

## In Memory of Dick Jeffrey

Princeton, February 5, 2003

Dick's philosophical career is intimately intertwined with the story of 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy. He worked with Carnap at Chicago, with Gödel at the Institute for Advanced Study, and with Hempel at Princeton. His work is unified by his development of Bayesianism, the view that making up one's mind is a matter of adopting judgmental probabilities. He was the most influential philosopher working in decision theory. He was also a major proponent of developing and securing the heritage of logical empiricism, himself championing *radical probabilism*, a view that denies objective probability and abandons attempts to analyze judgment into a rational and an empirical component, without residue.

Decision theory was not a discipline prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Thinking about rationality became more systematic when it was done in terms of the connection between preferences, utility, and probability. Such connections became important when logical empiricism raised doubts about the meaning of utility and probability, suggesting that those notions could be accounted for only if derived from preferences, a notion that seemed empirically accessible. While Dick never subscribed to this foundational role of preferences, his most lasting contribution to philosophy, I believe, is an account of the relations among those notions, and thus a theory of rationality in action. His proposal appealed to many philosophers, but less so to economists and statisticians, largely, I suppose, because its mathematics are less tractable than those of its main competitor, an account due to Leonard Savage. Nevertheless, Bayesianism as such, it is fair to say, has won the day against *its* competitors: the view that making up one's mind turns on subjective probabilities has come to stay across disciplines. Dick has done more than anybody in recent memory to shape the philosophical sides of this view.

At this stage, the future of decision theory as a *philosophical* discipline is a bit uncertain. Still, the concept of rationality is one of the basic notions under philosophical scrutiny, and systematic questions involving the epistemic and the valuational component of rationality will inevitably lead to the sort of inquiry at the center of Dick's work. Dick's work on decision theory and the nature of probability will remain the seminal work to consult. It will remain a source of inspiration as a genuine, deep, and lasting contribution to knowledge.

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Dick had a wonderful sense for what was important, and for what was worth doing, as opposed to what he sometimes called "plausible trash." He was truly unpretentious, in a manner in which I think extremely few people are, and his sources of self-esteem seemed to be independent of how he thought he compared to others. It is that feature that I have always most admired about him, and one by which I will continue to feel humbled. Working with Dick as a dissertation supervisor was quite unique. For his

ways of caring about others did not naturally include this sort of supervisory activity. He was either a reader, more or less interested, or he was a co-author, officially or in spirit; what did not interest him he could not bring himself to think about, and when he had to attend a meeting when his mind was otherwise busy, his mind was simply *otherwise busy*. But what intrigued him he would eagerly absorb and ponder, never concerned to toot his own horn, but always to find out what is right. I was fortunate to become his co-author in my first year at Princeton, after I had been assigned to him as a first-year advisee. His view on the republic of letters, one might say, using more verbose language than he himself would use, was as thoroughly and naturally democratic as it could be. Also, while it did take him a while to remember my name and come to terms with its apparently odd spelling, his natural warmth contributed more than anything to my sense of feeling at home in this department. Thus he saved me from at least a fair amount of the anxieties inherent in grad student life at distinguished institutions. During my last year at Princeton we even shared his office, and it was from his office phone that I accepted my first job. As far as he was concerned, however, I had accepted the wrong job, and after I had moved from Yale to Harvard, he once told one of my new senior colleagues that he was quite glad I had moved and, I quote, “had stopped banging on about Nietzsche at Yale.” I do, however, still bang on about Nietzsche. So although I did not always take his advice, I will always remain deeply grateful to Dick for all he did for me.

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And then there was his cancer. I remember when he was first diagnosed and was told that most people with that condition die on the lower side of two or three years; he beat the cancer for more than five years. I remember how he was once getting deeply depressed when he tried to come to terms with the finality of his condition. And I remember how later he told me that he was just not going to let the cancer ruin his life: that his life was *his* to live. I was originally supposed to see him on the day when he died, and after we rescheduled I was supposed to see him on the day when he was buried. Ultimately he died in a way in which I did not even know one could die – with his mind clear, his new book finished, and not much affected by pain. He died in the midst of a truly wonderful family, and I would think it was only because he was surrounded by such a family that he could beat the cancer for so long.

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From *my* perspective the world is a better place because of him, and I claim that for any  $n-1$  people for whom that is so I find an  $n$ -th person for whom that is so as well, and thus it must be true: the world is a better place because of him, period. I am glad I could express this gratitude while he was still around, at the Tribute to Teaching Dinner in 1999. Dick’s modesty made it a subtle assignment to praise him publicly, and worse, while he was standing right next to me at the lecturn. After doing so, I quickly moved on to a funny story. I conclude by telling you that story because I suppose he would want to be remembered in a manner that includes a funny story, and because he himself was bemused by it. The year is 1996, and we are on our way to Caen, Normandy, for a conference in honor of John Rawls and the Nobel Prize recipient John Harsanyi. At the

airport in Paris Dick kindly helps Harsanyi with his luggage. (Harsanyi is fragile and dies a few years later; note that both of them became famous for thinking about processing information.) Since they come late and there is nobody else around, Dick assumes the remaining luggage is Harsanyi's, and noticing no objection, he claims it all. Surprised about the heavy suitcases, Dick asks Harsanyi what is in there; somewhat puzzled Harsanyi answers "books?" When upon arrival in Caen, Dick takes the luggage to Harsanyi's room, Harsanyi points out that two pieces are not his, Harsanyi's, but *his*, Dick's, a fact, of course, that Dick denies. (When asked earlier what was in that suitcase, Harsanyi thought that Dick jokingly asked him to guess what he, Dick, might have in there.) It turned out that one of the two misplaced pieces of luggage was not meant to go to Paris, but to Copenhagen, and the other one belonged to a Japanese tourist, presumably in a group that had long left for Rome or Heidelberg.

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I miss him dearly: as a supervisor and co-author; as a philosopher, as a friend, and as a truly wonderful human being. I will always remember him as a source of inspiration in all those roles. The world *has* been a better place because of him, and I will continue to learn from him.