environment, those concepts are foundational—that is, universally presupposed by our experience. But we acknowledge that changes in the nature of those concepts could occur over time—for example, if our evolutionary path is altered in the future due to some unforeseeable dramatic environment change. Although we cannot give an exhaustive list of all basic experiential concepts here, they are concepts mostly related to our sense perceptions and individuation, duration, and identity of objects within space and time. For example, to experience the lovely, beautiful flower in front of me right now on the table, I need to have a concept of differentiation (such that I can distinguish the flower from its background), a concept of relative stability of the object (I know that it will not melt into thin air in the next moment), a concept of identity (I know it is the same flower sent to me by my lover yesterday), a concept of myself (I am the subject who is enjoying the flower), a concept of space and time, and so on. We can safely assume that, based on Darwinian evolution theory, there are some basic experiential concepts shared by human cultures and societies. In this sense, they are global or universal.

Accordingly, our common-sense experience is the product of the dialectical interaction between our basic experiential concepts and experiential input from nature, whatever it may be, such that there is no way to separate which is form and which is content. The notion of "experiential input from nature" is, borrowing N. Rescher's comment on the notion of scheme-independent reality, "not *constitutive,* not as a substantial constituent of the world—in contrast with 'mere appearance'—but a purely regulative idea whose function to block the pretensions of any one single scheme to a monopoly on correctness or finality" (Rescher 1980, p. 337). In other words, I intend to use the notion to emphasize the empirical root of our basic experiential concepts. Our common-sense experience thus can be thought to be a common content shared by other higher-level schemes. Hence, we can have commonality without neutrality.

Besides our basic experiential concepts as the foundation of our conceptual and experiential life, there are some more advanced sets of concepts or metaphysical presuppositions associated with specific cultures, intellectual traditions, or languages. Some of those conceptual schemes are radically distinct and schematize our rudimentary common-sense experience in different ways to form diverse worldviews, cosmologies, or ways of life. The presence of different conceptual schemes manifests itself most dramatically when we come across some different ways of categorizing what seems to be the common experience. The best-known case would be classification of color in different cultures. As the literature on color amply demonstrates, apparently individually identifiable color samples, which two cultural groups presumably experience in the same way, are often categorized into very different color systems in terms of different concepts of color. Similar examples are plentiful in anthropological and historical literatures that have often been discussed by scholars in other areas, such as cognitive scientists, psychologists, and linguists. If not only what one experiences determines what one believes, but also what one believes shapes what one experiences (the thesis of the theory-ladenness of observation), communities that adopt two radically distinct conceptual schemes and accordingly different worldviews would have different "more conceptually enriched experiences," so to speak. This is the reason why Thomas Kuhn makes a seemingly absurd claim that those communities "live in two different worlds."

I have argued that alternative conceptual schemes neither entail nor presuppose the Kantian scheme-content dualism. In giving up the Kantian scheme-content dualism, we do not give up scheme-content dualism and alternative conceptual schemes. Our non-Kantian scheme-content dualism does not need to introduce any epistemological intermediary between the world and us. In terms of our conceptual schemes, we are connected to the world as closely as possible; only through conceptual schemes can we be connected to the world. We can acknowledge our common experiential root and celebrate our conceptual diversity at the same time.

References

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