

Does the notion of organizing only apply to pluralities? The origami, circle, and family hatter objections

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Abstract. In this brief paper, I present some counterexamples to Donald Davidson's claim that the notion of organizing only applies to pluralities.

In the midst of one of his papers, Donald Davidson offers the following analysis of the notion of organizing:

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)

Davidson summarizes his point by saying that the notion of organizing only applies to pluralities. Is this true? I find it difficult to object to by means of counterexample, but below are some efforts.

The origami objection. Consider the art and craft of origami: of folding a piece of paper to make something, such as a figure of a swan or a frog. As I understand English, I can meaningfully say, "Origami involves organizing the paper." But I don't have to conceive of the paper as containing or consisting of objects. Perhaps that conception is more scientifically accurate, but I do not contradict myself if I reject the science nor does my statement become

meaningless if combined with this rejection. The paper is one thing distributed over space. On my untutored view, it does not contain or consist of objects, six objects say. It is true that portions of it are over here and portions over there, but it does not come divided into a specific number of portions. I can say, “Let us call this top half ‘portion A’ and this lower half ‘portion B’ ” and someone else can say, “Let us divide it up into three.”

The circle objection. A mathematics teacher tells their class, “A circle is a set of points organized in the following way. There is a point which is the centre and a circle consists of all the points at a certain distance from that centre. That distance is the radius.” But the mathematics teacher wishes to allow for a circle of radius zero. I cannot see that their use of “organized” is meaningless, or misplaced, because this possibility is allowed.

The family hatter objection. The expression, “He keeps his family under one hat,” describes a way of organizing a family, but I believe the expression, when used more literally, is meant to convey the following: he wears a hat, only one family member can fit under this hat, and so there is only one member of this family. Can I not still say that the expression describes a way of organizing a family?

Reference

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