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From the Myth of the Given to Radical Conceptual Diversity

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ABSTRACT: This paper evaluates the following argument, suggested in the writings of Donald Davidson: if there is such a thing as the given, then there can be alternative conceptual schemes; there cannot be alternative conceptual schemes; therefore there is no such thing as the given.

KEYWORDS: Alternative conceptual schemes – Donald Davidson – given – myth of the given.

As I shall use the term 'the given', to say that there is such a thing as the given is to say that human sensory experience, or else part of the content of such experience, is independent of concepts and is evidence for the way in which the world is. For example, if a person steps outside on a windy day and experiences certain sensations caused by the wind, one might think that the sensations have the following properties: they do not require the possession of concepts in order to be experienced, for a creature without concepts may experience sensations too; they provide evidence for the belief that the wind is blowing. In this example, the sensations are the given.

Some philosophers think that the given is a myth, the term 'myth' being used to imply that there is no such thing as the given (cf. Bradley 1935, 12-13; Sellars 1997; Davidson 2001a, 143). The most well-known argument against the given is that it is impossible for something to have both

the properties it must have in order to be the given. For if something is concept-independent then it cannot be a reason in favour of any belief, in which case it cannot be evidence. To grasp this point, consider the proposition that the wind is blowing strongly and the proposition that if the wind is blowing strongly, things will move. These two propositions together entail that things will move, hence a person who believes these propositions has reason to believe that things will move. The beliefs one has provide reasons to hold other beliefs, through entailment relations. Now to believe either of these propositions one needs concepts, such as the concept of the wind and the concept of the wind blowing. It is the concepts involved that allow for an entailment relationship, or so one might think (cf. Crane 1992, 147). But how can something concept-independent, a stream of sensations, have entailment relations, or rational relationships of some other kind, if there are any? Those who think that there is no answer to this question judge that there is no such thing as the given, because something concept-independent cannot be a reason for a belief and so cannot be evidence.

This argument is widely associated with Wilfrid Sellars, who coined the term 'the myth of the given', though he uses it in a broader sense than I am here (cf. Sellars 1997, 14). The argument also appears in an early work by F.H. Bradley, where he attacks the view that the concept-independent sensations of witnesses provide the ultimate justification for historical knowledge. The attempt to ground historical knowledge on such sensations is vividly described by him as "the pursuit of a phantom for ever doomed to fade in our embraces, a mocking shadow beyond the horizon of our grasp, known to us as the unreality of all that we can hold, and whose existence must perish at the threshold of human possession" (Bradley 1935, 12-13). Non-conceptual sensations cannot be involved in rational relationships. If one thinks one has found a non-conceptual sensation which stands in such a relationship, one has found nothing or found something that does not give a reason for holding any belief or found something that involves concepts, hence Bradley's imagery.

Donald Davidson endorses this argument (Davidson 2001a, 143), but he also suggests another argument against the myth of the given. This argument is a novel contribution to the literature on the given. To introduce the argument it will be useful to begin with the following quotation:

> ...various schemes might be seen as relative to, and assigned the role of organizing, this common element. The common element is, of course,

> some version of Kant's intuitions, Hume's impressions and ideas, sense data, uninterpreted sensations, the sensuous given. Kant thought only one scheme was possible; but once the dualism of scheme and content is made explicit, the possibility of alternative schemes is apparent. (Davidson 2001b, 40)

In this quotation, Davidson presents us with the premise that if there is such a thing as the given, then there can be alternative conceptual schemes – alternative sets of concepts for interpreting this given. Now a well-known commitment of Davidson's is to the premise that there cannot be alternative schemes (cf. Davidson 1984, 198). From these two premises, it follows that there is no such thing as the given. This is the novel argument I have in mind. (It will be clarified in the paragraph after next.)

Does Davidson actually make this argument? The quotation above is Davidson presenting how some philosophers think, rather than endorsing their thinking. He is more cautious, writing that, if we can make good sense of a conceptual scheme as a scheme for interpreting the given, this way of thinking appears to be true (Davidson 2001b, 41). Hence I prefer to describe the argument as suggested. It is suggested by the way of thinking that conditionally appears to Davidson to be true along with his rejection of the possibility of alternative conceptual schemes. Even if it is only suggested, I think the debate over whether there is such a thing as the given is incomplete without an assessment of this argument. My aim in this paper is to object to the argument by objecting to the first premise identified above: that if there is such a thing as the given, then there can be alternative conceptual schemes.

Before introducing an objection, the premise is in need of clarification. To understand this premise, we need to understand what alternative conceptual schemes are. Suppose that there is a person who classifies their sensory experiences using certain concepts and as a consequence forms certain beliefs about what there is. For example, they classify some sensations of theirs as impressions of the wind blowing, using the concept of the wind, the concept of the wind blowing and more, and as a consequence they believe that the wind is blowing. If there is another person whose sensory capacities are such that they are able to have much the same sensory experiences as this person, but who has radically different concepts for classifying sensations, then the other person has an alternative conceptual scheme. They would classify their sensations differently, and come to different beliefs as a consequence. Both sets of beliefs would be justified on the basis of

the data received through the senses. So far this paragraph has identified conditions in which it is sufficient for one person to have an alternative scheme to another. Perhaps there are other conditions which are sufficient for this possibility to be realized, but here we do not need to investigate this issue further.

More needs to be said, however, regarding when the concepts of one person and the concepts of another are radically different. Davidson proposes that monolingual speakers A and B have radically different concepts if and only if A speaks a language that cannot be translated into the language that B speaks and vice versa (cf. Davidson 1984, 184). In these circumstances, the concepts associated with the words of one language and the concepts associated with the words of the other language are radically different. Davidson's criterion for translation failure is a demanding one. An extremely long explanation of a sentence from one language, using another language, which succeeds in explaining the meaning of that sentence is still a translation, by his criterion. For the sentence to be untranslatable into the other language is for it to be impossible to adequately explain the meaning of the sentence using this language (cf. Davidson 1984, 184).

Now from the proposition that there is such a thing as the given, it does not follow that there can be alternative schemes. From this proposition alone, one cannot validly draw this consequence. At least one other proposition is needed. What is this other proposition, or what are these other propositions? Admitting the existence of the given is supposed to lead to the conclusion that there can be alternative schemes without any need for empirical evidence from cultural research, in particular evidence that there are others who have an alternative scheme (cf. Davidson 2001b, 40-41). It seems then that the conclusion is to be inferred from the following propositions:

(i) There is such a thing as the given.
(ii) If there is such a thing as the given, then it is coherent to suppose that two persons or groups can have alternative conceptual schemes, consisting of radically different concepts for interpreting the given.
(iii) If it is coherent to suppose that two persons or groups can have alternative conceptual schemes, then there can be alternative conceptual schemes.

'Coherent' here means consistent. In response to proposition (ii), someone might well protest that they cannot conceive the details of two alternative schemes. They can speculate that others have such a scheme, but they cannot imagine any concepts that might belong to this scheme. Perhaps it will be replied that the bare speculation is enough (cf. Davidson 2001b, 41). In any case, I wish to make an objection that does not turn on this issue.

Imagine that there is a person who believes (i), (ii) and (iii). Imagine that they are provided with a compelling argument that there cannot be alternative conceptual schemes. They must now give up holding this combination of beliefs, because this combination entails that there can be alternative schemes. But giving up on holding this combination does not necessarily mean giving up on (i), the proposition that there is such a thing as the given. One can abandon the combination by abandoning (ii) or (iii) or both. Once we realize that from proposition (i) on its own, it does not follow that there can be alternative schemes, we can uncover ways of preserving this proposition while accepting that there cannot be alternative schemes.

But what if propositions (ii) and (iii) are beyond reasonable doubt? Then there would not be the option of abandoning one or both of them. I will focus on (ii) in order to show that we are not stuck with both propositions. There is a replacement for (ii) which makes more sense:

(ii*) If there is such a thing as the given, then there is no given-related incoherence about two persons or groups having alternative conceptual schemes.

Attacks on the possibility of alternative conceptual schemes are generally attacks on the coherence of this possibility. Either its internal consistency is disputed or else whether someone who holds the best available theory of meaning can consistently suppose that there is this possibility (cf. Davidson 1984). If one knows about these attacks, I cannot see why one would hold (ii) over the replacement above, because the existence of the given just does not guarantee the coherence of alternative schemes. According to the replacement, the existence of the given secures that there is nothing inconsistent about the idea of the given. It does not secure that there is no incoherence which has nothing to do with the coherence or incoherence of the idea of the given. Consequently, one might believe that there is such a thing as the given and that there cannot be alternative schemes, because the idea of alternative schemes has some other incoherence infecting it.

Recall the argument I am objecting to: if there is such a thing as the given, then there can be alternative conceptual schemes; there cannot be alternative conceptual schemes; therefore there is no such thing as the given. My objection here is to the first premise. My objection can be summarized as follows: "From only the proposition that there is such a thing as the given, one cannot validly infer that there is the possibility of alternative conceptual schemes. Other propositions are needed. There is a replacement available for one of these propositions and there is reason to prefer the replacement. But the replacement allows for there to be such a thing as the given even if there is no possibility of alternative conceptual schemes."

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