Language, Concepts and Culture: Between Pluralism and Relativism

Relativism

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Certain problematic philosophical positions can, I believe, be traced back to an excessively narrow conception of linguistic understanding. On that conception—which I describe as a 'theory'-theory of language understanding—our understanding of other people's speech is to be explicated as fundamentally a theoretical process of figuring out, tacitly perhaps, on the basis of observation, evidence, and inference the correct interpretation of the sounds they make in speaking.[1] It can be argued, for example, that this conception plays an important role in Quine's arguments for his well-known indeterminacy thesis.[2] And it may lie behind some of Dummett's arguments for global anti-realism that proceed from considerations about speakers' linguistic understanding.[3]

In this paper, I want to argue that certain mistakes committed by both proponents and opponents of so-called Conceptual Relativism can be also traced back to a commitment to the 'theory'-theory conception of linguistic understanding. A less artificial, `non-theoretical' conception would allow us to make intuitive sense of the possibility of genuine conceptual diversity. But acknowledging this possibility does not force us to join the camp of contemporary radical relativists. Accepting the possibility of conceptual diversity, I will argue, is consistent with rejecting relativism.

1. On the Very Idea of Conceptual Differences

Let me begin by formulating four different claims that have been made in connection with Conceptual Relativism.

> (I) There can be <u>substantive differences</u> among conceptual 'frameworks' or 'schemes' or 'world views' across different cultural, social, historical, etc. groups.
>
> (II) <u>We cannot adjudicate</u> among divergent conceptual schemes.
>
> (III) The <u>correctness</u> of a conceptual scheme <u>is relative</u> to culture, society, historical period, etc.; there is no absolute, culturally- (or socially-) independent standard for assessing conceptual correctness.

I will call (I) the Conceptual Diversity claim. (II) will be the Impossibility of Adjudication claim. (III) is the Conceptual Relativity claim. These claims have familiar analogues in the

case of Moral Relativism. Moral Relativists typically try to point out systematic, genuine diversity in moral judgments or values across different cultures, societies, or historical periods. They often argue that there is no principled way to adjudicate among conflicting alternative 'moral codes'. And they conclude that there is no absolute truth about which from among conflicting alternatives is the correct one. What is morally right or wrong, and not only what is believed to be so, varies with culture etc.

A word on terminology. The term "relative" as it is used in discussions of relativism is at least two-way ambiguous. In one of its meaning, it contrasts with "universal". To say that something, X, is relative to Y in this first sense, is to say that X varies with Y, as a matter of fact. In another sense, "relative" contrasts with "absolute". To say that X is relative to Y in this second sense is to claim that X has no validity, or correctness, or sense independently of a specification of Y; X is (at least in part) constituted or determined by Y. For reasons that will become clear as we go along, I think it is misleading to speak of a claim to the effect that X is relative to Y in the first sense as a claim of relativity. Rather, I shall speak of such claims as claims of diversity. In my terminology, claims of relativity proper are to the effect that there is no absolute validity or correctness or sense to X absent a specification of Y. Thus, the claim that attributions of moral rightness/wrongness to an act, for example, vary from group to group (e.g., that killing an innocent elderly person would be morally condemned in one culture but morally approved of by another) would count as a claim of moral diversity. By contrast, a claim of genuine moral relativity would be that all moral attributions have a hidden place-holder; so that being morally right just is being morally right for the relevant group (in somewhat the way that being tall is relative to a comparison group: Joe may be tall for a teenager but not tall for a basketball player).

In the case of Conceptual Relativism, there is, in addition to the above claim of relativity (III), a further claim on the table, namely:

> (IV) The worlds in which possessors of different conceptual schemes live are
> themselves different from one another (since "[a] world exists only relative to an
> imposition of concepts").[4]

According to this "constructivist" claim, divergent conceptual schemes are not sets of concepts of things that exist in a mind-independent world. Rather, what we think of as "the world" is a construction out a particular set of (basic) concepts, which is not without alternatives. We tend to think of our concepts as responsive to, representative of, and answerable to a world independent of our conceptualizations. The constructivist thinks that true appreciation of the possibility of conceptual diversity should lead us to see that, on the contrary, our conceptualizations are creative, or constructive: the (basic) concepts we employ determine what world we live in. Whether our world has rocks, tables, red things, tigers, Douglas firs, middle class, concertos, even atoms or black holes, ultimately depends on our entrenched repertoire of classifications and categories.

It is not clear that (IV) has a proper analogue in the moral case.[5] When it comes to Conceptual Relativism, however, this constructivist claim is arguably the most seemingly exciting and intellectually tantalizing claim. For it seems to offer an antidote to the human condition as diagnosed by the Conceptual Relativity claim (III). The Conceptual Relativity claim portrays us as in a sense trapped within our various conceptual schemes, unable to reach beyond them so as to grasp the true nature of the world in which we live. But the Constructivist claim assures us that there is no such a thing as THE world. Corresponding to each distinct conceptual scheme there is a world it constructs. If so, then perhaps the fact that there are alternative conceptual schemes among which we could not adjudicate need no longer seem threatening, since it is not a consequence of any limitations we suffer as concept-users. On the contrary, it attests to our constructive powers—powers to bring worlds into existence through our conceptualizations.[6]

It is clear that an analogue of (II) (the Impossibility of Adjudication claim) plays a crucial role in supporting Moral Relativism. And it is not too difficult to see what the claim amounts to. Let us say that, after completing our anthropological investigation, we conclude that culture C_1 adheres to a principle that says "Cannibalism is wrong," whereas culture C_2 rejects this principle. And let us suppose that, even after sophisticated philosophical discussion, we are unable to decide whether cannibalism is wrong or not. This could lend

support, or at least give some sense to the idea that there is may be no objective way to adjudicate between the moral codes of the two cultures.[7] But in the conceptual case, it is not so obvious what the claim of the Impossibility of Adjudication amounts to.

To fix ideas, let us call upon the familiar case of alternative color vocabularies, which rely on different ways of dividing the color spectrum.[8] So suppose our anthropological investigation revealed that speakers in culture C_1 group lemons and limes together with respect to color, whereas speakers in culture C_2 separate them sharply.[9] It is not entirely obvious how to derive two conflicting claims involving ordinary application of color terms between which there may not be a way to adjudicate. The best candidates would seem to be appropriate translations of comparison claims such as "Lemons and limes have the same color," which speakers from C_1 will accept, whereas speakers from C_2 will reject. But, given that the respective speakers use different color vocabulary, it is not clear that we should regard their respective claims as genuinely conflicting. (On the other hand, accepting that there is no conflict may just amount to accepting an application of the Relativity claim (III) to the particular case at hand.) For now, let us settle for a reading of (II) according to which, in the case at hand, there may not be an objective way to determine which of the two sets of color-concepts is the correct one, leaving it somewhat indeterminate what correctness may amount to in such a case.

Diversity claims are often used in support of relativist positions of both Moral Relativism and Conceptual Relativism. Insofar as the existence of diverse moral codes is thought brings the threat of moral relativism in its train, the opponent of Moral Relativism has good reason to deny that there is genuine, non-superficial diversity among basic moral codes. My concern in this paper, however, is to examine the case for Conceptual Relativism, and to argue that the claim of Conceptual Diversity has received unjustifiably bad press in analytic philosophy.[10] Fearing the horrors of Conceptual Relativism, philosophers have been led— down some strange paths at times—to deny that genuine conceptual diversity is even possible. I think this denial is implausible, but is facilitated by adherence to the theoretical conception of understanding mentioned earlier. Moreover, the `denial strategy' (as I shall refer to it) may

be overkill, if, as I will suggest in Section 4 below, conceptual diversity need not bring

conceptual relativism in its train.

1.1 The Denial Strategy

The `denial strategy' can be presented in a general argument form as follows:

> P If two individuals possess genuinely divergent conceptual schemes, then there must be failures of intertranslatability between the languages they speak.

But Q There can be no failures of intertranslatability.

So, C There can be no genuine divergence of conceptual schemes.[11]

P presents untranslatability as a <u>necessary</u> condition for genuine conceptual diversity. Indeed,

attempts to establish conceptual diversity are often supported by furnishing examples that

allegedly meet this condition—actual cases where translation of another culture's discourse is

impossible.[12] We can think of the intuitive idea connecting untranslatability and conceptual

diversity as follows. Possession of a language requires possession of a set of concepts. The

words and phrases of the language serve to express those concepts. Where we find failures of

translation between two languages, we can locate expressive gaps in one or the other language,

or expressive mismatches between the two languages. To the extent that the expressive gaps

signal the presence of incommunicable concepts, and to the extent that the expressive

mismatches reveal incommensurability of concepts, the notion of divergent conceptual

schemes—and with it the threat of conceptual inaccessibility—can get a foothold. In this way,

the limits of translatability—if there were such—would seem to mark the limits of our ability

to 'see the world through the eyes' of those whose discourse we're unable to translate. The

more pervasive untranslatability between our languages is, the wider the conceptual chasm

between us.[13]

Now, exploiting this kind of link between untranslatability and genuine conceptual

divergence, the anti-relativist might then deny that there can be genuine failures of

intertranslatability—that is, she can argue for Q above. However, Q seems implausible on its

face. I think there are plenty of examples to show that failures of translation are quite

common; this is a direct consequence of the syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic mismatches

that exist between any two extant natural languages. Here I can only mention some examples

briefly. The examples are actually designed to show that denying untranslatability is both implausible and unnecessary for rebutting Conceptual Relativism.

1.2 Failures of Translation

Lexical mismatches are mismatches at the level of lexicon. Every language has lexical items that stand for idiosyncratic elements in the environment, history, culture, or society of its speakers, and which may be completely missing from the environment, etc. of speakers of other languages. For example, the term *kabary* names a special kind of formal speech given only on certain types of Malagasi ceremonial occasions. Languages may also 'package' differently elements that are present in the background of their speakers. For example, Vietnamese reportedly has a single lexical item that means *someone who leaves to go somewhere and something happens at home so that he has to go back home*. And there are more radical examples of incompatible divisions of the color spectrum. These kinds of mismatches are a constant source of translation challenges.

There are also various grammatical and pragmatic mismatches.[14] For two simple cases, consider these. First: in Hebrew, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, and nouns constructed out of verbs and adjectives are marked for gender. This relatively superficial grammatical feature could get in the way of translatability. Just imagine a context in which an English speaker says: "I have just broken up with my lover" having no intention of disclosing the lover's gender. Second: a translator of the sentence "You are sick" into French, would have to have background information of which the ordinary English-speaking audience need not be aware, in order to decide whether to translate it as *Tu es malade* or *Vous etes malade* (viz., as to whether the speaker is sufficiently familiar with the addressee). Where the information is not available—or where it's important that it not be conveyed—the translation is bound to be misleading, distorting, or to disclose too much information to the French audience. (More examples will be given later.)

Now, in these sorts of cases, translators are usually in a position to provide an adequate gloss that conveys the content of the untranslatable material.[15] But such glosses will often involve metalinguistic descriptions of the relevant languages, or very lengthy socio-

cultural explanations, or even ungrammatical sentences. These widely available explanatory devices do not by themselves enable us to produce appropriate translations; rather, they enable us to justify particular judgments about <u>failures</u> of translation. This is important, because it undercuts one popular anti-relativist strategy, which proceeds by arguing that, any time a relativist tries to convince us that a bit of discourse is untranslatable, she must defeat her claim by unwittingly providing a translation. The reason this strategy does not work is that not every explanation of untranslatable material can count as a translation of it. At the same time, however, where the possibility of providing such explanations exists, the effort to establish conceptual inaccessibility would indeed seem thwarted.

The above examples are designed to support the claim that <u>there is no direct route from untranslatability to conceptual inaccessibility</u>, or even to conceptual divergence (witness the gender marking example). But, if this is so, then we should be suspicious of any attempt to connect failures of intertranslatability too tightly to divergence between conceptual schemes. Languages can fail to be intertranslatable even though their speakers do not diverge in their conceptual schemes. The reverse possibility also obtains. Consider for example English-speaking flat-earthers, or (genuine) Berkeleyian idealists, or committed astrologists. By ordinary standards, they share our language, so (again, by ordinary standards) no issue of intertranslatability arises. Yet they seem to differ from us conceptually. On anybody's view, they clearly have radically different <u>conceptions</u> (as distinct from concepts) from us concerning some basic worldly matters; that is, they have sets of beliefs concerning relatively well-circumscribed matters that systematically diverge and even conflict with ours. But given the radical nature of the differences between our conceptions, it may be legitimate to suspect that, appearances to the contrary, we don't share all the key concepts that figure in our respective beliefs.[16]

If failure of intertranslatability is neither necessary nor sufficient for failure of conceptual access, and cannot serve as a measure of conceptual difference, then I think we should set it aside in assessing the matter of conceptual diversity. What is really at issue is the possibility of genuine conceptual 'distance', as well as the possibility of conceptual inaccessi-

bility. By shifting the discussion from these possibilities to questions of intertranslatability, and by playing fast and loose with the notion of translation, both proponents and opponents of Conceptual Relativism end up committing themselves to implausible positions.

Examples of the sort given above can be explained and described in our language. This by itself may give the lie to the claim that they illustrate the possibility of radical conceptual differences.[17] The anti-relativist may be willing to acknowledge the existence of schemes of concepts that are alternatives <u>for</u> us: ones we can comprehend and explicate, or represent, using our own conceptual resources. The 'very idea' the anti-relativist wants to reject is that of alternatives <u>to</u> us: conceptual schemes that are supposed to be <u>incommensurable</u> with ours, or are otherwise inaccessible to us.[18] If the examples of failures of translation we have seen indeed presuppose broad conceptual similarity between the others and us, the anti-relativist may insist that they are beside the Conceptual Relativist's point.

1.3 Failures of Interpretation

Perhaps what should matter to the anti-relativist argument is not translation, but <u>inter-pretation</u>. On a widely accepted conception (due to Davidson), the interpretation of a sentence in an object language consists in providing its <u>truth-conditions</u> in a metalanguage.[19] So, you have given the interpretation of, say, the French sentence *La neige est blanche* when you've specified in a language you understand what the world would have to be like for that sentence to be true. Importantly, the constraints on (Davidsonian) interpretation can be regarded as in some ways less stringent than the constraints on translation (ordinarily understood).[20] For example, a book-length description of the conditions in the world that have to obtain in order for a Malagasi sentence containing the term *kabary* to be true would constitute an interpreta-tion of that sentence; but it would not qualify as a translation. Similarly for the Hebrew gender-marking example. These examples show that not all translation failures are interpreta-tion failures.

It might then be suggested that the sharing of a conceptual scheme should be tied to inter-interpretability, not to intertranslatability. If so, establishing conceptual divergence or inaccessibility would require giving examples where interpretation is blocked. And the anti-

relativist would insist that this is what cannot be done. This last claim is partially supported by the fact that, so often, exotic examples produced by way of illustrating conceptual divergence are so often accompanied by specifying truth-conditions for the exotic utterances in our language. Even if we grant that such specifications do not amount to translations, it still seems far from clear that the relativist can meet the challenge to illustrate genuine interpretation failures.

I think we should also be cautious about linking conceptual divergence or inaccessibility too closely to failure of interpretation. First, the explanatory devices actually used in making sense of untranslatable discourse sometimes fall short of, and other times outrun interpretations (read as specifications of truth-conditions). Secondly, it can be argued that there are conceivable cases where even interpretation fails, yet where conceptual access is still possible and vice versa. So substituting 'interpretation' for 'translation' would not help very much the anti-relativist's argument against conceptual diversity. Furthermore, the denial of failures of interpretation seems no more necessary to a rejection of conceptual relativism than the denial of translation failures.

Let me briefly illustrate how interpretation might fail. I shall first give a somewhat technical example that comes from an early work by Davidson, "Truth and Meaning."[21] Using Tarski's theory of truth, and adopting his solution to the Liar paradox, Davidson accepts that the truth-predicate for each natural language is not expressible in that language, though it is expressible in other languages.[22] We cannot specify in English truth-conditions for sentences involving the predicate "true in English", on pain of paradox; though we can speak about these sentences in French using, say, the predicate *vrai en Anglais*. The point of the example is that, at least on Davidson's own semantic treatment, it will turn out that any French sentence containing the predicate *vrai en Anglais* cannot be interpreted in English. So this illustrates a failure of interpretation, and a principled one at that.[23] However, I would argue that the concept expressed by *vrai en Anglais* is not inaccessible to us as English speakers.[24] Intuitively, it seems wrong to think of each language's own truth-predicate as hiding a kind of conceptual blind-spot. As long as we have mastery of the relevant formal apparatus, there

seems to be nothing to block our access to the concept which the French speaker expresses using *vrai en Anglais* (or vice versa), failure of interpretability notwithstanding. Here, conceptual access seems secured by our understanding of the semantic goings-on, where this understanding is <u>not</u>, as it happens, manifestable in our ability to interpret. So I take this example to illustrate <u>both</u> the possibility of interpretation failure <u>and</u> the fact that interpretation and conceptual access may pull apart.[25]

Let us consider a less technical example where interpretation fails. Certain Australian languages (e.g., Walbiri) are reported by linguists to have a rather limited numerical language. They have names for *one*, *two, a few, many*. Now whereas <u>we</u> can presumably interpret Walbiri sentences involving number words in English, there is no way to interpret infinitely many English number sentences in Walbiri <u>as it stands now</u>. (Just consider English sentences such as "the cube root of ten is not a rational number.")[26] So we get here systematic (though partial and one-way) interpretation failures between English and Walbiri.

An anti-relativist might deny that this type of interpretation failure supports any exciting thesis of conceptual divergence, because in describing the mathematical limitations of the Walbiri case (he might say) we presuppose a lot of conceptual similarity between the Walbiri speakers and ourselves. So, even if we have succeeded in showing some conceptual differences between the Walbiri and ourselves—viz., that we possess, and they lack a certain range of mathematical concepts, the conceptual divergence illustrated is of a very limited and local sort. I have two comments in response. First, how limited the divergence is in this case will depend on the extent to which mathematical thinking permeates other areas of thought and action. Genuine differences in mathematical concepts may indeed turn out to lead to a rather interesting case of conceptual divergence.[27] Second, if the anti-relativist resorts to denying that the kind of interpretation failure illustrated by the Walbiri's inability to interpret our mathematical discourse does yield an exciting enough case of conceptual divergence or inaccessibility, it looks like we are no better off with interpretation than we were with translation. In both cases partial failures will be said to come in two varieties: the exciting and the

not exciting. And we still do not have a principled way of separating the cases, so as to be able to use the im/possibility of interpretation as a test for conceptual distance.

2. A `Theory'-Theory of Linguistic Understanding

At least as characterized so far, both proponents and opponents of Conceptual Relativism may be guilty of linking the possibility of conceptual access too directly to the possibility of translation or interpretation. I believe this is due to their implicitly taking under-standing to consist in being able to translate or at least interpret. I take it as fairly obvious that full understanding of others' discourse is both necessary and sufficient for gaining access to their conceptual scheme. But it is only equating understanding with the ability to provide translations or specify truth-conditions that would tempt one to conflate the issue of conceptual diversity with questions of translatability or interpretability. So far, I have tried to argue that the link is much more indirect than is sometimes believed. I now want to point out that the faulty equation is part and parcel of a rather prevalent philosophical conception of understanding that seems to diverge from our ordinary conception. (Later, I will be arguing that the ordinary, broader conception can be used to make sense of conceptual diversity and even inaccessibility.)

2.1 Linguistic Understanding as Theory

The conception of understanding I see at work here can be described as a kind of 'theory'-theory.[28] The basic idea behind this conception is that full understanding of what other speakers say and mean, at home as well as abroad, is the outcome of a theoretical expla-nation of their behavior (verbal and non-verbal). Our entry into others' speech, both as novices and as mature interpreters, is provided by observation of speakers' behavior. The behavior serves as our data, or evidence on the basis of which, with the help of various hypo-theses, we infer what they mean, think, etc. We have achieved understanding of what they mean when we have matched with the sounds that come out of their mouths with the interpre-tation dictated by our theory.[29]

Under the broad canopy of this 'theory'-theory one finds strange bed-fellows, such as Quine and Davidson, on the one hand, and Fodor and Chomsky, on the other. Both Quine and

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Chomsky, for instance, invite us to think of a child learning a first language as in crucial respects like an amateur theorist of the language spoken in his community. In probing a language, Quine tells us, both child and radical linguist use as their data "the concomitances of .. utterance and observable ... situation" (1969:81). And Chomsky presents "[t]he problem for the linguist, as well as for the child learning the language" as that of "determin[ing] from the data of performance the underlying system of the rules" that govern the language, which requires having "a method for devising an appropriate grammar, given primary linguistic data." (1975: 4, 25). On this picture, the task for both the child and the linguist is to settle on a theory of the language at hand. In the child's case, this (obviously tacit) theory is expressible in the more or less stable set of linguistic judgments that can serve to characterize her as a competent speaker. In the linguist's case, the theory may be explicitly expressed in terms of a set of rules for the language under study.[30]

The child-linguist analogy is not a modern invention. In an early passage of the Philosophical Investigations, Wittgenstein ascribes it to Augustine:

> Augustine describes the learning of human language as if the child came into a strange country and did not understand the language of the country; that is, as if it already had a language, only not this one. Or again: as if the child could already think, only not yet speak. And 'think' would here mean something like 'talk to itself'. (1953: #32)

One feature of the analogy is that it requires seeing the child as being in principle able to represent to herself various alternative hypotheses regarding adult speech. And Wittgenstein took this feature as showing the absurdity in the Augustinian picture. By contrast, Jerry Fodor has seized upon it in an argument that aims to establish the existence of a language of thought. Fodor thinks learning a language must involve constructing hypotheses about (at least) the extensions of predicates of the language learned. And this, in turn, requires that the first-language learner possess a system rich and complex enough to represent "the predicates of [the learned language] and their extensions" (1975: 64). Hence, Fodor argues, to learn a

language one must already <u>have</u> a language. And, on pain of regress, that language cannot itself be learned, so it must be innate.

This picture is directly carried over by Fodor from first language learning to adult linguistic understanding and interpretation. A mature hearer's understanding of an utterance made by a speaker consists in a <u>translation</u> of the utterance into the hearer's language of thought. And determining what is the appropriate translation is a matter of deciding "which hypothesis about the speaker's [communicative] intentions best explains his (the speaker's) verbal behavior" (1975: 108 fn.7). Fodor remarks that this is just a 'special case' of the view that "attributions of mental states to others are, in general, to be analyzed as inferences to the best explanation of their behavior" (*ibid.*). He thus advocates returning to the good old mentalist model of linguistic communication: a speaker has a particular message in mind that she 'encodes' in a conventional linguistic form. The hearer's job is to use her own knowledge of linguistic conventions to 'decode' the message. Communication succeeds when decoded and encoded messages converge.

> A speaker is a mapping from messages onto wave forms, and a hearer is a mapping from wave forms onto messages. The character of each mapping is determined, *inter alia*, by the conventions of the language that the speaker and hearer share. Verbal communication is possible because the speaker and hearer both know what the conventions are and how to use them: ... The exercise of their knowledge .. effects a certain correspondence between the mental states of speaker and hearer. ... The speaker ... has a certain [message] in mind and the hearer can tell [what message] it is. (1975: 108)

Surprisingly enough, we find Davidson saying very similar things.[31] A hearer's interpretation of a speaker's words represents her best attempt at figuring out the speaker's intention. And the process by which the hearer does that, Davidson thinks, is best described in terms of the interpreter constructing a <u>theory</u> of the speaker's speech. "A person's ability to interpret or speak to another person," Davidson says, "consists ... [in] the ability that permits

him to construct a correct, that is, convergent, .. theory for speech transactions with that person. (1986: 445)[32] What the interpreter constructs, Davidson adds

> really is like a theory at least in this, that it is derived by wit, luck and wisdom from a private vocabulary and grammar, knowledge of the ways people get their point across, and rules of thumb for figuring out what deviations from the dictionary are most likely. .. [This is like] the process of creating new theories to cope with new data in any field—for that is what this process involves (1986: 446).

Since this apparent agreement between Davidson and Fodor on the general, theoretical, character of the process of interpretation may seem puzzling, given the well-known, and fundamental disagreements between them on so many philosophical issues, I would like to remark that the agreement I am identifying concerns certain broad aspects of the epistemology of language and understanding. There remains plenty of room for wide disagreement between Davidsonians and Fodorians on the metaphysics of language (as well as on details in their respective theories of interpretation). Below, I offer a way of seeing some of the deeper disagreement behind the agreement. (Readers who are not interested in this particular issue may skip 2.11.)

2.11 Quine&Davidson v. Chomsky&Fodor

Following Quine, Davidson upholds, whereas Chomsky and Fodor reject, a "Publicity Requirement" for language:

> The correct understanding of linguistic expressions by their users must be in principle possible. The meanings of linguistic of expressions must be publicly available to and discoverable by the learners of a language.[33]

For Quine and Davidson, this is what distinguishes linguistic facts (or, more narrowly, facts about meaning) from ordinary scientific facts about which we may theorize. From their point of view, the sorts of mental facts (principles, inner mechanisms, etc.) that go into determining what is not determined by publicly accessible evidence do not—cannot—matter to meaning; they certainly cannot be what linguistic meaning consists in. Where publicly

available evidence gives out, so does meaning. Since, in addition, both Quine and Davidson believe that the public evidence leaves undetermined certain semantic matters that are intuitively thought to be determinate, they claim that meaning is inescapably indeterminate. There can be no fact of the matter about which of two conflicting assignments of meaning to a given linguistic expression is the correct one.

Fodor and Chomsky, on the other hand, want to bring the metaphysics of language fully on a par with a realist metaphysics in other domains, and believe there is no more room for skeptical anxiety in studying language and mind than there is in any other area. On their view, facts about meaning consist in facts about certain kinds of internal goings-on in the 'minds/brains' of speakers (to use Chomsky's locution). The assignments of meanings we ordinarily make when interpreting others' speech are in effect hypotheses about those internal goings-on. As interpreters of others' speech, we may, at least in principle, be as wrong about what they mean as we can are about other internal goings-on (say, in regarding processes in people's stomachs). Meaning assignments are thus assimilated to theoretical conjectures in other areas where evidence may underdetermine theory. And they are equally in good realist standing.

The Quine/Davidson reasoning that leads to the indeterminacy thesis relies on the claim that public evidence is insufficient to determine (intuitively distinguishable) meanings. The realism advocated by Chomsky and Fodor consists in insisting that hidden facts about goings-on in speakers' minds-brains can serve to determine what public evidence leaves undetermined. But note that there is another way to reject Quinean skepticism about meaning. One could deny that public evidence is insufficient to determine meaning assignments.[34] Elsewhere, I have argued that the support for this claim can itself be traced to a tacit acceptance of the 'theory'-theory conception of linguistic understanding, a conception that I am claiming the Quineans share with their Chomskian opponents.[35] If we can free ourselves from that conception, it may turn out that we need neither resign ourselves to indeterminacy nor embrace meanings as hidden, hypothesized internal goings-on.

2.2 'Theory'-Theory and Conceptual Relativism

There is another point of convergence between Davidson and Fodor on the issue of Conceptual Relativism. We have seen that Davidson denies the possibility of genuine, philosophically interesting conceptual differences across cultures. We can now see this denial in the context of his acceptance of a 'theory'-theory of language. For Davidson, understanding others is a matter of devising a theory for interpreting their utterances. But the methodology we must employ in devising such a theory has built into it a rather strong Principle of Charity, which guarantees that we must see them as conceptually like us in all fundamental respects.[36]

Interestingly, Fodor arrives to the same idea of fundamental conceptual similarity beneath the surface of apparent cross-cultural diversity, though by a rather different route. For him, as we saw, understanding is a matter of translating into one's language of thought.[37] This means that genuine conceptual difference could arise only if translation into the language of thought were in particular cases impossible. But, at least for human languages, the possibility of such translation is guaranteed by the empirical fact that any normal human speaker is born capable of learning any human language. (Indeed, this is part of the empirical support Fodor cites for his innate language-of-thought hypothesis.) Fodor would, then, treat any practical obstacles in matching the expressions of two natural languages as owing to merely superficial differences in conventional ways of encoding of mental messages. Human <u>thought</u> (as opposed to speech) is conducted in a single innate language which is <u>universal</u> in Tarski's sense: it is capable of expressing anything expressible in any natural language, past, present and future.[38] It should be remarked that, even if there is a universal human language of thought, at least some of the claims that self-proclaimed conceptual relativists seek to establish may remain intact. For it still may be possible to maintain that what can be thought – and indeed, even the facts about the world – depend on human thinking and conceptualization. (Consider the analogous move in the moral case: even discovering that there is a single universal moral code may not give the lie to the claim that moral right and wrong depend in crucial ways on us, human beings.)[39] But the existence of a universal human language of

thought may at least give the lie to the claim that there can be genuine diversity at the level of concepts among different human groups.

Whether we take Davidson's transcendental route or Fodor's empirical route to the denial of conceptual diversity, we end up in roughly the same place. Actually, it is not any one specific place. In a sense, we end up all over the place, since the kind of position Davidson and Fodor converge on finds our basic concepts, our basic beliefs, everywhere. Depending on your perspective, you could see this position as a form of either cognitive imperialism, or cognitive parochialism.[40] Such a position does not seem to me very plausible, since I think the possibility of interesting conceptual diversity, and even inaccessibility, is intuitively a perfectly intelligible one.

3. 'Non-Theoretical' Understanding and Conceptual Diversity

So far, I have tried to connect the denial of diversity with a 'theory'-theory conception of understanding others. I will now connect the acceptance of diversity with what I consider to be a more intuitive, non-theoretical conception of understanding.

3.1 A Bit of Conceptual Diversity

Part of the 'denial strategy' is to downplay all potential candidates for conceptual diversity. Thus, Davidson tells us that the existence of "a common co-ordinate system on which to plot" the conceptual differences "belies the claim of dramatic incomparability" (1984: 184). Fodor might make the same claim, taking the 'common co-ordinate system' to be the language of thought. But let us consider again the Walbiri number example. It seems that whereas we can represent the Walbiri number system, compare, and contrast it with ours, using the expressive resources of English, Walbiri speakers cannot do the same. We may allow that Walbiri speakers could undergo serious retraining and learn our mathematical concepts, and that Walbiri could evolve so as to allow its speakers to talk about them. But this does not detract from the intelligibility or interest of the claim that right now, the Walbiri mathematical thinking is significantly different from ours, and that at present a whole range of our mathematical concepts is beyond the Walbiri conceptual access. To the extent that

mathematical concepts permeate numerous aspects of our thought and action, the differences between us may be far more reaching than seems at first.[41]

The Walbiri example illustrates an asymmetrical case involving one-way conceptual inaccessibility. However, in the case we may assume that the inaccessibility could be remedied by retraining or re-education. (Using previous jargon, we might say that, whereas the Walbiri system is only an alternative <u>for</u> us, our system is an alternative <u>to</u> theirs, but only contingently so, psychologically speaking.) I think even more extreme examples can be conceived, ones where there is threat of mutual inaccessibility, which cannot be remedied so easily. We can conceive of intelligent, conversing beings who possess radically different sense organs from ours. Imagine that, unlike us, they are completely incapable of perceiving colors. Or, imagine that they (like bats, and unlike us) possess an ecolocation sonar system for detecting the presence of objects in total darkness. Let us further suppose that we share enough science with the aliens so that we can fully interpret their experience-discourse and vice versa. That is, we can make enough discoveries about each others' brains (as well as about relevant environmental inputs and behavioral outputs), so as to be able to match each others' experience utterances with truth-conditions.

Let us assume that all this puts us and the aliens in a perfect position to have theoretical knowledge of all the facts about each others' experiences, and thereby to achieve a certain kind of mutual understanding—viz., <u>theoretical</u> understanding.[42] We are able to develop correct theories about the experiences of the aliens based on the available evidence— we can explain and predict their behavior, and vice versa. Moreover, let us suppose with physicalists that the radical differences in our experience do <u>not</u> map onto distinct sets of (non-physical) <u>facts</u> -- either about our respective experiences or about their objects. Still, intuitively, it does seem that our understanding of each others' experiential discourse is incomplete. The reason, it seems, is that, because our sensory experiences are so radically different, we and the aliens diverge in our conceptualization of colors and sounds (at least). We possess, if you will, different 'experiential concepts'. In the familiar case of incompatible color divisions, we can easily master the others' color concepts (and they ours') and, with

suitable practice, apply them so as to classify things <u>by their colors</u> as they do. By contrast, in the present case, there seems to a genuine psychological barrier to our mutual understanding of each others' experiences (due to the fact that we are physically unable to undergo each others' sensory experiences).

       Let me emphasize that my reason for claiming that mutual understanding between the aliens and us is compromised is not that experiences, in general, are essentially 'private' or ineffable. We can suppose that members of each group can communicate about their experiences, and fully know about and understand each other's experiences. If members of each group could somehow come to have the sense organs of the members of the other group, they could fully understand their experiences as well. Furthermore, I am not relying on the idea that there are 'subjective' <u>properties</u> of experiences (or facts about them) that are inaccessible from an observer's 'objective' point of view. At issue here are <u>concepts</u>, not properties.[43] I take it that this is not too controversial to suppose that e.g., the concept WATER is a different concept for the concept H_2O, even if we take the <u>property</u> of being water to be one and the same as the property of being H_2O. All that is required for my point is that it be similarly conceded that a single experience – even if understood as a physical event that a subject undergoes – may be brought under different concepts, and (what may be admittedly more controversial) that possession of some of the concepts under which an experience may be brought – the 'experiential' ones – requires undergoing (or being able to undergo) the relevant experience.

       The above case trades on the potentially controversial notion of an 'experietial concept'. I cannot here argue for the existence of such concepts.[44] However, the purpose of describing this case is rather limited: to illustrate the possibility of limits on our actual ability to achieve complete mutual understanding.   The crucial point for my purposes is this. If the theoretical conception of understanding sketched earlier were exhaustive, then the possibility of mutual interpretation in the case described should have automatically guaranteed that we already have full mutual understanding and conceptual access. Yet it seems intuitively

plausible at least to question whether we have (or even could) achieve full understanding in such a case.

3.2 'Non-Theoretical' Understanding

I submit that our intuitive assessments of conceptual distance and the intuitive idea that genuine conceptual diversity may be possible rely on a broader conception of understanding, to which I now wish to turn. We have seen that, on an intuitive conception of understanding, interpretation (at least in the Davidsonian sense) may not guarantee understanding or conceptual access. We may be in a position to provide truth-conditions for someone's discourse without possessing all the concepts they employ when engaging in the discourse, where these concepts may even be unavailable to us, at least in the sense that we may be unable to acquire them without radical change to our physiology. This is what the case of aliens was supposed to illustrate. We have also seen that there could in principle be understanding and conceptual access even where interpretation is not possible. There could be principled limitations on the expressive resources of languages (of the sort illustrated by As the truth-predicate case described above, p.xx), which would prevent us from specifying the truth-conditions of certain utterances, even if we have mastery of all the concepts involved in making the utterances, and are therefore in a position to understand them.

I take this to suggest that the commonsense conception of understanding is in some ways broader than what I've called the 'theoretical' conception. Commonsense seems to recognize more ways of understanding than is dreamt of by `theoretical' philosophers. Can we make sense of commonsense here? What else could there be to understanding others besides the theoretical understanding that is captured by the philosophical notions of translation, interpretation, and theoretical explanation?

Let us go back to our examples. In the aliens' case, we should consider that, given our respective physiological make-ups, the aliens and we would not be able to <u>employ</u> each others' sensory concepts, despite the fact that we can have a theoretical grasp of the conditions under which the aliens apply them. Since we could not <u>adopt</u> the aliens' sensory concepts, we might say that their sensory 'conceptual framework' constitutes an alternative to ours; it is not an

alternative for us. In the truth-predicate case, what allows us to understand the French speakers' utterances involving the predicate *vrai en Anglais*, despite our inability to specify their truth-conditions in English, is the fact that we <u>are</u> able to employ the concept expressed by the French predicate. The semantic thinking of the French is not an alternative to our own.

Whether or not a (portion of a) conceptual framework can count as an alternative to (a portion of) ours may not depend on whether we can have what I have been calling 'theoretical understanding' of it. It may depend instead on whether or not we could <u>use</u> the scheme to get around in the world. A conceptual framework is, as the common metaphor goes, a way of 'seeing the world'. We have access to another's conceptual framework if we can 'see the world through the other's eyes'. I am suggesting that 'seeing the world (or part of it) through others' eyes' is a matter of <u>using their concepts</u>. It requires having your own thinking of things—your perception, categorization, attention, etc.—structured and guided by their concepts. Sometimes we can recognize our ability for this despite our inability to find words in our language with which to translate the other's speech or to specify the truth-conditions of their utterances. And other times, we can recognize our <u>in</u>ability to do so despite the availability of translation or interpretation. (Here we have the aliens case, but perhaps closer to home: the mentally retarded, the criminally insane, or the multiple personality.[45])

What plays a crucial role in our recognition of conceptual difference in such cases is a perceived lack of ability to <u>project</u> ourselves into the other person's position and act or think as s/he does or would. In such cases, we may well be able to <u>theorize</u>; what we are unable to do is <u>empathize</u>. This inability may account for the perceived incompleteness of understanding or limited access. Empathy, then, is an ingredient missing from the theoretical conception of understanding. Theoretical understanding may offer only limited help when our aim is to understand <u>understanders</u>. Full understanding of understanders is empathetic; it seems to require being able to employ (some of) the same concepts they employ in their thinking.[46]

Empathy's role in understanding has been increasingly appreciated by, of all people, Quine, whom we presented earlier as a leading 'theory'-theorist in language. Already in <u>Word & Object</u>, Quine pointed out that in the actual practice of radical translation as well as in the

ordinary attribution of propositional attitudes at home, we resort to an 'essentially dramatic idiom': "we project ourselves into what, .., we imagine the speaker's state of mind to have been, and then we say what, in our language, is natural and relevant for us in the state thus feigned" (1960: 219). Still adhering to the child-linguist analogy, Quine has explicitly mentioned empathy as what "dominates the learning of language, both by child and field linguist." The parent volunteers utterances and encourages the child's utterances based on the parent's assessment of the child's perceptual orientation. And the linguist "imagines himself in the native's situation as best he can." Similarly, the ascriber of a belief or desire etc. that such-and-such "projects [the content] empathetically to the creature in the attitude," be it another human subject, or an animal. In all this, "practical psychology is what sustains us" and its "method ... is empathy".[47]

When speaking in a theoretical vein, however, Quine's position concerning 'practical psychology' is still skeptical. In another recent book, he describes empathy as coming into play when objective considerations give out; its use signals that we have moved away from solid ground and into infirm territory, where almost anything goes, objectively speaking.[48] Quine, then, would seriously doubt that the deliverances of our commonsense empathetic understanding could constitute a legitimate subject matter for scientific study.[49] But other contemporary authors seem much more optimistic, and have been trying to develop empirically workable alternatives to the 'theory' theory which incorporate the idea of empathy.[50] Of course, to ground their optimism one would need a full articulation of the alternative 'no-theory' conception of understanding, which is not something I have provided here. Instead, I have tried to motivate the search for an alternative by considering the debate over Conceptual Relativism.

4. Conceptual Divergence and Conceptual Relativism

I want to emphasize that in urging that commonsense understanding of others is not primarily theoretical in nature, I am not rejecting all attempts to advance an empirical theory, or a general (philosophical) conception of that understanding which may itself be theoretical in nature. To recognize that the ordinary understanding of others is primarily empathetic is just

to abandon one type of theory—the 'theory' theory—in the theoretical understanding of human understanders. However, we saw that recognizing the significance of empathetic understanding allows us to make intuitive sense of the idea that others—another culture, another society, another species—may employ different sets of concepts from us, see the world differently from us. Can one afford to accept such pluralism without becoming a relativist?

Conceptual differences, and with them, conceptual distance, come in different kinds and degrees. To issue her challenge, the conceptual relativist—much like the moral relativist, or the relativist about, say, epistemic justification—would need to make out the case that different conceptual schemes may stand in some sort of serious <u>competition</u>. And this is not as easy as it may seem. (In fact, I think it may be harder than in the other cases.) Consider some of the ways groups may differ conceptually. They may represent different types of animals, plants, phenomena, objects, practices, institutions, and so on, because different types of these things are present in their natural and socio-cultural environment. One group may possess detailed descriptions or elaborate explanations of matters that other groups have never gotten around—or cared—to describe or explain. So far, there does not seem to be any call for alarm, since no serious competition seems to be suggested (although the relativist is likely to argue that enough differences of these kinds could add up to more serious and global differences).

But we must not forget our aliens example, which suggests that two groups with different sense organs might possess different sets of experiential concepts under which they bring the same worldly phenomena. And we could also imagine groups differing in their basic commonsense categories, say, in the way economic theory differs from psychology (the former recognizing only equivalence classes of individuals with the same income, and the latter recognizing subjects of mental states). It is primarily these sorts of more radical and global differences that the relativist is likely to seize on.

In an intriguing article ("Something About Conceptual Schemes"), Paul Ziff compared different conceptual schemes to maps that use <u>different methods of projection</u>.[51] I think the map analogy is a useful one, since there are <u>diverse</u> ways in which different maps—even of

the same geographical area—could differ. Two maps of New York state, say, could cover particular sections in more or less detail; or they could mark different locations or roads. When you go hiking, you might use a regular trail map or a contour map. There are satellite maps, maps using different scales, and, as Ziff mentions, there are maps using different methods of projection (e.g., Mercator vs. Gnomonic). It would take some doing to draw a closer analogy between the different conceptual diversities and the different cartographic diversities. But we have enough to make some general points.

Let us go back to the remaining relativist claims separated at the beginning, starting with the most radical and seemingly most tantalizing one, the constructivist claim:

> (IV) The worlds in which possessors of different conceptual schemes live are themselves different from one another (since "[a] world exists only relative to an imposition of concepts").

The claim is that groups employing alternative sets of concepts ipso facto live in different worlds. This claim requires for its support the idea that a world is something constructed through human conceptualization. Conceptual relativists typically accept this claim without argument. Consider:

> [reality is] a vast production…something humanly produced and maintained. (Carey (1989: 26).)

> [A]ll facts are discourse specific [(since no fact is available apart from some dimension of assessment or other)] (Fish (1980: 199).)

> [W]e do not make stars as we make bricks; ... The worldmaking mainly in question here is making not with hands but with minds, or rather with languages or other symbol systems. Yet when I say that worlds are made, I mean it literally... (Goodman (1978: 213).)

Goodman's reference to a plurality of worlds is of course a consequence of coupling the construction idea with the diversity claim. Versions of this combined view have become almost orthodoxy among literary critics, and in various academic circles. The picture you get is one of different cultural, social, historical, biological groups, bringing different worlds, distinct realities, into existence through their conceptualizations. Not only are their discourses incommensurable; but they also fail to live in the same world. Going back to our map analogy, in the constructivist transformation, it is as though by drawing a map of a country you actually bring the country into existence. There are no geographical areas to be mapped,

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there are only the maps we draw. (One may wonder where the maps exist, not to mention the map drawers, if not in some particular place; but never mind.)

4.1 Construction, Adjudication, and Relativity

I think that an anti-relativist confronted with a constructivist would do well to go after the constructivist claim itself, and the way it is supposed to be supported by the Impossibility of Adjudication and Relativity claims, rather than denying the possibility of Conceptual Diversity. And there are plenty of things to say here.

The constructivist idea seems driven by considering a rather extreme case of diversity: the case of genuine alternative conceptual schemes or frameworks—ones that are in some sense or other globally <u>incommensurable</u>. Using this idea, constructivists often try to support their position by putting forth the claim that we could not adjudicate among alternative schemes. This is the Impossibility of Adjudication claim:

(II) <u>We cannot adjudicate</u> among divergent conceptual schemes.

The idea of adjudication has its home in cases such as the moral one, where we are faced with alternatives such that a. we understand them and b. we appreciate that they are in some competition. The analogue of that in the conceptual case would be alternative conceptual schemes that we could compare and be baffled by our inability to choose amongst them. But alternative conceptual schemes are not like pairs of glasses in a drug store, nor are they like maps you buy in a bookstore. They are not even like alternative scientific theories. We are not 'faced with' alternative conceptual schemes and consider a choice amongst them. If we are thinkers, then <u>ipso facto</u> we are concept users. We can examine our concepts, sharpen them, uncover interrelationships among them; and our conceptual scheme can change piecemeal, over time. Using our concepts, we can recognize from <u>within</u> our scheme, that there are other schemes, more or less accessible to us. If we are to be faced with a problem of adjudication, the relevant schemes have to be alternatives <u>for</u> us. But such alternatives are usually not thought to raise the specter of relativism. Yet the alternatives that are grist to the relativists' mill—alternatives <u>to</u> us—cannot be for us potential candidates for adjudication. Thus, the

Impossibility of Adjudication cannot play the role it needs to play in order to support the constructivist position.

We are still left with the Relativity claim:

(III) The <u>correctness</u> of a conceptual scheme <u>is relative</u> to culture, society, historical period; there is no absolute, culturally- (or socially-) independent standard for assessing conceptual correctness.

The map analogy encourages the following challenge: maps, after all, can be assessed as correct or incorrect, accurate or inaccurate, hence as better or worse. Can't the same be said of conceptual schemes? Yet, we know how to judge maps—we compare them to the things mapped. But this is, of course, something we cannot do with conceptual schemes. For we all have learned that we cannot step outside all conceptual schemes and compare them to THE world, or reality ITSELF, to decide their relative depictive merits.

I think there is a subtle confusion here. It is true that we judge maps to be correct or incorrect, etc. But such judgments are made only <u>given</u> a method of projection (as well as scale and other parameters). We compare <u>what the map says</u> to the way the things mapped are. And what the map says is determined by the method of projection it employs. Though we may compare two alternative methods of projections in terms of ease of use, elegance, etc., what we do <u>not</u> do is compare each method of projection to the way things are (and try to determine which method is more faithful on that score). This would be a version of the use-mention confusion. Similarly, in the conceptual case, what can be evaluated as correct, accurate, reasonable, appropriate or otherwise, is the content of what concept users are saying or thinking, not the means by which they think. And to be able to assess what others are saying or thinking, we must understand the concepts they use. Understanding is a precondition of evaluating or judging.

Consider the case where another culture uses concepts that are different from ours, but that are still accessible to us. Here, we are in a position to determine what it is they are saying or thinking, and thus make judgments of correctness using—what else—our normal standards. Of course, we may disagree; they may hold dear beliefs that we think plainly false. Under-standing does not guarantee agreement. (Tous comprendre <u>n'est pas</u> tous pardoner.) But that

is no different from our predicament at home. If the thesis of scientific underdetermination is right, two complete scientific 'theories of the world' taking account of all possible evidence may be in disagreement.[52] The more extreme case is where the other culture's concepts are inaccessible to us. But in this kind of case, we are simply <u>unable to understand</u> them, and thus unable to make a judgment as to whether what they say or think is right, true, reasonable, etc.

Still, acknowledging the possibility of incommensurable schemes may well be detrimental to <u>one</u> kind of absolutist. This is someone who labors under the idea that there is a privileged, unique, global, and complete method of projection. It would give us the grid of all grids, the mother (or father) of all schemes, the one that carves reality at its ultimate joints, and is 'one with the world'. We (ought to) strive to model our conceptual scheme after this ideal one; and will (or must) not rest as long as we can get closer to it.

If you feel sad to give up this idea, you may find some consolation in the following thought. Even an omniscient being, if she is a thinker, a believer, a represter, then she must maps things in a certain way, using a certain method. Being omniscient, everything she says is so. But <u>what</u> she says or believes to be so is a function of the concepts she employs. And her concepts—like pictorial representations—will also be partial, perspectival 'takes' on determinate <u>somethings</u>, which are independent of the 'takes', and which have a life of their own. As Ziff says: "No picture captures everything: even the best picture of a cat won't purr." One might add: even an omniscient being's concept of a cat won't purr.

5. Conceptual Schemes and Reality[53]

A conceptual framework or scheme can be tentatively characterized as a more or less stable set of basic concepts that members of a certain group (delineated socially, culturally, historically, or biologically) regularly employs in their perceptions, judgments, classifications, and descriptions of the world around them.[54] Resistance to the idea that genuinely diverse conceptual schemes are possible may take different forms and come from different sources. The foregoing reflections suggest one such source: a certain idealized conception of how concepts work. I shall refer to it as the 'hyper-realist' view of concepts. On this view, concepts are pure 'vehicles of resonance'.[55] They evolve or are acquired as a consequence of

cognitive systems being tuned to worldly objects and properties. The world comes to us all carved up, and cognizers are simply passively shaped through evolution and/or experience to mirror nature's own classifications. In the ideal limit, we can find cognizers who are entirely unencumbered by ordinary psychological and epistemic limitations. We may expect that their conceptual schemes would converge.

The constructivist conception may be seen as an antidote to the 'hyper-realist' view. On the constructivist view, concepts are (as the familiar metaphor goes) like cookie-cutters employed to carve up shapeless dough. The world floods cognizers in an undifferentiated flux—a swirling 'given', or "noumenal blah" (a phrase I've heard attributed to Charles Martin). Cognizers actively bring order to the chaos through the application of concepts. It is an arbitrary matter what sets of concepts they settle on, and different groups of cognizers will settle on different sets of concepts, there being no external arbiter to exercise control on the character of their concepts. It is in this way that concept users can be said to construct the worlds in which they live.[56]

The truth, to be sure, does not lie with either extreme. I would advocate a more realistic, 'responsive-constructive' conception. Most of our concepts, on this conception, are not 'pure vehicles of resonance'—they do not directly reflect nature's own classification into basic ontological categories. Insofar as our concepts are seen as classificatory tools, as devices for grouping things together,[57] they partly reflect our particular sensibilities, needs, and interests. However, our concepts are not shaped exclusively by our sensibilities, needs, and interests. The groupings implied by our concepts are answerable to features of the world, though certain features of us will determine which of the worldly features will be discernible by us.

A fresh illustration might help. Far away on some island, we have a community of islanders who develop a rock-climbing hobby. Gradually, they begin to notice specially shaped protrusions in the rocks especially apt for grabbing by human hands. The protrusions look more or less like the capital letter B in English, which is why the islanders begin to call them "B-edges," or "bedges". It is easy to see that, in time, the concept BEDGE that the

islanders begin to employ, will exhibit a considerable degree of plasticity. Though it is far from arbitrary whether something is a bedge, the concept BEDGE will apply to a great variety of things, including, in time, many non-B-shaped protrusions. Even among the B-shaped ones, there seems to be no hope of identifying an underlying feature common to all and only bedges—not even a geometrical feature. It also does not seem right to think that the concept must be analyzed in purely functional terms, as a protrusion graspable by a human hand (in a certain way). For, we can imagine productive application of the concept even after the islanders lose interest in climbing and their hand muscles weaken. (We can also imagine it applicable to things that happen not to be firm enough to be graspable.)

The kind of plasticity and dependence on interests, needs, and sensibilities exhibited by the BEDGE example is arguably the rule rather than the exception when it comes to our concepts. As the familiar example of "jade" illustrates, even natural kind concepts can exhibit this kind of dependence. Where does that leave the idea that the world we conceptualize exists independently of us, and is not of our own making?

To use another metaphor, we can think of concepts as nets in which worldly items get caught, lassos cognizers throw to tie together some worldly things. The things to which a concept correctly applies are what form the concept's extension. Now, some extensions are 'homogenous': they are held together through the sharing of a single underlying property, a unifying feature. Concepts whose extensions are so unified do correspond to distinct worldly properties. But it may well be that most of our concepts do not. Often our concepts have 'non-homogenous' extensions: they tie together things that do not share a single property in virtue of which they are to be grouped together under the relevant concept.

Not all concepts with 'non-homogenous' extensions, however, are 'arbitrary' or 'made up' in a way that is grist to the constructivist's mill. Even a concept that is relatively artificially introduced like BEDGE can be seen as responsive to reality. For, its use is keyed to perceived similarities among worldly items. The items in the extension of BEDGE clearly do not share a single property in virtue of which they fall under the concept; the world does not come grouped into bedges. (I mean: there is no single, non-trivial property, being bedge,

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to which the concept BEDGE 'resonates'.) But the items to which the concept BEDGE is applicable may well be held together by certain similarities in their properties, which similarities the islanders have become attentive to due to their circumstances, interests, and sensibilities.[58] I see no reason to deny that this suffices for maintaining that there are bedges, and that bedges are not of the islanders' own making, or depend for their existence on the islanders' minds, or judgments.[59] On the other hand, I do not think that accepting the independent reality of bedges requires us to hold that the <u>concept</u> BEDGE is one that must be usable (and thus fully understood) by every cognizer.

The classifications implied by our concepts depend on us in the sense that our sensibilities, needs, interests, and so on, (partially) determine what similarities among worldly items we will respond to. Insofar as there are differences in sensibilities, needs, interests, etc. among different groups of cognizers, there will be room for conceptual diversity.   To the extent that the differences can be radical and systematic, there will be room for alternative conceptual schemes. The extent to which the possessors of such alternative schemes could fully understand each other would depend on the extent to which they can put themselves in each others' place, conceptually speaking. Such mutual understanding would be a genuine achievement, one that is not guaranteed by the existence of a mind-independent reality to which our concepts are responsive.[60]

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[1] A word of caution. In recent years, there has been a very lively debate in the philosophy of mind/psychology between proponents of the so-called 'theory'-theory, and their opponents, who often subscribe to the so-called Simulation Theory. (For discussion, see the papers in Davies and Stone (1995a and 1995b).) What I shall be referring to as a 'theory'-theory of linguistic understanding bears some relations to various views that have been grouped under that same title in that debate. However, I do not take myself here to be engaging directly in that debate, nor do I take myself to be offering direct reasons in favor of a 'simulation theory' of linguistic understanding, since it is not clear, at this stage, what such a theory would amount to.

I discuss some of the connections between what the 'theory'-theory of linguistic understanding and the 'theory'-theory of mind in my (forthcoming). In <u>Linguistic Understanding: Theory and Practice</u> (a monograph in progress), I offer further discussion of these connections, and develop a more positive, 'no-theory' conception of linguistic understanding.

[2] I argue this briefly in Bar-On (1992). The argument is developed more fully in my (forthcoming). I touch on it briefly in 2.11 below.

[3] For a critical assessment of Dummett's argument, see Bar-On (1995).

[4] For this statement of constructivism, as well as criticism, see Devitt (1991: 157, and <u>passim</u>).

[5] Or, at any rate, its analogue in the moral case would not seem to be a claim properly separable from the relativity claim. The moral relativist analogue of (IV) would be the claim that the moral realities in which possessors of different moral codes live are themselves different from one another. But what is there to the claim that the moral realities of these groups are different, over and above the claim that the groups adhere to different (and irreconcilably conflicting) moral codes? The problem here is that the idea of a <u>moral reality</u> that is independent of any moral values/standards makes little sense. What would make such a reality distinctively moral? In the conceptual case, by contrast, we seem able to make sense of the idea of a world independent of our (or perhaps even any) conceptualization of it, as well of the idea that there may be different ways of conceptualizing it. Indeed, in this case, the relevant normative element (the idea of a <u>correct</u> conceptual scheme) seems to depend on this idea of an independent world, whereas in the moral case (as well as in other 'overtly' normative cases such as the case of aesthetic norms and of norms of rationality), the normative element seems 'internal' to that which is said to vary across cultures, etc. (More on this below.)

[6] Thus, on this way of understanding it, the constructivist claim allows us to affirm the diversity of conceptual schemes while taking the sting out of the idea of conceptual relativity. If constructivism is right, there is no need to deny the absolutist notion of scheme-independent conceptual correctness, inasmuch as that notion depends on a misguided idea of a scheme-independent world.

What I have offered so far is a very rough, if not caricaturist sketch of the constructivist line of thought. For some variations on the constructivist theme, see Carnap (1950), Goodman (1978), Putnam (1990), and Rorty (1991).

[7] The status of such findings is far from controversial. It is important to recognize that

the attribution to another culture of adherence to the said principle will depend on our interpretation of their various practices, as well as their moral vocabulary. For some relevant discussion, see Harman (1977) and Foot (1979). Foot questions the straightforwardness of moral diversity claims, on the grounds that the very interpretation of another culture's moral discourse may be constrained by the basic moral principles we ourselves endorse.

[8] We shall return to this case below, p. x. For a recent discussion of diversity in color categorization, see Saunders and van Brakel (1997).

[9] For a concrete example (one that may, however, seem not as extreme as the case suggested here), consider the term "blue" in English. English speakers describe both the sky on a clear day and periwinkles as blue. In Hebrew, by contrast, there is as sharp a division within the 'blue range' as the division between "pink" and "red" in English. The term *kakhol* is reserved for the darker shades of blue, whereas the term *t'chelet* is reserved for the lighter shades. Thus, it would be as incorrect for a Hebrew speaker to describe the sky on a clear day as *kakhol* as it would be to describe a pink flower as "red" in English.

[10] It is worth noting, however, that, on the face of it, the conceptual relativist is in a peculiar position compared to the moral relativist with respect to the diversity claim. The moral relativist typically <u>presupposes</u> a prior understanding of the moral discourse of the allegedly different culture. And she tries to support the claim of moral diversity by describing <u>in our language</u> the others' actions and moral pronouncements or beliefs <u>taken as understood</u>. However suspect such a presupposition of understanding may be in the moral case, in the conceptual case it would seem detrimental. How can you presuppose that you understand the other culture's discourse, while at the same time claiming to establish that its members are <u>genuinely different conceptually</u>? This point feeds into well-known philosophical arguments that deny the possibility of conceptual diversity (see below). At the same time, this aspect of the discussion of conceptual diversity helps explain why considerations about language and translation figure more prominently in discussions of conceptual relativism than they do in discussions of moral relativism. (But see note #7 above.)

[11] A prime example of this strategy is Donald Davidson's line in his well-known article "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," henceforth "OIVC" (1984: 183-198). In that article, Davidson sets out to reject Conceptual Relativism by undermining the 'very idea' of a conceptual scheme. He tries to do that by denying the possibility of significantly <u>different</u> conceptual schemes—that is, by denying genuine conceptual diversity. And he does that by, in effect, denying the possibility of untranslatability between languages.

Davidson can be seen as supporting P by an identification he proposes early on in "OVICS" between conceptual schemes and sets of intertranslatable languages (1984: 185). Davidson also explicitly attributes the necessity claim to proponents of Conceptual Relativism: "The failure of intertranslatability is a necessary condition for difference of conceptual schemes" (*op. cit.* 190); "The test of [conceptual] difference remains failure or difficulty of translation" (*op. cit.* 191). The context is one in which he is attacking the proponents' attempt to make sense of the idea of alternative conceptual schemes; and so it may seem as though he does not himself wish to endorse the necessity claim. However, the necessity claim follows from the identification of intertranslatability and sameness of conceptual scheme, which Davidson does endorse.

For a fuller treatment of Davidson's argument see my (1994). 1.1-1.3 summarize those parts of that paper which will be relevant to my discussion here.

[12] Cf. Whorf (1956).

[13] This intuitive idea is behind the following quotations:

> Words ... constitute, in the words of Humboldt, "a veritable world which the mind, ... must interpose between itself and objective reality". (von Wartburg, 1969: 169)

> Language is the expression of the form in which the individual carries the world with him. (von Wartburg, 1969: 162)

> The difference in languages ... implies a different conception of the world. (von Humbolt, in Leitzman 1905: 27)

[14] For an example of a grammatical mismatch, consider:

English: (i) Rabe put the basket on/under the table.

(ii) The table on top of/under which Rabe put the basket was damaged.

Malagasy: (i') (similarly) [Rabe put the basket on/under the table.]

 but: (ii') [The table which was basket-put by Rabe was damaged.]

When the Malagasi relative clause is extracted and put in the subject position, the exact locative relation that "table" bears to the verb is lost. Keenan argues that proposed translation of English (ii) into Malagasi will fail to be exact. Here I will skip his reasons, and point out instead the problem that arises when you consider translation in the other direction. Any natural English candidate for translating (ii') will inevitably contain <u>more</u> information than the original Malagasi sentence, and, to this extent, will be an inexact translation. Note also that the Malagasi (ii') can be asserted in ignorance of whether Rabe put the basket under, on top of, next to, etc. the damaged table, but it doesn't imply such ignorance; the sentence simply remains silent on the issue. You might want to try: "The table under which or on top of which or next to which or ... Rabe put the basket was damaged". But such a sentence would clearly suggest that the speaker doesn't know which is the case, and so would be at best misleading. See Keenan (1978) and Bar-On (1993).

[15] For a more extensive discussion (including more examples and references) see Bar-On (1993), where I defend the claim that we should not be so permissive as to count just <u>any</u> content-conveying gloss as a translation. We shall return to this point shortly.

[16] Someone inspired by Davidson might deny that we can assume that, e.g., the flat-earthers speak the same language as ours (that they mean *earth* by "earth", etc.), all appearances to the contrary. But it seems the only way to do that is to make—question-beggingly—(apparent) conceptual difference a sufficient condition for non-homophonic translation. Furthermore, this maneuver would be useful only if we can guarantee that no other conceptual differences (generated by other fundamental disagreements in beliefs) would surface when we specify the contents of their beliefs using non-homophonic translations of their discourse. This is, I believe, highly questionable. For relevant discussion and examples, see, e.g., Aune (1987), Rescher (1980) and Devitt (1991: Ch.s 9 & 13).

[17] Such examples, as Davidson puts it, "can be explained and described using the equipment of a single language. … 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." (1984: 184)

[18] For the distinction between alternatives for us and alternatives to us, see Lear (1982).

Davidson's "OIVC" can be seen as an attempt to argue that there can be no alternatives to our conceptual schemes. His argument trades on the identification of shared conceptual schemes with sets of intertranslatable languages which we have seen reason to reject. Davidson says: "we must say much the same thing about differences in conceptual scheme as we say about differences in belief: we improve the clarity and bite of declarations of difference, whether of scheme or opinion, by enlarging the basis of shared (translatable) language or of shared opinion." (1984: 197, my emphasis.) And elsewhere, where Davidson summarizes his "OVICS" argument, he also puts it in terms of translation: "if translation succeeds, we have shown there is no need to speak of two conceptual schemes, while if translation fails, there is no ground for speaking of two." (1980: 243). (Note that this formulation of the argument remains misleadingly silent on whether what is at issue is total or partial failure of translation.)

[19] Where the object language can—but need not—be the same as the metlanguage. For Davidson's theory of interpretation, see Essays 1-5 and 9-11 in his (1984).

[20] In my (1993), I argue that our ordinary assessments of translations are highly context-dependent and appeal to an equivalence relation which is different from the relation of sameness of truth-conditions. It is often more stringent, but in some cases it is looser.

[21] Reprinted in Davidson (1984: 17-36).

[22] Indeed, the truth-predicate for each natural language L is expressible in any natural language other than L, provided it has the appropriate semantic vocabulary.

[23] The same will hold for other semantic predicates such as "refer". Of course, the success of the example will depend on one's particular approach to the Liar. For a critical review of a number approaches to the Liar, as well as an anti-hierarchical approach, see Simmons (1993). The point of the example is simply to illustrate how failures of (Davidsonian) interpretation could arise, and how even if they did, this should not provide grist to the conceptual relativist's mill.

[24] Davidson himself presents this case as illustrating relative conceptual deficiency: "there may in the nature of the case always be something we grasp in understanding the language of another (the concept of truth) that we cannot communicate to him" (1984: 29). He takes failure of interpretation of this kind to establish that there is at least this much conceptual divergence between ourselves and speakers of any other language: they possess, whereas we lack, concepts expressed by (certain) semantic predicates of their language, and vice versa. I beg to differ. (And, arguably, there are reasons why Davidson himself should not take the case this way.)

Incidentally, if we were to agree with Davidson, we should be able to devise a Twin Earth case in which two individuals differed conceptually (with regard to certain semantic concepts), even though there were no differences between their ('narrow') psychologies or their environments.

[25] Indeed, it may be insisted that it is manifestable through our ability to translate the relevant expressions. For, I would argue that our own English predicate "true in English", while inadequate to interpret (in the Davidsonian sense) her *vrai en Anglais,* is perfectly adequate to translate it. This would be just another example where a perfectly good translation

does not preserve extension, or truth-conditions. Such examples are prevalent. (See my (1993: section 1).)

[26] See Keenan (1978: 174f.). Keenan refers his readers to a manuscript by Ken Hale, "Gaps in Grammars and Cultures" (1971) for supporting data and analysis.

[27] It is useful to think about the case by considering of what thoughts the users of the richer set of concepts are able to think that are unavailable to users of the impoverished system. The case of small children is of obvious relevance.

[28] But see note 1 above.

[29] This characterization requires further elaboration. In particular, there may be different versions of this conception, pertaining, for instance to whether the view concerns the process of the <u>acquisition</u> of language understanding, the actual <u>practice</u> of linguistic interpretation (radical or not), or the character of the relevant <u>concepts</u> (e.g., meaning, reference, synonymy, etc.). (For relevant discussion, see the introduction to Davies and Stone (1995a).) I allow myself some liberty here, since the authors I cite below as representatives of what I am calling a 'theory'-theory of linguistic understanding explicitly treat language acquisition, as well as intra-linguistic understanding, on a par with the interpretation of foreign speech.

I do attempt a fuller characterization in my (forthcoming). I leave fuller discussion for my <u>Linguistic Understanding: Theory and Practice</u> (in progress).

[30] For further articulations of this 'theory'-theory by these authors, see e.g. Chomsky (19755: Chapters 1&2), and Quine (1960: Ch.2), (1974), and (1976: 57f.).

Over the years, Chomsky has gradually moved away from attributing to the 1st-language learner a process of selecting among alternative grammars. His present picture is one according to which the child's innate "universal grammar" places heavy constraints on the set of possible grammars the child can acquire, leaving certain `surface' linguistic features (characterized by "parameters" of the universal grammar) undetermined. These 'parameters' become 'fixed' upon exposure to the idiosyncratic linguistic input of the particular language the child ends up acquiring. (See, e.g., Chomsky 1986.) While this may seem like a denial of the 'theory'-theory, it really is not. For, on the present picture, we are still to think of the linguistic input as evidence on the basis of which the child can determine (unconsciously, as always) <u>inductively</u>, the surface features of her language. This determination is what Chomsky (still) counts as constructing a theory of the language the child is acquiring. The point of enriching the innate universal grammar, so as to leave very little unsettled, is to make the process of theory construction by the child <u>possible</u>, given the limited amount of data he has to work with. (This is Chomsky's way of solving the "poverty of the stimuli" problem.) For relevant discussion of Chomsky's view, see my Bar-On (1992) and (1997).

[31] I say "surprisingly", since it's well known that Davidson would have no truck with Fodor's language of thought, and differs greatly from him on so many other issues in the philosophy of language and mind, metaphysics, and epistemology.

[32] Davidson distinguishes a "prior" theory from a "passing" theory. "For the hearer, the prior theory expresses how he is prepared in advance to interpret an utterance of the speaker, while the passing theory is how he <u>does</u> interpret the utterance. For the speaker, the prior theory is how he <u>believes</u> the interpreter's prior theory to be, while his passing theory is the theory he <u>intends</u> the interpreter to use." (1986: 442)

For some critique of Davidson's view as presented in the article from which these quotations come, see Bar-On and Risjord (1992)

[33] Cf. e.g. Davidson (1990: 301, 314). Fodor and Lepore (1992) reject Davidson's Publicity Requirement. For discussion of the Requirement, see my (1992), (1996) and (1997).

[34] Indeed, there is a way that Chomsky and Fodor would agree with this. After all, they do think that speakers are remarkably successful in figuring out the speech of others, and take it as evidence for the fact that we are endowed with very rich and domain-specific innate structures. However, Chomsky and Fodor take the further (and arguably unnecessary) step of taking the 'real' meaning facts to consist in facts about internal goings-on that are implicated in speech and interpretation.

[35] See Bar-On (1992), (1997), and (forthcoming).

[36] In order for Davidson to be able to deny the possibility of conceptual diversity, he must argue (as indeed he tries to) that there can be no uninterpretable speech. See Bar-On and Risjord (1992) for an argument that, properly understood, Charity cannot afford this strong result. Moreover, even a strong Charity principle (such as is needed to support Davidson's "OVIC" argument) would at best help rule out only radical divergence of beliefs. Given Davidson's "inscrutability of reference" thesis (see 1984: Essays 15 & 16), an interpreter could interpret someone's simple vocabulary items as being about, say, rabbits-on-a-rainy-day, rather than rabbits, consistently with making most of the interpretee's beliefs turn out to be true. But this means that an interpreter could understand the interpretee as operating with different basic concepts. The Davidsonian methodology of interpretation does not force us to 'read our own concepts' into the interpretee's mind. This seems to leave plenty of room for conceptual divergence.

The right Davidsonian response to this may be to endorse Quinean skepticism: beyond what can be settled by the methodology of interpretation, there is no fact of the matter as to what concepts the interpretee possesses, and thus no factual import to questions of conceptual similarity/difference.

[37] An interesting twist: Fodor adamantly objects to the view that in good part drives Davidson's argument against relativism, namely, semantic holism. He says: "I hate holism. Because holism always leads to relativism, and I really hate relativism" (1991: 299).

[38] Given this claim, we are to see the diverse natural languages we are familiar with as essentially like notational variants of each others—each language exhibits its own idiosyncratic phonetic labels of the very same Mentalese items. The only differences among natural languages that are ones that are due to 'Saussurian' arbitrariness – the arbitrariness of assigning different phonetic forms to a single meaning (e.g., referring to a certain given color using the word "bleu" rather than "blue"). Chomsky is reported to have once said: "there is really only one human language'; and, the reporter added, no one speaks it!

[39] Thanks to Bill Knorpp for prompting the last remark.

[40.] The latter term is used in Ramberg (1989: 69,85).

[41] Although no sharp lines can be drawn here, it could be argued that the Walbiri example is different from our earlier example of the Malagasi term [kabari]. For, introducing English speakers to the concept expressed by the Malagasi term [kabari] would presumably not require re-educating or retraining them. On the other hand, re-education would be required for members of a pre-scientific culture to gain access into our scientific concepts. (So

Davidson's dismissal of the Kuhnian examples of radical scientific changes may be unwarranted.)

[42] This kind of theoretical understanding is not available to the Walbiri speaker vis-a-vis our mathematical concepts. (In this respect, the Walbiri example illustrates a more radical case than the alien beings case.)

It should be noted that the lack of theoretical understanding in the Walbiri case is matched by the impossibility of the interpretation of certain sentences in Walbiri. There may, then, be some interesting link between what I have called 'theoretical understanding' and interpretation (though we should still bear in mind the truth-predicate case).

[43] For a recent attempt to derive an anti-physicalist, property dualism using 'conceptual dualism' of a sort I'm advocating, see Chalmers (1996). I think this attempt is seriously flawed, but cannot argue this here.

[44] Loar (1990) proposes that there are what he calls "phenomenal concepts" whose acquisition requires undergoing certain experiences.

[45] In these latter cases, we legitimately use the homophonic translation, assigning to utterances truth-conditions disquotationally, yet we come to realize gradually and partly in that way, that these people see things very differently from us, sometimes unfathomably so.

[46] The charge that 'theory'-theorists fail to take proper account of the role played by projection and empathy will not be new to anyone familiar with the debate between 'Theory'-Theory and Simulation Theory in the philosophy of mind. (Davies and Stone 1995a.) I am here putting the charge to a particular use, in the context of defending the possibility of conceptual diversity. The connections between my claims regarding the role of empathy and those of Simulation theorists remain to be explored.

[47] Here are fuller quotations from which some of the remarks in this paragraph are excerpted (See Quine's 1990):

> Empathy dominates the learning of language, both by child and field linguist. In the child's case it is the parent's empathy. The parent assesses the appropriateness of the child's observation sentence by noting the child's orientation and how the scene would look from there. (p. 42)
>
> Empathy guides the linguist still as he rises above observation sentences through his analytical hypotheses, though there he is trying to project into the native's associations and grammatical trends rather than his perceptions. And much the same must be true of the growing child. (p. 43)
>
> Practical psychology is what sustains our radical translator all along the way, and the method of his psychology is empathy: he imagines himself in the native's situation as best he can. (p. 46)
>
> Martha empathizes Tom's perception that it is raining just as the field linguist empathizes the native's perception that a rabbit has appeared. Learning a language in the field and teaching it in the nursery are much the same at the level of observation sentences: a matter of perceiving that the subject is perceiving that p. (p. 62-3)
>
> The evidence is not assembled deliberately. One empathizes, projecting oneself into Tom's situation and Tom's behavior pattern, and finds thereby that the sentence `The train is late' is what comes naturally. Such is the somewhat haphazard basis for saying that Tom perceives that the train is late." (p. 63)

Empathy is why we ascribe a propositional attitude by a content clause. . . . The content clause purports to reflect the subject's state of mind rather than the state of things. (p. 68)

The language [in which a content clause is specified] is that of the ascriber of the attitude, though he projects it empathetically to the creature in the attitude. The cat is purportedly in a state of mind in which the ascriber would say `A mouse is in there'. The quotational account reflects the empathy that invests the idioms of propositional attitude from `perceives that' onwards. (p. 68-9)

We all have an uncanny knack for empathizing another's perceptual situation, however ignorant of the physiological or optical mechanism of his perception. The knack is comparable, almost, to our ability to recognize faces while unable to sketch or describe them. (p. 42-3)

[48] Quine remarks that the need to 'read ourselves into the minds of others' arises "the farther we venture away from simple discourse about familiar concrete things," since then "the farther apart the checkpoints tend to be spaced"; that is, the less testable our hypotheses are. He thinks we naively harbor "an exaggerated idea of" successful communication. Whereas objectively speaking, beyond "simple discourse on familiar concrete things, ... [t]he miracle of communication... is a little like the miracle of transubstantiation: what transubstantiation?" (1987) p. 29). (I think that in these passages, Quine may be conflating empathy with the principle of charity.)

[49] As for the possibility of conceptual differences, principle of charity.) Quine would abide by his earlier, Word & Object position: "There is no telling how much of one's success with analytical hypotheses is due to real kinship of outlook on the part of the natives and ourselves, and how much of it is due to linguistic ingenuity or lucky coincidence. ... We alternately wonder at the inscrutability of the native mind and wonder at how very much like us the native is, where in the one case we have merely muffed the best translation and in the other case we have done a more thorough job of reading our own provincial modes into the natives speech." (1960: 77)

[50] For references, see Davies and Stone (1995a) and (1995b).

[51] See Ziff (1972: 135-140). Ziff's discussion clearly allows for the intelligibility of conceptual diversity and also alludes to the connection between understanding and empathy I made earlier in an attempt to fund diversity.

[52] Quine defends the thesis in, e.g., (1981).

[53] This section is based on my "Pains, Stains, and Automobiles: Concepts and Reality (A Reply to John Heil's 'Levels of Reality and the Reality of Levels')" delivered at the Greensboro Symposium in Philosophy on Current Issues in Ontology, 2000). Some of the ideas I present below are directly inspired by John Heil (200X).

[54] A fuller characterization would attempt to capture the fact that concepts that are elements of a conceptual framework are, in some sense, not optional. (This, in contrast with 'made-up' concepts.)

[55] For this idea, see Fodor (1998) especially Ch. 7.

[56] I do not mean to suggest that this conception is cogent. As remarked in section 4 above, I believe it is rife with confusion.

[57] Millikan (2000) argues that it is a mistake to think of concepts solely (or even

primarily) as classificatory devices. She suggests that the more fundamental function of concepts is as identificatory devices.

[58] Perhaps the extension in such a case is held together by similarities among objects and properties, as suggested by Heil (2003: 216). The sharing of a single property, Heil maintains, is not the only legitimate ontological glue or bond; similarity among items' properties will often do too.

[59] Could there be bedges if no one did (or would) judge anything to be a bedge? Note that, as we raise the question, we ourselves are using the concept BEDGE. It is up to the world whether anything gets caught in the BEDGE-net in the counterfactual situation envisaged. Though there may be cases where the answer is No, the case at hand does not seem to be among them.

The line I am pursuing here may be further clarified by considering how concepts that have 'non-homogenous' extensions behave with respect to the Tarskian truth-schema (which some consider to be the hallmark of realism). A relevant instance would be:

'That bedge is crumbling" is true iff that [contextually salient] bedge is crumbling.

Properly understood, the schema has a mentioned sentence on the left-hand side, and a used sentence of our own language on the right-hand side. On my understanding, using the sentence "That bedge is crumbling" assertively does not suffice for committing you to there being a distinct property—being a bedge—that all and only bedges share. The schema is about the semantic relation of truth, not about ontology. It should be seen as a semantic principle, rather than a way of ushering in a suspect metaphysics. So I can use the concept BEDGE to pick out an item that bears only certain similarities to other items properly called "bedge," so as to say something true—namely, that that one is crumbling.