

## FROM AN ANALYSIS OF THE NOTION OF ORGANIZATION TO LIMITS ON CONCEPTUAL DIVERSITY

[Bir Düzenleme Nosyonu Analizinden Kavramsal Çeşitliliğin Sınırlarına]

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### ABSTRACT

This paper evaluates an argument from Donald Davidson against alternative conceptual schemes. The argument can be divided into two stages. In the first stage it is argued that only pluralities can be organized. In the second stage it is argued that if our conceptual scheme organizes a plurality and someone else's scheme also organizes that plurality, there must be a set of common concepts, hence someone else's scheme can never be an alternative scheme to ours. I object to the first stage of the argument.

**Keywords:** Donald Davidson, conceptual scheme, organize, plurality, sensitive to reality.

### ÖZET

Bu çalışma Donald Davidson'un alternatif kavramsal şemalara karşı argümanını değerlendiriyor. Bu argüman iki aşamaya bölünebilir. İlk aşamada yalnızca çoğullukların düzenlenebileceği savunuluyor. İkinci aşamada ise, kavramsal şemamız bir çoğulluğu düzenler ve başka birinin şeması da aynı çoğulluğu düzenlerse, ortak kavramlar grubu olması gerekeceği ve dolayısıyla başkasının şemasının hiçbir zaman bizimkine alternatif bir şema olamayacağı savunuluyor. Ben bu argümanın ilk aşamasına itiraz ediyorum.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Donald Davidson, kavramsal şema, düzenleme (organization), çoğulluk, gerçekliğe duyarlı.

Conceptual schemes are sometimes said to organize the world in different ways. From the point of view of our system of concepts, of our conceptual scheme, the world contains houses, closets, clothes, seas, fish, sunlight and more. From the point of view of an alternative scheme to ours, it contains other things. Our scheme, it is said, organizes the world in one way, whereas another scheme organizes it in some other way.

In his well-known essay ‘On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme’, Donald Davidson makes an argument that focuses on this talk of our scheme organizing the world in one way and an alternative scheme organizing it in another way (1984, pp. 191-192). He claims that the notion of organization only applies to something if it contains or consists in a plurality of objects. Davidson then goes on to argue that, once this point is appreciated, we should realize that others cannot possibly have an alternative scheme, when conceptual schemes are understood to be systems of concepts.

Davidson’s argument can be divided into two stages. In the first stage, he supposes that if others have a system of concepts which is an alternative scheme to our own, then there must be some common thing that their scheme and our scheme organize. The aim of this stage is to establish that we cannot understand the claim that this common thing is organized unless we understand it to contain or consist in a plurality of objects:

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 (1984, p. 192).

Davidson later summarises his conclusion by saying that the notion of organization only applies to pluralities. A plurality, in this context, is a plurality of objects. The objects that are part of it are called objects by Davidson, I believe, because he thinks that they can exist independently of one another.

The second stage of Davidson's argument aims to establish that, in light of the conclusion of the first stage, there cannot be alternative schemes. To be more precise, it aims to establish that there cannot be alternative conceptual schemes, when a conceptual scheme is understood to be a system of concepts – a qualification that I shall generally omit. Davidson asserts that if someone else's scheme organizes the same thing as our scheme and this common thing has to be a plurality, in accordance with the first stage of the argument, then their scheme cannot be sufficiently different to our own to count as an alternative scheme. Hence there can be no alternative schemes.

Why must their scheme be not that different from our own scheme if it organizes the same thing and this thing is a plurality? There are different interpretations of what Davidson's answer to this question is, because the text is less than transparent. Kirk Ludwig and Ernest Lepore present one interpretation (2005, p. 310). Other interpretations can be found in various dissertations (Julien Beillard, 2008, p. 76; Broadbent, 2009, p. 43). I will present an interpretation that is suggested by the following passage, in which Davidson considers the claim that conceptual schemes organize sensory experience, rather than the world:

The notion of organization applies only to pluralities. But whatever plurality we take experience to consist in—events like losing a button or stubbing a toe, having a sensation of warmth or hearing an oboe—we will have to individuate according to familiar principles. A language that organizes *such* entities must be a language very like our own (1984, p. 192).

This passage suggests that Davidson's line of thought is as follows. What it means to say that our conceptual scheme organizes sensory experience is that we classify the sensations we experience with the concepts of our scheme. A person might classify certain sensations as impressions of the breeze, using the concept of the breeze, and other sensations as impressions of a wave, using the concept of a wave. If they have a significantly different set of concepts for organizing experience, they will classify the same sensations differently, as impressions of other things, but they will still individuate the items that are subject to classification in the same way. In other words, they will

abide by the same principles for determining when there is one of these items, one sensation, and when there is another, even if they differ in how they interpret these items. This can only be the case if they have some common concepts, such as the concept of numerical identity and the concept of numerical difference.

A parallel line of thought can be pursued if the thing organized is something other than sensory experience, for instance the world. If others differ significantly in their concepts for organizing the world, they might classify the objects in the world differently, but they will still abide by the same principles for determining when there is one of these items, one object, and when there is another. They will therefore rely on some common concepts. Below I will be concerned with the world as the thing organized, not sensory experience. The general point is this: others who organize the same thing differently must abide by the same principles for individuating the items that are subject to organization, which requires having some common concepts, hence they cannot have an alternative scheme.

One might suspect that Davidson is working with an overly stringent criterion for when others have an alternative scheme. Even if there are one or two shared concepts, it might still strike one as reasonable to describe the others as having an alternative scheme. I suspect that a follower of Davidson will respond to this point by saying that concepts do not come in isolation or anything close to it: if others have a single concept of ours, they must have a host of related concepts. Whether or not this is true, the result that there must be concepts which are shared by those who purportedly have alternative schemes is a significant one in its own right, if Davidson's argument establishes it. This is what I wish to deny.

Davidson thinks that, if there are alternative conceptual schemes, then there must be some common thing to which each scheme stands in a relationship. The first stage of his argument is supposed to show that this common thing must be a plurality. Davidson focuses on a characterization of the relationship in terms of organizing – each scheme organizes the same thing differently – but he intends for the lesson to hold for other ways of characterizing the relationship, characterizations

which he treats as much the same (1984, pp. 191-192). The objection I wish to make is that we are not given any adequate reason to think that it holds for the crucial relationship claim that is of concern here.

In order to explain this claim, I will rely on the idea that a discourse we participate in can be sensitive to reality without accurately representing reality. It will be useful to first introduce an example to help grasp this idea. Take talk of the sun rising and setting. One might think that this kind of talk is, strictly speaking, false, because the sun does not literally rise or set. Let us grant this error theory. Nevertheless, we abide by certain norms when participating in this discourse and thereby convey information about how the world is. Our claims are sensitive to how the world is.

Ordinarily, we think that we can specify which features they are sensitive to, given that it is not the actual rising and setting of the sun. Later in this paper, I will introduce one kind of advocate of alternative conceptual schemes, who wants to preserve the idea that such talk is sensitive to how the world is while denying that we can provide this specification. Generally different kinds of advocate believe that what there is from the perspective of our scheme is what we ordinarily presume there to be. From this perspective, the world contains houses, closets, clothes, seas, fish, sunlight and more. The perspective of our scheme is the result of applying the concepts of the scheme to the world. It is a conceptual representation of what there is. But not just any concept applications will reveal the perspective of our scheme. The concept applications have to be in line with certain norms. The result is a representation of the world which is sensitive to its content, even if the representation does not correctly identify this content. The perspective of an alternative scheme is in turn the result of applying the concepts of that scheme in line with norms. From its perspective, there are other things from the things that we ordinarily presume there to be. Assuming it is the scheme of another culture, advocates of alternative conceptual schemes will generally say that, from the perspective of this scheme, there are what users of the scheme ordinarily presume there to be.

The crucial relationship claim here is that the concepts of a scheme, when applied in line with certain norms, generate a perspective on the world which is sensitive to its content. We can break this claim down into three propositions:

- (a) A given conceptual scheme consists of concepts.
- (b) The application of these concepts in line with certain norms results in a representation of what there is, which is the perspective of that scheme on reality.
- (c) This perspective is sensitive to the content of reality.

What Davidson needs to show, in the first stage of his argument, is that the claim composed of these propositions can only be true if the world is a plurality, so that the second stage can show that its being a plurality entails the impossibility of alternative schemes. His remarks on organizing simply do not contribute to the goal of the first stage.

I have asserted this point as if it were obvious. If it is not that obvious, then recall Davidson's remark about organizing the closet. The instruction to organize the closet itself and not the items within it is indeed bewildering. This is because it seems essential to organizing the closet that one moves items within it for the purpose of achieving a practical or aesthetic end. If Davidson's remark is to contribute to his argument, we must experience much the same bewilderment when considering the idea of the concepts of a scheme being applied to generate a perspective on a non-plural thing, a perspective that is sensitive to how that thing is. Whatever reservations there might be about this idea, I do not experience this bewilderment and I assume that the same is true of others. It may be said that the important issue is not what we experience, but what we have reason to experience. But there is no apparent reason to experience much the same bewilderment and Davidson does not identify a less-than-apparent reason.

As indicated earlier, advocates of alternative schemes can be divided into different kinds. One kind says that the perspective of our scheme and the perspective of another scheme are both sensitive to the world and, moreover, both accurate representations of the world. Another kind says that,

although both perspectives are sensitive to the world's content, we cannot know which representation, if any, is correct. The advocate of alternative schemes whom I shall now focus on does not belong to either of these categories. They deny that the world can be correctly represented with concepts, except by asserting the absence of certain things, not by specifying what there is. This advocate will deny that the world is a plurality, for if it is, then its content can partly be specified by saying that it contains a plurality of things. If they speak of conceptual schemes organizing the world into pluralities, they can easily evade the first stage of Davidson's argument by dropping all talk of organizing and articulating themselves in the way that I have articulated their relationship claim. What they can say is that, despite the pluralistic perspective of our scheme being sensitive to the content of reality, and the pluralistic perspective of some other scheme also being sensitive to this content, these representations of reality are nevertheless false. (This is such a mouthful that, for convenience, they may continue to speak of reality being organized into a plurality.)

I have referred to the argument evaluated in this paper as Davidson's argument, but the argument I have presented is not quite the same as the material on organizing that appears in the original text. There Davidson writes of a language organizing rather than a system of concepts, and of translatability between languages rather than shared concepts. If others have an alternative scheme to us, then they have a language which organizes some common thing in a different way and which cannot be translated into our language (1984, p. 192). More precisely, no significant range of sentences from that language can be translated. Davidson first argues that the notion of organization only applies to pluralities. He then argues that if others have a language that organizes the same thing, which is a plurality, there must be a significant range of sentences from it which can be translated into our language. Hence they cannot have an alternative scheme.

Much the same criticism can be made of this linguistic formulation of the argument. The crucial relationship to this common thing can be explicated without using the notion of organization and in a way that reveals the first stage of Davidson's argument to be inadequate. When the words of our language are applied in line with certain norms associated with them, the result is a perspective on the common thing, a perspective that is sensitive to the content of this thing, even if it does not

correctly specify this content. When the words of a language that incorporates an alternative scheme are applied, the result is a different perspective on it, also sensitive to its content. Once we have these claims in focus, we can see that Davidson's remarks about how we cannot make sense of the instruction to organize the closet itself, and about how one would go about the herculean task of organizing the Pacific Ocean, fail to justify his view that the common thing must be a plurality. These cases do not draw attention to a puzzle in a philosophical picture which relates conceptual schemes to a non-plural thing.



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