

What Is Real?


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Abstract: Two of the most fundamental distinctions in metaphysics are (1) that between reality (or things in themselves) and appearances, the *R/A distinction*, and (2) that between entities that are fundamental (or real, *etcetera*) and entities that are ontologically or existentially dependent, the *F/D distinction*. While these appear to be two very different distinctions, in Buddhist metaphysics they are combined, raising questions about how they are related. In this paper I argue that plausible versions of the R/A distinction are essentially a special kind of F/D distinction, and conversely, that many F/D distinctions imply an R/A distinction. Nevertheless, while this does suggest that the F/D distinction is more basic than the R/A distinction, it does not favor a particular understanding of the F/D distinction. There are many kinds of existential or ontological dependence that cannot be meaningfully combined into a single notion, and reality does not force us to accept any specific kind of dependence as more fundamental. Consequently, what we consider to be ‘real’, ‘fundamental’, or ‘really existing’ is not entirely given by reality, but partially up to us.

Keywords: Meta-ontology; Metaphysics; Ontological dependence; Phenomenal appearances; Reality; Svabhāva

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1. Introduction

Two of the most fundamental distinctions in metaphysics are that between things in themselves and phenomenal appearances, and that between entities that are fundamental, real, or independent (in some relevant sense) and entities that are not (or less so). According to the first distinction—which I shall call the *reality/appearances* or *R/A* distinction hereafter—there is at least a possibility that things as we experience them (or as they appear to us) are different from how they really are, independently from us. There is considerable variation in the terms used to make this distinction. The world as it appears to us (or the world of appearances) is sometimes called ‘phenomenal reality’ or ‘conventional reality’,¹ for example, leading to an apparent distinction between two different kinds or levels of reality or two realities. Alternatively, the distinction may be conceptualized as involving two perspectives on, or aspects of reality, or in similar terms. Kant’s distinction between things in themselves and phenomenal appearances is, more or less, the paradigmatic R/A theory, but Thomas Kuhn’s (1962) famous claim that “after a revolution scientists are responding to a different world” (111) also presupposes a distinction between some kind of independent reality and a world of experience (*i.e.*, the world scientists respond to), and further variants of the distinction can be found throughout the history of philosophy.

According to the second distinction—which I will call the *fundamental/dependent* or *F/D* distinction hereafter—not all things that can be said to exist have the same ontological status: some entities are substances, while others are ontologically dependent, or some entities are more fundamental than others, or more real (in some ontologically loaded sense of ‘real’), and so forth. An event of alpha decay, for example, is ontologically dependent on the atom that emits the alpha particle, and a water molecule is ontologically dependent on the oxygen atom and two hydrogen atoms that constitute it.

On the face of it, these appear to be two very different distinctions. Although R/A theories generally (implicitly) assume that phenomenal appearances depend for their existence on the independently real things that

¹ The term ‘phenomenal reality’ is more common in Kant-influenced (Western) philosophy. The term ‘conventional reality’ is more common in Buddhist philosophy.

cause or ground them, they rarely appeal to an obvious or explicit F/D distinction to explain the relation between phenomena and things in themselves. F/D theories, on the other hand, typically assume a single reality without 'levels' or 'aspects', and thus appear to deny the R/A distinction. The water molecule and its constituent atoms in the last example do not exist in different kinds or levels of reality (or in different perspectives on reality, or different realities, *etcetera*). Rather, in the F/D perspective there is just one reality, but some things in that one reality are more fundamental or more real than others. However, despite this apparent incompatibility, in Buddhist metaphysics the distinction between ultimate reality (*paramārthasat*) and conventional/phenomenal reality (*saṃvṛtisaṭ*) is both an R/A distinction and an F/D distinction, and this raises the question of how different these two ontological distinctions really are.

In this paper I will argue that plausible versions of the R/A distinction are essentially a special kind of F/D distinction, and conversely, that many F/D distinctions imply an R/A distinction; or in other words, that the two distinctions are not as fundamentally different as they may appear to be. R/A theories hold that phenomenal appearances depend (among others) on their independently/externally real grounds or causes. (See sections 3 and 4.) This is an existential dependence relation in which appearances are the dependent and the things in themselves that ground or cause them are the independent (or more fundamental or more 'real'). Hence, this is an F/D distinction. (See sections 5 and 7.) The other way around, many F/D distinctions involve some kind of conceptual dependence. In case of the dependence of wholes on their parts, for example, we probably would not even recognize the whole as an individual entity without a concept naming or describing it. (See section 5.) In other words, we have a phenomenal appearance of that whole *as something*, which depends (among others) on a concept and which is not (necessarily) given (as such) by the independently real thing(s) that ground that appearance. This is an R/A distinction.

Nevertheless, while the classification of the R/A distinction as a special kind (or kinds) of F/D distinction suggests that the latter is more basic than the former, it does not favor a particular understanding of the F/D distinction. There are many kinds or varieties of existential or ontological dependence that cannot be meaningfully combined into a single category,

and which specific kinds of dependence we accept or reject as metaphysically relevant is largely a matter of convention. Independent/external reality does not force a choice of F/D distinctions (or a particular conception of that distinction)—*we* make that choice. (See sections 6 and 7.) Consequently, what we consider to be ‘real’, ‘fundamental’, or ‘really existing’ is not entirely given by reality, but *partially* up to us.

Sections 2 and 3 of this paper give brief overviews of the F/D and R/A distinctions, respectively, followed by a deflation of the R/A distinction in section 4. After that, section 5 discusses the Buddhist metaphysical notion of *svabhāva* and how it relates to the two distinctions, and section 6 argues against combining different varieties of existential dependence into a single category. The final section 7 summarizes key findings and discusses their meta-ontological implications.

2. The F/D Distinction

In “The Question of Ontology” (2009), Kit Fine points out that “the commonly accepted view [...] is that ontological questions are quantificational questions” (158), but that there is a problem with this view because the answers to many quantificational questions are trivial: “given the evident fact that there is a prime number greater than 2, it trivially follows that there is a number” (*ibid.*). However, “it is usually supposed that the answers to ontological questions are non-trivial” (*ibid.*), and consequently, something is wrong with the quantificational view. An anti-realist about numbers may very well agree that there are prime numbers greater than 2 *and* resist the conclusion that this means that numbers ‘exist’, and this does not imply that her view is incoherent. What she means to say is that numbers do not *really* exist, or something like that, and the key question for meta-ontology is what that ‘really’ means.

The critical and distinctive aspect of ontological claims lies not in the use of the quantifier, but in the appeal to a certain concept of what is real; and it is only by focusing on this concept, rather than on our understanding of quantification, that further clarification is to be achieved ... (Fine 2009, 171)

Thus, some things might be said to exist in some ‘thick’, ontologically loaded sense, while other things might be quantified over, and thus exist in a ‘thin’ sense, but do not exist in the thick sense because they do not satisfy the relevant criterion. F/D theories are concerned with this distinction, but conceptualize this criterion differently. Fine proposed a distinction between what “is constitutive of reality” and what is not, many others have used the term ‘fundamental’, but perhaps the most prominent collection of F/D theories conceive of the distinction as one between things that are ‘ontologically dependent’ (and therefore, not fundamental or thickly existing) and things that are not (*i.e.*, that are independent).

In her discussion of varieties of ontological dependence, Kathrin Koslicki (2012) uses some examples that are helpful to illustrate the notion: smiles ontologically depend on mouths, sets depend on their members, events and states of affairs depend on their ‘participants’, chemical substances depend on their atomic constituents, tropes and Aristotelian universals depend on their ‘bearers’,² and holes and boundaries ontologically depend on their ‘hosts’. Significantly, the whole/parts relation does not occur on this list.³ While it seems undeniable that wholes (in some relevant sense) depend on their parts,⁴ this is usually not conceived of as a kind of ontological dependence, and there are other existential dependence relations—such as causal dependence—that are not typically considered examples of ontological

² The ontological dependence of tropes is debatable. In (Buddhist) Abhidharma metaphysics, *dharmas* are spatio-temporally atomic tropes (Siderits 2022), and these tropes are held to be ontologically independent. That is, there are no bearers of tropes, and things as they appear to us are mere bundles of *dharmas*/tropes.

³ Except, perhaps, for the dependence of chemical substances on their atomic constituents, although the emergent properties of chemical substances suggest that this is not a mere whole/parts relation.

⁴ In case of the whole/parts relation it is easy to confuse questions of identity with questions of ontology. If I have a book and rip out one page, is it still *the same* book? This is a question of identity, but this question is irrelevant here. To say that a book depends for its existence on its pages is to say that if those pages (*i.e.*, all of them) would not exist, the book would not exist, and this is true both before and after I rip out that one page. The book-before depends on *its* pages and the book-after depends on *its* pages. These are not the *exact* same pages and not the *exact* same books, but that does not matter here.

dependence either. Thus, while to say that what is causally dependent is not fundamental is making an F/D distinction, this is rarely deemed to be a kind of ontological dependence. Supervenience is another example of a dependence relation that is usually not considered to be a variety of ontological dependence, and grounding *may* be a further example, but this is more controversial. While theories of metaphysical grounding appear to make some kind of F/D distinction, this distinction is usually not framed in terms of dependence. “Grounding is understood to be a form of constitutive (as opposed to causal or probabilistic) determination or explanation” (Bliss & Trogon 2021). If x grounds y , then x appears to be more fundamental than y , and it could be argued that y depends on x , but not everyone agrees that this dependence is properly classified as *ontological* dependence.

Ontological dependence, then, is a variety or a collection of varieties of a broader category that could be called ‘existential dependence’. To say that x existentially depends on y is to say that if y would not exist, then x would not exist, but this is only a necessary and not a sufficient condition,⁵ because dependence is not a purely formal notion. To see why this is the case, consider the following general, but flawed (!) definition of ‘dependence’:

(CD) A depends on B if and only if, if B would not be the case, then A would not be the case.

According to (CD), “precipitation in Aikawa depends on humid, westerly wind” is true if and only if it is the case that if there would be no humid, westerly wind, there would be no precipitation in Aikawa. On a glance, this may seem alright, but there is a problem. In a common understanding of counterfactual conditionals (*e.g.*, Lewis 1914), the right-hand part of (CD) is equivalent to “necessarily, if not B then not A ”, which is true whenever B is necessarily true (or necessarily the case, but those are equivalent expressions). And consequently, (CD) would also imply that “precipitation in Aikawa depends on the truth of ‘1=1’”, which is nonsense—or which is not what we mean with ‘dependence’, at least. Similarly, if the necessary condition for existential dependence would also be sufficient, anything would

⁵ I owe gratitude to this journal’s reviewers for bringing this to my attention.

be existentially dependent on anything that exists necessarily (if there is anything that exists necessarily at all, of course).

Furthermore, adding a condition “and not because B is necessarily the case” to (CD) does not solve the problem, because something may depend (in the relevant sense of ‘dependence’) on necessary B for other reasons than B ’s necessity. And neither does there seem to be any other formal criterion that could be added to (CD) such that this new criterion would be jointly sufficient with the condition already mentioned. ‘Dependence’, then, is not a formal notion, and by extension, neither is ‘existential dependence’. Nevertheless, the informal category of ‘existential dependence’ could be defined *loosely* as follows:

(ED) x existentially depends on y if and only if, if y would not exist, then x would not exist, and not just because x exists necessarily.

This category of existential dependence coincides with the F/D distinction. F/D theories hold that for any two things that have a relation R , one of those things is more fundamental, or more ‘real’, or more appropriately labeled as ‘existing’ than the other; and the only sensible kinds of relations R are kinds of existential dependence as loosely defined in (ED). It is not particularly difficult to come up with apparent counter-examples that do not use the *term* ‘dependence’, of course, but terminology is largely irrelevant here. One could, for example, say that wholes can be *reduced* to their parts (rather than that they depend on them), but that does not change anything about the fact that an ax existentially depends on its handle and its head or a tree on its roots, trunk, and branches (*i.e.*, their parts) in the sense of (ED). That is, the ax would not exist if the handle and head it happens to have would not exist, and the tree would not exist if the roots, trunk, and branches it happens to have would not exist.⁶

F/D theories differ with regards to which kinds of dependence they consider metaphysically relevant, but also with regards to the formal properties

⁶ Questions about changes in the handle or head, or whether the ax depends on a *particular* handle and/or head are questions of identity, rather than of existence. What matters here is that an ax must have *some* head and handle, and that a tree must have *some* roots, trunk, and branches. (Although it could be argued that a tree could be temporarily without branches.) See also two notes before this one.

of the dependence relation(s). Ricki Bliss and Graham Priest (2018) proposed a taxonomy of these theories on the basis of their acceptance or rejection of four theses. If we read ‘ xDy ’ as “ x ontologically depends on y ”, then these four theses are the following: antireflexivity $\forall x (\neg(xDx))$, antisymmetry $\forall x, y (xDy \rightarrow \neg(yDx))$, transitivity $\forall x, y, z ((xDy \wedge yDz) \rightarrow xDz)$, and extendability $\forall x \exists y (x \neq y \wedge xDy)$.⁷ Two to the power of four is sixteen, but Bliss and Priest show that of these sixteen hypothetical combinations, six are inconsistent, and that all of the remaining ten appear to have been defended by at least some philosophers in the Western and/or Buddhist traditions. As mentioned, this taxonomy does not just apply to theories of ontological dependence, but to other existential dependence relations as well. Whole/parts dependence, for example, is characterized by the first three but probably not the fourth. We will return to this topic in section 6 below.

3. The R/A Distinction

According to the R/A distinction, the way the world appears to us (or the way we experience the world) may be different from the way it really is. By implication, the R/A distinction involves two claims: (1) that there is a way the world really is, and (2) that this way the world really is is not necessarily the same as the way we consciously experience it. The first of these claims is external-world realism.⁸ The second can be unpacked in a number of ways, depending on whether the explanation of the (potential) discrepancy between reality and appearance (also) appeals to something mind-internal or only posits mind-external distortions. The latter include

⁷ The notation used here is slightly different from Bliss and Priest’s.

⁸ The term ‘realism’ is sometimes misunderstood as having epistemological, semantic, or other implications, but as John Searle has pointed out, ‘realism’ in the here relevant sense is just “*the view that there is a way that things are that is logically independent of all human representations. Realism does not say how things are but only that there is a way that they are.* And ‘things’ in the previous two sentences does not mean material objects or even objects. It is like the ‘it’ in ‘It is raining,’ not a referring expression.” (1995, 155—emphasis in original)

systematic deception by something like Descartes's evil demon and brain-in-vat or *Matrix*-like scenarios, but also distortions or misrepresentations caused by the nature, limitations, or disorders of our sense organs. Most R/A theories locate the *main* cause of the (potential) discrepancy between appearance and reality within the mind, however, and thus assume some form of epistemological idealism, that is, the view that all of our experience of reality is necessarily mediated by (something in) the mind. In case of linguistic relativism, for example, that mediating role is played by language. Benjamin Lee Whorf called this "a new principle of relativity" and argued that it "holds that all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar, or can in some way be calibrated" (1940, 214).

Often, what plays the mediating role is called a 'conceptual scheme'.⁹ According to W.V.O. Quine (1960), we can only talk about the world by imposing a conceptual scheme upon it and interpreting reality in accordance with the categories of that scheme. John Searle argued that "external realism allows for an infinite number of true descriptions of the same reality made relative to different conceptual schemes" (1995, 165). And Maria Baghramian advocates a view in which conceptual schemes are likened to maps: "We cannot *talk* about that which our conceptual schemes map outside the parameters set by the maps we currently have at our disposal, but this does not mean that there is nothing outside our maps to speak of" (2004, 319). (Notice the explicit commitment to external-world realism in the quotes by Searle and Baghramian.)

Many other terms (in addition to 'conceptual schemes') have been used—Thomas Kuhn (1962) used the term 'paradigm' for a relevantly similar notion, for example—and there is considerable variety in the terms used to refer to reality and appearance as well. 'External reality', 'independent reality', and 'noumenal reality' are among the most common terms for the first, but it should be noted that the second and third are potentially confusing. The notion of independence in 'independent reality' is not (exactly)

⁹ The term 'conceptual scheme' became fashionable after the 1940s. (Before the 1920s it was very uncommon and did not seem to refer to the same idea either.) Hence, my claim that what plays the mediating role is often called a 'conceptual scheme' is only true for R/A theories dating to the second half of the 20th century and later.

ontological or existential independence, but something like independence from a conceptual scheme, independence from social convention, or mind-independence.¹⁰ And while analytic philosophers typically understand ‘noumenal reality’ to refer to something like Kant’s thing in itself or like World 1 in Popper’s *Three Worlds* view, continental philosophers more often interpret the term to refer to something like Plato’s world of ideas or Popper’s World 3. ‘Phenomenal reality’ is probably the most common term used to refer to the world of appearances, but other terms, such as ‘experienced reality’ or ‘the world as we experience it’, are also frequently used.

In addition to this terminological variety, there is much substantial variety as well, or probably even more. Essentially, the R/A distinction is nothing but the distinction between a reality as it really is (independently from us) and a way or ways the world appears to us (or me). Hence, when a child makes a distinction between what is the case and what merely appears to be the case—a distinction that normally develops in children between the ages of 3 and 4½ (Flavell 1993)—then it is making an R/A distinction. And when Galileo, Descartes, or Locke argued that secondary qualities are not properties of things as they really are, but the way our minds represent certain effects of things, they were making a distinction between how things really are and how they appear to us, and thus an R/A distinction. Kant’s transcendental idealism (*i.e.*, the paradigmatic R/A theory mentioned in the introduction), children’s recognition that appearances may be deceptive, Searle’s ‘perspectivalism’, the primary/secondary quality distinction, and Baghramian’s moderate pluralism all involve an R/A distinction, but aside from that, they might have less in common than what they share.

There are significant differences between R/A theories. They differ with regards to what causes the difference between appearance and reality (*i.e.*, our conceptual schemes *etcetera*), but also with regards to the extent that

¹⁰ I will argue below (in sections 5 and 7) that the R/A distinction (in as far as it involves something like a conceptual scheme) is typically based on a specific variety of existential dependence, which implies that independent reality is existentially independent in some particular sense after all. But this is a specific kind of dependence, and it does not imply that the term ‘independent’ in the notion of ‘independent reality’ refers to existential or ontological dependence in the F/D sense.

appearances can differ from (or misrepresent) their external, ‘real’ grounds or causes, and how much (if anything) we can learn or know about the latter. Kant, for example, argued for a kind of epistemological humility: there is nothing we can know about things in themselves *except* for the few things we can infer through transcendental reasoning. And skeptics might go even further than this, and argue that we cannot know anything at all. At the other end of the spectrum we find ideas like Donald Davidson’s suggestion (1977a; 1999) that the differences between conceptual schemes—and thus, between alternative appearances of the same reality—are as insignificant as the choice to measure temperature in Celsius or Fahrenheit: “nothing depends on whether we use one set of numbers or another” (1999, 306).

As mentioned, R/A distinctions that do not depend merely on mind-external distortions (like evil demons, brains-in-vat, flawed sense organs, and so forth) posit something like a (mind-internal) conceptual scheme, although not always explicitly (due to an emphasis on other aspects or implications of the R/A distinction, for example). Regardless of what it is called, this conceptual scheme somehow co-determines our conscious, phenomenal experience. That is, we experience a tree *as* a tree because we have a concept of ‘tree’. Lacking that concept, we might still see *something*, but not recognize it as a discrete individual belonging to a certain kind—we wouldn’t see it *as* a tree, and therefore, *in some sense*, we would not see a tree. Phenomenal appearances, thus, depend on concepts, which some R/A theories describe as appearances being ‘conceptually constructed’. But this raises the question of what these ‘concepts’ are exactly. It is important to realize that they are not *necessarily* verbal (even if they usually are). Concepts do not necessarily require words—children may learn concepts before learning words (although it appears more likely that they learn them together), and non-human animals can have concepts, but cannot use words.¹¹

Concepts are mental categories used to organize the raw input of our sense organs into distinct things, features, events, and so forth, but how

¹¹ It could, perhaps, be argued that some primates are capable of learning word-like symbols, but pigeons can learn a concept of ‘bad children’s drawing’ (Watanabe 2010), for example, and certainly do not have any kind of word or symbol representing that concept.

much ‘organizing’ needs to be done is controversial. Davidson (1974) argued that this notion of ‘organizing’ does not make much sense, and indeed it does not if one assumes that external/independent reality is already more or less ‘organized’ in the sense that it mostly consists of discrete objects and features belonging to discrete kinds. But this is a metaphysical assumption that many R/A theories reject—either it is assumed that independent reality lacks clear or sharp boundaries (between things, between properties, and between kinds), and thus that we draw those boundaries by means of our conceptual categories, or it is assumed that this is at least a possibility for significant parts or aspects of independent reality, and that we cannot *a priori* know whether our concepts ‘cut nature at the joints’ or in more or less arbitrary places. The aforementioned difference between R/A theories in the extent that appearances can differ from their independently real grounds or causes (or noumenal correlates) is largely determined by this kind of metaphysical assumption, which will be further explored in the next section. There is another question that needs to be addressed here first, however.

If phenomenal appearances depend on concepts, can infants or non-human animals have phenomenal appearances? Although I already mentioned that concepts do not necessarily have to be verbal and that some other animals can have concepts, there are other reasons why there is no clear answer to this question. First, phenomenal appearances are *conscious*, determinate experiences of things, features, and so forth, and it is not self-evident that infants and non-human animals are conscious in the right sense and/or to the required extent.¹² Consciousness is not a singular faculty and comes in degrees—a neonate might almost completely lack consciousness, while by the age of four or so, a normal human will be fully conscious (*e.g.*, Zelazo, Gao, & Todd 2007). Similarly, animals differ widely with regards to the extent that they are conscious. Second, there is a similar progression (in case of children) or variety (in case of animals) with regards to the

¹² This raises a question about the right kind(s) or level(s) of consciousness needed for phenomenal awareness, of course, but I do not have an answer to that question. My point here is merely that being conscious in some way or sense does not necessarily imply being conscious in the way and to the extent required for phenomenal awareness, whatever that way and/or extent may be.

possession of concepts or language and thought. Davidson once pointed out that we have no way to describe the stage between the absence of language and thought and their emergence.

In both the evolution of thought in the history of mankind, and the evolution of thought in an individual, there is a stage at which there is no thought followed by a subsequent stage at which there is thought. To describe the emergence of thought would be to describe the process which leads from the first to the second of these stages. What we lack is a satisfactory vocabulary for describing the intermediate steps. (1997, 127)

Very much the same applies here: there is a stage (or state, in case of many non-human animals) in which both consciousness and concepts are lacking and there can, therefore, be no experience of phenomenal appearances, but we lack the tools to describe what is experienced in that stage or even to determine whether the term ‘experience’ is applicable at all; and there is another, later stage (in case of normally developing humans) in which consciousness and concepts have fully developed and we do experience phenomenal appearances, but we lack “a satisfactory vocabulary for describing the intermediate steps” between those two stages (or states).

So, does as an infant or a cat have a phenomenal experience of a tree when it looks at one? Assuming that it can actually see the tree, it would, of course, see something, but whatever it would be seeing would not be seen *as* a tree. It might be conceptualized otherwise—perhaps, the cat has some relevant concept—and in that case, there might be some phenomenal appearance, but it would not be a phenomenal appearance of a tree. Then what does the infant or cat experience? This question will remain unanswered for the reason mentioned in the previous paragraph: we lack the tools and vocabulary to describe (or even understand, except perhaps, from a third-person perspective) this intermediate stage between absence and presence of conscious, determinate experience.

4. Deflating the R/A Distinction

Donald Davidson famously rejected conceptual schemes and associated R/A theories in his “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme” (1974). It has been shown repeatedly, however, that his arguments are only successful against *some* versions of the R/A distinction, and not against ‘the very idea’ (*e.g.*, Lynch 1997; Wang 2009; Brons 2011). On the other hand, it seems to me that Davidson made an important point when he argued that “successful communication proves the existence of a shared, and largely true, view of the world” (1977b, 201), an idea he fleshed out later in his often misunderstood theory of triangulation (*e.g.*, Davidson 1992; Verheggen 2016; Brons 2012; 2022, ch. 8). The R/A distinction—or a sufficiently deflated version thereof, at least—does not necessarily conflict with that idea, however.

Let us assume that some hypothetical R/A theory holds that mountains are not real. How could this seemingly absurd claim be defended? The R/A theorist may appeal to the fact that both the class of mountains (or the set of things called ‘mountain’) and individual mountains have vague boundaries. The boundary between mountain and hill (or that between mountain and not-yet-a-mountain or not-a-mountain-anymore in geological processes) is more or less arbitrarily set by us and not given by nature. And similarly, the boundary between mount Fuji or any other individual mountain and its surrounding area is just as arbitrary. Hence, there is no non-arbitrarily and non-fuzzily bounded kind of non-arbitrarily and non-fuzzily bounded things in independent reality that corresponds with what we call ‘mountains’. Independent reality does not determine what is a mountain and what is not—there are no mountains *as such* in independent reality. Rather, *we* decide what is a mountain and what is not. *We* draw boundaries, cut up, classify, and label, and it is this what produces our phenomenal appearances. Our experiences of mountains *as mountains* are conceptually constructed and not given by the real world, and therefore, mountains are mere phenomenal appearances and not independently real. (Notice that this argument depends on the assumption that for some kind of thing to be real, there must be discrete, individual, and clearly identifiable entities in reality corresponding to the things belonging to that kind. To say that *Xs* are real is to say that there are discrete individual *Xs* in reality, and that that

discreteness and individuality are given by reality. Hence, the argument depends on something like Quine's famous dictum *no entity without identity*.)

An obvious objection to this argument is that the chunks of rock we refer to with the word 'mountain' are very real, but the same problem applies there. Sedimentary rocks (such as sandstone and lignite), for example, are slowly formed out of non-rock (sand and peat, respectively, in case of these examples) by pressure and heat, and in that process there is no non-arbitrary boundary between not-yet-rock and rock. And consequently, 'rock' and those 'chunks of rock' are mere phenomenal appearance as well.

At this point one may start to wonder, how can we talk about the things in themselves that ground or cause our phenomenal experiences of mountains if we cannot even call them 'chunks of rock'? A common, apophatic answer to that question is that we cannot, or only in negative terms (*i.e.*, we can say that they are *not* mountains and *not* chunks of rock, but that is all). This apophatic attitude does make some sense—language is a useful tool to describe things in the context in which it evolved, the world of phenomenal experience, but it may struggle if it is used to describe anything well outside that sphere, as quantum mechanics nicely illustrates. A lot of quantum-inspired pseudo-science is based on an attempt to express the equations and predictions of quantum mechanics in terms that are fine to make sense of the ordinary objects that surround us, but that may be meaningless on the quantum scale. If there is a fundamental distinction between our phenomenal experience and independent reality, then it seems plausible that language would not be able to describe the latter either.

This apophatic conclusion seems to create a fundamental problem: How do we talk about something we cannot talk about? But this question assumes that we need to, and that might not be the case. All we really need is the conceptual distinction between phenomenal appearances and their independently real grounds or causes. (Notice that this is not the same sense of 'grounding' as mentioned in section 2.) However, this distinction we can already make—I just did so by using the phrases 'phenomenal appearances' and 'their independently real grounds or causes', but as these are rather clumsy expressions (especially if we need them a lot), it would be helpful to abbreviate them a bit.

In the following, I will use floor brackets [...] to denote the independently real cause(s) or ground(s), or noumenal correlate(s) of some phenomenal appearance(s). So, [Mount Fuji] is that part of independent or external reality that causes or grounds my phenomenal experience of Mount Fuji, and [mountain]s and [rock] are those parts of reality that cause or ground my experiences of mountains and rock, respectively.¹³ Formally, the [...] operator changes one kind of predicate Φ that applies to phenomenal appearances into another kind of predicate $[\Phi]$ that applies to parts or chunks of independent reality as follows:

$$(\text{IRCG}) \quad \forall x ([\Phi]x \leftrightarrow_{\text{def.}} \exists y (Gx,y \wedge \Phi y)),^{14}$$

in which Φ represents some kind of phenomenal appearance (such as ‘mountain’, ‘rock’, or ‘Mount Fuji’) and ‘ Gx,y ’ stands for “ x is the independently real cause or ground of the phenomenal appearance y ” or “ x is the part or chunk of independent reality that causes or grounds y ”. (Notice that ‘independent reality’ is effectively a mass term, and thus that the universal quantifier does not quantify over discrete individuals, but over parts or chunks of independent reality.) Hence, (IRCG) can be read as: “any x is a $[\Phi]$ if and only if there is some y such that x is the independently real cause or ground of the phenomenal appearance y and y is a Φ ”. A [mountain], then, is defined (by an application of IRCG) as the independently real ground (or noumenal correlate) of a phenomenal appearance of a mountain.

According to (IRCG), while [mountain]s are parts of independent reality, what determines their being [mountain]s is not some feature of independent reality, but their phenomenal appearances as mountains. In a

¹³ Notice that it makes a difference whether the plural suffix -s goes inside or outside the floor brackets. ‘[mountain]s’ is a plurality of noumenal correlates of multiple, singular mountain phenomena; ‘[mountains]’ is the singular noumenal correlate of a combination or collection of multiple mountain phenomena or of a singular phenomenal appearance of several mountains.

¹⁴ The four-letter sequence ‘IRCG’, which is derived from ‘independently real cause or ground’, is introduced here merely for ease of reference and does not really mean anything (even if it looks like an acronym). The same is the case for ‘SRA’ and ‘WRA’ below. These three names refer to these definitions/formulas—nothing else. Other names for these three formulas would work just as well, but I find these names easiest to remember.

maximally strong version of the R/A distinction there *cannot* even be an independently real criterion for the classification of certain chunks of independent reality as [mountain]s. In such a view (regardless of whether anyone ever seriously defended it), there would be *nothing* that [Φ]s share that makes them [Φ]s aside from this grounding or causing of the phenomenal appearances of Φ .¹⁵ Or in other words:

(SRA) for any Φ , there is no non-trivial property Ψ , such that

$$\forall x ([\Phi]x \leftrightarrow \Psi x).$$
¹⁶

(An obvious, and possibly only, example of a ‘trivial’ property Ψ_t such that $\forall x ([\Phi]x \leftrightarrow \Psi_t x)$ is “being the independently real cause or ground of some phenomenal appearance y such that Φy ”.)

An R/A distinction based on (SRA) is so strong that it becomes effectively indistinguishable from metaphysical idealism. If there is no independently real property that some [Φ]s share, then there is no real property that causes their appearances as Φ s either. And if there is nothing in independent reality that (co-)determines phenomenal appearance, then independent reality is causally inefficient with regards to phenomenal appearance(s), which is effectively the same as there not being any independent reality at all (as metaphysical idealism holds). If [Φ]s have absolutely nothing in common except their phenomenal appearances as Φ s, then those appearances could just as well be groundless.

Furthermore, if the independently real properties of [Φ]s play no role in their appearances as Φ s, then something else must influence or determine their appearances as such. Conceptual schemes are supposed to order, organize, cut-up, and/or classify something, and if it is not something independently real they work on, then they must organize (*etcetera*) something else. Because the ultimate grounds or causes of our phenomenal appearances

¹⁵ This applies equally to mountains and to Mount Fuji. In the latter case, there is nothing that [part-of-Mount-Fuji]s share that makes them phenomenally appear as parts of Mount Fuji. In other words, (SRA) implies both the arbitrary boundaries of classes of things and the arbitrary boundaries of individual things suggested in the second paragraph of this section.

¹⁶ The expression ‘ $\forall x ([\Phi]x \leftrightarrow \Psi x)$ ’ can be read as “anything that is [Φ] has property Ψ and *vice versa*”.

are supposed to be independently real (as this is a defining feature of the R/A distinction), this ‘something else’ must be some kind of intermediary between the two, that is, something like sense data. However, if the sense data that present $[\Phi]$ s to the mind are to play the causal/grounding role in the appearances as Φ s that $[\Phi]$ s cannot play themselves because $[\Phi]$ s have no relevant properties in common, then those sense data cannot similarly lack relevant shared properties. Or in other words, for sense data to play the role they are supposed to play, they must present $[\Phi]$ s as something they are not—namely, relevantly similar to each other in some Φ -determining respect—and thus, those sense data must systematically misrepresent $[\Phi]$ s. The intermediary implied by (SRA), then, is not some kind of relatively innocent causal intermediary like the nerve signals between our sense organs and brains, but is systematically deceptive. Davidson (1983) called this kind of intermediary “epistemic” because our beliefs would be grounded upon them rather than on independent reality itself, and it is such epistemic intermediaries that he rejected (*e.g.*, 1974; 1983; 1988). Weaker versions of the R/A distinction do not assume (SRA), however, and thus, do not necessarily assume such epistemic intermediaries.

There are (at least) three other problems for (SRA), moreover. First, the radical apophysis implied by (SRA) undermines (SRA) itself. If nothing can be known about independent reality, then we cannot know that all $[\Phi]$ s lack a non-trivial property Ψ either. Second, in case of mountains, there *is* a non-trivial property Ψ such that $\forall x ([\Phi]x \leftrightarrow \Psi x)$, namely, “being naturally higher than 1km relative to the surrounding landscape” or something similar. (We will turn to the third problem below.)

This second problem for (SRA) can be avoided in two ways: by changing ‘for any Φ ’ into ‘for most/some Φ ’, recognizing that there may be some $[\Phi]$ s that have unambiguous, independently real properties determining their $[\Phi]$ -ness;¹⁷ and/or by assuming that non-trivial properties Ψ such that $\forall x ([\Phi]x \leftrightarrow \Psi x)$ are (often/typically) vague and/or depend on more or less arbitrary thresholds that are drawn by convention rather than that they are given by anything independently real (as in case of the 1km threshold in the last example). The mapping metaphor on which Maria Baghramian’s

¹⁷ Chemical elements seem to be an example, as any chemical element has a given number of protons and it is this number that determines which element they are.

(2004) pluralism relies illustrates this particularly well. The boundaries between zones on climate maps or vegetation maps, for example, do not correspond to exact boundaries in the real world, but are drawn in gray zones. And arguably, the same is true for coast lines and many other features on maps. That they are drawn in gray zones implies that they are not completely arbitrary, but where exactly in those gray zones those boundaries are drawn is largely determined by an applicable convention.

Hence, weaker R/A theories can amend (SRA) in two ways: by changing the first quantifier, and by claiming that insofar it is the case that some $[\Phi]$ s have a non-trivial property Ψ , this is not an *inherent*, independently real property, but it is at least partially conventional.

(WRA) for most/some Φ , there is no non-trivial, inherent property Ψ , such that $\forall x ([\Phi]x \leftrightarrow \Psi x)$.

A third problem for (SRA) is that it seems to make language and communication impossible, unless one makes some rather exotic and/or question-begging assumptions.¹⁸ This is the point of the quote by Davidson in the first paragraph of this section: “successful communication proves the existence of a shared, and largely true, view of the world”. If $[\Phi]$ s have absolutely nothing in common (aside from the aforementioned trivial property), then there would be no way in which we could learn a concept and category ‘ Φ ’. If a language learner would repeatedly hear the word ‘table’ in reference to various things, but those things appear to have nothing in common, then she will never be able to work out what kinds of things tables are and form a concept of ‘table’. For this reason, the fact that we have language proves that (SRA) cannot be right. It does not similarly refute the weaker (WRA), however, as the language learner does not need a complete lack of ambiguity to learn concepts—in practice, vague (or non-discrete) properties and arbitrary, conventional thresholds work just fine.

¹⁸ *Matrix*-like brain-in-vat scenarios would do the trick. And certain assumptions about memory might seem to make solitary language learning possible, but as Verheggen (2016) has shown, such assumptions would be begging the question, as the reliability of memory is itself part of the problem.

If this argument is right (and I will just assume that it is here),¹⁹ this has rather deflationary implications for the R/A distinction. It is indeed the case that there are no sharp, non-arbitrary boundaries between mountains and non-mountains (and between Mount Fuji and its surrounding area), and thus that our category of mountains is not given by independent reality, but we are (or can be) fully aware of all of this. Our experiences of mountains are not deceptive—[mountain]s are very much like how they appear to us. And the same is true for most of our other phenomenal experiences. There really are trees and shrubs, even though the boundary between them is vague and conventional. There really are tables and rain clouds and sunsets.

Consequently, phenomenal experience is not (and cannot be) *radically* different from independent reality. Indeed, “successful communication proves the existence of a shared, and *largely* true, view of the world” (Davidson 1977b, 201; emphasis added). If phenomenal reality is like a map, it is like a transparent 1:1 scale map overlaid on top of the terrain. But even this leaves room for (self-) deception. It would be a mistake to confuse the map for the terrain and to believe that our category of ‘mountain’ is given by the world (*i.e.*, to assume joints in reality that follow our conceptual categories or the lines on the map). Nietzsche once warned against our tendency to take language for granted, to think of our “concepts and names of things as eternal truths” and to mistake our conceptual description of the world for the world itself (1878, §I.11). But this is a kind of (self-) deception that can be vanquished through critical reflection.²⁰

5. F/D and R/A in Buddhist Metaphysics

The Buddhist equivalent to being fundamental in the F/D distinction is having *svabhāva* (literally: ‘own being’ or ‘self-being’). What does not have *svabhāva* is empty (*śūnya*). The closest equivalents of ‘reality’ and ‘appearance’ in the R/A distinction are ‘ultimate reality’ (*paramārthasat*) and

¹⁹ For a defense of more or less this argument, see (Brons 2022, chapters 8 and 9).

²⁰ Vanquishing this kind of (self-) deception is aided by the advance of technology, which increasingly liberates us from the biological limitations to our perception.

‘conventional reality’ (*saṃvṛtīsat*), respectively. R/A and F/D are not two different distinctions, however. What does not have *svabhāva* is merely conventionally real, or in other words, having *svabhāva* is the mark of ultimate reality. This puts all the metaphysical weight on the notion of *svabhāva*, of course, but unfortunately, that notion is not without its problems.

Svabhāva is existential independence (as opposed to dependence), but there are at least three kinds of dependence involved—causal dependence, whole/parts dependence, and conceptual dependence (*e.g.*, Garfield 2015)—and different schools and thinkers differently accentuated these. In the early Buddhist Abhidharma view, which emphasized whole/parts dependence and conceptual dependence, the only things that have *svabhāva* are *dharma*s, spatio-temporally atomic tropes (Siderits 2022). Nāgārjuna, the most influential philosopher of Mahāyāna Buddhism, put greater weight on causal dependence and argued that not even *dharma*s have *svabhāva* and thus that everything is empty. And the Tibetan philosopher Tsongkhapa identified emptiness with ‘dependent origination’, implying that *svabhāva* (as the opposite of emptiness) is (primarily, at least) causal independence.

Further complicating matters, while *svabhāva* is typically understood as a metaphysical notion, Jan Westerhoff (2009) argues in his introduction to Nāgārjuna’s philosophy that it has cognitive and semantic dimensions as well. Those dimensions appear to be aspects or implications of conceptual dependence, however. Within the ontological dimension, Westerhoff distinguishes essence-*svabhāva*, substance-*svabhāva*, and absolute *svabhāva*, but he concludes that the third is an instance of the first. Essence-*svabhāva* is having an essential property, which can be understood as a non-trivial, inherent property Ψ , such that $\forall x ([\Phi]x \leftrightarrow \Psi x)$ as in (WRA) above. About substance-*svabhāva* Westerhoff writes that “to have *svabhāva* means to exist in a primary manner, unconstructed and independent of anything else” (24), which seems to be a description of existential independence in general, but it turns out that—at least for Nāgārjuna and his interpreters—this is primarily independence from causes and conditions, and thus causal independence.

Of the varieties or forms of *svabhāva* mentioned in the previous two paragraphs, two are relatively straightforward: causal dependence, and whole/parts dependence. It is worth noting that usually neither of these is

considered a kind of *ontological* dependence in Western philosophy, although the debate about parts, wholes, and composition could be easily rephrased in such terms. More commonly, claims in that debate are phrased in terms of existence rather than dependence. According to mereological nihilism, for example, wholes do not exist and only part-less parts exist. Peter Van Inwagen (1990) famously defends a view something like this, although he makes an exception for wholes that constitute a life. The idea in Abhidharma metaphysics is somewhat similar, even though it uses very different terms: only part-less parts have *svabhāva*, and wholes or composites are only conventionally real.

Conceptual dependence—or dependence on conceptual construction (*kalpanā*)—may seem to be more questionable as a kind of existential dependence. On the surface, conceptual dependence does not look like a kind of existential dependence at all. Rather, conceiving it as such appears to be the result of a confusion of the ontological and predicative uses of ‘existence’, which was common in ancient thought in both India and Greece (McEvilley 2002). To say that mountains do not exist independently from conceptual construction is to say that their existence *as* mountains—or in other words, our classification of them as ‘mountains’—depends on conceptual construction.²¹ It means that the phenomenal category is due to convention. What is dependent here, is the *predication* or classification, and not the *existence* of the part of reality that is classified as something.²² This is not exactly right, however, because it ignores the difference between [mountain]s and their phenomenal appearances. The independently real cause or ground of some mountain appearance is not conceptually constructed, of course, but the phenomenal appearance *as* mountain depends on conceptual construction by definition. A [mountain] can only appear *as* mountain to someone who has a concept of ‘mountain’, and consequently,

²¹ Notice that the term ‘construction’ here also refers to our boundary-drawing between mountains and non-mountains and between individual mountains and their surroundings. (See section 4.) For convenience, where it does not matter I will ignore this aspect of construction in the following, and treat conceptual construction as if it is mere classification.

²² Westerhoff (2009) calls this “notional dependence” and contrasts it to existential dependence.

that phenomenal appearance existentially depends on the process of conceptual construction (or classification) and on the concept of ‘mountain’. Hence, conceptual dependence *is* a kind of existential dependence.

It is important to understand what it means for something to be dependent on conceptual construction in this sense. What it means is that [mountain]s lack an inherent, non-trivial property that makes them [mountain]s, and thus, that the ‘mountain’-ness of Mount Fuji, for example, is not inherent or given by independent reality, because what is and what is not a mountain is at least partially decided by us. (See also sections 3 and 4.) To be dependent on conceptual construction, then, is the same as lacking essence-*svabhāva* (as roughly defined above), and this conclusion brings us back to the interpretation of *svabhāva* as three kinds of independence mentioned in the second paragraph of this section (*i.e.*, causal, whole/parts, conceptual).

However, this interpretation seems to make the notion of *svabhāva* polysemous or equivocal, while I do not think it was ever (consciously) conceived as such. An alternative interpretation that solves this problem is that *svabhāva* is existential independence *in any sense*, that is, some kind of absolute or radical independence. If Buddhists metaphysicists consider things that are ontologically dependent in some other sense than the three kinds of existential dependence mentioned above empty or merely conventionally real (*i.e.*, lacking *svabhāva*), as well (or if there would be sufficient reason to believe that they would have held that view), then this would provide strong support for this interpretation. Providing that support is well beyond the scope of this paper, but I think it is a plausible interpretation, and I find the fact that holes are a typical object for meditation on emptiness rather suggestive.²³

Nevertheless, regardless of whether *svabhāva* comes in the aforementioned three kinds or is better understood as absolute or radical independence, it *is* a multifaceted notion. As mentioned above, Westerhoff (2009) distinguishes cognitive and semantic dimensions of *svabhāva* in addition to

²³ Recall that ‘empty’ means lacking *svabhāva*, and that lacking *svabhāva* means being existentially dependent (either in some relevant sense, or in any sense). Hence, if holes are empty, then this implies that they are existentially dependent (and *vice versa*).

the ontological dimension, and those dimensions are inseparable from the notion of conceptual construction. Conceptual dependence was shown to be a variety of existential dependence above, as phenomenal appearances existentially depend on conceptual construction (but also usually on their independently real grounds or causes),²⁴ but Buddhist metaphysicists typically held that what is merely conventionally real—and thus lacks *svabhāva*—is conceptually constructed by definition. This is essentially what the cognitive and semantic dimensions of the notion of *svabhāva* consist in. But this may also very well be one of the most problematic aspects of the notion of *svabhāva*.

In case of whole/parts dependence, it is quite plausible that the whole is only recognized as a thing if there is a concept naming or describing that thing/whole. Hence, a whole is not just existentially dependent on its parts, but on a concept naming/describing the whole as well. The same may be true for several (perhaps even most) other kinds of existential or ontological dependence. Arguably, a set is not just existentially dependent on its members, but also on some kind of concept (in a loose sense of ‘concept’, perhaps) combining those members into a set (*i.e.*, something like a membership function), and we would not recognize an event or state of affairs as such either without a concept classifying and/or naming/describing it. The odd one out is causal dependence.²⁵ Of course, if some particular fire causes smoke, then the phenomenal appearance of that smoke is conceptually constructed, but this would be the case because it lacks essence-*svabhāva* and not because it is causally dependent. Furthermore, we can talk about causality on the level of independent reality as well. [That fire] causes [that smoke], but [that smoke] (*i.e.*, the independently real ground or cause

²⁴ Notice that even hallucinations co-depend on independently real causes, such as drugs or disease, but such causes are not grounds in the sense of (IRCG). A hallucination of a dragon is not caused by a [dragon]. This is what the word ‘usually’ in the parenthetical remark points at.

²⁵ It is not the only exception, however. The dependence of chemical substances on their atomic constituents does not involve a conceptual co-dependence. The same may be true for the dependence of tropes on their bearers, if this dependence is accepted at all, as tropes in Abhidharma metaphysics (*i.e.*, *dharmas*) are existentially independent.

of the phenomenal appearance of/as smoke) is not conceptually constructed by definition, and consequently, causal dependence does not imply conceptual dependence.²⁶

6. Misleading Generalizations

There is a further problem for *svabhāva*, but it shares this problem with other F/D theories that combine multiple kinds of existential dependence into a single category. This problem is that different kinds of existential dependence differ in their formal properties, which is summarized in table 1. These four formal properties (*i.e.*, the column headers in table 1) were defined by Ricki Bliss and Graham Priest (2018; see also section 2) as follows:

- (1) *antireflexivity* $\forall x (\neg(xDx))$ —nothing is dependent on itself;
- (2) *antisymmetry* $\forall x, y (xDy \rightarrow \neg(yDx))$ —no two things are dependent on each other;
- (3) *transitivity* $\forall x, y, z ((xDy \wedge yDz) \rightarrow xDz)$ —if x depends on y and y depends on z , then x depends on z ; and
- (4) *extendability* $\forall x \exists y (x \neq y \wedge xDy)$ —everything depends on something other than itself.

The ‘ xDy ’ predicate represents the dependence relation ‘ x depends on y ’, but it is important to realize that in all of the kinds of dependence listed in table 1 it is more specific than this, because the kind of dependence implies what kinds of things x and y are. In case of hole/host dependence, for example, ‘ xDy ’ means something like “ x is a hole and y is the host of that hole and x (therefore) depends on y ”. Often x and y belong to different, mutually exclusive ontological categories (as in the case of holes and hosts; they are mutually exclusive in the sense that a hole cannot also be a host of a hole),

²⁶ If this is right, then that would obviously be a problem for interpretations of *svabhāva* that focus on causal independence, such as Nāgārjuna’s and Tsongkhapa’s. I am not interested in trying to refute (or support) their ideas, however, so I will ignore any exegetical implications of the arguments and findings in this paper.

which has important implications for the (possible) formal properties of these kinds of dependence.

type of dependence	anti-re-flexivity	anti-symmetry	transitivity	extendability
causal	?	?	yes	probably yes
whole/parts	yes	yes	yes	probably no
conceptual	yes	yes	<i>d.n.a.</i>	<i>d.n.a.</i>
phenome-non/ground	yes	yes	<i>d.n.a.</i>	<i>d.n.a.</i>
chem.subst./constituents	yes	yes	<i>d.n.a.</i>	<i>d.n.a.</i>
set/members	yes/no	no	no	<i>d.n.a.</i>
hole/host	yes	yes	<i>d.n.a.</i>	<i>d.n.a.</i>
event/participants	yes	yes	<i>d.n.a.</i>	<i>d.n.a.</i>

Table 1—Formal Properties of Different Kinds of Existential Dependence

Table 1 is obviously not exhaustive—many more kinds of existential dependence can be conceived than can be listed here. The first three dependences are the counterparts of the three kinds of *independence* that are involved in *svabhāva* (see previous section). Causal dependence is the existential dependence of effects on their causes, whole/parts dependence is the dependence of wholes on their parts,²⁷ and conceptual dependence is the dependence of a conceptually determinate phenomenal appearance on conceptual construction, and thus, on a concept guiding that construction (see section 3). The fourth dependence listed also has phenomenal appearances as its dependents, but what they depend on in this case is their

²⁷ But not dependence for their identity on a small subset of some kind of identifying parts. That would be confusing questions of identity with questions of existence. See section 2, and especially notes 4 and 6.

independently real grounds or causes (or noumenal correlates; see sections 3 and 4).

The remaining five are selected from the examples of ontological dependence given by Kathrin Koslicki (2012; see section 2). Chemical substances depend on their constituents, which could be considered a special kind of whole/parts dependence. Chemical substances have emergent properties, of course, but that probably is the case for many other wholes as well. (Otherwise there might be little reason to recognize and conceptualize them as something different from their parts.) Sets (by definition) depend on their members. Holes can only exist as holes in something, and thus depend on their ‘hosts’. The same is true for boundaries, which are not separately listed in the table, but what is true for holes in this section is true for boundaries as well. Events and states of affairs depend on the things (in the broadest possible sense of ‘thing’) that participate in them.²⁸ (Notice that states of affairs are not separately mentioned in the table either.)

Most of these kinds of existential dependence are antireflexive (*i.e.*, they hold that something cannot existentially depend on itself) and antisymmetrical (*i.e.*, they hold that two things cannot depend on each other). Holes (or boundaries) cannot be their own hosts, events (or states of affairs) cannot be their own participants,²⁹ chemical elements cannot be their own constituents, and so forth. The two possible exceptions, set/members dependence and causal dependence, are controversial. *If* there are things that cause themselves, then causal dependence would not be antireflexive. God or the universe appear to be the most common candidates for things that cause

²⁸ I omitted trope/bearer dependence as I have no idea about what its formal properties could be. (Contemplating the this-trope-ness of a trope turned out not to be particularly enlightening, unfortunately.) Koslicki’s first example was that of the dependence of smiles on mouths. Its values in the table would be ‘yes’, ‘yes’, ‘*d.n.a.*’, ‘*d.n.a.*’ for the same reasons as the other kinds of dependence with those values.

²⁹ A reviewer of an earlier version of this paper wondered whether fires, storms, or floods might be their own participants. What is potentially confusing in examples like these is that we use the term ‘fire’ to refer both to an event or process of something burning (in a particular way) *and* to a kind of reified collection of the participants in that burning (*i.e.*, the fuel, oxygen, and other molecules involved). The same applies to storms and floods. However, the reified collection of participants in the event is ontologically distinct from the event (as are the participants themselves).

themselves, but again, such claims are controversial. (Hence, the question mark in the table.) In a set theory that allows sets to be members of themselves there can be a singleton that has itself as its only member, and that set would, thus, depend on itself. However, contrary to naive set theory that allows this, axiomatic set theories typically do not allow sets to be members of themselves to avoid Russell's paradox and/or other problems. (Hence, naive set theory would have 'no' in this table cell, while axiomatic set theories would typically have 'yes'.)

The reason why most kinds of existential dependence are antireflexive was already alluded to above: the two relata belong to different, mutually exclusive ontological categories. But in case of the two possible exceptions, the relata belong to categories that are not mutually exclusive or belong to the same category. The first is the case for set/members dependence because sets can be members and *vice versa*, while in case of causal dependence both the effect (*i.e.*, the dependent) and the cause (*i.e.*, the independent) are generally assumed to be events. Furthermore, it is for the same reason that most of these dependence relations are antisymmetrical with the same two exceptions. Sets can have other sets as their members, so (at least in naive set theory) one set A can have a set B as its only member, while B has A as its only member, and consequently, A would depend on B and B would depend on A. And if it is possible that two events cause each other, then causal dependence would not be antisymmetrical either, but this is controversial as well. (Hence, again, the question mark in the table.) In all of the other cases the relation is fundamentally asymmetrical. If *x* is a hole and *y* is its host, then *y* cannot be a hole in *x*; if *x* is a chemical substance and *y* stands for its constituents, then *y* cannot be a chemical substance with *x* as its constituents; if *x* is a phenomenal appearance and *y* is its noumenal correlate (as in phenomenon/ground dependence) or *y* is the concept it depends on (as in conceptual dependence), then *y* cannot be a phenomenal appearance with *x* as its ground or relevant concept; and so forth.

Whole/parts dependence is also antisymmetrical, but for a slightly different reason. Contrary to the last three examples, wholes and parts are not mutually exclusive ontological categories: wholes can be parts of other wholes, and parts can have further parts, and thus, be wholes relative to those parts. The dependence is still antisymmetrical because if *x* is a whole

and y is its parts, then y cannot at the same time be a whole with x as its parts. But perhaps, whole/parts *interdependence* is also conceivable, and that relation would not be antisymmetrical. ‘Perhaps’, because I am far from convinced that this idea even makes sense. The only apparent example I can come up with is that of an ecosystem that depends on its parts (*i.e.*, the animals and plants in it), while those parts simultaneously depend on that ecosystem.³⁰ However, this dependence appears to be biological rather than metaphysical, and is, therefore, probably irrelevant here. (This is debatable, of course, but the outcome of that debate is irrelevant for the arguments in this paper.)

Because wholes can be parts of other wholes, the whole/parts dependence is transitive. Although sets can be members of other sets, the set/members dependence is *not* transitive, however. If x is a member of set Y and Y is a member of set Z , then this does not imply that x is a member of Z . Causal dependence, on the other hand, is transitive. If x is causally dependent on y and y on z , then x depends on z .

None of the other kinds of dependence in table 1 is transitive, and this is the case for the same reason that they are antisymmetrical: the relations belong to mutually exclusive ontological categories. In all of these cases what goes in the ‘ x ’ slot in ‘ xDy ’ cannot even go in the ‘ y ’ slot, and therefore, the antecedent in the definition of transitivity given above (*i.e.*, ‘ $xDy \wedge yDz$ ’) is fundamentally impossible. If x is a hole and y is its host, then y cannot also be a hole with z as its host. Or with any other host, for that matter—the problem is not that further host z , but that y cannot be both a hole and a host. Similarly, a phenomenal appearance cannot also be a ground or a concept (as in phenomenon/ground dependence and conceptual dependence, respectively), and the participants in an event cannot themselves be events (but events can be *parts* of other events). In all of these cases, it seems misleading to say that they are intransitive, however. What makes $\forall x, y, z ((xDy \wedge yDz) \rightarrow xDz)$ false for these kinds of dependence is that the antecedent just does not and *cannot* apply. Hence, transitivity is inapplicable. It is for this reason that it says ‘*d.n.a.*’ (*i.e.*, does not apply) in the table.

³⁰ A reviewer of an earlier version of this paper suggested organisms (and their parts) as another possible example.

A somewhat similar problem applies to extendability. In a kind of existential dependence in which what goes in the ‘ x ’ slot in ‘ $x\mathcal{D}y$ ’ necessarily belongs to ontological category Ω , $\forall x\exists y(x\neq y\wedge x\mathcal{D}y)$ would imply that $\forall x(\Omega x)$, and in many cases of existential dependence that implication is obviously false. Furthermore, in these cases it would be misleading to say that they are not extendable as well, as the main problem is not that $\forall x\exists y(x\neq y\wedge x\mathcal{D}y)$ itself is false, but that the implication $\forall x(\Omega x)$ is false. Extendability would imply that everything is a hole in case of hole/host dependence, that everything is an event in event/participants dependence, and that everything is a phenomenal appearance in phenomenon/ground dependence or conceptual dependence.³¹ Because not everything is a set, extendability does not apply to set/members dependence either, but it does apply to the remaining two kinds of existential dependence in the table. In case of causal dependence, extendability means that everything has a cause (and thus, is an effect of that cause), which is probably true. It is sometimes suggested that the Big Bang is a counter-example, but that would be a mistake. The Big Bang is not necessarily uncaused and is not necessarily the first event—it is just the fundamental limit to how far back we will ever be able to see. In case of whole/parts dependence, on the other hand, extendability is probably false as it would imply that there are no final, part-less constituents of reality. We once believed that atoms were part-less, but those turned out to consist of further parts, and in the 20th century we found that those further parts (protons and neutrons, specifically) consist of yet smaller parts (namely, quarks), but it is generally assumed that this does not go on infinitely. For all we know now, quarks do not have parts.

As mentioned, table 1 is not complete—many other kinds of existential dependence could be considered—but completeness is not the goal here. Rather, what I want to illustrate is that while *specific* existential dependence relations have certain formal properties, something like existential or ontological dependence *in general* (or any notion of dependence that aggregates or combines several kinds of existential dependence) does *not* have

³¹ Metaphysical idealism holds that everything is a phenomenal appearance, of course, but not because it would accept extendability. Instead it rejects independent reality, and thus the phenomenon/ground dependence.

formal properties (or any other interesting properties for that matter), and therefore, that positing such a general notion is misleading for a number of reasons, or in a number of ways.

First, if the general category of existential dependence is broad enough, extendability becomes trivial. Everything (probably) depends on something else in *some* sense of existential dependence. What makes this especially problematic is that extendability appears to be a rather uncommon property of specific kinds of existential dependence. If this is indeed the case, then aggregating different kinds of dependence into a single category may seem to make common (or even standard), what actually is rare.

Second, the supposed properties of a general notion of existential dependence are determined by the selection of paradigmatic dependence for each of the four formal properties mentioned. Consequently, an F/D theory could, for example, reject antireflexivity because *some* kind of dependence is antireflexive, reject antisymmetry because *some other* kind of dependence is antisymmetrical, reject transitivity because *some third* kind of dependence is intransitive, and accept extendability because at least one other kind of dependence continues *ad infinitum* (or because extendability is trivial), while there might not be any specific kind of dependence with this combination of properties. Regardless of the plausibility of this particular example, the possibility of cases like this raises questions about whether and how properties of the ‘species’ (*i.e.* the generalized notion of existential dependence) can be inferred from its specific varieties.

Third, different F/D theories may differ in the formal properties of dependence they posit, not because of a substantial disagreement about the nature of existential dependence, but merely because they include different kinds of dependence in their general notion of existential dependence (*i.e.*, their F/D distinction). If theory A makes an F/D distinction that includes causal dependence, while theory B excludes it, then A and B will most likely differ significantly with regards to these formal properties. Furthermore, this kind of problem can arise even when theories *agree* about what counts as ‘ontological dependence’ and what does not. Imagine, for example, two philosophers, Thomas and Tarō, fiercely debating the formal properties of ontological dependence, even though they agree that chemical substance/constituents dependence, set/members dependence, and event/participants

dependence are the paradigmatic examples of ontological dependence. Despite that agreement, Thomas argues that ontological dependence is antireflexive and antisymmetrical because substance/constituents dependence and event/participants dependence are, while Tarō argues that ontological dependence is *not* antireflexive and antisymmetrical because set/members dependence is not.³²

Fourth, positing properties of existential or ontological dependence in general risks rather spurious reasoning. Continuing the last example, Tarō might argue that because ontological dependence is not antireflexive and because chemical substance/constituents dependence is a kind of ontological dependence, chemical substances can be their own constituents. The fallaciousness of this example illustrates that a general notion of existential dependence employed by some F/D theory is useless because the formal properties of specific kinds of dependence cannot be inferred from the supposed properties of this generalized existential dependence. (Recall that the second point above raised a question about inference in the opposite direction.) Because of this, a general or aggregate notion of existential or ontological dependence that combines several specific kinds of dependence is explanatory useless as well. Some *specific* kind of existential dependence is transitive or antitransitive, not because existential or ontological dependence in general is transitive or antitransitive, but just because of the characteristics of that specific kind of dependence. The general notion is redundant.

Fifth, transitivity makes little sense for an aggregate or general notion of existential dependence, which further illustrates the redundancy or even vacuity of such a general notion. Let us say that x is a hole and y is its host, and that y is a whole and z is its parts; or that appearance a is conceptually dependent on concept b and that b was caused into existence by event c . It may be technically true to say that (due to transitivity) x existentially depends on z and a on c , but this ‘dependence’ is misleading more than informative. That the hole in my shirt existentially depends on the textile, buttons, and thread that are the parts of that shirt, and that the phenomenal appearance of an apple on my table existentially depends on the events that lead to the first formation of the concept of ‘apple’ by some early

³² Notice that Tarō’s theory of the formal properties of set/members dependence is (apparently) based on naive set theory.

hominids a long time ago, is simultaneously technical true and quite meaningless. It is technically true, because according to (ED), the loose definition of existential dependence given in section 2, the hole and the apple appearance indeed existentially depend on the textile, buttons, and thread and original concept formation of ‘apple’, respectively. But this does not reveal anything important about the relations between that hole and those parts or between that appearance and that distant event. In the contrary, it suggests that ‘existential dependence’ does not mean anything besides what is stated in (ED).

To illustrate the latter point, consider another example of dependence that has nothing to do with metaphysics: if Ezenwa depends on Harleen for emotional support, and Ivan depends on Ezenwa for financial support, then it could be argued that, in some sense, Ivan depends on Harleen. But what does this ‘dependence’ mean or amount to? What properties does this broader, more general ‘dependence’ relation have? How does it work? What does it do? Do these questions even make sense? This ‘dependence’ that is exemplified by the relation between Ivan and Harleen appears to be some kind of container category without any interesting properties of its own. The container holds various kinds of specific relations that we call or consider some kind of ‘dependence’—such as emotional and financial dependence—and these specific kinds have further properties and implications, but the container does not. The point is that much the same is true in case of existential dependence. We can ask the same questions and reach the same conclusion. What properties does the general notion of existential dependence have? How does it work? What does it do? Do these questions even make sense? We can answer questions like these for various specific kinds of existential dependence, but the general category is just a bare container defined by (ED) that does not have any further properties itself. Or in other words, a generalized notion of existential or ontological dependence is meaningless.

7. Conclusions

This paper discussed two kinds of metaphysical distinctions that are used to separate what is ‘real’ from what is not, or what is more real from

what is less real. These two distinctions are the R/A or reality/appearance and F/D or fundamental/dependent distinctions. The former distinguishes phenomenal appearance (*i.e.*, the way we consciously experience things) from independent or external reality (*i.e.*, the way things really are in themselves; see section 3); the latter distinguishes more fundamental things from what ontologically depends on them (and what, therefore, is less ‘real’ or does not ‘really’ exist in some thick, ontologically loaded sense of ‘existence’; see section 2).

Varieties of ontological dependence form a subset of varieties of existential dependence, which is loosely defined by means of a counterfactual conditional: x existentially depends on y if and only if, if y would not exist, then x would not exist, and not just because x exists necessarily. Neither existential dependence, nor ontological dependence is more than a collection of varieties, however. There is no such *thing* as ‘ontological dependence’ or ‘existential dependence’.³³ Rather, the many different kinds or varieties of existential dependence relations have different (formal and other) properties, and combining them into a single category is more likely to be misleading than helpful. At best, such a general/aggregate notion of existential or ontological dependence is redundant because it does not explain anything. (See section 6.)

One specific kind of existential dependence is the dependence of phenomenal appearances on conceptual construction, which grounds the distinction between appearance and reality. (See sections 3 and 4.) Consequently, the R/A distinction is a special kind of F/D distinction. Furthermore, many other kinds of existential dependence imply or involve some kind of conceptual dependence, and therefore, F/D distinctions often come with (implicit) R/A distinctions. (See section 5.)

³³ It might seem contradictory to say that varieties of existential dependence have nothing in common (*i.e.*, that there is no such *thing*), while they share a (rough!) definition. (I owe gratitude to this journal’s reviewers for bringing this apparent contradiction to my attention.) Sharing a definition does not necessarily imply having anything substantial or important in common, however. Think of being related, for example. One could (in principle) come up with a definition of ‘being related’ or ‘relation’, but this definition does not guarantee that all kinds of relations have anything interesting or meaningful in common (in addition to being a kind of relation).

Different F/D distinctions are different ways of thinking about what is real and what is not (or what really exists and what does not), but a conception of ‘real’ based on some kind or kinds of existential independence—and this includes the R/A distinction—inherits the latter’s problems. If a general/aggregate notion of existential or ontological dependence does not explain anything, then neither does a conception of ‘real’ built upon such a notion. Hence, a notion of ‘real’ based on such generalized dependence would be explanatorily redundant.

If the generalizing approach does not work, the most obvious alternative is to select or prioritize one or a few specific kinds of (in-) dependence. As mentioned, F/D distinctions often come with (implicit) R/A distinctions, and intuitively, F/D distinctions that involve R/A distinctions seem to be more fundamental (*at least to me*) than those that do not, just because there are more kinds of dependence involved. For example, whole/parts dependence or events/participants dependence both involve conceptual dependence (and thus an R/A distinction), because without a concept naming/describing the whole or event, we would not (normally) recognize or experience it as such (*i.e.*, as an individual thing, in the broadest possible sense of ‘thing’). If this intuition is right, then parts are more ‘real’ than the wholes they constitute, and endurants are more ‘real’ than the events they participate in. Causal dependence, on the other hand, does not necessarily involve conceptual dependence, as both cause and effect can be parts of independent reality and phenomenal appearance plays no role in their causal relation (in that case!). For this reason, whole/parts and events/participants dependence seem more fundamental kinds of existential dependence than causal dependence.

F/D distinctions in which the dependent and the (relatively) independent belong to different ontological categories also seem intuitively more fundamental (*again, to me*) than those that do not. For example, in events/participants dependence, the event and the participants belong to different ontological categories (*i.e.*, events or occurrents and endurants, respectively), while this is usually not the case for causes and their effects in causal dependence. This suggests again, that endurants are more ‘real’ than the events they participate in, and that effects are just as ‘real’ as their causes (or in other words, that causal dependence does not make something less real).

These are mere intuitions, however, and I have no good argument for either intuition. The problem is that, besides intuition, there does not seem much to go on.³⁴ Nothing in reality forces us to conceive of ‘real’ or ‘exists’ in a particular way, or to choose between varieties of existential dependence. What we consider to be ‘real’ or ‘really existing’ is not given by reality, but decided by us. By implication, ‘real’ is a relative term—it is relative to a conventional metaphysical distinction.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that we have complete freedom to decide what is real and what is not. In *Realism with a Human Face*, Hilary Putnam considers a ‘World 1’ consisting of three objects x_1 , x_2 , and x_3 , and a ‘World 2’ consisting of those same three objects plus their mereological sums (*i.e.*, three combinations of two, and one combination of three) making seven objects in total (1990, 97). I would not call these two different cases ‘worlds’, but two different descriptions of the same world, and the same world could also be described as consisting of only one object, namely, the mereological sum of x_1 , x_2 , and x_3 . (I suppose that this description could then be called ‘World 3’.) However, our choice in deciding which description is the ‘right’ one and which of these (three, seven, or one) objects ‘really’ exist is limited to those three options. Saying that there really are 42 objects would be plain false. Something similar applies to our choice in deciding what is ‘real’ in the world we live in. We can choose to say that chairs are real or that only the elementary particles they ultimately consist of are real, for example (and nothing important might depend on that choice), but we cannot decide that unicorns are real.

Nevertheless, while independent, external reality sets limits to our metaphysical description(s) of the world (at least, in as far as we want those to make sense), the description we choose *within* those limits is largely conventional. (See also section 4.) Again, the world does not force us to conceive of ‘real’ or ‘exists’ in a particular way. The qualification ‘real’ is not given by reality, but relative to a convention, and lacking objective criteria to transcend that convention (*i.e.*, to objectively decide what ‘real’ really means), any use of the term ‘real’ (or ‘exists’ or any other variant) that does not (explicitly or implicitly) acknowledge this relativity is empty

³⁴ And I do not trust intuition—yours even less than I trust my own.

rhetoric. It is like claiming that the sky and lapis lazuli are really the same color, namely, blue, without recognizing that what is called ‘blue’ in English is at least partially conventional and that other languages (such as Russian or Japanese) have different conventions in this respect, and would, therefore, describe the colors of a cloudless sky and a piece of lapis lazuli with very different words.³⁵

The answer to the question ‘What is real?’ then, is ‘It depends.’ It depends on one’s conception of ‘real’, and there are multiple equally truthful conceptions of ‘real’ and no objective criterion to choose and elevate one of them as the one and only ultimate standard of reality. Nāgārjuna famously held that emptiness (*i.e.*, existential dependence) is itself empty (*i.e.*, merely conventional). We have reached a similar conclusion here—what we consider to be real (*i.e.*, not existentially dependent) is itself dependent on convention (and thus empty, in Nāgārjuna’s terms)—but the argument that led to this conclusion is rather different from Nāgārjuna’s.³⁶

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³⁵ Russians and Japanese would use the words *голубой* (*goluboy*) and 水色 (*mizuiro*) to describe the color of the sky, and *синий* (*siniy*) and 青 (*ao*) for the piece of lapis lazuli, respectively.

³⁶ Section 5 effectively rejected Nāgārjuna’s prioritizing (or even inclusion!) of causal dependence in *svabhāva*, and section 6 rejected *any* aggregate/generalized notion of existential (in-) dependence (like *svabhāva*). Hence, even if this conclusion *seems* similar to one of Nāgārjuna’s claims, this paper can hardly be considered an endorsement of his philosophical views.

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