

Review of Wiggins, Sameness and Substance Renewed
(for TLS).
Stephen Yablo

No one could argue with his premise: “The world is so full of a number of things.” But R. L. Stevenson’s conclusion — “I am sure we should all be as happy as kings” — shows that he hasn’t spent much time around philosophers. That the world is full of so many things makes them nervous. “Why these things in particular?” they wonder. It all seems so arbitrary.

“Why these things?” could be heard as a question of natural history. Why did Stonehenge come into being when the bookends that were to have been my eighth-grade carpentry project did not? Well, ancient Druids (or whoever) did a better job of getting pertinent bits of matter to line up in the required way. But philosophers do not care about this sort of thing. They are not wondering how the world’s matter came to be thus-and-so distributed, but why the given distribution makes for mountains and not just piled rocks; pieces of furniture rather than furniture arrangements; caterpillar-cum-butterflies rather than caterpillars that die when butterflies are born.

There are two main ideas about this. One is that you and I impose the macroscopic order by lumping bits of world-stuff together—not in a physical way, but cognitively, as one might for some purposes lump tornadoes with cyclones. The reason there is such a thing as Kiliminjaro, on this view, is that rocks piled mountainwise are conceptualized as a unit. The second idea is that mountains et al do not greatly care about our lumping practices because they exist in their own right. The macro-order lies waiting and our job is only to determine its nature.

If you find yourself attracted to the first idea, you are a “conceptualist”; if you prefer the second, you are a “realist”; if you see truth in both ideas, you should read David Wiggins’s book Sameness and Substance Renewed, for this is where conceptualism and realism come closest to working out their differences. Part of the story is repeated from Sameness and Substance (1980), but part is in a chapter (the sixth) that is quite new.

Aficionados will know that Sameness and Substance grew out of an even earlier book, Identity and Spatio-Temporal Continuity (1967). This was Wiggins’s first attack on the question that he says “carried me into philosophy” in the mid-1950s: the question of “how the objects we speak of and think about . . . are articulated or isolated or found or drawn or formed or carved out in the world” (from autobiographical remarks in Lovibond and Williams, Identity, Truth, and Value: Essays for David Wiggins, Blackwell 1996). The new book thus culminates an almost 50 year run of sustained thinking on the nature of, well, things.

Sameness and Substance was important both for the specific doctrines advanced and for its effect on theoretical attitudes. It combined with work by Saul Kripke and others to wipe a deeply ingrained anti-metaphysical smirk off the face of Anglo-American philosophy. The specific doctrines are not easily summarized, but we have Wiggins’s own word for it that there were “two important things I had to say” in 1980. One concerned the realism debate already mentioned; he urged the “doubtfulness of the separation, supposedly obvious or truistic and still widely insisted upon, between ontological and conceptual questions”. But it is the other important thing that people remember. This is prima facie surprising, because the other important thing was to do with identity, the relation everything bears exclusively to itself. What could be simpler or less in need of elaboration than that?

The relation's simplicity turns out to be the topic, however, for it proves hard to square with how identification is handled in practice. This is the same table as before, we say, but not, after so many repairs, the same wood. And today's wood may tomorrow be rearranged into a new piece of furniture. The italicized qualifications are puzzling if identity is simple and self-sufficient. It ought to be possible to throw them away and ask: is this just the same as before? And yet the question feels ridiculous. One might as well ask whether an Oslo maple made by Parisian carpenters into an Art Nouveau armoire is Norwegian, not as wood or as furniture but as itself. The simple, clear identity relation we started with seems destroyed.

According to Wiggins, we were right the first time. He agrees that "is this thing (simply) the same as that earlier thing?" can feel silly, and that this reflects some kind of unclarity in the question. He traces the unclarity not to "same", though, but "this thing" and "that earlier thing". Are we talking about this and that table, or this and that quantity of wood? Once such questions are settled, the relations take care of themselves.

This strategy of inflecting the objects rather than the identity relation has its costs. Our elbows seemed to be resting on one thing, but now it turns out there were two: first the table, and second the wood that makes it up. It is supposed to mitigate the strangeness of this that the two are exactly alike in every ordinary respect; they sit in the same spot and have the same shape, weight, and appearance. But this is strange in itself. How can items so overwhelmingly similar still be two? Wiggins says that they differ in how we trace their evolution through time, and that that is enough.

The problem is that this sounds a bit like conceptualism. After all, we could have traced evolutions differently. Suppose the rule for furniture had been: it goes out of existence every Friday at sunset;

exactly similar furniture instantly takes its place. Having just pronounced our actual tracing scheme enough for tables, we seem poorly positioned to deny that there would have been shmables (think "shabat-mutating-tables") had we employed this alternative scheme. It might, I suppose, be maintained that we landed by pure dumb luck on a conceptual scheme to which something actually corresponds. But this is not very plausible. If the choice is conceptualism or the dumb luck hypothesis, I cast my lot (however reluctantly) with conceptualism.

The challenge for Wiggins is to explain what else but conceptualism could legitimate the move from “we have a certain style of tracing” to “there is a corresponding sort of object”. His answer draws on an analogy once used by Sir Arthur Eddington (in The Philosophy of Physical Science 1958, based on lectures given in 1938). Eddington tells of a surface-dwelling ichthyologist who, finding no counterexamples, concludes that sea-creatures can never be less than two inches long. When some onlooker suggests that there might be shorter fish, “only your net is not adapted to catch them”, the reply comes that the “kingdom of fishes [is] defined as the theme of ichthyological knowledge.” Since uncatchable fishes are unknowable, they are not in the relevant sense fishes at all.

Eddington’s sympathies are, believe it or not, with the ichthyologist. But he allows the onlooker one final, memorable speech: “I bet he does not get very far with his ichthyology of catchable fish. I wonder what his theory of the reproduction of catchable fishes will be like. It is all very well to dismiss baby fishes as metaphysical speculation”, but then where do the bigger fish come from? I will not trouble you with Eddington’s reply, because Wiggins’s is so much better.

The onlooker is right that “the size and mesh of a net determine, not what fish are in the sea, but which we we shall catch.” But why should this be cause for concern? The worry must be that it

would be pure dumb luck if what held of our catch held of fish overall. But that depends on the nets. If they are chosen at random or on the basis of price or color, then it would indeed be dumb luck. More likely, though, "our expectations of what was there to be caught condition[ed] our choice of that net and affected at an earlier point some netmaker's design for that net". Enough back and forth between net, catch, and ichthyological theory, and our success becomes, as the saying goes, not luck but skill.

The same applies to our ways of tracing objects over time and our theories of the objects thus traced. Having refined each in light of the other until results are reached that make sense, what else are we supposed to think but that these results are correct? Wiggins is undoubtedly right that his approach "preserves our thought's prospects of passing beyond the narrowly anthropocentric." How reassuring should we find this? I don't know, because I am not sure how far beyond the narrowly anthropocentric our thought had it in mind to go.