MEMORIES OF DONALD DAVIDSON

I arrived at Stanford in August 1950 having just finished my PhD at Columbia University in New York City. Donald Davidson arrived just a few months later in January 1951. Our arrival just about doubled the number of full-time instructors in philosophy at Stanford.

When Don showed up, we had already started an informal reading seminar in logic and philosophy in the fall, and in that January of 1951 we had just begun reading the first volume of Hilbert and Bernays’ *Grundlagen der Mathematik*¹. He joined in with enthusiasm. There is a typical aspect of Don that this example brings out. His interests ranged far and wide. Not much later one of Don’s most popular courses at Stanford was on philosophy and literature – in this context ‘literature’ means what it means in Departments of English in American universities, a subject matter very far from Hilbert and Bernays’ reflections on the foundations of mathematics.

For reasons I can’t remember in detail now, rather early Don, the logician J.C.C. McKinsey, who had also joined the department in 1951, and I began discussing the theory of value in philosophy, concurrently with studying the theory of expected utility in game theory and economics. This led to our first joint publication: Davidson, McKinsey and Suppes, “Outline of a formal theory of value, I” (1955)². The writing was actually completed in 1953, shortly after McKinsey’s death in that year.

Certainly no later than the fall of 1953 or the winter term of 1954, Don and I began discussing how to think about experimentally measuring expected utility. We were, at that time, both naïve about running experiments. Neither of us had done so before, and neither of us had taken the kind of graduate courses that teach students how to do it. I am thinking here especially of students in psychology. So we got the cooperation of Sidney Siegel, who was at that time a graduate student in psychology at Stanford, to join us in designing and carrying out some experiments. Don and I also spent time on the theory of measurement needed as a background for empirical measurements of utility and subjective probability. This theoretical work led to our 1956 paper in *Econometrica*, “A finitistic axiomatization of subjective probability and utility”³. The intuitive ideas were very much those set forth much earlier by Frank Ramsey (1931)⁴. But the details were different, because of the finitistic requirement for experimentation that we imposed.

So in 1954 we conducted several experiments on measuring expected utility. A full report was given in our 1957 book with Siegel, *Decision Making: An Experimental Approach*⁵. The work was completed by sometime in 1955. This was the last collaborative published effort by Don and me, although we continued to talk about new projects that never got off the ground.
Let me end with some remarks on collaborating with him. The first, and perhaps most important, remark is that by and large we worked in a very congenial and easy way. I think it is fair to say that many people thought, probably correctly, that Don had a rather prickly personality. But at least not so in these early years. The collaboration with me was the most extensive in terms of published research of any such efforts during his long academic career, and so I can speak with some authority about what it was like to work with him. We argued a lot, but in the intellectual spirit of clarifying things that initially neither one of us understood well. We were exploring territory new to both of us and we instinctively recognized that we ourselves had different intellectual backgrounds, which could enable us to make separate but essential contributions to the research underway. Don’s thinking about our experiments was as careful and systematic as those of you who knew him would expect. Also, as the Preface to the 1957 book notes, we got help from a large number of persons, and I think we appreciated equally well how important this assistance had been to our work.

In later years our conversations did not ever turn to an in-depth analysis of our early years of collaboration. But I have tended to assume, in conversations with others about Don’s later influential ideas in many areas of analytic philosophy, that those three or four years of intensive work on subjective probability, utility and decisions played a role in his development of new and original ways of looking at belief, desire and meaning.

Notes

5. Donald Davidson/Patrick Suppes/Sidney Siegel, *Decision Making: An Experimental Approach*.