Chapter VI

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THE INFLUENCE OF QUINE AND DAVIDSON ON AUSTRALIAN PHILOSOPHY

W.V. Quine presented the *Gavin David Young Lectures* in the University of Adelaide in 1959; in 1968, Donald Davidson was the presenter of those lectures at the same university. Whilst neither event marked the beginning of interest in the works of these philosophers in Australia, both events marked the beginning of a dramatic increase in the level of interest shown by Australian philosophers in those works; and they marked these processes in the best possible way — by stimulating them. And it is no mere happy coincidence that the first two American philosophers to be widely influential in Australia should each have been introduced to Australian audiences 'live', and at the height of their powers, through a lecture series organised by J.J.C. Smart. Smart had both a lively early awareness of the importance of Quine\(^1\) and Davidson and an enthusiastic eagerness to promote interest in both quite generally. He came to support each on important matters of doctrine, without ever being a slavish disciple of either. He deserves our gratitude for both introductions, for even those who would disagree greatly with both Quine and Davidson on most mat-

\(^1\) As early as 1953, Smart had produced a critical notice of Quine's *From a Logical Point of View* for the *A.J.P.* ([19]). It is fascinating and illuminating to compare his enthusiastic, but by no means uncritical, account of that work with his later writings about Quine.
ters of importance would find it hard convincingly to maintain that assimilating the work of these philosophers has done us more harm than good.

In 1959, most Australian philosophers who looked overseas for guidance or support in problematic, methodology and ideology looked to Britain (and often to Wittgenstein or Ryle) for inspiration. Quine was the first American philosopher of the analytic school to have his work taken seriously, by many Australians, as a highly appealing organic whole. This was no accident. There were several features of it which combined to generate substantial interest. On the one hand, the empiricist tradition was well established, and not just in Sydney. The demise of verificationist positivism created, for scientifically-inclined philosophers, a vacuum which Quinean metaphysics seemed particularly well-suited to fill. Further, Quine had a 'grand vision', and ambitious systematic philosophy had often in the past proved to be attractive to Australian philosophers. (Even in Melbourne where systematic philosophy had long been treated with suspicion, the then-recent dominance of Wittgenstein now seems, ironically, to be an instance of this phenomenon. Although officially anti-systematic, his philosophy was assuredly ambitious. His followers must certainly have appeared to outsiders to have embraced an ideology, however metaphysically minimalist it might have been.) Thirdly, Quine had done much to promote the widespread acceptance of modern logic as an important and powerful analytic tool, and logic was fast gaining ground in Australia, especially amongst younger philosophers. Finally, Quine combined a taste for sweeping synthesis with rigorous analytic work in philosophical logic, and this commended his work even to those who had little antecedent interest in scientifically-founded ideology.

A decade later, when Davidson began to exert an increasing influence, his popularity was unsurprising. He had (for many) a beguiling appeal, both as a programmatic philosopher and also as an analytic philosopher of ingenuity and charm. Again, a combination of factors made his appearance timely. First, his work shared with that of Quine the attraction of blending analytical rigour and subtlety with systematic ambition. Secondly, much of that work could be viewed as straightforwardly descended from Quine and this facilitated speedy assimilation. Third, with modern logic now well entrenched in Aus-

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2 See chapter 2, this volume, for Graeme Marshall’s lively account of this era.