

Degrees of Reality

Damian Aleksiev, University of Vienna

aleksiev.damian@gmail.com

Published in *Facets of Reality – Contemporary Debates: Contributions of the Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein Society*, Vol. XXX

Abstract: This essay outlines a hierarchical framework of Reality that allows for degrees of Reality. I use Reality (with a capital “R”) to designate reality in a primitive, metaphysical sense. Reality, grounding, and essence are the key elements of the framework presented here. I assume that Reality must have a fundamental level and all fundamental phenomena must be Real. Moreover, I postulate that everything non-fundamental is ultimately grounded in the fundamental Real. But what about the Reality of the non-fundamental? I argue that it is possible for non-fundamental phenomena to be Real, Unreal, or Semi-Real. The framework developed here accommodates these possibilities and illuminates them using the notion of essence. I argue that the essential nature of a phenomenon determines its degree of Reality. The framework does not assume that Reality must have degrees but only that it may have degrees. Its theoretical attractiveness consists in its ability to accommodate many diverse intuitions about grounding, help us better understand and classify theories about grounding, and illuminate Reality and its possible degrees.

§1. The Hierarchy of Reality

Reality appears to have a hierarchical structure. The less fundamental facts seem to be grounded in the more fundamental facts. It is plausible that all non-fundamental facts are ultimately grounded in fundamental and perfectly Real facts. These privileged facts might concern physical entities like particles or spacetime, or minds, or God, or something else. Let the fundamentalia be whatever they may be. What interests me in this essay is what bearing does the grounding relation have on the *reality of the non-fundamental*. I will articulate a framework where some non-fundamental facts might be perfectly Real, others Semi-Real, and yet others perfectly Unreal. In other words: I will demonstrate how *Reality might come in degrees*.

By “*Reality*” (with a capital R), I mean reality in the metaphysical sense. Reality, thus understood, is likely a primitive concept, as Fine (2001) believes it to be. Still, Reality can be illuminated in a few ways. For instance, it seems evident that existence is a necessary condition for being Real. Moreover, it is plausible that the Real should exist independently of our ideas, attitudes, or perceptions towards it. If so, being Real also requires representational independence.

The preceding glosses of the Real are not meant to be exhaustive. My proposal will focus on a further gloss. I will attempt to illuminate Reality via considerations of *essence*. My preferred way to understand “essence” is inspired by the idea of a real definition, a definition of *what something is* (Fine, 1994; Lowe, 2012). For example, the essence of *being human* is to *be a rational animal*. I assume that all phenomena have essences, although, as I will show, some essences might be impossible to express in words.

Following the current orthodoxy, I understand *grounding* as a relation between facts. I will assume that facts are worldly entities. Specifically, every fact is a non-mereological unity constituted by one or more particulars and their properties or relations (Armstrong, 1997). Every grounding connection obtains between ground/s and a groundee. The ground/s are always more fundamental than the groundee. They metaphysically determine and explain their groundees. Grounding, as I understand it, is asymmetric, transitive, and irreflexive.

The view I will be articulating takes for granted that there is a *fundamental level*: that some facts are absolutely fundamental. Moreover, it requires that *all* fundamental facts are Real.

Reality and grounding generate a hierarchical structure: a *hierarchy of being*. Fundamental Reality grounds a hierarchy of nodes ordered by grounding relationships. The nodes in this hierarchy can be Real, Unreal, or somewhere between the perfectly Real and the perfectly Unreal. The essential nature of every phenomenon determines its degree of Reality. Moreover, as I will demonstrate, it also determines the position of both Unreal and Semi-Real phenomena within the grounding hierarchy.

§2. The Unreal

Any conception of Reality with a hierarchical structure requires that the fundamental facts are perfectly Real. But what about the derivative facts? Are the derivative facts likewise Real? Before going any further, I must note that grounding, as standardly conceived, is *neutral* on this question. As Fine (2001: 27) acknowledges, groundees might be either Real or non-Real. Nevertheless, many philosophers—for example, Cameron (2010), deRosset (2017), and Sider (2011)—have assumed that the derivative facts fully lack Reality. Fine himself maintains that: “In the absence of any reason to the contrary [...] we should assume that any given grounded proposition is unreal.” (2001: 27)

I will refer to groundees that fully lack Reality as *Unreal*. Grounding is neutral on the Reality of groundees. Thus, the Unreality of a groundee cannot result solely from its role as a groundee; instead, it must result from additional factors. In this section, I will show that one good way to understand the Unreal is by considering essence.

Since grounding is a relation between facts, my focus will be on the essences of facts. For any fact F, I will understand F’s essence to be the fact corresponding to the answer to the question “what it is to be the case that F?” (Correia & Skiles, 2019). For illustration, consider [Socrates is human]. It is reasonable to assume that for it to be the case that Socrates is human is for it to be the case that Socrates is a rational animal. If so, the essence of [Socrates is human] is [Socrates is a rational animal].

Many friends of grounding are what I call *top-down essentialists*. Top-down essentialists believe that many grounding connections are *mediated by the essence of the groundee*. Top-down essentialists include Aleksiev (2022), Dasgupta (2014), Fine (2012), Goff (2017), Jago (2018), Rosen (2010), and others. Top-down essentialism assumes an essential connection between groundees and their grounds. As Fine (2012: 76) puts it, the groundee’s essence, in some way, “points” to its ground. I offer the following characterization of the Unreal inspired by top-down essentialism:

The Unreal: a fact F is Unreal only if

- (i) F is ultimately grounded in a Real ground, and
- (ii) Every possible ground of F contains an aspect identical to F’s full essence.

Clause (i) in the above characterization follows from the basic assumptions of my framework. Thus, my focus will be on clause (ii).

Clause (ii) states that the essence of every Unreal fact is identical to an *aspect shared by all possible grounds* of that Unreal fact. First, by “aspect,” I have in mind the product of *abstraction*, what we get after we abstract away from some detail in an entity. Aspects are contained in the entities they are abstracted from. Second, I mention *possible grounds* because many groundees are multiply realizable; they can be grounded in many different grounds. Moreover, groundees often belong to grounding chains; they are separated from the Real by many derivative facts serving as mediate grounds.

Put another way, clause (ii) says that for any Unreal fact F, F’s essence corresponds to a condition that any possible ground of F must satisfy. This condition can be seen as the set-membership condition for being a member of the set of F’s possible grounds.

The essences of Unreal facts are identical to aspects of their Real and ultimate grounds. Thus, it is adequate to say that the essence of every Unreal fact *fully points* to or, better put, *fully drains away* into its Real ground. This is why the Unreal facts lack Reality. They are exhaustively explainable by their Real grounds and are *nothing over and above* their Real grounds. An example might help. Consider the following fact:

Table: t is a table.

Table is likely grounded in some fact—call it Φ —about the macroscopic structure of t 's legs, surface, and other parts. In turn, Φ might be grounded in some fact Ψ about t 's chemical structure. And lastly, Ψ might be ultimately grounded in a Real fact Ω about t 's physical structure. Φ , Ψ , and Ω are three among many possible grounds for *Table*. *Table* is multiply realizable. It could have been grounded in many different arrangements of fundamental physical entities, or molecules, or macroscopic parts.

Now, consider *Table*'s essence. *Table*'s essence is likely a fact about t having the structural features of *being a table*. I propose that Φ , Ψ , and Ω , as well as any other possible ground of *Table*, share an aspect identical to *Table*'s essence. In other words, *Table*'s essence can be abstracted away from Φ , or Ψ , or Ω . Thus, *Table* is Unreal.

The above example is overly simple and lacks detail. Nevertheless, it illustrates my proposal. Moreover, its logic can be generalized to many other groundees. Facts about ordinary objects, and presumably, also about societies, geology, living organisms, and so on, seem to be at least in principle subject to an analogous analysis. That is evidence of their Unreality.

§3. The Real

Essence can also help us get a firmer grip on the Real. I stated that the Real facts can be fundamental or derivative. The fundamental facts *must* be Real, while the derivative facts *may* be Real. In this section, I will offer an essentialist gloss of both the fundamental and the derivative Real. Consider the following characterization.

The Real: a fact F is Real only if

- (i) F 's essence is inexpressible or trivial or concerns other fundamentalia, and
- (ii) F 's essence is not identical to any substantive aspect of F 's ground (assuming that F is derivative).

Clause (i) intends to capture the intuition that Real phenomena are special because they have special essential natures. Clause (ii) states that if a Real fact is grounded, its

essence will never be identical with any substantive aspect of its ground. I say “substantive” because, for any two phenomena, no matter how distinct they may be, there will certainly be at least some aspects they have in common. For example, they will both be facts, or they will both exist. The substantiveness requirement is meant to exclude these aspects as obstacles to the grounding of Real facts.

Simply put: for any Real fact F, F’s essence will either point *inwards*, to itself, or point to Real facts of *equal rank* to F. In either case, even if F is derivative, F’s essence will never point to nor drain into F’s ground. Thus, it is reasonable to say that the derivative Real facts will always be *fully over and above* their grounds.

Plausible candidates for Real facts include facts about fundamental physical entities, consciousness, God, moral and aesthetic value, and mathematical entities. I will illustrate my proposal with two examples: a form of physicalism and a form of dualism.

Consider *physicalism*: the thesis that all fundamental facts are physical. According to one influential view, the physical facts concern dispositional properties (Bird, 2007). Dispositional properties essentially *are what they do*. Their essences plausibly are exhausted by their stimulus and manifestation conditions (Bird, 2007: 45). These conditions will concern other dispositional properties that are fundamental and causally related to the property whose essence we are considering. If so, the essences of the fundamental facts in this view will likely only point to other fundamental facts. Thus, they will be Real.

Consider the following form of *dualism*: the thesis that both physical and mental entities exist, yet the physical entities are fundamental and ground the mental. Let us moreover assume that the physical entities are dispositional properties while the mental are phenomenal properties. I have already shown that, if fundamental, facts about dispositional properties are Real. I will now show that if this version of dualism is true, facts about phenomenal properties are likewise Real.

It is plausible that the essential natures of phenomenal properties concern their phenomenal characters; they concern what these properties are qualitatively like (Goff, 2017). For example, the essence of red is what red *looks like*, while the essence of pain is what pain *feels like*. Such essences appear to be ostensive and, thus, inexpressible. If so, the essences of phenomenal facts will likely not point beyond themselves. There will be no essential connection between them and their physical

grounds (Aleksiev, 2022). Thus, this form of dualism posits both Real physical facts and Real phenomenal facts.

§4. The Semi-Real

Reality is often viewed in a binary way. According to the *standard* view, Reality has no shades; things are either Real or Unreal, and there is nothing in between. In this section, I will sketch an alternative to the standard view. I will show that it is both coherent and in line with our intuitions that Reality might come in degrees. Some facts may be *Semi-Real*. Essence will once again help us; this time, to understand the Semi-Real.

The Semi-Real: a fact F is Semi-Real only if

- (i) F is ultimately grounded in a Real ground, and
- (ii) Every possible ground of F contains an aspect identical to a constituent of F's essence but never F's full essence.

Clause (i) should be obvious. Clause (ii) expresses the idea that the Semi-Real facts are part Real and part Unreal. Like the Unreal facts, their essences point to or drain into their grounds. However, they *do not do so fully*. Like the Real facts, their full essence is non-identical to an aspect in their grounds. This makes the Semi-Real facts *something over above* their grounds, but *never fully*. They are, in a sense, *semi-reducible*. Consider the following two facts as examples:

Set: {Socrates} exists.

Heavy-Table: *t* is a table.

I begin with *Set*. *Set* is a fact about the existence of the singleton set {Socrates}. Intuitively, facts about the existence of sets are grounded in facts about the existence of their members. If so, *Set* is grounded in the fact that Socrates exists.

It is reasonable to assume that *Set's* essence concerns Socrates' existence (Fine, 1994). But will that be *Set's* full essence? According to a *deflated* or *lightweight* conception of sets, sets are nothing more than their members or aggregates of their members (Armstrong, 1991, 1997). However, it is also possible that sets are something more than their members, that sets are entities in their own *sui generis* way. Call this second conception *inflated* or *heavyweight*.

Set's essence will concern Socrates' existence on both the lightweight and the heavyweight conception. Thus, at least a part of *Set's* essence will be identical to an aspect of *Set's* ground. On the lightweight conception, that will be all there is to *Set's* essence. However, there will be *more* to *Set's* essence on the heavyweight conception. On the heavyweight conception, *Set's* essence will contain a part about {Socrates} being a set. If so, *being a set* will be a constituent of *Set's* essence. This constituent will not be identical to an aspect in *Set's* possible grounds. If so, *Set* is Unreal on the lightweight conception; however, it is Semi-Real on the heavyweight conception.

Onto *Heavy-Table*. In §2, I argued that facts about tables are Unreal, and I used a fact called *Table* to illustrate this. On the surface, *Table* and *Heavy-Table* are identical. However, just as we can have a lightweight or heavyweight conception of sets, so we can have of composites. I assumed a lightweight conception of composites in §2. In contrast, *Heavy-Table* assumes a heavyweight conception of composites.

On both conceptions, the essence of *Heavy-Table* will mention a structure that any possible ground of the corresponding fact must have as an aspect. However, according to the heavyweight conception, there will be more to *Heavy-Table's* essence. *Heavy-Table's* essence will contain a part about *t* being a composite (in the heavyweight sense). If so, *being a composite* will be a constituent of *Heavy-Table's* essence. This constituent will not be identical to an aspect in *Heavy-Table's* possible grounds. If so, *Heavy-Table* is Semi-Real while its lightweight relative *Table* is Unreal.

In summary: facts about sets and composites will be Semi-Real if sets and composites are heavyweight entities. The essences of such facts will be part Real and part Unreal. This distinguishes them from plausibly Real entities such as minds, fundamental physical particles, numbers, God, etc. Moreover, it also makes them distinct from Unreal entities such as lightweight composites or lightweight sets.

§5. A Framework

I used essence and grounding to shed light on the Real, the Unreal, and the Semi-Real. My goal in this paper was not to argue for a specific worldview of what is Real, Unreal, or Semi-Real. Instead, I aimed to offer a *framework* that can accommodate many worldviews. The nodes in this framework can be filled or left empty depending on our views about what exists, what grounding relationships hold, and what the essences of the entities in these relationships are. Moreover, my goal was not to be exhaustive. Some phenomena may not fall under one of the three categories outlined here.

The unique feature of this framework is that it can accommodate a Reality with *degrees*. I did not argue that Reality must come in degrees nor that actual Reality comes in degrees. My goal was to demonstrate that Reality *may* have degrees.

The framework I presented assumes that all groundees are ultimately grounded in the Real. Moreover, it entails three categories of grounding connections. A grounding connection can fall under one of the following categories based on the essence of the groundee it involves:

1. *Reductive*: the groundee is Unreal.
2. *Semi-Reductive*: the groundee is Semi-Real.
3. *Non-Reductive*: the groundee is Real.

Reductive and semi-reductive connections are mediated by the groundee's essence. The mediation is full in reductive connections while partial in semi-reductive connections. Even in semi-reductive connections, the groundee's essence limits the possible grounds. In contrast, non-reductive connections—i.e., connections where both grounding partners are Real—are not mediated by essence. Instead, they must be either a matter of brute necessity or be mediated by (grounding) laws.

The above categories can help us better understand existing grounding proposals. For instance, Dasgupta (2014), Fine (2001), Rosen (2010), and Sider (2011) advocate for or lean towards the Unreality of the derivative. When taken all the way, views like these result in worldviews where all grounding connections are reductive. In contrast, Schaffer's (2017, 2021) system is best interpreted as only posting semi-reductive or non-reductive grounding connections. His system does not allow for Unreal groundees. Instead, it appears to require that all groundees are Semi-Real or Real.

I did not defend any of the foundational principles of this framework in this short essay. Moreover, I did not provide thorough support for the framework's elements. More work certainly remains to be done. Nevertheless, despite its current rough state, I believe the framework is theoretically attractive and motivated. It can accommodate a diverse spectrum of intuitions about grounding. It can help us better understand, classify, and compare current theories of grounding. It clarifies the notions of reduction and lack thereof, as well as the notions of nothing and something over and above. Lastly, it illuminates the Real, the Unreal and the possible degrees of Reality between the Real and the Unreal.

Acknowledgments

Many thanks to Paolo Bonardi, Yannic Kappes, Xiao Li, Julio De Rizzo, Benjamin Schnieder, and Ricardo Alcocer Urueta for helpful discussions. This research was funded in whole by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) 10.55776/ESP318.

References

- Aleksiev, Damian. (2022). Lightweight and Heavyweight Anti-physicalism. *Synthese*, 200(112). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-022-03506-3>
- Armstrong, David Malet. (1991). Classes are states of affairs. *Mind*, 100(2), 189–200. <https://doi.org/10.1093/mind/c.398.189>
- Armstrong, David Malet. (1997). *A World of States of Affairs*. Cambridge University Press.
- Bird, Alexander. (2007). *Nature's Metaphysics*. Oxford University Press.
- Cameron, Ross P. (2010). How to have a radically minimal ontology. *Philosophical Studies*, 151(2), 249–264. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-009-9442-2>
- Correia, Fabrice, and Alexander Skiles. (2019). Grounding, Essence, And Identity. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 98(3), 642–670. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.12468>
- Dasgupta, Shamik. (2014). The Possibility of Physicalism. *Journal of Philosophy*, 111(9–10), 557–592. <https://doi.org/10.5840/jphil20141119/1037>
- deRosset, Louis. (2017). Grounding the Unreal. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 95(3), 535–563. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.12437>

- Fine, Kit. (1994). Essence and Modality. *Philosophical Perspectives*, 8, 1–16.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/2214160>
- Fine, Kit. (2001). The Question of Realism. *Philosophers' Imprint*, 1(1), 1–30.
- Fine, Kit. (2012). Guide to Ground. In Fabrice Correia & Benjamin Schnieder (Eds.), *Metaphysical Grounding* (37–80). Cambridge University Press.
- Goff, Philip. (2017). *Consciousness and Fundamental Reality*. Oxford University Press.
- Jago, Mark. (2018). From Nature to Grounding. In Ricki Bliss & Graham Priest (Eds.), *Reality and its Structure: Essays in Fundamentality* (199–216). Oxford University Press.
- Lowe, Edward Jonathan. (2012). What is the Source of Our Knowledge of Modal Truths? *Mind*, 121(484), 919–50. <https://doi.org/10.1093/mind/fzs122>
- Rosen, Gideon. (2010). Metaphysical Dependence: Grounding and Reduction. In Bob Hale & Aviv Hoffmann (Eds.), *Modality: Metaphysics, Logic, and Epistemology* (109–36). Oxford University Press.
- Schaffer, Jonathan. (2017). The Ground Between the Gaps. *Philosophers' Imprint*, 17(11), 1–26.
- Schaffer, Jonathan. (2021). Ground Functionalism. In Uriah Kriegel (Ed.), *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Mind* (Vol. 1, 171–207). Oxford University Press.
- Sider, Theodore. (2011). *Writing the Book of the World*. Oxford University Press.