

Donnellan at Cornell

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In Joseph Almog and Paulo Leonardi (eds.), *The Philosophy of Keith Donnellan*. Oxford University Press, 2012

From 1964 until 1968 I was a graduate student in the Philosophy Department — that is, in the Sage School of Philosophy— at Cornell University, where Keith Donnellan was a professor. I had gone to Cornell mainly because Max Black and Norman Malcolm were there, and I thought it was the best place to learn more about the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein, whom I had come to admire as an undergraduate. Black and Malcolm were indeed wonderful teachers and gifted and accomplished philosophers, and I learned a lot about philosophy and about Wittgenstein from them. After a year or so, like most Cornell graduate students of that era, I could carry on a lengthy philosophical conversation about Wittgenstein that proceeded mostly by section numbers from his *Tractatus* and *Philosophical Investigations*. Nevertheless, by the time I left Cornell, my head was more full of Keith Donnellan and Sydney Shoemaker than Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Donnellan was an extraordinarily nice person and an effective and encouraging teacher. He also became a good friend. Still, although he was young then, he was a professor and an important philosopher already, and so, in my mind, in spite of himself, an August Person. By my third year at Cornell my wife Frenchie and I often played bridge with Donnellan, whom I called “Professor Donnellan.” During one bridge game he said, “For crying out loud, don’t call me ‘Professor Donnellan,’ call me ‘Keith.’” I was incapable of calling a professor by his first name, but I dared not completely ignore his request. So for the last year or so I always referred to him with “you” or when that would not work by saying something inaudible, while making my intended referent clear. Thus, though Donnellan wasn’t thinking too much about indexicals and demonstratives then, perhaps he got me to thinking about them.

In seminars these days I assign a lot of Donnellan and talk a lot about Donnellan. Some of the time I say “Donn’ellan,” the preferred pronunciation, as I now know. But a good bit of the time I slip up and say “Donnell’ an.” This confuses students, who ask which is the right pronunciation. The explanation is that until he moved to U.C.L.A. in 1970, everyone in philosophy called Donnellan “Donell’ an.” The reason for this, I think,

is as follows. When Donnellan arrived as a graduate student at Cornell, Max Black called him “Donnell’ an.” Donnellan was too shy to correct him, so that pronunciation stuck for his graduate career. After getting his Ph.D., he taught for a couple of years at the Air Force Academy, and then returned to Cornell as an Assistant Professor. It was an opportune time to correct the pronunciation, but he was still too much in awe of Max Black, and so he was “Donell’ an” again as he climbed through the professorial ranks at Cornell, and that’s how graduate students of my era learned to say his name. When he came to U.C.L.A., however, he set everyone straight. (I couldn’t keep the new pronunciation straight, so I finally started calling him ‘Keith.’) Maybe that’s not the right story, but I like it, because it suggests that he was in awe of August Persons too. I’m sticking to it, until he tells me a better one.

My first semester at Cornell there was no Wittgenstein taught. Malcolm was visiting U.C.L.A. Max Black taught a seminar about J.L. Austin’s work on Speech Acts. H.P. Grice was visiting, and gave as a seminar the material that later became “Logic and Conversation.” Donnellan taught logic. We whipped through Quine’s *Methods of Logic*, and then studied P. F. Strawson’s *An Introduction to Logical Theory*. Grice’s seminar had no textbook, but his main stalking horses were A.J. Ayer, Malcolm, Austin, and Strawson, all of whom he thought had made philosophical claims that depended on confusing what is strictly said or implied and what is conversationally implicated. I practically memorized Austin’s works, poured over Strawson, J.L. Urmson, and Geoffrey Warnock, and hung on Grice’s every word. So, before Malcolm returned and Wittgenstein studies began in earnest the second semester, I had been inoculated to a certain extent by immersion in the Oxford philosophy of the time.

All of this changed in my third year, 1966-67. Both Wittgenstein and Oxford were eclipsed, as I was introduced to something I suppose we might call “American Referential Realism.” Donnellan had just published “Reference and Definite Descriptions.” In his seminar he worked out some of the ideas and arguments that were to appear in “Proper Names and Identifying Descriptions,” the main point of which is that contrary to what Frege and Russell and Searle and particular Strawson had claimed, you don’t need a backing of descriptions that identifies the bearer of the name in order to use the name to refer to its bearer. He talked a lot about what he called “genuine reference.”

He talked about descriptions and names and demonstratives; he talked about Russellian propositions; he talked about how historical chains seemed to play a role that somehow seemed to preclude the necessity for identifying descriptions; he talked about thinking and talking about things and having things in mind. He put not only the arguments but also all of the problems for his emerging view right up front. He seemed to be buying into Bertrand Russell’s idea of acquaintance. This idea had led Russell to the conclusion that we couldn’t really strictly think about ordinary things, but only sort of one-dimensional things, like one’s own sense-data. Donnellan wanted the concept of “thinking about,” and maybe some condition on it like acquaintance, but not the slide into sense-data as the only knowables. What to do about modes of presentation, identity statements, nonexistence—all of the things that motivated the need for identifying descriptions? Well, he didn’t claim to know, but tried out different ideas. What about belief-reports? He had some ideas. But he didn’t know for sure.

The seminar was incredible. Most of the next twenty-five years in the philosophy of language, at least in that part of the philosophy of language that has been my home, were foreshadowed in one way or another. A lesser philosopher than Donnellan would perhaps have been more quick to try to develop a general theory, and lost track of the essence of the ideas with which he had been blessed. But for Donnellan, it was clear, philosophy was not a matter of getting together a comprehensive theory, but of getting straight as one possibly could about what certain examples, certain distinctions, certain ideas that flew in the face of orthodox consensus, really came to. It was also supposed to be enjoyable, and to involve a common search for truth rather than mutual destruction of views and egos. I don’t mean to suggest that Donnellan told us to operate that way, he simply exemplified it. When Donnellan had to destroy a view, he did it gently, if possible pointing to insights that underlie it. To me Donnellan seemed to combine the brilliance of Max Black, the doggedness and sense of philosophical problems of Malcolm, Shoemaker’s attention to detail and willingness to go after hard problems, and Grice’s solid philosophical intuitions and eye for examples. In that seminar, he rose above these other heroes, and became my Ideal.

I remember being impressed at Donnellan’s teaching style, in his seminar and in other classes of his which I attended, and for which I sometimes was a teaching assistant.

He would pace, often smoking, which was allowed. (In fact, it was almost required of philosophy teachers in those days.) I don't remember much in the way of written notes, except for the logic course. He seemed to just be up there thinking, philosophizing, mulling things over in a public way. The students were honored that he would actually philosophize with them, rather than merely read from old notes.

When I've tried to imitate Donnellan, to live up to my Ideal, it hasn't always gone so well. The students mostly suggest I should prepare my lectures better, rather than appreciate the fact that I am trying to actually do philosophy. But Donnellan could make it work. I'm very grateful that I was there forty-five years ago to witness it, to benefit from his teaching and absorb his ideas, as best I could.