

On Cosmos and Concepts

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ABSTRACT

ROCHELLE MICHON GAGG: On Cosmos and Concepts
(Under the direction of Thomas Hofweber)

Priority monists maintain that the most fundamental concrete thing is the entire cosmos. However, in contrast with *existence* monists, priority monists hold that other objects, including medium-sized objects such as tables, exist in exactly the same way as the cosmos. They hold the metametaphysical view that the job of metaphysics is to organize the ontology of the world into hierarchical relations; they are neo-Aristotelians. And, on the most natural reading of priority monism, wholes are more fundamental than parts. Here, I attempt to show that these commitments lead the priority monist into an inescapable trilemma. My argument will focus upon the fact that a priority monist must make room in her ontology for a certain kind of structured mental object, i.e. concepts. But, I shall argue, because of the nature of concepts, every way a priority monist can possibly fit them into her hierarchical ontology leads her to untenable conclusions.

DEDICATIONS

I dedicate this work to my family. To my mother, Michelle Marie Jones, whose unshakable faith in me keeps me writing, even when I think I shouldn't. To my sister, Rockne Mirage Gagg, whose bright and spirited personality shines in everything she does. To my brother, Roman Alexander Gagg, who gracefully bears the curse of being exactly like me. And to my father, Ronald Allen Gagg, the person for whom I swore to solve the mysteries of the cosmos.

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Introduction

Priority monists maintain that the most fundamental thing is the entire cosmos, the object composed of all objects. However, in contrast with *existence* monists, priority monists hold that other objects, including medium-sized dry goods such as tables, exist in exactly the same way as the cosmos. In fact, priority monists believe that a great many things exist; they are ontological permissivists. And they hold the metametaphysical view that the job of metaphysics is to organize the (gigantic) ontology of the world into hierarchical relations; they are neo-Aristotelians. And, on the most natural reading of priority monism, wholes are always more fundamental than parts. Here, I attempt to show that these commitments lead the priority monist into an inescapable trilemma. Since I think that the arguments in favor of neo-Aristotelian metametaphysics are sound, I shall argue that it is the monistic element of priority monism that must be given up. My argument will focus upon the fact that a priority monist must make room in her ontology for a certain kind of structured mental object, i.e. concepts. But, I shall argue, because of the nature of concepts, every way a priority monist can possibly fit them into her hierarchical ontology leads her to untenable conclusions.

It is worth mentioning that, admittedly, priority monism has very few modern proponents. The main contemporary champion of priority monism is Jonathan Schaffer; besides him, few people have argued in favor of the view in recent years. However, it seems to me as though none of the previously offered arguments against priority monism are convincing. In fact, I think that as a philosophical position, priority monism has been taken

far less seriously than it should be. The literature on the thesis seems to fall into one of two strategies: either it dismisses the view offhand as crazy, or it misunderstands the view and offers weak arguments against a weakened version of priority monism. This paper is envisioned as an attempt to give priority monism the kind of treatment it deserves, and to argue against it on its own terms, rather than on the terms of unsympathetic opponents.

This paper has one other ambitious goal; to serve as a model for the structure that metaphysical arguments will take upon widespread adoption of a neo-Aristotelian framework. Contemporary metaphysics is littered with arguments that take for granted standard Quinean metametaphysics; here I hope to show how arguments might look when that assumption is discarded.

Section 1: Neo-Aristotelianism

Neo-Aristotelianism is a metametaphysical position according to which the goal of metaphysics is to limn the fundamental structure of the world. In other words, this means that metaphysicians, when they do their job well, determine how the things in our ontology are ordered into structural, hierarchical relations. Which things are most fundamental, and which things are derivative on these fundamentalia?

This is to be contrasted with a Quinean picture of metaphysics, according to which questions about structure are mostly uninteresting, and that the work of the metaphysician consists in determining which entities exist and which do not. A metaphor that will help us here and throughout the paper is that of a warehouse. Picture a giant warehouse, in which we place everything that exists. Quineans do metaphysics by arguing about what the warehouse contains. They are interested in, as it were, an inventory of the Great Warehouse of Being, a comprehensive list of things that exist. For instance, some Quinean

metaphysicians are mereological nihilists; they believe that ordinary objects such as tables and chairs do not exist, but rather that such things are actually mereological simples arranged so as to look like a chair. One opponent of the mereological nihilist is the mereological universalist, who holds that **every** combination of mereological simples forms a new existant. Thus, not only do simples and tables exist, but so too do odd fusions of simples such as fusion of the ten atoms on the end of my nose, the tail of a long-dead archaeopteryx, and the nearest hemisphere of Betelgeuse. The nihilist and the universalist argue about the inventory of the Great Warehouse of Being, but what these two metaphysicians agree upon is that their job is to answer the question “what exists?”

The neo-Aristotelian, on the other hand, is uninterested in questions of existence. She believes that existence questions have obvious answers, and that these answers are invariably “yes.” Do numbers exist? Yes, obviously. Some numbers are prime, so there are some numbers¹. What about fictional characters? Well, Mark Twain created Huck Finn, so Huck Finn must exist. The neo-Aristotelian gives similar arguments for the existence of all entities, controversial and otherwise, provided there is no trick embedded in the existence question. What is interesting, then, is not whether such things exist, but how. For instance, are numbers mind-dependent? Do fictional characters depend for their existence on their authors, or are they discovered by their authors within a realm of possible fictions? This leads us to characterize the project of the neo-Aristotelian metaphysician as one of structuring or ordering entities within the Great Warehouse of Being. For the neo-Aristotelian, the warehouse contains, in a word, everything. The work we do as

¹ As Schaffer says, quoting David Lewis (1991): “I’m moved to laughter at the thought of how *presumptuous* it would be to reject mathematics for philosophical reasons’ (1991: 59). The sort of concerns one finds typically involve substantive causal and/or epistemic theses, aimed to show that entities like numbers would have to be causally inert or epistemically inaccessible. These concerns are interesting. Indeed they might help us learn about the nature of causality, or the limits of knowledge, or the need for concrete grounds for numbers. The point is just that mathematical truisms [...] deserve far greater credence than any causal and/or epistemic philosophical dictums they may conflict with.”

metaphysicians is to limn the structure of these entities, to determine how they are ordered in hierarchical fundamentality relations. To the metaphorical warehouse then, we add levels, shelves stacked atop one another on which we place objects. The most fundamental objects go on the ground level, and derivative objects go on shelves at higher levels, and they're grounded by the objects resting on the ground.

As Jonathan Schaffer says "What emerges is that the neo-Aristotelian and Quinean views will differ on at least two points. First, while the Quinean will show great concern with questions such as whether numbers exist, the neo-Aristotelian will answer such questions with a dismissive yes, of course. Second, while the neo-Aristotelian will show great concern with questions such as whether numbers are fundamental or derivative, the Quinean will have no concern with this further question. (Or the Quinean concern will be expressed in terms she mistakenly thinks are analyzable via supervenience; or in terms she admittedly considers dark; or in terms that belie an implicitly Aristotelian hierarchical view.) (Schaffer, 2009)"

This leads the bewildered Quinean to ask of the neo-Aristotelian "Whatever happened to parsimony? What happened to Occam's Razor? Why should we adopt a project for metaphysics that not only allows, but actually endorses, this huge explosion of entities, when philosophy is so deeply committed to the notion that we ought not to posit the existence of more entities than we need to explain the world as we see it? Do you deny that this is a good guiding principle for philosophy?"

The answer that the neo-Aristotelian should give to this (very good) latter question is a resounding "no." Of course parsimony concerns should guide our philosophy. But we ought to distinguish between differing ways a view can be parsimonious. Quinean metaphysicians sometimes brag that their views exhibit ontological parsimony, or parsimony

with respect to the number of existants. The idea is simple and intuitive. If we're deciding between two theories that are equally good at explaining a particular phenomenon, but Theory A necessitates the existence of a giant bronze duck the size of a planet hiding behind Betelgeuse, while Theory B has no such implications, we ought to go with Theory B.

But parsimony doesn't have to be a matter of limiting the number of entities on our ontological inventory. It is just as good a measure of parsimony to look instead at other factors. And the kind of parsimony that the neo-Aristotelian can brag about is parsimony of **fundamental** things, or what I'll call grounding parsimony². The story might go like this: Suppose that God was creating the world from scratch. She wants to create a galaxy, so she creates stars and planets and asteroids and black holes and whatever else is in galaxies. Now suppose that she's created all the components of a galaxy, and arranged them in the right way so they swirl around or whatever. The thing God has made now looks just like a galaxy. Does God now have to do anything else, anything extra, to make a galaxy, or is it enough that she's made all the components of a galaxy and arranged them in the right way? The neo-Aristotelian who was concerned with maintaining parsimony in her theory could say that the galaxy exists and the stars exist, but these components are more fundamental than the galaxy itself. In other words, the galaxy is derivative on the arrangement of stars and planets, and God doesn't need to do anything *extra*³ to ensure the existence of galaxies once she's created and properly arranged stars and planets. If the story goes like this, then the neo-Aristotelian

²² There is at least one other metaphysically interesting kind of parsimony a theory can exhibit - categorical parsimony, or parsimony with respect to the number of metaphysical categories entailed by a theory. Laurie Paul gives an argument in favor of categorically parsimonious views such as her version of Bundle Theory in (Paul, Forthcoming)

³ She might need to also make the laws of composition true, if they weren't already true in virtue of being metaphysically necessary.

will claim that it's no mark against the theory that it posits extra existants, so long as it doesn't posit more **fundamental** existants than necessary⁴.

Grounding parsimony seems to me a better measure of the spirit of Occam's Razor than ontological parsimony. To adequately defend this statement would require a whole project that I don't want to embark upon here, but for this reason, I wish to set aside Quinean metametaphysics for the remainder of this paper. What I think unites the bad arguments against priority monism that have been given is that each of them presupposes this Quinean framework. This is hardly surprising; this way of thinking about metaphysics has been prevalent at least since the post-positivist revival of the study. But I'm interested in a different project; to argue against Schaffer's metaphysical position on his own metametaphysical terms. And to do this, I'll accept a neo-Aristotelian framework, with all its commitments.

What are these commitments? I see the following two theses as the central components of neo-Aristotelianism, and so for the remainder of this paper, I shall assume them without argument (although I will explain them in a bit more detail.)

The Hierarchy Thesis: Entities in our ontology are arranged into an ordered hierarchy, with some entities being more fundamental than others. An entity's position in this hierarchy is determined by some uniquely metaphysical and well-founded partial ordering relation(s), where this (these) relation(s) is/are irreflexive, asymmetric, and transitive.

The Permissiveness Thesis: Answers to existence questions are, when taken in isolation from other metaphysical questions, uninterestingly obvious. Sound arguments are available for

⁴ As we'll see, this story can also plausibly be told in reverse - it could be that all God needs to do is create the *galaxy*, and she has thereby created and arranged all the stars and planets (not to mention the atoms and molecules.)

the existence of any purported entity x , just in case x is not logically contradictory or described in such a way as to entail category information.

I'll say a little more to clarify these theses. The partial ordering relation mentioned in the hierarchy thesis is, I think, the grounding relation, but the hierarchy thesis is not a position about what grounds what. I'm drawing a distinction here between grounding and priority. Thus, it would be consistent with the hierarchy thesis (though strange) to say that there are only two things that bear the grounding relation to one another, and that nothing else is either grounded nor grounds anything else. All that is entailed by the hierarchy thesis is that there are at least two distinct "levels" in our ontological warehouse that are occupied, and that there exist two things that are not equal in their fundamentality. Anything that exists must exist somewhere in the warehouse, either at the level reserved for grounds, or at one of the levels of derivative things. It is consistent with the hierarchy thesis that there are two things x and y such that x does not ground y and y does not ground x . It is *not* consistent with the hierarchy thesis that there are two things x and y such that x is neither more fundamental than y , nor less fundamental than y , nor equally as fundamental as y . Everything that exists has some priority or other. When I talk about an object's "position in the hierarchy," that is all I mean.

The permissiveness thesis also needs a little explaining, and a *caveat*. I agree with Schaffer that even ontological permissiveness has its limits: He says "I certainly do not mean to suggest that every candidate entity should count as an existent (the neo-Aristotelian does retain a rubbish bin for the non-existent[...]). For instance, if a candidate entity is described in such a way as to entail grounding information (e.g., "a Platonic number," understood as a

transcendent substance), or so as to engender contradictions (e.g., “a non-self-identical creature”), one need not remain permissive. My point is only that one should be permissive about those very entities Quineans typically consider most controversial.”

Another thing I will take as given for the purposes of this paper is the well-foundedness of the grounding relation. This entails that the grounding relation gives a partial ordering of entities in our ontology (necessarily, if x grounds y , x is prior to y), and that it terminates somewhere with an entity that is grounded by no other entity (there is a bottom level of the hierarchy.)

Furthermore, note that I take the following terms to be synonymous, and include them both only for stylistic variance:

X is (metaphysically) prior to Y.

X is more fundamental than Y.

I also take the terms “object,” “thing,” “existant,” and “entity” to be synonyms. I make no distinction between “there is an X” and “X exists.” Importantly, and perhaps tendentiously, I take it that being “concrete” amounts to the same thing as being “material” or “physical,” and that anything that is not concrete is “abstract” or “immaterial,” even when non-concrete things occupy spacetime. I’ll also assume, as Jonathan Schaffer does in “Monism: The Priority of the Whole” that “there is a cosmos, that it has proper parts, and that it is not identical to any plurality of its many proper parts.” As stated, this was already implied by the Permissiveness Thesis, but I want to make especially clear that I am not doubting the existence of the cosmos, but merely its status as the ultimate grounds, or most basic thing.

Section 2: Priority Monism

The best way to start talking about priority monism is to talk about its main opponent, priority atomism. The priority atomist holds the hierarchy and permissiveness theses above, and also holds a further view about what grounds what, namely:

The Atomistic Thesis: (i.) The most fundamental concrete things are the mereological simples. (ii.) Parts are ontologically prior to wholes.

Priority atomism is, I think, a very intuitive and natural way to understand the world. Even Schaffer has agreed that it holds intuitive appeal⁵. Yet Schaffer also thinks it is false. The Stanford Encyclopedia article on Priority Monism states of the view:

“Priority monism targets concrete objects and counts by basic tokens. It holds that exactly one basic concrete object exists—there may be many other concrete objects, but these only exist derivatively. The priority monist will hold that the one basic concrete object is the world (the maximal concrete whole). She will allow that the world has proper parts, but hold that the whole is basic and the parts are derivative. In short, she will hold the classical monistic doctrine that the whole is prior to its parts (Schaffer, Monism, 2007).”

Thus, Priority Monism is, at its core, a view about which concrete thing is most fundamental. The priority monist believes the permissiveness and the hierarchy theses, and combines them with this further thesis:

The Monistic Thesis: (i.) There is exactly one basic concrete object: the whole world, AKA the cosmos, AKA the blobject.

⁵ Personal Correspondence 23 March 2012

So far we have not stated the analogue to (ii.) of the atomistic thesis. This is because priority monism is consistent with a wide array of ways to treat the non-basic things. For instance, it could be that the cosmos is most fundamental, and that everything else is less fundamental than the cosmos, but everything that's not the cosmos is equally fundamental, perched like a flat plank on the single object that grounds them all. This "seesaw" monism would be consistent with the hierarchy, priority, and monism theses. It would also be pretty bizarre.

Another consistent way to treat derivative things is to say that the cosmos is most fundamental, but then the next most fundamental thing is the mereological simples, and from then on, the priority chain looks virtually identical to the one for atomists, so we start with the biggest thing, then drop all the way down to the littlest things, then slowly build our way back up. This "roller coaster" monism is perhaps less strange than seesaw monism, but still seems to violate the spirit of monism in some way.

One more way of being a monist is to hold that mereology has nothing to do with priority, but that wholes and parts are scattered around the warehouse on levels without any mind to mereological relations that hold between them. This "jumble" monism would be in an awkward position: it would have to explain why it happens to be that the maximal concrete whole is the most basic instead of some other thing.

I mention these three strategies only to set them aside. The third way to be a monist is the one on which I will focus all my attention. It is the one that holds the following:

The Monistic Thesis: (ii.) Wholes are ontologically prior to parts.

This makes priority monism the natural counterpart to priority atomism, and captures the spirit of the view better than the strange seesaw or roller coaster versions.

Note especially in the quote above, Schaffer states (as he does elsewhere⁶) that priority monism is only a view about concrete objects. He explicitly tries to distance the theoretical core of the view from making any claims about any objects that are not concrete, and says instead that the view is restricted to only concrete things. This is very puzzling for many reasons.

First, Schaffer's ontological permissivism commits him to the *existence* of many objects that are not concrete. Yet at no point does he explicitly say whether or how these non-concrete entities relate to the hierarchy for concrete things. Furthermore, he explicitly denies ontological pluralism; there is just one "warehouse" of entities in our ontology, just one existential quantifier, so it can't be that numbers "exist" in some different sense than concrete things.

Second, Schaffer suggests that [there's a quote somewhere, find it] numbers and other non-concrete objects are grounded by concrete objects. And, by well-foundedness, if physical things ground non-physical things, then physical things are more fundamental than non-physical things. This, combined with priority monism, suggests a hierarchy relation in which *everything*, and not only concrete things, are grounded by the cosmos. This seems to be in the spirit of priority monism anyway, especially when compared with historical monistic accounts, so it is once again strange that Schaffer would stay so quiet about it.

Perhaps the reason Schaffer wants to distance himself from making claims about non-concrete things is because he wants to avoid the kinds of problems they might pose for his view. For instance, someone might think that before priority monism can be taken

⁶ (Schaffer, *Monism: The Priority of the Whole*, 2010)

seriously as a thesis, a proponent must give a satisfactory account of how members of one category (such as abstracta) can emerge from members of another category (such as concreta). If someone thought this, they would supposedly not accept priority monism because of its incomplete account of numbers. If this is the case, then it seems Quineans have the upper hand here, for there are intuitive arguments for (and against) the existence of numbers, and once such an argument is accepted as sound, no more needs to be said. But if this is Schaffer's reason for disavowing any claims about abstracta, I think it is ill-advised, for I think a priority monist can say something intelligible about abstracta and the ways they exist. In fact, I think there are at least two good ways to respond to such a challenge. One of them corresponds with what I'll call a neo-Aristotelian materialistic nominalism; this would amount to saying that abstract objects exist (because of neo-Aristotelian permissiveness commitments), but that every abstract object is grounded (perhaps transitively through some other abstracta) by some concrete object; abstracta depend for their existence on material things, such as physicalist minds, and all concrete things are grounded by the cosmos. The other way would be more in line with an idealistic position; the most fundamental concrete thing can be the cosmos, but all concrete things, including the cosmos, are grounded by immaterial minds. This would also be consistent with priority monism as stated.

So although abstract objects might pose a *prima facie* problem for the priority monist, I think these issues are solvable. In any case, it does no good to form a theory that claims to have nothing to say about non-concrete objects, and then immediately make theoretical claims about non-concrete objects. It seems as though Schaffer wants to adopt something like the prior strategy, so I will grant for the remainder of this paper this kind of materialistic nominalism, but I take it that anything I say could be rehashed into idealistic terms as needed.

Here is another reason Schaffer might not have wanted to talk about abstracta very much. When it comes to concrete objects, a thing's priority depends in some sense upon whether or how it is built out of other objects. How a concrete object is composed, it is usually thought, is the unique determining factor pertaining to that object's place in a hierarchy. On the kind of monism against which I am arguing, wholes are always prior to their (mereological) parts, so whether an object has parts will determine how fundamental it is, fix its place in the hierarchy. But composition isn't enough if we expand our domain of existants to abstract objects. After all, *composition* as a building relation *does* only involve concrete objects. If we want to go on to sort non-concrete things into priority relations, or to determine how fundamental they are, then it seems we must come up with some analogous building relation for abstracta.

I emphasize: **the composition of a concrete object is a building relation that determines that object's position in the ontological hierarchy. So, to determine a non-concrete object's position in the ontological hierarchy, we need to establish a building relation for non-concrete objects.**

This is certainly difficult to do, but not impossible. A semblance of a solution to this problem will prove integral for my argument against priority monism. However, I take it that I will not need a fully fleshed out theory of concepts or a robust theory of conceptual building to make my point; rather, a wide range of plausible answers to this challenge will suffice for my argument to go through. I will embark on this project in section 3.2.

Section 3: Argument against priority monism

We have reached the meaty section of the paper, in which I argue against priority monism. My argument will take the form of a trilemma, or, if you like, a two-tiered dilemma.

Without further ado, here is the argument that the remainder of the paper will defend. I'll explain the relevant terms and names of theses in due time, but this should make the structure of the argument sufficiently clear.

Argument Against Priority Monism

1. Concepts exist and have a place in the hierarchical structure of the ontological warehouse. [Assumed]
2. Building Relation Monism is true. [Assumed]
3. If Building Relation Monism is true, then either the Cone Thesis is true, or the Pyramid Thesis is true. **[PREMISE]**
4. The Pyramid Thesis is false. **[PREMISE]**
5. If Priority Monism is true, then the Cone Thesis is false. **[PREMISE]**

Conclusion: So, Priority Monism is not true.

Lines 3, 4, and 5 represent the three horns of the trilemma. Line 1 I take as an assumption, since it follows from the Hierarchy and Permissiveness Theses. I'll say more about line 2 in section 3.2 but it is I think, relatively uncontroversial to the typical priority monist. The following five subsections will flesh out and defend each of these claims.

Section 3.1: Concepts exist and have a place in the hierarchical structure of the ontological warehouse.

A priority monist, if she is to take her ontological permissiveness commitments seriously, must make room in her ontological warehouse for concepts. Here is a Schaffer-style argument for the existence of concepts: "The concept renate is different from the

concept cordate. So, concepts exist.” Although I will take this premise as an assumption, I want to make clear here at the outset what I take a concept to be. However, although I have tried to take care in this definition, it will remain somewhat sketchy. I obviously do not have time or space to develop a full theory of concepts, yet I rely on the notion as the core of my argument. Hence, I will rely only on those features of concepts that I take it are relatively uncontroversial, and try my best not to tread on the toes of philosophers who have a lot more to say about the nature of concepts than I. So, here is a list of features I think concepts have, which I will assume without further argument.

1. Concepts are the means by which we represent the world to ourselves in our minds.

Or, from the SEP, concepts are “the constituents of thoughts.” They are **mental objects**. Hence, they are themselves **abstract** but they are **grounded by physical states** of the brain or of many brains.

2. Concepts are the kinds of things we aim to capture and represent to others with words. They have content and their content can be expressed with linguistic terms.

3. Concepts are the objects of conceptual analysis. When philosophers engage in conceptual analysis, they do so by expressing concepts in terms of other concepts.

4. Concepts exist (this is entailed by the Permissiveness Thesis, unless the three previous things prove to be self-contradictory).

5. And, concepts must have some place or other within the hierarchical structure of the ontological warehouse, some ranking of priority relative to the other objects in the warehouse (this is entailed by the Hierarchy Thesis).

That is all I have to say in defense of premise 1. If you are not convinced, either because you have independent reason to reject ontological permissivism or because you think my definition of “concept” commits me to some contradiction, or for some other reason, please feel free to take the argument that follows as the consequent to this premise taken as an antecedent.

Section 3.2: Building Relation Monism is true.

Recall that priority monism is committed to the view that material things get their priority rankings in virtue of how they are constructed (this was spelled out at the end of section 2.) The building relation for material objects, composition, uniquely determines a material thing’s location in the hierarchical chain of being. Thus, it is natural to think that the same holds for concepts. And on the assumption that there are multiple ontological categories, it is natural to think that this general strategy for generating a thing’s priority ranking holds for objects in all categories. There are two ways this picture might go for a priority monist. In lieu of a thousand further words, here is a pair of pictures.

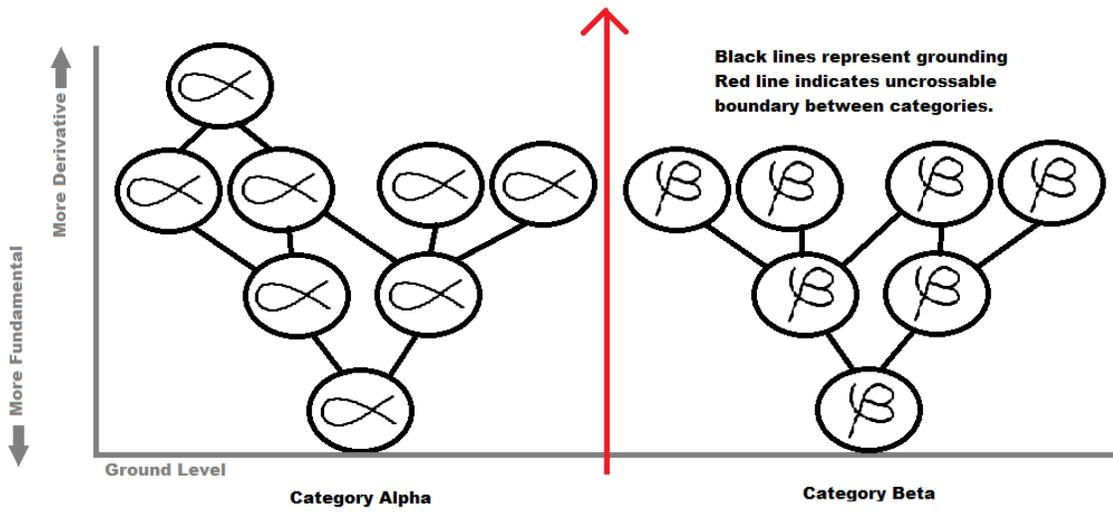


Figure 1

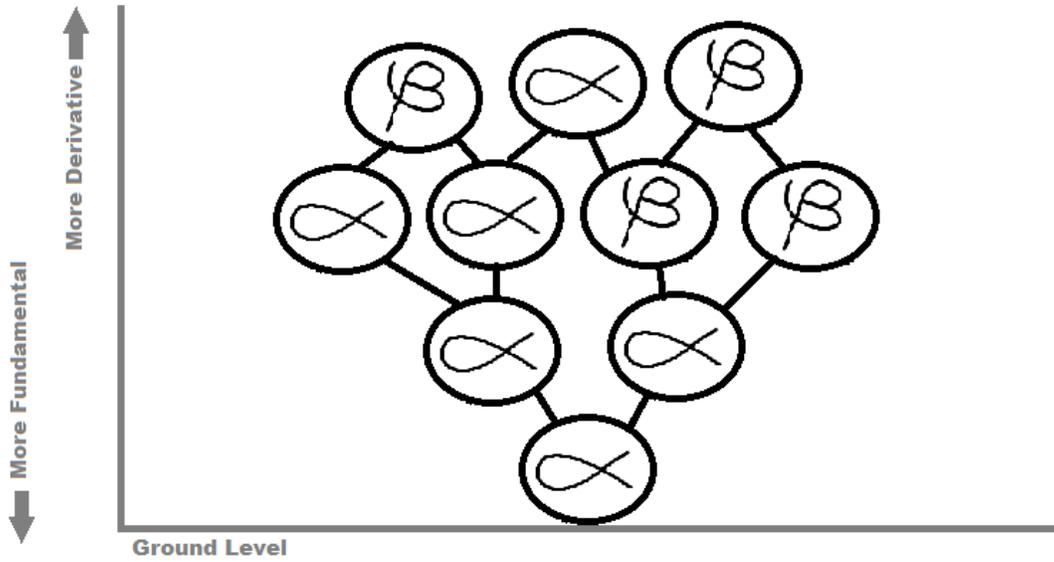


Figure 2

Figure 1 represents what I call Building Relation Pluralism. The BuRPer will maintain that for each category of thing in the warehouse, there is a separate, incommensurable building relation for that category, generating separate, incommensurable hierarchies for each of those categories' ontologies. Alphas are built out of and grounded by other alphas, betas are built out of and grounded by other betas, and never the two shall meet. That is, it is never the case that a beta is grounded by or grounds an alpha, and vice versa.

Figure 2 is meant to be neutral between two ways of rejecting BuRP, both of which I call "Building Relation Monism" or "BuRM". One of the ways is to say that there is only one building relation, and that the relation at play when building with, for instance, material things just is the relation that does the building work in other categories. This would characterize an eliminativist strategy. If there is only one building relation, then there is only one priority hierarchy generated by that building relation. The other way is to hold that while these building relations are distinct, they are themselves ordered into hierarchical relations, which, as Schaffer thinks, causes the hierarchies generated by those building relations to collapse into one. This would be a reductionist strategy.

It should be clear why BuRP and BuRM are the only two options; either every item in the ontological warehouse hierarchy connects to every other item via some set of priority relations or other, or else some item does not connect to some other item.

As another assumption, I'll take it as given that the monistic picture is true. However, I don't think this is an implausible assumption. Before I move on, I'll briefly give reasons to think that the picture of the ontological warehouse cannot look like Figure 1 above, but that rather, it must be possible to draw a path connecting (and thereby comparatively ranking) any two entities in our ontology. These are admittedly not robust

arguments, although I think each of them could be fleshed out into a full-blown argument for BuRM. That being said, here are four good reasons to think BuRP is false. In no particular order, they are:

1. If BuRP is true, then we are always wrong when we compare the fundamentality of objects across two or more categories. I take it as an undesirable consequence of any theory that it entails that we are always wrong about some subject, especially when that subject is exactly what we are purporting to be authorities about. So since Schaffer, like the rest of us neo-Aristotelian metaphysicians, is consistently making claims about the comparative fundamentality of objects across two or more categories, or claims about objects in one category being grounded by objects in another, it better not be that he is always wrong about such claims. And he does make claims about entities being grounded by other entities in distinct categories. For instance, in *On What Grounds What*, he says

“[G]iven that numbers exist, they must either be counted as substances (grounds), or else explanation is required for how they are grounded in the real substances.”

I take it as obvious that if any two things belong in distinct categories, numbers and concrete objects are prime candidates. If the latter option holds, and numbers are grounded in real substances, then this is an instance of items in one category being grounded by items in another.

An analogy may help here. We are all pluralists about “shortness” in the following way: We have an idea of what it is for an interval of time or an event to be “short,” and we have an idea of what it is for a tree branch or a person to be “short,” but if we ask whether the movie was shorter than Danny DeVito, we think that makes no sense (maybe it’s a good pun, but the whole point of puns is to exploit different meanings of the same term.)

So if Building Relation Pluralism is true, then we should be able to say something like this: “We know what it is for an abstract thing to be fundamental, and we know what it is for a concrete thing to be fundamental, but if we ask whether some abstract thing is more fundamental than some concrete thing, that makes no sense.” But this seems false. We ask questions like that all the time. That’s metaphysics!

2. It is sometimes vague, indeterminate, or unsettled which category a given object in our ontology belongs to. For example, it is still unsettled whether spacetime is a concrete thing or merely a relation. Presumably we should be able to make claims about how fundamental spacetime is without knowing whether it belongs to the category “concreta” or “abstracta.”

3. There are excellent arguments for monistic building relational hierarchies all over the literature. In particular, I refer the reader to Laurie Paul (forthcoming) and Karen Bennett’s (Bennett, 2011) on building up building relations. Both of these arguments suggest that we maintain just one hierarchy of objects in the Warehouse. Paul’s reason has to do with parsimony concerns, where Bennett thinks that since relations themselves all belong to one category, then some building relations will be more fundamental than others, and so the hierarchies generated by those building relations collapse into one hierarchy.

4. Schaffer himself rejects a thesis very like BuRP in (Schaffer, *On What Grounds What*, 2009). In the opening sections, Schaffer considers four possible models for our ontology: Flat, Sorted, Ordered, and Sorted/Ordered. He dismisses all but the Ordered version, saying “I will not be paying further attention to the prospects for the sorted (or sorted-and-ordered) conception, because I think the categories are indeed determined by the grounding relations[...] Thus, a sorting presupposes a prior dependence ordering over the

entities. *Categories are places in the dependence ordering.*” (His emphasis). Jonathan Schaffer has also adopted a thesis he refers to as “grounding unity,” which is, I take it, roughly equivalent to my building relation monism on the assumption that ground is determined by building relations.

Section 3.3: If BuRM is true, then either the Cone Thesis or the Pyramid Thesis is true.

Here is where the structure and function of concepts will start to play an important role. Recall the list of features that concepts have. Among them is the fact that they are supposed to represent the world in some way. Consider the domain of just the concrete world. It is natural to think, as Schaffer and I do, that if the world is arranged hierarchically, then the basic concrete objects must be either very big things or very small things. For Schaffer, the basic object, the thing at the bottom of the hierarchy, is the entire cosmos. And given the second part of the monistic thesis, sticking two objects together always nets you something more fundamental than what you started with, or roughly, big things are prior to small things. Wholes are prior to parts.

So what should we say about concepts? If you accept the argument up to this point, especially the bit about BuRM, it seems natural to say that something analogous to the mereological relations can be spelled out for the hierarchy within the domain of concepts.

An argument:

1. Some concrete objects have proper parts, and some do not.
2. Composition is a building relation.
3. All building relations are reducible to one building relation.
4. Some concepts are built out of other concepts, and some are not.

5. So, some concepts have proper parts, and some do not.

Lines 1, 2, and 3 have been defended or assumed true already. 4 stands in need of some defense, though. We have a notion of “thickness” and “thinness” of concepts that, with some massaging, resembles the property of “bigness” for objects. Thick concepts are roughly those that are built out of a larger number of primitive concepts, that are less natural. For instance, take the example of “bachelor” and “unmarried man.” When we do conceptual analysis on the term “bachelor,” we analyze a thick concept “bachelor” into two thinner concepts “unmarried” and “man.” And for concepts, it seems as though there are some concepts that are unanalyzable into further concepts: conceptual primitives. These are analogous to mereological simples in that they don’t have proper parts. And some concepts *are* properly analyzed into component concepts; conceptual compounds. So, conceptual compounds have proper parts, and some of these proper parts are conceptual primitives. (Just like how a chair has some proper parts, and some of those proper parts are mereological simples.) Here I am understanding proper parthood not as a strictly mereological relation, since it can hold between non-concrete things. Rather, I am talking about proper parthood in the sense that is entailed by Building Relation Monism.

For the sake of brevity from here on out, I will refer to concepts that are closer to the level of conceptual primitives as being “smaller” than concepts that are more compound (or, likewise, I’ll call more complex concepts “bigger” than their more primitive counterparts.) Please understand that this terminology is merely metaphorical, but that it is meant to gesture toward the literal parthood relation that concepts bear to one another.

But just as there were two plausible ways to arrange our hierarchy for material things, it seems now we have the same two options for our conceptual hierarchy. Either wholes are prior to parts, or parts are prior to wholes.

The Cone Thesis: For any two concepts X and Y, if X is conceptually “smaller” than Y, then X is more fundamental than Y. The most fundamental concepts are the smallest concepts.

The Pyramid Thesis: For any two concepts X and Y, if X is conceptually “smaller” than Y, then X is less fundamental than Y. The most fundamental concepts are the biggest concepts.⁷

So why must concepts be structured in one of these two ways? Why, for instance, can't we hold one of these views for concepts?:

The Flat Thesis: For any two concepts X and Y, X and Y are equally fundamental.

The Jumble Thesis: For any two concepts X and Y, the question whether X is more fundamental than Y is not settled by the “size” of the concepts, but by something else.

I take it that these two options are unpalatable. Here's why. For starters, we've already discarded both of these structures for concrete things twice: first when we assumed the hierarchy thesis, and then when we discussed and set aside “seesaw” and “jumble” monism in section 2. I think that if we want our metaphysics to “carve the world at the joints,” we'll want our conceptual framework to have something to do with our metaphysical framework. Ruling out Flat and Jumble theories for concrete things gives us *prima facie* reason to rule them out for concepts too.

⁷ Why did I name my views this way? Because on the pyramid thesis, the large things are closer to the ground and smaller things are stacked on top, whereas on the cone thesis, the ground level of the hierarchy is occupied by small things, like in an ice-cream cone.

But I ultimately want to give more than just a *prima facie* reason. To do that, I need to expand and elaborate my account of grounding for concepts. I have already hinted at what I think the solution is, but now I state it explicitly.

Concepts are grounded in virtue of the naturalness of their content - the most natural concepts (conceptual primitives) are the grounds for less natural concepts (conceptual compounds.)

If this is true (and I think it is at least intuitively so), then the only thing left to settle is which concepts are most natural. Are conceptual primitives “big” or “small?” The answer to that question will fix the answer to the question about how the rest of the hierarchy is shaped: like a cone, or like a pyramid?

One last thing: if this is the horn of the trilemma a priority monist takes on in resisting my argument, she owes us a story about how concepts map onto concrete things they are concepts of, and how the shape of the conceptual hierarchy can differ so greatly from the concrete hierarchy. There may be some option I haven't yet considered, that isn't any of the Cone, Pyramid, Flat, or Jumble theses, and maybe one of these is more plausible than any I've thought of. But if this is where you get off the boat, much more needs to be said about the shape of the conceptual hierarchy, and the metaphysics of concepts.

Section 3.4: The Pyramid Thesis is False.

Here I will argue that in the domain of concepts, big concepts cannot be more fundamental than their parts. The argument will proceed by *reductio ad absurdum*. Suppose, then, that the Pyramid Thesis is true. Then, large concepts are more fundamental than small concepts. Putting ourselves in the shoes of a priority monist, this seems natural. After all, priority monists hold something like the pyramid thesis for concrete things, why not for

concepts? On this view, it would also follow that combining two concepts to get a third results in a concept more fundamental than either of those you started with. So “bachelor” is more fundamental a concept than “unmarried” or “man.”

For starters, note that this seems deeply unintuitive. Our notion of fundamentality seems connected to our idea of naturalness, and this is why we think that gruesome concepts are both less natural and less fundamental than non-gruesome concepts. The Pyramid Thesis seems to get this the wrong way around. If this were right, then the philosophical project of analysis would be a move **from** fundamental things **to** derivative things. But that doesn't seem like the way analysis goes. Analysis is supposed to move us toward primitive, smaller concepts, and it's supposed to help us better understand the fundamental structure of the analysandum. So the Pyramid Thesis gets the wrong direction for analysis.

But there is an even more damning problem for the Pyramid Thesis - recall that the grounding relation must be well-founded. This entails that all members of our ontology, concepts included, must terminate at a ground level. But as I hinted at before, there's no obvious stopping point for assembling concepts. In the case of concrete things, it was easy to see where to stop: once you've composed the whole world, you're done. But concepts, it seems, are infinitely recombinable into ever larger and larger concepts. For instance, here's one potential candidate for a non-terminating conceptual chain: take a concept of a flower. Now take a concept of a white flower. Now a concept of a white flower on another planet. A white flower on another planet that orbits Betelgeuse. And so on. It seems like we can continue stacking up concepts like this *ad infinitum*, with no obvious point at which the chain will ever terminate. If that's true, and if each successive concept is grounded by (and less fundamental than) its preceding concept, this violates the well-foundedness requirement for the grounding relation.

Or if you don't like that example, then here is another one. Take a horse. Now take a concept of a horse. Now take a concept of a concept of a horse. Then keep repeating this pattern. Each of these concepts must exist because of the Permissiveness Thesis. And it seems like each successive concept is built out of the thing that it is a concept of. So, by the Pyramid Thesis, each successive concept is more fundamental than its predecessor. But this is both independently absurd, and it violates well-foundedness. So, I claim, the Pyramid Thesis is false.

If this is the horn that the priority monist decides to take issue with, she will need to do two things: she must try to motivate the tendentious claim that each iteration of the above operations yields a more fundamental concept than its predecessor. And she must give some natural stopping point at which concepts can get no bigger, in order to satisfy well-foundedness.

Section 3.5: If Priority Monism is true, then the Cone Thesis is false.

We have come to the last stand of the priority monist. If concepts must be in the ontological hierarchy and cannot be ordered in any of the competing ways, concepts must be arranged in such a way that the smallest concepts, the conceptual primitives, are more fundamental than larger concepts. This is, in fact, the way I think the conceptual hierarchy must look. But I think this treatment of concepts is unavailable to the priority monist I am imagining. I have two distinct arguments for this claim.

Recall that the version of priority monism I am arguing against is committed to the view that wholes are always prior to parts. As I have tried to make clear above, concepts have parts. Not in the strictly mereological sense, perhaps, but in the sense that is entailed by Building Relation Monism. The concept "man" is a proper part of the concept "bachelor." If the cone thesis is true, then the concept "man" is also *more fundamental* than the concept

“bachelor.” In general, concepts that we identify as primitives will be more fundamental than concepts that are not primitive.

This should strike a chord with those who are familiar with the study of naturalness in metaphysics, a project championed by David Lewis. According to the SEP article on David Lewis’ account of naturalness, Lewis’ account is essentially boiled down to the following claim “Property F counts as more natural than property G just in case some predicate expressing F can be defined, in terms of predicates expressing perfectly natural properties, more simply than can any predicate expressing G. (Weatherson, 2009)” A perfectly natural property, then, is one that cannot be explained using any fewer primitives. Then, on the picture I have pushed, a perfectly natural property corresponds nicely to a certain type of conceptual primitive. In fact, we see a strong analogy between all of the following notions:

Mereological simple (concrete object with no proper parts)

Conceptual primitive (concept with no proper parts)

Perfectly natural property (property with no proper parts)

On the atomist picture, these strong analogies are really easy to explain. Each of these terms refers to something that’s the most fundamental member of its category. But on the monist picture, the mereological simple is going to be maximally derivative, while the primitive and the perfectly natural property are going to be maximally fundamental. This is at least a tension for the monist, if not a knock-down argument.

My other argument has to do with our concept of the cosmos itself. For the priority monist, the one perfectly fundamental object is the cosmos. But if the cone thesis is right, our concept of the cosmos is very, very derivative. Since (by the cone thesis) our concept of the cosmos is grounded by all the concepts that are proper parts of it, it must be that our

concept of the cosmos is grounded in part by the concepts of everything that is entailed by the existence of the cosmos - in a word, everything. So our concept of the cosmos is grounded by everything that exists, but the content of that concept somehow grounds all other existants? Perhaps it is only my anti-monist intuitions speaking here, but this seems unbearable. As I said earlier, we want our metaphysical theories to “carve the world at the joints.” This idea is prevalent in (Sider, 2012), among others. If we adopt this monistic theory combined with the cone thesis, we are doing just about as bad a job of that as we could possibly do.

If this is the horn that the priority monist decides to tackle, she must say why the mapping of concepts to objects makes the hierarchy get flipped upside down, and she must say why there are so many powerful analogies that seem to push us strongly to an atomistic worldview.

Section 4: Closing Remarks

Where does this leave the priority monist? The argument is valid, so I see no way between the three horns. This leaves her with the three options I suggested. To recap

1. Deny premise 3 of the argument, and claim that the hierarchy for concepts is neither cone-shaped nor pyramid shaped. Tell a story about how concepts map onto concrete things they are concepts of, and how the shape of the conceptual hierarchy can differ so greatly from the concreta hierarchy.

2. Deny premise 4 of the argument, and claim that the hierarchy for concepts is pyramid shaped. Say how it can be that, despite appearances, the conceptual hierarchy is both well-grounded and not completely bonkers with regards to gerrymandered concepts.

3. Deny premise 5 of the argument, and claim that priority monism is consistent with with a cone-shaped conceptual hierarchy. Explain why the mapping of concepts to objects makes the hierarchy get flipped upside down, and say why there are so many powerful analogies that seem to push us strongly to an atomistic worldview.

I hope I have succeeded here in showing that at least there is a burden on the priority monist to say something about concepts and about other abstracta. At best, I hope I have convinced the reader that priority monism is false, solely on grounds that a neo-Aristotelian metaphysician should accept. The theory does a good job accounting for priority relations between concrete things. But given that abstracta exist, the theory is critically incomplete until it can give some account of priority relations both within abstracta hierarchies, and those that hold between concrete and abstract things.

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