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## CONCEPTUAL RELATIVISM AND TRANSLATION

According to *conceptual relativism*, different cultures view the world through conceptual schemes that cannot be reconciled. This doctrine may seem to be supported by a phenomenon familiar to translators: exact translations, even adequate ones, often seem impossible to come by. Untranslatability, the conceptual relativist reasons, attests to the inaccessibility of other cultures; the more pervasive it is, the wider the conceptual chasm between ourselves and the native users of the untranslatable language.

In a celebrated article<sup>1</sup>, Donald Davidson has proposed to take the wind out of the sails of conceptual relativism by undermining 'the very idea of a conceptual scheme'. Davidson seeks to undermine that idea by denying the possibility of untranslatability. Once the idea is rejected, Davidson believes, it will be seen that "it is hard to improve [the] intelligibility [of the conceptual relativist doctrine] while retaining the excitement" (183). This paper is an attempt to increase intelligibility, without giving up on excitement.

### 1. INTRODUCTION – CONCEPTUAL RELATIVISM

Let us first consider briefly the doctrine of *moral* relativism. The moral relativist typically maintains that what is morally right or wrong is a matter which is relative to a given society or culture. Roughly, we can discern three stages in arguing for the moral relativist position:

- (I) An observation of moral diversity – of *substantive differences* in moral judgments and standards – across cultures or societies.<sup>2</sup>
- (II) A judgement to the effect that *we cannot adjudicate* among the diverse moral codes.
- (III) A conclusion that moral values are culturally (or socially) *relative*; e.g., that there *is* no absolute, culturally- (or socially-) independent moral rightness/wrongness, good/evil, etc.

Clearly, the moral relativist cannot stop at the first stage. The observation of moral diversity, in and of itself, does not suffice to support the relativist position. The relativist must argue that we cannot choose among the differing sets of moral standards. But even if that is so, relativism is not established. For, a culture's moral standards may simply be mistaken. Even if we cannot make such a judgment from our parochial point of view, it may still be the case that there are absolute – albeit epistemically elusive – culture-independent moral values or standards. Hence the need to take the third step.

Now, many moral philosophers would accept the observation of cross-cultural moral diversity (stage (I)). Dispute may arise as to whether – or to what extent – that observation supports the claim made in (II), about the impossibility of adjudication. But the ultimate threat posed by moral relativism – as well as its real excitement – seems to be generated at stage (III). By contrast, much of the excitement generated by conceptual relativism seems to be associated with the analogue of stage (I) above, namely:

- (I') An observation of conceptual diversity – of *substantive differences* in conceptual 'frameworks' or 'schemes' or 'theory of the world' – across cultures or societies.

There seems to be already something tantalizing and troubling about the idea that people of other cultures (societies, etc.) may 'see the world through different eyes', in that they may exercise radically different concepts from us, or possess radically different modes of experience and thought.

Perhaps what makes this idea philosophically interesting is that the possibility of genuine conceptual diversity immediately raises the possibility of conceptual *inaccessibility*, or impenetrability. It seems to land us in a kind of sceptical quandary: if there are indeed 'conceptual schemes' which constitute genuine alternatives to ours, how could we possibly ever hope to learn of them? Yet we ordinarily tend to think that there should be no special problem in learning of alternative moral codes. Perhaps this is why the claim of conceptual diversity has given philosophers more pause than the claim of moral diversity.

The claim of moral diversity is often supported by an examination of another culture's moral discourse as it is represented in *our* language.

Their actions combined with their moral claims or beliefs *taken as understood* and *expressed in our language* serve to ground the claim of diversity. In this way, the moral relativist's argument typically presupposes that we have a prior understanding of the moral discourse of the other culture. There may be something suspect about this presupposition. If, based on a certain understanding of the other culture's claims, we conclude that they possess genuinely different moral values/principles from ours, how can we be certain that we have understood their claims properly as *moral claims*?<sup>3</sup>

However the case may be with the moral relativist's presupposition of understanding, an analogous presupposition in the argument for conceptual diversity would be inherently problematic. The problem seems to be this. In the moral case, we think we can make sense of an alternative moral code as a set of values and (basic) moral principles which we understand, and take to be different from ours, but which as a matter of fact we do not – or perhaps even *would* not, if given the choice – adopt. But the situation seems different in the conceptual case. As noted above, we tend to think that real conceptual alternativeness implies conceptual inaccessibility. The thought is that if there were real alternatives to our conceptual schemes, they would be sets of concepts, categories of thought or modes of experience, which we in some sense *could* not adopt, not merely ones we did not happen to – or would not choose to – adopt. Now, any set of conceptual canons which we could understand would seem to be *ipso facto* conceptually accessible to us; it would therefore (by the above implication) not constitute a genuine alternative to ours after all. For this reason, a conceptual relativist who begins with an observation of genuine conceptual differences is under immediate obligation to tell us *how to make sense of the attribution of genuinely different concepts* etc. to members of another culture or society.

In an attempt to discharge this obligation, proponents of conceptual relativism very often make direct use of evidence about the language of the culture which is alleged to be conceptually alien. In particular, they make use of evidence of difficulties or impossibilities of translation. It is for this reason that considerations about language and translation figure more prominently in discussions of conceptual relativism than they do in discussions of moral relativism.

## 2. TRANSLATABILITY AND CONCEPTUAL SCHEMES

Here, in a nutshell, is the intuitive idea connecting untranslatability and conceptual inaccessibility. 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 find ourselves unable to translate, and would form a barrier to our ‘sharing in their conceptual scheme’. This intuitive idea is behind the following string of 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).

But the conceptual relativist who appeals to untranslatability seems to be in a bind. If she attempts to support her thesis by citing interpreted forms of speech and behaviour, she seems in danger of undermining her own claims. The more detailed and explicit the linguistic evidence she provides for the alleged difference in conceptual schemes, the more she will be demonstrating that a linguistic rendering of the alien discourse in her own language is possible after all. And that would clearly seem to go against the claim of untranslatability. In other words, it can be argued that the conceptual relativist cannot be in a position to support her claim of untranslatability without undermining part of her thesis – or so it would seem. Whatever may remain of the claim of conceptual diversity will not suffice to generate real philosophical excitement or threat. Thus, unlike in the case of moral relativism, where evidence of diversity may be regarded as simply insufficient to support an interesting

or threatening relativist thesis, in the case of conceptual relativism, evidence of diversity would seem to defeat part of the very thesis which it is used to establish.

I shall refer to the above argument against conceptual relativism as “the evidential argument”. A more rigorous version goes as follows:

(P1) Failures of intertranslatability would be the best evidence for divergence of conceptual schemes.

But

(P2) Any attempt to establish non-intertranslatability is self-defeating.

This is because, in explaining why or how sentences of some language are not translatable into ours we inevitably render those sentences in our language, thereby giving the lie to the claim of non-intertranslatability. So,

(3) Non-intertranslatability can never be established.

Conclusion:

The best evidence for divergence of conceptual schemes cannot be produced, in principle.

Although I think the evidential argument contains a grain of truth, and should make us wary of being won over too easily by conceptual relativists, it does not seal the case against them. For one thing, the evidential argument as it stands only serves to point up deficiencies – albeit systematic ones – in the kinds of *evidence* conceptual relativists typically attempt to produce for their thesis. Insofar as the relativist thesis is supposed to be a metaphysical thesis about the possible existence of genuinely different conceptual schemes that are inaccessible to us, it does not stand refuted by rejection of proposed evidence for it. A more directly metaphysical, or conceptual approach is required. Such is, I believe, Davidson’s intended approach in “On The Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme”. Davidson alludes to the evidential argument early on in “OVICS” (184), but seems reluctant to rest with it. Part of our task in what follows will be to determine to what extent, and in what ways – if any – Davidson’s argument differs from the evidential argument.

3. NON-EVIDENTIAL ARGUMENTS AGAINST  
'CONCEPTUAL SCHEMES'

The evidential argument tries to undermine conceptual relativism by denying that there can be evidence from untranslatability for conceptual divergence. A more metaphysical/conceptual approach might seek to reject directly the possibility of conceptual divergence, rather than argue that any attempt to provide evidence for it is self-defeating. Such an approach might still appeal to considerations about translation, but it would need to invoke a constitutive or criterial link between conceptual divergence and non-intertranslatability. Along these lines, one might advance the following simple argument (inspired by certain aspects of Davidson's complex discussion in "OVICS"):

- (P) Failures of intertranslatability are criterial of genuine divergence of conceptual schemes.

But

- (Q) There can be no failures of intertranslatability.

So,

- (C) There can be no genuine divergence of conceptual schemes.

P is to be read as the claim that there can be no genuine conceptual differences – ones that would qualify as yielding a divergent, alternative 'conceptual scheme' – without failures of intertranslatability between the languages spoken by the possessors of the allegedly different schemes. In other words, it is *not* that failures of intertranslatability are sufficient – evidentially or otherwise – for a divergence in conceptual schemes, but rather that such failures constitute a *necessary* condition for it. This claim, as well as the sufficiency claim, follow logically from the identification Davidson proposes early on in "OVICS" between conceptual schemes and sets of intertranslatable languages (185).<sup>4</sup>

Q, the denial of the possibility of translation failures, seems implausible on its face. In order to assess it properly, we should – following Davidson – distinguish two possibilities: the possibility of *total* failures

of intertranslatability and the possibility of *partial* failures of intertranslatability. In "OVICS", Davidson treats separately the case of total failure and the case of partial failure. As for the total failure case, we might attribute to Davidson the following argument (which follows the pattern of the above simple argument):

- (P') If two individuals possess different conceptual schemes, then the languages they speak are totally non-intertranslatable.

- (Q') There can be no total failure of intertranslatability.

So,

- (C) No two individuals possess different conceptual schemes.

As I understand it, Davidson's argument for Q', in outline, is this. Anyone who is prepared to entertain the notion of a language which is completely untranslatable into some familiar language must have a criterion of languagehood which is independent of translation. But Davidson believes he can argue for the claim that 'translatability into a familiar language' is 'a criterion of languagehood'.<sup>5</sup> His argument consists in considering some alternative criteria and showing either their inadequacy or their tacit dependence on the notion of translation (see 186–2). The upshot of the argument is, in effect, that nothing can be both a language and completely untranslatable into a language we understand; hence there can be no totally non-intertranslatable languages, as Q' above asserts. Since Davidson's argument against total untranslatability has received considerable attention from other authors,<sup>6</sup> I shall not dwell on it at any length here.

However, even if we accept Davidson's argument for Q', there is room to question P'. Why should *total* failure of intertranslatability be required for conceptual divergence? Could we not conceive of speakers who make enough utterances that we can translate, so that we may suppose that they are similar to us in possessing a language, but where there are enough of their utterances which we *cannot* translate, so as to warrant the claim that they are conceptually different from us? This would present us with a case of partial untranslatability which is used to give sense to conceptual divergence; indeed, it seems to be precisely the sort of case that proponents of conceptual relativism who invoke untranslatability

have in mind. Thus, P' seems to posit an implausibly demanding criterion for divergence in conceptual schemes. This may be partly what motivates Davidson to consider the partial failure case.

Now, one might propose the exact analogue of the above argument for the case of partial failure of intertranslatability, to wit:

(P'') If two individuals possess different conceptual schemes, then the languages they speak are at least partially non-intertranslatable.

(Q'') There can be no partial failures of intertranslatability.

So,

(C) No two individuals possess different conceptual schemes.

P'' seems intuitively more acceptable than P' – it expresses a weaker necessary condition on conceptual difference.<sup>7</sup> The Whorfian examples of partial untranslatability might now be taken to have a more limited goal: to show that this necessary condition is met.

The main problem with the above argument rests with (Q''). In the next section, we shall argue that a categorical denial of the possibility of mere partial untranslatability is neither plausible nor necessary for the rebuttal of conceptual relativism.

#### 4. PARTIAL UNTRANSLATABILITY

While one may plausibly question our ability to make sense in detail of the possibility of two languages which completely fail to be intertranslatable, partial failures of intertranslatability seem to be a phenomenon encountered regularly by translators. One often hears translators – professionals and amateurs alike – complain that words, expressions or phrases of one language are 'impossible to translate' into another language. To fix ideas, let us consider briefly a few examples.

*Mikabari* is a word of Malagasi meaning, roughly, to perform a *kabary*: a special kind of formal speech given only on certain types of ceremonial occasions.<sup>8</sup> *Mikabari* stands for an element in the social background of the people of Madagascar, absent from that of English-speaking people. To convey the content of *mikabari* in English, one would have to provide a very detailed explanation, possibly of book length, of certain activi-

ties and cultural institutions peculiar to the Malagasi speaker and unfamiliar to the English speaker. Even by the loosest standards, such an explanation would not qualify as a translation of the word.

Vietnamese has a single lexical item which means *someone [who] leaves to go somewhere and something happens at home so that he has to go back home*.<sup>9</sup> In contrast to *mikabari*, the Vietnamese word stands for something which is present in the life of English speakers, but which English happens not to designate by a single lexical item. It would seem impossible to provide a proper translation into English of, say, a Vietnamese sign or advertisement containing that word.

The Navaho basic colour vocabulary has three terms, unlike the English six-term vocabulary, which has "red", "orange", "yellow", "green", "blue" and "purple".<sup>10</sup> The Navaho term *doot'lizh* covers roughly our *green + blue + purple*. Now, colours are equally part of the lives of both English and Navaho speakers. Their respective basic colour vocabularies, however, divide the colour spectrum differently. Suppose a Navaho speaker says [I want to paint my house *doot'lizh*], and seems equally content when presented with samples of (what we describe as) green, blue and purple. You may insist that the English translation "I want to paint my house green or blue or purple" is adequate, even though it would normally convey an indecision that seems missing from the Navaho utterance. Translation of the English "I want to paint my house green" into the Navaho language, however, will inevitably suffer (at least in some contexts). For instance, there will be circumstances in which the natural Navaho candidate (using *doot'lizh*) will be true – e.g., where the individual referred to by the Navaho translation of "I" wishes to paint her house blue – whereas the original English sentence will not be.

These examples illustrate various kinds of what we may call "lexical mismatches" between languages. Lexical mismatches abound. Other kinds of mismatches are also prevalent. As an example of a "grammatical mismatch", consider the following.<sup>11</sup> Malagasy has exact translations for the English sentences "John put the basket on top of the table" and "John put the basket under the table". In English, we can perform on these sentences the syntactic operation of relativization to get, for example:

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

In Malagasi, however, when the relative clause is extracted and put in the subject position, the exact locative relation that the translation of "table" bears to the verb is lost. We can only say in Malagasi something which can be rendered in English by the following ungrammatical sentence:

(M) \*The table which was basket-put by John was damaged.

It can be argued that in such a case we could at best have a rough and inaccurate translation of the English sentence into Malagasi, since the Malagasi translation would be deficient in information provided by the original (namely, whether the basket was placed on top of or under the table). Translatability in this case is even more clearly impaired when we consider translation from Malagasi into English. Since specification of the locative relation between "table" and "put" is obligatory in English, any natural English candidate for translating (the Malagasi version of) M will inevitably contain more information than it, to the detriment of its translatability.

Or consider the obligatory gender marking of verbs, adjectives and pronouns in Hebrew. In many contexts, gender marking is redundant. The verb and the adjective (respectively) in the Hebrew utterances *ani holechet lakhanut* ("I am going to the store") and *ani ayefa* ("I am tired") are both marked feminine. In most conversational contexts, the marking is of no importance to the understanding of the utterances' content – the receiver usually knows who the speaker is. The English translations given in parentheses in such cases would qualify as perfectly adequate translations. But this does not change the fact that, in some contexts, the obligatory gender marking can get in the way of translation. We can easily conceive of a context – say, a play or a story – in which the fact that the English does not disclose the gender of the friend in "All I did was have lunch with a friend" is important to the understanding of the sentence. The natural Hebrew candidate will inevitably disclose the friend's gender; again, translatability suffers.<sup>12</sup>

Given the prevalence of these kinds of cross-linguistic mismatches, it is natural to expect failures of intertranslatability to be fairly common, rather than impossible. But we must make a crucial observation concerning our above examples. While it is arguable in each of the above cases that translatability suffers, we were able to provide, in each case, an adequate gloss conveying the content of the material deemed untrans-

latable.<sup>13</sup> To this extent, we have demonstrated grasp of the concepts expressed by the untranslatable material; so they cannot be said to be inaccessible to us. This indicates that there is no direct route from non-intertranslatability to conceptual inaccessibility. At least some of the examples we have considered can be regarded as innocuous cases of untranslatability which do not support any claim of conceptual inaccessibility.

More directly relevant to the arguments we have formulated so far is the connection between non-intertranslatability and (genuine) conceptual *differences* – specifically, the sort of conceptual differences that would warrant talk of a 'different conceptual scheme'. But even this connection should seem less than straightforward in view of some of our examples. For we have seen that there can be failures of translation without anything that would count as conceptual difference (witness, e.g., the gender marking example, or the Malagasi relative clause example).

Part of the point of our examples was to establish that providing an explanation or description of allegedly untranslatable material using our language is not in every case tantamount to providing a *translation*. Given the nature of linguistic mismatches of the sort we have illustrated, the description and explanation of the untranslatable material will often require resorting to metalinguistic explication of the source – (or target-) language, or to socio-cultural characterizations of the source-language speakers, and so on. Sometimes a translator (linguist, anthropologist) will need to provide an ungrammatical sentence of the target language, which the target hearers can understand by analogy to other, grammatical sentences (see the Malagasi relative clause example). Now, we would not count a book-length explanation of the background necessary for understanding some source expression as a translation of that expression. We would not regard as a translation a metalinguistic explication of the systematic semantic effect introduced by some grammatical construction (or marking) used in the source language but absent from the grammar of the target language. We would also not regard as a translation an ungrammatical sentence. These explanatory devices often do not enable us to produce translations; what they do is allow us to justify particular judgments concerning *failures* to provide them.

By ordinary standards, then, we could find plausible examples of non-intertranslatability. Such examples, however, cannot be grist to the conceptual relativist's mill, as long as we have reason to believe that we understand (or have 'conceptual access to') the untranslatable

material. So our examples work against the Whorfians, by showing that intertranslatability failures cannot be thought sufficient to establish claims of conceptual divergence. But the examples also tell against certain ways of countering conceptual relativism. Thus, consider again the evidential argument. That argument relied on the claim that any attempt to establish non-intertranslatability is self-defeating, because one supposedly cannot support a claim that some material is untranslatable into our language without providing a translation for it. But we have seen that this is not so. What one does in such cases is *explain*, make sense, or convey the content of, the untranslatable material using various verbal means; but not all such verbal explanations can count as translations. In general, then, it would be a mistake for opponents of conceptual relativism to try to deny the doctrine by denying the possibility of (at least partial) translation failures.

If failures of intertranslatability are not sufficient to establish divergence of conceptual schemes, then we cannot straightforwardly accept the identification proposed by Davidson of conceptual schemes with sets of intertranslatable languages. The identification can be seen to fail in its other direction, as well. That is, it can be argued that failures of intertranslatability are *not necessary* to establish conceptual divergence (contrary to claims P-P" above). This can be argued by providing examples of intertranslatable languages whose speakers apparently differ conceptually. We might consider as possible examples the cases of English-speaking flat-earthers, or Berkeleyian idealists.<sup>14</sup> Here we have people who, by ordinary linguistic standards, speak *our* language, so no problem of intertranslatability should arise. Yet there seem to be grounds for claiming that they differ from us conceptually, at least to the extent that they have fundamentally different beliefs from us on basic matters. On the face of it, it seems that the only way to insist that, appearances to the contrary, we are faced with non-intertranslatable languages in these cases is tacitly – and question-beggingly – to make (apparent) conceptual difference a sufficient condition for non-intertranslatability. In these cases, the presupposition that we understand what these people are saying, and the claim that they are *prima facie* different from us in relevant respects, seem no more questionable than the analogous presupposition and claim in the standard examples for moral diversity. We shall return to this issue below, when we discuss Davidson's treatment of partial untranslatability.

The conclusion I draw from our discussion so far is that we should

see intertranslatability (or failure thereof) as an innocent bystander in the debate over conceptual relativism. What is really at issue is the possibility of genuine conceptual 'distance' or difference and the possibility of conceptual inaccessibility, as well as the relationship between them. 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.

##### 5. DAVIDSON AND PARTIAL TRANSLATION FAILURES

By now it should be clear that two different claims play a role in the debate over conceptual relativism: a.) the claim of *conceptual diversity*, that there can be *different* sets of concepts, or diverse 'conceptual schemes', and b.) the claim of *conceptual inaccessibility*, that there can be sets of concepts that are inaccessible, or unintelligible to us. Earlier we identified the latter claim as the source of philosophical excitement or threat. But we have also indicated that the inaccessibility claim is often taken to be implied by the diversity claim. As we shall see, in "OVICS", Davidson himself runs the two claims together: like many authors, he apparently takes the only philosophically interesting/threatening claims of conceptual diversity to be ones that bring in their train the possibility of conceptual inaccessibility. We should bear this in mind in assessing Davidson's treatment of partial translation failures.

In the early passages of "OVICS", Davidson mentions that he is not concerned to challenge examples of conceptual changes and contrasts that "can be explained and described using the equipment of a single language"; these he considers to be 'legitimate' and 'modest' examples that "we have no trouble understanding" (184). Surely the people of Madagascar have concepts – such as that expressed by the Malagasi term *kabari* – that we do not possess. And surely we can make good sense of the idea of a conceptual difference between us, who possess the concepts of neutrino, mass, gene, DNA, etc. and the ancient Greek who lacked them, or the isolated jungle tribe people who have not (yet) mastered them. However, says Davidson, "[d]ifferent points of view make sense, but only if there is a common coordinate system on which to plot them; yet the existence of a common system belies the claim of dramatic incomparability" (184).

Davidson only wishes to deny the existence of 'dramatic', 'extreme'

examples; examples purporting to illustrate philosophically exciting/threatening conceptual alternatives. He seems willing to acknowledge alternative conceptual schemes as long as – to borrow an idiom<sup>15</sup> – they are merely *alternatives for us*. Such alternatives we can comprehend and explicate, or represent using our cognitive means; we can compare and contrast them with our own. The ‘very idea’ he wishes to reject is that of conceptual schemes that are supposed to be ‘incomparable to’/‘incommensurable with’ ours, or are otherwise inaccessible to us; such schemes purport to be *alternatives to us* (or to our own conceptual scheme).

Our present concern is with Davidson’s effort to show that “the attempt to give a solid meaning to the idea of conceptual relativism . . . fares no better when based on partial failure of translation than when based on total failure” (197). Davidson’s argument to that effect is rather cryptic. Its main point is that we must think of the ascription of divergent concepts to others along the same lines Davidson has proposed that we think of the ascription of divergent beliefs to others. The possibility of ascribing *any* concepts to others (and any meanings to their utterances), like the possibility of ascribing any beliefs to them, requires that we employ a “principle of charity”: “Charity is forced on us; whether we like it or not, if we want to understand others, we must count them right in most matters” (197). In both the belief-ascription and the concept-ascription cases, any specific and detailed claim of divergence (or disagreement) must presuppose a good deal of basic similarity (or agreement).<sup>16</sup> And, evidently, Davidson thinks that this basic similarity is what counts when it comes to individuating conceptual schemes.

Succinctly put, Davidson’s argument seems to be that declarations of (‘extreme’) conceptual differences between ourselves and others are self-defeating, in that attempts to give substance to such declarations are bound to exhibit – or presuppose – fundamental conceptual similarities, rather than differences, between us. But the context in which Davidson argues this is one where he is considering attempts to support relativist declarations *by appeal to partial translation failures*. Presumably for this reason, he puts the point in terms of translation: “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” (197, my emphasis).

The analogy drawn here is between improving the ‘clarity and bite’ of declarations of difference of opinions/beliefs by enlarging the basis of shared opinion, on the one hand, and improving the ‘clarity and bite’ of declarations of conceptual difference by relying on more and more successful translations, thereby ‘enlarging the basis of shared (translatable) language’.<sup>17</sup> For the analogy to hold, we must see the enlarged basis of intertranslatability as contradicting the threatening claim of genuine conceptual diversity. Here, Davidson is clearly relying on his earlier identification of shared conceptual schemes with sets of intertranslatable languages. His claim is that it is not possible to support declarations of ‘real’ conceptual difference without relying on conceptual similarity *read as intertranslatability*.<sup>18</sup>

#### 6. FROM TRANSLATION TO INTERPRETATION

In section (4), we found fault with the identification between conceptual schemes and sets of intertranslatable languages. But, given Davidson’s concern with the claim of conceptual inaccessibility (as opposed to mere garden-variety diversity) – and given the nature of his argument (see note 15) – it is perhaps mistaken to hold him responsible to that implausible identification. Faced with the examples we have used to reject the identification, Davidson might cede the notion of translation in favor of his notion of *interpretation*.<sup>19</sup> For instance, Davidson might be happy to acknowledge our examples of failures of intertranslatability, since they cannot be taken to support any ‘interesting’ conceptual diversity claim by his standards. After all, whatever conceptual differences or contrasts they revealed were ‘explained and described using the equipment of a single language’. Thus, there is perhaps no reason to saddle Davidson with an implausible denial of the possibility of partial translation failures.

Should we, then, instead take Davidson to be proposing an identification of conceptual schemes with sets of *interinterpretable* languages, and denying rather the impossibility of (even partial) failures of *interpretation*? We should consider whether there is anything substantive to be gained from the shift to interpretation from the point of view of Davidson’s goal in “OVICS”, namely, to undermine the ‘very idea’ of inaccessible (‘incomparable’, ‘incommensurable’) conceptual schemes.

For Davidson, the interpretation of a sentence in an object language, SL, consists in the provision of its *truth conditions* in a metalanguage,



TL (where SL can – but need not – be the same as TL).<sup>20</sup> It is important to note that the provided truth conditions need not always qualify as a translation of the SL sentence. In general, the constraints on translation (ordinarily understood), as illustrated by our earlier examples, can be more stringent than the constraints on interpretation (as Davidson understands it).<sup>21</sup> A book-length description of the conditions in the world that have to obtain in order for a Malagasi sentence containing the term *kabari* to be true would constitute an interpretation of that sentence; but it would not qualify as a translation. Similarly, the grammatical reasons which stand in the way of providing a proper translation into Malagasi of the English sentence “The table under which Rabe put the basket was damaged” should not stand in the way of specifying the correct truth conditions of that sentence in Malagasi.

Not all cases where translation fails are cases where interpretation fails. The question is whether there can be (partial) failures of interpretation, and if so, whether such cases are apt to support claims of conceptual inaccessibility. If the answer to the former question is positive, but the answer to the latter is negative, then the identification between conceptual schemes (individuated à la Davidson) and sets of interinterpretable languages would also be faulty. And the denial of failures of interpretation would be no more necessary to Davidson’s rejection of conceptual relativism than the denial of translation failures. I shall now argue that this is indeed the case.

First, we should note that actual justifications of claims about translation failures often do not take the form of provision of truth conditions (=interpretations). When translation from a source language into a target language fails, explanations and descriptions of why and how it does, while conducted in the target language, typically do not take the form of a pairing of source discourse with conditions of truth formulated in the target language.<sup>22</sup> As pointed out earlier (section 4), such explanations typically resort to metalinguistic explanations of background (linguistic, socio-cultural, historical). They are designed to help us make sense of, understand, the source discourse, even in the face of its untranslatability into our language. But their success does not depend exclusively on – nor is it guaranteed by – the possibility of providing a truth conditional interpretation of it.

Arguably, what allows us in these cases to deny any claim of conceptual inaccessibility is not the possibility of (Davidsonian) interpretation *per se*, but rather our ability to explicate, or make sense of,

the others’ discourse, using *whatever* explanatory means. This is not yet to say that failures of interpretation are possible, or that understanding can be achieved even in the face of such failures. But it does already suggest that the issue between conceptual relativists and their opponents does not turn purely on questions of interpretability.<sup>23</sup>

The following, somewhat technical example illustrates the possibility of interpretation failure. Ironically, the example is drawn from Davidson’s own earlier work. In “Truth and Meaning”<sup>24</sup>, Davidson offers an adaptation of Tarski’s formal theory of truth to accommodate the needs of a theory of meaning for natural languages. For Tarski himself, such an adaptation is inappropriate, since – unlike classical formal languages – natural languages contain their own semantical predicates. According to Tarski, then, natural languages are semantically universal; and it is this feature of natural languages that yields contradiction and paradox when formal methods are brought to bear.<sup>25</sup> Davidson proposes to rescue his adaptation by giving up the claim that natural languages are universal in Tarski’s sense. The result is that, for any natural language NL, the predicate “true in NL” is not expressible in NL, although it *is* expressible in other languages (indeed, in natural any language other than NL, provided it has the appropriate semantic vocabulary). Thus, on Davidson’s proposal, we cannot speak unparadoxically in English about the set of sentences that are ‘true in English’; we cannot specify *in English* truth conditions for sentences involving the predicate ‘true in English’, on pain of paradox. But we can speak about these sentences in French using, say, the predicate ‘*vrai en Anglais*’. Now, take any French sentence containing that predicate. That sentence cannot be interpreted (i.e. its truth conditions cannot be specified) in English. We have here a failure of interpretation, and a principled one at that.<sup>26</sup>

In “Truth and Meaning”, Davidson himself takes this kind of case to illustrate relative conceptual deficiency, to wit: “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). This is, of course, in keeping with the proposed identification between conceptual schemes and sets of interinterpretable languages. Accepting the identification – and assuming the semantic analysis proposed in “Truth and Meaning” – we should have to conclude 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. The relevant concepts will be those expressed by the semantic terms which have in their extension *our* linguistic expressions.<sup>27</sup>

But, intuitively, it seems wrong to think of each language's own truth predicate as hiding a kind of 'conceptual blind spot' which signals conceptual differences between its speakers and speakers of other languages. As long as we have mastery of the relevant formal apparatus, there seems to be nothing to block our 'conceptual 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 *not*, as it happens, manifestable in our ability to interpret. However, our understanding is manifestable through our ability to provide the explanation given earlier, for instance. (It can be argued that it is even 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 her "*vrai en Anglais*" – on the Davidsonian account presupposed here – is perfectly adequate to *translate* it.)<sup>28</sup>

Admittedly, the truth predicate example turns on technical considerations. Still, it has helped us see one way failures of interpretation could arise, and how, like failures of translation, they may be insufficient to establish conceptual divergence.<sup>29</sup> More familiar examples can, I believe, be used to cast further doubt on the use of Davidson's notion of interpretation to help resolve the debate over conceptual schemes. Thus, consider the following example, described by Keenan (1978: 174f):<sup>30</sup>

Among the indigenous languages of Australia and New Guinea it is common to find languages which have no ways of referencing numbers beyond what is inherent in the pronominal systems (which frequently distinguish singulars, duals, perhaps trials or paucals, and plurals). So the number names in those languages are limited to phrases like 'one', 'two', 'a few', and 'many' . . . It is safe to say then that such languages cannot, at the moment, provide translations of English sentences like *the cube root of ten is not a rational number, all subgroups of a cyclic group are cyclic, etc.*

Indeed, while we can interpret (i.e., give the truth conditions of) sentences of, say, the Walbiri language which contain references to numbers into English, there is no way to interpret English sentences involving references to numbers in Walbiri. To this extent, there are systematic (though partial and one-way) failures of interinterpretability between English and Walbiri. Now, if Davidson were to concede that these failures

are indeed indicative of a divergence between the conceptual schemes of the Walbiri speakers and ours – following his identification of inter-interpretability languages and conceptual schemes – he would obviously be conceding too much, to the detriment of his "OVICS" line. If, on the other hand, he were to deny that we have here sufficient grounds for declaring conceptual divergence, it would no longer be clear what role considerations of interinterpretability play in individuating conceptual schemes.

Davidson would presumably want to argue that in cases such as the Walbiri number system there is still a lot of conceptual similarity that is being presupposed, and that such similarity is necessary for the understanding of the alleged conceptual differences. In other words, he would argue that the only failures of interpretation that are possible (or that have been illustrated) are 'modest' enough as to not warrant any exciting claim of conceptual diversity. But this would show that with interpretation, as with translation, there are failures and there are failures. Granted that the failures of interpretation involved in the Walbiri case reveal *some* conceptual differences between the Walbiri speakers and ourselves, we are forced to face squarely the question *what* conceptual differences we should count as philosophically exciting, or threatening, or usable in getting the conceptual relativist doctrine off the ground.

#### 7. CONCEPTUAL RELATIVISM: INCREASING INTELLIGIBILITY WHILE RETAINING (SOME) EXCITEMENT

By Davidson's standards, recall, claims of conceptual diversity are only exciting insofar as they carry the threat of conceptual inaccessibility in their train. But, he thinks, existence of "a common coordinate system on which to plot" the conceptual differences "belies the claim of dramatic incomparability" (184). From this point of view, the Walbiri example should give us some pause. For, whereas we can represent the Walbiri number system, compare and contrast it with ours, using the 'equipment of a single language' (namely, English), Walbiri speakers *cannot* represent our number system, or compare/contrast it with theirs, using their language. Perhaps, as Keenan suggests, there is "no doubt that Walbiri speakers could learn these [our] mathematical concepts and enrich their language so as to be able to talk about them in Walbiri". In that sense, our mathematical concepts are not beyond the reach of the

Walbiri speakers. But, to the extent that "at the moment such discussion is impossible" for the Walbiri (*ibid.*), a whole range of our mathematical thought is beyond the Walbiri *present* conceptual access. In that sense, our number system is at least for now inaccessible to the Walbiri speakers.<sup>31</sup>

To gain access to our mathematical concepts, the Walbiri speakers would need to undergo retraining in another culture and/or language; for them to be able to translate or interpret our mathematical language, Walbiri would need to undergo significant changes and expansions. We have allowed that Walbiri and its speakers can evolve in the requisite respects, and we can also allow that in many other respects Walbiri speakers are conceptually similar to us. But all this does not detract from the intelligibility of both the claim that *right now* Walbiri *mathematical* thinking is significantly different from ours, and the further claim that at present our system of mathematical concepts is inaccessible to the Walbiri speakers. Nor does it detract from the philosophical interest of these claims.

The Walbiri example illustrates an asymmetrical case involving one-way conceptual inaccessibility,<sup>32</sup> where we may assume that the inaccessibility can be remedied by retraining or re-education. But perhaps even more extreme examples can be conceived, ones where there is threat of mutual inaccessibility, which cannot be remedied so easily.

We can easily conceive of intelligent, conversing beings who possess radically different sense organs from ours. Imagine that, unlike us, they are incapable of perceiving colours. Or, imagine that they (like bats, and unlike us) possess an eco-location sonar system for detecting the presence of objects in total darkness. Now, suppose there are 'experiential concepts' – concepts which are crucially shaped by the actual undergoing of certain ranges of sensory experiences. (Our particular colour concepts would be plausible candidates.) Then we and the alien beings would likely diverge in our experiential concepts. Given our radically different sense organs, however, we would be physically unable to undergo each others' experiences. And this could, arguably, severely limit our access to each others' 'experiential concepts'.<sup>33</sup>

To see why, consider that it seems perfectly possible that we should be able to *interpret* the aliens' experience-discourses (as they might be able to interpret ours). For instance, we (the aliens) might make discoveries about the aliens' (our) brains (as well as about relevant environmental inputs and behavioural outputs), which would allow us

(them) to match their (our) utterances with truth conditions. Thus, in the first imagined case, they could assign truth conditions to human utterances such as "D. B. sees a red apple"; and, in the second imagined case, we could assign truth conditions to alien utterances reporting eco-location experiences. In both cases, we may suppose that we share with the aliens enough science so that perfect interinterpretability may obtain. Still, full conceptual access need not. The possibility of mutual interpretation would allow the aliens and us to have a kind of 'theoretical understanding' of each others' sensory discourse.<sup>34</sup> But we must consider that, given our respective physiological make-ups, we and the aliens could not *employ* each others' sensory concepts, despite the fact that we can have full theoretical grasp of the conditions under which the aliens apply them. Since we could not *adopt* the aliens' sensory concepts, we might say that their sensory 'conceptual framework' constitutes an alternative to ours; it is not an alternative *for* us.

Obviously, a lot more needs to be said here, more than space permits. For our purposes, however, it is enough if the example helps illustrate the possibility of mutual obstacles to conceptual accessibility, ones which may obtain even in the face of full interinterpretability. It provides us with yet another way of breaking loose interinterpretability from conceptual accessibility.

All in all, I believe the connection between possibility of conceptual alternativeness/accessibility and the possibility of linguistic translation, or even interpretation is much less straightforward than Davidson's discussion in "OVICS" would suggest. On the one hand, the considerations of this paper suggest that conceptual accessibility does not require translatability, nor even (Davidsonian) interpretability. More to the point is the possibility of understanding, or making sense of others. Such understanding may manifest itself in the ability to supply translations into our language of the expressions which serve to express the others' concepts in *their* language, or to provide interpretations of their linguistic utterances. But we have suggested that other manifestations are possible. On the other hand, we have suggested that an intelligible possibility of interesting conceptual alternativeness ('alternative to') might survive even in the face of full interpretability. For, whether or not a (portion of a) conceptual scheme could count as an alternative to (a portion of) ours may not depend on our ability to have the kind of understanding afforded by interpretation (what we have called 'theoretical understanding'), but rather on whether or not we could *use* it to get around in the world.

And we have sketched conceivable reasons for why we might not be able to do so in some cases.

The possibility of philosophically interesting conceptual alternative-ness, and with it the 'very idea' of a conceptual scheme, is, I submit, at least intelligible. It does not require support from philosophically suspect metaphors (such as that of a noumenal world, or a 'given', unformed stream of experience, awaiting organization by concepts). Are there in fact genuine alternatives to what we call 'our conceptual scheme'? If so, how are we to individuate the various alternatives? And how are we to adjudicate among competing alternatives? All these are questions which remain to be answered.

Furthermore, as in the debate over moral relativism, proponents of conceptual relativism cannot rest with a claim of diversity. To reach a *relativist* conclusion, they would still need to convince us that we cannot adjudicate between alternative conceptual schemes, and, finally, that conceptual correctness is ultimately relative to a culture (or society, or theory). The radical conceptual relativist has the additional burden of arguing that the *worlds* in which possessors of alternative conceptual schemes live are themselves different. We have done nothing to help the conceptual relativist with all these further tasks. Our aim has been to increase the intelligibility of the conceptual diversity claim, without giving up on its philosophical excitement.<sup>35</sup>

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme", henceforth "OVICS" – as reprinted in Davidson's (1984: 183–198). All unspecified page references are to that article.

<sup>2</sup> "Societies" is intended to cover both different but contemporaneous social groups and different social groups across history.

<sup>3</sup> That is to say, if we come to think that members of another culture would deem morally good actions or agents that we regard as morally bad, and so on across the board, what guarantee do we have that it was legitimate to attribute to them our moral concepts (of e.g. *goodness, justice, virtue*) in the first place? Even at home, we are sometimes moved to declare so called "sociopaths", whose actions are beyond the moral pale, as *amoral* – as lacking moral sensibility and concepts altogether – rather than as possessing a morality different from ours.

<sup>4</sup> 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" (190); "The test of (conceptual) difference remains failure or difficulty of translation" (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 (as I have just pointed out), the necessity claim follows from the identification of intertranslatability and sameness of conceptual schemes, which Davidson does endorse.

<sup>5</sup> This is the claim Davidson thinks authors such as Rorty accept 'as fiat', but for which he wishes to provide an argument (185 f).

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., Nicholas Rescher, 1980, and Bruce Aune, 1987. Especially helpful is Robert Kraut's "The Third Dogma", in Lepore, ed., 1986.

<sup>7</sup> Later, though, we shall briefly take issue with P".

<sup>8</sup> The example is from Keenan, 1978.

<sup>9</sup> See Larson, 1984, 6.

<sup>10</sup> See Catford, 1965, 43f, 51.

<sup>11</sup> The example is due to Keenan, 1978. I will be simplifying his analysis of the example.

<sup>12</sup> Another carefully analysed related example is provided by Catford, 1965, 38f.

<sup>13</sup> For a much more extensive discussion (including more examples and references) see Bar-On, 1987, Chapter 5 and 1993, where I defend at length the claim that we should not be so permissive as to count just *any* content-conveying gloss as a translation. But we shall come to this point shortly.

<sup>14</sup> For relevant discussion and examples, see, e.g., Aune, 1987, Rescher, 1985, and Devitt, 1990, Chs 9 & 13.

<sup>15</sup> See Lear, 1982.

<sup>16</sup> Davidson's argument here relies heavily on his conception of the methodology of 'radical interpretation' which he develops elsewhere. See, e.g., "Belief and the Basis of Meaning", "Radical Interpretation", and "The Method of Truth in Metaphysics" all in his 1984, where Davidson advocates replacing Quinian translation with interpretation in discussions of meaning. Below (section 6) we consider the plausible suggestion made by other authors (see, e.g., Aune, 1987, and Rescher, 1985) that the notion of translation is not what is crucial to the issues discussed in "OVICS". Rescher proposes to shift the discussion to the notion of interpretation, but his notion of interpretation is evidently much broader than Davidson's.

<sup>17</sup> Actually, Davidson sees more than a mere analogy here: "Indeed, no clear line between the cases can be made out. If we choose to translate some alien sentence rejected by its speaker by a sentence to which we are strongly attached on a community basis, we may be tempted to call this a difference in scheme; if we decide to accommodate the evidence in other ways, it may be more natural to speak of a difference of opinion. But when others think differently from us, no general principle, or appeal to evidence, can force us to decide that the difference lies in our beliefs rather than in our concepts".

<sup>18</sup> 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.)

<sup>19</sup> Again, see note 15. It should be noted that Davidson himself often uses 'transla-

tion' interchangeably with 'interpretation'. (E.g.: "interpretation is essentially translation", 1980, 243.)

<sup>20</sup> For discussion, see Essays 1–5 and 9–11 in his 1984.

<sup>21</sup> In 1987, Ch. V and in 1993, I argue that our ordinary assessments of translations are highly contextual and appeal to an equivalence relation which is *different* from the relation of sameness of truth conditions. Often it is more stringent. But in other cases it is looser.

<sup>22</sup> That is, the explanations/descriptions of failure do not typically contain anything that could be straightforwardly plugged into the right-hand side of the Tarskian biconditional "S is true iff . . .".

<sup>23</sup> I here agree with Aune, 1987, 274.

<sup>24</sup> Reprinted in Davidson, 1984, 17–36.

<sup>25</sup> For relevant references, see Davidson's "Truth and Meaning".

<sup>26</sup> The same will hold for other semantical 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 of approaches to the Liar, as well as an anti-hierarchical approach, see Simmons, 1993. The point of the example is simply to illustrate how uninterpretability *could* arise, and how even it need not be grist to the conceptual relativist's mill.

<sup>27</sup> Notice that this seems to give rise to a 'Twin Earth' case in which two individuals differ conceptually (with regard to certain semantic concepts), even though there are no differences between their ('narrow') psychologies *or* their environments.

I would like to thank the participants of a seminar I conducted in the Spring semester of 1990, and especially Ed Beeker, for discussion of the truth predicate example.

<sup>28</sup> This would be just another example where a perfectly good translation does not preserve extension, or truth conditions. Such examples are prevalent. Again, see my 1993, section 1.

<sup>29</sup> Other examples can be brought to show that, quite apart from discussions of conceptual relativism, even where interpretation *is* possible, providing it on its own can be unhelpful – and even misleading – in understanding source discourse. Consider the sentence

This very sentence begins with a four-letter demonstrative.

Suppose the sentence occurs in the context of a discussion of self-reference. A German audience, e.g., would be quite at a loss as to the point of the original discussion, if given only a specification in German of the truth conditions (= the interpretation) of the English sentence. The German hearer would be much better helped by a German translation which failed to preserve the truth conditions of the source English sentence, to wit: "Dieser Satz fängt mit einem hinweisenden Artikel mit sechs Buchstaben an" (this sentence refers to *its* first word, which has six letters, not four).

This example is discussed by Tyler Burge in "Self-Reference and Translation", in Guenther and Guenther-Reutter, 1978, 138 f. Burge argues, and I agree, that a truth conditions preserving translation would be a bad one.

<sup>30</sup> Keenan refers his readers to a manuscript by Ken Hale, "Gaps in Grammars and Cultures", 1971, for supporting data and analysis.

<sup>31</sup> Although no sharp lines can be drawn here, it could be argued that, in this respect,

the Walbiri example is different from our earlier *kabari* example. 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 scientific concepts. (So Davidson's dismissal of the Kuhnian examples of radical scientific changes may be unwarranted.)

<sup>32</sup> Using previous jargon, we might say that, whereas the Walbiri system is only an alternative *for* us, our system is alternative *to* them.

<sup>33</sup> There is no assumption here that experiences are private. We can suppose that members of each group can fully know about and understand each other's experiences, and that, if each group could somehow come to have the sense organs of the other group, they could fully understand their experiences as well. Furthermore, for purposes of this discussion, there is no suggestion here that we must recognize 'subjective' properties of experience, inaccessible from an observer's point of view. At issue here are concepts, not properties. All that is required for the present point is that it be allowed that, e.g., the concept of *being water* can be different from the concept of *being H<sub>2</sub>O*, even if the property of being water is taken to be one and the same as the property of being H<sub>2</sub>O.

<sup>34</sup> This kind of theoretical understanding is not available to the Walbiri speaker vis-à-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).

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## CONCEPTUAL RELATIVISM AND TRANSLATION

According to *conceptual relativism*, different cultures view the world through conceptual schemes that cannot be reconciled. This doctrine may seem to be supported by a phenomenon familiar to translators: exact translations, even adequate ones, often seem impossible to come by. Untranslatability, the conceptual relativist reasons, attests to the inaccessibility of other cultures; the more pervasive it is, the wider the conceptual chasm between ourselves and the native users of the untranslatable language.

In a celebrated article<sup>1</sup>, Donald Davidson has proposed to take the wind out of the sails of conceptual relativism by undermining 'the very idea of a conceptual scheme'. Davidson seeks to undermine that idea by denying the possibility of untranslatability. Once the idea is rejected, Davidson believes, it will be seen that "it is hard to improve [the] intelligibility [of the conceptual relativist doctrine] while retaining the excitement" (183). This paper is an attempt to increase intelligibility, without giving up on excitement.

## 1. INTRODUCTION – CONCEPTUAL RELATIVISM

Let us first consider briefly the doctrine of *moral* relativism. The moral relativist typically maintains that what is morally right or wrong is a matter which is relative to a given society or culture. Roughly, we can discern three stages in arguing for the moral relativist position:

- (I) An observation of moral diversity – of *substantive differences* in moral judgments and standards – across cultures or societies.<sup>2</sup>
- (II) A judgement to the effect that *we cannot adjudicate* among the diverse moral codes.
- (III) A conclusion that moral values are culturally (or socially) *relative*; e.g., that there *is* no absolute, culturally- (or socially-) independent moral rightness/wrongness, good/evil, etc.