

Existential Relativity

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A. THREE WAYS IN ONTOLOGY

Artifacts and natural objects are normally composed of stuff or of parts in certain ways. Those that endure are normally composed of stuff or of parts at each instant of their enduring. Moreover, the stuff or parts composing such an object right up to t must be related in certain restricted ways to the stuff or parts that compose it right after t , for any time t within its history.

Thus a snowball exists at a time t and location l only if there is a round quantity of snow at l and t sufficiently separate from other snow, and so forth; and it endures through an interval I only if, for every division of I into a sequence of subintervals I_1, I_2, \dots , there is a corresponding sequence of quantities of snow Q_1, Q_2, \dots , related in certain restricted ways. I mean thus to recall our criteria of existence and perdurance for snowballs.

So much for snowballs. The like is true of chains and constituent links, boxes and constituent sides, and a great variety of artifacts or natural entities such as hills or trees; and the same goes for persons and their constituent bodies. In each case we have criteria of existence and of perdurance, an entity of that sort existing at t (perduring through I) if and only if its criteria of existence are satisfied at t (its criteria of perdurance are satisfied relative to I).

We are supposing a snowball to be constituted by a certain piece of snow as constituent matter and the shape of (approximate) roundness as constituent form. That particular snowball exists at that time because of the roundness of that piece of snow. If at that time that piece of snow were to lose its roundness, then at that time that snowball would go out of existence.

Compare now with our ordinary concept of a snowball the concept of a "snowdiscall," which we may define as an entity constituted by a piece of snow as matter and as form any shape between being round and being disc-shaped. At any

given time, therefore, any piece of snow that constitutes a snowball constitutes a snowdiscall, but a piece of snow might at a time constitute a snowdiscall without then constituting a snowball. For every round piece of snow is also in shape between disc-shaped and round (inclusive), but a disc-shaped piece of snow is of course not round.

Any snowball *SB* must hence be constituted by a piece of snow *PS* that also then constitutes a snowdiscall *SD*. Now *SB* is distinct (a different entity from) *PS*, since *PS* would survive squashing and *SB* would not. By similar reasoning, *SD* also is distinct from *PS*. And again by similar reasoning, *SB* must also be distinct from *SD*, since enough partial flattening of *PS* will destroy *SB* but not *SD*. Now, there are infinitely many shapes S_1, S_2, \dots , between roundness and flatness of a piece of snow, and, for any shape S_i , having a shape between flatness and S_i would give the form of a distinctive kind of entity to be compared with snowballs and snowdiscalls. Whenever a piece of snow constitutes a snowball, therefore, it constitutes infinitely many entities all sharing its place with it.

Under a broadly Aristotelian conception, therefore, the barest flutter of the smallest leaf creates and destroys infinitely many things, and ordinary reality suffers a sort of “explosion.”

This is where we are led by our first option.

We might perhaps resist this “explosion” of our ordinary world by embracing a kind of conceptual relativism. Constituted, supervenient entities do not just objectively supervene on their requisite, constitutive matters and forms, outside all conceptual schemes, with absolute independence from the categories recognized by any person or group. Perhaps snowballs do exist relative to all actual conceptual schemes ever, but not relative to all conceivable conceptual schemes. Just as we do not countenance the existence of snowdiscalls, just so another culture might be unwilling to countenance snowballs. We do not countenance snowdiscalls: conceptual scheme denies the snowdiscall form (being in shape between round and disc-shaped) the status required for it to be a proper constitutive form of a separate sort of entity—at least not with snow as underlying stuff.

That would block the explosion of reality, but the price is existential relativity. Supervenient, constituted entities do not just exist or not in themselves, free of any dependence on or relativity to conceptual scheme. What thus exists relative to one conceptual scheme may not do so relative to another. In order for such a sort of entity to exist relative to a conceptual scheme, that conceptual scheme must recognize its constituent form as an appropriate way for a distinctive sort of entity to be constituted.

Must we now conceive of the existence even of the conceptual scheme itself and of its framers and users as also relative to that conceptual scheme? And aren't we then caught in a vicious circle? The framers exist only relative to the scheme and this they do in virtue of the scheme's giving their constituent form-cum-matter the required status. But to say that the scheme gives to this form-cum-matter the required status—isn't that just to say that the *framers* of that scheme do so? Yet are not the framers themselves dependent on the scheme for their existence relative to it?

Answer: Existence *relative* to a conceptual scheme is *not* equivalent to existence *in virtue* of that conceptual scheme. Relative to scheme *C* the framers of *C* exist *in virtue* of their constitutive matter and form and how these satisfy certain criteria for existence and perdurance of such subjects (the framers). Their existence is in that way relative to *C* but not in virtue of *C*. There is hence no vicious circularity.

That is our second option.

A third option is a disappearance or elimination theory that refuses to countenance supervenient, constituted objects. But then most if not all of ordinary reality will be lost. Perhaps we shall allow ourselves to continue to use its forms of speech, “but only as a convenience or abbreviation.” But in using those forms of speech, in speaking of snowballs, chains, boxes, trees, hills, or even people, we shall *not* believe ourselves to be seriously representing reality and its contents. “As a convenience” . . . to *whom* and for what *ends*? “As an abbreviation” . . . of *what*?

What follows will first develop and defend our middle, relativist, option; but we shall be led eventually to a compromise position.

Our conceptual scheme encompasses criteria of existence and of perdurance for the sorts of objects that it recognizes. Shall we say now that a sort of object *O* exists (has existed, exists now, or will exist) relative to a scheme *C* at *t* iff, at *t*, *C* recognizes sort *O* by allowing the corresponding criteria? But surely there are sorts of objects that our present conceptual scheme does not recognize, such as artifacts yet uninvited and particles yet undiscovered, to take only two obvious examples. Of course we allow that there might be and probably are many such things. Not that there could be any such entities relative to our *present* conceptual scheme, however, for by hypothesis it does not recognize them. So are there sorts of objects—constituted sorts among them, as are the artifacts at least—such that they exist but not relative to our present scheme *C*? But then we are back to our problem. What is it for there to be such objects? Is it just the in-itself satisfaction of constitutive forms by constitutive matters? That yields the explosion of reality.

Shall we say then that a constituted, supervenient sort of object *O* exists relative to our present scheme *C* if and only if *O* is recognized by *C* directly or recognized by it indirectly through being recognized by some predecessor or successor scheme? That, I fear, cannot suffice, since there might be sorts of particles that always go undiscovered by us, and sorts of artifacts in long-disappeared cultures unknown to us, whose conceptual schemes are not predecessors of ours.

Shall we then say that what exists relative to our present scheme *C* is what it recognizes directly, what it recognizes indirectly through its predecessors or successors, and what it *would* recognize if we had developed appropriately or were to do so now, and had been or were to be appropriately situated? This seems the sort of answer required, but it obviously won't be easy to say what appropriateness amounts to in our formula, in its various guises. Whether it is worth it to specify our formula further so as to assuage the foregoing concerns will depend on whether even our preliminary formulation is defensible against certain natural objections. We next formulate and answer five such objections.

B. OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES

Objection 1

Take a sort of object O recognized by our scheme C , with various instances; for example, the sort Planet, with various particular planets as instances: Mercury, Venus, etc. The instances, say we, exist, which amounts to saying that they exist relative to our scheme. But if we had not existed there would have been no scheme of ours for anything to exist relative to; nor would there have been our actual scheme C either. For one thing, we may just assume the contingent existence of our actual scheme to depend on people's actually granting a certain status to certain constitutive forms. If we had not existed, therefore, the constitutive form for the sort Planet would not have had, relative to our conceptual scheme, the status that makes it possible "that there be instances of that sort, particular planets." And from this it apparently follows that if we had not existed there would have been no planets: no Mercury, no Venus, and so on.

Reply. While existing in the actual world x we now have a conceptual scheme C_x relative to which we assert existence, when we assert it at all. Now we suppose a possible world w in which we are not to be found, in which indeed no life of any sort is to be found. Still we may, in x : (a) consider alternative world w and recognize that our absence there would have no effect on the existence or course of a single planet or star, that Mercury, Venus, and the rest would all still make their appointed rounds just as they do in x ; while yet (b) this recognition, which after all takes place in x , is still relativized to C_x , so that the existence in w of whatever exists in x relative to C_x need not be affected at all by the absence from w of C_x , and indeed of every conceptual scheme and of every being who could have a conceptual scheme. For when we suppose existence in w , or allow the possibility of existence in w , we do so *in* x , and we do so there still relative to C_x , to our present conceptual scheme, and what it recognizes directly or indirectly, or ideally.

Objection 2

What does it matter whether we "recognize" the snowdiscall form (being in shape between round and disc-shaped, inclusive)? We are anyhow "committed" to there being such a property in any case, to there being the property or condition of being shaped in that inclusive way. If a piece of snow is in shape anywhere between disc-shaped and round then it just is a snowdiscall. So there must be lots of snowdiscalls in existence and that must be nothing new. What is the problem? Could we not even just define a "caog" as anything that is a cat or a dog, and are there not as many caogs in existence as are in the union of the set of cats and the set of dogs? Why should anyone worry about this "explosion"? Why not just admit the obvious: that, yes, there are snowdiscalls, and caogs, even if heretofore they had not been so-called?

Not only is that obvious. If anyone is misguided enough to want to avoid admitting the obvious, it does not really help to introduce some conceptually relative notion of existence according to which the entities that so exist are only those that we are committed to through the properties and kinds that we admit in our ideology and

ontology. For if we admit being a dog as an ordinary, harmless enough property, and the kind dog as well, along with being a cat, and so on, then we are implicitly committed to admitting anything that is either a dog or a cat, as being “either a dog or a cat,” and that is tantamount to admitting that there are caogs—not under this description, of course, but what does that matter?

Reply. That is all quite true, of course, but not in conflict with existential relativity, which is a thesis about ontological constitution, presupposing as it does that there are levels of individuals, and thus individuals on a higher level, constituted out of individuals on a lower level. How then are the constituted entities constitutable out of the constituting entities? One (partial, Aristotelian) answer: A constituted entity must derive from the satisfaction by the constituting entity (or entities) of a condition (a property or relation, a “form”). *Any* condition? That is absolutism, and leads to the “explosion.” Only conditions from a restricted set? *How*, in what way, restricted? Somehow by reference to the conceptual scheme of the speaker or thinker who attributes existence? This is existential relativity (of the sort at issue here).

Returning to the examples of the objection: First, yes, of course there are snowdiscalls if all one means by this is that there are pieces of snow with a shape somewhere between disc-shaped and round. And when something is so shaped and, also, more specifically, round, then it is not only such a snowdiscall but also a round piece of snow, a “snowround,” let’s say. But one and numerically the same thing is then both the snowdiscall and the snowround. And this is no more puzzling than is the fact that someone can be both a mother and a daughter, or both red and round, or both an apple and a piece of fruit, and so on. When I introduced the term “snowdiscall” this is not what I had in mind. In my sense, a “snowdiscall” is not just any piece of snow with a shape between round and disc-shaped. Nor is a snowball just a round piece of snow, a snowround. For a round piece of snow can survive squashing, unlike the snowball that it constitutes, which is destroyed, not just changed, when it is squashed. The question is: what is special about the form of being round combined with an individual piece of snow, what is special about the ordered pair, let’s say, that makes it a suitable matter-form pair for the constitution of a constituted individual, a particular snowball? Would any other shape, between roundness and flatness, also serve as such a form, along with that individual piece of snow? Could they together yield a matter-form pair that might also serve, in its own way, for the formation, the constitution of its own individual: not a snowball, presumably, but its own different kind of individual? It is to *this* question that the absolutist would answer in the affirmative, while the existential relativist might well answer in the negative.

According to existential relativity in ontology, what then is required for a matter-form pair to serve as the form and matter for the constitution of an individual, a constituted individual? Answer: that the sort of matter-form combination in question be countenanced by the relevant conceptual scheme, a conceptual scheme determined by the context of thought or utterance.

Objection 3

If it is granted that things can exist prior to the development of any conceptual scheme whatever, prior to the evolution of any thinkers who could have a conceptual

scheme, is that not a concession to absolutism? Is it not being conceded that things exist “out there, in themselves,” independently of conceptual schemes altogether, so that things do not exist in virtue of our conceptual choices after all. Rather things exist “in themselves.” Reality itself manages somehow to cut the cookies unaided by humans. Isn’t this just absolutism after all? What can be left of existential relativity after this has been granted?

Reply. Compare this. If I say, “The Empire State Building is 180 miles away,” my utterance is true, but the sentence I utter is true only relative to my present position. If I had uttered that sentence elsewhere then I might well have said something false. So my sentence is true relative to my spatial position, but it is not true or false just on its own, independently of such context. And, in a sense, that the Empire State Building is 180 miles away is true relative to my present position but false relative to many other positions. However, it is not so that the Empire State Building is 180 miles from here *in virtue of* my present position. The Empire State Building would have been 180 miles from here even had I been located elsewhere. Whether I am here or not does not determine the distance of the Empire State Building relative to this place here.

Existential relativity can be viewed as a doctrine rather like the relativity involved in the evaluation of the truth of indexical sentences or thoughts. In effect, “existence claims” can be viewed as implicitly indexical, and that is what my existential relativist is suggesting. So when someone says or thinks that *O*s exist, this is to be evaluated relative to the position of the speaker or thinker in “ontological space.” Relative to the thus distinguished conceptual scheme, it might be that *O*s do exist, although this is not true relative to many other conceptual schemes.

But what is it about a “conceptual scheme” that determines whether or not it is true to say that “*O*s exist”? Answer: what determines whether “there are” constituted entities of a certain sort relative to a certain conceptual scheme would be that scheme’s criteria of existence (or individuation). And what are these? They are specifications of the appropriate pairings of kinds of individuals with properties or relations. Appropriate for what? For the constitution of constituted entities, *in the dispensation of that conceptual scheme*.

When one says or thinks “*O*s exist,” then, according to existential relativity this is not true or false absolutely. Its truth value must be determined relative to one’s conceptual scheme, to one’s “conceptual position,” including its criteria of existence. However, even if one’s claim that “*O*s exist” must be evaluated relative to one’s conceptual position, so that it can be very naturally said that “*O*s exist” relative to one’s conceptual position (in that sense), it does not follow that “*O*s exist” only *in virtue of* one’s conceptual position, in that if one had not existed with some such conceptual scheme, or at least if no one had existed with some such conceptual scheme, then there would have been “no *O*s in existence.” This no more follows than it follows from the relativity of the truth of my statement “The Empire State Building is 180 miles from here” that the Empire State Building is that far from here as a result of *my* being here (even if I am the speaker or thinker). Despite the relativity of the truth of my statement, the Empire State Building *would have been* exactly where it is, 180 miles from here, even if I had not been here. Similarly, *O*s might have existed relative to this my (our) conceptual position, even if no one had existed to occupy this position.

Objection 4

It is not easy for me to understand what relative reference in thought would be. Relative reference in *language*, however, seems explicable in terms of conventions to refer *simpliciter* in thought. There is a rule for relative reference (for the first-person pronoun [I]): [I] refers to x relative to y iff $x = y$. But the rule only gives us truth-conditions for propositions attributing relative reference; it doesn't explain it. Correspondingly, I have trouble grasping existential relativity, even when restricted to supervenient entities. If entities in one layer of reality exist and have their properties *simpliciter*, it seems to me that either they determine *simpliciter* the existence and properties of a class of entities or they don't. What would determination relative to a conceptual scheme be? Wouldn't it be more palatable to conclude that there are snowdiscalls as well as snowballs?

Moreover, if we accept existential relativity, can we recognize disagreement between users of "rival" conceptual schemes? One population recognizes snowballs but not snowdiscalls, let us say, while another has the reverse preference. Further, suppose nothing prevents the populations from discussing this difference in what they respectively recognize. Would not each population know both what snowdiscalls would be and what snowballs would be, even if each "recognizes" only one of these. Nevertheless, shouldn't we find in the difference between them some real disagreement? If we say that to recognize Fs is to believe there are Fs , we can of course easily locate such disagreement. But if we say that to recognize Fs is to use a conceptual scheme that recognizes Fs , with no further explanation possible of recognition by schemes, wherein might reside the disagreement?

Reply. Can't one think of it as follows? There is some sort of selection function that for a community or an individual picks out the matter-form pairs that are suitable for object constitution. One's selection function determines one's position in ontological (individuation) space. "The objects that there can be"—this for our relativist view is not an absolutely and objectively denoting description; rather, it denotes relative to a position. So it is in that respect rather like "the objects that are nearby." When you and I occupy sufficiently different spatial positions, we need not disagree if you say "X is nearby" and I say "X is not nearby." Similarly we need not disagree with the alien culture if, speaking of the same place, we say, "There are only snowballs here," and they say, "There are only snowdiscalls here."

Wherein then resides our disagreement? Perhaps just in the fact that we differ in what we include in our respective ontological positions. Well, it resides at least in that. But do we not disagree also in that we believe that there are in fact snowballs and disbelieve that there are snowdiscalls, whereas they believe there are in fact snowdiscalls and disbelieve that there are snowballs? This is the move that seems questionable in the light of our analogy to judgments of what is nearby. Given that what we say is said from relevantly different positions it may just be that we are not disagreeing at all in those respective beliefs.

"There are" and, especially, "there can be" are according to this view covertly indexical. Therefore we cannot report their beliefs by saying that according to their belief there can be no snowballs. They may say, "There can be no snowballs," and they may even say, "There can be no objects composed of a chunk of snow and

roundness.” But we could not properly describe them as believing that there can be no snowballs or even as believing that there can be no objects so composed. We can no more do that than I (from Providence) can unambiguously describe you as believing that Boston is far away, just because you in Tokyo say sincerely, “Boston is far away.”

The lack of agreement (“disagreement” may now well strike one as the wrong word here) would then reside simply in the fact that we are selecting different matter-form categories. Of course there may be reasons why it is better to select one set of categories rather than another, pragmatic reasons at least; rather as there may be reasons why it is better to be at one location rather than another. But this would not show that the actual judgments of “what is nearby” made by those poorly positioned are inferior to the judgments made by those better positioned. Nor would it show that there is any real disagreement when one says, “X is nearby,” and the other says, “X is not nearby.” Their only failure of “agreement” is their lack of spatial coincidence. Similarly, to have different positions in ontological space might reveal a lack of coincidence in the selected matter-form object-constituting pairs, but little else by way of real disagreement as to what there can be or what there cannot be. (There might be such disagreement anyway; but it would not derive just from the occupancy of divergent ontological positions. Rather, the disagreement might be over, say, whether there can be things that are cubical and eight-sided, or over similar property combination questions.)

That all seems compatible with its being nontrivial to determine what objects there can be relative to our position in ontological space. Nothing rules out the possibility that the selection function operate beneath the surface, such that it is far from easy to determine our implicit individuation and persistence criteria. Their being relative to the psychology of the individual or the culture of the group would seem compatible with its being a matter of difficult analysis, psychological or cultural, to tease out just what they are.

Objection 5

Surely it will prove difficult to be selective about existential relativity. Could we reasonably say that some things (atoms, perhaps) exist *simpliciter* whereas others (snowballs) exist only relative to our scheme? If we did, wouldn't we be pressed to conclude that snowballs do not *really* exist: they only “exist” courtesy of our scheme? Thus facts about atoms don't determine that there are snowballs, but they might perhaps be said to do so relative to our scheme. If so, doesn't our scheme then commit us to some falsehoods? Our scheme would then seem to attribute existence to snowballs (snowdiscalls), whereas snowballs do not exist (not *really*).

Reply. Evaluable claims as to what is or is not nearby require that the claimant be spatially located. Analogously, sensible judgments as to what objects do or do not exist, or, indeed, might or might not exist, may require a subject located in ontological space. There might still be good reasons to change our ontological position, however, just as there often is good reason to change our spatial location. And if we do move, we might in the new location be able to make true judgments that we were not in any position to make in the earlier location.

Are we precluded from supposing that there might be, or even that there definitely is, or more yet that there must be, some noumenal reality constituted in itself, with no relativity to categories or criteria of individuation and/or persistence contributed by the mind or by the culture? I can't see that we are.

Nevertheless, when we say that there are atoms, the truth of our utterance seems independent of our point of view. Whether there are atoms gives no sign of being relative to our ontological position. Would atoms be like snowballs, so that some alien culture might fail to recognize atoms, might just have some other set of categories? Surely they would just be missing something real if they miss atoms. Well, yes; but perhaps we can do justice to this fact from within existential relativity.

Consider again the analogy to judgments of distance. Boston is nearby. That's a fact I am aware of, and one I probably could not express nonperspectivally. Would someone with a different location, far from here, be unable to grasp that fact? Would they not be missing something real if they missed that fact? Here we would need to consider the coordination of thoughts, starting with simple location-relative thoughts. For example, the fact that Boston is near me now is a fact that someone else far away and in the future might still grasp even though it would be grasped, not by means of that very perspectival proposition, but by some appropriately coordinated one. Someone with a snowdiscall ontology could perhaps grasp a fact that I grasp by saying, "There are snowballs," but only by means of a coordinated proposition such as, perhaps, "There are non-disc-shaped snowdiscalls."

We can always drop down a level if our schemes coincide at the lower level: for example, if we both believe in chunks of snow and we both have a grasp of the properties of roundness and of being disc-shaped, and so on, we can compare notes at that lower level. But if a level recognizes items, be they particles or fields or whatever, and if we think of these items in terms of the matter-form model, with entailed criteria of individuation and persistence, then the same issues will recur. Nevertheless, every level might allow for agreement or disagreement determined by coordinated, perspectival propositions, such coordination among propositions to be understood in terms of some deeper ontological level, deeper in a sense suggested as follows. When I think, "Boston is near to where I am now," a fact makes that true, one involving two entities and a distance between them. Of course, if one tries to pick out the entity that is oneself, it may not be possible for *us* to do this without doing it perspectivally: either I do it, in which case I use the first-person conceptual mechanism(s), or you do it, in which case you might use some second- or third-person mechanism(s). Actually stating the fact in virtue of which my thought "Boston is nearby" is true may be a problem if one tries to do so nonperspectivally; I actually think it cannot be done, not by humans anyway. But that need not prevent us from supposing that a fact *is* stated and could be stated by any one of a large number of coordinated propositions, which would be used by different, appropriately positioned subjects; a fact, moreover, that is not mind-dependent, in the sense that its being a fact is independent of its being thought of by anyone, in any of the various perspectival ways in which it might be thought of. What is that fact, one might well ask, what could it be? Why not "the fact that Boston is nearby"? The point is that I have no way to state it except perspectivally; and of course the truth of the thought or proposition that I thereby state is not objective or mind-independent. But consider the

fact thereby stated, the fact stated in that mind-dependent way, a fact that we humans may be unable to state except in some such mind-dependent way. As far as I can see, it simply does not follow that the fact itself must therefore be mind-dependent. So one single mind-independent fact can be approached from indefinitely many perspectives and can be stated in the corresponding, mutually coordinated perspectival ways. All of these statements, and the thoughts they would express, are of course mind-dependent, at least in the sense that they are not truth-evaluable except relative to the mind that uses them. But from that it does not follow that there is no mind-independent fact that is thereby stated, even if we lack access to that fact except perspectivally, and hence mind-dependently.¹

C. SOME MIDDLE GROUND?

What then shall we say exists relative to our present scheme *C*? Assuming the success of our defense against the foregoing objections, may we answer that what so exists is what our scheme *C* recognizes directly, what it recognizes indirectly through its predecessors or successors, and what it *would* recognize if we had developed appropriately or were to do so now, and had been or were to be appropriately situated? This does seem the sort of answer required by our relativism, but we are still left wondering what “appropriateness” amounts to in our formula, in its various guises. Let us step back and reconsider.

We are pulled in several directions at once, as is typical of a paradox.

On the one hand, when a certain combination ($w + m$) of a piece of wood w and a piece of metal m is used both as a doorstop and occasionally as a hammer, it constitutes both that doorstop and that hammer. Are there then three things there: ($w + m$), the doorstop, and the hammer? Are these distinct entities, occupying the same location? One is drawn here to say that really there is just ($w + m$), which might be used as a hammer, or used as a doorstop, or both.

On the other hand, why stop with ($w + m$)? Why not say that what really exists in that situation is just w and m severally, which, if properly joined, can be used for hammering, for stopping doors, and the like. But why stop even there? After all, w itself will be a combination of certain molecules, each of which in turn combines certain atoms, and so forth. Where does it all stop? What is the bottom?

How indeed can we know that there *is* a bottom? How do we know that there is a level that does not itself derive from some underlying level of reality in the way the hammer derives from ($w + m$)’s having a certain use, or in the way ($w + m$) derives from w and m severally, when the two are relevantly joined, or the way w derives from certain molecules being arrayed a certain way? And so on.

Science, so far as I can tell, itself postulates no such bottom. Only philosophers do so. But on what basis? Is this just a metaphysical dogma?

Consider now the eliminativism that rejects the entities at any given level ontologically derivative from an underlying level. To avoid the ontological nihilism for which there is absolutely nothing ever anywhere, such eliminativism must commit itself to the existence of an ontological bottom level. But, again, this seems little better than dogma.

However, if one does therefore admit a layered reality, with ontological levels derived from underlying levels, what governs such derivation? The most general characterization of the way in which ontologically derivative particulars derive from an underlying reality would seem to be our Aristotelian conception according to which a sequence of particulars (matters) at the underlying level exemplifies a property or relation (form), giving rise thereby to a distinctive object at the higher, derived level.

But now our earlier questions recur: One would want to know what restrictions if any there might be on matter-form pairs that constitute derived entities. Why rule out entities of the sort ($w + m$) or properties of the form: having such and such a function (hammering, stopping doors, etc.)? Why not allow that these can constitute distinctive derived entities? And why not allow not only a piece of snow as matter and approximate roundness as form, but also a piece of snow as matter, and a shape anywhere between roundness and being disc-shaped as form? And if we allow these, then where does it all stop? We seem driven to the explosion.

Compare the claim that a certain irregularly shaped figure f drawn on a surface is “shapeless.” Such a claim is interestingly relative to context. On the one hand it might be true iff figure f has no shape whatever, in which case it would of course be false, since f does have some shape or other, surely, however irregular. And yet in another context it might be evaluated as true iff f lacks any of the shapes in some restricted set of shapes: where the context would somehow determine the specific restriction. Thus in one context the religious background may pick out a certain irregular shape as highly significant, in which case items with that shape would not count as “shapeless,” whereas in other contexts they would.

On an analogous contextual relativism of *existential* claims, the objects on the derived level relevant to the truth evaluation of an existential claim are those in some restricted set, the context somehow determining the restriction. Compare here: “There is nothing in that box.” (What about the air?) Or “there is only a hammer here.” (What about the doorstep?) Or even “there is only a snowball here.” (What about the snowdiscall?)

So our choices, none pleasant, seem to be these:

- *Eliminativism*: Supposed entities that derive ontologically from underlying entities do not exist, not really. But this carries a commitment to an ontological bottom, one that seems little better than dogma, on pain of nihilism.

- *Absolutism*: Eliminativism is false. Moreover, there are no restrictions on the appropriate matter-form pairs that can constitute objects.² Any matter-form pair whatever, at any given ontological level, determines a corresponding derived entity at the next higher level, so long as the matter takes that form. This is the “explosion” of reality.

- *Unrestricted absolutism*: Absolutism is true. Moreover, any existential claim is to be assessed for truth or falsity relative to all objects and properties without restriction.

- *Conceptual relativism*: Absolutism is true. Moreover, existential claims are true or false only relative to the context of speech or thought, which restricts the sorts of objects relevant to the assessment. Such restrictions are governed by various pragmatic or theoretical considerations.

Note how moderate this conceptual *relativism* turns out to be. It is even absolutist and objectivist enough to accept the “explosion.” Reality is objectively much richer and more bizarre than is perhaps commonly recognized. All sorts of weird entities derive from any given level of particulars and properties. Snowdiscalls are just one straightforwardly simple example. Our objective metaphysics is hence absolutist and latitudinarian, given our inability to find any well-motivated objective restriction on the matter-form pairs that constitute derived entities. Our relativism applies to the truth or falsity of existential and other ontologically committed claims. It is here that a restriction is imposed by the conceptual scheme of the claimant speaker or thinker. But the restriction is as harmless and even trivial as is that involved in a claim that some selected figure f is “shapeless” made in full awareness that f does have some specific shape, however irregular. Similarly, someone who claims that there are only snowballs at location L may be relying on some context-driven restriction of the totality of objects which, in full strictness, one *would* recognize at that location. Speaking loosely and popularly we may hence say that there are only snowballs there, even if strictly and philosophically one would recognize much that is not dreamt of in our ordinary talk.

Have we a robust intuition that snowballs are a different order of entity, somehow less a product of conceptual artifice, than snowdiscalls, or a robust intuition that doorstops are too dependent on the vagaries of human convenience and convention to count as distinctive kinds of entities no matter how artificial? And if doorstops do not count, how or why can cars count? Or is any such intuition displaced under reflection by corresponding intuitions about such natural kinds as animals and elements? But what exactly enables us to distinguish the distinguished classes of entities favored as objectively real, by contrast with the artificial or shadowy snowdiscalls, doorstops, hammers, snowballs, and even cars? I have here raised this question, but any claim of originality would be ludicrous. Here I have tried to frame that question in a context that rejects eliminativism on one side, and questions the “explosion” on the other. But in the end I do express a preference for the latitudinarian “explosion.” This preference is motivated by the rejection of eliminativism on one side, and by my failure to find attractive and well-motivated restrictions on allowable matter-form pairs on the other. My preference can only be tentative, however, given the vast history of the issue and the subtle and intricate contemporary discussions of it. I do point to a way in which one might be able to accommodate some of the intuitions that drive the desire for restriction, through a kind of metalinguistic or metaconceptual ascent. And it is through this ascent that our relativism emerges. It remains to be seen, however, whether the accommodation thus made possible will be accommodating enough.

NOTES

1. Part A of this paper draws from part C of my “Putnam’s Pragmatic Realism,” *Journal of Philosophy* 90 (1993): 605–26. My thanks to Matthew McGrath for helpful comments, and also to Reginald Allen and Mitchell Green, for helpful comments at an APA Central session on my earlier paper.
2. Again, the reference should be, more strictly, to “matter(s)-form” pairs, so as to allow plural constitution.