

Meaning, Expression, and Thought. WAYNE A. DAVIS. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. Pp. xvii, 654.

When we think that if the square root of two is rational then one equals zero, we think, “The square root of two is rational,” that is, the thought that the square root of two is rational occurs to us. The occurrence of the thought does not entail that we believe the thought true, or desire it true, or have any other attitude toward it. On the other hand, belief entails an occurrence of the thought. If Jane, a novice math student, believes that the square root of two is rational, the thought that the square root of two is rational occurs to her, or at least has occurred to her and can occur to her. Likewise with all other propositional attitudes. Or so says Wayne Davis. Thoughts are the basic building blocks of his ambitious theory of meaning. Davis defines speaker meaning, communication, word meaning, speaker reference, word reference, and many other related notions to be included in any comprehensive theory of meaning, in terms ultimately of thoughts and their occurrence. For example:

By (the expression) e , S means “ p ” iff S directly expresses the idea or thought that p by producing e . (p. 32)

S expresses Ψ iff S performs an observable act as an indication of occurrent Ψ without thereby covertly simulating an unintentional indication of Ψ . (p. 59)

Here “ Ψ ” is a substitutional variable to be replaced with any term denoting a mental state.

S communicates M to A iff S does something by which S expresses M and from which A recognizes that S is expressing M. (p. 94)

This thick book is extensively researched and contains a large number of arguments, many of which are convincing and most of those which are not are provocative and worth close scrutiny. Davis presents a comprehensive picture of language based on the conviction that a language is a conventional system of expressing thoughts and their component parts (ideas). The most consistently plausible part of this admirable book is Part One, in which he argues relentlessly against what might be termed the *doxastic fallacy*, namely, the view that linguistic meaning is ultimately a matter of transmission of belief as such. I shall mainly confine myself to two critical remarks on the rest of the book, which is still quite strong.

Even though Davis declares his notions of thought and its occurrence primitive, he says a great deal about them. The thought that the square root of two is rational is a structured mental event type. It occurs to Jane by being instantiated in her. The mental event token in Jane is a spatiotemporal object, whereas the type is an abstract object, which could exist without being instantiated by any token. Davis identifies the proposition that P with the thought that P. Propositions are thus mental event types with internal structure. The thought, or proposition, that the square root of two is rational is composed of its constituent parts, main ones of which are the idea *square root*, the idea *two*, and the idea *rational*. Such parts are the objects of expression by words and phrases the way propositions are the objects of expression by sentences. The phrase “square root” expresses the idea *square root* and the word “rational” expresses the idea *rational*.

As events, propositions are demystified. They are no longer murky objects of darkness the

nature of which is mysterious except their contentfulness. They are just events, and while a satisfactory theory of events is yet to be formulated, they are made more mundane. At the same time, as types, propositions retain their aloof independence from the realm of particulars. Countless types exist without being tokened. Propositions thus keep their comfortable abstractness intact. Davis thus manages to have his cake and eat it too. Or does he? A proposition has its content essentially. So, if a proposition is a mental event type, that mental event type has its content essentially. But given physicalism, which Davis favors, some mental event (e.g., every mental event in a human being) is a neurophysiological event. Therefore, some neurophysiological event has a content and has it essentially. But neurophysiological events are not essentially contentful; *a fortiori* they do not have a specific content essentially. A contradiction. Davis's reaction to this *reductio* argument is to bite the bullet and say that since propositions have a content and have it essentially and they are (empirically likely to be) neurophysiological events, neurophysiological events have a content and have it essentially. Davis also thinks that the content of a contentful neurophysiological event is intrinsic to the event. It seems to me that this reaction to the objection is too hasty. What the version of physicalism Davis favors offers is token identity. So, for the objection to go through, it must be assumed that if a type has a feature intrinsically and essentially, so do its tokens. But this is an implausible assumption. Davis is only committed to locating the intrinsic essential contentfulness in the types. The mental event type, the proposition that the square root of two is rational, has the content, *the square root of two is rational*, intrinsically and essentially. This is plausible, and this seems to be a cleaner response Davis can make to the objection. The price for this, however, is that the proposed definition of proposition becomes rather uninformative. If

some human neurophysiological event token and some Martian inner-hydrodynamic event token both count as tokens of the same type, say, the proposition that the square root of two is rational, what unifies them into the same type except that they are tokens of that proposition, i.e., that type? It would not help to try the Kripkean “theoretical identity” gambit here. If the proposition that the square root of two is rational is identical with the human neurophysiological event type *à la* “Water is identical with H₂O,” then the same proposition is also identical with the imagined Martian inner-hydrodynamic event type. It then follows that the human neurophysiological event type and the Martian inner-hydrodynamic event type are identical with each other, which they are not.

Davis says:

Suppose that Peter believes that there are two famous Americans named “Ronald W.

Reagan” ... When watching a movie, Peter says “Reagan is nothing but a two-bit actor.”

When watching a presidential address, he says “Reagan is one of the greatest Americans who has ever lived.” ... But clearly, Peter is expressing different ideas on the two occasions. As a result, he is not contradicting himself. Yet there are no words in the English language (or in any idiolect that we share with Peter) that express those ideas. (P. 113)

Clearly, different mental event tokens occur in Peter on the two occasions. This does not mean, however, that he is not contradicting himself. If I say “The square root of two is rational” on Monday and say “The square root of two is not rational” on Friday, I am contradicting myself, even though two different mental event tokens are involved. Why does Davis say that clearly

Peter expresses different ideas of Reagan on the two occasions? The following passages seem to offer some help:

S is thinking of (about) Φ iff the idea of Φ is occurring to S. (P. 318)

“S is thinking of Φ ” and “ Φ is the object of S’s thought” should not be treated as expressing a relation between Φ and S or his thought. They should be treated only as descriptions of S and what S is thinking. (P. 320)

This means that when we say that Peter thinks about Reagan, we are not expressing any relation between Peter, or a mental event token in Peter, and Reagan. But then, it is not clear what it means to say that Peter think about Reagan. When we say pretheoretically, “Peter thinks about Reagan,” we clearly seem to express a relation between the two men. Davis uses the words “idea” and “concept” interchangeably as meaning *part of thought*. Thus, when he says,

Since we can think about Socrates, we have to have a concept of Socrates (p. 409),

we naturally understand him as saying that since mental event types about Socrates are tokened in us, there are parts of mental event types that are tokened in us that are about Socrates. When two people think about Socrates, two different mental-event-part tokens occur which are of the same type, the idea of Socrates. So, possession of the idea of Socrates is guaranteed by the ability to think about Socrates. According to Davis, it is unintelligible to speak of *a--*as opposed

to *the*--belief that P, for any specific "P." So we should speak of *the* belief that Socrates is wise, not *a* belief that Socrates is wise. Likewise Davis should say that we should speak of *the* idea of Socrates, not *an* idea of Socrates. There is a word in English that expresses that idea, namely, the word "Socrates"; cf. 7.9 **Definition:** *The idea of ϕ = the idea " ϕ "* (p. 149). So, Peter's idea on either occasion is the idea of Ronald W. Reagan, viz., the idea "Ronald W. Reagan." What more can we say about this idea? It is tempting to say that it is the thought-part type whose tokens are unified by means of bearing a certain specific external (perhaps causal-historical) relation to Reagan. Furthermore, consider:

... word reference is transparent and fully relational, subject to both existential instantiation and the substitutivity of identity. ... we can say that *e* refers to Φ iff (i) Φ exists and (ii) for some $\Phi' = \Phi$, *e* verbally expresses the idea of Φ' . Thus "Roosevelt" refers to Franklin Delano Roosevelt in English because it is a word that expresses the idea of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who was a real person. (P. 151)

Davis here speaks of *the* idea of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Even though he is speaking of word expression rather than speaker expression, of which he was speaking in the earlier passage about Peter and "Ronald W. Reagan," the two passages are about ideas of particular individuals and there is some tension between them. If Peter has two different ideas of Reagan, it is hard to see how there can be such a thing as *the* idea of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, whether it is or is not expressed by some word or speaker. Furthermore, the context "the idea of ()" must be transparent and relational, for otherwise, the relative clause "who was a real person" in the last

quoted sentence would be nonsensical. This makes it hard to fathom how there could be two distinct mental types that are both properly called “idea of Ronald W. Reagan.” This also seems to make the current passage go against the two earlier passages quoted from pp. 318 and 320 taken together.

Some may notice a small number of howlers in this rich and otherwise well-researched and carefully-reasoned book. For example, on p. 362, Davis says:

Salmon presents an interesting variant of the Mates problem, in an effort to show that even the clearest synonyms are not substitutable.

Nathan Salmon’s effort is exactly to the opposite end. Such infelicities are rare and should not deter anyone from finishing this rewarding tome.

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