

# Radical Interpretation, Logic, and Conceptual Schemes

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July 23, 2000

## Abstract

§1 investigates the issues that can arise in radical interpretation from reading one's own logic in to a foreign tongue. Davidson's method of radical interpretation allows the interpreter to impute differing metaphysical convictions (realist or anti-realist) to the natives. §2 takes issue with Davidson and Rorty on the possibility of alternative conceptual schemes. §3 examines the link between truth and translation, and argues that Convention T provides inadequate grounds for conceptual monism.

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\*To appear in Mario De Caro, ed., *Interpretations and Causes. New Perspectives on Donald Davidson's Philosophy*, Kluwer Academic Press. Thanks go to Jon Cogburn, Diana Raffman, Barry Smith and William Taschek for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

# I

Logic plays a central role in radical interpretation. As Davidson explains,<sup>1</sup>

The process of devising a theory of truth for an unknown native tongue might in crude outline go as follows. First we look for the best way to fit our logic, to the extent required to get a theory satisfying Convention T, on to the new language; this may mean reading the logical structure of first-order quantification theory (plus identity) into the language, not taking the logical constants one by one, but treating this much of logic as a grid to be fitted on to the language in one fell swoop.

It is crucial that Davidson enters the qualification ‘to the extent required to get a theory satisfying Convention T’ in the quote just given—to be interpreted as ‘only to the extent required . . .’. This shows that the ‘reading of one’s logic in to the natives’ language’ that he recommends takes place in the weaker of the two senses about to be distinguished.

On this weaker sense, we seek native analogues of each of the logical operators in the logic that is to be ‘read into’ the natives’ language. We also assume that the native language will have modes of composition, other than the logical operators themselves, like those of the logical syntax of our own language—means for forming such expressions as complex denoting terms, sentences with predicate/argument structure, etc.<sup>2</sup>

When identifying native analogues of the quantification theorist’s inclusive disjunction operator  $\vee$  and negation operator  $\neg$ , we check whether they match up in their respective ‘central logical inference patterns’. That is, we check whether the natives’ analogues of  $\vee$  and  $\neg$  appear to behave, within their language, in much the same way that  $\vee$  and  $\neg$  behave in standard (classical) quantification theory. This presupposes that we are able to identify what counts as making a deductive inference within the natives’ language; so let us assume for the sake of argument that we are so able. A great deal now depends on what we take to be the ‘central logical inference patterns’. Would it be enough, for example, for the native analogue of  $\vee$  to behave, inferentially, in ways that we would regiment as disjunction introduction and

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<sup>1</sup>‘Radical Interpretation’, in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford University Press, 1984; at p. 136.

<sup>2</sup>This assumption is easy to grant when the natives in question are fellow human beings. It is worth stressing, however, that we shall allow the assumption even in the case, to be considered in §II below, where the ‘natives’ are extra-terrestrial intelligences (ETIs).

disjunction elimination (proof by cases)? Or should we require more?—such as that all four de Morgan dualities, and excluded middle, appear to hold?

In the ‘weak sense’ of ‘reading our logic into the natives’ language’ it should suffice to establish that the introduction and elimination rules appear to hold sway for the natives’ analogues of  $\vee$  and  $\neg$ . These are the major sense-determining inferential moulds that shape the bulk of the overall logical behavior of these constants—the bulk being intuitionistically as well as classically acceptable, and hence moot on the possibly disputed classical extras.<sup>3</sup>

We could then proceed to give Tarskian clauses for these operators in the usual way, and generate truth-conditions for complex sentences involving them. In doing so, we shall not be exploiting, in the metalogic of our truth theory, any more logical relations than those already afforded by the central inference patterns mentioned. For the derivation of T-sentences exploits only that sub-classical kernel of logical conformity,<sup>4</sup> and it leaves room for subsequent disagreement over whether such-and-such other logical inference patterns within the language should be taken as valid (the de Morgan inference ‘ $\neg(P \wedge Q)$ ; therefore  $\neg P \vee \neg Q$ ’, say; or double negation elimination ‘ $\neg\neg P$ , therefore  $P$ ’; or non-constructive counterexample ‘ $\neg\forall xFx$ ; therefore  $\exists x\neg Fx$ ’).

As already noted, this weaker sense of ‘reading our logic in to the natives’ language’ is the one to be attributed to Davidson, on the basis of his *caveat* noted above.

Let us turn to the stronger sense in which one might ‘read one’s logic’ into the natives’ language. This stronger sense is not to be imputed to any interpretive recommendation by Davidson; the concern is just to explore its consequences. In this stronger sense, one would be much more finicky about the apparent normative logical patterns into which the various operators might enter. One would require the natives to ‘agree with’ all the valid patterns of our own (classical) logic. To the extent that their logical behavior appeared to deviate from what we expected, we would call them

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<sup>3</sup>What we mean by ‘introduction’ and ‘elimination’ rules, especially for negation, are the thoroughbred notions of the professional proof-theorist, not the mongrel notions to be found in Gilbert Harman’s ‘The meanings of logical constants’, in E. Le Pore, ed., *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1986, pp. 125-134. Harman confuses matters by not employing a primitive notion of absurdity, and by not carefully distinguishing the absurdity rule *ex falso quodlibet* from the rule of negation-elimination.

<sup>4</sup>This kernel is contained within the system *IR* of intuitionistic relevant logic. On this point, see N. Tennant, *Anti-Realism and Logic*, Oxford University Press, 1987.

incompetent—regarding them as misapprised of the senses that we think their logical operators ought to have.

If we were to read our own (classical) logic into the natives' language in this stronger sense, we would be rendering the natives as classical logicians and metaphysical realists. But might they not be of different metaphysical persuasion from this default interpretive realism, but still intelligibly so? Should we not be able to interpret them in such a way as to respect their demurrals at metaphysical realism, but register none the less their common-sense agreement (with us) on matters mundane and decidable? Surely one can imagine cases, indeed ones of even a terrestrial kind, where one's intuitions would protest against the radical interpreter who insisted on fitting the grid of his classical logic upon the finely thought-out filigree of native inference?

Attaining a realist outlook by adopting classical modes of logical inference might be an achievement with which it would be premature to credit the natives. So it would be wrong to try to impose our full classical logic upon them in the course of interpreting their language. If this be thought patronizing, then let us play the matter the other way round, adopting the view that an anti-realist outlook is the more sophisticated achievement.<sup>5</sup> Imagine, then, that a Dummettian splinter-group from a philosophy conference at some Caribbean venue were stranded on a desert island, there to breed in isolation and to attempt to conserve their metaphysical and mathematical culture. Their distant descendants would be brought up to wince at the application of excluded middle to any but effectively decidable sentences.<sup>6</sup> The place would be a Waco of the logically wary. They would conceive of truth as consisting in the constructive existence of appropriate proof. They would use 'or', 'not', 'if ... then ...', and 'some' with only their anti-realistically licit (that is to say, intuitionistic) senses. Over several generations there may even be some lexical substitutions for these logical operators, so that they do not even sound like their original turn-of-the-millennium Oxford-English counterparts. In due course a rescue party arrives, consisting of distant descendants of Davidsonians at Princeton, Chicago and Berkeley. They set about the task of interpreting the evolved

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<sup>5</sup>Here, and subsequently, 'anti-realism' is to be understood in the Dummettian sense.

<sup>6</sup>Note that an application of excluded middle involves the blanket assertion  $P \vee \neg P$  in the absence of any proof or disproof of  $P$ . The desert islanders need not have any objection, in principle, to an application of  $\vee$ -introduction to produce  $P \vee \neg P$  as a conclusion *from*  $P$  or *from*  $\neg P$ , for effectively undecidable sentences  $P$ . For, in doing so, one would not be applying the law of excluded middle.

creole of these anti-realist islanders. Would it really be in the best interests of interpretation for them to impose the grid of their classical logic (in this stronger sense) on the islanders' speech? Would it not upset the delicate reflective equilibrium achieved by those islanders after generations of linguistic introspection, painstaking studies of language acquisition, and philosophical analysis of the nature of meaning and of linguistic understanding? The Davidsonian, with his insistence on the inextricability of fact and meaning, will retort here that there would be no fact of the matter as to what the islanders' metaphysical views really are. But the thought-experiment has been described so as to allow principled disagreement on this score with the Davidsonian. For the attribution of the metaphysical view is tied intimately to facts about the islanders' basic dispositions to perform certain kinds of inference. The attribution of the metaphysical view is justified by extremely 'low-level' generalizations about the islanders' behavior.

The 'classical extras' in logical inference that are eschewed by the anti-realist should not be thought to add to the content of the logical operators as they feature in the classical realist's thinking and speaking about his chosen subject matter.<sup>7</sup> Thus Dummett should not represent the anti-realist's complaint as to the effect that the classical logical operators are endowed with illicit (possibly even incoherent) extra 'classical content'.<sup>8</sup> Rather, it is because the logical operators have the only licit content that they could—namely, the content conferred on them by the rules of intuitionistic (relevant) logic—that the anti-realist is able to see in the classicist's invocation of strictly classical inferential principles an expression of his realist metaphysical outlook. When the classicist applies the law of excluded middle  $P \vee \neg P$ , he is in effect taking the world to be determinate in the regard  $P$ . This could be backgrounded but marked as a metaphysical premise, in which the logical operators have their anti-realistically acceptable meanings. This proposal as to how to conceive of what is at issue in the disputed area of strictly classical reasoning would appear to cohere well with Davidson's minimalist method of 'reading our logic' into the natives' language.

This conclusion is at odds with the commonplace among Quineans that 'fair translation preserves logical laws.'<sup>9</sup> We have to ask: in which direc-

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<sup>7</sup>Cf. N. Tennant, 'The Law of Excluded Middle is Synthetic, if A Priori', *Philosophical Topics* 24, 1996, pp. 205-229.

<sup>8</sup>Cf. M. Dummett, *The Logical Basis of Metaphysics*, Harvard University Press, 1991, at p. 17.

<sup>9</sup>See, e.g., B. Stroud, 'Conventionalism and the Indeterminacy of Translation', in D. Davidson and J. Hintikka, eds., *Words and Objections: Essays on the work of*

tion? And in what sense could a translation manual represent the natives as accepting ‘a logic whose laws are ostensibly contrary to our own’?<sup>10</sup> It is one thing for a translation manual to represent the natives as logically incoherent or fallacious—say, by representing them as accepting a contradictory ‘law’ of the form ‘ $P \wedge \neg P$ ’, or a fallacious ‘rule’ of the form ‘ $P$ , so  $P \wedge Q$ ’. It is quite another to represent them merely as being more cautious, or more venturesome, inferentially, than we are, without lapsing into incoherence or fallacy.

The anti-realist radical interpreter, confronted with apparently classical inferential behavior on the part of the natives, could take the liberty of attributing to them metaphysical beliefs (about the determinacy of reality in certain regards) which it is not necessary for the interpreter to share in order to be able none the less to render the natives intelligible. The anti-realist radical interpreter will not himself accept the classical law ‘ $P \vee \neg P$ ’ as logically valid, nor will he accept ‘ $\neg\neg P$ , so  $P$ ’ as a logically valid inference. Nevertheless he could represent the natives as accepting these moves (given what they might say and do), without thereby holding them up as logically fallacious. Acceptance of strictly classical logical laws is evidence of a realist metaphysical outlook, rather than evidence of fallaciousness, incoherence or incompetence on the natives’ part.

On the other hand, the realist radical interpreter, confronted with the otherwise inexplicable inferential austerity of anti-realist natives, could interpret them as refusing to profess those same metaphysical beliefs. It is the very metaphysical character of the beliefs in question that ensures that differences with regard to them (as between the radical interpreter and the natives) can be accommodated by the principle of charity.

On a thorough-going anti-realist approach to radical interpretation, the speakers being interpreted (like fellow-speakers of the interpreter) are to be held accountable to a higher standard of correctness than their apparent communal norms. That higher standard of correctness is set by Dummett’s well-known manifestation requirement, which flows from a conception of communication as essentially public. This is the requirement that any speaker’s grasp of any aspect of meaning can be fully manifested in his or her linguistic behavior. The probative bedrock for attributions of correct grasp will be the speaker’s exercise of various recognitional capacities. The kind of linguistic behavior that can be in breach of this requirement, and

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*W. V. Quine*, Reidel, 1969, pp. 82–96; at pp. 86 and 90.

<sup>10</sup>*W. V. O. Quine*, *Word and Object*, MIT Press, 1960; at p. 59.

thus revealed as symptomatic of metaphysical (realist) confusion, is the use of non-constructive, or strictly classical, rules of deductive reasoning. The realist metaphysical account to be eschewed is that of a mind-independent world allowing us to discover determinate truths not of our own making, which might even transcend our capacities for detecting them, even if we can conceptualize them.

The Davidsonian radical interpreter holds views congenial to the anti-realist. Davidson adopts a cautious approach to the matter of imputing a logic to the natives. Radical interpretation can be sensitive to the possibility not only that we, as interpreters, ought to espouse anti-realism, but the possibility also that the natives to be interpreted might in effect be anti-realists also, and that we should therefore be capable of rendering them as such. The difference between the realist and the anti-realist, important though it is for metaphysics, may well be a difference that is not registered in their possession of different conceptual schemes. That is to say, there is more to one's metaphysics than one's conceptual scheme—which is not to deny that the latter, too, is an essential ingredient in one's metaphysics.

## II

We turn now to consider conceptual schemes. The foregoing reflections on realism v. anti-realism, and on logical pluralism and/or deviance, can safely be put to one side. They are orthogonal to the concerns that will now occupy us. We could think, if we so wished, of every language henceforth to be considered as cut to some common logico-grammatical pattern, at least in so far as the possibilities of sentence construction are concerned. In so far as the field of the consequence relation is concerned, we have just seen that we can tolerate certain fringe differences (as between, say, classical and intuitionistic logic), provided only that an inferential kernel is in place.

The monistic radical interpreter insists that there is at most one conceptual scheme (if it even so much as makes sense to speak of a conceptual scheme), while being able to take the exotic linguistic contrasts between, say, English and Hopi in his stride.

How exotic or weird would a language have to be, in order to defy radical interpretation in our own language? Could there be such a language, in principle? Such a language, for Davidson, is what it would take in order to confound 'calibration with our own conceptual scheme.'<sup>11</sup> The thought experiment earlier was about a terrestrial case. We should be able to cope

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<sup>11</sup>This phrase alludes to Benjamin Lee Whorf's statement of his 'principle of linguistic

also with the interpretive problem in the imaginary context of encountering (embodied) extra-terrestrial intelligences (ETIs).<sup>12</sup>

For those who would raise an eyebrow at the introduction of ETIs by way of thought experiment, it is worth pointing out that even more bizarre situations have been contemplated in philosophical attempts to think through semantic features of our language. The ‘Twin Earth’ thought experiments of Hilary Putnam and Tyler Burge involve imagining another planet just like Earth, with *Doppelgänger* for everyone on Earth, and differing from Earth only in so far as what looks like water there is not  $H_2O$  but rather  $XYZ$ . If one is thinking of probabilities of such scenarios, Twin Earth is an unfeasible number of orders of magnitude less likely than the existence of a planet in another solar system within our galaxy, populated by alien evolved and embodied intelligences, adapted to different nutritional and climatic conditions from those prevailing on Earth. The far-fetched cases like Twin Earth have been used as conceptual foils enabling us to appreciate better some fea-

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relativity’ from his 1940 article ‘Science and Linguistics’ (J. B. Carroll, ed., *Language, Thought and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*, MIT Press, 1956; at p. 214). The sentence in question appears to be the first explicit statement by Whorf of his principle of linguistic relativity:

We are thus introduced to a new principle of relativity, which holds that all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar, or can in some way be calibrated.

Davidson includes this passage as the second part of a quotation from Whorf at p. 190 of ‘On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme’, in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford University Press, 1984, pp. 183–214. He sources the passage in question as taken from Whorf’s 1936 article ‘The Punctual and Segmentative Aspects of Verbs in Hopi’. The first part of Davidson’s quotation comes from the latter article, but Whorf’s statement of the principle of linguistic relativity does not.

For an analytically severe assessment of Whorf’s collected essays, see Max Black, ‘Linguistic Relativity: The Views of Benjamin Lee Whorf’, *Philosophical Review*, LXVIII, 1959, pp. 228–38.

<sup>12</sup>Jorge Luis Borges gave us the planet Tlön; Richard Rorty has given us the planet Mongo. One should be happy to settle for an actual planet in our galaxy. See *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, in D. A. Yates & J. E. Irby, eds., *Jorge Luis Borges: Selected Stories & Other Writings*, New Directions Publishing, New York, 1964, pp. 3–18; and R. Rorty, ‘The World Well Lost’, in *Consequences of Pragmatism*, University of Minnesota Press, 1982, pp. 3–18. Nicholas Rescher has made passing mention of a possible *Gedankenexperiment* about ‘intelligent and actively inquiring . . . beings from outer space’. He has not, however, systematically explored the suggestion. See N. Rescher, ‘Conceptual Schemes’, *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 5, 1980, pp. 323–46. A useful lead, by contrast, is given by Lewis White Beck’s doughty ruminations in ‘Extraterrestrial Intelligent Life’, *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, XLV, 1971–2, pp. 5–21.

ture of our own (human) languages. Scientifically more plausible cases than Twin Earth could likewise be used in order to get clear about features of language and thought in general. The possibility of intelligent life elsewhere in our galaxy is being taken seriously by astrophysicists and evolutionary biologists. If it is ever discovered, official announcements would be subject to international protocols already in place. Analytical philosophy has moved away from its original anthropocentric dismissal of (broadly) linguistic and cognitive abilities in non-human terrestrial species. The conceptual topology of language, information, meaning, concepts and thought could be clarified by coming to grips with the problem of how ETIs might communicate, and, if so, whether and how we might be able to interpret them, and enable them to interpret us.<sup>13</sup>

Some prominent figures in the search for extra-terrestrial intelligence (SETI) proceed on the naïve and overly optimistic assumption that we would be able to crack whatever galactic code might one day crackle in on the ether.<sup>14</sup> The naïve view is that decoding would be possible even if we were not in a position to observe the behavior of the ETIs, but were only in receipt of electromagnetic signals from them. The thought experiment to follow assumes, in contrast, that we do have close enough encounters with the ETIs to be able to make informed conjectures about their modes of sensory awareness, their physical capabilities, their behavioral goals, their means of communication, etc.

What mental adjustments might we have to make if we ceased to think of the problem of radical interpretation as that of interpreting human speech in a newly encountered natural language, and thought of it instead as the problem of ‘breaking into’ whatever communicative code might be employed by any embodied form of (presumably evolved) intelligence, however alien it might be?

An ETI might have a different range of observable qualities—say, a different region of the electromagnetic spectrum for ‘vision’, or a non-human form

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<sup>13</sup>Cf. White Beck, *loc. cit.*, p. 19: ‘hypotheses about extraterrestrial situations may throw light on the terrestrial’.

<sup>14</sup>For a critique of SETI theorists’ ‘serendipity semantics’, see N. Tennant, ‘The Decoding Problem: Do We Need to Search for Extra Terrestrial Intelligence to Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence?’, in S. Kingsley (ed.), *SPIE Proceedings*, Vol. 1867, 1993, pp. 50-59. That paper was written for a non-philosophical audience. It sought to convey Wittgensteinian and Davidsonian concerns about interpretation to an audience consisting mainly of scientists from NASA and the Jet Propulsion Laboratory. White Beck (*loc. cit.*, pp. 16–17) hints at the same misgivings about the possibility of decoding electromagnetic signals from outer space, but does not develop them into a cogent critique.

of sensory transducing, such as sonar. It could be that their sensory qualities (that is, the qualities that their senses detect) were ones for which we could give only theoretical descriptions at best, if indeed we could describe them at all.<sup>15</sup> Call the possibility where we *can* give theoretical characterizations of the application-conditions of their observation terms the *optimistic* possibility. The aliens' medium of communication might be very different—not vibrations in an atmospheric medium, as with us, but rather, say, emissions of variable concentrations of pheromones, along with electromagnetic signals of frequencies that our own eyes and skins cannot detect. The variations could be subject to a hidden recursive syntax—one that the aliens would cope with effortlessly (as we do with our own), but which we would be able to discover only *via* the upper reaches of our own advanced scientific theorizing about odorless chemical emissions, their diffusion patterns, etc. We would be able to describe the aliens' 'utterances' in such a case only by using theoretical terminology. There might be no way, in principle, for us to coordinate their stimulus meanings for their 'observation' sentences with our stimulus meanings for our observation sentences.<sup>16</sup> For, what counts as observational for them might, because of the strange nature of their sensory transducers, count as theoretical for us. (Think of those terrestrial freshwater fish that communicate with low-frequency electromagnetic pulses from the sides of their bodies.) Conversely, what we register with an observation sentence like 'it is raining' might, for the aliens, be registered with some theoretical statement in their system.

The lack of any correlation between observable-for-them and observable-for-us does not stop interpretation dead in its incipient evidential tracks. All analytical hypotheses, including those concerning the translation of observation sentences of one human language into observation sentences of another,

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<sup>15</sup>It might be thought that this point would be made more apparent if we were to reflect on the possibility that our own color ascriptions might not be satisfactorily explicable in our own scientific terms. The thought would be that if the truth-conditions of our color reports could not be captured in the vocabulary of any scientific theory that we might develop, then it is all the more likely that we would be unable to provide scientific expressions of the truth-conditions of alien 'qualia reports'. But there is an unexpected twist here. Ironically, the aliens might succeed in giving satisfactory characterizations, in their scientific terms, of the truth-conditions of our color reports. So, by symmetry, perhaps we could do the same, in our scientific terms, for their qualia-reports.

<sup>16</sup>*Cf.* White Beck, *loc. cit.*, p. 17: 'If their sensory channels are different from ours, as may well be the case, what is image for them will be snow for us.' Of course, this still leaves open both the optimistic possibility just specified, as well as the pessimistic possibility to be specified below.

are just that: hypotheses. What is important is not how we might come by them, but what we might deduce from them. However they might be discovered, and whatever obstacles might lie on the path to their discovery, these hypotheses can and will be tested only by their practical results—namely, the extent to which they can render the parties mutually intelligible. (As Davidson emphasizes, the ascription of truth-conditions to utterances has to go hand-in-hand with ascription of beliefs and desires, in order to make sense of what agents utter and what else they do.) Even if fruitful and workable analytical hypotheses can be discovered only with mutual willingness to understand and to be understood, the present thought experiment would not be weakened.

Not only could the observational-theoretical axis be reversed as between the two systems of perception and communication; it could also be the case that their observational saliences corresponded to no specifiable theoretical characterization in our own best theories of the operation of their sensory systems. Chaotic disjunctiveness would be but the thin end of the wedge. We might have no way to render, in our terms, what would be common to all cases of the same-qualia-for-them.<sup>17</sup> Thus, even prescinding from the problem of trying to communicate what it would be like for them to enjoy such qualia, we might be unable in principle even to specify objective truth-conditions, within our own scheme, for worldly situations that impinge on them in some constant-way-for-them. Thus we might not be able to provide truth-conditions, even using our theoretical conceptual resources, for their observation statements. Call this the *pessimistic* possibility.

Both the optimistic and the pessimistic possibilities are much more exotic than Kuhn's competing scientific paradigms within a global human community that has a shared threshold of sensorily accessible, observable states of affairs. When considering theory-succession in Kuhnian terms we take the proper relata of the translation relation to be *theories in languages*, where the theories can involve new technical terms that go beyond the humanly observable, and that acquire their cognitive significance from the logical relations into which sentences that contain those terms enter with sentences that do not.<sup>18</sup>

What even the optimistic possibility in our thought-experiment about ETIs shows, by contrast, is that

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<sup>17</sup>But see the last footnote but one.

<sup>18</sup>For an account of the logical process by which cognitive significance is conferred on terms and sentences, see N. Tennant, *The Taming of the True*, ch. 11.

- (i) pre-scientific English and pre-scientific ETI-ese need not be intertranslatable; but
- (ii) English extended with scientific theory might be translatable into ETI-ese extended with its own scientific theory.

The ETI thought experiment shows the need to disambiguate an influential claim of Stroud's, which foreshadowed Davidson's opposition to alternative conceptual schemes:<sup>19</sup>

we can give no content to the notion of a conceptual scheme or language which is a genuine alternative to our present one.

The considerations that Stroud adduced would justify his claim only on the following disambiguated reading:

we can give no content to the notion of a conceptual scheme or language which is a genuine alternative *for us* to our present one.

But one can hold that there could be alternative conceptual schemes precisely because they are inaccessible, in important respects, to human beings. It is because they are neither of our making nor there for our taking that they are genuine alternatives (in some cosmic sense) to our own. These conceptual landscapes would be inhospitable to, indeed uninhabitable by, human beings. Note that the modal of 'accessible' is the same as the modal of the metaphorical 'habitable'. We are considering *nomological* possibility, not logical possibility. In our thought experiments about what is possible in principle, we are holding constant what can roughly be thought of as 'the' human constitution. Given our neurophysiology, and the laws of physics, chemistry and biology, certain physical features of things might be inaccessible to us, but not, perhaps, to alien beings. Our 'inability in principle' to form the appropriate concept responsive to those features would be a nomological inability. It is on such contingent abilities and inabilities that the accessibility or inaccessibility of a conceptual scheme depends.

Davidson contrasts Strawson and Kuhn:<sup>20</sup>

Strawson invites us to imagine possible non-actual worlds, worlds that might be described, using our present language, by redistributing truth values over sentences in various systematic ways.

The clarity of the contrasts between worlds in this case depends

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<sup>19</sup>Stroud, *loc. cit.*, p. 92.

<sup>20</sup>'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme'; at p. 187.

on supposing our scheme of concepts, our descriptive resources, to remain fixed. Kuhn, on the other hand, wants us to think of different [human—NT] observers of the same world who come to it with incommensurable systems of concepts. Strawson’s many imagined worlds are seen or heard or described from the same point of view; Kuhn’s one world is seen from different points of view. It is the second metaphor we want to work on.

Kuhn’s one world is seen from different but still human points of view. Like Stroud, Davidson appears to have overlooked the possibility that there might be non-human creatures with different receptivities and sensibilities, who have an observable-for-them, as well as a theoretical-but-cognitively-significant-for-them, which are asymmetrically related to the observable-for-us and the theoretical-but-cognitively-significant-for-us.

Davidson asserts<sup>21</sup>

The failure of intertranslatability is a necessary condition for difference of conceptual schemes; the common relation to experience or the evidence is what is supposed to help us make sense of the claim that it is languages or schemes that are under consideration when translation fails. It is essential to this idea that there be something neutral and common that lies outside all schemes.

If translational failure were necessary for difference of conceptual scheme, then translational success would be sufficient for sameness of conceptual scheme.<sup>22</sup> The inference from translational success to conceptual sameness is counterexemplified, however, by the alien ETI example offered above.<sup>23</sup> This example harbors the possibility of eventually establishing an interpretive mapping between our theory in our language and their theory in

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<sup>21</sup>*Loc. cit.*, p. 190.

<sup>22</sup>This inference has the form “If (difference of scheme  $\rightarrow$  translational failure), then (translational success  $\rightarrow$  sameness of scheme)”. Put another way, “If (not[schemes the same]  $\rightarrow$  not[languages intertranslatable]), then (languages intertranslatable  $\rightarrow$  schemes the same)”. It would be dialectically inappropriate to object that this reasoning is strictly classical in its treatment of negation. For the intention here is to show that it lands the classicist in difficulty; and the counterexample on offer infirms both the embedded conditionals, anyway.

<sup>23</sup>Despite his general opposition to Davidson and Rorty on the issue of alternative conceptual schemes, Rescher still fails to challenge their premise that ‘Intertranslatability establishes sameness of conceptual scheme’ (Rescher, *loc. cit.*, p. 325). Intertranslatability is necessary, but not sufficient, for sameness of scheme.

their language, despite the imagined observable/theoretical reversal. If we differ from the ETIs at least in so far as concepts counting as response-dependent for us are different from ones counting as response-dependent for them, then we would be occupying distinct conceptual schemes.<sup>24</sup> But, for all that, mutual interpretation might be possible between the two systems of communication. We might not be able to render vivid to ourselves what it would be like to perceive the world in their alien way, from their alien point of view; but we might, for all that, be able to coordinate objective truth-conditions (expressed by some physical theory formulated in scientific English) with their sentences, including their observational ones, even though we ourselves would have no inkling how it would be to observe the world in that way. *Mutatis mutandis*, for them interpreting us. When Davidson writes<sup>25</sup>

Different points of view make sense, but only if there is a common co-ordinate system on which to plot them; yet the existence of a common system belies the claim of dramatic incomparability

we can agree with the first claim as a spatial metaphor, but demur at the second as an interpretive metaphor.

Later, Davidson asks<sup>26</sup>

How about the other kind of object, experience? Can we think of a language organizing *it*? . . . The notion of organization applies only to pluralities. But whatever plurality we take [human—NT] 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.

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<sup>24</sup>For a discussion of response-dependence, see C. Wright, *Truth and Objectivity*, Harvard University Press, 1992. Wright makes use of a Euthyphronic contrast: are matters judged thus-and-so because they are thus-and-so, or is it our best judgments to the effect that matters are thus-and-so that makes them thus-and-so? The contrast is given more analytic precision by means of what Wright calls ‘basic equations’; see *T&O* for details. As a first approximation, one might think of Locke’s secondary qualities as corresponding to response-dependent concepts, and his primary qualities as corresponding to response-independent concepts. Thus *red* is a response-dependent concept, while *cubic* is response-independent.

<sup>25</sup>*Loc. cit.*, p. 184.

<sup>26</sup>*Loc. cit.*, p. 192.

Once again, this overlooks the alien ETI case. As the pessimistic possibility made clear, we could have good grounds for imputing to the ETIs some sort of ‘experience’, based on the deliverances of their sensory transducers, and their goal-directed behavior, without being able to venture any conjectures as to what precisely causes such experience (for them). Furthermore, even the optimistic possibility conflicts with Davidson’s quoted claim: for, in the case where we do succeed in finding theoretical characterizations of the application conditions of the aliens’ observational vocabulary, the accompanying individuation of events and their participants will not proceed according to ‘familiar principles’ at all.

There is more to a language being ‘very like’ our own than the mere possibility of coördinating correct truth-conditions expressed in our language (and in terms of a suitable theory) with sentences of the other language (and *vice versa*). Rather, for a language to be ‘very like’ our own, like expressions would have to be interpreted *via* like expressions. Thus, response-dependent concepts for the one community of speakers ought to go over into response-dependent concepts for the other community (for example, the color vocabulary of the natives’ language ought to be coördinated with the color vocabulary of English); their re-identifiable medium-sized objects should correspond to ours; their understanding of the causal web should correspond to ours; and so on. This is an essential part of what charity consists in.<sup>27</sup> A language that organizes human experience might end up having to be a language very much like our own; but what about a language that organized alien experience, reversed—in the way bruted above—on the observable/theoretical axis with respect to human experience?

Davidson insists that the concept of truth presupposes that of translation. For, given the standard statement of Convention T, we require a translation (into the metalanguage) of the sentence of the object language

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<sup>27</sup>Colin McGinn has challenged the principle of charity as a transcendental precondition for correct interpretation, arguing that the majority of the natives’ beliefs about perceptible objects could be false, while yet those beliefs still be about the objects in question. There is a lacuna in McGinn’s argument. He fails to consider just how many normally implicit background beliefs would still have to be true in order to secure reference. It would be too much of a digression, however, to press such a critique here. Bruce Vermazen has also rebutted McGinn from a different angle. The point in mentioning charity is to stress not so much the quantitative thresholds of agreement, as the need to assume common qualitative modes (in the human case) within which agreement or disagreement would then have to be quantified. See C. McGinn, ‘Charity, Interpretation and Belief’, *Journal of Philosophy*, 74, 1977, pp. 521–35, and B. Vermazen, ‘General beliefs and the principle of charity’, *Philosophical Studies*, 42, 1982, pp. 111–118.

to which truth is ascribed. Davidson writes:<sup>28</sup>

... Convention T suggests, though it cannot state, an important feature common to all the specialized concepts of truth. It succeeds in doing this by making essential use of the notion of translation into a language we know. Since Convention T embraces our best intuition as to how the concept of truth is used, there does not seem to be much hope for a test that a conceptual scheme is different from ours if that test depends on the assumption that we can divorce the notion of truth from that of translation.

The conceptual-scheme relativist disavows this last assumption. The relativist might have to divorce the notion of truth (in some language  $L$ ) from that of translation *into English*, but this does not entail that one can divorce the notion of truth (in  $L$ ) from that of translation into any language whatsoever. If the concept of truth—or at least, that part of its extension that is appropriate for the object language—can be characterized by means of some metalanguage, then of course there will have to be metalinguistic translations of all sentences of the object language. The metalanguage, however, need not be English, or any language translatable into English.

The radical relativist would not in general expect to be able to obtain a theory of truth (in our language) for an alien language  $L$  employing a different conceptual scheme. But that is not to say that the concept of truth would have no application at all to that language  $L$ . An appropriate truth-predicate for  $L$  would be definable, but only in languages employing the same conceptual scheme as  $L$ —such as extensions of  $L$  that contain the auxiliary notions necessary for defining true-in- $L$ . If truth is made relative to a conceptual scheme, then we cannot expect, of any language we know, that it be able to cope with the characterization of truth for (suitably weak) fragments of all other languages, including ones used by non-human beings.

By Gödel's second incompleteness theorem we already know that we cannot hope to have any language cope with the characterization of truth for all other languages. Putnam identifies the assumption forcing Davidson's anti-relativist conclusion as<sup>29</sup>

the very assumption that there is such a thing as the radical interpreter's "own" language—one language in which he can give

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<sup>28</sup> *Loc. cit.*, pp. 194–5.

<sup>29</sup> 'Truth and Convention: On Davidson's Refutation of Conceptual Relativism', *Dialectica*, 41, 1987, pp. 69–77; at p. 77.

the truth conditions for *every* sentence in *every* language he claims to be able to understand.

Given any language (to serve as a metalanguage), there will be languages with stronger existential presuppositions, making them too strong to be treated as object languages. It would appear that the admission of conceptual relativity for languages alien to (as opposed to merely: stronger than) our own does not make the theoretical situation concerning truth intolerably worse. Language, a range of truth-conditions, and conceptual scheme all go hand-in-hand. If one regards a conceptual scheme as different or alien, then one cannot assume that one will be able to account for how to use the language embodying that scheme. This is because whatever sorts of things the propositional representations within the alien language happen to be, one cannot hope always to be able to characterize their truth-conditions. This in turn means that one cannot hope to gain adequate purchase on the range of truth-conditions expressible by utterances in that language.

Two clarifications are in order. First, the claim is not that every language of inhabitants of every different conceptual scheme would defy all attempts at interpretation in a language we understand. On the contrary, it was argued above that one might, with scientific ingenuity (and, probably, the co-operation of the aliens) be able to co-ordinate theoretical truth-conditions (expressed in scientific English) with what, for the aliens, would be their observation sentences; and find their theoretical descriptions of situations that prompt assent to our observation sentences. So long as truth-conditions were successfully ascribed, interpretation would be effected; but it would not follow that their conceptual scheme was at all like ours.

Secondly, the claim is not that the concept of truth would have no application to any such language  $L$  as would defy all attempts at translation into a language that we understand. In regarding  $L$  as a language in the first place, one need only have good grounds for believing that it is an instrument for the communication, among its users, of propositional thoughts. This could be the case without our having even the slightest idea as to what any particular 'utterances' in that language might mean. One can have good grounds for believing that communication must be taking place, without having any informed idea as to what is being communicated. Indeed, that is the initial phenomenology involved when one is immersed, for the first time, in a foreign human language. Without even being able to tell a greeting apart from a warning, or a self-reference apart from an imitation of a bird squawk, one can have compelling grounds to believe that the foreigners

are communicating among themselves. In an encounter with alien intelligences, one could have good grounds for believing that thoughts were being communicated among them, without having any idea as to how they were being communicated. The discovery of the very medium of communication might be theoretical (for us), but the research leading to its identification could be motivated by a well-grounded suspicion that they must be able to communicate somehow.

It is worth stressing here how this claim is at odds with both Davidson and Rorty. The following quote from Rorty embodies some unargued presuppositions behind his attempt to dismiss the possibility of untranslatable languages and, concomitantly, of different conceptual schemes:<sup>30</sup>

But (to extend Davidson’s argument a bit) if we can never find a translation, why should we think that we are faced with language users at all? It is, of course, possible to imagine humanoid organisms making sounds of greater variety at one another in very various circumstances with what appear to be various effects upon their interlocutors’ behavior. But suppose that repeated attempts systematically to correlate these sounds with the organisms’ environment and behavior fail. What should we say? One suggestion might be that the analytic hypotheses we are using in our tentative translation schemes use concepts that we do not share with the natives—because the natives “carve up the world” differently, or have different “quality spaces” or something of the sort. But *could there be a way* of deciding between this suggestion and the possibility that the organisms’ sounds are *just* sounds? Once we imagine different ways of carving up the world, *nothing could stop us* from attributing “untranslatable languages” to *anything* that emits a variety of signals. But, so this verificationist argument concludes, this degree of open-endedness shows us that the purported notion of an untranslatable language is as fanciful as that of an invisible color. [My first and third emphases—NT.]

*Could there be a way* of deciding the question Rorty rhetorically poses? Certainly! It does not take much evolutionary-scientific imagination to think

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<sup>30</sup>See R. Rorty, ‘The World Well Lost’, *loc. cit.*, pp. 3–18; at p. 6. Note that another prominent neo-pragmatist, Rescher, finds lines of thought in the writings of William James and C. I. Lewis that he would be inclined to develop in ways that contradict Rorty’s denial of alternative conceptual schemes. See Rescher, *loc. cit.*, pp. 323–4, p. 342.

up controlled experiments that could be performed in order to gain support for the reasonable explanatory hypothesis that the aliens' communicative acts enable them to share survival-relevant information. As John McDowell once put it, when speaking of the communicative repertoires of creatures quite generally, the asserted contents would 'represent states of affairs by standing in for them in [the aliens'] cognitive dealings with the world.'<sup>31</sup> Nor need such an experimentally-controlled willingness to posit languages in advance of any possibility of translation into a human language place us on some slippery slope of interpretive promiscuity, ready to see Language everywhere. For, *something could very well stop us* from attributing 'untranslatable languages' to creatures from which emanate 'signals' that we cannot interpret. What would stop us from doing so would be the discovery, through controlled experiments, that being 'in receipt of' such signals did not significantly improve the alien organism's chances of dealing with various environmental exigencies. (Note that by his very use of the word 'signal', Rorty lets on that he might be tempted to regard them as semantically loaded.) Finally, in response to Rorty's pessimism about cosmic conceptual pluralism: the analogy with the admittedly fanciful (indeed, incoherent) notion of an invisible color is not well-taken. It is neither fanciful nor incoherent to suppose that creatures with different perceptual apparatuses might have 'qualia' incommensurable with the colors, sounds, tastes, smells and feels that are the stuff of our experience. Whatever the qualitative nature (for the bat) of the affordances of its sonar system, it is neither fanciful nor incoherent to say that its sonar-qualia might correspond to nothing in our ken.

For this reason it would appear, also, that Rorty's attack on the notion of a scheme-independent World (a notion deriving from the Kantian *Ding an sich*) will not dispose of the possibility of different conceptual schemes. Rorty writes<sup>32</sup>

The notion of "the world" as used in a phrase like 'different conceptual schemes carve up the world differently' must be the notion of something *completely* unspecified and unspecifiable—the thing-in-itself, in fact. . . . "the world" is either the purely vacuous notion of the ineffable cause of sense and goal of intellect, or else a name for the objects that inquiry at the moment is

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<sup>31</sup>J. McDowell, 'Meaning, Communication and Knowledge', in Z. van Straaten, ed., *Philosophical Subjects*, Oxford University Press, 1980, pp. 117–39.

<sup>32</sup>'The World Well Lost', *loc. cit.*, pp. 14–15.

leaving alone: those planks in the boat which are at the moment not being moved about. . . .

To remove altogether the “realistic” temptation to use the word ‘world’ in the former vacuous sense, we should need to eschew once and for all a whole galaxy of philosophical notions that have encouraged this use—in particular, the Kantian distinctions [between spontaneity and receptivity, and between necessary and contingent truth].

But, *pace* Rorty, the person who finds intelligible the possibility of different conceptual schemes need not be committed to holding that ‘the world’ or the *Ding an sich* exists in advance of the application of concepts.<sup>33</sup> Conceiving of ‘the world’ in this way might be conducive to conceptual relativism; but it is by no means a necessary condition for such relativism. The conceptual relativist could hold that, in the operation of the scheme-content distinction, the content in question need not be supposed to be some uniformly available input to the various conceptual schemes. One need not assume that such input would be of some common kind for all thinking creatures, regardless of how varied their sensory systems might be. Rather, the content (before it is conceptually organized) could be as variable, from kind of creature to kind of creature, as their sensory systems. The content need only be that species-specific kind of input to the operation of the thinking creature’s conceptual system as would be vouchsafed by its modes of receptivity—its *Anschauungen*—that await shaping by the application of its own peculiar categories, in order to yield up its own peculiar kind of empirical experience.<sup>34</sup> This is why it is important for the conceptual monist to address one further way in which one might be able to make sense of the idea of alternative conceptual schemes: namely, by appeal to languages not translatable into any of our own. This was Davidson’s own final configuring of the possibility, before

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. Rescher, *loc. cit.*, pp. 338–40.

<sup>34</sup> The view here is at odds with Rescher’s uncritical assimilation of the more plausible *Anschauungen* to the much more questionable *Dinge an sich*. He does not distinguish among ‘reality, experience, *materia prima*, the matrix of sense-stimuli, or whatever . . . that is prior to and independent of all scheme-based conceptualization.’ See Rescher, *loc. cit.*, p. 337. Our point about variability could also be sustained on a less orthodox account of receptivity and spontaneity, such as that offered by McDowell. For McDowell, the Myth of the Given is the Myth of the Allegedly Raw Given. He wants to see conceptual permeation even in the products of the passive operation of receptivity. One could grant him this, and still insist that the conceptually permeated contents could be radically different in the human and the alien cases. See J. McDowell, *Mind and World*, Harvard University Press, 1994; especially Lecture 1.

seeking to dispose of it by means of a tantalizingly brief argument at the end of ‘On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme’.<sup>35</sup> Thus Davidson:<sup>36</sup>

We may identify conceptual schemes with languages, then, or better, allowing for the possibility that more than one language may express the same scheme, sets of intertranslatable languages.

We shall take a closer look at Davidson’s argument presently, to the effect that there can be only one such set.

Rorty’s way of arguing by means of the foregoing rhetorical question about language reduces to a straightforward appeal to an intuition that he supposes his reader must share. This is the intuition that no pattern of behavior could count as the use of a language to communicate thoughts unless it could be translated into a language that we could understand. From an evolutionary standpoint, the intuition is dubious; as a conceptual point, it appears to be a dogmatic stipulation. Indeed, it is hard to imagine how Rorty, by his own lights, could hope to provide any independently compelling and rigorous argumentation to support the claim in question. For his own view is that<sup>37</sup>

there is . . . no rigorous argumentation that is not obedience to *our own* conventions.

To the extent that philosophers of Rorty’s verificationist persuasion could succeed in establishing a convention to the effect that there would be no gainsaying the claim that all possible languages must be humanly interpretable, they would indeed not need to provide any more suasive argument than that. No such convention, however, has yet been established; and even if one were to be established, many a thinker would refuse to be bound by it.

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<sup>35</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 183–198.

<sup>36</sup> *Loc. cit.*, p. 185. Note that both Putnam and Robert Kraut have advanced arguments for relativity of scheme (among conspecifics) even in the case where (presumably) the modes of receptivity are the same. For Putnam and Kraut, the identity of the conceptual scheme is marked by how it enables or allows one to individuate and count objects. See Putnam’s discussion of the Polish logician’s world, *loc. cit.*; and see Robert Kraut, ‘The Third Dogma’, in E. Lepore, ed., ‘Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson’, Blackwell, 1986, pp. 398–416. It was also argued above that translation of an alien language might be possible without our sharing the same conceptual scheme.

<sup>37</sup> ‘Introduction’, *op. cit.*, p.xlii.

If such a *tu quoque* appears to be a little below the belt, then the supporter of Rorty's line would have to insist that some deep conceptual point about the nature of language and thought was being missed. Such insistence would be welcome. One could ask for it to be developed further, into a piece of conceptual analysis, starting with some introspective intuitions (or other philosophical data) and leading inexorably to the desired conclusion. But then there would be dissonance within the practice of a philosopher who claims<sup>38</sup>

... The pragmatist is urging that we do our best to *stop having* such intuitions, that we develop a *new* intellectual tradition  
... the pragmatist's quarrel with the intuitive realist should be about the *status* of intuitions—about their *right* to be respected.

Perhaps, Rorty would reply, no foundationalist justification of the kind mooted is to be had. Perhaps Rorty would wish to retreat instead to some holistic web of scientific belief and quasi-philosophical opinion, within which there would be no such thing as a philosophically analytic argument. But then one could press the question whether there would not be some disagreeable tension between his insisting on the hermeneutic priority of human beings, while yet (presumably) accepting the scientists' evolutionary accounts of the origins of various species-specific perceptual and cognitive systems. These in turn support an astonishing variety of signalling systems, including the natural languages spoken by human beings. Does not the sheer creativity and inventiveness of the workings of terrestrial evolution give one pause when it comes to trying to legislate what might be going on in the minds of thinking creatures that might have evolved elsewhere in the universe?

### III

At the beginning of his paper 'The Structure and Content of Truth'<sup>39</sup> Davidson claims

Nothing in the world, no object or event, would be true or false if there were no thinking creatures.

Thereupon the ensuing discussion confines itself to talk of human beings—their interests, attitudes etc. Later, when contrasting an epistemic view of truth with a realist view, Davidson writes<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> *Loc. cit.*, p. xxx.

<sup>39</sup> *Journal of Philosophy*, 87, 1990, pp. 279–328.

<sup>40</sup> *Loc. cit.*, p. 298.

the assertion of an essential tie to epistemology introduces a dependence of truth on what can somehow be verified by *finite rational creatures*, while the denial of any dependence of truth on belief or other *human* attitudes defines one philosophical use of the word ‘realism’. [My emphases—NT.]

It is as though Davidson aspires to the fullest possible generality by means of phrases like ‘thinking creatures’ and ‘finite rational creatures’, but then pulls back at crucial points to the likes of us. Rescher effectively does likewise, holding<sup>41</sup> that the merit of a conceptual scheme lies in the extent to which it

underwrites more efficient and effective intervention in the course of events so as to produce those desired results in the area of cognition and communication for whose sake languages and their conceptual schemes are instituted as *human* resources. [My emphasis—NT.]

The terminological vacillation between ‘thinking [finite rational] creature’ and ‘human being’ reveals an anthropocentric streak in Davidson’s thinking. It is an anthropocentrism out of keeping with the more generous generality of Kant, who conceded in the first *Critique* that

We know nothing but our mode of perceiving [objects]—a mode which is peculiar to us, and not necessarily shared in by every being, though, certainly, by every human being.<sup>42</sup>

What was referred to above as the tantalizingly brief argument in ‘On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme’ appears to proceed as follows:<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> *Loc. cit.*, p. 343.

<sup>42</sup> A42/B59; Kemp Smith translation. The Meiklejohn translation makes my point even more emphatically:

We know nothing more than our own mode of perceiving [objects], which is peculiar to us, and which, though not of necessity pertaining to every animated being, is so to the whole human race.

Kant’s original reads as follows:

Wir kennen nichts, als unsere Art, [Gegenstände] wahrzunehmen, die uns eigentümlich ist, die auch nicht notwendig jedem Wesen, ob zwar jedem Menschen, zukommen muß.

<sup>43</sup> Conversation with William Taschek has been helpful here with the exegesis of Davidson’s account; but he bears no responsibility for the critical view formulated.

1. if the other creatures are using a language, then they are able to express truths (for that is essential to language);
2. in saying (1), we are using *our* concept of truth;
3. that concept of truth, whatever its further features might be, has at least as a central and necessary feature that any predicate expressing it conforms to Convention T, where
4. in the expression of Convention T, it is crucial that the metalanguage be one that we human beings can understand. (As a representative of such languages, we could, for subsequent argumentative purposes, take any suitable extension of English.)

By dint of this argument, translatability into a language that we human beings can understand becomes a necessary condition for languagehood. But the argument is not fully convincing. There is no reason to accept premise (4).

In communicating by means of their language, the alien users would be privy to the meanings involved. Those meanings would still be truth-conditions. But it would be truth-conditions-for-them, truth-conditions expressed in their terms, truth-conditions constituted by their concepts. That we might not (in principle) be able to characterize that range of truth-conditions in our own language (as metalanguage) in conformity with Convention T is a wholly expected corollary to the admission of radical conceptual relativity.

For what is so distinctive and privileged about humanly graspable truth-conditions? Note that the talk here of ranges of truth-conditions, rather than of any supposed plurality of notions of truth (or truth-concepts), provides for the univocal character of truth itself, but also for incommensurable modes for its articulation.

To go absolutist on the range of truth-conditions, as Davidson and Rorty do, is a different matter from insisting that there is a unique concept of truth. This attempt by Davidson and Rorty to eliminate the possibility of conceptual relativity appears to involve a *petitio principii*.

To see this, it will be convenient to employ an abbreviation for a central complex predicate. We do so for two reasons. First, it will make it easier thereafter to focus attention on certain quantifier prefixes to be entertained presently. Secondly, it will enable us to anticipate and meet a potential objection from Davidson that turns on the exact role of subscripts in the

truth predicate. Consider the following open sentence with free variables  $L$  (for the object language),  $M$  (for a metalanguage),  $\Theta$  (for a sentence in the metalanguage) and  $T(\ )$  (for a metalinguistic predicate intended, via the theory of truth  $\Theta$ , to capture the notion *true-in-L*):

theory  $\Theta$  formulated in  $M$  provides a formally correct and materially adequate definition of the notion *true-in-L* by means of the metalinguistic predicate  $T(\ )$ .

What Tarski's Convention T maintains is that this will hold just in case

for every sentence  $s$  of  $L$  there is some translation  $p$  of  $s$  into  $M$  such that  $\Theta, T(s) \vdash p$  and  $\Theta, p \vdash T(s)$ .

Let us abbreviate this explicating condition as *Defines-as-truth<sub>T</sub>*( $L, M, \Theta$ ).

Two comments are in order. First, note that our explicating condition is a condition on  $L, M$  and  $\Theta$  (involving  $T(\ )$ ) presumed given. Secondly, note that  $\Theta$  is the theory of truth, a theory characterizing the truth-predicate  $T$ . The requirement that  $\Theta$  be a single sentence in the metalanguage is precisely the requirement that the theory of truth be finitely axiomatized. This requirement is imposed in order to avoid meeting the condition trivially by taking as one's theory of truth all instances of the T-schema. As Wright has observed,<sup>44</sup> such an infinitely axiomatized theory of truth would provide

no *explanation* of a man's ability to understand novel sentences in his language ...; to attribute that knowledge [i.e., implicit knowledge of T-theorems] to him is no more than to attribute to him the very ability that interests us.

Moreover, by having the variable  $L$  feature the way it does, we are not displaying any insensitivity to the following point from Davidson, which is well-taken:<sup>45</sup>

The predicate in T-sentences, ' $s$  is true <sub>$L$</sub> ', is a one-place predicate; the subscript is not a variable, but the name or description of a particular language and an undetachable part of the predicate.

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<sup>44</sup>See C. Wright, *Wittgenstein on the Foundations of Mathematics*, Duckworth, 1980; at p. 284.

<sup>45</sup>'The Structure and Content of Truth', p.289.

For our predicate  $T$  is precisely Davidson's ' $\dots$  is true $_L$ '. Our explicating condition says that this predicate is being defined as the truth predicate *for*  $L$ . Our reference to  $L$  stands outside of its role as undetachable subscript within the truth predicate. It is because it is undetachable that we do not exhibit it as a constituent piece of notation within the predicate  $T$ .

Now any claim affirming the applicability of the concept of truth within any given (object) language  $L$ —any claim affirming the availability of a truth-predicate for  $L$ —will involve an appropriate quantificational prefix to bind the variables  $L$ ,  $M$  and  $\Theta$  within the otherwise open formula *Defines-as-truth* $_T(L, M, \Theta)$ . In order to say that the concept of truth has to find application within any system  $L$  in order for  $L$  to count as a language, those variables should be bound as follows:

given any object language  $L$ , there is some metalanguage  $M$   
and some theory  $\Theta$  in  $M$  involving a predicate  $T( )$  such that  
*Defines-as-truth* $_T(L, M, \Theta)$ .

But in order to effect his absolutist move on truth (premise (4) above), Davidson had to have been taking a much stronger quantificational prefix as implicitly governing the matrix:

given any object language  $L$ , *there is some extension  $M$  of English*  
and some theory  $\Theta$  in  $M$  involving a predicate  $T( )$  such  
that *Defines-as-truth* $_T(L, M, \Theta)$ .

But this is unwarrantedly strong. It goes beyond the conceptual controls that Tarski sought to place on the notion of truth by means of Convention T. It imposes, without sufficient motivating argument, the condition of translatability into (some extension of) English<sup>46</sup> as a *sine qua non* of other beings' being able to make sense, in whatever terms, about the world, however accessed and conceptualized.

The conclusion of these considerations is that Davidson's theory of radical interpretation has suffered an unwarranted extension into a supposed refutation of the possibility of alternative conceptual schemes. This is not to say that Davidson's theory of radical interpretation is mistaken, or misconceived, or unimportant. On the contrary, it is correct on all the essentials, within its legitimate range of application. For occupants of the same conceptual scheme, the same range of truth-conditions will be involved in translating among the various languages expressive of that scheme. Davidson gives

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<sup>46</sup>Since, for Davidson, all human languages are intertranslatable, this restriction to extensions of English will not sacrifice any of the generality for which he strives.

a beautifully compelling and deservedly celebrated account of how that is so, deftly inverting the original order of conceptual dependence between truth and translation. The challenge here is to an unwarranted extension of the doctrine of radical interpretation, into an argument for conceptual monism for all possible thinkers, however alien their perceptual and cognitive apparatus. For the radical interpreter, three propositions have to be considered together:

1. There is a shared range of truth-conditions;
2. The two languages are intertranslatable; and
3. The two communities of thinkers occupy the same conceptual scheme.

Claims (1) and (2) are equivalent, and are entailed by (3).<sup>47</sup> Neither (1) nor (2), however, entails (3). It follows that languages form translational equivalence classes, each class having its own range of truth-conditions and at least one associated conceptual scheme; but that a translational equivalence class might be host to different conceptual schemes. Within each translational equivalence class, however, the doctrine of radical interpretation holds good. In particular, it holds good for the translational equivalence class of English—within which class are all other natural (that is to say, human) languages. All human languages embody the same conceptual scheme. It does not follow, however, that every cosmically possible code for the communication of representative thought about the external world would have to be in the same equivalence class as the languages used by human beings.

Note that there is no surrendering of the concept of truth in this suggestion. The concept of truth is indeed our concept; but so too would it be the concept of truth had by any other thinking beings. Just as we are

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<sup>47</sup>To establish the equivalence of (1) and (2), we reason as follows. Suppose two languages given, and suppose that they share (or give access to) the same range of truth-conditions. By definition, a truth-condition  $p$  is in the range of truth-conditions to which language  $L$  gives access just in case there is some  $L$ -sentence  $s$  whose truth-conditions are  $p$ . Thus it will hold that  $s$  is true-in- $L$  if and only if  $p$ . Take the sentence in the first language and the sentence in the second language that have truth-condition  $p$ . Then each serves as a translation of the other. Thus (1) entails (2). For the converse, suppose that the two languages  $L, L'$  are intertranslatable (or, in Davidson's terms, mutually interpretable). In  $L'$  as metalanguage there will be a truth-theory for  $L$  containing a T-sentence of the form ' $s$  is true-in- $L \leftrightarrow s'$ ', where  $s'$  will be a translation, into the metalanguage  $L'$ , of the  $L$ -sentence (designated by)  $s$ . So the latter is true-in- $L$  just in case  $s'$  is true-in- $L'$ . Thus all the truth-conditions that can be captured in  $L$  can be captured in  $L'$ ; and obviously, *vice versa*. So (2) entails (1).

able to think of them as occupying a different conceptual scheme from us, so too they should be able to think of us as occupying a different conceptual scheme from them. It is the very uniqueness of the concept of truth that ensures such symmetry.

At this level of generality and abstraction, thanks to this symmetry, such Philosophical<sup>48</sup> thoughts of the same general structure can be shared by occupants of different conceptual schemes. Perhaps that is the mark of the Philosophical: it is what is invariant across all conceptual schemes. A conceptual scheme may be provincial, while truth remains cosmopolitan. Therein lies the reason why logic, the study of the most general conditions for the transmission of truth, lies at the heart of Philosophy. Conceptual schemes will differ at most with regard to the concepts employed to obtain empirical knowledge from the operation of the senses. The logical operations, however, such as those effected by the connectives and the quantifiers, will be a transcendental invariant across all conceptual schemes. Mastery of those operations is a pre-condition for the possibility of structured thought and its linguistic expression.<sup>49</sup>

Truth-conditions, in whatever language they are expressed, still remain epistemically constrained—constrained, that is, by the epistemic capacities of the agents able to grasp them. The hypothetical realism<sup>50</sup> that is guided by known laws of physics and biology in countenancing the possibility of alien thinkers with alien conceptual schemes is compatible with an anti-realist view of and within each possible conceptual scheme. Communication among any thinking creatures will be essentially public; whence the manifestation requirement will apply to their grasp of such meanings (i.e. truth-conditions) as can attach to their utterances. For any community of finite creatures there will be stretches of their discourse—once it reaches a certain level of logico-grammatical complexity—that are effectively undecidable. Hence anti-realism will be the correct metaphysical view to hold of and within the associated conceptual scheme.

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<sup>48</sup>Note the use of the Rortian adjective here.

<sup>49</sup>For a fuller development of this line of thought, see N. Tennant, 'Logic and its Place in Nature', in P. Parrini, ed., *Kant and Contemporary Epistemology*, Kluwer, 1994, pp. 101-113.

<sup>50</sup>This kind of scientific realism is compatible with semantic anti-realism. Indeed, the latter has its source in the former.