Ways of being have no way of being useful
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1. Introduction
Ontological pluralists distinguish between multiple ways of being. The kind of ontological pluralism which has recently received increased attention simply promotes some familiar distinction(s) between objects to distinction(s) in ways of being. Thus we find pluralists suggesting that objects can exist abstractly and concretely (Turner 2010), actually and merely possibly (McDaniel 2017: 73–5), or pastly and presently (McDaniel 2017: 78–108). They capture these ways of being formally with multiple primitive existential quantifiers, e.g. $\exists_a$ and $\exists_c$ to capture abstract and concrete existence, respectively.[1]

Most of the recent literature on ontological pluralism concerns arguments against it. The few arguments in favour of pluralism there are roughly divide into two: those that aim to show that ways of being allow us to capture certain intuitions we cannot otherwise capture and those that aim to show that ways of being are explanatorily fruitful. It seems to me that arguments of the second type, if successful, are the more convincing ones, partly because they would be independent of metaphysical intuitions and partly because explanatory value is typically taken to be one of the most important theoretical virtues. I here argue against two kinds of such arguments and so target what I take to be some of the strongest motivations for ontological pluralism.

The first kind of argument I discuss are *sensitivity arguments*, which aim to show that pluralists, unlike monists, can explain why certain domains, for instance the abstract and concrete domains, obey different fundamental principles. I critically discuss an argument of this kind in §2 and conclude that, in general, such arguments require a non-arbitrary method for deciding which ways of being there are. In §3, I consider three such methods proposed in the literature and argue that they all make assumptions that undermine the need for ways of being.

The second kind of argument I discuss are *exhaustiveness arguments*, which are supposed to show that ontological pluralists, unlike monists, can explain why certain ontological categories are exhaustive. In §4, I introduce an example of this kind of argument and argue that its assumption, namely that 'everything is either abstract or concrete' is logically true, is problematic. Finally, in §5, I show that, from a formal perspective, pluralism with just abstract and concrete ways of being is a notational variant of a monism which accepts 'everything is abstract or concrete' as logically true.

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[1] Ways of being need not be captured quantificationally and could, for instance, be captured with existence predicates instead. §§2–3 target ontological pluralism generally and §§4–5 specifically target the quantificational kind, which has proved most popular

This result entails that my argument in §4 not only targets exhaustiveness arguments, but ontological pluralism as a whole.

2. Armstrong's sensitivity

According to D.M. Armstrong, two concrete objects *cannot* be composed of exactly the same parts but two abstract objects *can* (Armstrong 1986). Jason Turner writes that Armstrong's position is 'unlovely' because it entails that 'the metaphysically deep and important parthood relation acts very differently when it acts upon concreta than it does when it acts upon abstracta' (2010: 31). This is supposed to lead to two problems that Turner argues ways of being may solve.

The first problem is that, for Armstrong,

> an attempted axiomatization of the parthood relation, in the fundamental language, will seem hopelessly convoluted, including all sorts of clauses reflecting whether parts are concrete or abstract. (Turner 2010: 31)

If he, however, were to accept two fundamental existential quantifiers, one for abstract and one for concrete existence, then

> the fundamental-language axiomatizations of the compositional rules look remarkably clean: there are simply two different axiom systems, one formulated using the fundamental quantifier for concreta, and the other using the fundamental quantifier for abstracta. (Turner 2010: 32)

An ontologically pluralist version of Armstrong's position does better in terms of the theoretical virtue elegance, or so Turner argues. He is of course correct in claiming that Armstrong would have to state some mereological axioms using appropriately restricted quantifiers. But note that there will be mereological axioms, like reflexivity, that hold on both sides of the abstract–concrete distinction. The pluralist loses elegance points here because they, unlike Armstrong, have to state this axiom twice: once for each of their quantifiers.

But more importantly, how cheaply does symbolic elegance come? The kinds of extra clauses (simple restrictions on quantifiers) in Armstrong's axioms certainly do not increase the complexity of the axiomatisation in any serious, mathematical sense. Computationally, for instance, there is no interesting difference between Armstrong's and Turner's axiomatisations. Turner's argument thus seems to rely on psychological notions like readability. But surely we have stopped doing serious metaphysics when the success of the argument depends on psychological research into the comparative readability of two symbolisations of equivalent systems.

The second, more interesting problem with Armstrong's position is that it

> seems objectionably arbitrary. A monistic ontology may include many metaphysically important divisions—the division between abstract and

concrete, the division between space-time points and their occupants, the division between phenomenal and nonphenomenal properties, and so on—so why should composition be sensitive to *this* one? (Turner 2010: 31–2)

Turner thinks that Armstrong is incapable of non-arbitrarily explaining why the parthood relation is sensitive to the abstract–concrete divide but not any others. If Armstrong were to accept abstract and concrete ways of being, however, then he would have a good explanation: the parthood relation is sensitive only to the abstract–concrete divide because it and only it corresponds to a distinction in ways of being (Turner 2010: 32). This pluralist version of Armstrong's position does better than its monistic counterpart in terms of explanatory power, or so Turner argues.

First of all, note that ontological pluralism here creates problems similar to the one Turner thinks Armstrong faces. Take, for example, the identity relation: it is presumably *not* sensitive to the abstract–concrete divide. The pluralist now seems to owe us an explanation: given that the abstract–concrete divide is one between ways of being, how come some relations, like the identity relation, are *insensitive* to it?

But there are deeper reasons to be suspicious of the pluralist's helping hand. Consider an analogous case. Suppose that the abstract–concrete distinction corresponds to a distinction in temporality in such a way that the '___ is simultaneous with ___' relation also is sensitive to the abstract–concrete distinction: all abstract objects but not all concrete objects are simultaneous with each other. The pluralist couldn't be happier: another sensitivity they, unlike the monist, can explain. When asked to justify why the simultaneity relation is sensitive to the abstract–concrete divide and not any others, they answer as before: because that divide corresponds to a distinction in ways of being. But how helpful can that answer be if it is identical to the answer they give in Armstrong's mereology case? It certainly does not begin to explain why the simultaneity relation behaves the way that it does on the respective sides of the divide: why are all abstract objects but not all concrete objects simultaneous with each other? Ways of being offer no help at all with answering such more interesting questions.

This latter point applies equally to the pluralist's efforts to help Armstrong: they do not contain even the start of an explanation of the actual difference in behaviour of the parthood relation. What the pluralist has to say is in principle consistent with switching the mereological axioms for abstract and concrete objects. In other words, Armstrong, whether he remains a monist or becomes a pluralist, still faces the same issue, namely of explaining the behaviour of the parthood relation. The problem with Armstrong's position is *not* that he cannot justify that the parthood relation is sensitive only to the abstract–concrete divide. Rather, the problem is that he seems unable to justify that two distinct abstract objects can be composed of the same parts. Ways of being do not help him solve it.

That there are interesting issues that ways of being might seem to but ultimately do not help resolve merely shows that their explanatory value is not as high as perhaps expected. As long as they help answer *some* interesting question, however, they arguably

deserve our attention. Turner will argue that they enable a non-arbitrary, uniform answer to questions of the form 'why is the so-and-so relation sensitive to the abstract–concrete divide?'. Call this type of question a *sensitivity question*. Kris McDaniel has also used sensitivity questions to argue for ways of being, for instance by suggesting that actual and merely possible ways of being could help explain the epistemological and normative differences between the actual and merely possible (2017: 76–77). For example, he, unlike the monist, seems to have a non-arbitrary answer to the question 'why do our normative practices differ between actual and merely possible people, but not between people on different continents?', namely that the former but not the latter corresponds to a distinction in ways of being. But the pluralist's answers to sensitivity questions are of course non-arbitrary only insofar as they can justify their choice to promote their preferred distinction (abstract/concrete, actual/merely possible or whatever it may be) *and not any others* to a distinction between ways of being. How, then, have pluralists justified their choices?

3. Choosing ways of being
There are three ways in which ontological pluralists have justified picking specific ways of being. I will argue that, in each case, the monist can use the assumptions of the justification to answer sensitivity questions without adopting ways of being.

First, pluralists have simply felt that some distinctions, e.g. that between abstract and concrete objects, 'run deeper' than others.[2] But remember what kind of question the pluralist hopes to answer, namely those like 'why is the parthood relation sensitive only to the abstract–concrete divide?'. If the answer is that this divide is one between ways of being and moreover it is one between ways of being *because* that distinction is deeper than others, then why not simply say that the parthood relation is sensitive to the abstract–concrete divide because this divide is deeper than others? Why we should take the extra step of introducing ways of being is unclear.

In his recent defence of ontological pluralism (forthcoming), Byron Simmons has claimed that entities have both a *nature* and a *being*. He then provides a novel defence for thinking that the properties *abstract*, *concrete* and *actual* are 'properly ontological', namely because they are importantly analogous to generic existence. Generic existence has, for Simmons, three important characteristics (forthcoming: 11): (i) 'it is the most general of all concepts', (ii) 'it is empty of qualitative content' and (iii) 'it does not admit of real definition'. But he thinks *abstract*, *concrete* and *actual* also have these characteristics, at least to an extent:

> They are highly general because they are pervasive: anything that is properly related to something that enjoys a given way of being, enjoys that way of being as well. They are empty of qualitative content because they are non-qualitative: they do not play, and are not grounded in properties that play, fundamental

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[2] Turner (2010) uses the intuition that some distinctions 'run deeper' than others to argue for ontological pluralism and McDaniel expresses similar sentiments (e.g. 2017: 124).

causal roles. And they do not admit of real definition because we can only form indexical or demonstrative concepts of them: our concept of something's being actual is, for example, that of its being exactly ontologically like me and everything at my world. (forthcoming: 11–2)

Because these properties are significantly like generic existence, we should take them to be part of an object's being and not part of its nature. But if they are ontological properties in this sense, we should, according to Simmons, say that they correspond to ways of being.

We now have an explanatory chain: there are systematic metaphysical differences along the abstract–concrete distinction because this distinction is one in ways of being, which in turn is explained by the fact that the properties *abstract* and *concrete* are significantly similar to generic existence. But why not cut out the middle man? Why not be a monist and, when challenged to explain the systematic differences across the abstract–concrete divide, simply reply that the properties *abstract* and *concrete* are special because they are highly general, qualitatively empty and in some sense indefinable? The monist and pluralist may agree that these characteristics set these two properties, perhaps together with *actual*, apart from the rest. But once we have agreed that they are special, we do not also need to introduce a distinction between an object's being and nature and we do not also need to introduce ways of being. The monist can hijack Simmons's story to answer sensitivity questions without accepting ways of being.

Finally, McDaniel (2017: 68–75) has argued that existence might be an analogous notion because it might be *systematically variably axiomatic* (SVA for short). Here is how he defines what it is for a notion to be SVA:

Let us say that the 'logic' of a feature consists in those necessary truths stateable using only some term, such as a predicate or a name, standing for the feature along with purely logical vocabulary. The principles constituting the logic of a feature are principles that *govern* that feature: they apply to all possible situations in which that feature is exemplified, but explicitly mention no other qualitative features obtaining in that situation. Let us say that a feature is *systematically variably axiomatic* just in case the principles governing that feature differ systematically from one ontological category to the next. (2017: 58)

If existence is SVA, say because the principles governing it differ systematically between the abstract and concrete domains, then, according to McDaniel, we should think that the restricted notions are more primitive or natural than the generic one. If existence is indeed SVA, then this seems like a promising justification for thinking that there are ways of being.

The problem with McDaniel's strategy is that most of the work is done by the notion of an ontological category. To see this, consider what McDaniel writes about the parthood relation. He claims that this relation is SVA because universal

composition holds necessarily when we restrict the domain to regions of spacetime, but does not hold necessarily when we restrict the domain to facts (2017: 58–9). So, says McDaniel, we should be pluralists concerning composition. But suppose we restrict our attention instead to simples and things composed of exactly two simples. Then, using only logical vocabulary and the parthood relation, I can express that everything is either a simple or composed of exactly two objects, which is a necessary truth on this domain. How can McDaniel exclude this case from showing that composition is SVA? By denying that the simples and things composed of exactly two simples constitute an ontological category.

There are similar goings-on when we consider McDaniel's various cases for thinking that existence is SVA; I will discuss just one example but the point is easily extended. McDaniel suggests that, if we accept modal logic as logic, then, given some metaphysical background assumptions, 'everything that exists, exists contingently' is 'stateable using only logical vocabulary and is necessarily true when the quantifier is restricted to one ontological category [concrete objects] but necessarily false when restricted to the other [abstract objects]' (2017: 72). Thus existence would be SVA between abstract and concrete ways of being. But if we, for instance, further assume that there are mathematical objects—it doesn't matter much which, but say the natural numbers—then what prevents us from restricting our attention to the first five natural numbers, showing that 'there are exactly five objects', which can be expressed using only logical vocabulary, holds necessarily relative to this domain and concluding that we have found yet another way of being? McDaniel's theory of ways of being requires a theory of ontological categories and, in particular, one on which the first five natural numbers do not form an ontological category but the abstract objects do.

But if we have such a theory of ontological categories, then we do not also need ways of being to answer sensitivity questions. If the pluralist accepts abstract and concrete ways of being, then these must correspond to ontological categories for McDaniel's SVA test to work. So if you now ask Armstrong why composition is sensitive to the abstract–concrete divide, he can use the pluralist's reasons for taking those properties and not any others to correspond to *ontological categories*, side-stepping ways of being entirely.

4. Necessarily exhaustive

The second kind of argument in favour of ontological pluralism also purports to show that pluralists have an explanatory advantage over monists. Suppose that necessarily, everything is either abstract or concrete.[3] Turner (2010: 32; cf. 2012: 427–8) has argued pluralists are able to explain this necessary exhaustiveness in a way that is not available to monists, namely by capturing abstract and concrete ways of being formally with primitive subscripted quantifiers.

Turner's argument requires some formal stage setting. He thinks ontological pluralists who accept two ways of being should adopt a first-order logic with two

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[3] I again focus on the abstract–concrete distinction, but the discussion is easily generalised.

primitive existential quantifiers, one for each way of being. In our case, the pluralist accepts a system with $\exists_a$ and $\exists_c$ primitive to capture abstract and concrete existence, respectively. Using these quantifiers, pluralists can define predicates that capture properties *abstract* and *concrete* as follows:

$$(1) \quad \begin{aligned} At &=_{def} \exists_a y(t = y) \\ Ct &=_{def} \exists_c y(t = y) \end{aligned}$$

In words, 't is abstract' is short for 't is identical to an abstractly existing object' and similarly for concreteness. Moreover, they can define a generic existential quantifier using their two more specific existential quantifiers:

$$(2) \quad \exists x \phi =_{def} \exists_a x \phi \lor \exists_c x \phi$$

With the usual definitions of the universal duals, $\forall x \phi$ is thus short for $\forall_a x \phi \land \forall_c x \phi$.

Now consider how monists, who are assumed to accept classical first-order logic with its single primitive existential quantifier, capture 'everything is either abstract or concrete':

$$(3) \quad \forall x(Ax \lor Cx)$$

Using definitions (1) and (2), this gets translated into the pluralist's system as:

$$(4)\ \forall_a x\big(\exists_a y(x = y) \lor \exists_c y(x = y)\big) \land \forall_c x(\exists_a y(x = y) \lor \exists_c y(x = y))$$

In Turner's preferred pluralist logic, (4) unsurprisingly comes out as logically true. He claims pluralists therefore have a natural explanation of the necessity of 'everything is either abstract or concrete': that very sentence is *logically* true and logical truths are necessary. The monist is without such an explanation because they will translate 'everything is either abstract or concrete' as (3), which is not a logical truth of classical first-order logic. Pluralists, unlike monists, can explain why certain ontological categories are necessarily exhaustive by appealing to their formal system.

We should not be convinced by Turner's argument. Few philosophers and no non-philosopher would accept the status of $\exists x(x = x)$ as a logical truth in classical first-order logic as an answer to the question 'why is there something rather than nothing?'. That question, insofar as it is answerable at all, seems to require an answer in metaphysical and not logical terms. Similarly, insofar as we do indeed think that certain ontological categories are necessarily exhaustive, we expect an explanation of that necessity in metaphysical and not logical terms.

But even if we accept Turner's explanation of what seems like a metaphysical fact in terms of a logical fact, it is still unclear *why* we should think that 'everything is

either abstract or concrete' is logically true. That its translation in Turner's formal system is logically true does not constitute an argument: for every sentence there is a formal system that makes it logically true. Indeed, Peter van Inwagen (2014: 18–9) takes what Turner thinks is an explanation of the necessity of exhaustiveness to be an argument *against* ontological pluralism: if pluralists reduce what is so obviously not a logical truth to a logical truth, then pluralism must be wrong. If we agree that logic should not take a stance on metaphysical issues, then we should view the logical truth of 'everything is either abstract or concrete' in the pluralist's system as Russell came to view the logical truth of 'there is something' in *Principia*'s system, namely as a 'defect of logical purity' (1920: 203).

5. Notational variance

The pluralist can use definitions (1) and (2) to define those parts of the monist's logic that are not part of their own system. The monist can also define the pluralist's primitive existential quantifiers:

$$(5) \qquad \exists_a x\phi =_{def} \exists x(Ax \land \phi)$$
$$\exists_c x\phi =_{def} \exists x(Cx \land \phi)$$

These natural definitions seem to suggest that the difference between monism and pluralism is like the difference between classical first-order logic with the existential quantifier ∃ and with the universal quantifier ∀ primitive, or like the difference between normal modal logic with the necessity operator □ and with the possibility operator ◊ primitive, namely not important. The vocabulary of one can always be captured adequately in the other; they are merely notational variants.

Turner has argued that this suggestion is incorrect (2012). As we have seen, (3) is not a logical truth in the monist's logic but its translation (4) is a logical truth in the pluralist's logic. Since a translation should preserve logical contingency if it is to show notational variance, the translation induced by (1) and (2) cannot show notational variance.

If we were to assess the notational variance argument properly, we would need exact formulations of the monist's and pluralist's logics and then a formal definition of notational variance. That would take us too far afield. But I do want to argue, informally, that the formal difference between the pluralist's logic and the monist's logic is captured *entirely* by the difference in logical status of (3) and its translation (4).[4] More specifically, I want to show that if we add (3) as a logical axiom to classical first-order logic, then we get a notational variant of Turner's pluralist system.[5]

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[4] I make a few simplifying assumptions: I take (i) the monist's logic to be inclusive i.e. allow the empty domain, (ii) the pluralist's logic to be inclusive in the sense that one or both of its domains may be empty and (iii) the pluralist *not* to sort their terms and so not to impose selection restrictions on the admissible arguments of predicates.

[5] Bruno Whittle (2020) states but does not explicitly prove a similar result.

I want to show, then, that if the monist restricts their semantics to models in which (3) is true, then their logic is a notational variant of the pluralist's logic. For the pluralist, a model consists of two domains, one for each of their quantifiers to range over, and an interpretation function assigning semantic values based on these domains to the non-logical vocabulary. For any such pluralist model, there is a unique first-order model—its *monist analogue*—of which the domain is the union of the pluralist's domains, the interpretation of A is the domain of $\exists_a$ in the pluralist model, the interpretation of C is the domain of $\exists_c$ in the pluralist model and the interpretation of all other non-logical vocabulary is exactly as in the pluralist model. It is easy to check that any pluralist model and its monist analogue make exactly the same sentences true under the translations induced by (1), (2) and (5). This entails that if the monist semantically admits only analogues of pluralist models, then the two systems are notationally equivalent: if there is a pluralist model in which ϕ is false, then there is a monist analogue in which the monist translation of ϕ is false and if there is a monist model in which ψ is false and which is the analogue to a pluralist model, then there is a pluralist model (namely that of which the monist model is an analogue) in which the pluralist translation of ψ is false.[6]

Now, the class of first-order models that are an analogue of a pluralist model is characterised by the first-order sentence (3): a first-order model is an analogue of a pluralist model if and only if (3) is true in it. Putting these results together, it follows that classical first-order logic with (3) as an additional axiom is a notational variant of the pluralist's system.[7]

In the previous section, we saw that Turner's exhaustiveness argument in favour of ontological pluralism depends on accepting that 'everything is either abstract or concrete' is logically true. Because that sentence does not seem logically true, the argument is unconvincing. It is now clear that this problem not only undermines Turner's argument, but also ontological pluralism as a whole. If you think the choice between having $\exists$ or $\forall$ primitive is metaphysically uninteresting because the difference is merely notational, then you should also think that the choice between the pluralist's logic and classical first-order logic with the additional axiom $\forall x (Ax \lor Cx)$ is metaphysically uninteresting. But then ontological pluralism is in trouble because it is notationally equivalent to the implausible variant of monism that accepts as a logical truth something that isn't a logical truth. Or, to put the point contrapositively, if the pluralist thinks that, despite the result above, there is an important difference between pluralism and monism with the additional axiom, then it seems that they are committed to the problematic position that the choice between $\exists$ and $\forall$ is also important.

6. Conclusion: don't believe the hype

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[6] A formal exposition of this kind of reasoning can be found in Enderton 2001 (296–9).

[7] Moreover, for any first-order model M, if there is a pluralist model N such that the translations preserve truth between M and N in both directions, then M is the monist analogue of some pluralist model. (M is not necessarily the analogue of N as an easy Löwenheim-Skolem argument shows.)

The kinds of ontological pluralism I have discussed reconceive some metaphysically important distinctions, for instance that between abstract and concrete objects, as distinctions between ways of being and capture these using subscripted existential quantifiers. These pluralists clearly do *not* gain any discerning power by adopting ways of being: they can't make distinctions between objects that the monist can't. The utility of ways of being is therefore supposed to come from answering sensitivity questions like 'why are there principled metaphysical differences across the abstract–concrete division?'. But the pluralist's answers are interesting only to the extent that they can justify adopting the ways of being that they do. I argued that the justifications that have been given in the literature all have assumptions that in effect already answer sensitivity questions, making the introduction of ways of being superfluous.

I also discussed a different kind of argument in favour of ontological pluralism, namely Turner's suggestion that ways of being can be used to explain why certain ontological categories are necessarily exhaustive. I argued that it is problematic to explain this metaphysical fact in logical terms and, moreover, that for the argument to work, pluralists need to justify making 'everything is either abstract or concrete' logically true in the first place.

Finally, I extended this last challenge by showing that, from a formal point of view, the only interesting difference between abstract–concrete pluralism and monism is the fact that 'everything is either abstract or concrete' is logically true for the pluralist. Since it does not seem logically true that everything is either abstract or concrete, this looks like a *reductio* of ontological pluralism.[8]

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