

Pragmatic self-refutation, the denial of water, and alternative conceptual schemes

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Abstract. Pragmatic self-refutation is when one asserts something but one's act of assertion refutes the content of that assertion. In this paper, I consider whether Donald Davidson is guilty of this when arguing against the possibility of alternative conceptual schemes.

Does anyone know any interesting examples of pragmatic self-refutation? This occurs when one asserts something but one's act of assertion provides material which refutes the content of the assertion, for example someone asserts, "It is impossible to assert anything."

I think Donald Davidson is guilty of pragmatic self-refutation – or something quite similar – when arguing against alternative conceptual schemes. An anthropologist claims that group A speak a language which incorporates one system of concepts for organizing the data of sensation and group B speak a language which incorporates an alternative system for this purpose. Davidson argues, "The notion of organizing only applies to pluralities, but then alternative conceptual schemes are being said to organize the same plurality and each will have ways of referring to the items within the plurality and so they will not count as genuine alternative systems, in a philosophically interesting sense." (His argument in my words.)

Now here is Davidson arguing that the notion of organizing only applies to pluralities:

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)

But what about the water? It seems to me that Davidson starts with this understanding of organizing the closet: there are items in the closet and one organizes those, but one does not count the empty space (or the air in the closet) as an item. Then when he contemplates organizing the Pacific Ocean, the water is regarded as analogous to the empty space. It does not count as one of the items to be organized. But someone else organizing the Pacific Ocean might well include the water as amongst the things to be organized. So both Davidson and this other organize the Pacific Ocean but they work with different lists of the items to be organized.¹ So Davidson's very argument that alternative organizing systems must refer to the same list of things organized "includes" material which refutes that argument.

Perhaps there is some other explanation for why Davidson makes no reference to water, but I cannot see that this will help. His own Pacific Ocean example undermines his view that if others have a conceptual scheme which organizes the same thing, it will "have to individuate according to familiar principles." (1973-4: 14-15)

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

Edward, T.R. 2022. Conceptual schemes, analytic truths, and organizing the Pacific Ocean.

Available at: <https://philpapers.org/rec/EDWCSA-2>

¹ The material here overlaps with the appendix to another paper of mine, entitled "Conceptual schemes, analytic truths, and organizing the Pacific Ocean," but its purpose there is to argue that someone can meaningfully apply "organizing" to something regarded as not-a-plurality, whereas here two people organize the same thing, each regarding it as a plurality, but each has a different list of the items that compose the plurality.