Conceptual schemes and truth, by J*seph 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. After the pastiche, I present a note with further clarifications.

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, for example 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.[1] 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.

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[1] One can either agree with the interpretation which focuses on truth and say that this metaphor should be dispensed with in these cases, or reject the interpretation for these cases.

Note

Davidson's paper is concerned amongst other things with alternative conceptual schemes in science, but the point about conceptual schemes being valued without being regarded as true is probably easier to grasp if one focuses on disciplines whose ends are chiefly practical, such as engineering and economics, and whose relationship to standard examples of science is not transparent. Note also that in the definition above, the notion of a point of view is left undefined. A natural starting point for clarifying this notion is that the propositions composing the scheme must be general, so that they can be applied to specific case after specific case, and also consistent; but it seems something else must be added because a haphazard set could meet these conditions.[2]

References

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

Quine, W.V. 1950. Two Dogmas of Empiricism. *The Philosophical Review* 60: 20-43.

Wang, X. and Xu, L. 2010. A Presuppositional Approach to Conceptual Schemes. *South African Journal of Philosophy* 29: 404-421.

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[2] Xinli Wang and Ling Xu have clarified a presuppositional approach to conceptual schemes and argued against a focus on each scheme's being true, but by subtly shifting the focus to how users of a conceptual scheme attribute truth and falsity to claims by users of another scheme: that they do not attribute these properties at all, or their scheme does not. No such proposal is made in the Raz pastiche above.