Reader Response

The Malaprop in Spite of Herself: A Desperate Reading of Donald Davidson

SUSAN WELLS

A month after Gary Olson asked me to respond to Thomas Kent's interview with Donald Davidson, I packed my xeroxes from Davidson's *Essays on Actions and Events* and *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* and mailed them to Tokyo, where I would be teaching for a year. By the time my envelopes came, Davidson's principle of charity was for me no longer a remote procedural maxim; without the interpretive patience of someone willing to believe, against the available evidence, that I was a rational agent, I could not open a bank account, do dry cleaning, buy groceries. Davidson was quite clear, in this interview and elsewhere, that charity was not a matter of being kind to people, but, helpless as I was, I had become deeply grateful to anyone who was willing to see me as a logical agent. It was (and is) nothing to take for granted.

I would like to use this desperation to shape my response to Davidson's interview with Kent. Since, like many readers of JAC, I encountered Davidson for the first time in Kent's provocative interview, perhaps the projects of reading Japan, being read by Japan, reading Davidson, and allowing oneself to "be read by" Davidson can form a series of mutually illuminating metaphors.¹ Let me open that series with a story.

Rationality and "Passing Rules"
I had gone with my daughter to buy a birthday present for one of her friends at the gift section of our local department store, the "personal gift selections department, full of dream and joy." They had a broad assortment of ceramic birds, bath salts, handkerchiefs, and joke items—latex false breasts, something that might have been sneezing powder. After the gift was wrapped, the salesperson gave me a card, a "cardo," with the price of the item blocked out in thousands of yen. She pointed to some numbers, and said "sen en," or "a thousand yen." Ah, a charge for giftwrapping—and a rather steep charge, I
thought. I gave her a thousand-yen bill, which she refused. Instead, she put a red box in front of me and invited me to pick something out of it. I reached in, drew out a yellow candy, and thanked her. But the salesperson—now accompanied by two colleagues—applauded, explained that I had a “lucky candy,” and showed me two sets of matching plastic bathroom accessories, white and blue. Since this was one of the few times in my life when a plastic soap dish would be both an addition to the household economy and a substantial purchase, I was pleased, picked the white set, tried out the word for white, had my pronunciation corrected, and went home happy. My daughter wanted the candy.

This story demonstrates, besides a traveller’s obsession with ordinary confusions, the truth of Davidson’s epigram that knowing a language is indistinguishable from “knowing our way around in the world generally.” The world of Japanese retailing was new to me; that ignorance generated as much confusion as my bad Japanese. In fact, I probably misunderstood the English signs and slogans in the department store: surely they couldn’t have really meant “dream and joy.” Both parties in this transaction, buyer and sellers, formed “passing rules” at higher and higher levels of adequacy: we tested ways of explaining procedures, expanded our scanty common vocabulary, found ways of correcting error. But, as Davidson says, our communication was incomplete; we don’t get everything right. I might have left the store with a soap dish, but I never did figure out the one thousand yen part; I still don’t understand why they marked my card, or what the card was for; and I can only guess what embarrassment my clumsiness caused the salespeople.

While it seems true that both parties in this exchange practiced a principle of charity, it is difficult to locate our mutual assumptions of rationality semantically, and one of Davidson’s central projects is to connect semantic issues with issues of truth. I made assumptions about buying: that after this confusing business with cards and giftwrap and drawings from boxes, I would be allowed to leave with my purchases. The salespeople made assumptions about selling: that someone approaching a counter with merchandise wants to buy. But these are not arguments, not connected propositions; to dispute them is not to contest a belief. These assumptions are predictions based on schemes of action. If somebody were to dispute one of these assumptions, the correct response would not be to argue for a proposition—to show its plausibility—but to demonstrate an action—to show the efficacy of a prediction, the coherence of an action schema. What we took for granted was not rationality as a mental state or intention of the subject, even the intention to get out of this scene without humiliation. The issues of interpretation would have been much the same if, in some howling lapse of taste, I were buying sneezing powder for an asthmatic grandmother. In this context, rationality implies nothing more than a plausible correspondence between means and ends. The principle of charity, therefore, does not signify that either party considers the other rational, only that each party
expects the other to act in a way that is appropriate to the setting—a much less significant assumption, and one without semantic force.

Further, our formulation of “passing rules” was neither a matter of extending our linguistic competence nor of learning the world in general. The interaction was quite specifically framed: both our good guesses and our mistakes were formed within the model of retail exchange, specifically the action of giving a customer a gift. It was within these frames, or routines, of institutional expectations that we made guesses about which meanings were likely. The salesperson assumed that I offered a thousand-yen note as payment, rather than as a personal gift; I assumed that whatever I picked out of the box would be mine to keep. None of these guesses is itself rational: they are not propositions that can be tested by argument; they do not depend on a belief that either speaker is capable of argument, or accountable for giving reasons. There is, thank goodness, no system of values or beliefs in which it is more rational to offer customers plastic soap dishes than it is to offer them hard candies.

Finally, in this setting, the principle of charity does not imply judgments about individual speakers of a language. The salesperson and I do not encounter each other as innocent speakers, testing the limits of our powers of interpretation. We encounter each other within a series of institutional contexts: this department store, with its particular ethos; the system of gift giving, the system of retail exchange in Japan, with its lavish expenditure of young women’s labor. We encounter each other, mutually, as strangers representing cultural stereotypes: the store girl meets the foreign humanities expert. Like the action scenarios through which we interpret specific utterances, these frames are not propositional. They can be represented as a series of assertions about gifts, or retail trade, or women’s labor, but they are not identical to those assertions. Relations among speakers are not exhausted by the propositions with which we might describe them. This is especially the case when such relations are embedded in such complex contexts as the cultural relation between Japan and the United States that exchanges a certain number of academic workers between the two countries, a relation that neither I nor the salesperson fully understand, although we understand each other only within its boundaries. Actions take place within institutional and historical frames, and they are represented, rather than reproduced, in language.

**Davidson and “Truth”**

To read my story of retail desperation through Davidson, then, is to be struck both by the analytic power with which he frames the communicative situation, and by the limits of his emphasis on the truth of propositions. Since, as rhetoricians, we are mortgaged to anti-foundationalism—what rhetorical theory could make peace with any guarantee of truth outside discourse?—we are also constantly fending off relativism. Davidson’s theory provides us with
a challenging and useful model of an anti-foundationalism that is not at all relativist. He works out a theory of truth from the relations and assertions implicit in language and communication. But there is more, in any communicative situation, for us to worry about. While it may be that nothing distinguishes knowing a language from knowing how to get along in the world, perhaps there is more involved in getting along in the world than knowing a language.

We experience this distance in our classrooms daily. Control of the propositional content of a discipline is only the first of the problems that a student writer faces; he or she must also undertake the action of writing a particular kind of academic text that takes this propositional content as its theme. Such a text is defined, at least in part, by the agency of the writer, specifically by the writer's skill at demonstrating compliance, at reproducing what has been offered in the classroom, varying its emphasis slightly, offering a new arrangement of details that might be called "her own." A student writer is taken up in an exchange much more complicated, and considerably more arbitrary, than my retail ballet of the soap dish. It may be that in walking a writer through this dance, we are not teaching language. And we are not teaching the world in general, only the discursive actions peculiar to a corner of it, to a specific institutional setting. But we are surely teaching something.

About that project, Davidson has important things to say. It is salutary, even emancipatory, to assume that most of what our students think is probably right and that our job is to find the explanatory devices that show us why and how it is right. It is even more praiseworthy to assume that, if we identify a real difference of opinion, we cannot judge in advance, outside the context of a particular discourse, whose opinion is true. Such a notion of truth invites us to ask our students hard questions—how else could we understand what they mean?—but it denies us any indifference to the truth of what student writers assert. It is a guard against the limits of a technical understanding of rhetoric. And, finally, Davidson's understanding of truth forestalls any assumption that we have much to gain from hiding our own ideas from students: it is not as if our ideas are so likely to be right that it would be unfair of us to argue for them.

When we move from questions of truth to the issues raised by the institutional situation of discourse, however, Davidson is much less helpful to us. And this limit proceeds from the strength, rather than the weakness, of his method. Davidson refrains from any easy speculation about the political implications of his theory. In the interview, we see him withdrawing from general questions, complicating issues, making questions more specific and more interesting. Such a discursive tactic is entirely coherent with a notion of truth that reasons from the intentions of speakers. It is difficult to relocate it in the more sedimented and obstructed terrain of institutionally and ideologically bound discourse.
Let me take as an example Davidson’s response to the question about whether women might think differently from men, not because I think that Davidson is particularly wrong in his answer (although I do disagree with him), but as a way of getting at the kind of disagreement that a theory of truth based on intentions and on interpretive charity cannot mediate. Davidson rephrases the question about women thinking differently from men as a question about the possibility that specific women might have languages specifically divergent from those of men. Such rephrasing of central political questions keeps us from easy generalizations: it also keeps us from hard and potentially useful ones. I would want to argue against the notion of women having a distinct rationality by uncoupling a description of gender differences in language from any assertion about the ways that men and women generally think. The theory that gender differences in language imply serious and fundamental distinctions in the forms of rationality available to men and women must either deny the connections among forms of rationality, or deny that both genders are rational. To assert a different mode of thought for men and women—even when the motive for this assertion is to proclaim the value of a peculiarly feminine “way of knowing”—is to deny those bonds of language that are our only stay against real irrationality, and to confine women to those discursive forms that traditionally define “their place.”

What would a Davidsonian interpreter do, faced with two groups of feminist theorists, one group believing that women think differently than men, and the other holding the position I just outlined: that all speakers have access to the same forms of rationality? Such a position poses both propositional and procedural problems. If indeed women think differently than men—a larger question than simply having some concepts that men don’t have—then all interpretations become deeply problematic in their performance of gender. Davidson has written in “Psychology as Philosophy” that “if translation succeeds, we have shown there is no need to speak of two conceptual schemes, while if translation fails, there is no ground for speaking of two.” If men and women think differently, then a translation that did not reproduce that difference would fail in its fidelity, while a translation that did reproduce the difference would not be understandable. The interpreter, then, cannot be indifferent to the truth of the propositions advanced in this argument and cannot undertake a radical interpretation without deciding the argument in advance.

On the level of procedure, a Davidsonian interpreter (of whatever gender) faces a second problem. If the interpreter extends the principle of charity to both the parties in this debate, then he or she must do so in accordance with some definition of rationality—and it is exactly that definition that is in question here. If the interpreter assumes that both speakers are rational, and defines rationality in a way that is gender specific, then the speaker who argues that rationality is the same for men and for women is self-contradictory, since the argument for a common rationality has been phrased
in a gendered language. A complementary contradiction emerges if the interpreter assumes that rationality is gender neutral. In both cases, the interpreter has produced a contradiction that is extraneous to the argument: it is the rule of charity, ironically, that produced contradictions in the discourse.

Context and Communicative Action
The argument about gender and rationality is an argument about language, and still more an argument about the frames of action suitable for the understanding of language. I discuss it as an instance of the kind of ideologically framed and politically inflected language that it seems to me Davidson’s theory can situate and contextualize, but not resolve.

To take my argument a step further, I would hold that Davidson’s understanding of rationality cannot support our interventions into such complex contexts because it provides for only one form of rationality, and for one means of understanding rationality: the reflection upon what is assumed and asserted in discourse. I would argue that it is characteristic of the discourses of modernity to follow quite distinct practices of rationality, and to locate those practices within frameworks of communicative action, so that a good reason within the context of public policy is quite different from a good reason in scientific controversy. Further, such frameworks are not sustained by assumptions of rationality—and sincerity, appropriateness, and other forms of discursive good faith—so much as they are interrupted when such assumptions are violated. Some readers will recognize in these two arguments two of the central assertions in the theory of Jürgen Habermas: the differentiation of reason, and the counterfactual force of the truth claims implicit in communication. Both of these arguments allow us to gain a stronger, more rhetorically situated purchase on the difficult issues that Davidson’s interview raises.

Davidson’s work shows us that issues of communication are issues of truth: while he might interpret this connection to mean that writing cannot be taught, we might interpret it to mean that writing cannot be taught without attending to what counts as truth. In this case, “attending to” means “talking about,” a demanding and exacting discussion to be carried out in our classrooms and in our dealings with one another. In that discussion, all of us—feminists, critical theorists, analytic philosophers—will need all the philosophic tools we can lay our hands on, and we can all be grateful to Davidson for those that he has provided us.

Temple University
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Notes
1I was helped in this initial encounter by my colleague Steven E. Cole, whose essay “The Scrutable Subject: Davidson, Literary Theory, and the Claims of Knowledge,” is forthcoming in Reed Way Dasenbrock’s Literary Theory After Davidson (Penn State UP). Cole’s argument, commentary, and generous guidance through the body of Davidson’s work have been invaluable.