

# Seminar on Quine and Davidson\*

PHIL 491/591  
Call no. 05652/05668, Winter 2006  
Mon & Wed 5–7 pm  
Class in Ellis Hall 215

Prof. Nathaniel Goldberg  
[goldberg@ohio.edu](mailto:goldberg@ohio.edu)  
Mon & Wed 4–5 & by appointment  
Office in Ellis Hall 220F

*All I am or ever hope to be is due to irritations of my surface, together with such latent tendencies to response as may have been present in my original germ plasm.* – W.V. Quine



*I conclude that there is no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what many linguists have supposed. There is therefore no such thing to be learned, mastered, or born with.* – Donald Davidson

## **Course Description**

With the possible exception of John Rawls, Willard van Orman Quine (1908–2000) was the most influential analytic philosopher of the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Besides his formal work in logic, set theory, and the philosophy of mathematics, Quine resurrected metaphysics from its positivist grave, naturalized epistemology for the legions of philosophers who came after him, and was the seminal philosopher of language second only, perhaps, to Gottlob Frege. Donald Davidson (1917–2003), Quine’s unofficial student, was among the most influential analytic philosopher of the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and Davidson’s influence may still be on the rise. Besides his formal work in decision theory, Davidson set the stage for all subsequent debates in the philosophies of action and mind, proposed a powerful account of linguistic interpretation, rejected external-world and other-mind skepticism, and did more than any other philosopher since, perhaps, Kant to provide a systematic philosophy of the human condition.

This course focuses on what are perhaps Quine’s three most influential articles and a late monograph that offers as a synopsis of his program. It then progresses to several different works by Davidson, from his seminal articles on action and mind, to those on meaning, conceptual relativism, skepticism, language, and literature.

## **Course Texts**

### **PRIMARY AND REQUIRED**

1. The Quine articles are all available on-line, from me, or in very many anthologies.
2. I would encourage buying (from Amazon or otherwise): Quine, W.V. 2004. *Pursuit of truth*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, revised edition. (Originally published 1992.)

---

\* The lectures, activities, and all materials associated with this class and developed by the instructor are copyrighted in the name of Nathaniel Goldberg on 3 January 2007.

3. The Davidson articles can all be accessed from any on-campus computer at <http://www.oxfordscholarship.com/oso/public/index.html>. For ease of access, and also for anyone who would like to purchase the anthologies in which they are located:
4. The first two readings are in Davidson, Donald. 2001. *Essays on actions and events*. New York: Oxford University Press. (Originally published in 1980.)
5. The next three readings are in Davidson, Donald. 2001. *Inquiries into truth and interpretation*. New York: Oxford University Press. (Originally published in 1984.)
6. The following three readings are in Davidson, Donald. 2002. *Subjective, intersubjective, objective*. New York: Oxford University Press.
7. The final three readings are in Davidson, Donald. 2005. *Truth, language, and history*. New York: Oxford University Press.

## **SECONDARY AND RECOMMENDED FOR PAPERS**

A dizzying amount has been written on Quine, and the corpus of writings on Davidson is quickly catching up. While some of the best resources are stand-alone articles (since I've read many of them, feel free to run titles by me), the best full-length treatments are these:

1. Gibson, Roger. 2004. *The Cambridge companion to Quine*. New York: Cambridge University Press. (Excellent articles by world authorities on Quine.)
2. Gibson, Roger. 1986. *The philosophy of W.V. Quine: an expository essay*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida. (Systematic formulation of Quine's views.)
3. Hahn, Lewis Edwin, ed. 1986. *The philosophy of W.V. Quine*. The library of living philosophers, vol. 19. La Salle, IL: Open Court. (Penetrating articles on Quine's work with responses by the author, though perhaps a bit dated.)
4. Hahn, Lewis Edwin, ed. 1999. *The philosophy of Donald Davidson*. The library of living philosophers, vol. 27. La Salle, IL: Open Court. (Penetrating articles on Davidson's work with responses by the author.)
5. Lepore, Ernest, ed. 1986. *Truth and interpretation: perspectives on the philosophy of Donald Davidson*. New York: Basil Blackwell. (Based on a conference on Davidson's work in the philosophy of language and epistemology.)
6. Lepore, Ernest and Brian P. McLaughlin, eds. 1985. *Actions and events: perspectives on the philosophy of Donald Davidson*. New York: Basil Blackwell. (Based on a conference on Davidson's work in the philosophies of action and mind.)
7. Lepore, Ernest and Kirk Ludwig. 2005. *Donald Davidson: truth, meaning, rationality and mind*. New York: Oxford University Press. (Systematic formulation of Davidson's views.)

## **Course Objectives**

1. To think through issues in epistemology and the philosophy of language, as well as related issues in metaphysics and the philosophies of action and mind, through the lens of Quine's and Davidson's works
2. To gain perspective on Quine's and Davidson's place in the history of analytic philosophy and of philosophy generally
3. To become smarter (yes, really)

## **Course Requirements and Grading**

1. Midterm
  - It will consist of questions based on the readings.
  - It will be take-home and due over email *before* class as per the schedule below.
  - It will contribute roughly 35% to the course grade.
2. Critical Presentation
  - It will *critique* one aspect of the reading for which you sign up.
  - It will last approximately 15 minutes.
  - Along with general class participation, it will contribute roughly 15% to the course grade.
3. Research paper
  - It will be 8–10 pp for undergraduates, 12–14 pp for graduate students.
  - It will require your coming up with a paper topic—and running it by me—as per the schedule below.
  - It will engage both primary and some secondary literature. (Again, feel free to check with me concerning the secondary literature.)
  - It will be due to me over email as per the schedule below.
  - It will contribute roughly 50% to the course grade.
4. Reaction papers (summaries, questions, reflections) on the day's readings
  - Each will be due to me via email sometime before class during the day for which the reading is due.
  - Each will be not much more than one paragraph long.
  - None will be graded but points will be deducted from the final grade for any not done.
  - Collectively these will be used for rounding a student's course grade; that is why the above assignments each count for only roughly a certain percentage of that grade.

## **Getting in Touch with Me**

Please feel free to come to my office hours, schedule a time to meet outside my office hours, or email me. If you email me, then please do so from your OU account (so that my email client won't confuse your message with spam).

## **Academic Dishonesty**

The Ohio University Student Code of Conduct prohibits all forms of academic dishonesty. These include cheating; plagiarism; forgery; furnishing false information to the University; and alteration or misuse of University documents, records, or identification. If a student is caught engaging in course-related academic dishonesty, that student will be prosecuted to the fullest extent possible. Ignorance of the Student Code or my enforcement of it is no excuse for academic dishonesty, so please talk to me should you have any questions.

## **Tentative Schedule**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Wed 3 Jan Introduction

### **QUINE**

Mon 8 Jan "Two Dogmas of Empiricism"

Wed 10 Jan "Epistemology Naturalized"

Wed 17 Jan "Ontological Relativity"

Mon 22 Jan *Pursuit of Truth*, I, II

Wed 24 Jan *Pursuit of Truth*, III, IV

Mon 29 Jan *Pursuit of Truth*, V

### **DAVIDSON**

Wed 31 Jan "Actions, Reasons, and Causes"

Mon 5 Feb "Mental Events" (with "Appendix")

Wed 7 Feb "Truth and Meaning" **& Midterm Assigned**

Mon 12 Feb "Radical Interpretation"

Wed 14 Feb "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme"

Mon 19 Feb "A Coherence Theory" (with "Appendix") **& Midterm Due**

Wed 21 Feb "First Person Authority"

Mon 26 Feb "Three Varieties of Knowledge"

Wed 28 Feb "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs"

Mon 5 Mar "Seeing Through Language"

Wed 7 Mar "Locating Literary Language" **& Topic for Final Paper Due**

### **CONCLUSION**

Tue 13 Mar **Final Paper Due**

*Philosophy can be more critical than science and more imaginative than art. It therefore can also be more difficult than either. Consequently, please feel free to approach me with any questions or concerns as the course progresses.*