Donald Davidson: Life and Words
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This book of essays about Donald Davidson might seem to be of low interest for those not already in the know about Donald Davidson. However, if the reader approaches this book from an outsider point of view or as one engaged in what is called 'radical interpretation' in Quinean-Davidsonian terminology, and uses the principle of 'charity' for interpretation (or, in ordinary terms, 'sympathy'), one can find interesting critical-expositions of the problems of interpretation, translation, and the place of mind in nature and reality. Four essays (two of which are in the biographical section of the book) provide a good vantage point for interpreting the book.

The first vantage point essay is the biographical essay by Thomas Nagel:

'Donald [Davidson] shared with Quine a love of the surface of the earth, and I suppose many people would associate him philosophically with Quine, but I always thought they were poles apart. It's true that Davidson, like Quine, was formed in the logical empiricist branch of analytic philosophy that reached the United States directly from central Europe, rather than in the ordinary language branch that arrived from England. But Quine was by temperament a positivist and reductionist, and Donald was the reverse. In spite of his interest in formal systems and theoretical unification, he was wedded to a rich and generous sense of reality and truth, and this is what I found congenial in his philosophical outlook. He did not think of philosophy as an extension of science at its most reductive, and seemed to me never to lose sight of the unique character of philosophical questions.' (52–3) Davidson, according to Nagel, thought of philosophy as having an autonomous character.

The second vantage point essay is the biographical sketch by Richard Rorty:

Rorty also attempts to find a philosophical context for Davidson outside the analytic school of philosophy altogether: '...there are

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similarities between Whitehead [a former teacher of both Rorty and Davidson] that are worth bringing out. Both outgrew their youthful interest in axiomatizability. Both shared a Wordsworthian appreciation of the details of the natural world. But the most salient resemblance is that neither ever allowed himself to be professionalized. Both were too adventurous, too bold, and too original to let their thinking be shaped by what Kuhn called a "disciplinary matrix". They set their own problems and followed their own stars... Like Whitehead, he was an adventurer of ideas who wished other adventurers well.' (57). Davidson according to Rorty may have used techniques common to technical analytic philosophy, but was one who had his own problematique.

The third vantage point essay is by Donald Davidson 'Could There Be a Science of Rationality?' (271–286):

Davidson says very succinctly (as characteristic of his writing style) that mind and the mental are independent of the natural sciences: '...I believe the normative, holistic and externalist elements in psychological concepts cannot be eliminated without radically changing the subject.'(275–6) This is not to say that there cannot be a science of the mental, but such a science must relate together the ordinary mental concepts of belief, desire, intention, and meaning without attempting to reduce those concepts to non-mental concepts. Currently, according to Davidson, there are all sorts of genuine empirical studies of the mental but they are fragmentary. Davidson aims to unify those studies into a 'unified' or general theory of rationality: 'The entire theory is built on the norms of rationality...norms or considerations of rationality also [apart from decision theory and truth theory] enter with the application of the theory to actual agents, at the stage, where an interpreter assigns his or her own sentences to capture the contents of another's thoughts and utterances... and this is a matter of using one's own standards of rationality to calibrate the thoughts of the other.' (281). How we can understand the thought of other people, according to Davidson, is to assume they are rational, and that when they use 'sentences' similar to ours, they are expressing thoughts similar to the ones we have when using those similar sentences to express our own thoughts. Davidson insists the theory of rationality is 'as genuine a theory as any, [and] is not in competition with any natural science' (285). In traditional philosophical terms his general theory of rationality would have been called a 'philosophical anthropology'.

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The fourth vantage point essay is by William Child, 'Interpreting People and Interpreting Texts' (234–252):

Because Child compares the theories of Davidson with the theories of Paul Ricoeur, a 'Continental' philosopher, Child has to step out of the confines of analytic terminology, and use a language (ordinary English) common to both Davidson and Ricoeur as a 'meta-language' as it were. Hence, this essay does not require as much translation into ordinary English as do the other essays in the book in order for an outsider to the idiosyncratic schools of philosophy (analytic or other schools) to appreciate both the arguments of the essay and their bearing on the philosophical problems addressed by Davidson.

Child argues for three main points: First, Davidson sees no crucial difference between speech and writing, and concentrates on speech as the clue to the nature of thought and mind. Second, Ricoeur sees that writing or text is very different from speech, and concentrates on text as the clue to the nature of thought and mind. Third, according to Child, though Ricoeur is largely correct that text is different from speech, it is speech that better expresses thought and mind. So, though Davidson, according to Child, may have been mistaken in thinking that interpreting text is secondary to and derivative to interpreting speech, he was correct in thinking that interpreting speech results in getting closer to the nature of thought and mind. Child tightly summarizes what may be Ricoeur's own general theory of rationality: 'Ricoeur develops an analogy between the meaning and interpretation of texts and the meaning and interpretation of human actions. ...his [Ricoeur's] key claims about texts are (i) that the meaning of a text is independent of its author's intention, and (ii) that the reference of a text is independent of the situation in which it was produced. We can, he thinks, make analogous claims about human actions...' (246) However, according to Child, Davidson's extension of how we interpret speech, by applying the principle that specific intentions and the specific context of the 'agent' or rational speaker are crucial to interpreting what people say and to interpreting how people act, is closer to the truth about understanding action than is Ricoeur's theory of action.

We now have a good vantage point for reading the remainder of the critical-expository essays. They can be read as in-between-the-lines answers to the question: how closely do we need to stick to the text or go beyond the text and search for a context beyond the author's intentions and beliefs for the project of developing a Davidsonian approach to a general theory of rationality?

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Reviews

The essay by Ernest Lepore and Kirk Ludwig, 'Ontology in the Theory of Meaning' (75–85) translated into ordinary English is roughly twofold, there are no meanings and the only way to understand the meaning of a sentence is to translate it into other terms. In other words, understanding equals using other words. But why do we care about paraphrasing sentences? This question is taken up in Barry C. Smith's essay, 'Davidson, Interpretation and First-Person Constraints on Meaning' (190–211). We spend time on translating sentences because we want to understand other people's beliefs. That of course is my paraphrase of a very complicated argument that critically discusses the idea that understanding our own beliefs is no different from understanding other people's beliefs. In other words, Davidson, according to Smith, endorsed the idea that we understand ourselves as if we were another person: we use so-called third-person understanding. However, Smith wants to restore the more common-sense position of using '...the speaker's inner comprehension of speech: the conscious linguistic experience we all have in speaking and listening' (194). Though Smith does not point this out, Smith's discussion of first-person constraints (or 'conscious linguistic experience') goes pretty deep from the perspective of Davidson's project of a unified or general theory of rationality. Davidson rejects the division between an inner and outer mental world: all mental phenomena such as beliefs, desires, intentions, and thoughts are transparent because they are linguistic. Thus, according to Smith, it follows from Davidson's view of understanding the speech of others exclusively from the position of the third-person regardless of conscious experience, that Davidson's unified theory of rationality must also exclude the conscious experience of others. Basically, what a Davidsonian wants to do is to pin a general theory of rationality on a theory of language interpretation. However, if we need to use first-person constraints on the interpretation of speech as Smith argues, can we still make language interpretation and understanding the core of a general theory of rationality?

There is a pair of essays that indirectly discuss the crucial issue of whether Davidson was correct in dispensing with the idea of an inner world of beliefs. Kathrin Gluer's essay, 'The Status of Charity I: Conceptual Truth or *A Posteriori* Necessity?' (144–166) argues that the 'principle of charity', which means that we assume the beliefs of others that we find through interpreting their speech, is basically, as a whole, true. So, when we want to understand those who use 'alien sentences' (146), we assume that their 'alien sentences' are true (and not idiosyncratic). The short of her argument, is that the principle of 'charity' is empirical, but not testable: without using the

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principle of 'charity' we cannot understand others. But then, when using 'charity' in the interpretation of a person's speech, how do we use a person's ('alien') speech to identify their beliefs? After all, they may still have 'alien' or false beliefs. Peter Pagin's essay, 'The Status of Charity II: Charity, Probability, and Simplicity' (167–189), demonstrates the use of 'standard Bayesian reasoning' (178) as a technique for assigning probabilities to hypotheses about a person's beliefs. So, given that inner life may differ from speech, the principle of charity is fairly reliable in finding a person's beliefs and provides 'an *empirical* justification for believing that, as a matter of nomic regularity, charitable interpretation will yield correct interpretation' (187). In other words, again we use other's words as an indicator about their beliefs and assume that 'alien' speech is at bottom interpretable into speech that is more familiar to us.

There are two independent essays about how to understand Davidson's 'anomalous monism' or the place of mind in reality or nature. Sophie Gibb's essay, 'Why Davidson is not a Property Epiphenomenalist' (253–268) argues that Davidson rejects mind but does it in an upside down way. 'Anomalous monism [psychological phenomena are part of the natural world but cannot be reduced to physical phenomena] is … closer to eliminativism [mental phenomena are mythical and only neurological phenomena are real].… However, unlike most eliminativists, Davidson is not rejecting the existence of mental properties because they are mental, but because he rejects the ontological category of properties.' (260) However, Gibbs goes on to argue that 'causation is an ontological relation…[and so] properties will inevitably play an essential role within one's ontological system…[thus], Davidson's theory of the causal relata [that does not involve an "ontological category of properties" governed by natural laws] should be rejected, and along with it, anomalous monism.' (266) This argument seems to undercut Davidson's project for a unified theory of rationality that rests on the idea of a single natural world where such abstract entities as properties do not exist and where beliefs, desires, and actions are linguistically saturated: actions speak as loudly and clearly as words (or, sentences). Can Davidson's naturalism and 'anomalous monism' be rescued? Indirectly, the essay by James Higginbotham, 'Expression, Truth, Predication, and Context: Two Perspectives' (212–233) answers No. Higginbotham states that according to Davidson predicates do not refer to distinctive objects but can be true or false; but after a lengthy analysis and discussion of theories of semantics, Higginbotham argues that Davidson's 'thesis [that predicates are non-referring but true or false] is unproven, and in any

case there is no infinite regress in assigning predicates a reference to properties' (230).

The upshot of the critical-expository essays discussed up to this point is that Davidson's project for a unified theory of rationality may be a non-starter because interpreting and understanding others requires more than Davidson allows for in his theory of rationality, interpretation, speech, and human psychology. So, where can we go from here? I am guessing that the gaps in Davidson's general theory of rationality underlie the following dispute.

Frederick Stoutland, 'Critical Notice: A Mistaken View of Davidson's Legacy' (86–103) argues that Ernest Lepore and Kirk Ludwig, in their book, 'Donald Davidson: Meaning, Truth, Language, and Reality' (2005) provide '..a deeply unsympathetic study of Davidson's work...' (86). Moreover '... Lepore and Ludwig give a distorted interpretation of his [Davidson's] work and then sharply criticize what they mistakenly take to be his views, the result being an impoverished Davidson who hardly counts as a philosopher of the first rank.' (87) Ernie (sic) Lepore and Kirk Ludwig, 'Radical Misinterpretation: A Reply to Stoutland' (104–132) respond to Stoutland's 'hostile review' that Stoutland misinterprets Davidson' and misinterprets Lepore and Ludwig's arguments with Davidson. Stoutland replies to Lepore and Ludwig in his essay, 'Radical Misinterpretation Indeed: Response to Lepore and Ludwig' (133–166) that his 'review was not hostile...[rather the] ...review was motivated not by ill will but by an attempt to give an honest evaluation useful to serious students of Davidson.' (133) This debate among 'serious students of Davidson' may indicate that Davidson's working theory of the transparency of the language of those in the same school of thought or culture is mistaken: if speech were transparent even to those immersed in the same school of thought, then misunderstanding those in the same school of thought would be impossible. How, then if speech is not transparent, even when trying to understand one in the same culture, can we understand the other person? Stoutland's concluding statement indicates an answer to the general question of interpreting another philosopher or another person regardless of their cultural background, when talking about interpreting Davidson as an analytic philosopher: 'What is important is not whether he is *called* an analytic philosopher but whether his work is understood and criticized in its own terms rather than in terms of external categories, distinctions, and doctrines.' (142)

It, in general, is a good idea to take a philosopher on their own terms and to stick to their text. By looking at a philosopher's text

from within the philosopher's own perspective, we can, as the various critical-expository essays in this book do, uncover unresolved problems, such as whether to include the conscious experience of others in understanding their speech and text, and in developing a general theory of rationality.

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Physician-Assisted Death in Perspective: Assessing the Dutch Experience
Edited by S. J., Youngner and G. K., Kimsma
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The title of this book reveals its purpose: deaths which a physician (or anyone) assists are by definition the deaths of others, and are therefore assisted suicides or euthanasia. Deliberate softening of those descriptors betrays an apologist, at times defensive stance. That is no great revelation, for the editors openly admit: 'Our focus was...the practice of [euthanasia/assisted suicide]...we did not include authors...who find [it] morally unacceptable.' The collection then was never intended to be a 'balanced discussion' of views; it is a series of justifications from 'enthusiastically cooperative' authors. (xxiii)

Twenty-four articles in favour of Dutch practice, in six sections, first discuss the historical or socio-political background, regulatory or legal requirements. Later, more clinically-oriented papers on quality assurance, learning and development of practice, give way to discussion of unbearable suffering and a final round-up. Overall, with a few more heavily weighted to moral matters, they detail a wide aspect of the development and practice of assisted suicide and euthanasia in Holland to date.

The editors' express the hope that this collection can be an important contribution to what is mostly (in my view) a polarising, low-level public debate, more often run on high emotion than facts, or deep questions about, say, the importance of life. Whatever position one takes on this vexed subject of euthanasia and assisted suicide, rendered as 'EAS' in this volume, at least it confirms the subject is a far more complex matter than is reflected in that public debate. Thus the editors' aspiration may be frustrated by a limited community of readers, and there is this rider: the collection has not 'seen