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PART III

EPILOGUE

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DAVID FOSTER WALLACE AS STUDENT: A MEMOIR

JAY GARFIELD

THIS WAS all a long time ago, and I cannot be sure that my memory is entirely accurate, especially regarding details; but David was memorable enough that I think that most of our time together is burned into my brain. I was teaching then at Hampshire College. My close friend and colleague Bill de Vries, then teaching at Amherst College phoned (e-mail was still a rarity) late in the fall semester to ask me if I would be willing to talk with an honors student he was advising. Much of my work at the time was on natural language semantics and logic; Bill knew that I was supervising another student—Jamie Rucker—on a semantics thesis; and he suspected that his student's thesis was headed in that direction. He did mention that this student was uncommonly talented, that he was the son of the renowned philosopher James Wallace, that he was simultaneously writing honors theses in philosophy and English, and that the English thesis was to be a novel. I agreed to meet with him, and a few days later David Wallace turned up in my office.

It was evident immediately that Bill was right about the talent. David's passion and aptitude for philosophy were obvious. He wanted to talk about Taylor's fatalism paper, the many failed attempts to refute its argument, and he proposed to explore a new refutation. David came prepared. His grasp of the literature was sure, even pro-

fessional. His insight into the reasons that prior attempts to reply to Taylor failed was not just accurate but also nuanced and precise. He felt that Brown was on the right track but also saw the inadequacies of his approach and wanted to talk about how to develop Brown's ideas. It all came out in a torrent, but a carefully constructed torrent. I probably guessed at the time that it was rehearsed, but over the ensuing months in which I worked closely with David, it was clear that he simply thought and spoke so clearly that I now guess that this unlikely introduction was most likely spontaneous.

I was also struck by the fact that David's reaction to Taylor's argument and to the failure of so many philosophers to have solved it was righteous indignation. He was outraged that Taylor sought, and claimed to have derived, an explicitly metaphysical conclusion from purely logical or semantic premises; and he was genuinely offended by the failure of professional philosophers to have put things right. His depth of feeling about this circumstance, and his identification of the nerve of the problem as this derivation of substance from form, as opposed to the commitment to fatalism itself, bespoke an unusual combination of philosophical passion and intellectual maturity. I was very happy to take him on.

David agreed with my suggestion that a solution to this problem would have to be both philosophical and formal. But at that time, he had a background only in elementary logic. So we began with a tutorial on tensed and modal logic so that he would have the formal tools necessary to solve the problem. We met at least once, and often twice weekly for the remainder of that semester and for most of the spring, often overlapping our meetings with those I held with Jamie. David quickly, with Jamie's help, mastered the basics of Montague grammar and tensed modal logic and was immediately ready to apply his newly acquired formal skills to the problem at hand. Those meetings were energetic, involving much leaping to the blackboard, sometimes with chalk—though often with erasers, given our many false starts—and we made steady progress.

It is hard at this point to say with any certainty who introduced what ideas into those conversations, and would probably have been

difficult to do so at the time. These were discussions among colleagues, not ordinary supervision meetings between teacher and student. We established early on the importance of physical modality to the argument, and the need to distinguish between situational possibility and general possibility in order to model the interaction between tense and modality. In one of those conversations early in the spring we hit upon the difference, so central to his solution, between “couldn’t have” and “can’t have,” and that insight opened the doors to the solution.

I am pretty sure, but not positive, that I proposed system J and the broad sketch of its semantics (that is probably the reason David calls it J); I am also pretty sure, and a little more positive, that as soon as I did, David ran with it and showed both how it solved the central problem of demonstrating the invalidity of Taylor’s argument (as well as vindicating Brown’s basic intuition) and how treating time and physical modality this way makes sense of a number of other related puzzles about physical modality and time. His philosophical instincts were sure; his thought was precise. The thesis came together in a matter of a few weeks. David’s initial ideas were all confirmed and made precise. I regarded his argument as decisive then, and I still do.

I knew at that time, as I mention above, that David was also writing a novel as a thesis in English. But I never took that seriously. I thought of David as a very talented young philosopher with a writing hobby, and did not realize that he was instead one of the most talented fiction writers of his generation who had a philosophy hobby. Of course, he returned to philosophy for a while years later, and I am sure that had he stuck with it, and had he lived, he would have been a major figure in our field. I cannot understand what drove David to take his own life; his ending is a source of great sadness; but the memory of our brief time as colleagues is one of pure joy.

