

Fundamentality, Existence, Totality: On Three Notions of Reality and the Landscape of Metaphysics

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Abstract

Metaphysics is, historically as well as systematically, mostly taken to be the inquiry into reality, insofar it is considered to be: (1) the *totality* of everything there is; (2) of everything that *exists*; or (3) what is *fundamental*. This paper sets out to analyze the relation between all three metaphysical core notions and sketch the landscape of metaphysical theories that emerges from it. Taking *The Fundamental*, *The Existent*, and *Totality* to be the domains corresponding to each metaphysical object of inquiry, it is argued that they stand in the set-theoretical relations of: $The\ Fundamental \subseteq The\ Existent \subseteq Totality$. This general structure allows for a plurality of more detailed structures when we differentiate between the ones that treat at least two notions as extensionally equal and those that take them to be proper subsets. Furthermore, reductive and inflationary strategies between equating two of the notions will be differentiated, allowing for a detailed sketch of the landscape of metaphysical theories and their views on the nature of reality. In closing, it is argued that the metaphysical structure allowing for most differentiation in metaphysical status is to be preferred as it allows to adequately capture metaphysical disputes, constituting evidence for the importance of each metaphysical notion and a short plea against their conflation.

1. Introduction

Historically as well as systematically, the following three notions have proven to be good candidates for what might be taken to be the central topic of metaphysics:

1. *Totality*: Metaphysics as the most general science
2. *Existence*: Metaphysics as ontology, i.e., the science of everything that exists
3. *Fundamentality*: Metaphysics as the science of the fundamental layer of reality

While debates in metaphysics mostly focus on either discussing which of these conceptions is the right one, or on questions that emerge within one of the three, this paper sets out to take a step back and look at the relations between all three notions. It will proceed as follows: Firstly, possible relations between the three notions will be discussed and one argument for each relation will be developed. Secondly, the landscape of possible metaphysical theories that emerges from this general structure will be sketched. The decisions leading to these different structures will be connected to two long-lasting debates in

metaphysics. This structure will then be refined further by distinguishing between *reductive* and *inflationary* strategies. Thirdly, a plea for a specific structure (the "most permissible metaphysical structure") will be brought forward.

2. The General Metaphysical Structure

Let us take *Totality*, *The Existent*, and *The Fundamental* (with capital letters) to be domains corresponding to the objects of study of the different notions of metaphysics. I do not want to commit to any in detail description of what each domain encompasses or what exactly the domains themselves are (it is probably most natural to assume they are *sets*) as the aim is to make a general point neutral to (almost any) specific metaphysical theory.

The general relation, in which all three domains stand to one another, is the following:

$$\textit{The Fundamental} \subseteq \textit{The Existent} \subseteq \textit{Totality}$$

In natural language: what is fundamental is a part of what exists, which is, in turn, a part of the totality of everything there is.

Let me argue for each relation separately. That *The Existent* is a subset of *Totality* straightforwardly follows from the definition of *Totality*. If this would not be the case, there would exist something that is not part of *Totality*, undermining that the *Totality* in question is truly the absolute totality of *everything*.

That *The Fundamental* is a subset of *The Existent* follows from the following argument: If there were something that is fundamental but not existent, then either it is the ground of something existent, which contradicts the metaphysical principle of *ex nihilo nihil fit*. Or, it does not ground anything, but then it is neither explanatory nor existent, which makes the entity in question theoretically obsolete.

There are at least two counter-examples that might come to mind. Firstly, some authors take there to be fundamental negative facts (see, e.g., Amijee 2021). The response to this is rather laconic, as these negative facts are also

taken to *obtain*, which is, in turn, an existence predicate for facts (Moltmann 2020: 327), so these are no actual counter-examples. The other counter-example that might come to mind can be seen in theories that take *Nothingness* to be the ultimate ground of reality. This has, e.g., been proposed by Priest (2021) (with references to Heidegger and Nishida), who claims (bold face) **nothing** to be the ultimate ground of everything for the following reason:

Something (*g*) being an object depends on its being distinct from **nothing**. If *g* were the same (in ontological status) as **nothing**, it would not be an object, since **nothing** is not an object. (Priest 2021, 19)

While Priest himself claims **nothing** to both be an object and not be an object (hence taking the ground of reality to be contradictory in nature), one might not want to admit **nothing** to *exist* but still to be fundamental. However, even such a version would not constitute a counter-example to the proposed structure, as Priest conceptualizes **nothing** as the fusion of the empty set, which results in the fact that "[t]he empty fusion [...] is a part of everything" (Priest 2014, 98). As this **nothing** thus is a subset of *The Existent* as well, it does not constitute a counter-example either.

As I take the general structure to be widely acknowledged and intuitive, I hope this suffices as a justification and defense of it. I will now turn to sketching the landscape of metaphysical theories that emerges from the general structure.

3. A Landscape of Metaphysics

Since the relation between each of the domains corresponding to the three notions of metaphysics still allows for the two options of either being in fact *extensionally equivalent* or a *proper subset*, the following four possible combinations emerge:

1. *The Fundamental* = *The Existent* = *Totality*
2. *The Fundamental* \subset *The Existent* = *Totality*
3. *The Fundamental* = *The Existent* \subset *Totality*
4. *The Fundamental* \subset *The Existent* \subset *Totality*

It is quite standard nowadays to compare different ontological theories by distinguishing between a general and not ontologically loaded domain of quantification and a subset of this domain, which is interpreted to be the extension of an existence predicate. Let us call the general domain " T " and the existence predicate " E ". Normal ontological disputes regarding questions of the form "Do dinosaurs exist?" can be seen as just concerning whether the entities in question are to be found just in T or also within the extension of E (Azzouni 2021: 179). We can now enrich this model by including a fundamentality predicate " F ", which, according to the proposed general structure of metaphysics, is to be seen as a subset of E .

Whether F and E are coextensional is essentially the question of whether we take ontology to be flat or structured in the sense of Schaffer (2009: 355). If we claim *The Fundamental* to be equal to *The Existent*, then there is no further structure within ontology, and it becomes *flat*. If we take *The Fundamental* to be a proper subset (be it even the empty set in the case of Priest, or, for instance, in cases of a 'gunky ontology' (Tahko 2018: 239-240) where there is assumed to be an infinite chain of more fundamental layers that never terminates in a truly fundamental one), then our metaphysical picture is *structured* via relations of metaphysical dependence and along degrees of fundamentality.

Whether E and T are coextensional in the sketched framework now primarily becomes a question of whether we take quantification to be ontologically loaded or not. If we take them to be coextensional, then everything in the range of the quantifiers will also exist. If we take it to only be a proper subset, then we will partially quantify over things within the anti-extension of the existence predicate. Within the sketched formal model, these decisions then correspond to either endorsing the restrictions " $F = E$ " or " $E = T$ " in addition to the general restrictions or explicitly not doing so.

What these structures so far tell us is how many different domains there are and their extensional relations. So, it is clear that the structure equating all notions has one domain, the two structures that equate only two of the notions have two, and what I will call "the most permissible structure" has three extensionally distinct domains.

However, this does not yet tell us what kinds of entities are taken to be part of each domain in sufficient detail. To get clearer on this, let me introduce a differentiation between two strategies of equating two notions. The first option is what one might call a *reductive* strategy. This consists in (conceptually) shrinking the more encompassing domain down to the lesser one. This happens, e.g., when authors claim that what *truly* exists *just is* *The Fundamental* (in favor of "F = E") or all there *really* is, is *The Existent* (in favor of "E = T"). However, one could also follow an *inflationary* strategy and extend the smaller domain to the size of the more encompassing one. (The difference between both strategies points towards an explanatory asymmetry between both sides. These asymmetric 'just is'-statements are also briefly mentioned, although not endorsed, by Rayo (2013: 5)). In the following, the order in which the domains appear next to the equality symbol will indicate this asymmetry. The domain to the left is taken to be inflated or reduced to the extension of the right one, imitating the natural language intuition that there is a difference between saying "*The Existent* just is the *The Fundamental*" and "*The Fundamental* just is *The Existent*".

The differences between reductive and inflationary strategies do not become apparent when just looking at the abstract structure, but they appear when considering translations between statements made within different structures. This is easiest to see when looking at all three possibilities in the most permissible structure and how these would translate into more restrictive ones. So, let us assume that in the most permissible structure we can speak of three objects "*a*", "*b*", and "*c*". Object *a* is fundamental, object *b* is non-fundamental and existent, and *c* is in the domain of quantification but non-existent. Depending on whether a reductive or inflationary approach to the equality in the structure '*The Fundamental* = *The Existent* \subset *Totality*' is chosen, object *b*'s status will change. On the reductive approach, it will be in domain *T*, but not in E = F, while on the inflationary approach, it will be in E = F as well. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same goes for the equation of *The Existent* and *Totality*. Though one important detail in this case is that objects can, on a reductive treatment, fall out of even the largest domain *T*. If we take the reductive stance that we can only quantify over what exists, object *c* will be outside of *T*. One can adopt some version of a semantics for free logic to account for ways of still meaningfully speaking about them (see, e.g., Nolt 2021; Rami 2020), though

oftentimes authors endorsing this reductive strategy deliberately do not want to admit meaningful speech about such nonexistents. So, if a reductive strategy is adopted, objects, which are in the most permissible structure considered to be only in the larger of the two domains, get 'pushed out' of the smaller domain and into the next greater one. If there is no such domain, then it gets 'pushed out' of the model completely. While an inflationary strategy achieves the opposite to 'pull in' the object in question into the inner domain. In this sense, from the standpoint of the most permissible structure, we can determine the strategy chosen by a different metaphysical system by asking for the right translation of objects like b and c into the structure in question. If the object is taken to be part of the equated domains, it is an inflationary strategy. If it is 'pushed out', the pursued strategy is a reductive one.

Accounting for this asymmetry, the landscape of metaphysics now becomes a bit more complicated (parentheses are added for disambiguation and easier readability):

1. *The Fundamental* \subset *The Existent* \subset *Totality* (Most Permissible)
2. *Totality* = *The Existent* = *The Fundamental* (Fully Reductive)
3. *The Fundamental* = *The Existent* = *Totality* (Fully Inflationary)
4. *Totality* = (*The Fundamental* = *The Existent*) ((F-E)-Inflationary/(E-T)-Reductive)
5. (*The Existent* = *The Fundamental*) \subset *Totality* ((F-E)-Reductive)
6. (*The Fundamental* = *The Existent*) \subset *Totality* ((F-E)-Inflationary)
7. *The Fundamental* \subset (*Totality* = *The Existent*) ((E-T)-Reductive)
8. *The Fundamental* \subset (*The Existent* = *Totality*) ((E-T)-Inflationary)

Note that a (F-E)-Reductive/(E-T)-Inflationary structure is not possible. The two equality signs tell us that there is only one domain. However, being (F-E)-Reductive would mean for a non-fundamental existing object to not be part of the domain, while being (E-T)-Inflationary would mean for a non-existent object to be part of the domain. This, however, contradicts the general structure (*The Fundamental* \subseteq *The Existent* \subseteq *Totality*) and is thus impossible.

4. A Plea for The Most Permissible Structure

It is important to see that the type of questions we face now is of a different kind than the rather ordinary ontological questions about the existence of dinosaurs or electrons. The two choices of how to conceptualize the relations between *The Fundamental*, *The Existent*, and *Totality* are conceptual or theoretical choices about the imposed framework, rather than choices within a given framework (one might think of them rather as practical/external questions than internal questions in the sense of Carnap (1950)). What we mean when we equate either *The Fundamental* and *The Existent* or *The Existent* and *Totality* is usually not, that contingently it turns out that everything that exists is fundamental, or that it just happens to be the case, that everything there is also exists. Rather, it is a choice regarding which theory one wants to adopt *before* engaging in any object-level inquiry. These types of metaphysical disagreement can thus rather be seen as metalinguistic negotiations (Thomasson 2017).

But exactly this difference between object-level disagreement about the metaphysical status of certain entities and metalinguistic disagreements about what it means to be fundamental, existent, or how quantification should be employed, is in the easiest way reliably drawn when referring to the most permissible structure. Let me illustrate this by way of a simple example. Take there to be a disagreement between a metaphysician endorsing an (F-E)-Reductive structure and one endorsing an (F-E)-Inflationary one. What they disagree about, is then the ontological status of a certain class of entities. From the perspective of the most permissible structure, it becomes evident that the class of entities the disagreement is about is the class of non-fundamental existents. However, if both participants of the disagreement firmly stick to only using their own structure, the disagreement will seem like an object-level disagreement about the existence of chairs, persons and the like, while it should be seen as a disagreement about metaphysical theories. An example more often discussed in the literature is the comparison of ordinary existence assertions and more serious ones devised in the metaphysician's artificial language "Ontologese" or "in the ontology room" (Dorr 2005; Sider 2011). Ontologese corresponds to the fully-reductive structure, as it only speaks and quantifies over fundamental entities, while I take more ordinary metaphysics to resemble a (F-E)-Inflationary/(E-T)-Reductive structure. Several difficulties

for adopting and translating Ontologese from an ordinary speaker's perspective have been pointed out in the literature (Hewitt 2018; Wrigley 2018). What seems like a natural response from the proposed landscape of metaphysical structures is that the dispute between both languages becomes understandable as a metalinguistic negotiation from the point of view of the most permissible structure. In fact, proponents of Ontologese usually introduce their language by using the distinctions that only make sense from a standpoint that distinguishes between all three metaphysical core notions (see, e.g., the "Instructions for Introducing Ontologese" in Sider (2009: 415)). This points towards the fact that we need to differentiate between all three metaphysical core notions to explicate the different metaphysical structures and frame disagreements between them in understandable and correct ways.

Summarizing my plea for the most permissible structure: It is the most fine-grained structure just in virtue of not conflating any of the three metaphysical notions, allowing it to speak about every kind of possible metaphysical status of a given entity. This also explains how it can be used to show the true nature of certain metaphysical disputes, and why it is regularly used by authors, while then turning around and arguing against it. I take this to be an indication of the importance of all three notions in metaphysical theorizing and an argument for keeping them separate.

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