



Department of Philosophy



Department of Philosophy

Inquiry | Knowledge | Faith | Wisdom



Department of Philosophy, University of Mumbai
& Department of Humanities and Social sciences, IIT-Mumbai
jointly organise



Donald Davidson | Actions, Reasons and Causes



100

INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR ON THE PHILOSOPHY OF

donald davidson

AND THE INFLUENCE OF HIS IDEAS IN THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY
[TO COMMEMORATE HIS 100TH BIRTH ANNIVERSARY]

SATURDAY, NOV 25, 2017
10:00 am - 05:00 pm

Department of Philosophy, Jnaneshwar Bhavan, University of Mumbai,
Vidyaynagri Campus, Santacruz (East)

SUNDAY, NOV 26, 2017
10:00 am - 05:00 pm

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT - Mumbai, Powai

All are welcome.

RSVP (with full name) to : events.philosophy@gmail.com latest by 20-11-2017. No Registration Fee.

We commemorate the birth centenary of Donald Davidson (1917-2003) an American philosopher who studied with Willard Van Orman Quine at Harvard. Indeed, Quine's influence is so deep that Davidson dedicates his book *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* thus: "To W.V Quine without whom not." In a subtle way, he negates the philosophical sway that Quine holds and charts his philosophical position that has influenced many a philosophical debate in the twentieth century and still continues to inform discussions in philosophy of mind, language, agency, action and notions of truth. In this regard, his philosophy has relevance for a broad range of disciplines in Humanities and Social Sciences.

Quine's critique of logical empiricism in the classic 1951 paper *Two Dogmas of Empiricism* is taken up by Donald Davidson after two decades where he critiques the third and final dogma of the empiricists in his *On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme*. This is an influential work in the *Philosophy of Language and Mind*. It uses a Tarskian recursive theory of truth employing only extensional logic to boldly develop a compositional account of meaning which has been one of the most debated and challenging positions to defend, particularly with its impact on the restrictions it places on the logical form of natural sentences.

In the early phase of his career, during the sixties and seventies, Davidson developed seminal ideas in different directions concerning the philosophy of actions and events as well as interesting perspectives on philosophical psychology dealing with both epistemological notions like belief and thought as well as ontological ones like 'mental events' and 'reality without reference'. His ground-breaking *Actions, Reasons and Causes* linked agency, epistemology and ontology showing a new way to look at the old Cartesian problems. This was to have deep ramifications for central problems in the *Philosophy of Mind* and the *Philosophy of Action*.

In connection with the project of what form our ontological commitments should take, Davidson argues for the dependence of questions of truth on the semantic and logical structure of language. The notion of truth brings language, world, man and time together. The notion of man as a linguistic being not only uses language but also interprets it. In this connection, his theory of interpretation gets tied to a rational communicative agent

who is able to tie up the triangular epistemological nodes of access to the world around us, other minds and our own minds. Indeed, the project of radical interpretation, in contrast to Quine's project of radical translation, brings out various problematics regarding the inscrutability of reference, the impossibility of radically different conceptual schemes, the impossibility of massive error and the related externalism regarding content of thought.

It has been challenging to understand Donald Davidson's complex philosophical views that need to be woven through his independent articles on the above themes, most of which assume some familiarity with earlier writings. Arguments overlap in various essays showing an often daunting interconnectedness of ideas and positions, forming, as it were, a 'mosaic that forms a systematic account of the nature of human thought, action, and speech, and their relation to the natural world...'

Debates on Davidson's philosophy have taken interesting turns in recent times. Ripples seen in literature and communication theories as well as gender studies testify to the serious implications that his views on rationality and meaning have for how we interpret actions. For instance, both Habermas and Davidson converge on the necessity of developing conditions for meaning through notions of truth and conditions of satisfaction. But other thinkers (like Karl Otto Apel, for example) feel that there are two Davidsons such that his early position on language, truth conditions and the principle of charity are in consonance with his later suggestion that we abandon our search for theories of meaning and settle for a general 'knowing our way around in the world'. This may resonate, for some, with the Derridian insight that communication is always incomplete though the search for a common ground, to make sense of each other, continues.

This is what we intend to in this seminar: work our way out towards understanding various concepts inherited through the rich history of ideas on thought, agency, understanding, rationality, normativity, truth, reality and a host of related notions.

¹Kudwig Kirk, introduction, Donald Davidson, *Contemporary Philosophy in Focus*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, p.1.