Jim Swindler’s review of *Simplicity* for Lexington Books, April 2012

1. Content: Craig Dilworth has written an extraordinarily insightful book on one of the deepest and most comprehensive of philosophical subjects, metaphysical categories. And he connects explicitly with a truly amazing variety of philosophical ideas, often in binary pairs requiring subtle distinctions, including, e.g., perspective and world view, knowledge and understanding, reason and intuition, the transcendent and transcendental, the phenomenal and transcendental, primary and secondary qualities, universal and particular, objects and properties, the a priori and a posteriori, analytic and synthetic, emergence and reduction, mind and body, substance and accident, change and stasis, the abstract and the concrete, necessity and possibility, doubt and certainty, reference and intentionality, existence and being, being and nothingness, space and time, cause and effect, identity and difference, paradox and contradiction, knower and known, and, of course, at its core, simplicity and complexity. The book comprises 19 chapters, arranged in the classic style of Plato’s *Republic* and Kant’s *Critique*, with an “analytic” at the beginning, whose task is to explain the basic theory followed by a “dialectic” that demonstrates how the theory contributes to a unified understanding and resolution of a wide variety of contested issues. Dilworth’s analytic explains the “simplicity way of thinking,” a way of thinking about simplicity itself as the fundamental organizing feature of reality. Following the table of contents there is a handy listing of and index to all the principles (fundamental rules of reality) and definitions introduced in the book.

Dilworth’s background is in the philosophy of science, and there is no concept that plays a deeper role in the practice of science than simplicity. But there is much confused thinking about what simplicity is, and the notion of simplicity is most commonly invoked, rather thoughtlessly, under the guise of Ockam’s razor. *Here* simplicity is elevated to the status of metaphysical keystone, binding together into a stable structure rich and suggestive definitions and distinctions among a wide array of important concepts, and bringing them to bear on the problems of the unity of the world and of experience. Despite his modest conception of philosophical progress (“Any problem that can be solved is not philosophical.”), his consistently insightful accounts of basic concepts and their relations constitute a genuine advance on previous systems.

This is not an easy book, since the reader is required constantly to shift perspectives and levels of thought. But Dilworth introduces and develops a set of conceptual tools, complete with its own jargon, to aid in the enterprise. Though his specialized jargon of “analytic” and “synthetic,” “simplicity” and “complexity,” “perspectives,” “dimensions,” etc., is, on the whole, very helpful and even frequently leads the inquiry, his points are sometimes made more revealingly when he reverts to traditional language, as is the case in his discussion of the mind-body problem. But the aim, which his tools largely succeed in attaining, is to understand, systematically and non-reductively, why we reach certain characteristic kinds of philosophical impasses, like the mind-body problem, which he sees as the “paradigm” philosophical problem of our age and the root of many other problems, and the problem of causality, which is key to understanding science. So, the work also contributes substantially to meta-philosophy and philosophical methodology as well as to the methodologies of related fields.

Here is a brief sketch of just one aspect of the theory and how it applies. Though his respect for others’ efforts is evident throughout, and he consciously builds on the work of philosophers like Kant, Dilworth avoids aligning his work with any particular “school” of thought. This is important in grasping just how original this work really is. The central theory, the “simplicity way of thinking,” enables one to stand back and see what other perspectives assume and how they interact. It shows clearly what the assumptions of each possible perspective are, whether they are single level (monistic) or bi-level (dualistic), and what kind of (or lack of) complexity is involved at each level.

A key tool invented by Dilworth for this purpose is the “simplicity ladder,” in which what is complex on one level becomes or may be seen as simple on another level. In general we acquire better understanding when we are able to see the complex as grounded in the simple. The simple is transcendental with respect to the complex, and from the lower level is inconceivable. An example is the complexity or plurality that is unified by a universal, which may in turn be seen as complex with respect to a more fundamental (abstract) universal producing the ladder or hierarchy. Universals remain mysterious even as they explain what instantiates them. Again, we move from a great variety of chemical substances to a few elements, to a few particles, to a few forces, to perhaps one force, all the while talking about the same objects. Likewise, a singleton self enjoys rich and varied experiences, and a plethora of inclinations is resolved by a single choice.

To understand these features of reality, it is necessary, Dilworth proposes, to shift perspectives between the chaotic manifold to be understood and the relatively simple, and therefore mysterious, unifying principle that comprehends it. These shifts are often, if not always, shifts from one category to another, from a material body to the immaterial self, from matter to energy, or from art to Beauty itself. The problem he identifies with other approaches is that they typically fail to allow such shifts. Kant is (mostly) an exception, but the monistic materialism of modern science is a case in point. Dilworth strikingly, flatly says that there is no category of the mental available to modern science, so it has no means of making the appropriate perspectival shifts. And it is this fact that fuels the myriad of failed materialist reductionisms that now litter the philosophy of mind and cognitive science.

The theory gets more complicated and difficult (less intuitive at first) but gains much more power when the simple and complex are crossed with the analytic and synthetic to produce analytic and synthetic simplicity. This is a genuinely novel move, one that opens the way to a second “level” of understanding, in which, e.g., entities are conceived on the one hand from the outside as analytically simple units and on the other from the inside as synthetic, structured complexes. The whole of something transcends its parts, even in their relations. “Synthetic simplicity is the unity of a plurality; analytic simplicity is the plurality of a unity.” The analytically simple has no internal relations; the synthetically simple *is* relation. Everything is complex but each thing is synthetically simple in constituting a whole.

The notion of nothingness plays a significant role as a limiting concept in the simplicity way of thinking. One form or another of contradiction (linguistic, epistemic, ontological, etc.) is necessary to nothingness, so nothingness is complex. But, since the simple is inexplicable, it is indistinguishable from nothingness, though they are nevertheless not the same: one is simple and the other is complex. Nothingness can have being (we can think about contradictory things) but they cannot exist in reality: no contradictory objects exist. Related to contradictions on the simplicity way of thinking (or picture of reality) are “perspectival incompatibilities.” These occur when we try to see something as both analytically and synthetically simple at once, when we try to see it from both the inside and outside at the same time, mixing perspectives. It is the incoherence of doing so that motivates the conception of simplicity ladders, shifting perspectives as we move up, and that ultimately leads to the resolution or at least better characterization of philosophical impasses. In my judgment, this overall conception is a significant and novel advance in metaphysics and metaphysical methodology. Dilworth has, in effect, created a realist perspectivalism, if I might label it so.

2. Scholarship: Dilworth is on intimate terms not only with much of the philosophical literature but with the relevant literature of science (especially modern physics) and religion (Buddhism and Taoism) as well. The book contains a great many deeply insightful historical remarks and analyses. All in all, in my view *Simplicity* belongs in that rarified pantheon of masterpieces on fundamental metaphysics and category theory (what Dilworth calls *meta*-metaphysics), which includes Plato’s *Sophist*, Aristotle’s *Categories*, Aquinas’ *On Being and Essence*, Descartes’ *Meditations*, Berkeley’s *Principles*, Hume’s *Treatise*, Kant’s *Critiques*, Bradley’s *Appearance and Reality*, Russell’s *Logical Atomism*, Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* and *Philosophical Investigations*, Husserl’s *Ideas*, Strawson’s *Individuals*, and Butchvarov’s *Being Qua Being*, as well as foundational work in logic and mathematics by Aristotle, Euclid, Newton, Leibniz, Boole, Cantor, Frege, Russell, Gödel, Boolos, and Prior. Beside these, Dilworth’s effort is worthy indeed. Close reading is rewarded with much deeper understanding not only of how to frame metaphysical issues, but what the meaning is of various kinds of attempted solutions. To be sure, there are a few mistaken readings of important literature, most notably of Frege on indirect reference. But these are very few and do not distract from the development of the main argument, but only of a few particulars of its application.

The tone can be a bit oracular at times (though never abrasively so), with some rather dark sayings, which presumably are intended to stimulate deeper appreciation of the central ideas. E.g., simplicity is said to be neither something nor nothing, and to be indistinguishable from nothingness; absolute nothingness is said to be the same as neither analytic nor synthetic simplicity from any point of view; and nothing is said to be related to absolute nothingness as existence is related to being.

3. Audience: The book starts out easy, talking about what philosophy is, but quickly dives into deeper waters. (I’m reminded of Peter Strawson’s saying that there is no shallow end to the pool of philosophy.) Chapter 2, in which the main theory of simplicity is developed, is difficult, partly because it contains so much that is novel and exploratory, partly simply because it is deep. The applications of the theory to linguistics, mathematics, logic, physics, even religion and art, presume a lot of prior knowledge of these fields. This is especially true of Dilworth’s treatment of the logical paradoxes and quantum physics. These will give the cognoscenti marvelous insights but pass over the heads of others. So, I would expect the main clientele to be research libraries and teachers of relatively advanced courses on metaphysics.

4. Competition: (See item 2 above.) Of contemporary work, I’d mention Butchvarov’s *Being Qua Being*, Chisholm’s *Theory of Categories*, Grossman’s *Categorial Structure of the World*, Johansson’s *Ontological Investigations*, McDowell’s *Mind and World*, and perhaps Brandom’s *Making it Explicit*, though, of course, there are many other works that would be partially competitive and many other philosophers who blend these issues with others in their work, not to mention a plethora of journal literature.

5. Revisions: I wouldn’t change much. As it stands, it’s a rather delicate fabric. Pull a thread here or there and it could unravel. But that’s not a flaw; it’s a virtue. The methodology and the argument are tight and should remain so. More concrete examples would help to make the book more accessible and, perhaps, widen its audience. Chapters 15−17 are very brief and could use amplification. I like the organization. As noted, it is a classic structure and makes good sense for this kind of work. It is very helpful to list the principles separately up front and to highlight them in the main body of the text. The references and index are reasonably complete and helpful. The title is fine.

6. Recommendation: Yes. Emphatically, this book should be published; the more widely read the better. I would buy it myself, recommend it, and use it in my own metaphysics course. The reason is that it is so comprehensive and moves so insightfully through such deep waters, which is precisely what metaphysics is supposed to do. Moreover, as noted, it contains a wealth of insight on other approaches to metaphysics and related fields. It will take some preparation of students to understand it, but that is what goes on in the earlier part of a metaphysics course anyway. Each advances the argument beyond their predecessors. And that is certainly true of Dilworth.

7. Additional Comments: No. I’ve said enough to make it clear that I think it would be a mistake not to publish *Simplicity*. It is first-rate work and I am delighted to be able to recommend it.