

MY DAVIDSONIAN TIMES

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Donald Davidson taught me more philosophy than any other philosopher that I have known, although I never was actually his student. My interest in analytic philosophy, which grew out of a strong rejection of my French post-structuralist background was awakened, in the early 1970s, by some of my teachers in France, like Jules Vuillemin and Jacques Bouveresse, who lectured, against the trends of their age, on Russell, Quine, or logic, but I never had any actual teaching in contemporary analytic philosophy before I went to the UK and to the US. The libraries were so bad in France at that time that we had to cross the Channel to photocopy books and articles in Oxford or London, carrying large suitcases. I first heard the name of Davidson in 1976 at a lecture given by Dagfinn Føllesdal at the Collège de France and when I read, in 1977, Dummett's *Frege* and the Evans/McDowell collection *Truth and Meaning*. I was then teaching at the French Lycée in London, and I sometimes went to Oxford. Davidson had given the John Locke lectures in 1971 and the rumour had it that Oxford was enduring the so called "Davidsonic boom". But it must have been an underground explosion, for the sound of the boom did not come to my ears at the time. My first real contact with Davidson's views was in 1978, when I was a post graduate student in Berkeley in, finishing a first thesis on Kripke. Bruce Vermazen gave a seminar on Davidson's philosophy, which was a remarkable introduction, clear, wide ranging and so faithful to Davidson's views that it was like having a class by him in person. I was tempted to stay in the US to start a new PhD. I would have liked to meet Davidson who was then in Chicago, possibly do my dissertation with him, but there were too many obstacles and I had to come back to France (if I had figured out that he would join the Berkeley department in 1981, I certainly would have tried to stay there). At about that time I wrote an article on Davidson in the French journal *Critique*, soon followed by a translation and presentation of "How is weakness of the will possible". These attracted the attention of Jon Elster, who at that time organised meetings on rationality at the Maison des sciences de l'homme in Paris. It was at one of these, in 1982, that I first met Donald Davidson, when he gave his paper on deception and division. I was very impressed by something which I have not seen in many other philosophers: a capacity to put forward, on the basis of a very simple point, a complex theory with many ramifications. One of the reasons why Davidson was so good in writing dense, compact, stylish articles, and not good at writing books (he virtually never wrote one), was the amazing simplicity of his basic insights (meaning out of truth, reasons as causes, actions as events, belief and meaning) associated to a deep systematicity. On this first encounter, however, I did not really have a chance to talk to him. I came to know personally Donald only later, when in 1985, after having corresponded with him, he generously invited me to stay at his house in Oxford for two weeks. He was then the Eastman professor and had just married Marcia Cavell. It was a wonderful experience. Don and Marcia's hospitality, their simplicity and kindness were wonderful and I had the chance to have with Don several conversations, and to listen to a number of his classes. With Marcia we went to lectures by Dummett and Jennifer Hornsby, and for me too it was a philosophical honeymoon. The Davidsonic boom was then very perceptible. Ernie Lepore had edited his two landmark volumes which still are, in my view, the best collections on Davidson's work. Donald was at that time – but was there any time when it was not the case? – lecturing and travelling everywhere. He had a list of these inside the door of his fridge so that every time he needed a glass of water or milk he could be reminded of his travels. Marcia's interests have always been firmly based within psychoanalysis, a discipline which I saw with suspicion but which Davidson's essays on irrationality had, in a sense, rehabilitated. I was reassured when I understood that she was a

very classical Freudian, miles away from the charlatanism of the French psychoanalytic theory that I had known during my student years. I learnt a lot more from her work on Freud than from the psychoanalysts that I had read in France.

I became a Davidsonian, probably the only one in the French speaking world with my Canadian friend Daniel Laurier. I translated into French *Actions and Events* and *Inquiries into truth and interpretation* and wrote my habilitation thesis on Davidson's philosophy of language, edited several volumes of essays on his work and published *Davidson et la philosophie du langage* in 1994 and a number of articles on his views. I lectured on his work in France, organised a number of meetings with him during the 1990s, in particular in 1994 his invitation at a conference in Cerisy La Salle in Normandy where we discussed with Rorty and at his Jean Nicod lectures in 1995 when I invited him in Caen. We became friends, and met quite often, with Marcia. Memorable moments were when my wife Claudine and I visited him and Marcia in Berkeley in 1995, when he was in Europe and at the occasion of the many conferences which he attended or which were organised on his work (some of them by myself), such as the memorable one in Karlovy Vary in 1996, where the participants has the privilege of hearing, for each talk devoted to Davidson, Quine's extensive comments about the difference between his views and Davidson's. When I became professor at the Sorbonne, I invited him once in 2000, and his talk, to my surprise, attracted a lot of people. In spite of my efforts I was not very successful in promoting his views and the proverb "nobody's a prophet in his own country" was once again verified. Don and I used to joke that I had tried to impose his philosophy to my compatriots by force. My second thesis supervisor, Gilles Granger once asked me how I could have done so much work on such an uninteresting figure, and most of my French colleagues seemed to be of the same opinion. During all my career in France I could not find a single student willing to do a dissertation on Davidson under my supervision. The failure was mine, but I suspect that the main obstacle to the diffusion of Davidson's work in France, apart from the difficulties that analytic philosophy had to establish itself in this country, was the fact that his views were difficult to locate on the map of analytic philosophy itself. Even for those who, like my French colleagues at Institut Nicod were militant about analytic philosophy, Davidson was not naturalist enough and too critical of cognitive science, and for Wittgensteinians he was too coldly rationalistic. His austere theory of interpretation, his form of non reductive physicalism and his theory of action are not easy to fit in the spectrum of views which compose what is known as "mainstream" contemporary analytic philosophy, even less with the kind of sloppy post- modernism which pretends to be friendly to American pragmatism. He conceived philosophy both as a humanistic discipline and a rigorous analytical and theoretical enterprise. He liked technical philosophy in the style of Ramsey, Tarski and Quine, but he was also an accomplished classicist, who knew his Plato and his Aristotle. Like Aristotle he believed that philosophy was the best sort of life, but this did not make him forget that not everything in life is philosophical. I wish I had been able to do only 1 % of what he was able to do: building a house, repairing a car, gliding, surfing, sailing, skiing, climbing the Everest, crossing Europe by bike, Greece by foot, doing safaris, composing and playing music, travelling everywhere. Although when I first met him he was over 60, he never seemed to me to be old. Life had not always kind to him, but he seemed to have bathed in the fountain of youth (although, to my knowledge, he never lived in Florida, where it is supposed to be).

Davidson taught us that disagreement was only possible on the background of a wide agreement. Although I was inspired in my work by his overall framework, over the years, I began to disagree with him on a number of issues and my philosophical views have drifted away from his. His theory of interpretation, according to which nothing is a belief or a desire unless it is interpreted seemed to me a bit too anti-realist. I was worried, like many of the philosophers would had read Gareth Evans' *Varieties of Reference* , by the paucity of space

the gave to perception in his conception of thought. In a conference in Leuven in 1994, he found my views on belief far too psychologistic. Later we disagreed on the normative role of truth for belief. In epistemology, I was unconvinced by his views on scepticism and triangulation. But even when I disagreed and parted company from him, I was struck by the fact that he always had the shape of the problems right and how much his views still structured mine.

The reception of Davidson's work has undergone a number of changes since the nineteen seventies. Like many philosophy students of my generation, I was attracted by "Davidson's program" in semantics, and by the interconnections of views on meaning, truth, rationality, mind and action which what one can call his system promised to offer. These notions were, and still are, at the center of the field, and he contributed more than anyone else to connect them in illuminating ways. He has set the agenda of much analytic philosophy for at least two generations. Later, however, Davidson's views have been associated to all sorts of philosophical trends, which, in my view, have little to do with his philosophy: Rortyan pragmatism, Gadamerian hermeneutics, Wittgensteinian quietism, Pittsburgh Hegelianism and a variety of other so called post-analytical trends. Even the painter Robert Morris had found affinities between his paintings and Davidson's philosophy! I have distanced myself from all these kidnappings and from the atmosphere of worship which sometimes accompanied Davidson in some conferences or other public occasions, especially because my own philosophical path has consisted in an attempt to fly away from the temptations of French idealism and irrationalism, to which the philosophy of Davidson seemed to me the perfect antidote. Many of those who have tried to recruit Davidson in the anti-realist or in the pragmatist camp misunderstand or tend to minimise the core structure of his views, which seem to me not to have changed much since his first major essays of the 1960.

But the major change which philosophy has undergone since three decades is more institutional and cultural than strictly doctrinal. Donald Davidson was educated at Harvard during the forties. He belongs to the generation of American philosophers who were brought up in the atmosphere of logical positivism. He was a friend of Hempel, and he is indeed Quine's pupil. He received the best of this heritage, but was never tempted by the form of enthusiastic scientism which often went along with positivism. Today this enthusiasm has been replaced by others, like uncritical reverence for cognitive science and so-called "experimental philosophy" or, on the contrary, by wrongheaded anti-science. But most of all, the style of academic philosophy has changed. Donald Davidson is probably one of the last great American academic philosophers of the XXth century. He had an idea of philosophy and of its place within the University which is not shared by many people working in what we call universities today. The philosophical community has become wider, and it is not any more a community, in spite (and perhaps because) of the easiness of the means of communication. Even within analytic philosophy, which seemed to me once the perfect philosophical circle, the atmosphere has become aggressive and competitive. The university is a far different place than it was when professors like Donald Davidson were active. In his autobiography, Don said that it would seem that he had spent his time travelling but that he had mostly been teaching. Indeed he travelled a lot, and that was part of what he liked most. When he travelled to so many places, he did not simply give talks, or lectures. He tried to recreate the atmosphere of a seminar. His style was slow going, his pace firm, and he knew what he was up to. He did not try to please, and was not very impressed by a certain brilliance of style and apparent quickness of mind which is so praised these days within analytic philosophy. I have never understood why some people have found him cold, when I myself always found him so warm and humorous. Although he was shy, he had nerve. His reserved temper and his laconic style was always spelled with the words of friendship and generosity.