

Memories of Donald Davidson

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I knew Don only towards the end of his life – the last eleven years or so. That I knew him for even this short a time is something for which I am extremely grateful. We met initially largely as a result of the NEH summer institute organised by Bert Dreyfus on 'Heidegger & Davidson: Critics of Cartesianism' at the University of California, Santa Cruz, in 1990. I was not able to attend, but sent Don a copy of the manuscript for what became my first book, *Donald Davidson and the Mirror of Meaning*. Some little time after posting it off, I was amazed to receive a faxed message from Don that read: "Am chagrined to have to admit that I only just found time to read your book. Would have learnt more by staying home with it than going to Santa Cruz. Do you have a publisher?" In 1992 Don was kind enough to help organise for me, along with my family, to visit Berkeley for some months, and during that time I shared Don's office with him while I worked on editing Alan Donagan's papers for publication. Don was incredibly generous with his time, and always open and friendly in discussion. I would work in the office for the whole day, but Don would often come in during the afternoon, and we spent much time talking about a wide range of things – and not just philosophy. Sometimes I would be emboldened to put to Don my own readings of his work, and sometimes we would talk about Don's own life and experiences – his time as a student with Whitehead, trying to write radio scripts in Los Angeles, as assistant to Werner Jaeger (including strange dinners with the Jaegers in which he was also introduced to their daughter), working as an aircraft recognition instructor in Moraga (on the other side of the hills from Berkeley and not far from where we were living at the time), or having to watch American aircraft being shot down by their own ships during the sea-borne invasion of Italy. There was always something more to discover about Don. He had an incredibly wide range of knowledge and interests, practical as well as theoretical, and there seemed to be almost no subject (at least not that I ever discovered) with which Don didn't have a reasonably detailed acquaintance. I remember visiting Don and Marcia around Labour Day having just seen a documentary about the Australian-born organiser of the San Francisco longshoreman, Harry Bridges. I was surprised to find that, not only did Don know all about Bridges, and much about the history of labour in the United States (a subject about which I was woefully ignorant), but that he also had a personal reason to remember Bridges efforts: during the longshoreman's strike in 1934, Don was working on board a steamship carrying steel for the Golden Gate bridge (Don used to say that there was a

small piece of the bridge for which he felt responsible), and Bridges' activities led to him getting a welcome pay rise. On another occasion, arriving for dinner at the Davidson's house, and continuing an argument begun earlier that day with Bert Dreyfus, also a guest, over a detail of Greek mythology (something to do with the genealogy of Odysseus), I was pleasantly surprised to find Don weighing in on my side, and leaving Bert somewhat taken aback at discovering the depth of Don's knowledge of the matter. I recall talking with Don about so many things: astronomy, geography, art, music, electronics, history, literature (especially Joyce), and much more besides (he once told me that his first job at Queens University in New York involved such a wide range of teaching that if I ever wanted to know about crop rotation in the thirteenth century, he was the one to ask). Our philosophical discussions were no less wide-ranging. Because my interests were in European thought, as well as in the Anglo-American tradition, we also touched on figures such as Heidegger and Gadamer (although at the time I think I was too much taken up by the marvel of being able to talk to Don himself to be the best expositor of their views to him). Don was always interested – it was the ideas that moved him rather than any preconceived assumptions about the thinker. Yet while I thought then, and still think now, that there is significant convergence between a Davidsonian and broadly hermeneutic style of thinking, the differences in style and approach between Don work, and especially Gadamer's, was too great to hope successfully to bridge at a personal level at such a late stage in their careers (something borne out by the oddity of the encounter between Davidson and Gadamer in the *Library of Living Philosophers* volume dedicated to Gadamer – an encounter in which each seems to misread the other in spite of good intentions on both sides). Outside of personal conversation and interaction, Don was also a careful and patient teacher. I recall two general points that he stressed to his students and that seem to me to also lie at the heart of his thinking. Both should be familiar from his published writings, even if they do not always appear in such a general form. The first is that one should try to avoid asking 'what is' questions – they almost always, he said, mislead – and instead one should look to see how concepts, especially concepts like meaning or truth, connect up with other concepts. Related to this, Don also emphasised that concepts like that of meaning obtain all of their 'grip' from instances of successful communication, and so his own focus was on just those cases rather than on instances of communicative failure or anomaly (the reverse seems to be the rule in much current thinking). The second point concerns something that Don referred to as a 'basic principle' of semantics (and philosophy), namely, that if something can be given one true description, then it can be given many true descriptions, and so any one thing will always support an infinite number of logically independent descriptions of it (Don used to illustrate this principle using the example of the first Postmaster-

General of the United States who was also the inventor of bifocals who was Benjamin Franklin). This point may seem a simple one, but is central nonetheless, and a point that seems often to be overlooked in much contemporary thought. Some of the examples that Don made use of in his teaching, as well in his writing and his thinking more generally, gave rise to difficulties for his students as well as his other readers (the two most infamous being that of the Swampman and the Omniscient Interpreter – Don said he deeply regretted ever having introduced them), but in this regard Don had some very specific advice: “Pay no attention to the *truth* of my examples”, he said in class, “only to the *logic* of them.” Don’s teaching was full of asides about the history of philosophy, often about Aristotle and Kant – the two figures who seemed to me always to be present in his thinking even if not always mentioned by name – but also about Wittgenstein (another particularly significant figure). Most often, however, and in spite of the fact that I find Don constantly present in my philosophical work, it isn’t anything specifically philosophical that reminds me most strongly of Don – it is that breadth of knowledge and interest, those long conversations we had in his office and elsewhere, his careful attentiveness and thoughtfulness, and small, maybe odd things, such as his affection for eggplant (I recall him saying that if eggplant was on the menu in a restaurant he always felt obliged to order it), and a discussion we once had about our mutual liking for grapefruit. For me, then, both the black sheen of eggplant and the taste of grapefruit always bring back fond memories of Don. He is undoubtedly the most important figure in my philosophical life, as well as someone for whom I will always have a great personal affection.