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book review

Neo-Davidsonian Metaphysics: from the True to the Good

By Samuel C. Wheeler III

Routledge, 2014. Pp. 239. ISBN 978-0-415-85728-4. £80.00 (\$125) (hbk).

Published in *the International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 22.2, pp. 286-291.

There are some very minor differences between this text and the published version.

Imagine John. John is a second hand car dealer, occasionally supplementing his income by selling the still usable parts of cars that he cannot sell. Some day someone dumps a two-wheeled vehicle on his doorstep. John has never seen one before, and doesn't really know what to do with it. (The thought of riding it – or that that would even be possible – certainly never occurs to him.) There are two words written on a big roundish part near the middle. He cannot make out the first, but the second is “Davidson”. Not knowing what to do with this “Davidson”, John decides to disassemble it to see whether he can sell the parts. He tries out the parts one after another by putting them in a car, but finds that he cannot use most of them and discards them.

John's response to the motorbike he finds on his doorstep is embarrassingly similar to the reception of Donald Davidson's philosophy by most analytic philosophers, including many “Davidsonians”. Rather than trying to “ride the Davidson”, it is taken to be a random collection of car parts and disassembled. (See Jeff Malpas's introduction in *Dialogues with Davidson* (MIT Press, 2011) for a similar critique.) Samuel Wheeler's book *Neo-Davidsonian Metaphysics* is pleasantly atypical: he hops on, tinkers a bit with the engine (like any “true” biker), and is off on a transcontinental road trip. (Or actually, Wheeler has been tinkering with Davidson for a few decades, and that tinkering ultimately culminated in this “transcontinental road trip”.)

Nearly everything published about Davidson's philosophy until now is introduction, explanation, interpretation, and/or assessment of potential car parts, but Wheeler does actually *use* Davidson's philosophy, builds upon it, and develops it further. He sets out, as he writes himself, to “relaunch the Davidson program”, and succeeds, making the book the first substantial contribution to Davidson's philosophy since Davidson. Nevertheless, this doesn't mean that Wheeler's book is without its flaws or problems, and some of these I will discuss below.

The book consists of two parts, but there is no sharp boundary between the two. The first, consisting of chapters 1 to 4 and possibly 5 and 6, introduces Wheeler's interpretation and elaboration of the relevant parts of Davidson's philosophy; the second, consisting of chapters 7 to 10 and possibly 5 and 6 again, applies it to deflate some debates in the metaphysics of time (ch. 7), to Sorites problems (ch. 8), and to ethics (chs. 9 and 10). I will focus my attention in this review on the first part. (A chapter by chapter overview of the book is given in the introduction, which can be downloaded from Wheeler's personal homepage.)

In the introduction, Wheeler identifies three “crucial parts” of Davidson's philosophy for his own further development thereof. These are (1) a disquotational understanding of truth and the rejection of truthmakers, (2) a minimal/formal conception of semantics (separating semantics from “theory”), and (3) “interpretation as rationalization”. To these three at least two further foundational ideas need to be added: (4) identity is always relative to a predicate, and (5) there are no inherent “joints” in reality. (4) and (5) are essential for the argument in the first four chapters of the book (which serve as a foundation for the rest), but although I think that Davidson should have held these views or something similar, I'm not convinced that there is sufficient evidence that he actually did. This is not necessarily a problem, of course, and Wheeler makes explicit that he deviates from Davidson's views at some points – he writes that his “book argues that Davidson is implicitly

committed to some views he did not hold” (p. 13). However, in case of (4) and (5), Wheeler claims that these are views that Davidson *did* hold.

Wheeler’s source for (4) is a remark that Davidson apparently made at some symposium “somewhere on the West Coast in the 1990s”, and that serves as the epigraph of chapter 1. Although it may very well be the case that the idea that “sameness is always relative to a predicate” is some kind of Davidsonian variant of Quine’s famous dictum “no entity without identity”, I have been unable to find anything that is unambiguously similar to (4) in Davidson’s published writings. I think it is plausible that Davidson held *something like* (4), but it is unfortunate that there is no stronger backing for this foundational claim in Wheeler’s argument.

The case for (5) is even thinner. Every time Wheeler claims that Davidson rejected given objects or inherent joints in reality, he refers to just one source: “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme”. That paper, however, has the dubious honor of being the most obscure of Davidson’s writings (if not of all influential writings in analytic philosophy), and can be interpreted easily to argue for (rather than against) joints in reality. One of Davidson’s arguments against conceptual schemes is that those “organize” what is already organized, suggesting that the organization metaphor is (in his understanding) really a reorganization of what is already organized (*i.e.* given) by reality. More than its opposite, Davidson seems to argue that the joints between “knives and forks, railroads and mountains, cabbages and kingdoms” are very real (but I must admit that some parts of “On the Very Idea” are too obscure – to me at least – to be sure what exactly the argument is). In any case, “On the Very Idea” does not clearly support Wheeler’s interpretation (if at all), but more problematic is that there is textual evidence suggesting that Davidson did actually hold the opposite of (5), that is, that there are joints in reality, or “divisions in nature”:

[N]ature is pretty much how we think it is. There really are people and atoms and stars, given what we mean by the words. The infertility of hybrids defines real species, though this matters only to those interested in the relevant concepts. This explains why it is foolish to deny that these divisions exist in nature, whether or not anyone entertains the thought. Even if no one had ever had a concept, there would be species, though of course this is our concept and our word, born of our interests. (“Interpretation: Hard in Theory, Easy in Practice”, in M. De Caro (ed.), 1999, *Interpretations and Causes*, Kluwer, p. 38.)

Furthermore, in many of Davidson’s (later) papers there is an implicit or even explicit commitment to the existence of discrete objects and events in the external world. (See, for example, “The Second Person” and “Locating Literary Language”.) On the other hand, Davidson did compare different conceptualizations to measurements of temperature in Celsius or Fahrenheit on a few occasions, suggesting that in at least some cases or respects, nature/reality is not divided (*i.e.* without joints). Whether Davidson did hold (5) is, therefore, difficult to say with certainty, but it seems to me that there is more and less ambiguous evidence against that claim than for it.

Perhaps a more interesting question than whether Davidson did hold (5) is that whether he *should* have held (5). Wheeler obviously believes that (5) coheres with Davidson’s philosophy more than its opposite, and as I have expressed a somewhat similar view elsewhere, I mostly agree with him about this (see my 2012, “[Dharmakīrti, Davidson, and Knowing Reality](#)”, *Comparative Philosophy* 3.1: 30-57). Nevertheless, considering the central role of (5) in Wheeler’s book, the insufficiently supported – and possibly false – claim that this was Davidson’s view is a serious weakness. On the other hand, Wheeler’s arguments for the truth of (5) in chapter 2 are thoughtful and mostly convincing.

Wheeler develops (4) and (5) – together with (1) to (3) – into a theory he calls “relative essentialism”, and an application thereof to the philosophy of mind, which he calls “innocuous dualism”. It is these theories, especially the latter, which he contrasts with Davidson’s: innocuous dualism is Wheeler’s response to Davidson’s anomalous monism. I am not convinced, however, that the difference is as great as Wheeler seems to think it is, but let’s briefly introduce relative essentialism first before discussing that suspicion.

Relative essentialism belongs to a minor trend in analytic philosophy of the last three or four decades of incorporating elements of relativism into a broadly and minimally realist framework, resulting effectively in intermediate positions between realism and relativism or anti-realism. Well known examples hereof are Hilary Putnam's internal realism and John Searle's perspectivalism, but the list of analytic philosophers who defended variants of what I shall call "perspectival realism" is much longer. What these theories have in common is that they combine objective truth as (more or less) correspondence with the way things are (but usually not as sentence by sentence correspondence with external facts), with the idea that there are multiple, equally correct ways ("perspectives", *etc.*) to divide reality into objects and events.

In Wheeler's brand of perspectival realism, objects and events are "posits", and because such posits are necessarily dependent on objective reality, they have "essences", but because there are per (5) no givens in reality, these are "relative essences". A recurring metaphor in the book is that of a football field that can be measured in different units (reminding of Davidson's aforementioned comparison of different conceptualizations to measurements of temperature in Celsius or Fahrenheit): the field is not intrinsically divided into meters or yards, and in that sense, there are no objectively/externally real meters or yards (as kinds of entities), but those units or posits are based on something objectively/essentially real, and we need them to talk about that. And "just as space is not given in meters, so the physical world of objects is not given in chairs, squirrels, and hadrons" (p. 64).

Fallout of this idea, "relative essentialism", is that multiple objects – that is, multiple posits – can be co-located. Hence, for relative essentialism there is no philosophical problem of the statue and the clay. Applying this to the philosophy of mind leads Wheeler to suggest that mental and physical events are similarly co-located posits. They are, however, essentially different in the same way that the statue and the clay are essentially different: they have different (objectively real) identity conditions, different "essences". Consequently, while Davidson argued for anomalous monism: physical and mental events are the same events under different descriptions; Wheeler suggests "innocuous dualism": physical and mental events are essentially different but co-located.

It seems to me that both Wheeler and Davidson (would) accept that numerical identity of any x and y of any kind F is determined by an F -specific essential identity relation S^F :

$$(EI) \quad \forall x,y,F [Fx \wedge Fy \wedge S^F(x,y) \rightarrow x = y]$$

In case of Wheeler, (EI) follows from (4); in case of Davidson, (EI) is what underlies his arguments on the identity conditions of events. For events *simpliciter*, Davidson argued at different points in his career that S^F is sharing causes and effects, or sharing spatio-temporal location – that is, if E stands for events *simpliciter* and is substituted for F in (EI), then S^E would be one of those two options.

Let us assume that there are a mental event m and a physical event p , and that all mental events are events and that all physical events are events. Then, if $S^E(m,p)$ – that is, if m and p are sharing causes and effects *or* sharing spatio-temporal location (where the choice depends on the identity condition S^E we adopt) – m is numerically identical with p ($m=p$). However, if this is right, then mental events are physical events after all – albeit under a more general description only: they are the same "events" *simpliciter* – and there is no substantial difference between innocuous dualism and anomalous monism. Taking perspectival realism to a higher level: they are merely different perspectives. Of course, Wheeler can reject this conclusion on a number of grounds: (i) rejecting that mental events and physical events are events, (ii) rejecting that events *simpliciter* is a genuine count noun (*i.e.* a genuine class of discrete entities), or (iii) rejecting that there is an identity criterion for events *simpliciter*. None of those seems a particularly attractive option, however.

Furthermore, if numerical identity of objects is determined by spatial location and extension, then very much the same applies to objects. Unless "object" is rejected as a genuine count noun (Wheeler does reject "is a being" on that ground), the statue and the clay are the same object, but again: they are the same only *under that description* (*i.e.* as "object" *simpliciter*). In other words,

identity is relative to a description or a predicate indeed, but note that this claim is weaker than (4): it doesn't state that this is *always* the case. The weaker claim leaves open the possibility that there are some entities whose identity is description-independent. If that is the case, there would be some joints in reality (or divisions in nature), namely those that demarcate those description-independent entities. Consequently, a weaker version of (4) also leads to a weaker version of (5): there are or may be some joints in reality, but some or many of our predicate boundaries do not correspond to real joints. And considering the above discussion of Davidson's (non-) adherence to (5), this seems closer to Davidson's position than Wheeler's strong versions of (4) and (5). The weaker versions might be more defensible as well, but that is not a matter that can (or should) be decided in a short book review.

In any case, if my above comments are right, those only point out a few relatively minor problems in what is otherwise an admirable achievement. Wheeler takes some of the core ideas of Davidson's philosophy, and more than Davidson himself ever did, forges those into a single, clear and coherent theory. A single theory, moreover, that has a variety of philosophical applications and implications. I only touched upon some of the ideas in the first part of the book, but there is much more to contemplate in the second. For example, in discussing the Sorites paradox, Wheeler points out that indeterminability does not imply indeterminateness, which – oddly, I realize now – seems to be commonly assumed. And in his discussion of the semantics of predication he argues that there is no fundamental difference between, for example, “red” and “good”: saying that something is red means that it is red for that kind of thing (which has objective truth criteria), and “good” works in the exact same way. But even more than in these and many other important ideas, the real value of the book lies in its being evidence that the Davidsonian program is not dead, but is alive and well, and probably more fertile than any other program in philosophy.