

TALKING LIONS AND LION TALK: DAVIDSON ON CONCEPTUAL SCHEMES*

“If a lion could talk, we could not understand him.”

Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*

ABSTRACT. This essay is a reconstruction and defense of Davidson’s argument against the intelligibility of the notion of conceptual scheme. After presenting a brief clarification of Davidson’s argument in ‘On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme’, I turn to reconstructing Davidson’s argument. Unlike many commentators, and occasionally Davidson, who hold that the motive force of the argument is the Principle of Charity (or the denial of the Third Dogma), I argue that there is a further principle which underlies the argument. This principle I call the Strong Discrimination Principle.

But the argument of the paper is not purely exegetical. Not only do I show how the Strong Discrimination Principle meets certain objections to Davidson’s argument, but I show how the Principle clarifies the realist position. In particular, I show how a line of argument advanced by Rorty and Putnam against (metaphysical) realism can be rejected.

Lions, it seems, are in a bad way. For Wittgenstein has assured us, if only in passing, that if lions were to learn to talk, we should never be able to understand them. The radically different ‘form of life’ which was constitutive of lion talk would preclude our ever understanding them. That’s the good news. The bad news is that Davidson has equally assured us that if the background conditions for lion talk were so radically different as to preclude our understanding what they were saying, they wouldn’t be saying anything anyway.

I am somewhat puzzled by the diversity of reactions to Davidson’s ‘On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme’.1 Rorty counts the argument as verificationist in spirit and trivializing the realist position which Davidson wants to maintain.2 Thomas Nagel similarly counts the argument as verificationist, but as an argument for idealism and against realism.3 Carol Rovane, on the other hand, focuses on the role of the Principle of Charity in Davidson’s more general view. She sees the strategy as largely Kantian, but thinks it an unsuccessful defense of realism.4 More recently, David T. Larson seems to hold that the core of the argument against conceptual schemes is Davidson’s denial of

the Third Dogma of Empiricism. A further puzzle arises when one considers that such reactions have occurred even though the central premise in the argument is rarely, if ever, directly challenged. Nagel perhaps comes closest to challenging the truth of the key premise, but one is more likely to find considerations which are intended to undermine our confidence in the outcome of the argument. I think that this diversity of response is due to a failure to see the genuine underlying rationale for 'The Very Idea' argument [hereafter referred to as TVI].

I will argue that Davidson is right in claiming that the notion of 'conceptual scheme' is incoherent. However plausible such a notion might seem to us initially, it cannot bear the theoretical weight it was designed to bear. Further, I will claim that the essentials of the argument can be found in TVI. I will claim, however, that the motive force has not been sufficiently appreciated, on occasion by Davidson, and frequently by commentators.

Consequently, I will proceed in the following manner. In Section 1, I will recount what I take to be the major line of argument in TVI. This exegetical task can be forgiven. Accounts of the argument, and Davidson's view of interpretation more generally, frequently take the Principle of Charity to be Davidson's chief critical tool. I will argue that the Principle of Charity is itself grounded on some further principle, what I will call the Strong Discrimination Principle, a limiting condition on belief which I see as Kantian in design, realist in content.

In short, I will argue that Davidson's adversions to the Principle of Charity can be rendered plausible only once the Strong Discrimination Principle is in place. Thus, in Section 2, I will try to show why the central premise of the TVI argument requires such a principle and reconstruct the Davidsonian argument for it.

Again, elucidation of the nature of the argument is not just an exegetical task, for I think substantial issues hinge on it. By way of replying to various sorts of objection raised by commentators, I will claim that Davidson's position suggests a reassessment of what is implied by realism. In particular, in Section 3 I will claim the realist need not accept certain alleged consequences of the realist position. Properly understood the realist is thus immune to certain types of objection.