ISSN: 0967-2559 (Print) 1466-4542 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/riph20

In Memoriam – Donald Davidson (III)

To cite this article: (2006) In Memoriam – Donald Davidson (III), , 14:3, 321-324, DOI: 10.1080/09672550600858288

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09672550600858288

Published online: 17 Feb 2007.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 58

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
http://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=riph20

International Journal of Philosophical Studies Vol. 14(3), 321–324

In Memoriam – Donald Davidson (III)

I first heard Donald Davidson's name in a phone call from Dick Rorty, recruiting me to come to Princeton as a graduate student in 1967. Among the attractive features of the programme, Rorty said, was that they had just hired Donald Davidson. He spoke as if Davidson were a household name, but I had never heard of him. Rorty must have sensed this. He tried to be helpful. He said, 'He interacted with Quine a lot in the writing of Chapter II of *Word and Object*.' Now, I had barely heard of Quine either, and I certainly knew nothing of *Word and Object*, much less Chapter II. Sensing that I was showing some sort of culpable ignorance, I clumsily tried to cover this. Rorty may or may not have realized how little this second piece of information was comprehended. But he forbore giving me more. Something did get through, however. I took it from him that Davidson's coming to Princeton was an event of some importance. Fortunately, almost entirely on the basis of good advice that I received from Bob Stalnaker, I repressed my wayward inclination to go to Yale, and chose Princeton.

Having taken not a single course in philosophy as an undergraduate, I was fortunate to have been admitted. I was also thoroughly unprepared. Donald had just published 'Truth and Meaning' when I arrived at Princeton in 1967. I understood hardly a word of this paper when I first read it, and hardly a word of his initial lectures at Princeton in the philosophy of language. All the other graduate students seem to have been much more clued in. But I could see charisma when it played out before my eyes, even though I did not understand its content. There was an excitement and enthusiasm about the ideas, whatever they were, both in Donald's presentation and in the response. There was a sense that something significant was happening. I decided that whatever he was talking about was almost surely worth working on. I had a dim sense of what, I believe, attracted Gil Harman – the possibility of significant interaction between philosophy of language and what was then called 'transformational grammar' in linguistics (something I did know at least a little about). I also had a dim sense that somehow reflection on language was a key to significant philosophical insight.

Donald's interest in Quine's work on translation was also attractive. I did come to be familiar with Chapter II of *Word and Object*. I believe that I may have spent – perhaps mis-spent – as much as a quarter of my graduate

International Journal of Philosophical Studies
ISSN 0967–2559 print 1466–4542 online © 2006 Taylor & Francis
http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals
DOI: 10.1080/09672550600858288

student career thinking about it. Donald's scepticism about stimulus meaning (scepticism about Quine's central focus on proximal stimulation in the account of linguistic meaning), which I came to share, was probably an early impetus toward my thinking about relations between the environment, on the one hand, and mind and meaning, on the other. I was sceptical about both Davidson's and Quine's theses about meaning. But I found inspiring the methodological clarity and seriousness of Quine's work, and the brio and inventiveness of Donald's.

I have to say that the inspiration in those early years was action at a distance. My individual discussions with Donald as a graduate student were deflating. This was partly a result of my own lack of background. But he had some sort of difficulty in finding ways to connect with me. The form of the individual sessions was very consistent. Their content was consistently bad. I would come in with a question. Donald would conclude, on the basis of two or three sentences from me, that I held some absurd view that even I, in my ignorance and lack of sophistication, knew that I did not hold. And I would spend the whole hour or so desperately and unsuccessfully trying to persuade him that I did not hold the relevant view. We never really discussed the questions that I came in to ask him. I am sure that he thought that I was stupid as well as philosophically perverse. I came to wonder whether he was an ungifted interpreter. I certainly thought that he did not practise very well his own principle of charity in linguistic interpretation. I would like to have an audio tape of those frustrating sessions to help determine who was more justified. Still, I learned from him – at a distance, but in significant ways. Still, somehow, we remained on reasonably good terms. He said later to someone, who indiscreetly reported it to me, that he had never changed his mind about a student as much as he had about me. I took this to be less a compliment than a reflection on how hopeless he must have thought I was in those early years.

Donald left Princeton after two years – my first two years there. But he left his mark on most of us, students and faculty. His enthusiasm, his inventiveness and fresh ideas, and the solidity and depth of his projects added up to effective teaching, regardless of my particular travails with him. After leaving, he remained nearby at Rockefeller University in New York City. I continued, as a graduate student, to work on matters close to the topics of his papers in philosophy of language – principally topics on reference and logical form. I was aided by John Wallace, Gil Harman, Dick Grandy, Dick Rorty, Amélie Rorty, Dana Scott, and others. But I saw little of Davidson. When I finished my dissertation, he invited me in for a talk about it. To my astonishment, I found that he could read and interpret with the best of them. He asked a series of penetrating questions that showed that he really did understand what was going on. Radical interpretation and large bequests to charity no longer seemed necessary. My opinion of his powers as an interpreter changed markedly. After that session, communication went relatively smoothly. Over the years we became friends. We did not see each other often, but we kept up. I stayed in his and Marcia's house several times. They ate dinner in mine. He and I had many other lunches and dinners, several hikes, and several late-night discussions. The friendship and sense of connection grew.

My sense of Donald's work also changed. I came to realize that his work in language was not only complemented by his profound work in action theory. I realized that the more 'technical' work was supported by a broad conception of human life and activity. He seemed to be trying to understand what was special about being human – in practical deliberation, in knowing the world, in linguistic communication, in successes and failures of rationality, in self-knowledge. Richard Jeffrey articulated something like this point in his remarks at the Rutgers Conference in 1984. He said that Donald's work combined the scientific spirit of positivism with the humanistic concerns of traditional philosophy. That has always seemed to me right.

And not only the concerns of traditional philosophy. It seems to me that he kept in view the kinds of concerns that brought most of us into philosophy in the first place. Not concerns about solving fascinating puzzles. Not concerns about adverbs or quotation marks or truth schemas or reducing intention to belief and desire. All of these topics are important and arguably worthwhile in themselves. But he saw them, rightly, I think, as having their deeper value insofar as they fit into patterns that can help illuminate fundamental issues that ought to concern any reflective human being: the role of human decision and human value in a law-governed, causally blind world; the relations between mental activity and the underlying events in the body and brain; the relation between explanations in the natural and the human sciences; the question of how we can know things about the physical world when there is so much occasion for doubt; the relative priority of knowledge of our own minds and knowledge of the physical world; the scope and limits of our understanding of others' minds and feelings; varieties and limits of irrationality; the ways in which language makes human life different from any other life that we know about. He managed to address these issues in illuminating ways without going grandiose or rhetorical or ideological, without losing the commitment to the scientific spirit that positivism helped develop in philosophy, and without burying these issues under a load of philosophical jargon and arcanery.

This intellectual perspective was matched in his personal life. He kept up contact with a wide range of people in philosophy and outside of it. He was relentlessly curious about everything from weather patterns and how birds fly, to the nuances of Proust and Beethoven, to the ways of people and the lays of the land, all over the globe. He promoted philosophy in remote places. He was a traveller with endless energy and enthusiasm. He was emotionally open to music. He was a versatile musician, capable of playing many instruments and capable of sight-reading almost anything on the piano. He played four-hand piano music with Marcia; and in his undergraduate student years, he had done something similar with Leonard Bernstein. (He invited me, but I declined. I am a miserable sight-reader.) He lived a rich, full life, and enriched the lives of others, both through his philosophical work and through his personal optimism, energy, and enthusiasm.

Descartes's students were convinced that Descartes was immortal. The story is that they refused to believe it when they were told that Descartes had died. Given Donald's youthfulness and energy well into his eighties, many of us had something like the same attitude. In a sense we were wrong. But in another sense perhaps we were right. We can hope for Donald a longer, continuing life. In any case, he lives in the lives and memories of those of us fortunate enough to have read and known him.

UCLA, USA *Tyler Burge*