

Radical Alternatives: Conceptual Schemes and Expressive Behaviour

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Professor Mary Hesse wrote as follows:¹

“The thought forms of alien cultures may be so foreign to our own that it might make sense to say that I understand my dog, or even my chrysanthemums, better than I understand those people”.

No doubt that is a provocative formulation of the problem of understanding other people. In fact, as the context shows, what she means by understanding her dog is that she can teach him tricks and predict his visible behaviour. What she is suggesting, then, is that, confronted with people of a radically different culture from our own, we might find it impossible to teach them anything because their behaviour was unpredictable – so unpredictable as to make communication between us impossible. With the nearing prospect of inter-planetary, and eventually of inter-galactic, travel, of course, the question of communication with deeply alien beings is no longer entirely academic. But for a long time now, certainly, since the expansion of ethnography and social anthropology in the wake of the European colonisation of the rest of the world, we have been increasingly troubled by the thought that, even on Earth, human beings may already be, or may always have been, hopelessly unintelligible out of their own culture. It might even be something of a relief, in view of the appalling atrocities that have occurred this century, to accept that some people may simply see everything in a completely different conceptual framework from others. It would explain the horrifying breakdowns of consensus about moral and political values. Are there not *social* systems so different from our own that you would expect that our *conceptual* systems must be almost mutually unintelligible? Perhaps we might be more inclined to say that, on the contrary, the conceptual systems on this planet have always been extremely diverse and that what has been happening over the last couple of hundred years is simply that all the other crazy conceptual systems have at last begun to collapse, leaving the basically Greek rational scientific system (of which we happen to be the bearers) in the ascendant. There is plenty of room for argument here.

Obviously, theology has been affected. Consider the collapse of confidence among European missionaries. Not so long ago most of them had no serious problem about preaching the gospel in non-European cultures, once equivalents had been found or coined in the native language to convey the meaning of the key Christian terms (God and so on). Most would now think, as a minority have held all along, that something far more radical in the way of translation is required. It isn't a matter of establishing one-to-one correspondence between the key terms and their obvious or artificial equivalents in some ancient Christian language (Latin as it might be). It is rather a matter of transposing into a new key the Christian melody as a whole. The missionary has to become at home in the alien culture and then attempt to re-express the Christian tradition in terms of that whole culture. This may mean moving from one 'conceptual framework' to another radically alternative system of conceiving and perceiving the world. It becomes possible to entertain the idea that Christian cultures might have such different conceptual frameworks that they were unintelligible to one another, at a very early stage in theological discussion. It might then be open to us to resolve the more intractable ecumenical problems simply by allowing that the deep conceptual (cultural and historical) frameworks allow and even require different Christian traditions to say mutually incompatible things. Karl Rahner, in his more recent writings, has insisted very strongly on the reality of theological pluralism within the Catholic Church. He argues that we have to learn to live with an irreducible pluralism in Catholic theology because of the unbridgeable differences in philosophy now.

But just how incommensurable with one another may conceptual frameworks intelligibly be? Just how radical is radical pluralism coherently able to be? Alternative theological systems or approaches or perspectives are one thing; *insuperable* theological pluralism seems another matter altogether.² If theologians have only one single thing upon which they are agreed, even if they have agreed to differ over it, then it surely cannot be said that the differences between them are *altogether* unbridgeable? If we have almost insuperable problems when we translate from one theological language into another, or from some ancient idiom into a modern one, or the other way round, that is one thing. But if the differences are so radical that there may be no prospect of translating from one conceptual framework to another, then we seem to be heading into a very heady Nietzschean doctrine.

In Anglo-American philosophy the terms in which this question is usually discussed were set up by Willard Van Orman Quine in some famous speculations about "radical translation".³ His discussion is independent of controversies within social anthropology

over methodological problems raised by the investigation of alien peoples and cultures. These considerations, however, give some plausibility to the thesis which he attacks. Evans-Pritchard,⁴ for example, illustrates the problem by describing a Central African language which has a word “anzo” which we translate as “dog” – but dogs have such a radically different place in the social life of the tribe from the one that they occupy in England that the lexical equivalence of the terms only conceals from us (and the tribe, if they were interested) most of what matters. The terms overlap in reference, but we lose out all round in connotation. When we say that they are talking of dogs we in fact have very little understanding of what they mean – what dogs mean to them, etc. Difficulties of this kind afford some plausibility to the notion that, faced with a society radically different from our own in social structure, we might never be able to work out an adequate translation of their language. Needless to say, if they were talking of gods rather than dogs, the translation problems might be much greater. At least with the dogs the tribe and the visitor would be agreed over what creatures in the environment they were referring to, even if systematic differences over connotation immediately led to misunderstanding, or illusory understanding. It might not be so easy to be sure that the two sides had reached, or ever could reach, agreement over the reference of their respective terms for gods.

Quine speculatively imagines how a visitor would cope with the situation when she could not be sure whether they agreed even on reference. He supposes that what we call a rabbit runs by and the alien people say what sounds to us like “Gavagai”. The discoverer of this hitherto unknown people writes down “Gavagai = Rabbit” in her notebook and waits to try it out on them when a rabbit pops up. Quine complicates the example, gradually and entertainingly, but eventually he gets to what might be described as incommensurability at the level of conceptual framework. Suppose that we who think naturally in terms of wholes, entities, substances etc. are faced with people who think rather in terms of phases, sections, and the like. When we see a rabbit run by they perceive a transitory fusion of conic particles, or an epiphanic explosion of conyhood, or some phenomenon apprehensible only in terms of concepts and categories unimaginably remote from ours. (Bruno Snell maintains, on the evidence of Homer and Greek vases, that the human body was regarded as an aggregate of independent parts, referred to by plurals, before it was recognized as an organic unit.)⁶ In other words: couldn't there easily have been other ways of getting a grip on the endless onrush of raw experience upon our skins besides the classical (and now common-sense) ontology of “things with properties” with which we “naturally” operate?

The question was put more picturesquely by William James (*Pragmatism*, 1907, p 171):

“Were we lobsters, or bees, it might be that our organization would have led to our using quite different modes ... of apprehending our experiences. It *might* be too (we cannot dogmatically deny this) that such categories, unimaginable by us today, would have proved on the whole as serviceable for handling our experiences mentally as those which we actually use”.

He goes on to quote the transformation of Euclidean geometry by Descartes and concludes by arguing that human beings could surely “rationalize” their “sense-impressions”, as he says, “by using various conceptual systems”. With his deep attraction towards Pluralism William James is no doubt the most eloquent exponent of the idea of radically alternative conceptual schemes.

It seems forced and provincial to suppose that the interaction between human bodies and the rest of the furniture, right across millenia and continents, never mind planets and galaxies, can yield but one single homogeneously developing “true story” of what it is like. As Quine says,

“we have no reason to suppose that man’s surface irritations even unto eternity admit of any one systematization that is scientifically better or simpler than all possible others”.

It is surely more attractive to suppose that there are “countless alternative theories”, equally valid but mutually incompatible. “There is a notion”, as he says,

“that our provincial ways of positing objects and conceiving nature may be best appreciated for what they are by standing off and seeing them against a cosmopolitan background of alien cultures”.

It is what Nietzsche called Perspectivism. We are, so Nietzsche contends, in quite Quinean accents, “a particular species of animal that can prosper” — i.e. “maintain itself and increase its power” — only if there is a sufficient “regularity of its perceptions” to enable it to “accumulate experience”, and enough of “the calculable and constant” in its schematization of “reality” for it to develop a “scheme of behaviour”. The basic notion is that of the facilitation of our dealings with the physical environment to make our biological survival slightly more likely. “Euclidean space”, Nietzsche wrote, “is a mere idiosyncrasy of a specific kind of animal, and is only one among many others”. If Euclidean geometry is, or was, “true”, then that simply means that it worked for us for a long time as a way of measuring our environment so as to make it more

habitable (we could build better bridges etc). But alternative geometries have always been possible – even if Nietzsche knew nothing of non-Euclidean geometry. He wouldn't have been surprised by it. "There are", as he famously says, "no facts – only interpretations". There is no way the world really is in contrast with our ways of interpreting it. There is no world in itself apart from some interpretation – "as though there would be a world left over once we subtracted our perspective"! It does not even make sense to speak of interpretations as "distorting" reality – there is nothing that would count as the true interpretation relative to which any given interpretation might be a distortion. If you like – *every* interpretation is a distortion, except that there is nothing for it to be a distortion of. We cannot appeal to facts independently of their relation to the interpretative perspective which they might be invoked to support. We can do no more than insist on our own perspective and seek to persuade other people that it is more effective for promoting our welfare here and now.

That is the sort of pluralism of conceptual frameworks that might sustain claims (or fears) about insuperable differences within theological practice, and the like. Different cultures, across time and space, transact their cognitive business with the world so differently from us that intellectual exchange with them proves impossible and our languages are not intertranslatable. But the very idea of a conceptual framework, let alone of alternative frameworks, has been examined and found wanting by some philosophers who work in Quine's wake. The most discussed paper is by Donald Davidson and the argument goes as follows.⁶ A conceptual scheme (framework) is allegedly a system of categories by which people of a certain culture organize the raw data of sensation. There is no reason to suppose that these conceptual schemes cannot differ so radically from one another that the beliefs, hopes, desires, knowledge etc. that characterize subscribers to one scheme, simply have no counterparts in the lives of denizens of an alien framework. Reality is always relative to a scheme – and what counts as real, true, beautiful, etc. in one system may not be so regarded in another. Davidson first argues that a conceptual scheme coincides with a language. On Wittgensteinian grounds it needlessly confuses everything to insist on splitting language from mind in any fundamental way – as if "it is only wordlessly if at all that the mind comes to grips with things as they really are". Of course we are strongly tempted to conceive language as an inert medium or apparatus independent of the minds that employ it: Wittgenstein's work after 1929 is inspired by the desire to reveal just how deeply this picture affects us. As Davidson notes, this myth of the mind as divorced from what constitutes it remains powerful –

among philosophers also:

“There are, for example, theories that make freedom consist in decisions taken apart from all desires, habits and dispositions of the agent; and theories of knowledge that suggest that the mind can observe the totality of its own perceptions and ideas”.

These are the well-known voluntaristic and introspectionist doctrines that continue to dog and charm us. Pretending for the moment that we are all over *that* hump, Davidson invites us to identify conceptual schemes with languages. The question then may be reformulated in terms of *languages*: is it coherent to say that there might be languages that defy being translated into one another?

To keep the idea of alternative conceptual schemes alive, then, we need to be able to show that there could be a language that we could in principle never translate. Of course much of what we say *is* untranslatable, or would prove so troublesome to translate that we do not bother: speakers of many non-European languages simply have to learn English or French if they want to do physics or repair cars and the like. We may just have to learn Arabic if we want to understand camels. For radical alternativeness of conceptual schemes we need to have languages which display total lack of intertranslatability. Now Davidson's argument is to the effect that a language which *totally* defied translation into (say) English simply wouldn't *be* a language in the first place. Faced with creatures physically like ourselves (or otherwise fulfilling the conditions of being persons), we might hear sounds that they directed at each other – but, sooner or later, if you got the hang of how certain repeated sounds matched or meshed with phenomena in the environment such as rain, darkness, sickness etc. you would be in a position to attempt translation. As Wittgenstein noted,⁷ if you came to a strange tribe whose language was entirely unknown to you and you wanted to know what words corresponded to our “good”, “fine”, etc. “you would look for smiles, gestures, food, toys”. To an objection Wittgenstein conceded that if you went to Mars and found creatures like “spheres with sticks coming out”, then you would not know what to look for. Or – more imaginatively – “if you went to a tribe where noises made with the mouth were just breathing or making music, and language was made with the ears” – what would you look for? He concludes that we should still resort to certain occasions or activities – and “interpret the gestures of the tribe on the analogy of ours”. In other words, to put Davidson and Wittgenstein together and extend the formulation, if we met creatures with bodies sufficiently like ours for us

to recognize analogous gestures in the context of certain occasions or activities in our common environment, we could not but be able to communicate with them – however primitively.

Davidson's argument against the very idea of even one conceptual scheme, let alone many such, strikes at the deeply entrenched notion that experience does come at us in an onrush of raw sensation which we then have to shape. He argues that the whole notion of conceptual *scheme* and experiential *content* – “of organizing system and something waiting to be organized” – is simply incoherent: the last dogma of empiricism. The notion is that something is a language if it stands in a certain relation (organizing, matching) to experience (sensory stimulation, Nature). He cites examples of how we are in the grip of this scheme-content (form-matter) dualism. He argues that *how* people think cannot be separated in this fashion from *what* people think. We do not need the notion of a raw uninterpreted reality prior to and outside all schemes. If we freed ourselves of that notion then there is nothing for talk of a conceptual scheme to be doing. To say that a language must be translatable if it is to be a language in the first place is to say that whatever language people speak they are in principle intelligible to one another, across time and space.

The idea of alternative conceptual frameworks is thus the idea of equally valid languages (English, French, Martian etc.). To be languages at all, languages have to be intertranslatable. But in that case communication is at least in principle always possible. Some may want to play up the difficulties in translation across time and space; others may think such difficulties already all too obvious. But in the end claims for radically alternative conceptual frameworks which generate insuperable pluralism (in theology or elsewhere) seem to be empty. The heady and disturbing doctrine that there might be any number of mutually incompatible but “true” representations of the world, or no true picture at all, seems to collapse. And the reason it collapses takes us back to *the human body*.

Wittgenstein often touches on the problem. “Language is an *instrument*”, we may say (*Investigations*, par. 569); “Its concepts are *instruments*”. Talking is a manifold way of coping with our environment and each other, rather than a way of copying reality out in a depictive representation. The thought is quite Nietzschean. But if we agree to that thought we might be inclined to conclude that it needn't matter all that much *which* tools we use to cut our way through: a hammer might be as effective as a saw. “After all”, as Wittgenstein goes on to say, “it is possible to do physics in feet and inches as well as in metres and centimetres – the difference is merely one of convenience”. Thus the idea is opened up that there

might be alternative sets of concepts for taking the measure of reality or whatever. But it isn't really true to say that the option is so easy – "if, for instance, calculations in one system of measurement demand more time and trouble than it is possible for us to give them". One system *is* better than the other, even if the reasons here are pretty pragmatic. Concepts (we may say) are the expression or embodiment of our *interest*, and they also *direct* it (par. 570). We are not disinterested and impartial observers of the passing scene, or of our own internal stream of consciousness. On the contrary:

"I want to say: an education quite different from ours might also be the foundation for quite different concepts. For here life would run on differently. – What interests us would not interest *them*. Here different concepts would no longer be unimaginable. In fact, this is the only way in which *essentially* different concepts are imaginable" (Zettel, 387-88).

Wittgenstein has just imagined a tribe in which people have been reared from infancy never to show feeling of *any kind* – they regard showing one's feelings as infantile, their training has been severe, people are ridiculed or punished for complaining of pain, etc. It is this culture of stony-faced zombies, or something equally outlandish, that we should have to imagine in order to get the idea of essentially different concepts off the ground.

For Wittgenstein, then, radically alternative conceptual systems are imaginable only if you imagine radically alien life styles and ways of going on. Conceptual structures different from the ones with which we are familiar become an intelligible possibility only if we "imagine certain very general facts of nature to be different from what we are used to" (*Investigations*, p 230). To take his favourite example: people would have to be incapable of feeling pain, or the connection between pain, fear and joy and characteristic physical expressions would have to be eliminated – "if things behaved quite differently from the way they actually do ... then our normal language-games would ipso facto lose their point" (*Inv.* par. 142). We should not know how to respond to the stiff-upper-lipped zombies – "These people would have nothing human-like about them" (Zettel, 390). But why should we say that? "We could not possibly make ourselves understood to them. Not even as we can to a dog. We could not find our feet with them". Literally: we could not find ourselves in them. We, who find ourselves in one another, could not find ourselves in those people. The prospect is terrifying. Wittgenstein concludes the remark thus: "And yet there surely could be such beings, who in other respects were human". The imagined tribe might talk, build bridges, have wars, make love,

etc. all the usual human things – but since they never expressed emotion we couldn't get on with them, we simply shouldn't know how to react to them. We, who can speak for one another, because we can predict how we shall react to pain, fear, joy, etc, simply find that we cannot speak for these emotionless people. We find this out, of course, in finding that we cannot speak *to* them. "If speaking *for* someone else seems to be a mysterious process, that may be because speaking *to* someone does not seem mysterious enough" (Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* p 68). But, for Wittgenstein, it is nothing to do with conceptual frameworks – it is a matter of our *ways of acting*.

For Wittgenstein, at least, it isn't the accessibility of the conceptual frameworks which alien beings might have that would decide whether we could understand one another. We should be well away along the path to understanding each other when we recognized pain, fear, joy, etc. in one another's faces and gestures. For Davidson, one might perhaps say, to think of a conceptual framework is to think of a language. For Wittgenstein, to imagine a language is to imagine a life-form: a human activity such as warning, pleading, narrating, and innumerable others (*Inv.* par. 19). The multifarious activities that weave the tapestry of the human way of being in the world is always Wittgenstein's touchstone. In fact he explicitly poses Quine's question and answers it thus (*Inv.* par. 206):

"Suppose you came as an explorer into an unknown country with a language quite strange to you. In what circumstances would you say that the people there gave orders, understood them, obeyed them, rebelled against them, and so on? – The behaviour mankind has in common is the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language".

Of course the alien people might have practices, involving (let us say) cartomancy or clitoridectomy, which we should wish to teach them to abandon: mutual understanding might be difficult there. But there would always be a vast range of activities, such as slaking our thirst, erecting shelters, and so on, where we collaborated, and, in the process, learned to joke with one another and understand one another. In fact the only measure we have for understanding alien beings has to be *ourselves* – but that means, of course, ourselves in action in the community of which we are the bearers and the beneficiaries (and also the victims). "Perhaps we can imagine", writes Derek Bolton,⁸

"that all human beings shared in common not only the basic elements of life, such as the need for nourishment and shelter, perhaps also for friendship, but also the practices, attitudes

and beliefs of higher culture; or at least, if these practices were not universal, that each human being could understand in himself the meaning and purpose of what his fellow men do". But, as he says, that possibility, which we can hardly conceive, is not reality in our world at present. Rather, it is a vision that generates conflict – but where there is conflict there can be no *unbridgeable* gaps.

- 1 In her British Academy Lecture "In Defence of Objectivity", 1973
- 2 See Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. IX, pp 47 ff.
- 3 See *Word and Object*, Chapter 2, or better still "Speaking of Objects", in *Ontological Relativity and other essays*
- 4 *Theories of Primitive Religion*, 1965 p 12
- 5 *The Discovery of the Mind*, 1953 pp 5 - 8
- 6 "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme", *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Association* 17 (1973-74)
- 7 *Lectures and Conversations*, edited by Cyril Barrett, 1966, p 2
- 8 "Life-Form and Idealism", in *Idealism Past and Present*, edited by Godfrey Vesey, 1982.

Reviews

THEIR LORD AND OURS: Approaches to Authority, Community and the Unity of the Church, edited by Rt Rev Mark Santer. SPCK pp 160 £4.50

The genesis of this book was a letter in May 1981 from the Archbishop of Canterbury to the writers of these eight essays, declaring that it was his strong conviction that the visit of Pope John Paul to this country needs to be marked by some strenuous theological thinking on the Anglican side. He felt it necessary to provoke some reflection on the relation of 'authority' to 'community', and that indeed was to be the title theme under the heading *Rome and Canterbury*. The subjects to be covered, in their initial order, were exegesis, ethics, spirituality, ecclesiology, structures for unity, social witness, and ARCIC in wider perspective. The second essay on Christian scholarship has since been brought in; and the order changed – such are the vicissitudes of bookmaking.

The papal visit came and went, instant

books and videotapes recorded it, and this book quietly went ahead, rather behind the wave: but that serves to remind us that thought is deeper than immediate life. In the first essay the Franciscan Fr Barnabas Lindars deals with the new approach to the Bible in the two Churches, first mapping out the long arguments of history concerning the relations between scripture and tradition as 'two sources' or a double strand, or a major/minor mode nexus in the interpretation of divine revelation. He now believes that the Vatican Council Constitution *Dei Verbum* has resolved what stood between the exegetes of the two Churches. Pius XII's encyclical of 1943, *Divino Afflante Spiritu* commended cooperation between Catholics and Protestants in biblical study, which should now be extended much further: 'the word of