

Truth and Predication by Donald Davidson, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA., 2005, 180 pp., ISBN: 0-674-01525-8, Cloth \$29.95.

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At 85, Davidson had come to be resigned to a life where he could no longer surf, his long-time favorite pursuit, but when knee problems had begun to restrict even hiking he chose to undergo what should have been routine surgery. He died from complications related to the anesthetic. At the time of his death, his book *Truth and Predication* had been accepted for publication by Harvard University Press but was not yet complete. His wife, fellow philosopher Marcia Cavell, worked through the final revisions based on Davidson's marginalia and notes.

Marketed as his "first book," *Truth and Predication* is in fact comprised of two series of lectures in essay form—Davidson's preferred mode of philosophical communication. (A full five collections of his essays have been published, all by Oxford, from *Essays on Actions and Events* in 1980, to *Problems of Rationality*, published in 2004.) The first three chapters of the book focus on theories of truth and are based on his 1989 Dewey lectures that were then published in 1990 as the essay "The Structure and Content of Truth" (*The Journal of Philosophy* 87: 279-328). The remaining chapters center around issues of predication and are based largely on Davidson's Hermes lectures in 2001. Both sets of lectures were reworked for *Truth and Predication*, and brought together with introductory and concluding chapters.

Of the two main topics, philosophers of a pragmatist bent will find the chapters on truth to be the most interesting. Here Davidson's own pragmatist streak reveals itself. His focus is on everyday communication rather than on philosophical paradoxes that arise

only in the most artificial and constrained circumstances, and he spends much of his introduction explaining why the latter problems hold little or no interest for him.

His intellectual debt to Dewey is acknowledged in the first two sentences of Chapter 1: “Theories of Truth”. Davidson writes: “Nothing in the world, no object or event, would be true or false if there were not thinking creatures. John Dewey drew two conclusions: that access to truth could not be a special prerogative of philosophy, and that truth must have essential connections with human interests” (p. 7). Davidson agrees here with Dewey and, surveying various pragmatist thinkers’ approaches to truth, concludes that “the problem the pragmatists were addressing—the problem of how to relate truth to human desires, beliefs, intentions, and the use of language—seems to...[be] the right one to concentrate on in thinking about truth” (p. 9).

What then does Davidson think about truth, generally? He mentions Rorty in this context. Although Rorty gets Davidson roughly right with respect to issues of truth and with respect to the parallels between Davidson and Dewey’s treatment of truth (p. 9) Rorty might have Davidson and Dewey wrong when he claims that they all agree that “truth is not the sort of thing one should expect to have a philosophically interesting theory about” (Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, University of Minnesota Press, 1982, p. xiii, quoted in Davidson, p. 9). Davidson adds this clarification: “As I read him, Dewey thought that once truth was brought down to earth there were philosophically important and instructive things to say about its connections with human attitudes, connections partly constitutive of the concept of truth. This is also my view, though I do not think that Dewey got the connections right” (p. 10). Davidson spends the remainder of the chapter discussing the relationship between his own (evolving) thoughts about

truth and various “deflationary” accounts, especially the relationship between his own views and Tarski’s.

This discussion continues in Ch. 2: “What More is There to Truth?” Davidson rejects the view that there is no more to the concept of truth than what is revealed in the T-sentences for a language. There must be something more – but what? In Ch. 2 he discusses and rejects two common attempts to go beyond Tarski’s account: anti-realist/relativist attempts that try to “humanize truth, by making it basically epistemic,” and realist attempts that promote “some form of correspondence theory” (p. 33). Here he engages with Putnam, Dummett and Quine. Of particular importance is his reiteration of his regret about the title of his influential essay “A Coherence Theory of Truth” (originally published in 1983, and reprinted in his essay collection *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, Oxford University Press, 2001). He concludes:

We should not say that truth is correspondence, coherence, warranted assertability, ideally justified assertability, what is accepted in the conversation of the right people, what science will end up maintaining, what explains the convergence on final theories in science, or the success of our ordinary beliefs. To the extent that realism and antirealism depend on one or another of these views of truth, we should refuse to endorse either (pp. 47-48).

This Deweyan move beyond realism and anti-realism is important for understanding Davidsonian-influenced scholars such as Rorty and is bound to please pragmatist scholars like David Hildebrande who despair of finding such key Deweyan insights in the contemporary pragmatist landscape (see, e.g., Hildebrand’s *Beyond Realism and Anti-Realism: John Dewey and the Neopragmatists*, Vanderbilt University Press, 2003).

Davidson's own move beyond realism and anti-realism is articulated in the third and final chapter of the Dewey lectures: "The Content of the Concept of Truth." Here he reviews and further refines his influential work on the conceptual resources available to a "radical interpreter," and what these resources tell us about truth and meaning. The result builds on Tarski's work. Davidson's is an empirical theory "about the truth conditions of every sentence in some corpus of sentences" (p. 49). The theory is unlikely to be held explicitly as a whole by any individual speaker of course, but the key is that "the evidence for the theory be in principle publicly accessible, and that it not assume in advance the concepts to be illuminated" (pp. 55-56). As Davidson reminds us "public availability is a constitutive aspect of language" (p. 56).

The reader cannot help but regret that this first book of Davidson's will also be his last. As Charles Parsons describes it, these first three chapters of Davidson's book constitute "one of the most important philosophical writings about truth of its time." For readers unfamiliar with Davidson's work these chapters will provide a helpful introduction that show his views in dynamic interaction with the most influential philosophers of language and epistemology in the twentieth century. Pragmatist philosophers will find in Davidson a number of important ties to the American philosophical tradition of Dewey.