

In Memoriam – Donald Davidson (II)

Donald and I both started out as students of literature, of Greek, and of intellectual history. We were diverted into philosophy, as it happened, by encountering the same figure: Alfred North Whitehead, who was one of Donald's undergraduate teachers. In his intellectual autobiography Donald wrote that 'Whitehead's interests in philosophy were mainly historical, and soon mine were too; by this I mean (in my own case) that I was fascinated by the views of historical figures without much caring whether or not they were true.' As a student in Whitehead's classes, Donald read through *Process and Reality* and wrote papers in the jargon of that book, picking his way among the conceptual prehensions of eternal objects and the physical prehensions of actual entities. But he shortly became disenchanted. His autobiography goes on to say, ruefully, that his encounter with Whitehead set him back for years.

I too wrote papers about *Process and Reality* when I was in college. But, like Donald, I fell off the bandwagon. I soon became as glad that Sellars had liberated me from Whiteheadianism as Donald was that Quine had liberated him. Nevertheless, I think that historians of twentieth-century philosophy will find it intriguing that Whitehead and Davidson once interacted, if only briefly. For Whitehead was one of the boldest and most imaginative philosophers of the first half of that century, as Davidson was of its second half.

Both men were dissatisfied with the Kantian intellectual framework that had dominated nineteenth-century philosophical thought, and with the Kantian problematic that was still taken for granted by Russell, Carnap, and C. I. Lewis. Both did their best to replace it with something very different. Whitehead wanted to go back behind Kant – to return, as he said, to 'pre-Kantian modes of thought'. He hoped to give an account of the relations between modern physical science and human experience that would do equal justice to Einstein, to Locke, and to Bergson. Donald, inspired by Quine, had a more radical approach. He attacked the Kantian scheme-content distinction that had gone unquestioned by Carnap and Lewis – one that Whitehead had retained in the form of his distinction between eternal objects and actual occasions.

By switching from the relation between elementary particles and conscious experience to that between the particles and our linguistic

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

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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

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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.

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