

An interview with Donald Davidson

Donald Davidson is an analytic philosopher in the tradition of Wittgenstein and Quine, and his formulations of action, truth and communicative interaction have generated considerable debate in philosophical circles around the world. The following "interview" actually took place over two continents and several years. It's merely a part of what must now be literally hundreds of hours of taped conversations between Professor Davidson and myself. I hope that what follows will give you a flavor of Donald Davidson, the person, as well as the philosopher. I begin with some of the first tapes he and I made, beginning in Venice, spring of 1988, continuing in San Marino, in spring of 1990, and in St Louis, in winter of 1991, concerning his induction into academia. With some insight into how Professor Davidson came to the profession, a reader might look anew at some of his philosophical writings; as well as get a sense of how the careerism unfortunately so integral to academic life today was so alien to the generation of philosophers Davidson is a member of. The very last part of this interview is from more recent tapes and represents Professor Davidson's effort to try to make his philosophical ideas available to a more general audience.

Lepore: Tell me a bit about the early days.

Davidson: I was born in Springfield, Massachusetts, on March 6, 1917 to Clarence ("Davie") Herbert Davidson and Grace Cordelia Anthony. My mother's father's name was "Anthony" but her mother had married twice and by coincidence both her husbands were named "Anthony". My mother had a half-brother who was directly descended from Susan B Anthony, but I am not because I'm from the other "Anthony". I used to think I was related, because I knew my mother was named "Anthony" and I knew Susan B. Anthony was in the picture, but it's false. My mother's family lived in Gloversville, NY, and at that time it was a great place for manufacturing gloves. My mother's father had a foundry in which he manufactured the stamps with which they stamped out the parts of gloves. They were moderately prosperous. They had five or six children, and they had a great big summer place on a lake. My father was born and grew up in Jersey City, New Jersey. He came from poor parents. His father was American born, but his father, my great grandfather, came from Scotland with his family; and very shortly after he got to this country, he abandoned his family and disappeared into the west and was never heard from again. My grandfather worked much of his life as a Pullman car conductor. The Pullman car yards were then in the Bronx. So he then lived quite near the yards. He'd be gone a lot of the time, because Pullman cars didn't belong to any railroad; they'd be leased, and they could be attached to any old train. I think he rather enjoyed that work. He was a very impressive looking man, a great big man with a handlebar mustache.

My father went to Cornell University and he worked his way through college. We lived in the Philippines from shortly after I was born until I was about four years old. We lived about one year in Amherst (where my father taught elementary mathematics at the college), Swarthmore, and in Collingswood, which like Swarthmore, was another suburb of Philadelphia. It wasn't until I was nine or ten that we moved to Staten Island and stayed put. I hadn't had any formal school training until then because my family moved all the time. My parents sent me to a public school, which I walked to for about three miles. But being a public school, they insisted that I start in the first grade. So, I was among kids that were three or four years younger than I was. I was much older than anyone else in the class. It was ridiculous. And furthermore, though I had no formal schooling, I was still way ahead of even my own age group. They had me doing penmanship. But I was at that school for only part of the year, and then a woman we always called "Old Mrs. Wilcox" whom my family knew and who had helped found the first and only progressive education school in Staten Island, the Staten Island Academy, and just gave me a scholarship and supported me through the whole time I was there. There I started in the fourth grade, which was more or less my age group.

Lepore: When did you begin to think about philosophy?

Davidson: I was interested in philosophy from very young and thought about it when I was in high school. I was reading stuff of all different qualities. I read a lot of Nietzsche. I read Plato's Parmenides. I tried to read Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. All this was while I was in high school. Let me tell you why I tried to read the Parmenides. My high school [in Staten Island] had this set of the Jowett translations of Plato. I glanced at them and the Parmenides had all these one-line remarks; one guy would speak one line and another guy would speak another line, and I thought this would read like a play -- that it would be very easy. In fact, it's all this mishmash about the one

and the many; It's a hard book, whereas if someone had counseled me I would have started with Plato's *Apology* or something like that. I didn't know anything; instead I thought -- I'll just put my mind to this and get through it.

Lepore: All your education was at Harvard? How is it that you went to there?

Davidson: Hume Dow, my oldest friend, was the son of the Australian consul in NYC. We were great pals throughout high school. He introduced me to many things. He was a year older than I, and when he graduated he went off to Harvard University. That was part of the reason I went to Harvard. I had applied to colleges: Harvard University, Yale University, Dartmouth College and Swarthmore College. Being the kind of person I was at that point I took a week off from high school and went and visited all these schools. In each case I wrote to the Dean of Admissions and I said I'm looking your school over. Would you mind arranging for me to go to some classes and if possible I'd like to be put up in a dormitory to see what life is like on campus. No one had ever done this before and they all responded positively. It was a scream. They didn't quite know how to react. They all arranged for me to go to classes; in the end, all the universities offered me scholarships, but Swarthmore offered me the best in the sense that it was a four-year scholarship. I was very tempted. But then the Harvard Club of New York City, a bunch of rich stockbrokers, interviewed me for a scholarship they offered each year. They interviewed fifty students. I was the very last person they interviewed. They talked to me; and at the end of the interview, they simply looked at each other, nodded, and said to me -- you got it. It was the largest financial freshman scholarship available. It paid much more than tuition; it actually supported me while I was a student. Actually their parting words were -- you better pass the college boards. In other words, Harvard hadn't admitted me yet. This club had just gone ahead and gave me the scholarship. I got in. So, since I liked Harvard the best, and since this old pal of mine was there, I chose Harvard.

Lepore: You started Harvard in fall, 1935. Tell me about those early days at Harvard.

Davidson: From my point of view, Harvard was simply marvelous. When I was an undergraduate, I got really on very friendly terms with a lot of top-notch professors; the philosopher A.N. Whitehead took me under his wing; he would invite me to his apartment for afternoon tea all the time. I knew most of the people in the philosophy department, C.I. Lewis, Whitehead, later on Quine, Demos. I knew all the people in the classics department; I knew the chairman of the English department. I don't, for the most part, spend nearly as much time with my students as my teachers spent with me. It's just not in general done these days. I think it's partly because we all do so much traveling; and also so much time is taken up with correspondence. But back then these people actually invited me into their homes, regularly.

Lepore: But did you start off straight away in philosophy?

Davidson: Well, look I was in fact an English major to begin with. I studied Shakespeare, 17th and 18th century poetry; the English novel. The Bible and Shakespeare was a very important course for me. I took courses with Harry Levin. That's how I got started on James Joyce. Levin wrote the first critical book on Joyce. Levin was beginning the comparative literature department at Harvard - the first one in the United States. He and Theodore Spencer, a great Shakespeare scholar, went into the history of ideas, tracing an idea from Homer through the Middle Ages and then on into the Renaissance. This program combined philosophy with literature and classics. These people in the history of ideas had a great influence on me. So did Whitehead, in fact, and it all fit together, because Whitehead by then was writing things like *Adventures of Ideas*. So, he too was very much into the history of ideas, which of course fit in very well with the kinds of things that Spencer was telling me about, for example, how the Homeric stories, especially the *Odyssey*, were being treated in the early Middle Ages, and later on in the Renaissance -- how they became symbols for all sorts of things. He put me on to books like Arthur Lovejoy's *The Great Chain of Being*, which I just ate up. Boy, it turned me on. I had a very very strong historical approach to ideas.

Then when I returned after my second year in college to begin my third year, there were these very tough exams I had to take and pass in order to remain at Harvard. The examiners would give you one or two lines, for example, from Shakespeare and question you where did this line come from, who said it, what its role is in the play, etc. You had to know Shakespeare by heart. The same was true with the Bible. Everyone majoring in English had to do this. And then you had to choose an ancient and modern author. I chose Aeschylus and Goethe. And thus I did everything required to get a degree in English.

Lepore: Is this when you shifted into classics?

Davidson: Exactly. It's a characteristic of mine that anything I work on for very long I get interested in. It's a lucky characteristic to have. I got into classics just by sheer accident. When I went to Harvard, you had to have Latin or Greek if you were going to get a B.A. (Bachelor of Arts degree); otherwise, you received a B.S. (Bachelor of Science degree). That was the only difference; no difference in the courses you took otherwise. If Harvard had offered Latin I would have taken it. But Harvard assumed that you already knew Latin; I didn't. But they did offer beginning Greek. Now for no important reason whatsoever I wanted a B.A. and not a B.S. And so I took basic Greek. It was very well taught by teachers who were excellent, and so I continued with it. Already at Harvard in the first course you read Xenophon's *Anabasis*, which is very interesting. The second course you begin Homer. I loved it. You would do the *Iliad* in the first half of the year and the *Odyssey* in the second half of the year. Then I went on. I took a course on the dramatists. And then I did a wonderful course in Thucydides that was given by John Findlay. He was a brilliant teacher, absolutely marvelous. He just produced one beautiful sentence and paragraph after the other. He had a rhetorical flair. There weren't very many people majoring in classics. Harvard had this terrific classics department without any students to teach. So I got a lot of attention. After I shifted into classics and philosophy, I also had to take exams in philosophy and classics. Again, my idea was that if I had to take an exam on something, I wouldn't take the course. So, in fact, in undergraduate school, for example, I never took a course in logic; I just worked on it on my own.

Lepore: It seems you had a very broad education at Harvard.

Davidson: In fact I was spreading myself out through all this stuff. I also audited all the courses that there were on Greek art and architecture; and also on Romanesque architecture, and so in Greek I had a kind of advantage over others who were just classicists because I knew Greek philosophy, history, Greek art, and Greek architecture. I read all of Greek drama. I remember my senior year I persuaded Harvard to let me put on Aristophanes's *The Birds* in Greek. I played the lead, *Peisthetairos*, which meant memorizing seven hundred lines of Greek. Leonard Bernstein, who was also a senior in the class of 1938-39 and a friend (we used to play four hand piano together), wrote an original score for the production and conducted it. Some of the music he wrote for that score, resurfaced in his ballet, *Fancy Free*. I also had a great interest in music. I audited advanced seminars on Beethoven. Yes, it was a wonderful education, absolutely marvelous.

Lepore: So were you a brilliant student?

Davidson: Not at all. I was good enough that I always had a scholarship, and one year I had three A's and a B+. If I had three and one-half A's and a B+ I would have been on a special list and gotten a free book or something like that. That didn't bother me, but I did miss out on several things. For example, the philosophy department had in mind to graduate me with a *summa cum laude*. And so they interviewed me but something didn't go quite right and all I received was a *magna cum laude*. But my biggest failure came when I was as a graduate student several years later. Harvard considered me for a Junior Fellowship. I was living with two guys who were Junior Fellows; Quine was also one of the Fellows. Whitehead was a Senior Fellow. I came as close as you can come without getting it. The way I know this is that these guys, who were my friends, they would go to the meetings and the folders of the candidates were there and each week this pile would get smaller and smaller and they would tell me that I was still in the pile. In fact, I was the last one to be subtracted.

Lepore: But I'm not sure if I understand the importance of this to you.

Davidson: Well, you have to understand that practically every successful philosopher you have ever heard of who was at Harvard was a junior Fellow. For example, Bert Dreben was a Fellow; Saul Kripke was a Fellow; Stanley Cavell was a Fellow. The fellows were a richly endowed organization within the umbrella of Harvard. They had their own rooms in Elliot House, with its own dining rooms. To be a Junior Fellow meant to be fully supported for three years. The idea was that it would be given to people who did not yet have a degree and one of the conditions was that they would not study for a degree; it was so prestigious to be a Junior Fellow that you didn't need a degree and a lot of those guys don't have degrees. Kripke and Dreben don't have advanced degrees and that's why. This rule

was never absolutely rigid. For example, Quine got his degree so fast that he had his degree before he was a Junior Fellow. In fact, he was in the first batch of Junior Fellows along with B.F. Skinner. To be frank, I think in retrospect that they were right not to appoint me; at that point I didn't have the degree of achievement in any area that most of those guys had. They were brilliant people.

Lepore: What do you mean when you say "brilliant"? Was it obvious that Quine was brilliant at that early age?

Davidson: You aren't kidding! Look he had essentially no training in philosophy when he arrived at Harvard for graduate studies from Oberlin College. He had his PhD within two years. There was nobody at Harvard who knew any serious logic; he went there because Whitehead was there; all Quine knew was Principia Mathematica. Whitehead had no interest in that sort of stuff by the time Quine arrived; nor did Russell by that time for that matter. Look, Quine was obviously brilliant. In the third year of the Junior Fellowship, each Fellow was encouraged to go to Europe. Quine did and that's when he met Carnap, which he says in his autobiography is the first philosopher to really impress him.

Lepore: Surely C.I. Lewis must have impressed Quine?

Davidson: I do think that C.I. Lewis had a tremendous influence on Quine, but Quine doesn't realize it. The explanation for that is that Quine had no training in philosophy and so he when he took Lewis's course in epistemology, he took for granted this is what everybody knows about epistemology. Quine didn't realize that Lewis was any different from everyone else; pretty soon he worked out that there were something he didn't agree with Lewis about, like the analytic/synthetic distinction. I don't think Quine would put it this way. As I said, I don't think he realized any of this, but you can find most of Quine's epistemology in C.I. Lewis minus the analytic/synthetic distinction. Epistemology naturalized is very close to the heart of C.I. Lewis. I don't think that Quine knows the extent to which there really is a sequence that starts with Kant and goes through C.I. Lewis and ends with Quine.

Lepore: Let's see what happened after you graduated from Harvard in spring, 1939? At some point you returned. How did that happen?

Davidson: After graduating, I had no plans for the future. I had a girlfriend with a car, so we set out for Hollywood where her father was the agent of a number of celebrities. I wrote some radio scripts for Big Town, a once-a-week private eye program starring Edward G. Robinson. We spent most of the summer of 1939 having fun, swimming, and riding horses. During the summer I got a call from Harvard asking me if I would accept a scholarship in philosophy with an emphasis in classics. A man named Teschemacher had just left a generous sum to establish such a fellowship available to philosophy graduate students at Harvard. No one else was interested in classical philosophy. I accepted. I don't know what I would have done otherwise.

Lepore: So now you are back at Harvard? What happens next?

Davidson: Now I had to get serious about philosophy. I had to take preliminary exams at the end of my second year. I took my first course in logic with Quine [fall, 1939], an advanced course which covered what was to become his *Mathematical Logic*. I don't think I was ever really any good at logic, at least not as good as many others were. Still, over the years I would rediscover how much I enjoyed solving simple mathematical and logical problems, though I always knew my gifts in this direction were slight.

Lepore: Who were your peers at Harvard while you were in graduate school?

Davidson: The two Rodericks, Chisholm and Firth, were there and they were already as graduate students deeply into the problems of epistemology and could argue knowledgeably about sense data. Henry Aiken was clearly being groomed to occupy a senior position in the faculty, something he had already done by the time I returned to Harvard after the war as a continuing graduate student. Arthur Smullyan was challenging Quine on quantified modal logic and chatting with Bertrand Russell about the nature of propositions when Russell visited Harvard. There was a great year in the early 1940's when Russell came, and gave a seminar, to which Quine, Carnap and Tarski all came.

Lepore: In addition to the course on mathematical logic, did you take any other courses with Quine as a young graduate student?

Davidson: Yes, indeed, and this second one changed my attitude to philosophy. Until then I had thought of philosophy as not as serious as science but more serious than art criticism. Quine's seminar on logical positivism, which I took as a first year graduate student, turned me around. In later years, I often heard graduate students at Harvard complain about Quine's teaching; they found it clear and carefully worked out but uninspired. Quine himself has written that he did not much enjoy teaching, especially when it came to topics outside of logic. But he certainly turned me on, and in the process he turned me around. Under Quine's tutelage I discovered the magical satisfactions of contriving elementary formal proofs. More important to me in the long run were Quine's scrupulous attention to the distinctions between use and mention, the conditional and entailment, substitutional and ontic quantification. These implied a seriousness about the relations between semantics and logic which I absorbed without realizing at the time how few philosophers shared such concerns. When Quine came back from Europe in 1933, he was fired up by his encounters with the Vienna Circle, Tarski and especially Carnap. On his return to Harvard Quine gave three lectures on Carnap which seemed openly to espouse all of Carnap's central doctrines; in any case there was no criticism. But by the time I was taking Quine's seminar on logical positivism years later as a graduate student he had worked out his objections to the analytic/synthetic distinction, and to the reduction of ordinary statements about the physical world to statements about sense data. This led to the rejection of Carnap's policy of tolerance with respect to general ontological issues. What mattered to me was not so much Quine's conclusions -- I assumed he was right -- as the realization that it was possible to be serious about getting things right in philosophy -- or at least not getting things wrong. By comparison with most of the ideas I had studied as part of the history of ideas the issues being debated by Quine and his opponents seemed to me clear enough to warrant interest in their truth values. The change in my attitude in philosophy began to seep into my thinking about ethics and the history of philosophy; I found in C.D. Broad's *Five Types of Ethical Theory* and Russell's book on Leibniz concerned with clarity and truth I was beginning to prize. I didn't know enough to be bothered by the historical inaccuracies; what I liked was the application of contemporary analytic methods and standards to material I had previously viewed as beyond or above being judged as true or false. C.I. Lewis' famous course on Kant had somewhat the same effect on me.

Lepore: You left Harvard at some point to go into the war. When and how did that happen?

Davidson: In fall of 1941, I was in my third year of graduate school, and it seemed pretty clear that we were going to get into the war. At first I was against the war. I had been brought up believing that the WW I was a capitalist plot to make money from munitions manufacturers, which may not be totally wrong.

Lepore: Really! Was your father a very political man?

Davidson: Yes, my father was political; in fact, both my parents were left wing, but not as left wing as I became. He thought, as many liberals did, that the WW I has been a very questionable enterprise all around. Maybe it doesn't look that way now, but it did to them. He was for a strong graduated income tax. He didn't think people ought to inherit money.

Lepore: Your politics doesn't come across in your writings. What sort of political leanings did you have in these early days?

Davidson: I was quite clearly what was called a "fellow traveler." My politics were like all my left wing friends. I never joined the communist party, but I followed the party line. Still, given a choice between becoming cannon fodder or making a pile of money, I chose the latter. And so I applied for admission to the Harvard Business School. They had an accelerated course for people to become junior executives who would run the factories. I thought that's for me. It was very hard then as now to get into Harvard Business School. I was both simultaneously being a graduate student in philosophy and attending the Harvard Business School. In fact, I was teaching sections in philosophy. I bought a bicycle so that I could get back between two sides of the river. I don't know if you know anything about what Harvard Business School was like? It's like going to law school. It's extremely intensive and very competitive. It's all based on the case system. At night you read a case and you come in the next day and they

call on people. You have to sit in a certain seat. The professor had a picture of you and he just looked down at his chart and picked you out. He would say -- "okay, you read the case. What was the decision and what would you do? Why would you do it?" It was an educational process. And these professors were very very skillful. It was terrific teaching. So I'm working my head off. I had a lot of energy. This was an accelerated program in two ways. It went straight through the summer and they left out the course in advertising. The idea was that once you completed this program you would know how to set up a factory. They would give you the blue prints for a piece of machinery and say okay show us how you would set up a production line to manufacture this. We were supposed to learn how to do this. We were going to be the bosses.

Lepore: I'm sure most philosophers don't know this about you. How did you like business school?

Davidson: I was a straight graduate student in philosophy for two years. The third year I was a graduate student in philosophy and at the same time, was at the business school. I was actually third in my class at Harvard Business School; but in fact I never finished. I was a full year at the Business School and in my second year, something like forty-five days from when I would have graduated, I was called up by the Navy; I could have just said I didn't want to go, but I had volunteered. When Germany invaded Russia we fellow travelers changed our minds about the nature of the war. Now there was a good and a bad side. This is before December, 1942. I wasn't drafted; my lottery number was so low I would never have been drafted; indeed, no one who got into the Business School could be drafted. I actually volunteered. I could have said that I want to finish business school first and they would have let me. But I said -- Look if I'm going to go to the war I don't give a damn about this business stuff. I've always been glad I went to business school because it gave me an insight into how a lot of people think that I would have never known otherwise. And I liked the feeling that I could have done it. But I wouldn't have liked the people. After the war they said come back for a month and you could get your degree. I didn't go back.

Lepore: So you were in the war a long time?

Davidson: Absolutely. I was in three and one half years. I went in November of 1942 and got out about the summer of 1945.

Lepore: What rank did you enter the navy as?

Davidson: I went in as an ensign. That's like a second lieutenant.

Lepore: That's because you were a college graduate?

Davidson: That's right. But I didn't have to go to boot camp because I was put into this accelerated program to become a teacher of recognition. In the summer of 1942, we had just invaded North Africa, and our ships had shot down forty planes or so, all of them our own. There were no enemy planes. So, they needed people who could tell the difference. So they thought they better train people who could teach gunners how to recognize enemy planes. They very quickly picked a group of maybe thirty-five people. And not having any other idea of knowing how to do it, they picked people who looked as if they were going to be teachers, that included me. They sent us all to Ohio State, where there was a psychologist who thought he knew how to teach people well, if that's the right word, so that they can see a number on a screen that's exposed for only 1/100th of a second. And at first you don't see anything practically and then after a while you see can see something and you can write down some numbers. Now what you can teach people is that if you can see the thing for 1/100th of a second you can write down thirteen numbers. He thought, well, in modern warfare, planes are coming at each other about 1000 miles an hour, you got to pick it up like that. So, the training consisted of showing us these black and white silhouettes for 1/100th of a second. I was the best person they ever had. I loved airplanes and ships and I was extremely good at it. It had nothing to do with the 1/100th of a second thing. When I came to train people I discovered that wasn't the way to do it at all; I mean with silhouettes. You never see planes in perfect silhouettes. They come at funny angles. What's a much better way of identifying them is by how they move. So I got all these shots that they took from planes when they were shooting down other planes because, during the war, there was always a camera aimed in the same direction as the guns of the fighter, that is straight ahead.

I was going to teach gunners how to distinguish allied planes from enemy planes. They gave us a little of the standard boot camp stuff on the side.

Lepore: Though it was a good cause, wasn't it a waste of time?

Davidson: Yeah. It was a terrible waste of time. But I did participate in the invasions of Sicily, Salerno, and Enzo. After we had driven the Germans out of North Africa, we had Malta, which was like an aircraft carrier for us. So, I was in on the three big amphibious invasions before the big one in the north. Salerno was September 6, 1943; and Enzo was January 22, 1944. Still, it was a terrible waste of time. Most of it was incredibly boring.

Lepore: Did you stay in the Mediterranean the whole time?

Davidson: After one year in the Mediterranean, I knew more about plane recognition than anyone else. So they said you can go where you like and I said how about Florida. So I was sent to the naval air station in Jacksonville, Florida, around the end of 1943. I was there for almost a year. Then I was sent to Miami for a year and that was pleasant. This was my third year in the navy. I was now teaching pilots how to recognize enemy planes. I was able to rent a huge wonderful house on the beach just north of Miami. I commuted from there to the naval station. When I got back from the Mediterranean I had quite a bit of money saved. Any car that was good at this time cost a fortune. So when I got back to the states I bought this Plymouth convertible on Fifth Avenue in NYC right off the floor. This was the first extravagant thing of that kind I ever done in my life. I drove it to Florida.

Lepore: I'd like to know your impressions of the war.

Davidson: I didn't like risking my life and what I was doing was very dangerous. More than half the ships in the flotilla were sunk with every one aboard. Destroyers are very very vulnerable. Their skins are so thin that a machine gun bullet will go through it. Inside they are full of mines and other sorts of explosive materials. Practically anything in them will blow up. All you had do is tap them and that's the end of it. I kept changing from one ship to another. They were always putting me on the lead ship. I was lucky. I hated the idea of being killed. I wasn't fighting so much; I so much disliked the concept. On these ships, almost everyone was confused and everything confusing. One thing that stands out in my mind very clearly -- I think the first time it ever happened we were sitting in this harbor in North Africa getting organized to invade northern Sicily. There were hundreds of ships in this harbor -- and the Germans came over at night to bomb us -- all these search lines -- but the main thing you would see is all this incredible anti-aircraft stuff going on -- of all sizes: 20 mm, 40 mm, five inch guns. The sky was full of tremendous fire works. I love fire works.

Lepore: But it's difficult for me, given what I know about your personality, to imagine you being bossed around, but being in the military means being bossed around.

Davidson: There isn't all that much bossing. There is plenty that you have to do. Fortunately I was spared a lot of that by my peculiar situation. A ship had so many officers who do one thing. But I didn't occupy any known role, so to speak. I was just an attached officer who theoretically could tell the difference between a friendly plane and an enemy plane. The captains didn't know what to do with me. Since they had no theory about what I should do, I spent some of time in the messroom, trying to teach pilots to distinguish friendly from enemy planes. So I didn't suffer in the same way that others might have. I tried to explain to the captains of the ships I was on what I thought I could do. After they tried me out they were pretty impressed that I could do this.

Lepore: Okay, so the war is over. You are out of the navy. It's 1946. What do you do now?

Davidson: By then I was married. I had met my wife, Virginia Bolton, at my sister's wedding in 1941. She was the sister of the man my sister married. At that time, Virginia was married to someone else, to a German, who had come to this country to escape the war. I got married just as I graduated from the training school at Ohio State, at the beginning of my navy career, on New Year's Eve, 1942. My wife, Virginia, moved back to New York City while I was at sea. She was with me in Jacksonville and Miami. After I left the military, in December 1945 I was released from the Navy, though theoretically still in the Navy, Virginia and I just fooled around in Mexico for months while I just thought about what I wanted to do. I did a lot of drawing and painting, and a lot of writing. One of the few

dreams I never had was that I could become a painter, but I had certainly thought that I might be a writer. I had this experience writing radio scripts right after undergraduate school at Harvard and I knew a lot about literature. But after writing a few chapters of a prospective novel, I concluded that I was never going to be a great writer. I now think in a way I was very naive. I think I thought you try as hard as you can, and either it's okay or it's not. I didn't appreciate then the importance of persistence, something I have come to appreciate in philosophy.

Lepore: Was it at this point that you decided to go back to philosophy?

Davidson: Yes. I hadn't done anything for three and one-half years with philosophy. Being in the service was just like being marooned. When I went back to Harvard after the war in March 1946 all I had to do was write my dissertation; I finished all the course work and prelims before I went into the service. But I wondered what is it that I could possibly write on. C.I. Lewis said to me, "Look you lost three years. You got to get going." He was more worried about it than I was. So, I thought, ok, I don't see how I'm going to do it. So, I just rushed through. I wrote on the Plato's Philebus. It's an interesting dialogue. I've written about it recently in my paper "Plato's Philosopher."

Lepore: What's special about this dialogue?

Davidson: Socrates drops out of the platonic dialogues pretty early. The Philebus is the only one in which he becomes the major figure again. This is twenty years after having dropped out. Secondly, it's the only late dialogue in which Plato uses the elenctic method of question/teaching that he uses in the early dialogues and it's about ethics, which is the subject of all the early dialogues.

Lepore: You recently published your dissertation, didn't you?

Davidson: Yes Garland Press has recently published many Harvard dissertations in philosophy. However, they charge outrageous prices for it. Plus what I wrote in my dissertation is quite dull. I rushed it. However, I made \$600 on royalties from it after the first year. So, someone is buying it.

Lepore: Back to Harvard.

Davidson: The first draft of my dissertation wasn't accepted. At that point, summer, 1946, I was assisting Quine in his logic course. I had first met and started studying with Quine before the war during my first year of graduate school. I took his math logic course. That was my first logic course. As soon as I started studying with him, we became friends. In fact, at the end of my first year as a graduate student, summer of 1940, Quine and I spent the summer in Mexico.

Lepore: I can't imagine Quine being enthusiastic about your writing a dissertation on the Philebus?

Davidson: Well, the way to put it is that we remained friends through all of it. He was a little mystified by my writing on this. He never talked to me about it.

Lepore: So there you are back at Harvard.

Davidson: My second time around as a graduate student I simply wasn't earning any money. My wife Virginia was supporting us. She was making magazine layouts for some magazine in Boston. She worked the whole time I was in the Navy. Anyway I thought I had to start earning some money and get a job. When I was an undergraduate, I studied with Raffaello Demos -- the person who taught Greek philosophy at Harvard. The teaching assistant for my section was John Goheen. This was my freshman year. Goheen is my oldest friend in philosophy. By the time I completed by first draft of my dissertation Goheen was teaching at Queens College in New York City. Goheen offered me a job at Queen's College. Although my dissertation had not been accepted yet, I was offered several jobs. But I liked Goheen and I liked the idea of being in New York City. So, I took the job at Queens in September, 1946. I was only an instructor, not even an assistant professor.

Lepore: What was it like teaching at Queens?

Davidson: Queens' was a superior campus. It was in what was then the Catholic area of Queens. At the time Goheen came there from Harvard, his first job too, he was asked to form the philosophy department. So there I was teaching at Queens fifteen hours a week, plus extra time with students who wanted to be tutored. The first year I was living in Flushing (Queens). But we wanted to be in Manhattan. Since I was a veteran, I was at the top of the list to get into Peter Styvasant Town, just north of Greenwich Village, as they were building it. They were Federal apartments and we were able to pick out the apartment we wanted. We chose the top floor and we stayed there a couple of years. Then I had a year off 1948/49 because the Ford Foundation used to give a boost to people in the services that they thought were worthy in one way or another. Quine got one of these special year-off fellowships as well. I spent that year in California, partly because Goheen was already out there staying with relatives in southern California in Riverside, and we had this great plan of writing a history of philosophy. It never got anywhere. Actually what I did with that year was write my dissertation. I was just over thirty. That was a nice year. That's the year I learned how to fly. There was an airport near where we were living in Pamona. I first taught myself how to fly when I was quite young in my cellar. I built a little machine. It was a box that you put your knees in with foot peddles and a throttle. The throttle controlled the speed of a fan which was sitting in front of me flowing in my face. There was also a joy stick which controlled the position of a model airplane facing away from me. The wind is going by it and it had these control surfaces that I could work with the throttle.

Lepore: How did you know about flying?

Davidson: I had been fascinated by this since I was a little kid. I would put myself to sleep at night by putting myself through maneuvers. The first time I got in a plane I could fly. While I was in navy teaching all these guys at Jacksonville and Miami, I would talk these guys into taking me up. So we get in these little planes and they would leave me up in the cockpit flying. In Jacksonville I was flying these PBY2s, which is called the Catalina, a two engine plane. But earlier than that I flew a PBY4, which is the Mariner, which is a much bigger plane. But when I got to Miami they were flying fighters -- much more high powered planes. I use to get them to take me up in these and I would try all these various maneuvers. So there I was in California. I was being paid by the GI bill to attend graduate school and I had only used up a little of it during the three months I was at Harvard. So I had money left and I used it to train to fly. I wasn't teaching in California. After I got my solo license I could go anywhere I wanted and I flew all over the southwest. I flew to San Francisco; I flew to Death Valley; I had some wonderful adventures. I loved it. Flying then was much more fun than it is now.

Lepore: Did you return to Queens at the end of that year?

Davidson: I finished my dissertation fairly early in 1949. I went back to Queens in fall 1949 and everything had changed. The old president had retired and been replaced by this awful man Theobald, who was their in-house Catholic and he wanted to get rid of the whole philosophy department and hire a bunch of Catholics, which he eventually did. So, I had some interesting scraps where the president called me on the carpet and I fought with him and told him off. In the summer of 1950, Virginia and I went to Europe. We rented a house in the south of France. And the Quines visited us there. And he had the manuscript of "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" with him, which I read and commented on. I returned to Queens that fall, and then in the middle of the year, January, 1951, Goheen, who had left Queens to go to Stanford to become chairman, offered me a job at Stanford.

Lepore: Who was at Stanford at that time?

Davidson: Pat Suppes had arrived at Stanford in September, 1950. I went in January, 1951. The philosophy department consisted of Goheen, Suppes, myself, and several other people. There was a man named Mothershed, who was married to a very wealthy woman. There was a quite interesting man named John Reed. Reed taught ethics. He was married to a woman who was a psychologist and ran a clinic at Berkeley. After the first year I was there he decided, while he was teaching full time, he would go to medical school; he completed the first year of the medical school and then was hired by Johns Hopkins University to teach in their psychiatry department. He was a very very smart guy. It was not a absurd thing for Hopkins to do. So he left. Reed was in his 50's when he left.

Lepore: Your move to Stanford, career-wise, was a lateral move. Stanford did not have any philosophical reputation

at this point?

Davidson: It was coming up very fast but I didn't think about things that way. I didn't worry about tenure; I didn't worry about up and down but I did think very much of geography. I loved moving out there.

Lepore: Did you have a nice place to live in?

Davidson: Oh boy. We felt as if we were rich. Virginia was by then a professional potter and she made some money, not much. She never in fact made a lot of money. However we rented a huge house in Mountain View. It was enormous, and we had the idea that we were going to buy some property and build a house. So, we lived in the rented house for year. I was an assistant professor and I didn't have tenure or anything else. We bought seven acres of land for seven thousand dollars in the hills, in what became part of Woodside. During Christmas vacation I designed a house. Virginia was a draughtsman; she made the blue prints and we hired guys to pour the concrete. We were able to move into the house. We completed the garage first. It had a lot of windows in it and we lived in that while we completed the rest of the house. But it didn't take us long. The land and the house cost us something like eighteen thousand dollars. I was making very little money, less than six thousand dollars a year. But money went a long way. We were very lucky to fall into that piece of land. A superb piece of land way out in the middle of nowhere but very close to a country road which was kept up and there were power lines off to one side. So no problem about getting electricity; the people that sold us the land installed a water system. We had a little water company among seven of us. We bought our water wholesale from the California Water Company and pumped it up the hill in a pipe we had installed. It was cheaper than being in the city. So it was a very good deal. That house is now worth [1988] more than two million dollars.

Lepore: Okay. It's 1952. You are in your mid-30's and you still don't have a philosophical project. I recall from earlier conversations that Suppes and McKinsey had you doing various decision theory problems. But that's hardly a project.

Davidson: That's right. It was very sweet of them to teach me decision theory and measurement theory. After I learned a bit, they said let's write this article together "Formal Theory of Value," which appeared in *Philosophy of Science*. Then I made this little discovery -- the Ramsey result I describe in "Belief and the Basis of Meaning" and elsewhere. I should say I rediscovered this result of Ramsey's. Suppes realized immediately better than I did what it's potential was. So we published that and then we did this experimental work together. That all told took a couple of years.

Lepore: Suppes is about the same age as you?

Davidson: He's actually younger. But he thought of me as someone he was teaching. But in fact McKinsey was the guy who was teaching both of us. He was one of the inventors of quantified modal logic, though he didn't publish much of his stuff. We hired him because he was with the RAND corporation in Santa Monica, and there was all this stuff about his being a bad security risk because he was a homosexual. So they took away his security clearance and Stanford hired him. Then McKinsey committed suicide. By then he had already been invited to write this article for the Schilpp Library of Living Philosophers volume on Carnap. He was a natural to choose to write something on *Meaning and Necessity*, since he knew all about quantified modal logic, and he was to write about the method of intension and extension. He said to me "Look, I know the logic but you know the philosophy. Why don't we write it together?" I said okay and then he died.

Lepore: "Carnap on Extension and Intension" was your first serious philosophical publication. I always assumed that Quine arranged that?

Davidson: No, he had nothing to do with that. At that point in my career, Quine knew who I was, but we were not seeing anything of each other, or corresponding or anything like that.

Lepore: I've both taught that article and written on it. It's not dull, but it's long and plodding. Still one can see some of your life long interests beginning to appear in it, even though that article was written some thirteen years before

"Truth and Meaning".

Davidson: Well, I was simply teaching myself that subject when I wrote that piece. It was many years from when I finished writing that essay and it was published. I didn't know anything about Carnap when I started writing it. I was spending all my time at Stanford teaching all these basic courses. I taught everything at Stanford. In that sense it was like Queens. I taught ancient philosophy, the later dialogues of Plato; I taught modern philosophy, Descartes, Hume and so forth; I taught epistemology; I taught philosophy of language. At the same time I was in charge of the graduate program. When I showed up at Stanford they were just giving MAs. After I arrived, each year I would travel around the country picking up students. Very quickly, by the mid-1950's, we picked up a lot of very good students. It didn't take long.

Lepore: But still you had no serious philosophical project. I suppose you had the decision theory.

Davidson: Yes, but I never thought of it as my life work. It engaged me. You don't understand me. I get interested in things. I found the work in decision theory pleasant. Also, I was working up a lot of stuff. For example, on November 11, 1954, I gave a talk on Carnap's method of intension and extension to which Tarski came. Those early years at Stanford, I was doing also all that psychological stuff. I was giving talks to psychologists and economists, and a lot of other sorts of talks as well. I gave a talk on use and meaning at an APA meeting in 1953, a talk on metaphor in 1954, a talk on meaning and music in 1954. At a Western Psychological Association, in 1954, I gave a talk on the experimental study of some factors influencing decision making in conflict situations. The American Mathematical Society, that year, I gave a talk on quantitative axiomatization of subjective probability. I gave a talk in December in 1954, on meaning and music to an aesthetics group. But getting back to the piece for the Carnap volume. It took me a lot of time; you have to realize I didn't really understand it very well and I just had to think and think about that stuff. Even to get the most basic stuff straight in my head. After I sent the article in but before the Schilpp volume came out, Carnap invited me down to Los Angeles to talk about it. He was extremely sweet. He was a lovely man and very impressive. It was wonderful training writing that article and at the same time each year I was teaching the philosophy of language course and that was a big help too. Also, I was teaching the introductory ethics course. I did that for seventeen years at Stanford.

Lepore: There were many interesting stimulating people at Stanford, at least visiting at this time, for example, David Wiggins, Dagfinn Føllesdal, Michael Dummett, David Pears. Who brought all these foreign philosophers to Stanford?

Davidson: I did that. It was all my doing. There was no one else to do these things. There was no one else to teach the basic courses and there was no one else who even knew whom to invite. In the early days, I was in charge of speakers. I invited Ryle, with whom I got to be friends, Austin, Strawson, Anscombe, Dummett, Pears, Wiggins, Hampshire, Grice. Dummett came a number of times, at least two times, maybe three.

Lepore: How did you know whom to invite?

Davidson: Because I read. I read the truth paper by Dummett. I read everything. I was teaching philosophy of language every year and I read a lot of it; I was consuming a huge amount of stuff. How I had the energy and time to do all that I have no idea.

Lepore: I'm sorry to keep returning to this same theme, but I, and I'm sure most other philosophers, think of you as a programmatic philosopher. No one else comes to mind right away who is as deeply entrenched in a philosophical program as you are. Now such programs don't spring ex nihilo and here we are already up to 1955 and I still don't see a program forming. I can see traces of your philosophical work in the decision theoretic projects that you contributed to with Suppes and McKinsey but it's merely traces. Also, Quine hasn't shown up at the Stanford yet. So, you didn't even know about *Word and Object*. I just don't have any historical sense from where your philosophical ideas sprang.

Davidson: I can easily help with this. I was building up more and more a picture in two areas, one was philosophy of action and the other was philosophy of language. I was very inhibited so far as publication was concerned.

Lepore: One thing that must strike all students of your work is how relatively late in your career you began to publish on the topics for which you are so well-known. This is especially interesting when one knows, as I do now, how many public presentations you were giving before you began to publish, e.g at APAs, very public events. So, I'm wondering what you mean by saying you were "very inhibited so far as publication was concerned"? What was that all about?

Davidson: What's there to say? Lots of people have that. There is a sense in which I retained some of the attitude which I had as an undergraduate, which is that philosophy is something to view from afar. Although I was teaching philosophy and enjoyed doing it and I did it with confidence, I didn't really see myself as a player. And I probably found something frightening about the idea that the minute I actually published something, everyone was going to jump on me. And, part of the reason why Suppes and McKinsey took me under their wing is because they thought this guy really ought to get some stuff out. They certainly eased the thing for me by writing things with me. So, Suppes and McKinsey helped me over that to some extent and the Carnap paper as you see accidentally fell to me. Now it just takes two more elements. Dan Bennett, my graduate student, was writing his dissertation with me and he went off to England for the year and found out about what Elizabeth Anscombe and Stuart Hampshire were working on. He came back to Stanford and wrote a dissertation in the philosophy of action. I was reading it, thinking about it, and so forth. I thought I saw that these guys had made a mistake in thinking that, given the properties that reason-explanations have, that somehow reasons couldn't be causes. At that point Mary Mothersill, who happened to be on the program committee of the American Philosophical Association, invited me to be on the program of the eastern division meetings and so I wrote "Actions, Reasons and Causes." I remember thinking that a pile of bricks was going to fall on me after that presentation. I didn't realize that if you publish, as far as I can tell, no one was going to pay any attention.

Lepore: Well, they did to that paper!

Davidson: Ultimately, but it takes a little while before they respond. Here's an interesting fact, once the replies came in they were all positive and it was many years before I started getting negative responses to it.

Lepore: There are so many things going on in "Actions, Reasons and Causes" it's hard to believe there wasn't a decade's work and thought already behind it before it was written.

Davidson: Well, there wasn't a decade behind it but there were several years of sort of stitching it together and working with Dan Bennett. I was reading all the things that he was reading: Anscombe, Hampshire and all these other Red Book philosophers.

Lepore: What was the second element?

Davidson: The other thing that happened -- here I've been stewing about belief sentences. I really had a hang up about belief sentences, and I thought about that for one solid year. Writing the Carnap piece got me thinking about these kinds of sentences. Just at the right moment, I discovered the logician Alfred Tarski's paper on the concept of truth. I read the *Wahreitsbegriff*. It took me six months to work myself through it. But when I understood it, it really turned me on. Still, I might not really have appreciated it if I hadn't done the stuff in decision theory. I had an appreciation for what it's like to have a serious theory and I think the other people who were working in philosophy of language didn't have an appreciation for what it was like to have a serious theory. So, look there were these two kinds of people in very different ways -- there were people like Tarski, who knew what a serious theory was like alright but didn't have much philosophical interest -- Tarski didn't come at it from a philosophical point of view -- and he wasn't especially interested in the semantics of natural languages or anything like that. On the other hand, there were all these people working on the semantics of natural language but they didn't have any idea of what a theory was. I saw how to put these two things together. It came to me as if the heavens had opened and then I started writing a whole bunch of things.

Lepore: There are a few things here I don't get. Surely Carnap was interested in natural languages and he knew Tarski's work and he knew about natural languages. What was missing in Tarski's work that you saw, at least according to your hypothesis?

Davidson: There are lot of mysteries of that sort where you say, how could so and so not have recognized such and such; how could so many people have failed to see what a problem the semantics of adverbs were, for example? There are just endless things like this where you can ask yourself. These people had what it took to recognize the problem and so forth -- your example of Carnap is an excellent example -- he wrote this series of three books while at the University of Chicago. The first one was on formal syntax, the second one on formal semantics -- in which he develops a Tarski-type theory of truth, and the third is his *Meaning and Necessity*. It seems to me that he forgot the second book before when he wrote the last book. Alonzo Church had brought Frege to his attention and he was fascinated with all this apparatus of intension and extension but why did he not remind himself of Tarski, which he clearly did not?

Then there is Quine. He was never into Tarski and he still isn't; I think he still doesn't appreciate Tarski. How can someone as smart as Quine, who has known Tarski all his life, knows everything that's there, who wrote this wonderful little article on an application of Tarski's theory of truth; he understood everything about it; how come he still doesn't really use it?

Lepore: Well, with Carnap there is this grey area between doing semantics and doing logic. For example, *Meaning and Necessity*, despite its title, is really about inference. It's about why one sentence implies another; and all that that talk about state descriptions is doing is sustaining inference. In your paper "In Defense of Convention T" you make very clear that these two projects get accidentally conflated. Tarski is a focal point here because he was interested in both projects but he is not philosophical in a way to appreciate that his work on the truth theory hooks up with philosophical problems surrounding natural languages.

Davidson: That doesn't answer my questions.

Lepore: The reason I got excited about your paper "Truth and Meaning" is because, as I've said in print, even if one doesn't accept truth conditional semantics one must be impressed by this paper because it lays down conditions of adequacy and as far as I can tell they simply didn't exist anywhere else prior. The whole idea that one has to construct a theory is novel in that paper. The notion of theory, of course, has been around in philosophy for a long time. But this notion was ambiguous in philosophy at this stage. It might mean "analysis," as in standards accounts in the theory of knowledge. Here's an interesting fact, no theory of knowledge I know of issues in theorems of the form, for example: Donald Davidson knows that Italy is in Europe. So clearly theories in epistemologists' mouths don't mean the same thing as it did when you used the term in "Truth and Meaning." The use of "theory" as in "theory of knowledge" is a very idiosyncratic use of theory. Think about a theory of physics or chemistry. You don't get an enumeration of truths or an analysis of the concept of matter in the theory of physics. So where the notion of theory in the theory of knowledge comes from is an interesting peculiarity of contemporary epistemology. But still a philosopher like Carnap had the notion of theory in the right sense. What I think he lacked were clear conditions of adequacy. Here's a good question: if you go back and read *Meaning and Necessity* and ask yourself what were the conditions of adequacy here -- that would be a good project -- if we had the answer to that question, we would have an answer to the question how Carnap missed the boat.

Davidson: The same point can be made with Hans Reichenbach, with respect to his logic book, *Symbolic Logic*. When I first started getting into this I couldn't believe that I had hit on something that hadn't been pretty obvious to these guys. So I started working my way through the literature. I went back to the logicism, the [*Syntax de Sprache*] and Reichenbach and so forth. I thought somebody here must have had the idea.

Lepore: It was around. If you read C.I. Lewis, in particular, his argument about how translation couldn't be sufficient for determining meaning since one could know a grammar book for Arabic and have an Arabic dictionary but still wouldn't one thereby understand Arabic. But that's not enough. Lewis has this brilliant observation but he doesn't take it anywhere.

Davidson: I had the same experience when I got interested in events. I simply couldn't believe that nobody had ever really faced the problem, especially someone like Whitehead, whose whole philosophy, the philosophy of process, was about events and he was a logician. I thought there must be something there. But I found nothing.

Lepore: I guess, like others, I always thought that the "Action, Reasons, and Causes" literature was much more closely related to the "Truth and Meaning" literature than it in fact is. But I also associate your interest in action theory to your former student's Dan Bennett's return from Oxford. Now that was eight years before another student, John Wallace, showed up at Stanford and I tend to associate your interest in philosophy of language with Wallace's arrival at Stanford.

Davidson: It true that there was about eight year's difference between Bennett's departure and Wallace's arrival at Stanford. But I wrote up a lot of "Truth and Meaning" long before it was published.

Lepore: Well, if one studies the Carnap piece you wrote, you can see some of what's going on in "Truth and Meaning" already forming in that earlier piece. Also, I recall your saying, and it certainly makes good sense, that some of the ideas that occupy you in "Truth and Meaning," and certainly in "Radical Interpretation" and "Belief and the Basis of Meaning" are provoked by your work in the laboratory with Suppes and McKinsey, for example, your interest in the Presentation Problem in experimental decision theory. I expect that McKinsey and Suppes didn't know what was bothering you. But this is clearly a place where your interest in the philosophy of language is brought to bear on your interests in action theory (decision theory).

Davidson: Well, in fact, these interests all grew up together. It wasn't so much the presentation problem at first that connected the two. It was rather events -- thinking about events. In the very beginning these two things were somewhat separate. "Actions, Reasons, and Causes" was simply a result of my realizing that no one had a good argument against causal theories of action. Then I became interested in practical reasoning and that led to "How is Weakness of the Will Possible?" All these were written while I was teaching the course in the philosophy of language. I think I was slower to write that stuff up in the philosophy of language partly because I lacked confidence. I thought that's a much harder field. The guys that were in action theory were in a somewhat muddled state. None of them knew any logic. There I felt greater confidence. I really thought I saw clearly what they were in a muddle about. Whereas in philosophy of language I thought that with these really smart people it's not going to be so easy to set things straight. In the beginning those two things were somewhat separate. However, it's obvious how these two interests just overlapped. Because in philosophy of action the analysis of propositional attitudes had always been very central and I was very much into the problem of the individuation of actions. So that led to my doing semantics. Though I started out on each of the projects separately.

Lepore: It was around this time that John Wallace showed up at Stanford as a your graduate student fresh out of Yale. What was his influence on you?

Davidson: My basic ideas in philosophy of language were worked out before Wallace came along. But he was a great help to me because he knew more logic than I did for one thing and he was very enthusiastic, in fact, very positive about it. He got very excited about my project. His dissertation contributed to it. But he didn't get me started in the way that Dan Bennett actually got me started on action theory. Still, it was great having John Wallace around. I didn't yet have a whole lot of confidence. I thought that if I got an idea that works here in philosophy of language, then undoubtedly a whole lot of other people had it. This is a natural reaction. And I had to publish a few things before I discovered that at least I didn't have something absurdly wrong. So Wallace was great because he was enthusiastic and very smart and by talking with him a lot of things got straightened out. He had insights that were extremely useful.

Lepore: I'd like to stay with the "Truth and Meaning" paper for awhile. Many philosophers are unclear about your position in that paper. Are you a revisionist, saying that all there is to a theory of meaning is what a theory of truth provides, or are you a reductionist, in the sense that meaning is truth? The idea there is that in your theory it appears that the predicate "is true" occupies the place the predicate "means that" once did. So, they wonder whether your idea is to try to reconstruct all meaning facts by appeal only to truth facts. That is, are you claiming that there are no meaning facts above and beyond truth facts? My inclination, on the basis of having read you all these years and having talked to you so much over the years, is to say that you never thought about your program in this way. Rather you thought about there being a certain project, interpreting and understanding speakers, and that it's an open question what we must use to do that. But it is true that in "Truth and Meaning" there are passages that if you come

to that article with a certain vocabulary you can find evidence for each of these different ideas.

Davidson: Well, what's not in "Truth and Meaning" but what lies behind it is the years of teaching philosophy of language without anyone to give me any guidance, really without any background in the subject. So I started out as many people did in those days reading Ogden and Richard's *The Meaning of Meaning*, and Charles Morris. Now what looked like the central problem to them was to define the concept of meaning: x means y , where x is a word or a phrase or sentence and God knows what y was supposed to be -- and you wanted "iff" what. That is how a lot of people were thinking about philosophy of language. Really smart people sought analyses of particular locutions but never said anything about how you could tell whether you had come up with a correct solution or on what grounds you criticize these things aside from just ad hoc arguments. So I think perhaps I felt more frustrated by this situation than I found the subject to be in than I think other people did. On the one hand, so many issues seemed rather sharp -- what is meaning?, how do you even think about it?, where do you start? -- and somewhere along the line I discovered Tarski and I thought you don't even want to ask the question what is meaning. It's the wrong question. It was a huge shift of perspective to get away from worrying about what it is to talk about the meaning of a predicate. Reading Tarski made me realize that here's a way to get around all that -- and somewhere along there Quine showed up at the Center for Behavioral Studies at Stanford. At that point they invited people who were at the center to bring up an associate and I had a term off and I agreed to just come and read a manuscript version of what was to become his *Word and Object*. I really didn't do anything else that term except read it over and over again, trying to understand what was going on. And when I did I thought it was terrific. And I saw again that it was a whole way of approaching problems in the philosophy of language that other people hadn't caught on to, hadn't even thought about, and it seemed much more promising and so I sort of slowly put what I thought was good in Quine with what I had found in Tarski. And that's where my general approach to the subject came from. But you wouldn't see it the way I saw it unless you came into the whole subject at the time I did in the late-1950's. No one really knew what to do about the subject even though everyone was really fascinated by it.

Lepore: So Quine had very little influence on your philosophy of language until relatively late, until you were in your 40's. This I think would be a great surprise to many readers of your work.

Davidson: That's right. My philosophy of language didn't grow out of my relationship with Quine at all. Once I got interested in the subject in a deep way I went back and read Quine fresh with open eyes and I started teaching this stuff. I had become well-versed in Quine, but *Word and Object* was something new and it really was very hard for me to grasp exactly what was going on in it. I read the first couple of chapters over and over and over again, just trying to take it in.

Lepore: Well, even here I think readers might leave with the not so uncommon impression that Davidson's philosophy of language is really just modified Quine. That would be a mistake. Quine, according to me, has a very different perspective from yours. He starts off clearly from a revisionist point of view. As early as his paper "The Problem of Meaning in Linguistics," he's telling us that only very few features of our ordinary concept of meaning are salvageable. You don't think that at all. I don't see a revisionist perspective in your writings. Lastly, there is the Richard Montague tradition, which brings us back to Carnap's *Meaning and Necessity*. Carnap was really trying to devise theories of meaning and he wasn't trying to analyze meaning by saying that meaning is an associated idea, or is associated behavior, or any of the other familiar analyses we present in introductory philosophy of language courses. So what then is the difference between your program and the Carnapian program, which is after all much older? Carnap wasn't doing model theory. He says he is trying to devise a semantics for natural languages. Here's another way of putting this point. According to Michael Dummett, Frege was trying to provide a theory of meaning in your sense long ago. However, this is difficult to believe. If you read the Klemke anthology on Frege -- which I believe was an important and influential collection of essays on Frege as recently as twenty years ago -- you clearly don't get anything like Dummett's perspective on Frege. So clearly, just from a historical (or if you like a sociological) point of view, all along others were not thinking about Frege as Dummett counsels us to. And in fact I can't help, to the contrary, but wonder how much you actually influenced Michael's interpretation of Frege, at least with respect to reading Frege as attempting to devise theories of meaning in your sense.

Davidson: I think the idea that there was a way of thinking philosophically about meaning tied to the idea of getting a serious semantic theory for as much of natural language as you could -- well, I was the first person to say that and I

say it in "Truth and Meaning." There I suggested that my dream was to try to do for the semantics for natural language what Noam Chomsky was doing for the syntax of natural language. But he didn't have quite the same concept of a theory as I did. He knew what it was like to give a recursive definition of a sentence, for example. But when I was writing that paper I couldn't believe no one thought about it that way. So I looked about in Carnap, in Reichenbach and in Quine and none of them was even describing this as a project. Tarski discouraged everybody by saying, of course, you can't do this for natural language. Quine never thought of it in terms of a theory at all. Of course his discussion of translation could, if you think of it now with a little twist, could be re-described or re-expressed in a Tarski-like way. But he certainly wasn't thinking about it this way at the time he was first writing about it in *Word and Object*.

Lepore: By now you are getting ready to leave Stanford.

Davidson: I was at Stanford eighteen years. I started there in 1951 and I left in 1968. In that period Stanford went from being a more or less invisible university to being a top university. That was a period when there was a tremendous amount of money available in certain areas. And the upper administration at Stanford was full of people who were scientists and they just decided to take a chance in hiring senior people who had big grants. They were taking a chance because the money these new people brought might dry up. But this way they were able to get a terrific faculty very rapidly.

Lepore: But by the time you left Stanford the philosophy department had grown in stature and it was attracting very good graduate students. Still, you had not really published a lot by this time and yet you clearly had a big influence on that department and on its graduate students.

Davidson: The reason I had an influence on the graduate students was that there wasn't anyone else teaching these central subjects: epistemology, philosophy of language, even ethics. All these are central topics. So naturally the graduate students revolved around me. I was the only person teaching those subjects and also I was full of ideas; I was reading everything coming out and trying to digest it. I would write these ideas up and I would pass my material out. I was full of topics to write dissertations on and also I brought the graduate students there; I was director of graduate students for years and years and years and I would go around the country recruiting them. I would talk to the administration in order to get more fellowships.

Lepore: But when did you begin to attract attention outside of Stanford?

Davidson: As soon as "Actions, Reasons and Causes" came out I started getting offers from all over the country. Once that paper came out I was invited to all sorts of things and I was giving papers all over the country all of the time. I had stuff ready to read, but I was slow in sending it out for publication. Also, a lot of people in England knew about me. I had invited them all to Stanford. David Wiggins and I agreed about a lot about stuff at this point. He was the first philosopher in England to catch on to what I was doing. He was actually in a younger generation of philosophers that I had influenced but I knew the older generation as well. I knew Gilbert Ryle and J.L. Austin. All these people I knew quite well. They would be invited to Stanford for a quarter or to give a talk and no one else in the faculty paid any attention to them. I had a lot of students who were interested in what these English people were doing. Wiggins and Dummett were invited over and over again and later on David Pears. Even John Wisdom visited. They enjoyed visiting Stanford and there wasn't anyone else they got to know except me.

Lepore: So leaving Stanford must have been extremely difficult?

Davidson: It was a huge thing. For one thing I loved my house and I loved the area. But I thought the politics of the university were dominated by the scientists and I kept trying to get them to hire other people in philosophy. Pat Suppes, who by then was in the administration, had the idea which I don't think was absurd, that the philosophy department should be full of formal people who addressed standard philosophical subjects from a formal perspective. But I, instead, wanted to be surrounded by people who were really steeped in the subject, whether they had a formal background or not. Suppes, instead, wanted logicians who know something about other subjects. We hired Jaakko Hintikka, who knew something about epistemology and the history of philosophy from a logical point of view. We hired Dagfinn Føllesdal, who knew something about continental philosophy, but don't forget that he

was a logician, a student in fact of Quine's. And so on. I wanted something different. I was interested in philosophy of mind, in epistemology. I was operating on my own except for my own graduate students. I wanted the kind of challenge that this didn't provide.

Lepore: And so you left Stanford for Princeton? Do you think your work changed significantly after you arrived in Princeton? That's not obvious to a reader.

Davidson: I think so. Almost at once I was invited to give the John Locke Lectures at Oxford, which at that point were pretty prestigious. That came at the end of the academic year 1969-1970. I spent that year at the [Stanford Center for Social and Behavioral Sciences] and during that year I wrote about six of my best known papers. I had just spent two years at Princeton. Those papers were definitely better as a result of my mixing it up with David Lewis, Gil Harman, Tom Nagel. I was suddenly in the midst of a bunch of very active people. All those people influenced me, including older ones like Stuart Hampshire and Gregory Vlastos. I think it was a good idea to get into an atmosphere where I wasn't the only person dealing with these topics. It's easy to convince yourself that you have everything right if you have no one around who is in a position to challenge you and I knew Stanford was not the best intellectual environment. At Princeton, a lot of people would come to my seminars. I talked a lot of philosophy with Gil Harman and Carl Hempel, and just psychologically it made a difference to me. It was sort of like going from high school to Harvard.

Lepore: You have a tendency to work and rework papers before releasing them for publication.

Davidson: Yes, that's true. In 1969, I went to Australia and I gave the David Gavin Lectures. These are Australia's John Locke Lectures, the big lecture series at the University of Adelaide. [Others to lecture in this series have been Ryle, Quine, Feigl, Lewis Hempel, Dennett and Putnam.] The Australian philosopher J.J.C. Smart was reading my stuff and he arranged for my invitation. These lectures constitute at least half of the lectures in my collection *Actions and Events*. The same is true of my John Locke Lectures. All but one of these ended up in my collection *Truth and Interpretation*. That's a considerable body of stuff. Enough to fill two volumes. The one of my Locke Lectures that isn't there is the one that ultimately became my first American Philosophical Association Presidential Address, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme." I worked on that paper for seven years. I read all these papers all over the world for several years before they were published.

Lepore: In retrospect, do you think the move to Princeton was a good one for you?

Davidson: I think being at Stanford for me was psychologically very good. I was 50 when I arrived at Princeton. If I had gone straight to Princeton there is no chance I would have built up all this stuff in all these areas because there were people there who knew stuff about it. It was only because I was at Stanford and nobody was doing those things that it gave me a chance to move in any direction I felt without anyone to oppose me.

Lepore: After Princeton there was the move to the research institution -- the Rockefeller University in New York City.

Davidson: I only taught full-time at Princeton for two years. They had brought me in as chairman of the philosophy department. They thought people like Tom Nagel and Gil Harman and even Paul Benaceraf were too young to be chairman. I think that was a mistake on their part. After that, although I was at the Rockefeller, I was officially on the staff at Princeton, not just a visitor. I had this special title, "Lecturer with the rank of Professor." About Rockefeller, first I have to tell you that all of my moves in one way or another were partly related to women, except going to Stanford. While Virginia, my first wife, and I were at Stanford, our marriage got worse. Virginia was very eager to go back to the east coast, much more eager than I was. I had good reasons to leave Stanford and she really wanted to go. These two things cooperated. She felt that the west coast was nowhere artistically. She was quite wrong about that. In fact, the west coast was quite active at that point in a way in which the east coast wasn't and in fact she didn't get the kind of boost that she thought she was going to get by going to the east coast. In fact, she did better on the west coast. But her desire to go back to the east coast was partly an expression of her dissatisfaction with our relationship. But Princeton was back water and that was one reason for moving from Princeton to the Rockefeller. The second reason was my reason. There was all this stuff I wanted to write about and who wouldn't want a job where you didn't have to do anything you didn't want. [Rockefeller University, being a research

institution, had no official students or classes. Each faculty member was required to do no more than his individual research.] So, I made an arrangement with Princeton that I would teach there one semester each year. That gave me the opportunity to teach the way I like. So I never stopped teaching. The main thing I worried about was that I would lack the stimulation I got from teaching. Teaching keeps you moving. So I asked myself a lot would I really flourish under those conditions and I interviewed a lot of people who were at the Rockefeller or more importantly had left it, for example, Robert Nozick and Sidney Shoemaker. Those were the main ones. I saw the danger very clearly but I thought it would be cowardly not to accept an offer with such opportunity. It was grand, truly grand. Anything you wanted to do they just didn't let you do it, they would help you do it -- pay your transportation, etc. And so I went to the Rockefeller in 1969-1970, right after I spent a year at the Stanford Center for the Behavioral Sciences.

Lepore: Well, let's see you spent eighteen years at Stanford. You began there fairly young and you left there to become chairman of arguably the best philosophy department in the world. Now a lot of people come right out of graduate school, moving ahead full steam ahead, publishing in quality journals regularly, being offered jobs at the top universities, etc. That wasn't true of you.

Davidson: No it wasn't. Part of it had to do with the years in the Navy. I was losing touch all those years I was in the Navy. I didn't feel behind because I didn't even have the concept of an active career. It was only after being at Stanford for a while that I began to have ideas that were interesting and that I started feeling uptight about not publishing. But two things happened -- Pat Suppes, who was younger than I, was publishing up a storm and getting promotion after promotion and it was impossible for me not to notice this. The other that goaded me into publishing was that my students started publishing my ideas. They weren't stealing from me. No, quite the contrary. I began to say I better get something out myself. But if there's one thing that distinguishes my generation from yours in philosophy anyway it is that people now in graduate school form the concept of what it's like to be a professional operator, to have a career and publish and so forth and I just never went through that. I don't know whether this distinguishes me from my friends or not, or whether we were all that way. I can say that whatever successes came my way I haven't aimed for them and they always surprised me and still when somebody introduces me as having done this and this, and having accomplished such and such I'm actually embarrassed. I think, "Who, me?"

Lepore: I'd like to shift gears now and ask you some questions about your writing style, if I might. How would you describe your writing style?

Davidson: I begin most of my papers with either a problem or a question. I think the only thing I can say about my style is that I sometimes find it incredibly hard to start writing. I often imagine the first sentence and then ask myself, "Wait! What comes next?" Pretty soon, I'm writing the whole paper in my head and any problem in the composition or organization of the text stops me from even writing the first sentence for fear that I would be somehow trapped. When I do finally write something, I often find that the first couple of pages, which usually sort of ease me into the subject, are better left out. So, I'll throw away these painfully constructed early pages completely.

Lepore: But it's my impression that your papers undergo many revisions. Is this not true?

Davidson: I don't do a great deal of revising. I always believe that I have a pretty clear idea about how a paper is going to go before I start writing. However, in the throes of composing a paper, I find that I regularly think about the paper. When I'm trying to go to sleep or when I'm half asleep, ways of putting things often occur to me, or when I'm not in the midst of writing, a new idea or a solution for some problem of organization will come to me. I find that these relaxed moments are essential in my composing process.

Lepore: On a more philosophical note, your work is currently being labeled "externalist" in opposition to "internalist". I know this is a large question, but could you say a few words about your externalism?

Davidson: The internalist says that the contents of our thoughts -- our beliefs, our desires, our intentions, and what we mean by what we say -- are determined wholly by what is in the head. Generally speaking, this is a Cartesian position, and there are lots of internalists around. The externalist, however, maintains that there are factors external to the person which are determinants of the contents of our thoughts and not just causal determinants -- because

that's obvious -- but, so to speak, logical determinants too. For example, from an externalist perspective, you can't have a thought about an apple if you haven't had at some point in your life some contact -- direct or indirect -- with apples. So, externalism has to do with your history and things that exist outside of you that make a difference to what you can think or what you are thinking at a given moment. Now, beyond this description, externalism takes a number of forms, but unlike Saul Kripke, Hilary Putnam or Tyler Burge, I don't limit the extent to which the contents of our thoughts are fixed by external objects. I think externalism applies universally; there are connections everywhere between the world and the contents of our thoughts. It's not limited to a few words but is true of a very large number of them. So, I am an all-out externalist.

Lepore: Would you mind explaining some more of your terminology for a general audience, for example, would you mind explaining what you mean by "radical interpretation"?

Davidson: Radical Interpretation is a way of studying interpretation by purifying the situation in an artificial way. Imagine trying to understand somebody else when you have no head start: there is no translator around; there's no dictionary available; you have to work it from scratch. It would beg the question, in trying to study the nature of interpretation, to assume that you know in advance what a person's intentions, beliefs, and desires are. I hold that you never could get a detailed picture of any of those things unless you could communicate with the person first. There is no master key or framework theory that you can have prior to a communicative interaction or situation. You've got to work your way into the whole system at the same time.

Lepore: How does your famous "principle of charity" enter into this discussion? Is it correct to say that radical interpretation relies on this principle?

Davidson: The principle of charity says that in interpreting others you've got to make their thoughts hold together to a certain extent if you're going to see them as thoughts at all, because that's what thoughts are like. They have logical relations to one another. Although people can certainly be irrational -- they can have thoughts that don't go together -- we can only recognize them as irrational because their thoughts have some rational coherence. You can't make sense of total irrationality. For example, if you believe that everything is green, then you have to believe that this table is green, for if you didn't, you temporarily depart from standards that you have to have if you're to have the thought that this is green or that everything is green. You can't have those thoughts without those thoughts being related to others, and those relations are logical. The principle of charity really just formulates the recognition of the necessary element of rationality in thought. Thoughts have propositional contents and propositional contents are in part identified by their relations to each other.

Lepore: How does what you just said about the principle of charity hook up with comments you've made that in order to understand that we don't understand something we already must share a great body of common experience about our language and about our world?

Davidson: An account of anybody's thoughts will no doubt uncover some inconsistencies, but in order to uncover inconsistencies, you must first identify the thoughts that are inconsistent to each other, and to identify them, you have to embed them in a complex of thoughts with which they fit. Otherwise, you have no way of identifying them as what they are. So, I'm not disagreeing with you about that. I also didn't mention the other aspect of charity, which is how thoughts are related to the world. Externalism says there's a connection between the contents of people's thoughts and their causal relations with the world itself. In fact, I would say if it weren't for that, we wouldn't be able to interpret anyone else. It's only because we share a world with others that we can get the hang of what they're talking about. So, the word "charity" is a misnomer because it's not a matter of being kind to people; it's the condition for understanding them at all. Thus, charity has two features: one is that you can't understand people if you don't see them as sharing a world with you; the other is that you can't understand people if you don't see them as logical in the way that you are -- up to a point, of course.

Lepore: In your more recent papers, for example, in both "What is Present to the Mind" and "The Myth of the Subjective," you talk a great deal about triangulation as a way around the problem of correspondence and language as mediation. Would you discuss triangulation? What do language users do when they triangulate?

Davidson: Well, the idea of triangulation is partly metaphorical, but not wholly. The basic idea is that our concept of objectivity -- our idea that our thoughts may or may not correspond to the truth -- is an idea that we would not have if it weren't for interpersonal relations. In other words, the source of objectivity is intersubjectivity: the triangle consists of two people and the world. Part of the idea is this: if you were alone in the world -- that is, not in communication with anybody else -- things would be impinging on you, coming in through your senses, and you would react in differential ways. Now, here's where the metaphor comes in. If you were to ask, "Well, when you're reacting a certain way, let's say to some pleasant taste, what is it that pleases you?" We would say, "It's the peach." However, in the case of the person who has no one with whom to share his thoughts, on what grounds could you say, "It's the peach that pleases me" rather than the taste of the peach, or the stimulation of the taste buds, or, for that matter, something that happened a thousand years ago which set all these forces in motion which eventually impinged on the taste buds. How far out are the objects that he is responding to? There would be no answer to that question at all: nothing for him to check up on, no way to raise the question, must less to answer it. So, the idea of triangulation is this: if you have two people both reacting to stimuli in the world and to each other -- that is, to each other's reactions to the stimuli -- you've completed a triangle which locates the common stimulus. It doesn't locate it in one person's mouth; it doesn't locate it in one person's eyes; it doesn't locate it five thousand years ago. It locates it just at the distance of the shared stimulus which, in turn, causes each of the two creatures to react to each other's reactions. It's a way of saying why it is that communication is essential to the concept of an objective world.

Lepore: On a slightly different aspect of communication and how communication is "essential to the concept of an objective world," would you distinguish between what you call a prior theory and a passing theory in your much discussed paper "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs".

Davidson: The distinction between prior and passing theories is just the difference between what one anticipates that somebody will mean by something he or she says and what one decides was meant after one is exposed to an utterance. Whenever you talk to somebody, you have an unformulated theory of what that person would mean if he or she were to utter certain words. For example, you would know roughly what you yourself would mean if you were to utter these same words. However, plenty of things may tip you off that your interpretation is not the right interpretation. On occasion, someone's words don't mean what you would have meant by those words. They don't necessarily mean what they've meant in the past. You discover that this might be a slip of the tongue, or it might be a clever invention on the spur of the moment; it might be a joke; there are a thousand possibilities many of which we are so good at catching that we don't even notice we're doing it. Luckily, we can make lots of adjustments as we go along. Communication is always incomplete. It's not as though anybody ever gets everything right; it's a matter of degree.

Lepore: This point ties in with my next question. In an oft-quoted passage from "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," you write that "linguistic ability is the ability to converge on a passing theory from time to time. If we do say this, then we should realize that we have abandoned not only the ordinary notion of a language, but we have erased the boundary between knowing a language and knowing our way around in the world generally. I conclude that there is no such thing as a language -- not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed." Now, this kind of talk strikes many philosophers -- actually, I guess just about everyone -- as clearly counter-intuitive and others as downright crazy. Would you help us better understand your meaning when you say that there is no such thing as a language?

Davidson: Of course, you got to add the proviso, "if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed." In fact, elsewhere in that same essay, I say in a fairly sharp way what those assumptions are that I think are wrong. They include such things as the idea that there is a single repertoire of expressions -- with their meanings and their semantic interpretation -- which everyone shares. That, I say, is just wrong. There is no such thing that's shared. People differ. Every person has got his or her own language in that sense. But to say that every person has his or her own language is to say that there is no such thing as what philosophers have supposed a language to be. Interestingly enough, this is a view that I apparently share with Noam Chomsky, because he said exactly the same thing: everybody's got his or her own way of doing it. Of course, there is a tremendous amount of overlap from person to person in linguistic knowledge. If there weren't talking would be much more a chore than it is. That the overlap is never complete is not a very shocking view if you understand it. What is much more shocking to some people is my view that it's not essential to linguistic communication that any two people who are talking to

each other speak anything like the same language. In fact, it's inconvenient if they don't, but it can happen. I sometimes carry on conversations with people who are speaking French while I speak English. When I read papers in Europe, I'm constantly asked questions in German, French and Spanish, and I answer them in English. They understand me and I understand them. Of course, you might say that we have a background that allows us to translate back and forth; that's true. But, we could do it from scratch; it just would be very hard.

Lepore: Is this just another way of saying that according to you language is not convention-bound?

Davidson: Yes, that's exactly right. As you know, since you collected the three articles together, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs" was published along with two attacks, one by Ian Hacking and one by Michael Dummett. (See *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, ed., Ernest Lepore, Basil Blackwell, 1986.) I recently attended a conference in Sicily with Dummett and I finally produced my answer to his concerns. He is about to produce his answer to my answer, so this will go on, no doubt. He is strongly opposed to the idea that conventions are crutches. He thinks speaking as others do is not just convenience but absolutely essential. He, like Tyler Burge, thinks that what we mean depends very much on what other people mean by the same words. There's a big issue here, for philosophers anyway, because we're on the edge of Wittgenstein's private language discussion. As you know, Saul Kripke in his book on Wittgenstein's private language argument attributes the following argument to Wittgenstein and seems to endorse it himself, although he doesn't absolutely commit himself. The idea is that a certain element of objectivity -- which is essential to meaning something by what you say -- is injected only by there being a social custom or a habit. The question whether you, for example, are meaning the same thing from moment to moment by some given word depends upon whether I use that word in a certain way. And, in fact, it's only the confluence or convergence of a usage, custom, or habit that provides an objective test of whether somebody is going on in the same way or not. This is not my account of objectivity: my doctrine of triangulation is an alternative account that doesn't depend upon people doing the same thing.

Lepore: If I understand what you have to say about triangulation, you don't deny that there is an essential social element in determining what it is that we mean by our words.

Davidson: That's right. After all, the triangulation idea brings in a social element, but it doesn't say that something is right if it coheres with what everybody else is saying at the moment or something like that. It's not relativistic at all. It doesn't lead to a relativistic idea of truth. When people try to formulate this issue, they often get into the most obvious kind of trouble. You see, there are obviously some things that you can say that are true. As times goes on, what we mean by certain words changes, and therefore, a sentence that might have been true at one time is no longer true because it doesn't mean what it meant before. That change in meaning is a social change and has to do with the development of theory, belief, and all sorts of things of that kind -- but that's not relativism of truth. On the contrary, the truth of a sentence is relative to the circumstances of its use, but the intelligibility of this claim requires a non-relative concept of truth.

Lepore: Your program is so rich in ideas and arguments that I know we could continue this discussion indefinitely, but space limitations requires me to bring it to a close. Therefore, I'd like to end with something unusual. I'd like to ask you a question that requires you to extend the scope of your philosophical views. How do you see your work in relation to social issues, such as institutional power, authority, and ethnocentrism? Do you see any political or social implications embedded in your conceptions of truth and belief?

Davidson: Well, it's not something I want to push, but I do think that the rejection of certain kinds of relativism does make a difference about how we deal with people from different cultures, backgrounds, and periods. Instead of thinking of these things as sort of blocks that are fixed one way or another, we might think of them as just variance which we understand in terms of what we share and see ourselves as sharing. Understanding other cultures is no different from understanding our next door neighbor, except in degree. It's not a difference of kind. In both cases -- understanding a different culture or understanding a neighbor -- the principle of charity is essential to yielding the best interpretation. Of course, the more different we perceive the people as being, the greater the strain becomes on using the principle of charity. So, when we are faced with these differences among people, we may think what's required to understand them is an entirely different kind of act -- namely, a leap of the imagination of some sort. That's a rather common idea. However, I think it's a dangerous idea, because it leads us away from simply doing our

best to accommodate somebody else's view of the world. If we think of understanding as needing some magical leap of the imagination, we're no longer calling on ourselves to discover the common ground on which we can make whatever sense we can make of one another.