



IN MEMORIAM

Donald Davidson
Professor of Philosophy, Emeritus
Willis S. and Marion Slusser Professor of Philosophy
Berkeley
1917-2003

When Donald Davidson joined the University of California, Berkeley faculty in 1980, his international reputation — which has grown steadily since — was already secure and his philosophical views had been the topic of several seminars in the Department of Philosophy. Succeeding Paul Grice (1913-1988) as the department's senior research philosopher (though teaching a full course load that included undergraduate classes), Davidson brought to Berkeley an inspiring vigor both as philosopher and as teacher, along with absolute integrity as a thinker. On the teaching side, he took great interest in his students' work, both while they were in graduate school and as their careers subsequently developed. But his leading passion was for philosophy itself. From the day of his arrival until his untimely death, he seemed never to pause in his pursuit of a satisfactory synthesis of the ideas he had been wrestling with, refining, and expanding for decades: radical interpretation; anomalous monism; the interdependence of belief, desire, and meaning; decision theory as a model of the rational mind; the adequacy of a theory of truth as a theory of meaning; and interpretation as a species of measurement. Just before he died, he had almost finished readying for the press two collections of his recent essays and a third book, entitled *Truth and Predication*.

He also brought to Berkeley his well-deserved prestige. Although it is no exaggeration to say that he was an eminent figure in 1981, by 2003 he was one of the world's best known and most studied contemporary philosophers. He was appointed to about 60 posts as a visiting professor or lecturer, at universities from Sydney and Tokyo to Venice and Cape Town. At least seven international conferences have been held on his work, starting in 1981. Among his many lecture series were some of Philosophy's most admired: the John Locke Lectures at the University of Oxford (1970), the John Dewey Lectures at Columbia University (1989), and the Kant Lectures at the University of Munich (1993). The Universities of Oxford (1995) and Stockholm (1999) both awarded him honorary doctorates. His work has been published in Japanese, Chinese, and 18 European languages, including Estonian and Hungarian. Another kind of recognition came in the form of a notable series of drawings, called *Blind Time IV*, by artist Robert Morris, reacting to passages from Davidson's writings.

Born in Springfield, Massachusetts, on March 6, 1917, Davidson spent his early childhood moving from place to place with his family, with the result that he didn't start first grade until he was nine or ten. Although he had begun reading philosophy, on his own when he was in high school he earned his Harvard University B.A. in classics, in 1939. The following fall, he entered the Harvard Ph.D. program in philosophy and soon took a seminar from W.V. Quine that changed his attitude toward the subject. "Until then I had thought of philosophy as not as serious as science but more serious than art criticism," he recalled in an interview with Ernie Lepore, but the seminar made him realize "that it was possible to be serious about getting things right in philosophy — or at least not getting things wrong." (Donald Davidson, *Problems of Rationality* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, in press])

At the time the U.S. entered into World War II, Davidson had almost completed his Ph.D. work and was concurrently enrolled in Harvard's Business School. He left his studies to enlist in the U.S. Navy, where he trained spotters to distinguish Allied planes from those of the Axis, and he served as a spotter himself in the naval assaults on Sicily, Salerno, and Anzio. After the war, he finished his degree (1949) while teaching at Queens College in New York (1947-51). From 1951 until 1967, he was on the faculty at Stanford University, where he helped to found a Ph.D. program in philosophy and transform the department into one of the country's best regarded. It was there that he wrote and published the first essays in the long series upon which his reputation is founded: "Actions, Reasons and Causes" (1963), "Theories of Meaning and Learnable Language" (1966), "The Logical Form of Action Sentences," "Causal Relations," and "Truth and Meaning" (all three from 1967).

In moving to Princeton University in 1967, he was largely motivated by the desire to join a community of scholars who could understand his ideas and help him develop and articulate them and discover their implications and interrelations. The desire was fulfilled, but he was soon offered an even more tempting prospect: the opportunity to get in on the ground floor of such a community at the Rockefeller University in New York City. From 1970 until 1976, Davidson maintained a relationship with the Princeton faculty while his primary appointment was in the legendary all- star, teaching- optional Philosophy Department at Rockefeller. Rockefeller, however, abandoned its experiment in the humanities and dissolved the department. In 1976, Davidson became University Professor at the University of Chicago, where his second wife, Nancy Hirschberg, was also appointed to the faculty. After Hirschberg's death, Davidson felt he had little reason to remain in Chicago, and it was the Berkeley department's good fortune to persuade him to join it rather than one of his many other suitors.

In 1984, Davidson's private life became much happier when he married Marcia Cavell, whom he had met years before at Stanford. Cavell, a philosopher and psychoanalyst, left her position at the State University of New York at Purchase to come to Berkeley, where she taught courses from time to time in the Department of Philosophy. After Davidson's mandatory retirement from Berkeley in 1987, he continued to hold the Willis S. and Marion Slusser Professorship, to which he had been appointed in 1986, and he remained very active both in teaching and in departmental affairs, even as outside demands on his time burgeoned. Recently he had been in excellent health, but he regretted the inevitable diminution of the strength and energy that had once enabled him to surf, fly airplanes, ski, hike, and otherwise enjoy the outdoor life. Difficulty in walking led him to undergo knee- replacement surgery. The disastrous result was cardiac arrest shortly after the operation and death a few days later, on August 30, 2003. He is survived by Marcia Cavell; his daughter Elizabeth Davidson, whose mother was his first wife, Virginia Davidson; two grandchildren, Max and Natalie Boyer; and his sister, Jean Baldwin.

Those who knew Davidson will miss him and his warmth and kindness, wit and sense of fun, wisdom and enthusiasm for life. But his writings-- his monuments-- are likely to live on for a long time. Almost all of his work took the form of essays, many of the most important of which up to 1998 are available in the collections *Essays on Actions and Events* (1980), *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (1984), and *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* (2001). The three volumes mentioned in the first paragraph above are expected to appear over the next couple of years.

Alan Code
Barry Stroud
Bruce Vermazen