Middleism and Reality as Totality of Pluralities

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Abstract:
Sara Bernstein (2021) investigates into the possibility of the middle-levelled entities as the most fundamental existence of reality, whereupon I develop a picture of reality as totality of pluralities, a.k.a. middle-levelled entities.

Keywords: Reality; Totality; Plurality; Middleism

Introduction

The construction of reality is vastly significant for metaphysicians. The typical way to do such construction is to build reality from lower-levelled units—analогously “building blocks”—which are usually bottom-leveled entities, like atoms, individual persons, etc. Sara Bernstein (2021) recently suggests that middle-leveled entities—like tables, iPhones—may be most fundamental\(^1\) in reality. And everything, no matter it is as tiny as quarks or as massive as the Milky Belt, is non-exceptionally grounded—or pre-theoretically put, derived from—those middle-leveled entities. I find this conception—call it Middleism—intriguing, though in the Bernstein paper there lack details. My purpose of this paper is to draw a Middleist picture of reality: that reality is the totality of middle-leveled entities, which I call pluralities. Following Bernstein, my

\(^1\) Pacing Sider (2011), I leave the notion of fundamentality primitive, whereas it may be construed in terms of grounding relations.
paper does not intend to give a full defense of Middleism, whereas I may articulate several objections to sharpen my view.

**Elaboration**

Before I come to the core issue, some preliminaries are in order. I primarily clarify my usage of the term ‘plurality’ from a Middleist stance. Plurality is roughly mereological sum, only differentiating from the notion of mereological sum to the extent that a plurality is more fundamental than its mereological parts\(^2\). And there are many things falling in the category of plurality, for example, social groups, forests, cities, etc. I then introduce Grounding Coherentism\(^3\) which I utilize. It says, from the ultimate ground, there could be grounding chains going to two directions, say, upward and downward. For instance, consider \(f_1\) “the flower is scarlet” and \(f_2\) “the flower is red.” Let ‘\(>\)’ denote down-ward grounding relation and ‘\(<\)’ denote up-ward grounding relation (where ‘down-/up-ward’ is merely indexical), we have the general image “The world \(> \ldots >\) A planet \(> \ldots >\) A particle \(> \ldots \)” and a segment “\(\ldots < f_1 < f_2 < \ldots \)” And both are legitimate. Eventually, I leave the notion of reality undefined, however, I am not opposed to construing it as actual world, or universe in the mundane sense.

The core thesis of Middleism is that reality is ultimately grounded in middle-leveled entities. It roughly tells two stories: how top-leveled entities (like planets) are grounded in middle-leveled entities (i.e., pluralities) for one thing, and how bottom-leveled entities (like atoms) are grounded in middle-leveled entities (i.e., pluralities) for

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\(^2\) Let’s take this assumption—which is arguably uncommon—for granted in this paper. For illustration, see Bernstein (2021) or Wen (2022).

\(^3\) See Schaffer (2012).
another thing. In what follows, I first sketch a general picture of reality as totality of pluralities, and then respond two intended questions.

Reality, in general, is the totality of pluralities. The term ‘totality’ is open for interpretations. One possible reading is that ‘totality’ is merely the mereological sum of its components; the other one is that ‘totality’ contains something over and above the mereological sum, e.g., a world spirit in Hegel’s philosophy. I believe either is acceptable and open for academic preference. Let ‘W’ be the actual world (i.e., reality), P₁, …, Pᵢ, Pⱼ, …, Pₙ be pluralities and ‘E’ be the potential extra thing/things in the world other than the mereological sum of pluralities (if there were). We have, in set theoretical language, \( W =_{df} \{ P₁, …, Pᵢ, Pⱼ, …, Pₙ \} \) or \( W^* =_{df} \{ P₁, …, Pᵢ, Pⱼ, …, Pₙ, E \} \). Two points are worth noticing. First, a world should be maximally accommodative. That is to say, there couldn’t be one individual, e.g., an atom, that is not a part of any plurality in the formulation. Second, the pluralities composing the world need not to be exclusive. For instance, there could be both Pᵢ ‘men’ and Pⱼ ‘Caucasian people’ in one formulation; while a person like Joe Biden falls into both pluralities. One concern is, people may blame this view for the outcome that the world is potentially overpopulated. But this accusation obtains only if quantitative simplicity is universally treasured, which per se is a controversy in meta-philosophical disputes.

I now respond two intended questions. The first is a simple one. How do middle-leveled pluralities ground top-leveled entities (like the universe) via a downward-grounding chain? The response is easily granted by compositional grounding, which is, the whole exists in virtue of its parts. For instance, a navy exists in virtues of its fleet.
units; were there no fleet units, there would be no such a navy.

How, then, do middle-leveled pluralities ground bottom-leveled entities (like a subatomic particle) via an upward-grounding chain? I tentatively have two responses. Response one, to embrace a compositional universalist position⁴, one subatomic particle, a mereological part of mutually non-overlapping entities, is a fortiori grounded in the mereological sum, a middle-leveled plurality. Response two, as quantum mechanics suggests, the minimally stable unit is a pair of entangling particles. Even if there were a bare particle, it naturally would tend to be a part of a stable system, i.e., an entangling pair. And an object (e.g., a chunk of atoms) helps ground pairs of entangling particles that composed (or more rigorously, taking up the space that seemingly is taken by the object). Now, given that ‘<’ denote up-ward grounding relation, we have a grounding chain: a subatomic particle < an entangling pair < … < a human body < … < a community (i.e., middle-leveled plurality in this context).

**Conclusion**

To conclude, I have drawn a picture of reality as totality of pluralities, a.k.a. middle-levelled entities. It is an interesting start point for construction, with the spirit of ordinary ontology. Notwithstanding doubts upon Middleism in general, further question may include the relation between candidates of the middle-levelled groups—e.g., “is there a most fundamental entity within those candidates?”—whereupon a finer-grained image of Middleist reality may be available.

⁴ See, for instance, Lewis (1991).
References


