

David Wiggins
*Continuants. Their Activity, Their Being
and Their Identity. Twelve Essays.*
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David Wiggins is an important figure in the history of philosophy of the second half of the twentieth century, and beyond. His contributions were central, to stay close to the topic of the book under review, in making metaphysics a serious issue again in analytic philosophy. He did that while also showing the relevance of history of philosophy to contemporary research. This collection is impressive in showing the author to be equally at ease with ancient Greek and modal logic, with Aristotle and Putnam, with Kripke and Heraclitus, with Barcan and Leibniz. On a personal note, I read Wiggins' essay "Truth, Invention and the Meaning of Life" (Wiggins 1976) more than twenty years ago when I was an undergraduate student, and I still think it is by far the best thing I have ever read on the issue of the meaning of life.

The book comprises twelve published essays— with some revisions and additions – and a useful introduction by the author. Most of the essays are directly about metaphysics. There are also two essays on important figures in the history of Western philosophy (Heraclitus and Leibniz), one that might be considered a contribution to the History of Analytic philosophy (on Frege and Putnam) and two essays might also be seen as efforts in philosophy of science – in particular the philosophy of cognitive psychology and of biology. But the themes in all of the essays are very closely connected. Wiggins defends a neo-Aristotelian metaphysical theory of substance and identity. On this view

the primary substances are the basic constituents of the world. Everything else that is (everything beside the primary substances) is by virtue of being either one kind of primary substance (that is, by virtue of being some secondary substance), or else by virtue of being some qualification of primary substance, or in a primary substance. Moreover, primary substances are the subjects of change. 'It seems most distinctive of substance that what is numerically one and the same is able to receive contraries' (Categories 4a10) (p. 42).

I will try to clarify some of this below.

The theory of substance is most clearly the topic of the first three essays of the collection (the third one traces the historical roots of the view). The other metaphysical essays deal with the notion of a person (two essays), the metaphysics of modality, and mereology. Wiggins' contributions to all these topics are, in my view, extremely interesting, and sometimes fundamental. This volume is highly recommended for anyone with an interest in the mentioned disciplines, whether or not they have previous familiarity with Wiggins' work. Many papers could be useful readings for undergraduates (with a caveat about writing style to be noted shortly) in courses on several different topics; I am thinking e.g. of courses touching upon Putnam's semantic externalism, the necessity of identity, the already mentioned debate on what a person is, and the debates over what it takes for something to exist for an extended period of time. Wiggins's prose, it should be said, is not always easy to understand. I believe this is the only complaint – if it is a complaint – that one can fairly raise about this book. Wiggins writes in long sentences, and he deploys the full width of English lexicon. Although there is one essay on Heraclitus, I am not saying that Wiggins is obscure; on the contrary, I believe his writing is very clear. It just takes some cognitive work to get to what he is saying. Of course, some effort is also required by the fact that the topics are often hard, and the views expressed by Wiggins are often nuanced and original.

I will not have space to comment on all of the papers. I will try to give a sense of the overall view defended throughout the book, making reference to various papers, and I will then allow myself some critical remarks.

A central insight of much of Wiggins' work in metaphysics is, as he puts it (p. ix), that the question whether x and y are the same thing (whether they are identical) can be answered only with reference to the questions of what x is and what y is. Consider a specific human being, which is a paradigmatic example of a primary substance. Consider for example me, as I am at present; now also consider my past self (what I think of as my past self) twenty years ago. Call the former x and the latter y ; are x and y the same thing? It might well be that x and y are composed of entirely different matter (there is quite a lot more matter in x than in y , but let us leave aside this boring detail). Of course, there is a certain resemblance between x and y , but surely this is not sufficient to say that x and y are the same thing; twins can resemble each other a lot more without being the same thing. What makes the twins two different individuals, while we want to say, apparently, that I am the same individual I was twenty years ago? A crucial difference, it might seem, is that twins exist at the same time at different places, while my past self and I are appropriately connected by a series of intermediate states in time. This might seem to settle the matter in a trivial way. But note that the reason this does settle the matter is

not trivial; if we were talking about abstract objects, this consideration would not have force or would not even make sense. It is because we know that *x* and *y*, in the example, belong to the category of *human being*, that we can know what settles the matter, having some at least implicit grasp of what counts as the same human being, and what kind of bodily and psychological continuity is normally required for a human being to continue existing. Of course, there are several other categories that *x* and *y* belong to, and most of them are irrelevant. For example, *x* and *y* are both located in Europe, they both weight more than 50kg, and so on. But none of these qualities of *x* and *y* gives a plausible answer, according to Wiggins at least, to the questions “what is *x*?” and “what is *y*?”. That is why they are not relevant. We have no general idea of when two objects weighting more than 50kg are to be counted as the same object; there is no interesting general answer to that question.

The categories that guide the answer to *what is* questions, those that constitute secondary substances, also, quite naturally, give us some guide to establish when something ceases to exist, and when two objects are the same. More precisely, what guides us in judgements of sameness and difference and similar issues is not directly the essence of the relevant things, but rather our *conception* of the category they belong to. A conception is not the same as a concept, as Wiggins uses the term. Very roughly, the concept is the category, while the conception is our understanding of the category, our way of applying it. To quote from another work of Wiggins, “a conception of a horse is just a set of beliefs concerning what horses are” (Wiggins 2001: 79fn.2). With respect to the themes discussed below, it is relevant that “the conception of a thing-kind may specify the principle of activity or way of behaving characteristic of the instances of the kind.” (p. xiii). In chapter 8, Wiggins notes interesting similarities between his notion of a conception and Putnam’s stereotypes, which Wiggins describes as “a fund of ordinary information or a collection of idealized beliefs that one needs to grasp in order to get hold of the meaning of a thing-kind word.” (p. 162).

Furthermore, our conception of the fundamental categories (secondary substances) guide our thinking about what the things belonging to those categories *could* be, what possibilities there are for them. It is the fact that I am a human being that makes it so, for example, that I could have been, say, a policeman, but I could not have been, say, a frying pan. I could not have been anything at all that is incompatible with being a human being, since I am necessarily a human being. This topic is treated mainly in chapter 9, which is composed, peculiarly, of a selection of passages from three different articles, preceded by an introduction. Wiggins touches there on some topics that were paramount to the development of Analytic philosophy in the second half of twentieth

century, namely Kripke's (and Barcan's) thesis of the necessity of identities and Quine's attack on the intelligibility of quantified modal logic. Wiggins, in these 1970's papers, defends the now standard picture, on which identity claims are necessary when true, and there is no logical problem at all with quantification *de re* in modal contexts. In a way, however, he seems to concede that Quine has a philosophical point in tying *de re* quantification and essentialism; there would not be much use for quantification *de re*, for statements about what something could or could not be, in itself and independently of how we think of it, if there were no interesting answer to the question of what something is, in itself and independently of how we think of it. Wiggins point however is that this way of thinking of something as having an essence, or belonging to a substance category, is deeply entrenched in our common sense, and if we were not, implicitly, all essentialists, not only we would be guideless in making modal claims, but we would also be guideless in making claims about things persisting in time.

Of course, I left aside countless complications. The example I used, that of the category of human being, carries with it the connection with the notion of person. On the other hand, there are complications tied to less paradigmatic examples of substances, such as Theseus' ship and artifacts more generally. I will not have space to address these topics. I will say something instead about a feature of Wiggins' view that I find problematic, and I will end by briefly comparing the view with rival ones.

The second chapter in the book comprises the 1968 essay "Being in the same place at the same time" (the oldest of the collection) and a brief retrospective commentary. The main thesis of the essay is that two things can be at the same place at the same time. The example offered is that of a tree and the aggregate of molecules that constitutes, at present, the tree. They are two different things, Wiggins argues, because the tree might – and probably will – survive while losing some of the molecules that compose it, and the aggregate of molecules could survive the death of the tree (if the tree is chopped and the molecules reassembled). So, two different things can occupy exactly the same place at the same time; at least when one is a substance and the other is not. Now, this is a consequence of the overall view, and Wiggins does a good job of making it appear not too implausible. At this point, however, it will be useful to look at a different view, one which does not have this consequence. We might think of a continuant, such as the tree, as a four-dimensional object, made of a series of connected three-dimensional objects. On this view, the tree is not identical to the aggregate of matter, but the present part of the tree is. And there is at present nothing more to the tree than its present part. The tree and the aggregate of matter are not identical, but they coincide at this point

in time, like two roads that cross at some point. This view is of course most famously associated with David Lewis, and Wiggins does discuss Lewis directly. Wiggins' objections to the view also emerge in the last chapter, where he confronts some authors in philosophy of biology that argue for the centrality of the notion of process for the sciences of life, as opposed to the notions of individual or thing. Wiggins is sympathetic to some ways of putting this insight. In a substance, on his view, existence is tied to change, not just compatible with it. A living being survives through a series of constant processes, a constant activity that allows the being to absorb energy from the environment and carry on the bodily functions that are essential to life. There is a quote from Heraclitus that nicely sums up, metaphorically, this point. Here is how Wiggins presents this passage and comments on it:

A substance can persist through time, but only by virtue of constant process, and if work is done:

The barley drink disintegrates if it is not constantly stirred (B125).

The barley drink was a drink made of barley-meal, grated cheese and Pramnian wine (...). Being neither a mixture nor even a suspension, it separated and reverted rapidly to its constituents unless it was stirred vigorously. What the barley drink stands for is at once conditional persistence and the tendency towards disintegration which Heraclitus sees as so general that order, renewal and arrest of disintegration are what need explaining (p. 109).

Describing a living being in terms of processes is therefore not, for Wiggins, an alternative to describing it as an individual or a substance. The two descriptions are complementary. A substance continues to exist through change, both in the sense that it survives change and in the sense that, in most cases, change is precisely what allows the substance to exist, just like the barley drink remains together by being stirred.

There are two further questions about the presuppositions of the dispute, perhaps invited by my way of describing it: how incompatible are Wiggins's stance and four-dimensionalism? And how are we supposed to decide this sort of metaphysical dispute? Wiggins notes, for example, that processes can proceed faster or slower, while it would be meaningless to say that (in the same sense) of a living being. More generally, Wiggins claims for his view the advantage of adhering to a commonsense ontology; he calls it for example "our everyday or *endurantist* conception of substances" (p. 15), and he describes the four-dimensionalist view as committed to "deny ordinary substances their status as proper continuants, [and] insist that ordinary substances are really constructs" (p. 17). But the four-dimensionalist is not plausibly read as literally

denying the existence of everyday substances. At least I think this is a rather uncharitable reading. A recent proposal by Delia Fara (2012) develops a way of understanding “being the same” in a four-dimensionalist framework that gives a crucial role to sortal predicates (those that, in Wiggins’ view, apply to substances). Fara distinguishes between sameness and identity. Two things can be the same in a certain respect, and thus count as one exemplar of the relevant kind, without being strictly speaking identical. I am the same person I used to be twenty years ago, on this view, but my present part is not identical to what I was twenty years ago. Of course, I cannot even start to adjudicate the merits of this view here. What I wish to note is that the view does not obviously or literally contradict common sense. In my opinion, four-dimensionalism differs from the neo-Aristotelian view defended by Wiggins not about the truth of ordinary claims about substances, but rather about whether and to what extent those claims carve reality at the metaphysical joints.

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