ONTOLOGICAL PLURALISM AND ONTOLOGICAL CATEGORY

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ABSTRACT

Ontological pluralism is the view that there are different ways of being. Historically, ways of being are aligned with the ontological categories. This paper is about to investigate why there is such a connection, and how it should be understood. Ontological pluralism suffers from an objection, according to which ontological pluralism collapses into ontological monism, i.e., there is only one way to be. Admitting to ontological categories can save ontological pluralism from this objection if ways of being ground ontological categories.

Keywords: *ontological pluralism; ontological category; ways of being; fundamentality.*

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1. Introduction

According to ontological pluralism there are different *ways of being* as well as there are different *beings*. This view is in contrast with the dominant view in the contemporary literature, ontological monism, according to which all entities exist[1] in the same way and all differences are rooted in what these different entities are, rather than the way they exist. Ontological pluralism, in contrast, had been more popular throughout the history of philosophy. Aristotle's slogan "being is said in many ways" and Aquinas's thesis of the analogy of being (1968) are just a few to mention. More recently in the history, Russell, discriminating the way the concrete and the abstract things exist, pronounced that "the relation 'north of' does not seem to *exist* in the same sense in which Edinburgh and London exist" (Russell 1912, 98).

Usually those who endorse ontological pluralism adopt a multi-categorical ontology. Aristotle's categorical distinction between substance and accidents, and Russell's categorical division between *abstracta* and *concreta* are well-known. The association of ontological pluralism and multi-categorical ontology is not a mere coincidence. For instance, Aquinas believed that one can define an ontological category in virtue of "a *special* way of existing. For existing can have different levels which correspond to different ways of existing and define different categories of thing" (Aquinas 1993, 53). Recently, Jason Turner (2010) sets forth this identification as if this is a natural path for a pluralist to go. In the same line, Kris McDaniel (2017, ch. 4) argues in detail that nothing undesirable arises if one identifies ontological categories with ways of being.

Nevertheless, within the contemporary literature around ontological pluralism it is not clear why ontological categories should be *defined* in terms of ontological pluralism. This issue is the purpose of this paper. We believe that the connection between ways of being and ontological categories is integrated with the notion of the generic way of being. Hence, in section 2, we prefer a version of ontological pluralism that admits to the generic way of being. In section 3, we raise an objection against this version of ontological pluralism that we dub 'the collapse argument'.[2]

[1] Following the literature, we use *being*, *existence* and *particular quantifier* interchangeably.

[2] There is an argument, with the same title, raised against quantifier variance, the thesis that there are

As noted in the literature, appealing to the notion of fundamentality can save the ontological pluralism from the collapse argument. At this stage, the issue of the connection between ontological categories and ways of being comes up. In section 4, based on a plausible account of ontological category, we show why and how ontological pluralism can resolve the collapse argument. Our closing remarks depict the tie between ways of being and ontological categories.

2. Ontological Pluralism and the Generic Way of Being

Given that existence should be regimented by means of particular quantifier, every way of being will have its own particular quantifier. Let's assume that there are only two ways of being: abstract and concrete.[3] We will use $\exists_a$ for abstract existence and $\exists_c$ for concrete existence. Given that for every particular quantifier, one can infer a universal quantifier ($\forall x\ \phi x \equiv\ \sim \exists x \sim\phi x$), consequently, there are two universal quantifiers: $\forall_a$ ranges over abstract entities and $\forall_c$ ranges over concrete entities.

Given the symbolism, ontological pluralism is defined as the following thesis:[4]

(1) For all x ($\exists_a y\ y{=}x \vee \exists_c y\ y{=}x$)

The problem, however, is that in this formulation "for all" can be replaced neither by $\forall_a$ nor by $\forall_c$, because "for all" should range over both *concreta* and *abstracta*. The formulation requires a third *generic* universal quantifier $\forall$ that could range over both categories. By the bi-conditional $\forall x\ \phi x \equiv\ \sim \exists x \sim\phi x$, there is a *generic* particular quantifier $\exists$ that is the *generic way of being*.

In reaction, McDaniel (2017, 25-30) and Turner (2010, 32-34) suggest that the generic particular quantifier can be defined in terms of the specific ones, and therefore there may be no need for the generic way of being:

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alternative quantifiers that range over absolutely everything (Sider 2007). It is worth mentioning that these two *collapse arguments* are not the same.
[3] We stick with this example till the end of this paper.
[4] The question of how to characterize the thesis of ontological pluralism is beyond the scope of this paper. This issue is discussed in the introduction of McDaniel (2017) and Turner (2021).

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

Nevertheless, (2) is not still satisfactory since applying $\forall x \ \phi x \equiv \sim \exists x \sim \phi x$ to (2) would result:

(3) $\forall x \ \phi x \equiv \sim \exists x \sim \phi x \equiv \sim (\exists_a x \sim \phi x \lor \exists_c x \sim \phi x)$

Therefore, (1) is equivalent to:

(4) $\sim [\exists_a x \sim (\exists_a y \ y{=}x \lor \exists_c y \ y{=}x) \lor \exists_c x \sim (\exists_a y \ y{=}x \lor \exists_c y \ y{=}x)]$

Indeed, (4) is a trivial truth that both monists and pluralists concede. Consequently, the thesis of ontological pluralism (i.e., (1) that is equivalent to (4)), turns out to be trivial. However, it is not a desirable outcome for pluralists to concede that the thesis of ontological pluralism is trivial. Turner (2010, 32-34) claims that this result is not as undesirable as it seems. However, it seems that triviality is, *per se*, an undesirable feature of any metaphysical thesis.[5]

Another approach, that Turner (2021, 191) in passing suggests, is that an ontological pluralist can accept the generic way of being as part of the naïve and ordinary linguistic activity.[6] This suggestion makes sense, only if there is a precise distinction between the language of ontology (*ontologese*) and ordinary language, and ontological claims should be articulated in *ontologese* rather than in ordinary language. This is a non-starter, however. If ontological pluralists advocate the distinction between ordinary language and *ontologese*, they have to formulate the thesis within *ontologese*; a language that, as they already accepted, cannot accommodate the generic way of being.

At this point, there is a dilemma: either pluralists must acknowledge that they cannot formulate ontological pluralism; or conceding the reduction of the generic way of being to the specific ones, they should admit that ontological pluralism is a trivial claim. A way out of the dilemma is to adopt the generic way of being.[7]

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[5] To follow the discussion, see Turner (2010; 2021), van Inwagen (2014) and Mericks (2019).
[6] The same idea is implicitly assumed by McDaniel (2017, ch. 5), too.
[7] This solution to the dilemma has been already developed by McDaniel (2017), Builes (2019), Rettler (2021) Simmons (2022), among others.

3. The Collapse Argument and Fundamentality

The collapse argument is a serious concern that might undermine the intelligibility of ontological pluralism.[8] It is customary to have predicates for abstract and concrete entities, A and C, respectively. Now one can define the specific ways of being in terms of the generic way of being and the predicates A and C as follows (*SD*, for Specific ways of being Defined):

(5) $\exists_a x \; \phi x =_{df} \exists x \, (Ax \wedge \phi x)$
(6) $\exists_c x \; \phi x =_{df} \exists x \, (Cx \wedge \phi x)$

Therefore, ontological pluralism collapses into ontological monism. Put differently, a specific way of being turns into the generic way of being and its relevant category. For instance, one can get rid of the abstract way of being by adopting the genetic way of being and the category of abstracta. Consequently, ontological pluralism is ontological monism in disguise.

To avoid this objection, pluralists might hold that one can define *concreta* and *abstracta* in terms of the specific ways of being, as follows (*CD*, for Category Defined):

(7) $Ax =_{df} \exists_a y \, (x=y)$
(8) $Cx =_{df} \exists_c y \, (x=y)$

A new problem, however, arises: what is the criterion in virtue of which one could prefer *SD* over *CD* or *vice versa*? The issue is related to a similar question raised in the literature: what is the criterion in virtue of which one could decide which of the three quantifiers ($\exists$, $\exists_a$ and $\exists_c$) is *elite*, i.e. metaphysically privileged?[9]

McDaniel (2017, ch.1) and Turner (2010) propose that appealing to the notion of *naturalness* can help.[10] They argue that if the specific ways of being are more natural than the generic way of being, then the specific quantifiers are the elite ones. Similarly, a moist, like Sider (2009), can

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[8] Similar objections against ontological pluralism raised by Van Inwagen (2014) and Mericks (2019).
[9] The term 'elite quantifier' is introduced in Caplan (2011).
[10] The concept of naturalness for properties and objects is introduced by Lewis (1983) and then extended by Sider (2009) to quantifiers as well. McDaniel and Turner employ this extended notion in the present case.

coherently prefer the converse, holding that the generic way of being is more natural than all specific ways of being. Hence, appealing to the notion of naturalness might provide a criterion for deciding which quantifiers could be elite; however, the question of which quantifier is actually elite is not the primary concern.

Even if naturalness provides a criterion of elite quantifiers, the main problem still remains untouched. First, how can naturalness play a role in *definition*? Remember that the original problem was which of *CD* or *SD* has to be preferred. It is worth noting in this context by *definition* we mean *metaphysical reduction*. So, it should be explained what the role of naturalness in metaphysical reduction is. McDaniel can address this question, since he identifies levels of naturalness with levels of fundamentality (2017, ch. 8). As assumed in the literature of grounding, metaphysical reduction can be cashed out in term of grounding relation between levels of fundamentality (Fine 2001; Rosen 2010). Taking this identification for granted, McDaniel could hold that the less natural is reduced to the more natural, since the less fundamental is grounded in the more fundamental. Therefore, naturalness plays a role in definition; however, this role is mediated by fundamentality.

If this is a legitimate way of using naturalness to deal with the problem, it seems that the preferred strategy is appealing to grounding and fundamentality, directly. The original problem is what would be the criterion in virtue of which one could prefer between the two sets of definitions, i.e., *SD* and *CD*. The solution, now, is to see which one is more fundamental: the generic way of being or the specific ways of being. If the generic way of being is more fundamental, a version of monism is true; otherwise, a version of pluralism is more defensible.[11]

The second problem, however, is more pressing. Not only are *SD* and *CD* about ways of being, but also, they are tied to ontological categories, A and C. Now the question is what the relationship between ontological categories and their relevant ways of being could be. Appealing to the concept of elite

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[11] Indeed, the question of which definition is preferable can be addressed by appealing to the notion of naturalness *tout court*: as one might define *less natural* in terms of *more natural*. Although this approach is preferable by those who might not be comfortable with the notion of fundamentality, in this paper we offer the solution that is more congenial to the literature of fundamentality as this notion enables us to link *definition* to *metaphysical reduction*.

quantifier, by itself, does not address this question since the main issue is why ontological categories should be defined in terms of ways of being rather than the other way around. As we noted at the outset, this is the question that remained unanswered by McDaniel and Turner, though they believe in the identification of ontological categories and ways of being. In the next part, we attempt to provide an explanation to show why and how ontological categories metaphysically relate to ways of being.

4. Ontological Category and Way of Being

An important metaphysical question, germane to the discussion in hand, is: *what is it to be an ontological category*? A straightforward answer to the question is that ontological categories are the most general partitioning of all entities.[12] Although generality is necessary, it is not a sufficient condition for the characterization of ontological category. If X and Y, for instance, are ontological categories, X∨Y is more general than both X and Y. Therefore, based on the characterization, the disjunction is more eligible to be an ontological category. Hence, more conditions, besides generality, is needed to have an accurate characterization of ontological categories.

Jan Westerhoff (2005) suggests that appealing to the notion of *fundamentality* might help us here. Not only are ontological categories the most general partitioning of all entities, but also they are the most fundamental ones. In this way, the disjunction problem can be resolved, insofar as X and Y are supposedly more fundamental than X∨Y; hence, X∨Y is not an eligible candidate for being an ontological category (Westerhoff 2005, 27-28).[13]

Adopting fundamentally (besides generality) as the sufficient condition for the characterization of ontological categories,[14] we can explain what

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[12] There are alternative characterizations of ontological categories as well (see Westerhoff 2005).

[13] Westerhoff (2005, 25-26), as suggested by Norton (1976), takes up an alternative qualification: in addition to be the most general partitioning of all entities, ontological categories should be natural. The qualification solves the disjunction problem since X∨Y is supposedly less natural that X and Y. Due to the argument presented in the previous section, naturalness plays a proxy role in this discussion. Hence, we prefer to merely employ fundamentality and remain neutral about the relationship between naturalness and fundamentality.

[14] Although adding fundamentality to generality can resolve the disjunction problem, Westerhoff (2005, 28-29) believes that this characterization of ontological categories still suffers from a difficulty: in the hierarchy of levels of fundamentality, where is the *cut-off* that discriminates between ontological

relates ways of being to ontological categories. In the previous section, we argued that fundamentality gives us a plausible criterion for the preference between the definitions of the generic and specific ways of being in terms of each other. Here we state that fundamentality can play the crucial role in characterizing what an ontological category is. As a result, the key notion that links ontological categories with the ways of being is fundamentality. To illustrate this issue, let us turn into the concrete/abstract example.

Supposedly, concrete/abstract partitioning is categorical, that is to say this distinction is the most fundamental partitioning of all entities. In addition, there are two specific ways of being associated with these two categories. Now, the issue is whether the specific ways of being is less fundamental than any other ways of being including the generic way of being. Obviously not. For instance, if Dave's favorite things (which include colas, poems and hierarchical sets) enjoy a specific way of being, it is absurd to say that this way of being is more fundamental than the concrete/abstract way of being. If fundamentality explains that abstract and concrete are ontological categories, then that very fundamentality must ensure that the ways that *concreta* and *abstracta* exist are the most fundamental ways to be. Hence, we generally conclude that if there are specific ways of being associated with ontological categories,[15] then the specific ways of being are more fundamental than the generic way of being, *because* of the fact that ontological categories are the most fundamental partitioning of all entities. In virtue of the suggested connection between ontological categories and ways of being, we can overcome the collapse argument against ontological pluralism. *Abstracta* and *concreta* are ontological categories; thus, they are the most fundamental partitioning of all entities. The abstract and concrete ways of being, in effect, are more fundamental than the generic way of being. Hence, *CD* is legitimately and non-arbitrarily preferable to *SD*.

Objection: All said and done is that if ontological pluralism is true, admitting ontological categories can save ontological pluralism from the attack of the collapse argument. The objection is why one should be committed to both ontological categories and ways of being. Whereas

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categories and any other partitioning? We believe that this is not a problem for our conception of ontological category since we can coherently maintain that the most fundamentals are actually ontological categories.

[15] This is a return to the historical conception of ways of being as *ways of being of ontological categories*.

monists, who believe in the generic way of being, are only committed to ontological categories. Thus, ontological monism is more parsimonious than ontological pluralism.

Reply: Indeed, ontological parsimony is violated, only if pluralists take ways of being and ontological categories as fundamental. As explained above, ontological categories are defined in virtue of (i.e., metaphysically reduced to) the specific ways of being. So, both the generic way of being and ontological categories are less fundamental than the specific ways of being. In this way, contrary to the advertisement of monism, pluralism is a more virtuous theory. Monists have to take both ontological categories and the generic way of being as fundamental, while pluralists only take specific ways of being as fundamental. Furthermore, ontological pluralism is more *qualitatively* parsimonious than ontological monism, since the latter presumes two kinds of fundamentals (i.e., ontological category and the generic way of being), whilst the former only requires one kind (i.e., way of being).[16],[17]

Objection: One might object that McDaniel's theory, on which ontological categories are identified with ways of being (McDaniel 2017, ch. 4), would be more parsimonious than the theory proposed in this paper according to which ontological categories are grounded in ways of being. For illustration, McDaniel's theory posits abstract way of being and *identifies* the category of *abstracta* with the abstract way of being, while according to the theory proposed here abstract way of being is fundamental and the category of *abstracta* is defined in virtue of the abstract way of being.[18]

Reply: It is true that the theory proposed here holds that ontological categories should be *defined* in terms of ways of being, and for us the concept of *definition* is the same as metaphysical reduction. Indeed, one might explain *definition* (metaphysical reduction) as mere identity, while

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[16] Considering how terms are used in ordinary language, Tegtmeier (2011) argues that it is a mistake to identify categories with ways of being. It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore this claim. However, even though the objection is in place, it does not affect our project since we already noted that we are not committed to the strict identity between ways of being and ontological categories.

[17] Applying our thesis about the relation between way of being and ontological category to a one-category ontology, like the version of trope theory defended by Keith Campbell (1990), entails that there is only one way to be, i.e., the generic way of being, as we argued that way of being grounds ontological category.

[18] We are especially thankful to an anonymous referee for this objection.

someone else might appeal to the notion of metaphysical grounding to explain this issue. The question of how to interpret this concept, however, is not the main concern of this paper. What we attempted to do here is to show why and how ontological categories should be *defined* in terms of ways of being, and either interpretation is compatible with our proposal. The fact that which interpretation is preferable depends on several factors including explanatory powers, theoretical virtues, etc. For instance, those who defend the mere identity relation between ontological categories and ways of being owe us an explanation about why there is a conceptual gap between ontological categories and ways of being, while if ontological categories are grounded in ways of being, it is more understandable why these two are still conceptually distinct. Therefore, based on parsimony alone, one cannot determine which interpretation is more plausible.

5. Concluding Remarks

According to the collapse argument, ontological pluralism would be ontological monism in disguise. We argued that the collapse argument does not refute ontological pluralism, if it is augmented by ontological categories. Consequently, there is an epistemological and methodological relationship between these two notions: adopting ontological categories makes ontological pluralism less objectionable. Moreover, throughout the paper, we tried to make a new metaphysical connection between these two concepts: ways of being ground ontological categories. The mutual interdependence may explain why these two notions have been integrated throughout the history of philosophy.

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