

## BOOK REVIEWS

Robert Merrihew Adams, *What Is, and What Is in Itself: A Systematic Ontology*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. 223 pp.

This monograph was not authored in two, five, or even ten years. Its depth and breadth reflect half a century of meditating on historical texts in their original languages, weighing arguments across several subdisciplines, and systematizing the author's groundbreaking contributions.

In a preface to the *Principles of Philosophy*, Descartes compares philosophy to a tree. Its roots are neither epistemology nor the philosophy of language but rather metaphysics. In *What Is, and What Is in Itself*, Robert Merrihew Adams turns to these roots. He also returns to them—they were his own. The monograph serves as a bookend to a distinguished philosophical career that began where philosophy of religion meets metaphysical inquiry. But it does not simply compile past articles like an album of classic hits. In fact, only a single chapter closely approximates a previously published article. Chapter 6 repurposes one of Adams's (2007) more important but lesser-known articles to defend the priority of the mental over the physical. Adams weaves this defense into a coherent whole that connects, clarifies, extends, and in some cases corrects his past work. The subtitle rings true—"A Systematic Ontology."

The book presents a panentheistic—not pantheistic—worldview according to which the divine, in one or more senses, *contains* but also *outstrips* everything else. Adams's favored version of panentheism has three major pillars:

- Conceptualism—universals are concepts in the divine mind. (chap. 4)
- Idealism—physical objects are merely intentional objects. (chap. 6)
- Occasionalism—God maintains the causal unity of our fundamentally noncausal universe (chap. 10)

In the process of system building, Adams defends deflationary views of actuality and existence (chaps. 1 and 2), classifies various kinds of intentional objects (chap. 3), and explicates the core concept of intrinsic reality (chap. 5). He covers the epistemology of being and the role of practical reason in forming ontological beliefs (chap. 7), defends the reality of thisnesses (chap. 8), and argues for views of personal identity across time, possibility, and death (chap. 9, where practical reason once again plays a crucial role). The book, overall, bears the characteristic marks of Adams's earlier writings: erudition, systematicity, the centrality of the divine, sometimes dense sentence structure, and a heaping

dose of my favorite Adamsism—“as such”—which occurs as a rough synonym for the titular “in itself” some forty-six times.

Along the way, Adams makes several fascinating arguments. Within a sustained defense of irreducible thisnesses, for example, Adams presents a new counterexample to the Identity of Indiscernibles without drawing from outside his own broadly idealist toolkit. The counterexample involves a case of second-order imagination where he pictures himself visualizing nothing but a green disc that partitions into four indiscernible quadrants (146). Because the quadrants wholly appear within a conscious state, the counterexample invokes neither concrete spatial relations nor spatially located physical objects—unlike Max Black’s iron spheres or the nearly indiscernible embodied persons in Adams 1979: 17–19. For lovers of trivia, the green disc not only graces the dust jacket but also evokes the lone black circle on the dust jacket hugging the first edition of *The Nature of Necessity*, the classic text authored by fellow actualist and theist Alvin Plantinga.

The green wedges are, according to Adams, *intrinsically real*, a notion Adams wields effectively in qualified arguments for both idealism and occasionalism. A thing is intrinsically real when it has being in itself; without intrinsic reality, a thing derives its being from elsewhere. Whereas J. K. Rowling enjoys intrinsic reality as a conscious subject, Harry Potter lacks it. As a fictional character, Potter’s being is “located” in the minds of those who think of and imagine him, Rowling included (1).

What, then, is the difference between Potter and the green wedges? The green wedges are colored shapes and exist fully within the subject’s consciousness. Potter, by contrast, does not even exist. This follows from Adams’s Aristotelian conception of existence according to which something exists only if it satisfies its nominal essence—that is, only if the thing is as it is definitively represented (25–32). Potter’s nominal essence includes being a boy wizard, and nothing has ever exemplified such a property cluster.

Yet Potter nonetheless has being as a merely intentional object—a creature of mental representation. Adams, then, pulls being and existence apart. Potter’s nonexistence does not preclude him from serving as the value of a variable. Here, Adams departs from the Quinean orthodoxy that prohibits quantification over nonexistents (32–37). The earliest and most influential defenses of actualism grew from Quinean soil, including Adams’s own. For instance, in “Actualism and Thisness” Adams (1981: 7) characterizes actualism as “the doctrine that there *are* no things that do not exist in the actual world.” Despite this change of heart, Adams here doubles down on actualism under a different guise (7–8, 19–22). He now conceives of actualism not as a thesis about what is but as a thesis about the “ontological primacy” of what exists (9). Although mere possibilities don’t exist, they still have being insofar as actual conscious states represent them.

Mere possibilities and fictional characters like Potter have being but lack both existence and intrinsic reality. By contrast, the green wedges enjoy all three. This leaves room for a category of objects that, like the wedges, both are and exist, but, like Potter, lack intrinsic reality. Adams places certain social objects in this category, such as digital dollars (64, 80). Such things exist because they are as we definitively represent them.

For largely Berkeleyan reasons, Adams *suspects* that this third category also includes physical objects—from gluons to galaxies and everything in between. Now, inspired by Kant, Adams ultimately concedes ignorance about the ontological status of physical reality. Under reflective equilibrium, however, he first officially endorses a disjunction between idealism and panpsychism. Then, since system building grants no quarter to such disjunctions, Adams eventually throws his lot in with the idealists.

Adams suspects that physical objects lack intrinsic reality for several reasons. Among them is the idea that spatiotemporal relationships involving sizes, shapes, and motions are simply “too hollow” to undergird intrinsic reality (98). Sizes and shapes require, in Adams’s vernacular, “positive content” or “Real properties” to fill and animate them. And the surest examples of such hail from mental reality (81–82). Think here of the secondary qualities like colors and sounds. Adams also places spatiotemporal relations within the mental and argues, convincingly in my view, that idealism has the resources necessary to capture contemporary physics (108–9). This means that, as many fail or even stubbornly resist to appreciate, the deliverances of physics confirm idealism and physicalism equally.

Why, though, should we say that physical objects *exist* under idealist assumptions? What does saying so even mean? In chapter 7, Adams treats ordinary discourse about physical objects as ontologically superficial. Additionally, he argues that an idealist metaphysics does not negate the practical utility of believing in the existence of physical objects given their consistent and reliable roles in our experiences and the successful predictions and interactions they enable.

I am less clear, and less sure, about these moves. Folk metaphysics seems to me anti-idealist, not merely noncommittal. Given my experience teaching Leibniz and Berkeley, people ordinarily adhere to the mind-independence of tables and chairs. Therefore, tables and chairs so-conceived don’t exist if idealism is true. New converts to idealism can easily justify the continued use of terms such as ‘table’ and ‘chair’. And an idealist’s table-concept will almost entirely overlap the folk concept in ordinary discourse. So communication would continue as before—at least until these concepts come into direct conflict in ontologically deep contexts where, say, an idealist and nonidealist debate the fundamental nature of tables. I wonder whether Adams needs much more than that.

The book overall stands as a monument to the continued relevance of historical scholarship for contemporary metaphysics. Reading Adams warps one's sense of time. If you didn't know any better, you might think that he corresponded with both David Lewis *and* Spinoza and that Lewis and Spinoza had corresponded with one another. This speaks to the timelessness of philosophical inquiry as well as Adam's own recognition of it—as such.

Adams's disregard for temporal gaps among interlocutors is most clear in two discussions about the principle of plenitude, the thesis that all possibilities are equally real. Appearing in the first and last chapters, they serve as an *inclusio* for the entire book. In the first discussion, Adams rejects the principle to leave room for mere possibility partly because doing so preserves how we ordinarily think and talk about possibility. Since Spinoza and Lewis both endorse the principle, neither genuinely preserves our ordinary judgments about possibility. This poses a greater problem for Lewis, Adams argues. For Lewis alone motivates his system with appeals to ordinary thought and language despite offering “not so much an explication as replacement of what we have meant (and probably still mean to mean) in speaking of what is ‘possible’ and what is ‘actual’” (18).

Yet by the final and, in my view, most exciting chapter, Adams's own commitments threaten to revive the principle of plenitude. Here, Adams draws inspiration from an obscure debate he dusts off from the late eighteenth century between Moses Mendelssohn and Gottfried Lessing. In the previous chapter, the notion of intrinsic reality drives Adams to argue for a version of pantheistic occasionalism according to which God both acts in and experiences our own conscious experiences. At first glance it therefore seems that God's knowledge of possibilities requires that he entertain them in the very way that suffices to actualize reality as Adams conceives it—through thought and experience. Adams suggests that in entertaining merely possible worlds, God remains the only actual conscious subject representing them. So these worlds remain merely possible because they do not exist as represented—as containing other conscious subjects. This is not unreasonable. After all, in playing video games, we sometimes experience virtual worlds as if we had the company of other conscious subjects despite being fundamentally alone.

I conclude with a disclosure. Authors have an ethical obligation to convey conflicts of interest, especially on topics concerning personal investment. For obvious reasons, rarely does an *investment* disclose a relation to the *investor*. But I now find myself in such a position. For Adams was my adviser, and I'm grateful for his wholly positive influence on my life. When I asked Adams to advise my dissertation, he suggested that I pair him with a coadviser. In his words, “Each of us has an expiration date, and I suspect mine is sooner rather than later.” If *What Is, and What Is in Itself* is fundamentally correct, it will never expire, not as a structured series of thoughts, anyway. It will exist eternally

among the only intrinsically real things—an everlasting community of minds, including God’s own.

### References

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Carolina Sartorio, *Causalism: Unifying Action and Free Action*.  
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This is a wonderful book. The writing is lucid and crisp, the argumentation is powerful, and the position defended is novel and attractive. The book develops what Sartorio calls “big-picture causalism,” the view that “when a behavior is an action/free action, the actual causal history of the behavior is what makes it an action/free action” (3). Sartorio assumes that causalism about action is true (6) and asks how we can build on a causalist account of action to arrive at an account of free action. In her view, causes are of central importance because of their bearing on agential control—the control required for action and the more complex control required for free action.

After a brief introductory chapter, Sartorio turns in chapter 2 to the main motivations for causalism about action and about free action. Causalism about action, she contends, “offers a natural explanation of (1) the distinction between the things that we do (our actions) and the things that merely happen to us (mere behaviors), and (2) the significance, for our expressions of reasons-based agency, of the distinction between the reasons that we have for acting and the reasons for which we actually act” (24). The second point is associated with Donald Davidson’s much-discussed challenge to anticausalists. Imagine that an agent has two different reasons for doing something, *A*, but does it for only one of those reasons. For example, Paul has two different reasons for giving his ailing aunt a lethal poison—it will put her out of her misery and it will hasten