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What Is a Thing?

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Abstract

'Thing' in the titular question should be construed as having the utmost generality. In the relevant sense, a *thing* just is an *entity*, an *existent*, a *being*. The present task is to say what a thing *of any category* is. This task is, I believe, the primary one of any comprehensive and systematic metaphysics. Indeed, an answer provides the means for resolving perennial disputes concerning the *integrity* of the structure in reality—whether some of the relations among things are *necessary* merely given those relata themselves—and the *intricacy* of this structure—whether some things are more or less *fundamental* than others. After considering some reasons for thinking the generality of the titular question makes it unanswerable, I propound the methodology, *original inquiry*, required to answer it. The key to this methodology is adopting a singular perspective; confronting the world as merely the *impetus to inquiry*, one can attain an account of what a thing must be. *Radical ontology* is a systematic metaphysics—broadly Aristotelian, essentialist and nonhierarchical—that develops the consequences of this account. With it, it is possible to move past stalemate in metaphysics by revealing the grounds of a principled choice between seemingly incommensurable worldviews.

Keywords: essentialism, fundamentality, methodology, necessity, neo-Aristotelianism, ontology

§1. Introduction

'Thing' in the titular question should be construed as having the utmost generality. In the relevant sense, a *thing* just is an *entity*, an *existent*, a *being* (I make no distinction among these). The titular question is, then, one about the members of the *summum genus*, the all-inclusive category. Language can mislead, suggesting the presence of some thing when, in fact, none is there, but anything in the world is a thing. If there be material objects, mental entities, essences, forms, kinds, properties, relations, modes, tropes, events, processes, forces, laws, states of affairs, facts, propositions, moments, points, collections, sets, numbers, holes, privations—what have you—each example of any of these varieties is a thing. The present task is to say what a thing *of any variety* is.

One might think little hangs on such an indiscriminate question. This, however, would be a mistake. Indeed, I believe this question is the primary one of any systematic metaphysics. A

systematic metaphysics provides insight into what the world is and, more specifically, how things in the world are related—what a thing is determines the extent of these relations and their force and complexity. Since much of the contention in metaphysics, from the beginning of the discipline to today, ultimately turns on disagreement regarding just these issues, an explicit account of what a thing is would be invaluable.

I develop these claims, thereby defending the significance of the titular question, in §2. Regardless of this putative significance, some will be dubious of the question, for it has long been maintained that there can be no *summum genus*, no class that includes each thing just in virtue of its existing. If this were so, the question of what a thing is would be misguided, unanswerable. In §3, I defend the legitimacy of the question by considering—and dismissing—the reasons adduced for maintaining there can be no *summum genus*, as well as an additional concern that a satisfactory answer to the question cannot be given. Addressing these reasons and this concern, however, brings to light the singular difficulties in answering the titular question. In order to avoid these, one needs to employ a unique methodology. I introduce this methodology, *original inquiry*, in this section, then articulate, in §4, the answer to the titular question that it provides. I conclude, in §5, by presenting the principles of the systematic metaphysics, *radical ontology*, that follow from this account of what a thing is and by briefly considering this broadly Aristotelian position vis-à-vis more familiar ones.

§2. What Hangs on the Question of What a Thing Is?

An answer to the question of what an existent is provides the basis of a principled account of the scope of reality—what exists and what does not—and, hence, what must be included in a comprehensive metaphysics. Each thing within this scope stands in many relations. This complex of relations and relata, each relation and each relatum likewise a thing, is the *structure in reality*. There are two salient axes of disagreement regarding this structure

that are the mainsprings of much, if not most, of the dispute in the history of Western metaphysics. One axis turns primarily on an issue concerning the *relations* in this structure, the other on one concerning its *relata*. I maintain that an answer to the question of what a thing is also resolves, in a unifying way, disagreement along both axes. Hence, given its role in both circumscribing reality and resolving pivotal disagreement about the structure therein, this answer is the key to a comprehensive and systematic metaphysics.

So consider these two axes of disagreement regarding the structure in reality. The first concerns its *integrity*, the force—and origins—of the relations that yield the structure. Some philosophers maintain that there are *necessary connections* amongst things themselves, that some things, independently of how they are thought of or described, *must* be related as they are. Thus, certain things—substances, for example—are supposed to be necessarily related, given how or what they are, to other things—the kinds they instantiate or some of the properties they exemplify or other substances. Or, for another example, certain things—states of affairs, facts, or events—are supposed to be necessarily related to others—distinct states of affairs, facts, or events. Other philosophers deny all such necessary connections amongst things themselves, maintaining that any one thing can be related anyhow to any other (and, hence, any relation that in fact obtains could fail to). Those in this latter camp hold that any necessity among things arises not from those things per se, but from some other source, such as, the capacities of minds or the activities of conscious beings engaging what is real.

Such disagreement about the provenance of necessity raises the grand question of what role minds play in constructing mundane reality, as well as associated ones regarding the appropriate accounts of contingency, causation, the laws of nature, and explanation and its limits. These issues are at the heart of the early modern rejection of Scholasticism, and from that juncture have largely directed the narrative of Western philosophy (though disagreement surrounding them goes back much further, at least to Protagoras). Contentious assumptions

regarding them underlie empiricism (and positivism) and so inspired Kant and the legion of idealists, of various stripes, that followed him and all the realists, of various stripes, that have objected to their views. Basic disagreement about the integrity of structure remains central in contemporary debates between the heirs of Hume and Kant and neo-Aristotelians.

What is crucial, for present purposes, is recognizing that this disagreement about the necessity of the structure in reality turns on whether there are necessary connections among *things*. It can be resolved, therefore, with an account of what a thing is. If anything, just by being, must be connected to some other thing(s), then the very existence of a thing would require there be necessary structure in reality. Existence and necessity would be concomitant. Given such necessary connections, to some extent the world would be ready-made; there would be, prior to the engagement of any mind, joints to carve. On the other hand, if a thing could exist with no necessary connection to anything, then there would be in the world itself, that is, reality consisting only of each thing as it is in itself, no necessity. Insofar as there appear to be necessary connections, these must arise from a source other than those connected things (presumably via some mind or being with a mind). Hence, this long-standing disagreement about the integrity of structure depends on what a thing is.

The other axis of perennial disagreement regarding the structure in reality concerns its *intricacy*, the complexity and bases of the relata that are supposed to yield it. Consider some relatum that in relation to other, ostensibly independent things contributes to the structure in reality. Some philosophers maintain that such a thing can be dependent upon—*made up of* or *based on*—others[1], in the sense that the very being of the former is derived from the latter. Certain things—a wooden table or a statue or a mental property, for example—are supposed to be derived from others—cellulose molecules, a lump of clay, a physical property, respectively.

[1] These are metaphors. In this connection, see Karen Bennett: "One theme that cuts a surprisingly large swath through philosophy is that of *building up* or *generating* or *constructing* or *giving rise to* or *getting out of*… and there are many other metaphors that could continue that list." (Bennett 2011b: 79-80) Bennett calls all these "building relations".

Thus, the existence of one thing (or that thing being what it is or its having its distinguishing features) is explicable in terms of some other thing(s). There is a variety of putative relations here—composition, constitution, grounding, realization, emergence, etc.[2]—so there is a good deal of contention. This contention lacks any obvious unity. Some deny that composition ever occurs, some maintain constitution is identity, some repudiate grounding altogether, etc., with one's position regarding one relation not clearly determinative of one's position regarding another. It is, however, widely taken for granted that there are at least some such *constitutive dependence relations*. Whether indeed there are is a point worth examining.

Such disagreement about whether (or under what conditions) one thing can make another be raises the profound question of ontological status, whether there are *levels* in being. If the structure in reality were hierarchical, there would be something distinctive about those things that make others yet are themselves not made to be, for these would be the ultimate grounds of an explanation for how the world is. Whereas necessity is crucial to the integrity of structure, it is *fundamentality* that is key to its intricacy. Fundamentality is often construed—mistakenly, as I argue—as the correlate of *ontological dependence*, whereby what is fundamental is not ontologically dependent. The fundamental is supposed to be what builds, but is not built; what is simple or not constituted or ungrounded. Such issues have been contentious from the beginning of Western philosophy, at least since Aristotle's critique of the atomism of Democritus. This critique motivated Epicurus and his followers, leading to modern corpuscularianism and contemporary physicalist materialism. Controversy has been compounded in recent decades by various reductive and non-reductive hierarchical views, involving a host of putative constitutive dependence relations, and remains central to much contemporary metaphysical discussion.

[2] Other putative examples of such relations include, microbased determination, truth-making, singleton formation, bundling. See Bennett 2011b: §2.

What is crucial, for present purposes, is recognizing that this disagreement concerning fundamentality turns on whether one *thing* can be made to be by *another*. Like the foregoing disagreement, regarding necessary connections, disagreement here can be resolved with an account of what a thing is. If a thing, by its very existence, precludes being made to be by some other, then there would be no constitutive dependence relations, no relations in which existence is derived or transferred. Consequently, there would be no hierarchical structure in reality—no levels of being—and it would be misguided to characterize the fundamental in terms of what builds, but is not built. No thing would be (ontologically) built. On the other hand, if the very existence of one thing can be derived from another, then there could be building relations, i.e., relations of constitutive dependence, perhaps even the variety widely presumed to be. However, an account of what a thing is might nonetheless provide some insight into which building relations actually hold and the connections among them.

Thus, disagreement about both the integrity and the intricacy of the structure in reality—whether its connections are necessary and what is to be regarded as fundamental in it—turns on the question of what a thing is. Determining its answer should be the primary goal of any systematic metaphysics.

§3. Can this Question Be Answered?

If indeed much in metaphysics hangs on answering the question of what a thing is, some might conclude from this alone that metaphysics is futile. From near the outset of the discipline, this question has been regarded as fruitless. Aristotle argues in Book *B* of *Metaphysics* that *being* is not a genus, that there is no class that includes all things as things.[3] Of course, each thing *is*, but there is no basis here on which to expound what it is to be. Were this so, there

[3] 998b21-27.

would be nothing informative to be said about a being considered simply as a being and, thus, no answer to the question of what a thing is.

3.1 Aristotle's argument that *being* is not a genus

Aristotle's argument that *being* is not a genus occurs in the context of his efforts to provide an account of what makes a familiar concrete object be what it is (and do the things characteristic of that object). The argument rests on several assumptions regarding how such objects are individuated. In particular, Aristotle assumes that an object is first individuated as being of a certain kind and that a kind is characterized by means of a *real definition*. A real definition is a set of conditions determining what that kind is in terms of a general class (that subsumes that kind) and a specific difference that distinguishes that kind of thing, i.e., that species, from others in the general class. Thus, a given man is individuated as a man, a certain kind of animal, by exhibiting general features characteristic of animals and by exhibiting rationality, a specific capacity that distinguishes men from all other animals.

This account of the individuation of objects requires certain constraints. Thus, it is supposed to be impossible for a genus itself to apply to the specific difference that distinguishes a species of that genus. To illustrate: *Being an animal* cannot apply to *rationality*, for, first of all, rationality is itself not an animal. Furthermore, if *being an animal* were to apply to *rationality*, any rational thing would be an animal, so 'rational animal' would be redundant and would not characterize a specific kind of animal. *Being*, however, were it a genus, would apply to any specific difference, because every specific difference has being, that is, exists. (For example, rationality must exist if it is being rational that distinguishes humans from other animals.) Therefore, *being* violates the supposed constraint and so cannot be a genus.

This argument is not convincing. Even if one accepts that objects are individuated by real definitions, the putative constraints on such an account are not well-justified. In particular, the

constraint on which the above argument rests, namely, that it is impossible for a genus itself to apply to a specific difference (of that genus), is merely presumed. This constraint is plausible enough when considered in light of certain examples (like *being an animal* and *rationality*) but there is no reason to think that it generalizes to most or all cases, including the pertinent one of *being*. Of course, as just observed, *being*, as a genus, would apply to any specific difference, but whether the resulting definition is redundant or otherwise unacceptable cannot be evaluated in the absence of any particular proposal. (A related concern about circularity is addressed in the next section.)

Although some support is offered for the relevant constraint in the *Topics*, this support is also based on example rather than general principle.[4] It seems to me misguided, then, to think that a sweeping and all-important question regarding existence—what each thing is—is settled by a brief argument resting on an unjustified constraint concerning, in particular, the individuation of familiar concrete objects.[5] Relatedly, and more significantly, this argument from individuation via real definition includes a number of quite precise presuppositions about things (like that a genus cannot apply to a specific difference of that very genus) that are unacceptable in the context of trying to explicate what a thing—anything whatsoever—is in the first place.

Therefore, I conclude that it is by no means obvious that *being* cannot be a genus and that there is no *summum genus* of all things. This is corroborated in contemporary discussion of this issue: Some take it for granted that there is a *summum genus*[6]; others take pains to leave open the question of whether there is[7]; yet others, for reasons that seem problematic, deny that there is.[8]

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[4] See *Top*. VI. 6, $144^{a}31$-$^{b}3$ and Madigan's commentary, page 74, on *Metaphysics*, Book *B* and Book *K* 1-2
[5] Alexander of Aphrodisias seems to have criticized Aristotle on similar grounds, see Madigan's commentary, page 74.
[6] See, for example, Hoffman and Rosenkrantz 1994: 17-18 and Lowe 2006: 7-8, 39.
[7] See, for example, van Inwagen 2013: 15-16, especially Note 8.
[8] Thus, Amie Thomasson (2007: 113-114), following David Wiggins (2001: 69), argues that *being* is not a kind because 'being' is not a sortal. The argument conflates linguistic or conceptual issues with ontological ones, and also presumes

3.2 The circularity of a real definition of *thing*

If one rejects doctrinal Aristotelian (and other supposed) reasons for maintaining there is no *summum genus*, and takes it to be an open question whether *thing* is a kind, one might nevertheless be pessimistic regarding an insightful answer to the titular question given its utter generality. With some reflection, it is clear there can be no real definition of *thing* along the lines offered for other kinds. These definitions are provided by citing some general class and then distinguishing the *definiendum* from among that class by its peculiar properties; in this case, however, one is seeking illumination of the general class, the all-inclusive *summum genus*. Moreover, if a real definition requires a genus and a specific difference, and any specific difference exists, then *being* will be differentiated by itself, and so the resulting definition, if not redundant (see the preceding section), would be objectionably circular. (Indeed, it is this sort of consideration that, in part, leads some to deny that *being* is a genus[9].)

These concerns about the form of a real definition and its circularity are misplaced. A real definition is meant to illuminate what some kind is essentially; it makes perspicuous what it is to be something (of that kind). A traditional sort of real definition—an analytic definition, a definition *ad genus per differentiam*–might provide the means of doing this for some kinds, while incapable of doing so in the case of *thing* (i.e., *being*). Failure in the latter case does not show that there can be no real definition, for there is no reason to think that every such definition must have the same form. There surely can be other manners of providing an explicatory account of what something is. The success of a proposed explication or real definition needs to be assessed on the basis of the insight it provides, not whether it has any particular form. Still, what a thing is cannot be given in terms of anything but some thing—there

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that all things must conform to persistence conditions and so exist in time. David Oderberg (2007: 37, §5.3) denies that *being* is a genus because he accepts the Scholastic doctrine of the Analogy of Being. This doctrine, however, has its roots in the work of Aristotle considered above, where the claims on which it is based were found to lack appropriate justification.

[9] See Oderberg 2007: 107

can be no other means to articulate the account. Furthermore, *every* definition is of one thing in terms of another (or others). The definition of *thing* can be no different. If one is trying to illuminate what a thing—anything at all—is via a real definition, and that definition must be in terms of a thing (or things), such a definition is bound to be, in some way, circular.

Fortunately, not every circular, that is, impredicative, definition is inappropriate or unilluminating. An impredicative definition is one that defines some particular thing or kind by means of a totality that includes that thing (or instances of that kind).[10] Consideration of such definitions has been undertaken in several contexts, for example, in attempts to address the semantic paradoxes and to provide criteria of identity for various kinds. There seems to be consensus among those who have considered impredicative definitions—contra Russell[11]—that there is nothing about impredicativity per se that makes it problematic.[12] To paraphrase Lowe: impredicativity is only problematic in the absence of an appropriate supporting framework concerning the entities that one is trying to define.[13] Thus, each definition—impredicative or not—should be evaluated on its own terms given one's theoretical objectives.

3.3 The world as impetus to inquiry

So the question then arises of what supporting framework would be fruitful for illuminating what something—anything—is. In order to appreciate an explicatory account of *thing*, a real definition, which must be in terms of something or other, one must have some wider perspective on the *definiendum*. Here the prevalence of things seems to present an obstacle. What is required is some feasible origin that is not explicitly or obviously about things yet nevertheless has purchase on them. Such a principle needs to be entirely general, so that it

[10] Such an account of impredicativity, which comes from the work of Russell and Whitehead, can be found in Gödel 1944, Quine 1985: 166, and Lowe 1989.
[11] Russell 1908: 63.
[12] See, for example, the papers by Gödel, Quine, Lowe cited above. Indeed, Gödel argues that impredicative definitions are acceptable whenever the objects being defined exist independently of one's definitions.
[13] See the concluding paragraph of Lowe 1989.

may bear on all things, otherwise its limited scope would render it unsuitable to provide the means of illuminating what each and every thing is. Despite its generality, the principle needs to be telling enough to provide a context in which to understand what a thing is, yet not so telling as to preclude implausibly any particular metaphysics. The purpose here, after all, is to provide a real definition of *thing* that anyone would have to accept and then show how consequences of this definition constrain, even settle, more controversial metaphysical issues. Finally, the key principle needs to be plausible; if it were implausible it would undermine, rather than augment, a real definition of *thing* that accorded with it.

Thus, what is needed to appreciate a real definition of *thing*, a definition that cannot be but circular, is a contextualizing principle that has unlimited scope, is substantive without being tendentious and is plausible. The stringency of these criteria is daunting. Yet there is a source that meets them, one that is so obvious that it goes unremarked in any but the most rarefied investigations. The source is *this*—this encompassing array, *the world at large*. Accepting *this* is not to assume that there is a *material* world or an *external* world. As plausible as these assumptions might be, for present purposes, they are far too controversial, presupposing too much about what exists and what can be known. Rather, the principle I am demonstrating is not in the least controversial, it merely displays *an impetus to inquiry*. Such a datum is surely unquestionable. Any investigation, in any circumstance, from the humblest—a child examining a flower, a person looking to the sky—to the grandest metaphysical inquiry must accept it. All inquiry begins with *this*, or some aspect of it.

Not even the most rabid skeptic could deny that there is a prompt to ontological (and epistemological) investigation. Regard this prompt, this impetus to inquiry, as *the world*. One can recognize the world in this sense and yet assume nothing about its nature, not even that "it" is a thing. From the perspective at this origin, the singular one of original inquiry, all is *given*. There can be no distinction here between what is and what can be known, between ontology and

epistemology, because nothing—no thing—is being presumed; no defined subject, no object, nothing internal, nothing external. Hence, this perspective does not even permit a distinction between *appearance* and *reality*.

This is, admittedly, an extraordinary gambit—recognizing the world, this encompassing array, yet not *ipso facto* supposing that any *thing* exists—but such a move does not seem out of place in a rudimentary investigation of *everything*. Indeed, such an unsettling opening should not be entirely unfamiliar. It is redolent of the preliminary stances of others (consider Descartes *dans le poêle* and Husserlian *epoché*). The attempt to answer the titular question begins, therefore, with an incontrovertible principle, the impetus to inquiry, yet eschews any supposition about the nature and, at this point, explanatory basis of what is accepted, even that what is being confronted is a thing. My suggestion is that the elusive and unfamiliar—an explicatory account of a thing—can be apprehended in the context of the overwhelmingly familiar—the world at large—and that the aptness of the former can be evaluated by how well it can elucidate what cannot be questioned. Once one has an answer to the question of what a thing is, one can expect some insight into the world and how to regard "it" (whether or not "it" is a thing).

3.4 *Original inquiry* as a methodology

The purpose of this main section (§3.) is to argue that there is no obvious reason to think there can be no informative account of what a thing of any variety is. Indeed, I believe there can be one and, hence, that the titular question can be answered. Given the generality of this question, though, answering it requires a unique methodology. This methodology, call it *original inquiry*, begins with a certain perspective on the world, the one articulated in the preceding sub-section, and proceeds by illuminating prescriptions on being. Taking this

perspective is necessary in order to provide the appropriate context in which to appreciate the explicatory account, the real definition, of a thing (with its unavoidable circularity).

So consider the world. Consider it anew, as simply the impetus to inquiry. Regarding it in this way inspires a sense of the world as the "great blooming, buzzing confusion", in William James' famous phrase[14], that James supposed confronts an infant before a mind discriminates a tractable array. Such consideration refines the original datum to the extent that it is clear that *the world is not homogenous*. It is, on the contrary, *heterogeneous* (motley, piebald, variegated, multifarious, etc.). Therefore, in accepting an impetus to inquiry that is heterogeneous, what is accepted is a world that is *thus*—here 'thus' demonstrates the more or less determinate panoply immediately present. (Some such panoply is available to anyone in any circumstance).

There needs to be some explanation for how the world is *thus*, how it is as it is. To deny this would be to deny the very possibility of successful inquiry. All inquiry is directed either at the very phenomenon that prompts it—its impetus—or at some derived phenomenon that arises only in light of an originary impetus. If this derived phenomenon is to be intelligible, there must be some account of the originary impetus, an account that informs what is derivative and provides a basis for interpreting it. Therefore, since the world just is the originary impetus for any inquiry, in either case, successful inquiry requires some explanation for how the world is as it is. Moreover, all inquiry not only begins with the world, it ends with it. It begins with this impetus, insofar as inquiry is either directed at the impetus or what is derived from it; inquiry ends with this impetus, insofar as every explanation of any phenomenon must be evaluated with respect to an account of the impetus and comport with that account. So the present point can be made baldly: if there is no explanation for how the world is as it is, when the world is regarded simply as the impetus to inquiry, no sense can be made of anything.

[14] See Chapter 13 of James' *The Principles of Psychology*. The reference here to James is not merely casual. The ontological project in the present paper is closely related to James' in empirical psychology. In fact, this project seems to me to be a necessary precursor to James', insofar as ontology has a certain primacy in inquiry concerning the mind, and intentionality more specifically. In this connection, see Fiocco 2015.

There might be compelling reasons to deny or, at least, be skeptical of the possibility of successful inquiry given certain assumptions about the nature of the world or of the capacities of mind or inquirers. However, there can be no such reasons here. There are no assumptions being made about the nature of the world and none regarding the mind (nor inquirers). All that is being accepted is an (unquestionable) impetus to inquiry; to maintain already that successful inquiry is impossible is not merely defeatist, but wholly unjustified. At the point of original inquiry, where there cannot yet be a distinction between ontology and epistemology, skepticism is not a legitimate option. Therefore, if successful inquiry is to be at all possible—and, again, there can be no reason at this point for thinking it is not—there must be some explanation for how the world is *thus*.

It is important to be clear about what is in need of explanation. What needs to be explained is how the impetus to inquiry is as it is rather than some other way. Such an explanation cannot be causal. Causal explanations are supposed to account for how events occur in space over time in terms of the laws of nature or the powers of the constituents of those events. In the present context, a causal explanation would presuppose much too much about what things exist and how they interact. Furthermore, not only does it seem that the *explanandum*, an impetus to inquiry that is *thus*, is not even susceptible to a causal explanation—it is all-encompassing and no mere event—but even if it were, such an explanation would not explain the target. What requires explanation is not how the impetus to inquiry *arose* or *how it came to be* thus; what is needed in the first instance is, again, some explanation for how the impetus to inquiry is (now) as it is. Such an explanation cannot be causal, it would be more generally *ontological*, even *transcendental* (to use a provocative notion) in that it would rely on certain background conditions having to be met in order that more obvious ones be accounted for.

Regardless of the sort of explanation needed, if there is some explanation for how the world is as it is, then the explanation must have a basis in reality, in what exists. An explanation works by indicating some relation between the *explanandum* and something or some things, elucidating the former in terms of the latter. Explanation is, then, crucially relational and is not merely between linguistic or representational entities.[15] It is because the *explanans* is as it is and, hence, exists in the first place, that any insight into the *explanandum* is available. Although one might assume nothing about the *explanandum*—not even that it is itself a thing, an existent—one cannot be similarly noncommittal about the *explanans*. One cannot account for an *explanandum*, whatever it might or might not be, by no means at all, and if the *explanans* were *nothing* it would be no means. Therefore, if there is explanation, the *explanans* is something, some thing. In this way, every explanation is based on what exists, and so explanation is ontologically committing.

The world as the impetus to inquiry is not presumed to be a thing. Yet, for the reasons given above, there is some explanation for how the world is *thus*. Every explanation has a basis in what exists, and so if there is some explanation for how the world is as it is, there is something. It is certainly not implausible to suppose that something or other exists. On the contrary, it seems incoherent to presume that nothing whatsoever exists. Whatever a thing is, then, it must be able to provide the basis of an explanation, at least in part, for how the world is as it is. So applying the methodology of *original inquiry* as initiated above, one obtains a preliminary answer to the question of what a thing is: it is something that provides the basis of an explanation for how the world is as it is. Note that though this is circular—thing is characterized in terms of some thing—it is not vacuous, *the world*, this unquestionable encompassing heterogeneous array, provides context and gives it heft. But this is not a real definition or not a satisfying one, for it says what a thing *does*, not what it *is*. What is still needed

[15] For this sort of realist view of explanation, see Ruben 1990 (in particular, Chapter 7).

is an account of what it is to be something capable of providing the basis of an explanation for how the world is *thus*.

§4. What a Thing Must Be: A Natured Entity

Original inquiry reveals that a thing provides the basis of explaining how the world is *thus*, how it is as it is. It is a truism that explanation must end at some point; a thing is whereby an explanation *can* end. The question of what a thing is, therefore, becomes the question of what an entity must be in order to play this determinative role. A thing, at least in part, makes the world as it is; so that the world is *thus* is (again, at least in part) in virtue of some thing. Since it is a thing that provides the basis of at least a partial explanation for how the world is as it is, *there can be nothing further that determines how a thing in its entirety is*. If how a thing (in its entirety) were explicable in terms of some other thing, the former would be ontologically idle, making no contribution itself to how the world is; such a "thing" would merely be a manifestation of the latter, that genuine existent. Hence, if there were something that made a thing how "it" is, "its" contribution to how the world is *thus* would be made by whatever determines or makes "it" how "it" is. Yet if "it" itself were not capable of contributing to a partial explanation for how the world is as it is—if "it" itself were insufficient to do at least this—"it" would be no thing at all. "It" could in principle make no contribution to the impetus to inquiry and, therefore, is, literally, nothing.

Not only can a thing not be made *how* it is, it cannot be *made to be* by something else. Suppose that x makes to be y, in the sense that y is "latent" in x and so y derives its very existence from x.[16] *Makes to be* is, if anything, a relation (and if it is not anything at all, it cannot contribute to the structure in the world); as such, it relates things. If *makes to be* relates distinct things, if $x \neq y$, then both x and y must exist in order to stand in this relation, in which

[16] This is how many, including Jonathan Schaffer, understand the relation of *grounding*. See Schaffer 2009: 378, 379.

case, the existence of *y* is a precondition of its standing in the relation. Consequently, it cannot be by standing in this relation that *y* exists. The very existence of *y* is, therefore, not attributable to or determined by *x*: it is not the case that *x* makes to be *y*. If *x*=*y*, then '*x*' and '*y*' are merely co-referential terms and so *y* is merely a guise of *x* (and vice versa): it is not the case that *x* makes to be some other thing. Furthermore, if one thing cannot be made to be by something else, it follows that one thing cannot make another thing be *what* it is. This is because no thing can exist without being what it is. (Though some things might change *how* they are in certain respects, this does not change, in the relevant sense, *what* they are.) That one thing cannot make another be what it is stands to reason in light of the foregoing conclusion, to wit, one thing cannot make another how it is (in its entirety), for, presumably, how a thing is is not independent of what it is.

Therefore, each thing is an *ontological locus* in the sense that (i) its being is not determined (by anything beyond itself), (ii) its being how it is (in its entirety) is not explicable in terms of any other thing, (iii) its being what it is is not explicable in terms of any other thing—it just is what it is—and (iv) the existence of that thing is the basis of at least a partial explanation for how the world is at it is. As the basis of an (at least partial) explanation for how the world is *thus*, a thing is some ways or others. Given that at least some of the ways a thing is are not explicable in terms of anything else and so are attendant upon its being (and, thus, being what it is), as an ontological locus, a thing is these ways simply because it is. Such a thing is *natured* insofar as it must be certain ways just in existing; the explanation for its being *as* it is (with respect to these ways) is simply its being *what* it is. One might say that such a thing *has* a nature or *has* an essence, namely those ways it must be merely in existing. Such locutions should be avoided, however, for they are misleading. They suggest that a nature (or essence) is itself some variety of thing—some thing to be had by another—and this might suggest further that a thing is what it is because of its nature (or essence). But, again, there is nothing that makes a thing what

it is or as it is essentially.[17] So a thing is not an entity *with* a nature or *with* an essence, albeit *natured* and *essentially certain ways*.[18]

In light of these considerations, I can now answer the titular question: What is a thing? *A thing is a natured entity*. This real definition is, as was to be expected, circular—a thing is a natured thing—nevertheless, it is not vacuous. This definition in terms of being natured[19] captures an important insight: there is with a thing, nothing to explain how it is as it is. This does not mean that each thing is an explanandum lacking an explanans; rather, each thing is *inexplicable*, not even amenable to explanation. Things are the bases of explanations, they are themselves not to be explained. Each thing—of any variety whatsoever—is ontological bedrock, as it were.[20] A natured entity just is, just is what it is. It is being so that makes a thing a suitable basis of an (at least partial) explanation for how the world is as it is, and of any other explicable phenomenon. With this insight and the irrefragable need of some explanation for how the world is *thus*, one has a robust account of what it is to be.

What follows from this explicatory account of a thing is that what a thing is is not determined by the ways it is, rather the ways it is—specifically how it is essentially[21]—are determined simply by its being (and, thus, being what it is). Better purchase on this claim can be obtained by considering a different and perhaps more familiar one: Suppose, contrary to this

[17] Hence, what is being espoused here is a sort of *real essentialism*, not the *contemporary essentialism* made familiar by Hilary Putnam and Saul Kripke, according to which an essence is a set of properties a thing must have because it is these properties that make that thing what it is. See Oderberg 2007: Chapter 1 for this distinction, and a convincing critique of contemporary essentialism. The real essentialism that I am propounding in this paper is quite different from Oderberg's, for my account of a thing leads me to reject Aristotelian forms and hylomorphism in general.

[18] It is important to not reify essences. E.J. Lowe also stresses this point (2013; 2008). The real essentialism propounded here is more similar to Lowe's than Oderberg's (see last note). However, my overall project is quite different from Lowe's. I am attempting to justify and thereby provide adequate foundation for a systematic metaphysics by asking the primary ontological question, viz., what is a thing?. Lowe simply adopts an Aristotelian framework, and takes for granted a notion of an entity in the most general sense, never articulating this notion. See Lowe 1998: 180-181; Lowe 2006: 7.

[19] One should not be misled by language here: *being natured* is not a property, i.e., a thing.

[20] In Fiocco 2019a, I argue that each thing is fundamental.

[21] This qualification is needed because some things can be, in addition to the ways they are essentially, ways that they need not be. Call these ways how a thing is *accidentally*. How a thing is accidentally—some way it does not have to be merely in existing (and, hence, being what it is)—might be amenable to an explanation. But set such considerations aside for the present. In this paper, I am addressing *all* things and all things are some ways essentially, even if they are not, in addition, certain ways merely accidentally.

account of a thing, that a thing is what it is because of how it is. That is, suppose a thing is made to be what it is because of the ways it is. This is not farfetched; in fact, I suspect such an account is presumed by most philosophers. On this alternative account, a thing is an apple *because* it is round, red, organic, grows on certain trees, etc. or is a sample of water *because* it is liquid (at room temperature), potable, odorless, is of the same stuff that fills rivers and lakes, is composed mostly of H_2O molecules, etc. Under scrutiny, however, this alternative account of what makes a thing what it is is problematic. First of all, such an account must apply to *all* things, not merely familiar concrete objects. But then one must give an account of the ways that make, say, a red trope be what it is or the ways that make the property of being potable what it is (and so exist at all). These consequences indicate that the alternative account is misguided. Worse, though, this account of what makes a thing what it is seems incoherent, for an explanation of a thing's being *what* it is cannot be based on its being *as* it is, for it must first be in order to be as it is, and it cannot be without being what it is.[22]

Therefore, by being as it is, a natured entity contributes to the world by being the basis of an (at least partial) explanation for how the world is *thus*. A thing is as it is, the ways it is (essentially), because of what it is, and it is what it is simply in existing. So if there is a (general, instantiable) property, say *redness*, there is no thing that makes *redness redness* or makes *redness* a property. If there is a red mode (a particular instance of redness), there is no thing that makes that red mode a red mode or a mode. This is so even if there is some other thing—to wit, this apple—that must exist in order for that very red mode to be identified as the mode it is (i.e., the particular redness of this apple) or something else—to wit, the property *redness*—that the red mode could not exist in the absence of. If there is a (general, instantiable) kind, say *apple*, there is no thing that makes *apple apple* or makes *apple* a kind. If there is a particular apple, there is no thing that makes that apple an apple. If there is a state of affairs of this apple's

[22] Though, presumably, in many cases, a thing can persist as what it is without being precisely as it is.

being red, there is nothing that makes this a state of affairs or makes it the state of affairs it is—and to the extent that there is reason to think that the apple and its redness make this state of affairs be the state of affairs it is, there is reason to think there is no state of affairs (rather than just an apple and its redness). Similar claims can be made about a putative natured entity of any other variety whatsoever. (I say more about the relations of ontological dependence adverted to in this paragraph in the section below.)

§5. *Radical Ontology* and its Principles

The methodology of *original inquiry* provides the answer—a *natured entity*—to the titular question. It also provides the context needed to appreciate this answer. *Radical ontology* is a systematic metaphysics that develops the consequences of this account of a thing. The system is *radical* in that it arises from the roots of inquiry and *ontological* in that it begins, not with impressions nor ideas nor concepts nor phenomena, but with things, i.e. natured entities, themselves.

This account of what a thing is has some clear implications for the two axes of perennial disagreement regarding the structure in reality presented above. A first thing to note, however, is that, according to this account, structure is not itself a thing. Structure, unlike a natured entity, is what "it" is—a complex of relations and relata—because of these other things, these relations and relata. The structure in reality is straightforwardly as "it" is because they are as they are; a difference in being with respect to any relation or relata is ipso facto a difference in structure. As such, structure is no thing. Structure is indeed a multiplicity of things, but a bunch of things is itself no thing. (This is so despite the general term "structure" and the singular term "the structure in reality". As noted at the outset, the grammar of natural language is no guide to what exists.)

So consider again disagreement regarding the integrity of the structure in reality. The controversy here turns on whether some things, independently of how they are thought of or referred to or otherwise interacted with, *must* be related as they are. The upshot for the integrity of structure given that each thing is a natured entity is obvious. As the basis of an (at least partial) explanation for how the world is *thus*, each thing is, in itself, some ways or other. Each way of being, that is, each quality, particular or general, is a thing.[23] Since at least some of the ways a thing is are attendant upon its very being—and, thus, its being what it is—as an ontological locus, a thing is these ways simply because it is it. A thing must be these certain ways just in existing. Therefore, there are necessary connections among things. That there are follows simply from the existence of any natured entity. One of the principles of radical ontology, then, is that some of the structure in reality must be as it is merely given the things this structure comprises.

This result is perhaps not surprising, and is certainly not unwelcome, in light of examining the disagreement regarding the integrity of structure. If there is to be any real controversy here, it must be plausible—or at least coherent—that there could be absolutely no necessary connections among things as they are in themselves. Hence, there would have to be some account of a thing, of what serves as the basis of an (at least partial) explanation for how the world is *thus*, according to which things could be any way whatsoever, interacting with any other thing anyhow. But such a "thing", one of pure potentiality, so indeterminate in its own being, is incoherent. (A "thing" of pure potentiality need not be any particular way—not even of pure potentiality!—so such a thing might be constrained and, consequently, incapable of being some way or other.) Such a thing is not feasible as the basis of a systematic metaphysics that would provide insight into the world. It is precisely this sort of an account of a thing, with its

[23] I assume this here, though in other work—in deducing distinct categories of thing—I argue for the claim.

corresponding position regarding the integrity of structure, that is precluded by a thing's being a natured entity.

Now consider again disagreement regarding the intricacy of the structure in reality. The controversy here turns on whether one thing can be made to be by or derived from another or, conversely, whether one thing (or things) can make another be in the sense of providing the being through which the other exists. There are also obvious upshots for the intricacy of structure given that each thing is a natured entity. First of all, since a thing provides the basis of at least a partial explanation for how the world is *thus*, each thing must make its own distinctive contribution to the world. How it is with respect to this contribution, then, cannot be explicable in terms of some other thing—but, as argued above, neither can what it is, nor its very being. There are, then, no building relations, that is, no relations of constitutive dependence, whereby one thing is made to be by another.[24] In particular, there is no grounding of one thing in another, in the sense characterized above. Moreover, there is no such thing as an "ontological free lunch", in David Armstrong's sense (where, if one thing supervenes on another, it need not be accorded the same ontological status as the latter) and, pace David Wiggins, each thing is indeed something "over and above" any other.[25] Regardless of its complexity, each and every thing is fundamental, in that it must be included on an inventory of the world. To use a familiar locution: if God were to make the world just as it is, He would have to make *every thing*—not merely some of the things (the putative subvenient basis or "building blocks"), but all of them. Therefore, a second principle of *radical ontology* is that there is no hierarchical structure in

[24] Of course, in other senses, one thing can be made (to be) by other things: a carpenter can make (or build) a table, a tree can make fruit, parents can make a child. But this *causal* and *diachronic* sense of making differs from the *ontological* and *synchronic* one pertinent here. In none of these cases does one thing provide the very *being*—rather than merely the materials, the nutrients, the genetic material—that determines and, hence, explains the coming to be of another thing (at a particular moment).
[25] See Armstrong 1989: 55-56 and Wiggins 1968: 91-92.

reality—no levels of being—and it is misguided to characterize the fundamental in terms of what builds, but is not built.[26] Everything is existentially on par; the world is ontologically "flat".[27]

Although no thing is built from another, not everything is simple. A thing can have parts. The parts of a whole, a complex thing, however, do not make up that whole in the sense of making it be. In other words, a whole does not constitutively depend on its parts; the whole and (each of) its parts are equally fundamental. Nevertheless, a whole might be ontologically dependent on its parts or on some other thing(s) entirely. The notion of *ontological dependence* is multifarious, there are different ways one thing can ontologically depend on another.[28] The egalitarian notion of fundamentality on *radical ontology*, however, provides constraints on any tenable account of ontological dependence. Whereas there are (and must be) relations of ontological dependence in the *jointly-existing* sense—whereby the existence of one natured entity, given what it is, requires the existence of another—there is no relation of ontological dependence in the *constitutive* sense—whereby one thing makes another be. Such considerations are among the more subtle upshots of *radical ontology* for the intricacy of the structure in reality. Hence, being fundamental is not only consistent with being complex, it is consistent with being ontologically dependent.

Even in those cases where it seems natural to maintain that one thing exists *because* of another—for example, singleton Socrates exists because of Socrates; this red mode exists because of this (red) apple—this merely indicates an asymmetric relation between distinct, equally fundamental, entities. A singleton, given what it is, requires the existence of its sole member (and not vice versa); a mode, as a mode, requires the existence of the unique substance it characterizes (and not vice versa). What is illuminated here—though not explained—is *what*

[26] See, again, Fiocco 2019a.
[27] This notion of a "flat" world comes from Karen Bennett. (See Bennett 2011a: 27, 28 and Bennett 2011b: 88.) She is somewhat dismissive of such a view, assuming it to be false (2011b) and calling it "crazypants" (2011a). I believe this unfavorable assessment is a result of failing to begin with the primary ontological question of what a thing is and subsequent oversight of the ontological difficulties attendant on the claim, crucial to positions like Bennett's, that one thing's very being can come from another.
[28] For instructive discussion of the varieties of ontological dependence see Koslicki 2012 and Lowe and Tahko 2013.

one natured entity is, not *that* it is. (Or perhaps something epistemic is being explained: how one is able to cognize, identify or (epistemically) individuate one thing in light of another.) Again, what it is for x to be ontologically dependent on y is not for the very being of x to originate in y, but rather for x, given what it is, to require the existence of y. Therefore, ontological dependence in a non-hierarchical world is merely a reflection of the necessary connections that arise from the existence of things. Here is where the two axes of disagreement intersect and are resolved together by the account of a thing as a natured entity.

Thus, the principles of *radical ontology*, emerging from *original inquiry*, indicate structure in reality that is necessary and in which each and every thing is fundamental. This structure arises merely from the existence of things and so is there independently of the workings of any mind (but not independently of minds, per se, for the structure includes many minds). The view of the world revealed by *original inquiry* is, therefore, quite different from those commonly taken for granted in modern and contemporary metaphysics. Much more familiar are views on which the structure in reality arises from features of the mind or the linguistic activities of conscious beings, and a host of reductionist or constructivist views on which there is hierarchical structure in reality with the very existence and natures of most things explicable in terms of the existence and natures of a select class of things. (Most commonly, this select class of privileged, "fundamental" things are tiny and material.)

These more familiar views are the heritage of a too-strict empiricism—a reliance on the senses that overlooks more basic questions of intentionality, of how mind and the world engage[29]—and an associated (and laudable) maxim to be properly scientific—that nonetheless has a parochial conception of science. The views were developed by the giants of modern philosophy and were refined and perpetuated by the giants of 20th-century analytic philosophy, until the point when now their familiarity has become dogmatic and hegemonic. Their

[29] See, in this connection, Fiocco 2019b.

progenitors were reacting to the dogma and hegemony of Aristotelian Scholasticism. In recent years, though, some have recognized the need, in order to address seemingly intractable problems, to reexamine Aristotelian views that were long ago discarded.[30] However, there has been very little direct engagement between proponents of the familiar, standard, "modern scientific" metaphysical views and those working in a neo-Aristotelian vein. This is understandable given the deep differences in the principles with which they begin. Yet metaphysicians on neither side present real reason (other than, perhaps, pragmatic ones) for adopting the principles they do. One might wonder, then, given these two seemingly incommensurable approaches, yielding incompatible pictures of the underlying structure in reality, which is the correct one.

Some of the consequences of *radical ontology* are deeply antithetical to familiar Aristotelian doctrines; still, the system clearly shares more in common with the older tradition than the newer, "modern" one. Therefore, one of the purposes of this paper is to show—by asking the primary ontological question, what is a thing?—that the essentialism and the rejection of a certain ontological hierarchy that are part of a broadly Aristotelian view of the world are crucial features of any systematic metaphysics that can provide an explanation for how the world is *thus*. By starting at the beginning—with *original inquiry*—at a point prior to perennial disagreement regarding necessity and fundamentality, I hope to have gone some way toward resolving such controversy in a broadly Aristotelian way, and to present new motivation for reconsidering old yet hardly obsolete views of science and of the world.[31]

[30] See, for example, the work of the late E.J. Lowe, Kit Fine, Kathrin Koslicki, David Oderberg, Tuomas Tahko and the work of those authors collected in Tahko 2012, Novák and Novotný 2014 and Novák, Novotný, Sousedík, and Svoboda 2013

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