Samuel C. Wheeler III*

Quine, Davidson, Relative Essentialism and the Question of Being

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Abstract: Relative essentialism, the view that multiple objects about which there are distinct de re modal truths can occupy the same space at the same time, is a metaphysical view that dissolves a number of metaphysical issues. The present essay constructs and defends relative essentialism and argues that it is implicit in some of the ideas of W. V. Quine and Donald Davidson. Davidson's published views about individuation and sameness can accommodate the common-sense insights about change and persistence of Aristotle and Kripke. Aristotle and Kripke have to give up unmediated direct reference resting on a unique correct articulation of reality into entities. Davidson has to acknowledge a distinction between descriptions giving accidental and those giving essential features of an object. Quine and Davidson were in a position to be a relative essentialist, but were over-impressed by supervenience. The relative essentialist view of beings developed from Quine and Davidson strongly suggests the Heideggerian distinction between beings and Being, and is the perspective from which analytic philosophy can engage that topic. Relative essentialism also connects analytic philosophy to Derrida's thinking about difference.

Keywords: Quine, Davidson, Kripke, Aristotle, supervenience, sorites, essentialism, necessity, truth, mental events, Being, Heidegger, Derrida, difference

“The beginning of wisdom is the realization that sameness is always relative to a predicate.”¹

1 Introduction

Relative essentialism, the view that multiple objects about which there are distinct de re modal truths can occupy the same space at the same time, is a metaphysical view that dissolves a number of metaphysical issues. The present essay constructs and defends relative essentialism and argues that it is implicit in some of the ideas of W. V. Quine and Donald Davidson. Davidson's published views about individuation and sameness can accommodate the common-sense insights about change and persistence of Aristotle and Kripke. Aristotle and Kripke have to give up unmediated direct reference resting on a unique correct articulation of reality into entities. Davidson has to acknowledge a distinction between descriptions giving accidental and those giving essential features of an object. Both Quine and especially Davidson were in a position to be the right kind of essentialist, but were over-impressed by supervenience. The picture relative essentialism presents of how things are strongly implies something akin to Heidegger's distinction between Being and beings. An analytic philosopher must respond to the Question of Being. Relative essentialism also connects analytic philosophy with Derrida's thinking about difference, another way of addressing the fundamental puzzle behind relative essentialism.

¹ Davidson, remark at an APA symposium somewhere on the West Coast in the 90's.

*Corresponding author: Samuel C. Wheeler III, University of Connecticut, United States of America;
E-mail: samuel.wheeler@uconn.edu

1.1 Quine's insight: Metaphysics as pythagoreanism

The Pythagoreans perhaps reasoned as follows. Some lengths exceed other lengths. Exceeding is one thing being more than another. "More than" means "a larger number than." So, a length a exceeds another length b just in case a is more numerous than b . So, the world is made of units, pluralities of which are what make things have size. That's why we can successfully apply mathematics to the world. But one Pythagorean discovered a proof that this cannot be correct.² Some lengths are incommensurable. So, even though some lengths exceed others, and this can only be represented in terms of units, lengths are not *intrinsically* articulated into units.

Quine's³ approach to the Question of Being treats ontology as analogous to a system of measures. Ontology is not about something intrinsic to reality, but about measures. Count-nouns and mass-nouns are like units. They are required for us to think about reality. Just as we must posit units in order to apply mathematics to space, so we must posit masses and individuals in order to represent reality in language.⁴ From Quine's perspective, metaphysicians are generalized Pythagoreans, arguing about whether feet or meters are the true units.

1.2 Essentialism that Quine rejects; essentialism he could accept

Aristotelian essentialism about physical objects is the view that, for any entity, there is some kind-predicate that says what it is to be that entity. The entity continuing to have those features is its continuing to exist. There is thus an objective distinction between changes to an entity that leave the entity intact (accidental changes) and changes that destroy it (essential changes). Thus there are also objective truths about what is necessary and possible for a given kind of entity.

Quine⁵ rejects Aristotelian essentialism and later⁶ adopts a relativistic view of ontology. Quine's central objection to essentialism, that a mathematical bicyclist is necessarily bipedal qua bicyclist and necessarily rational qua mathematician, but not vice versa, leads him to deny that anything is necessarily anything in itself, not relative to a particular description.

Relative essentialism⁷ agrees with Quine that there are no absolute things in themselves, but still regards some descriptions as giving what an object is rather than how it is. Relative essentialism holds that there is more than one correct accurate articulation with more than one set of Aristotelian-like objective entity-defining predicates. Relative to different articulations, there can be multiple physical entities, with different *de re* necessities, occupying the same space. Such coinciding objects are fully real and on an ontological par. Distinct entities occupying the same space at the same time differ in essential features, and so have different individuation principles and survival conditions.

² The ancient proof was geometrical. An algebraic version of the proof runs as follows: The hypotenuse of a right triangle with side of length one is the $\sqrt{2}$. If $\sqrt{2} = a/b$ where a and b are integers with no common factors, then $2 = a^2/b^2$. Then $2b^2 = a^2$. Then a^2 is even, and a is even. So b is odd. If a is even, there is an integer c such that $a = 2c$. So $a^2 = 4c^2$, and $b^2 = 2c^2$ so b is even. So b is both even and odd. More generally, given the prime factor theorem, $\sqrt[n]{m}$, where n and m are integers, is either an integer or an irrational number. If $\sqrt[n]{m} = a/b$, then $m = a^n/b^n$, and $m \times b^n = a^n$. But, since a and b have no common factors, this is impossible unless $b = 1$. So, every integral root of every integer is either an integer or an irrational number.

³ Quine, "On What There Is."

⁴ "Positing" is largely unconscious and inherited, an evolved part of our billion-year ancestry See Quine, *Word and Object* and his "Ontological Relativity."

⁵ Quine, "Reference and Modality"; "Three Grades of Modal Involvement."

⁶ Quine, "Ontological Relativity."

⁷ Proposed in Wheeler, *Neo-Davidsonian Metaphysics: From the True to the Good*.

2 Davidson as implicit relative essentialist

2.1 Davidsonian essentialism

Davidson is committed to some version of *de re* modality and so essentialism just because there are countless obvious *de re* modal truths, and interpretation must maximize agreement. As an externalist, Davidson has to treat some modal statements as *de re*. “That animal has to be a ruminant” is true if said of a cow but “That animal has to go ‘moo’” is false even though a child’s concept of cow contains going “moo.” “A is necessarily F” is true of an object *a* if and only if *a* is necessarily F. Given Davidson’s views about truth and meaning, there need be no definition of the essence of a cow beyond the Tarskian. The criterion for whether a feature F is essential to cows is whether “A cow is necessarily F” is true. A biologist could say more, but the Tarskian formula is absolutely secure. Examining cows, not concepts, is the route to knowing more about their essence. Finding out about people’s beliefs about objects is *evidence* for an interpretation ascribing reference. However, *evidence* for ascribing truth-conditions is not truth-conditions.

Davidson rejects alternative conceptual schemes in the sense that he rejects the notion of a domain that is carved up in different ways yielding predicates with different extensions. “The notion of organization applies only to pluralities. But whatever plurality we take experience to consist in—events like losing a button or stubbing a toe, having a sensation of warmth or hearing an oboe—we will have to *individuate according to familiar principles*.”⁸ (My italics.) A domain of objects to be sorted by a “conceptual scheme” presupposes objects that *are* something. Objects to be grouped must already be some kinds of things in order to be a plurality of beings. Davidson has been taken to reject relativism about kinds of objects on the basis of his rejection of the metaphor of organizing the world via alternative conceptual schemes. As we will argue below, this rejection of there being a domain to organize is compatible with a kind of relativism which Davidson in fact endorses.

“Individuating according to familiar principles” agrees with part of Aristotle’s position on beings. According to Aristotle, for some predicates such as “is a man,” there is no *thing* to which that predicate is attached. According to Davidson, the application of predicates presupposes a domain of individuals, so for some predicates there are no *things* which can be “assigned” to those predicates’ extensions. Rather, the things are individuated, constituted as individuals, by falling under those predicates. Aristotle and Davidson thus take some count-nouns to be *entity-constitutives*, predicates which bring in a principle of individuation and so say *what it is to be* that individual. Davidson’s “familiar principles” are conditions for what it would be to be (*to tieineinai*) an object of that kind, how many objects there are, and when an object still exists. Aristotle agrees that there is no given, in the sense that there is no plurality of beings prior to substances-with-their-natures. Aristotle is committed to a given only in the sense that there is exactly one set of substance-determining natures. Thus he is a monistic essentialist. Davidson, while committed to essentialism of some kind, need not hold that there is a privileged articulating set of entity-constituting predicates. There are many ways Being is revealed.

The familiar principles we need to individuate entities, and so posit kinds of entities, need not provide of necessary and sufficient conditions in other terms for the application of a given predicate. We recognize cows by seeing that they are cows, not by checking out their DNA. When we have individuated some real kind of thing, we can most of the time have ways of determining how many there are and whether a previously-individuated entity still exists.⁹ Most of these positings are learned from others in our culture. Some of the most important ones about organisms and physical objects generally, are inherited. Familiar principles of individuation are *de re* necessities.

Davidson subscribes to Quine’s¹⁰ view that an entity must have identity condition. According to Quine, one must *specify* the identity-conditions of a posited object in other terms. But Davidson is an externalist and takes

⁸ Davidson, “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,” 192.

⁹ Mistakes occur. People posit spirits inducing episodes of epilepsy. Frogs mistakes pellets for bugs. But many of the principles constitute *de re* necessities about the posited objects. An organism cannot be in two places at once; a shape can be.

¹⁰ Quine, “On What There Is,” 4.

truth to be primitive.¹¹ While he requires that there *be* complete objective identity and persistence conditions, those conditions, while they need to have some connection to other positing, need not be specifiable in other terms. The most secure way to give identity and persistence conditions is by the Tarski formula, “‘A is F’ is true if and only if A is F.” Thus we can posit bushes and earth, as we must, given that there are rose bushes and earth-moving machines, without being able to give necessary and sufficient conditions for the count noun or the mass noun. Outside of mathematics, there is rarely a *definition* of a kind of object in other terms, although a useful posit must have some law-like connections with other terms. We know the modal truth that cows cannot be deciduous even though we are not cow experts and could not give necessary and sufficient conditions for being a cow. Even Putnam knew that elms were necessarily trees.

Davidson’s primitivism about truth supplies a simple answer to questions about the difference between posits which posit genuine entities and posits that do not. Briefly, “There are leprechauns” is false and “There are bushes” is true. If being true were definable, there would be a philosophical obligation to specify, in terms of experience or something, truth-conditions for “A is a leprechaun” beyond “‘A is a leprechaun’ is true if and only if A is a leprechaun.” If truth were definable, there would need to be an implausibly general account of what it takes for a term to refer. Such an account would show that there is earth and water, but disallow that there is phlogiston, even though all three terms are parts of discredited science. An account would have to tell us whether or not Democritus was talking about atoms but wrong about them. If truth is primitive, that is, not definable in other terms, as Davidson¹² argues, no such *general* account is necessary or to be expected. Accounts of particular cases, of course, can be important and interesting.

2.2 Davidsonian relativism

Davidson is committed to relativism about what entities exist, even though he rejects the usual relativist’s metaphor of “different sorting.” His response¹³ to the Goodman¹⁴ “grue-bleen” paradox is that “grue”-type predicates are perfectly fine, if applied to the right objects. If “All roses are red” and “All emeralds are green” are true and law-like, so is the equivalent “All emeraloses are gred.” Given that there are emeralds and roses, and given the definitions, “All emeraloses are gred.” is a logical consequence of “All roses are red” and “All emeralds are green” Davidson holds that there is no reason to deny the existence of emeraloses and gred things.

In his 1967 class in philosophy of language,¹⁵ Davidson, discussing this topic, described families of predicates as “made for each other.” “Gred” is made for emeraloses, “green” goes with emeralds. There is no question about the *reality* of gredemeraloses. They are genuine beings, for what that is worth. Although they would be utterly useless posits for us, given our positings, there are *truths* about them. They exist just as green emeralds and red roses do. This is relativism of exactly the right sort. Davidson already allows that we posit different families of objects. The predicate-family that interests him is the intentional-mental, but medium-sized object count-nouns, masses and other predicates would have their own family relations. There is room for frogs, social norms, and cuteness.

Emeraloses fill the same spaces at some of the same times as emeralds and roses. For Davidson, emeraloses and emeralds do not get in each other’s way, any more than meters and feet do.¹⁶ So, *prima facie*, Davidson is both a relativist ontologically, in that he accepts multiple overlapping objects in the same space, and an essentialist. He holds that there is no pre-conceptual domain which systems of concepts parcel out in

¹¹ Davidson, *Truth and Predication*; “The Folly of Trying to Define Truth.”

¹² Davidson, *Truth and Predication*.

¹³ Davidson, “Emeraloses by Other Names.”

¹⁴ Goodman, “The New riddle of Induction.”

¹⁵ Reported in Wheeler, “Remembering Donald Davidson: His 1967 Undergraduate Philosophy of Language Course.”

¹⁶ Likewise, the length of an object in moots, the length in meters if measured before 2020 and the length in feet if measured thereafter, would be useless outside of very special circumstances. Measures are good for some purposes, not so good for others. Just as “squishy” is not part of physics but useful in other contexts, so paces are good for some purposes, but not good enough for temple-construction.

different ways, but that every entity is always already something. He also allows distinct beings in the same space at the same time. He is committed to relative essentialism.

3 Relative essentialism

3.1 The basic idea

Davidson's attack on alternative conceptual schemes is an attack on a metaphor which cannot be coherently applied. There is no way to conceive of families of predicates as alternative devices for dividing something or things up, since any such something or somethings would only be conceivable as falling under entity-constituting predicates already. But that there are no alternative conceptual schemes derived from multiple ways of chopping up a domain does not imply that there are not multiple overlapping beings in the same spaces at the same times. Emeroses show that. "Articulates" for a relative essentialist is not a transitive verb. We articulate in applying predicates, but there is no thing or domain that gets articulated.¹⁷ We of course have multiple ways of describing what is the case. Some of those ways are not worth pursuing or practicing, as the Goodman examples and predications of "witch" show. There is no reason to be a metaphysical monistic essentialist just because applying predicates is not dividing reality.

Relative essentialism is quite different in one respect from Aristotelian essentialism and its descendants. If relative essentialism is the right view, Davidson correctly denies that there are "de re" necessities, if "de re" means an absolute, given res. For a relative essentialist, there is no single res in abstraction from some count noun. On the other hand, since there are no such absolute entities, "the thing itself" can only be a thing under an entity-constituting description. For Davidson and the relative essentialist, that kind of res is as good as there are. Aristotle's only disagreement with Davidson is his insistence that there can be only one res. Davidson and the relative essentialist can retain the distinction between what a constituted thing is but might not be and what a thing must be. Such entities are constituted by predicates which have principles of individuation and persistence. "Red" does not bring in such individuating principles, "frog" does. So, in the only sense of "thing itself" genuinely available, being a frog is something a thing itself is.

According to relative essentialism, both sameness and necessity are relative to which kind of thing is posited as the occupant of the space at a time. There may be multiple entities to be pointed at in a given space. "This" and "that" do not select unique entities without an understood count-noun. Pointing at a gold atom is also pointing at an aggregate of sub-atomic entities. What it is that is given a name is always relative to a count noun. Demonstrating is likewise relative to a count-noun. Direct reference not mediated by a predicate is limited to indexicals, at most.

Relative essentialism is not relative identity as proposed by Geach, even though it is motivated by some of the same considerations. Relative essentialism treats identity as identity. Geach's¹⁸ idea is designed to save monism about the partition of reality, whereas relative essentialism allows multiple objects in the same space at the same time. Being essentialist, relative essentialism of course allows that the bicyclist is the same entity as the mathematician while denying that the bicyclist is the same as the space-time worm comprising the bicyclist's micro-particles. The bicyclist might have stayed home.

3.2 Relative essentialism as Kantian

A rational agent must make well-founded inferences which are not truth-functionally valid, going from "All frogs are green" and "Joe is a frog" to "Joe is green." Such inferences require sub-sentential structure, that

¹⁷ This somewhat puzzling fact makes (analytic) sense of Heidegger's talk of Nothing and is expressed by Derrida in his notion of "difference." The corresponding Davidsonian puzzle would be how we can make distinctions about reality unless reality is already composed of distinguishable items. See the sections on Heidegger and Derrida below.

¹⁸ Geach, "Identity."

is, equivalents to singular terms and general terms. So, any thinking being must think in terms of objects as referents of singular terms, and properties, as general terms true of such objects. Thinking requires an articulated domain. Happily, that is what we have. How does it happen that the world is articulated so that it is possible for thinking beings to exist?

On the monistic essentialist view, nature is intrinsically articulated into beings and properties and our minds mirror that articulation. Modern essentialists¹⁹ take the match to be the result of evolution. The dominant view of the reason for this coincidence is that we have evolved the articulation we use as an adaptation to the world's intrinsic articulation. Relative essentialism holds that articulation is an artifact of us subjects who are thinking and speaking. Subjects who think and speak have to posit objects and properties in order to be able to think and speak.²⁰

But natural adaptation has not given us, let alone dogs, what would be the unique fundamental articulation of nature, if there were one. If there were only one ultimate articulation, it would be the micro-particles or their successors. Those would be the objects organisms posit. Our natural posits of dogs, chairs, people, and the like do not match microphysics and are not explicable in micro-physical terms.²¹ The explanation of why we impose the predicate-singular term format cannot be that the objects we have evolved to discriminate match an intrinsic articulation in nature. Of course, as discussed below, given supervenience there is some connection between truths about microparticles and how organisms have evolved on Earth. As we argue below, that connection is not enough to establish metaphysical priority, let alone intrinsicness-of-articulation, apart from some exotic suppositions.

The only reasonable answer to how we happen to have a world of beings, masses, and properties is the relative essentialist Kantian answer. We would posit properties and beings *whether or not* our posits matched nature's intrinsic articulation. Relative essentialism takes our articulation of the world into beings and properties to come from the necessity of thinking in a language that allows inferences that depend on sub-sentential structure, rather than mirroring nature's given joints. Thinkers have to be articulators. Whoever applies mathematics to space and time must do so by positing some unit. Likewise, in order to think about the world, thinkers must have an articulated language with singular terms referring to posited entities and predicates expressing their posited properties. Davidson's Kantianism goes beyond Quine in recognizing that there is no *ding an sich* on which this positing operates.

4 Multiple objects in the same place at the same time: Against monistic essentialism

This section gives three arguments against *monistic* essentialism. First, Kripke's gold example yields only a relative essentialist conclusion. Second, arguments for essentialism that separate reference from conceptual content apply to artifacts that no one would take to be natural kinds. Third, Davidson should have abandoned his Anomalous Monism and adopted in its place Innocuous Dualism about physical and mental events.

4.1 Gold

Kripke correctly observes that gold necessarily has atomic number 79. A relative essentialist agrees, but notes that in the same space as a gold atom, there is another object, a collection of micro-particles whose existence and survival conditions are continuing to have almost all of components in roughly the same configuration.

¹⁹ The traditional view was that the match was fixed, and part of the nature of human beings. For Plato, there is an affinity of soul to the structure of reality. For Aristotle, the intellect is designed to get forms of natural kinds without their matter from experience. (*Posterior Analytics* Book 2, Chapter 19; *De Anima* Book 3).

²⁰ These subjects are of course also posits.

²¹ See Wheeler, "Reference and Vagueness."

A gold atom has to have 79 protons, or it would not be gold. Having 79 protons is not an a posteriori necessity about whatever is in the region occupied by the atom. Rather it is a necessity about the stuff relative to being *gold*. If one of the 79 protons had instead been a neutron, the collection of particles occupying the space would have been a platinum ion instead of a gold atom. At a finer-grained level, if one of the up quarks in one proton in the gold atom had been a down quark, the particles would have made up a platinum ion. Still, of course, a gold atom necessarily has the atomic number 79.

Gold has 36 isotopes with atomic weights ranging from 169 to 205. Platinum has isotopes with atomic weights ranging from 162 to 202. Given that the mass of a proton is roughly 1836 times the mass of an electron, the gold isotopes with atomic weights in the 190s, as aggregates of particles, have *much* more in common with platinum isotopes in the 190s than with gold isotopes in the 170s. Furthermore, a gold isotope that decays (as gold) by electron capture,¹⁹⁵ Au, acquires an electron that turns a proton into a neutron, yielding a *nearly identical* platinum atom of the same atomic weight differing in mass from the parent gold atom by one part in roughly 358,000. That is a minor modification of an aggregate of protons, electrons, and neutrons. This is really the same *aggregate*, which persisted through the change.

There are interests that make atomic *number* significant, just as there are some interests that make a copy of a significant 1840s first edition with title page and advertisements at the back intact many times more valuable than a copy without the title-page and advertisements. Atomic numbers of atoms are often very important, but that importance is *chemical*, not metaphysical.

4.2 Essences of artifacts

Human creations are kinds of stuffs and things that no-one would take to be intrinsic articulations of reality. Pepsi, for instance, has essential properties. Even though Pepsi could be made of different ingredients (corn syrup rather than sugar) and can change its composition over the decades, it cannot be primarily fish-products. An anchovy paste called “Pepsi” would not be Pepsi. Just as with Kripke’s examples of natural kinds, a person’s concept of Pepsi may consist entirely of features not even be true of Pepsi. A person can refer to Pepsi even though all the person believes about it is that it is the cola served at McDonalds, just as people can refer to Isaac Newton when their only belief about him is that he discovered gravity. We correctly attribute necessities and possibilities to kinds of stuff and things are not part of nature’s intrinsic articulation on anyone’s view.

4.3 Event identity, multiple coinciding events, and mental events

Consider the Battle of Stalingrad, a gruesome complex event. That battle could have comprised different component events while being the same battle, whereas the coinciding space-time worm of micro-particle events in that part of Russia, being a mereological sum, could not have been the same aggregate if any part of it had been different. There are different ways the battle could have gone. Not so for the worm. So, the events are distinct even though the battle and the worm have the same causes, the same effects, and take place over the same time. Modal differences do not mean that there were two battles. Rather there was a battle and there was a worm, and those are two coinciding entities.

A single extra shell fired by a T-34 would yield the same battle but a different mereological sum. The battle has different phases than the space-time worm. Construing what has taken place as a mereological sum of events, with the individuation-criteria of such sums, there are no especially significant components of the complex. The battle, though, has sub-battles such as Operation Uranus, the encirclement of Paulus’ army. That component itself could have been different.

No-one thinking about the above case, and agreeing that the Battle of Stalingrad is different from, though coinciding with, the space-time worm, would think that this case shows that battles are non-physical or non-material. We should take the same attitude toward the parallel arguments Davidson has given that mental events and brain-events are identical.

Davidson argued that the constraints on predicate-application of the intentional system shape the application of the mental predicates in ways that do not correspond with the physical constraints that shape the application of brain- and micro-particle predicates. We should therefore not expect a reduction of mental events to brain-events or micro-particle events. This is the “anomalous” part of “anomalous monism.”

The “monism” part is that the physical event-descriptions are primary, for Davidson. Mental events cause physical events, and physical events cause mental events. But while every mental event has a physical description, and the causation is due to a purely physical law, there are no mental laws, laws in the intentional system, that predict physical interventions. The intentional scheme is thus not autonomous, since events that do not have intentional-scheme descriptions, such as beams of light, or impacts of baseballs, intervene in mental life. On the other hand, the physical description system is complete and autonomous. All events have a physical description and fall under physical laws. Davidson concludes that mental events are the same events as physical events. They are described in the terms of the intentional scheme which do not have any systematic relation to the physical predicates. Thus, even though there are no law-like relations between mental descriptions and physical descriptions of the same events, they are identical.

Davidson reached the wrong conclusion on the basis of very insightful thinking. Exactly the same considerations as those about the Battle of Stalingrad and the coinciding worm can be applied to such mental events as deciding to marry someone or figuring out a mathematical proof in relation to the mereological sums of the neurological events coinciding with that decision and figuring. The decision could have been made with slightly less trepidation and be the same decision. My figuring out the proof of the theorem that there is exactly one way of decomposing an integer into a sum of products of primes could have taken less time and involved fewer mental lapses. Mental events have essences. We have “familiar principles of individuation” by which we identify different such events. They also have accidents, features they in fact have but could have lacked. So, while they coincide with physical events, and have causes that also coincide with physical events, they are distinct entities.

I call this view “innocuous dualism.” It is a “dualism” that does not deny the materiality of the mental. Innocuous dualism defends the *reality* of the events and entities of the intentional framework. It defends the reality of minds and persons. All such events and their subjects are physical, but that is just to say that persons, their desires, and their perception are material beings, a view Aristotle agreed with.

Davidson’s choice for anomalous monism rather than innocuous dualism was motivated by considerations of supervenience. That is what his completeness and autonomy considerations amount to. I discuss the supervenience trap below. I argue below for the autonomy of every sort of being.

5 Why does monistic essentialism seduce philosophers?

5.1 Aristotle and Quine on Being as Something

Aristotle reasonably rejects Parmenides’ idea that being a Being is a nature things have, because it leads to Parmenides’ conclusion that all things are one.²² Aristotle rejects the idea that either Being or Oneness is an entity-constituting nature. His alternative is that there is a distinct “what it would be to be” for each different kind of being, but that being a being is not a nature.

But “Being” is still a noun. Aristotle regards being a substance as the central case of being a being; even if we cannot say that being a Being is a nature, the substances are the basis for all other things that can be said to be. Whatever is is either a substance or of a substance. What exists is all substances collectively.

²² The most relevant passage is *Metaphysics* B4 1001a, which argues that if being a Being were a substance-determining nature, then there would be only one kind of being, and everything would be one in the sense that what it would be to be them would be identical. Given that features, positions, and other entities in categories other than substance must also be, and so be beings, the regress argument would show that there are no natures whatsoever besides being a being.

So, “is a being” in its primary sense, even for Aristotle, is something like a mass noun. Reality is filled with it. Every region of space is something—its being a being is accomplished by exactly one entity-determiner. Aristotle expresses this very clearly: “No substance is composed of substances which exist in actuality...Thus if a substance is one, it cannot consist of substances which are present in it. And in this sense Democritus speaks rightly, for, he says, it is impossible for one thing to consist of two things or for one thing to become two things....”²³

If an iron atom that is part of a human were an actual substance, it would have a nature keeping which would amount to its remaining in existence. Then if the human ceased to exist, so would the atom. The whole human loses the what-it-would-be-to-be that makes it a substance, and so the atom, a part of the human, likewise ceases to exist. If the atom had its own what-it would-be-to-be, it would both cease to exist, since the human does, and continue to exist.

Aristotle’s principle is that if a substance is the Being of a region, then that substance ceasing to exist is the ceasing to exist of the whole of the Being filling the region. Being, while not strictly a kind of stuff, fills regions. Everywhere the human is there also is the being that the what it would be to be a human constitutes. You cannot have two bicycles in the same spot and you can’t fill a space with water and at the same time with air.

Once this idea is formulated, it is easy to see that Quine provides a preferable alternative,²⁴ if you want substances to contain others as parts. Being is not a kind of stuff.

5.2 Supervenience

According to almost everyone, a lot of real beings overlap with real other beings. The modern monist essentialist holds that there is a privileged set of beings, with which other beings overlap, micro-particles or their successors. The relation between ordinary beings and the special beings is supervenience. Roughly, supervenience means that there cannot be a difference in the ordinary beings without a difference in the special beings. The ultimate facts which determine all other facts are facts about these special beings. So, supervenience of cuteness on global micro-particle configurations means that I could not be less cute while the global configuration of micro-particles is the same as it is. Differences in cuteness entail differences in the special beings. On the other hand, the global configuration of micro-particles could be different (three fewer photons being emitted from Arcturus, for instance), while I was exactly as cute as I in fact am.

The plausibility of the supervenience thesis does not support monistic essentialism. For supervenience to support a metaphysical priority that claims one intrinsic articulation in nature, the genuine being of non-special overlappers and their properties would depend on their reducibility to the special beings. For instance, the genuine being of me and my cuteness would require our reducibility to the special objects. The macro would have to be reducible to, not just supervene on, the micro. Without reducibility, so that the kinds of overlapping beings there are can be defined as configurations of special beings, the overlapping beings would not have essences. There would not be a what it would be to be them unless it could be cashed out in terms of the ultimate articulation given by special beings.

Apart from drastic metaphysical claims which good sense would reject or major revisions in logic, the reality of the second-class overlapping beings must be rejected if supervenience shows metaphysical ultimateness. The sorites argument²⁵ shows that, if being an entity requires having an essence, as the monistic and relative essentialist agree, only micro-particles and a few other objects of physics are really beings. That is, if monistic essentialism is true, then almost all of the entities and features of the lived world are not really entities, given the privilege of the special beings, because there are configurations of the special beings such that medium-sized object predicates neither apply nor fail to apply. If tables are

²³ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Z13 1039a.

²⁴ Quine, “On What There Is.”

²⁵ This point was argued by Eubulides in antiquity. Wheeler’s “Reference and Vagueness” is the first rediscovery of the point in the Common Era.

real, and genuine reality is configurations of special beings, then whether or not a table existed would be a matter of special being configurations.

Monistic essentialism is committed to reducibility of the overlapping beings to the special beings. Otherwise, there are borderline cases in which medium-sized object predicates neither apply nor fail to apply. The choices for the monist, accepting that there is an ontologically privileged kind of being, are to abandon bivalence or to claim that there is a hidden fact of the matter. The core issue of the sorites is how to preserve the reality of anything other than the special beings. Given that being an entity is having an essence, beings other than the special beings must either have conditions under which they continue to exist expressible in special-being terms or there must be a revision of logic and the notion of essential features.

On the other hand, if it is allowed that beings can overlap without, as it were, getting in one another's way, then no metaphysical problem arises from the fact that the truth-condition of "Joe is a tall man" cannot be reduced to "Joe is n centimeters tall" for some n . "Joe is a tall man" has perfectly clear truth-conditions: "'Joe is a tall man' is true if and only if Joe is a tall man." The non-reductionist treats supervenience as independent of metaphysical questions. The special objects are indeed special, but that specialness does not go beyond the fact that they are ultimate in the sense of differing whenever other beings differ.²⁶ It does not mean that regular objects and properties lose their autonomy. There is no reason to expect that one kind of posit would have precise systematic relations to another kind. There will, of course, be connections and some rough generalizations. We can correctly say that tall men are more than one meter in height. Food is not tasty for humans if it consists primarily of chlorine compounds.

5.3 What about the sorites?

The Relative Essentialist does need to explain why bivalence is still true. For every entity, it is either a table or not, or nice or not. Without metaphysical priority for the beings on which other beings supervene, the correct view of the Sorites is a kind of absolutely innocuous epistemicism. Either "Joe is tall" or "Joe is not tall" is true, for every Joe. But, since the fundamental truth-conditions of "Joe is tall" are given by "'Joe is tall' is true if and only if Joe is tall," and since there are no metaphysically significant truth-makers (Davidson 1969), that one or the other is true is a consequence of the fact that predicates either apply or fail to apply in every case. Bivalence implies that there is a fact of the matter, but only in a metaphysically innocuous sense of "fact."

The basis for bivalence is akin to the basis for the mathematical truth that for any number n , $n^0=1$. Intuitively, exponentiation is multiplying a number by itself a given number of times. There is no intuitive sense to be made of what the value should be if you multiply a number by itself no times. However, principles which hold for the intuitive cases, for instance that $x^n / x^m = x^{n-m}$ requires that $x^0=1$. So it does. Likewise, the general principle that for any feature, an entity either has it or lacks it requires that "is tall" and "is a frog" either apply or fail to apply to any entity. It further, of course, requires that "is true of" either applies or fails to apply to any pair of predicate and entity.

Most predicates intuitively neither apply nor fail to apply to certain cases. If we are positing properties in applying predicates, though, the property must either be present or absent. So a condition of having a family of predicates is that we posit properties, which, being a kind of entity, must be present or absent. Properties corresponding to substance-determining count-nouns, such as that of being a frog, are a special case.

Properties whose application is, as it were, one-dimensional have been the focus of discussions of the

²⁶ Supervenience is quite limited in any case, relative to beings. What about triangles and sets? How would the physical disposition of the universe be different if the Continuum Hypothesis were false? Even in the case of the purely physical, there is little reason to suppose that particles and strings cannot both be right. Only a Pythagorean faith that nature itself is intrinsically articulated would lead a theorist to claim that one of two perfect theories is correct. Quine makes this point in "Ontological Relativity."

sorites and do require some more comment. A predicate like “tall” is such that not only does everything either have it or lack it, but there is a particular point on a dimension where, according to this account, the property first applies. So we posit, in applying perforce the property-object device for thinking and talking, that there is a precise length in meters only above which an entity is tall. In so positing, we are committed to there being one of the real numbers that gives this length. The commitment, though, is like our commitment to there being a value that results from multiplying a number by itself zero times.

Truth itself, the property of being true, is a posited property, and the entities it is applied to are likewise posited entities, typically abstract ones. Truth is not “fitting” some given array of facts. Just as exponentiation extends past its intuitive applications without harm and in useful theory-unifying ways, so some correct applications of “true” and “true of” are consequences of theory rather than intuitiveness. While intuitive paradigms are cats right there on mats giving us reason to think that “The cat is on the mat” is true, there are other cases. Just as there is some inclination to say that multiplying a number by itself one-seventy-third times makes no sense, and that there is no set of leprechauns, so there is some inclination to say that “tall man” neither applies nor fails to apply. The truth of the matter is otherwise.

5.4 What is left of Metaphysics?

Relative essentialism extends and develops views argued persuasively by Quine and Davidson. For instance, given Quine’s work, worries about the ontological status of, for instance, sets and numbers vanish. Given Davidson’s work, questions about the nature of predication, how properties combine with objects to create facts, and many other problems cease to be real problems. Quine had deep reservations about modality, with which Davidson seemed to sympathize. Relative essentialism is a conception of essentialism that comports with most of their work.

Relative essentialism dissolves metaphysical problems rather than solving them. There is little call for a science which provides ultimate foundations for common sense or the sciences. They are well-founded already, if properly understood. Ontology becomes largely a project for particular sciences. Relative essentialism seems generous with ontological commitments, but actually has little to say about what exists. Ontology as a special science between common sense and the particular sciences has little to do. Tropes, properties, and universals all exist, if they are coherent in the way gredemeroses are. Numbers, sets, and mathematical objects generally raise no special non-mathematical questions. Mereological universalism is *prima facie* harmless. Given that gredemeroses are real, the entity consisting of the Moon and my Chevy Impala exists, but like gredemeroses, is useless.

6 Relative essentialism, Being and beings, and difference

Being a being is not a great distinction, according to relative essentialism. There is not only an infinity of beings, but an infinity of kinds of beings.²⁷ But a question remains. Something about how things are must ground the fact that “All emeralds are green” “All roses are red” and “All emeroses are gred” are true and lawlike (more or less) whereas “All roses are green” and “All emeroses are grue” are neither true nor lawlike. Within predicate families, some connections hold and some do not. For useless families of predicates with non-null extensions, the same thing is true. There is at least a strong inclination to posit some kind of ground that accounts for the difference between the lawlike relations and others, and some basis for predicates being in families at all.

Relative essentialism at least strongly suggests a distinction between this unspeakable ground and the particular beings through whose positing we articulate it or by which it might be in principle articulated.

²⁷ Given that variants of “emerose” et al. exist for every (from our point of view) time-change point, there is strictly an infinity if time is continuous. A whole lot in any case. Each emerose variant has an essence.

The obvious way to express this, historically, is with Heidegger's distinction between beings and Being.²⁸ Relative essentialism, the view a Davidsonian²⁹ should hold, thus corresponds rather closely in some respects to the post-turn Heidegger. Any characterization of this ground will of course be in terms of predicates and singular terms, and so merely about beings, that is, things. Paradoxically, therefore, "nothing" that is "no thing" is an appropriate term for what one is trying to talk about in such considerations.³⁰

What would Davidson have said about Heidegger's attempts to "access" Being via art and poetry? In Davidson's (single) essay on metaphor,³¹ he rejects the metaphor that a picture is worth a thousand words by asserting that pictures are entirely different, but do present how things are. A great many aspects of how things are do not exchange well for the currency of posited entities and properties. Facial recognition, a smell that takes a person back to his Grandparents' house, and a line of poetry that evokes what a major disappointment was like all translate poorly into prose. Investigating what we can learn about what is the case from art and poetry are worthwhile projects. If Davidson and Heidegger are right, the "translation" of these insights into propositions about entities and their properties will be defective.

One aspect of Derrida's notion of difference addresses an issue exactly parallel to the issue of how there can be alternative predicate schemes without something being differently articulated.³² Saussure's linguistic theory, from phonology to semantics, treated linguistic phenomena as systems of differences. Derrida recognizes that differences, which Saussure had persuasively shown to be central to phonemes and important to the definition of concepts, themselves rested on predicates. Two things are only different if there is some feature of one absent in the other. That is, Saussure's conception presupposed an underlying given domain of some kind already articulated into sets. Difference can be thought of as Derrida's way of, within the general Saussurean conception of linguistics, referring to something that has to be, but cannot be fixed by concepts, a sort of texture that allows some predicates to be more or less successful but not others.³³ As I have noted elsewhere,³⁴ Derrida and Davidson have a few things in common.³⁵

Relative essentialism of the Davidsonian sort can at least make some parts of Heidegger and Derrida make sense to analytic philosophers. The question remains whether, for instance, the distinction between beings and Being should actually engage us. One relative essentialist Davidsonian response to a Heideggerian-Derridean question about what it is that explains why the predicates we use work would argue that the reason that "is a person," and "is a chair" are workable predicates is that there are people, and chairs. The fact that there are also gredemeroses has no bearing on what is, unless emeroses got in the

²⁸ The essay that most closely accords with the image of the infinity of families of predicates is Heidegger's "The Origin of the Work of Art."

²⁹ In the mid-1990s, there was a NEH program at UC Santa Cruz on "Davidson and Heidegger," if I remember correctly. What I remember distinctly is that, at one point in the proceeding Davidson (not a notably patient and benefit-of-the-doubt-conferring person) lost patience with Rorty, Charles Taylor, and others and said something like "I don't see anything about what people have been saying that connects Heidegger to my work." With all due reverence, I think Donald was wrong. He and Heidegger were on the same page, but reading different translations.

³⁰ See Heidegger, "What is Metaphysics?"

³¹ Davidson, "What Metaphors Mean", 263: "A picture is not worth a thousand words, or any other number. Words are the wrong currency to exchange for a picture."

³² The apparent mis-match between the issues for Davidson and Derrida can be thought of as going back to a mis-match between Saussure's *Cours de Linguistique Generale*, the paradigm of linguistic theory for Derrida and B. F. Skinner's *Verbal Behavior*, which supplies the basic equipment for Quine's stimulus meanings, a main target of Davidson's "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme."

³³ See Wheeler, "Derrida's Difference and Plato's Different."

³⁴ In Wheeler, *Deconstruction as Analytic Philosophy*.

³⁵ Derrida famously denies truth by unhooking reference and meaning from any stable anchors. Davidson makes truth the central concept of his account of language. However, Davidson and Derrida do not clearly disagree about truth except verbally. Derrida rejects the classical notion of truth as adequation to a given reality, articulated by objective meanings of the predicates corresponding to the intrinsic articulation of what is. Davidson in "True to the Facts," "The Folly of Defining Truth," and *Truth and Predication* rejects that notion also. By taking "true" as primitive, and by taking meaning as truth-conditions in the pure Tarskian sense, Davidson cuts truth and meaning loose from independently given meanings or facts. For an idiolect at a time, nothing except other truths with their truth-conditions strictly constrains what sentences are true or what they mean. Since what a sentence means and what its truth-conditions are is not under external constraint, there is plenty of room for dissemination.

way of emeralds and roses. Just as both “That field is roughly 100 meters long” and “That field is roughly 328 feet long” are both true, so are all the ways in which Being reveals itself. What use is this “ground”?³⁶

Here is a use. A relative essentialist Davidsonian can use Heidegger’s distinction between Being and beings to explicate the difference between innocuous and serious Cartesian dualism. Serious Cartesian dualism requires a bifurcation of Being. For a dualist, minds and bodies are not just two ways Being is revealed.³⁷ On the other hand, hammers and micro-particle configurations are just different kinds of beings. Innocuous dualism treats the mental and physical as two ways Being is revealed. Innocuous coinciding versus serious dualism is a central issue, it seems to me. So, it behooves analytic philosophers to pay some attention to people who have thought about it a lot.

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³⁶ Given supervenience, there would be some kind of explanation of all the ways Being is revealed, and it would be the set of equivalent physical theories. In some sense, then, an analytic philosopher can claim that Being ultimately comes down to some privileged kind of beings. There is in fact a best account in terms of beings, something like ideal units in terms of which all other units can (in principle) be explicated. So, there is (in principle) a scientific mode of access to the ground underlying beings.

³⁷ That would actually be something close to Heidegger’s view of Dasein in relation to entities of science.

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