

Introduction: Davidson and His Interlocutors

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This special issue of *Critical Inquiry* is dedicated to Arnold I. Davidson, the journal's executive editor from 1989 to 2012 and currently its European editor. In these capacities he played a crucial role in setting the journal's intellectual agenda for more than two decades. Davidson is *sui generis*, and it seems folly to try to sum him up in a few paragraphs. Still, readers may reasonably expect some explanation for what might otherwise seem a heterogeneous collection of essays.

After an early career as a prestidigitator, Davidson's formal training was in moral philosophy and religion. He wrote his dissertation with Stanley Cavell and John Rawls in 1982 on Kant, Heidegger, and Rawls himself—by no means an obvious combination of names. But it was his encounter with Michel Foucault, both in person and on the page, that proved decisive. Davidson discerned connections between Foucault's genealogy of concepts and the mode of conceptual analysis associated with the later Wittgenstein. These connections had far-reaching implications for epistemology, ethics, even ontology. To pursue them, however, would necessarily be a historiographic enterprise in its own right and would require a rigorous commitment to elucidating ordinary language. The very originality of this insight meant that Davidson's scholarship would have no obvious home in the disciplinary structure of the modern research university—yet its concomitant importance meant that it would be universally relevant and welcome everywhere. Davidson has, accordingly, roamed between departments of philosophy, history of science, comparative literature, divinity, Jewish studies, and

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the arts—and between America and Europe, Chicago and Florence, the seminar room and the concert hall, equally at home in each but beholden to none. He has tended to work from cases, preferring what Carlo Ginzburg calls “microhistories” to synoptic syntheses—although the cases in question could be anything from a passage in Foucault to an incident in nineteenth-century psychology or a solo by Sonny Rollins.¹ Like a modern-day Philo of Alexandria (who reconciled Plato and Moses in the first century CE) his originality has often taken the paradoxical form of the commentary: a dialogue, either actual or virtual, with an exemplar (a book-length conversation with Pierre Hadot, *La Philosophie comme manière de vivre*, exemplifies the former; introductions to work by Foucault, Vladimir Jankélévitch, Robert Musil, Emmanuel Levinas, and others exemplify the latter).² The result is not exegesis so much as a novel method for the analysis of concepts: Davidson “refracts” them through historical time on the one hand and an exemplary interlocutor on the other to discover their unseen spectra, as though it were imperative to route one’s own discourse through both the Other and the historical past.

Within these broad outlines, Davidson’s scholarship divides into two phases, although the break is by no means absolute. In the first, it would

1. See Carlo Ginzburg, “Microhistory: Two or Three Things That I Know about It,” trans. John and Anne C. Tedeschi, *Critical Inquiry* 20 (Autumn 1993): 10–35.

2. See Pierre Hadot, *The Present Alone Is Our Happiness: Conversations with Jeannie Carlier and Arnold I. Davidson*, trans. Marc Djaballah (Stanford, Calif., 2009). See also *Foucault and His Interlocutors*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson (Chicago, 1997).

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have been easy to see him as a philosophically inclined member of the “Stanford School” of the history of science. The preponderance of his work in these years concerned the historical conditions of possibility for a statement to be susceptible of evaluation in terms of truth and falsehood: a history, in short, of the criteria of veridiction. The statements that most interested Davidson did not concern the external world so much as they did other minds and introspection; where a colleague such as Peter Galison worked on physics, Davidson turned his attention to psychoanalysis and sexuality, horror and wonder. This phase culminated in *The Emergence of Sexuality: Historical Epistemology and the Formation of Concepts* (2001).³ In addition to clarifying the historical ontology of sexuality as a psychological and even existential category, this collection of essays included important, programmatic statements on the nature of historical evidence, the concept of a style of reasoning, and Foucault’s relationship to analytic philosophy. In their very different ways, the contributions in this issue by Mario Biagioli, Lorraine Daston, Galison, Ginzburg, and David Halperin all register (and respond to) this decisive contribution.

Davidson’s second phase coincides with his stint as the series editor for the English-language publication of Foucault’s Collège de France courses, the first of which appeared in 2003 and the last of which is in press as of this writing. Foucault’s “turn” to ethics in his last years proceeded directly from his earlier work on madness and the history of sexuality, and Davidson was among the first to see the challenge that “the final Foucault” presented to the very architecture of the modern disciplines. As early as 1990 he was introducing readers of this journal to the work of Hadot, whose excavation of the ancient conception of philosophy as a way of life—a set of everyday practices intended more to form than to inform—had been crucial to Foucault’s account of “the care of the self.”⁴ In the new millennium, the history of sexuality has become less prominent in Davidson’s published scholarship, although his course on the topic remains one of the most popular in the Humanities Division at the University of Chicago. Instead, moral phenomenology and techniques of (immanent) self-transcendence have come to the fore—the ethical equivalents, in effect, of those scientific practices that the Stanford historians studied. The question of musical improvisation—an apparently regulated suspension of regulation—proved particularly fertile and led Davidson into his engage-

3. Davidson, *The Emergence of Sexuality: Historical Epistemology and the Formation of Concepts* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001).

4. See Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, vol. 3 of *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, 1986). See also Davidson, “Spiritual Exercises and Ancient Philosophy: An Introduction to Pierre Hadot,” *Critical Inquiry* 16 (Spring 1990): 475–82.

ment with Jankélévitch's "drastic" philosophy of music as well as to his collaboration with George Lewis and his deep engagement with the training regimens of jazz musicians, discussed here by Jocelyn Benoist.⁵ His interest in the Talmudist Joseph Soloveitchik's practice of reading, described here by David Shatz, might be seen in a similar light. Equally important is the role of volition and deliberation in morality, with particular reference to Primo Levi, a concern much in keeping with recent work by Cora Diamond, Piergiorgio Donatelli, Sandra Laugier, and others. It is here that our readers might see the other face of Davidson's career: one that represents the Anglo-American dispensation in philosophy to the European academies.

Only a few of the essays in this volume are directly about Davidson, but all bear his stamp—and, in so doing, exemplify friendship itself as a way of life. Yet his project is ongoing, and any conclusion would therefore be precipitous. We close instead with some passages that might function as landmarks by which to navigate the essays that follow.

That man will be revolutionary who can revolutionize himself.

—Ludwig Wittgenstein

I do not picture my everyday knowledge of others as confined but as exposed. It is exposed, I would like to say, not to possibilities but to actualities, to history. There is no possibility of human relationship that has not been enacted. The worst has befallen, befalls everyday. It has merely, so far as I know, not befallen me. Tragedy figures my exposure to history as my exposure to fortune or fate; comedy as my exposure to accident or luck. Each will have its way of figuring this as my exposure to nature; meaning, in the end, human nature. As if the subjection to history *is* human nature.

—Stanley Cavell

In philosophizing, I have to bring my own language and life into imagination. What I require is a convening of my culture's criteria, in order to confront them with my words and life as I pursue them and as I may imagine them; and at the same time to confront my words and life as I pursue them with the life my culture's words may imagine for me: to confront the culture with itself, along the lines in which it meets in me. This seems to me a task that warrants the name of philosophy. It is also the description of something we might call education. In the face of the questions posed in Augustine, Luther, Rousseau, Thoreau . . . , we are children; we do not know how to go on with them, what ground we may occupy. In this light, philosophy becomes the education of grownups. . . . The anxiety in teaching, in serious communication, is that I myself require education. And for grownups this is not natural growth, but *change*.

—Stanley Cavell

5. See Carolyn Abbate, "Music—Drastic or Gnostic?" *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Spring 2004): 505–36.

I shall . . . characterize the philosophical ethos appropriate to the critical ontology of ourselves as a historico-practical test of the limits that we may go beyond, and thus as work carried out by ourselves upon ourselves as free beings.

—Michel Foucault

What I am trying to do is to understand the implicit systems that determine, without our ever being aware of it, our most familiar conduct. . . . We have to unmask our rituals and make them appear as what they are: purely arbitrary things linked to our bourgeois mode of life. It is good—and this is the true theater—to transcend them in the mode of a game, in a playful and ironic mode; it is good to be dirty and bearded, to have long hair, to look like a girl when one is a boy (and vice-versa). One should put “into play,” exhibit, transform and overturn the systems that peacefully order us.

—Michel Foucault

If most people think of philosophy as a luxury, that’s because it seems infinitely remote from the substance of their lives: their cares, their sufferings, their anxieties, the view of the death that awaits them and the ones they love. . . . In the end, what is most useful to people *as people*? Is it to talk about language, or about being and non-being? Isn’t it to learn how to live a human life?

—Pierre Hadot

In view of this rigorous research, the words that serve as the vehicles of thought should be employed in every position possible, in the most varied locutions; you must turn them over and over, again and again, on every side, in the hope of a glint flashing forth; you must tap them and listen to their sonorities in order to perceive the secret of their sense. . . . I impose this uninterrupted discourse upon myself, this “*streng Wissenschaft*” or rigorous science, which is not the science of scholars but more of an ascetics. I feel less uneasy, at least for the time being, when, having spent a long time turning words this way and that, delving into them, kneading them, exploring their semantic resonances, analyzing their allusive abilities, their powers of evocation, I verify that, decidedly, I can’t go any further. Certainly, the pretension to one day attain the truth is a dogmatic utopia: what matters is to go as far as you can.

—Vladimir Jankélévitch

The thing about me is that I was always practicing my instrument. I knew that’s what I had to do to improve. Here’s an incident I remember: I was playing in Munich and we had a nice concert that night, which is not always the case. During the concert, I’d been trying to work on some musical passages, and after it was over, when everybody was leaving, I was in my dressing room trying to work out this little passage. Everyone was leaving and I’m [in] this little room playing. See? I knew what I had to do to get better. . . . I never got to the musical place I wanted to get to. . . . But am I going to get mad at the heavens now because I couldn’t ultimately play the way I wanted to play? Of course not. I tried. . . . I have to do my part in every aspect of my life. If I’m trying to be a good person, I’ve got to do the work to be that. I don’t think any honest person is egotistical enough to feel that they’ve got every aspect of their life under control. But everyone has the capacity to work on those things, whether it’s getting mad too fast or getting better at your horn.

—Sonny Rollins