Wittgenstein and Conceptual Relativism

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Abstract
There are reasons to attribute conceptual relativism to Wittgenstein. They are related mainly to his notion of grammar, its posited arbitrariness, theory of language games and forms of life intertwined with them. In his famous article 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,' Donald Davidson rejected conceptual relativism, questioning the very idea that various conceptual schemes exist. In my paper, I would like to consider how Davidson’s arguments could be responded to. Drawing on some of Wittgenstein’s findings.

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In his famous article 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,' Donald Davidson rejected conceptual relativism, questioning the very idea that various conceptual schemes exist. Side by side with the analytical-synthetic division and the reductionist principle, this dualism is the third dogma of empiricism, which Davidson seeks to repudiate as Quine repudiated the first two.

In this paper, I would like to consider how Davidson’s arguments could be responded to. Drawing on some of Wittgenstein’s findings.

To start with, let us recall that for Davidson having a conceptual scheme entails having a language, which means that where conceptual schemes differ, languages differ as well. Of course, it may well be that users of different languages share the same conceptual scheme provided that these languages are mutually translatable. The disparity between conceptual schemes is bound up with their untranslatability, what is more, untranslatability is a necessary condition for differentiation of conceptual schemes. Davidson analyses two cases, namely, complete and partial untranslatability, only to assert that both cases are hopeless, which means that the dualism of scheme and content is impossible, as is, consequently, the stance of conceptual relativism. Complete untranslatability would take place if no meaningful part of sentences in one language could be translated into another; partial untranslatability, in turn, would be the case if some sentences could indeed be translated. As for the former, according to Davidson if a form of activity cannot be interpreted in our language, it follows that it cannot be a linguistic behaviour altogether. (The defining criterion of languagehood is, then, translatability into our language.) This, however, is far from obvious. Wittgenstein consistently stressed the interconnectedness of language and our actions, or forms of life, viewing language as a part of human practice. Considering this, we can easily imagine, for example, that we arrive among a tribe whose members produce sounds which, given their tonality, we just cannot sort out into particular words. That notwithstanding, we can identify them as a language because the community members respond to them by taking or abandoning action, listening, answering, etc. Unlike Davidson, but in keeping with Wittgenstein’s emphasis on the links between language and action, I believe that translatability into the language we know cannot be the only criterion of identity for language.

The dualism of scheme and content has been formulated in many various ways and species, but its general point is that something is a language, and associated with a conceptual scheme, whether we can translate it or not, if it stands in a certain relation (predicting, organizing, fitting) to experience (nature, reality, sensory promptings). The problem is to say what the relation is. (Davidson 1984, 191)

Davidson divides all metaphors into two groups: schemes either organize something or fit it. Correspond to it. As for entities which can be organised or which a scheme fits, they may be either reality or experience. Organising one object (the world, nature) is unclear to Davidson as is organising experience and it does not provide any other criterion of languagehood but translatability. Thus, he hastens to proceed to the other metaphor, that is, to the idea of fitting. This concerns whole sentences because sentences deal with things and fit reality or our sensory promptings and can be confronted with empirical evidence. According to Davidson, the concept of fitting the totality of experience or facts does not contribute anything comprehensible to the concept of being true. Which leads to a simple conclusion that a thing is an accepted scheme or theory if it is true. Davidson claims, however, that the concept of truth cannot be understood if dissociated from the concept of translation. This is the key argument Davidson advances against complete untranslatability. Thereby drawing on Tarski’s definition of truth. Tarski's Convention T holds that a viable truth theory for language L must entail for every sentence in language L, a sentence of the form ‘s is true in f. and only if p,’ where s is a name (a structural description) of sentence s. and p is a translation of this sentence into meta-language. If, according to Davidson Tarski’s Convention T embodies our best intuitions about the use of the concept of truth, then it is a futile venture to look for criteria that differ fundamentally from our schemes and assume dissociating the concept of truth from translation. It is, namely, difficult to imagine a language which would be untranslatable into another one and yet true. Concluding, translatability is, thus, the criterion of identity for language.

As already mentioned, Davidson associates a conceptual scheme with language and, upholding Quine’s refutation of the analytical-synthetic division, he rejects the notion that theory and language could be separated. As a result, he identifies language with theory, which does not seem right. First of all, language is not a totality of sentences, but a set of syntactic and semantic rules used to produce sentences. Secondly, unlike theory, language does not anticipate anything. Even if we agreed that language, like theory, was a totality of sentences rather than
rules, we would still need to observe that language as such a totality of sentences would necessarily have to include also the negations of these sentences, which a coherent theory cannot possibly comprise (cf. Hacker 1996, 297; Glock 2006, 31).} This difficulty is removed if a conceptual scheme is compared not so much to language (theory) but to a grammar of a language. A language’s grammar encompasses the use of expressions of that language and not of non-natural (logical) propositions that hide behind everyday word-use and provide a necessary basis of all possible systems of representation. Grammar rules determine sense and precede the truth or falsity of sentences. At the same time, Wittgenstein stresses that there are various autonomous grammars, and their rules are as arbitrary as the choice of the units of measure. The rules do not speak anything about facts, nor are they true or false instead; they define the sense of that speaking. In this context, Hacker aptly notices that it would be more advisable to speak of conceptual schemes or grammars for particular areas, as in fact Wittgenstein did, focusing on, for example, the discourse of colours, space, size, time or truth and falsehood. This is, however, what Davidson refuses to do since he seeks to avoid all distinctions similar to the difference Wittgenstein formulated between ‘grammatical propositions’, which determine sense or meaning, and empirical propositions, which describe the way things are in the world. As an argument against such divisions, Davidson cites Quine’s critique of analyticity, which was, however, originally targeted against Carnap first of all.

Let us now turn to partial untranslatability. In this case, understanding the difference between conceptual schemes is made possible by referring to their shared part. Davidson made a prior assumption that a person’s speech cannot be interpreted without a knowledge about that person’s beliefs (and also desires and intentions) and that identification of beliefs is impossible without understanding the language. In the case of ‘radical interpretation’, that is translation from a language entirely unknown to us, we must by necessity assume a basic agreement on beliefs. ‘We get a first approximation to a finished theory’, writes Davidson, ‘by assigning to sentences of a speaker conditions of truth that actually obtain (in our own opinion) just when the speaker holds them sentences true.’ (Davidson 1984, 196). Davidson refers to this as the ‘principle of charity’. By attributing maximum sense to words and thoughts of others, assuming that in most cases they are indeed right, we optimise agreement and the area of shared beliefs thereby accommodating explicable errors and differences of opinion. As a result, Davidson treats differences in conceptual schemes the way he does differences of beliefs, we make those differences more comprehensible by enlarging the basis of shared, that is translatable language or opinion. ‘But’, as Davidson writes, ‘when others think differently from us, no general principle, or appeal to evidence, can force us to decide that the difference lies in our beliefs rather than in our concepts’. (Davidson 1984, 197) Given this reasoning, we cannot make sense when we assert that two schemes are different as we are unable to assess whether concepts or beliefs radically differ from ours. By the same token, the dogma of duality of scheme and content collapses, and with it conceptual relativism does as well.

We should also remember that maximization of agreement postulated by the ‘principle of charity’ probably cannot be a theoretical act because if it were, it would be purely declarative and the attribution to others of beliefs resembling ours would not be underpinned by real premises. In §241 of Philosophical investigations, Wittgenstein writes, ‘It is what human beings say that is true and false, and they agree in the language they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life.’ It is not exclusively not even primarily in utterances that shared beliefs are manifested, but rather in action, in sensory and volitional responses to certain stimuli from the environment and in its compositional relationships. Davidson says that interpretation of an alien language must commence from attributing to statements a person utterers in this language truth conditions which indeed obtain when the statement is being uttered. But, as Hacker aptly notices, in what way the observer should identify assertions and separate them from imperatives or interrogations prior to understanding words or sentences is, as a matter of fact, rather puzzling. Davidson explicitly privileges truth over meaning.

However, in Davidson, the key problem as related to conceptual relativism is the claim that there is nothing to suggest that differences between us and natives in holding sentences to be true lie in different beliefs or judgments and not in the difference of concepts. In the language of the Piraha, there are no numbers, numerals or any forms of counting altogether. They basically use two words denoting more or less ‘a little’ and ‘a lot’, but their use thereof is very peculiar. For example, they refer to two small fish and one medium-sized fish alike as ‘a little’ and distinguish them from a tiger or a big fish. Given this, it is really difficult to accept Davidson’s distinction between ‘disagreement in beliefs’ and ‘disagreement in concepts’. In the case of the Piraha use of ‘a little’ and ‘a lot’, we do not deal with new words, but rather with an anticipation of a different conceptual structure for a given bit of language. It can serve as an example of a partial difference in conceptual scheme, which is a difference between the corresponding segments of the grammar of expressions, for example the grammar of colour expressions or of numbers and counting. And this is not a difference in truth, but a difference in grammar. When the Piraha say that two small fish means the same as one medium-sized fish – which in our grammar would mean that two equals one – the disagreement between us that is a disagreement about concepts, does not produce a disagreement about truth. What the Piraha say is true, but their truth is incommensurable with our truth. It does not mean, either that we are unable to understand their conceptual schemes for colours or numbers through, admittedly, we cannot translate them into ours. Hacker aptly notices that when trying to master the native language, an anthropologist not only engages in translation, as Quine’s and Davidson’s interpretations would suggest, but also wants to speak that language that is, to understand the meanings of words. The anthropologist would then seek explanations, extensive definitions, examples, paraphrases, etc. in the native language. Hacker compared differences in concepts to differences in ‘measures’ while the disagreement in beliefs or judgments to a disagreement in ‘measurements’. Consequently, he asks, ‘Is it intelligible to claim that we can never allocate an apparent difference in judgment to a difference in the measure used, as opposed to a disagreement in the measurement executed?’ (Hacker 1996, 303). Let us recall the example of wood-sellers which Wittgenstein resorted to in his Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics. The wood-sellers pile up logs in heaps of varying heights and then sell them at the price proportionate to the area they cover and not by the cubic meter. How could we convince them that they make a mistake and that the bigger area of the pile covers does not entail more wood? We could. Wittgenstein proposes, arrange the pile which is small for them in such a way as to make it big. Perhaps the fact that would convince them: but we might as well get to hear ‘Yes, it’s a lot of wood and it costs more.’ And that would be the end of the matter,’ states Wittgenstein. We should
presumably say in this case: they simply do not mean the same by a lot of wood and a little wood as we do and they have a quite different system of payment from us.” (Wittgenstein 1998, 94) At closer inspection, the example corresponds to the problem of partial translatability: the wood-sellers measure, count and sell, that is, they perform the same activities as we do, but they do it differently. “Differently” means simply wrongly. Their mistake seems to lie in the choice of the measure which determines the meaning “more wood” for them. It seems that it would be easy to convince them sooner or later that they are making a mistake, but it is in fact not the case, and Wittgenstein emphatically communicates that with the conclusive “That would be the end of the matter.” Stating this, he meant, I guess, that although their activities are similar to ours, we do not understand them, in fact, and we do not know what they refer to when they use such expressions as “a lot of wood” and “a little wood.” Neither do we know whether what they do is indeed measuring and selling because, as a matter of fact, we know only very little about them: what do they do with the wood, how do they distribute other products, why do they pile wood into heaps? Their activity of measurement and calculation cannot be correct or incorrect as we do not know for sure whether they indeed measure and calculate, or at least we are not authorised to identify such actions. We are seduced by a certain image, perhaps by the unconsciously applied “principle of charity”, which holds that there are beliefs and concepts whose meanings are independent of practices in which these concepts are applied. In such circumstances, we are prone to think that the concepts of measuring, counting and selling are already present in the language of the wood-sellers, but they are wrongly applied in practice. But the practice of the wood-sellers, which focuses only to the area covered by the piles and lacks the activities of measuring and calculating the quantity of wood familiar to us, is not a practice in which measurement takes place.

Concluding, we could assume, I believe, that relativism is not unthinkable. Particularly when language is comprehended, the way it was by Wittgenstein, as a part of human forms of life, and the meaning of words as intertwined with our actions. I think that responding to Davidson’s arguments, Wittgenstein would emphasise this interconnection, teaching us in this way, to perceive differences rather than to agree on shared truth conditions.

References
