

Ontological Pluralism and the Generic Conception of Being

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Abstract: *Ontological pluralism* is the view that there are different fundamental ways of being. Trenton Merricks has recently raised three objections to combining pluralism with a generic way of being enjoyed by absolutely everything there is: first, that the resulting view contradicts the pluralist's core intuition; second, that it is especially vulnerable to the charge—due to Peter van Inwagen—that it posits a difference in being where there is simply a difference in kind; and, third, that it is in tension with various historically influential motivations for pluralism. I reply to each of these objections in turn. My replies will help to bring out the true nature of the pluralist's basic commitments.

1 Introduction

Ontological pluralism—or *pluralism about being*—is, roughly, the view that there are different fundamental ways of being. The pluralist's core insight is, at least as I understand it, that there are peculiarly ontological differences between certain entities, differences which lie not in the nature of these entities, but in their being. Recent defenders of this view—such as Kris McDaniel (2009, 2010b, 2017) and Jason Turner (2010, 2012, forthcoming)—have sought to explain the peculiarly ontological nature of such differences

in terms of quantification.¹ There are, on this view, several fundamental quantifiers that range over distinct domains. These quantifiers are assumed to be *semantically primitive*: they cannot be defined in terms of an absolutely unrestricted quantifier and some restricting predicate. They are, moreover, supposed to be *fundamental* or *perfectly natural*: they carve reality at the joints. Entities enjoy different fundamental ways of being, on this view, when they are ranged over by different fundamental quantifiers.

McDaniel (2010a: 635, 2017: 146) formulates ontological pluralism as ‘the view that there are possible languages with semantically primitive restricted quantifiers that are at least as natural as the unrestricted quantifier’.² This minimal formulation leaves open the possibility that the generic unrestricted quantifier is itself perfectly natural; that is, it leaves open the possibility that there is a fundamental way of being that absolutely everything enjoys. McDaniel contrasts this minimal formulation with what he calls a ‘Heideggerian’³ (or

¹ They have thus endorsed, what I shall call, *quantificational pluralism*: the view that there are different fundamental ways of being which are most perspicuously represented by different fundamental quantifiers. This view, or one much like it, appears to have first been suggested—and then quickly rejected—by Morton White (1956: 68). It later makes a cameo appearance in W. V. Quine’s *Word and Object* (1960: 241-2) as the view that the difference between the way in which abstract objects such as numbers and classes exist and the way in which physical or material objects exist is due to ‘a difference in two senses of “there are”’, and appears again in Herbert W. Schneider’s claim that ‘[i]t may be necessary to have several kinds of existential quantifiers in logic, if ontology finds that things have different ways of being’ (1962: 10). It was also explicitly defended by Nino B. Cocchiarella (1969).

² Note that all it takes for a quantifier to be *restricted* here is for it to range over only some of what there is.

³ See McDaniel (2009: 312, 2017: 34, 55).

'neo-Aristotelian'⁴) version of ontological pluralism according to which the semantically primitive restricted quantifiers are more natural than the generic unrestricted quantifier.⁵ But the less than perfectly natural unrestricted quantifier need not be taken as a mere disjunction of the perfectly natural restricted quantifiers, it might instead be unified by analogy.⁶ Thus it seems that the pluralist can accept a generic way of being—corresponding to the unrestricted existential quantifier of formal logic—enjoyed by absolutely everything there is.

Indeed, McDaniel gives two reasons for thinking that the pluralist must accept a generic way of being. The first begins with the observation that we can be sure *that* something is, while also being unsure *how* that thing is. But if we can be sure that something enjoys being, while also being unsure about which of the specific ways of being it enjoys, then we must possess a generic conception of being.⁷ The second reason is based on the observation that we can say, in one breath, that Socrates, Smaug, and the number 2 have

⁴ See McDaniel (2010a: 635, 637, 2017: 146-7, 149).

⁵ It is important to note that while McDaniel (2010a, 2017) ultimately accepts a neo-Aristotelian version of pluralism and thus takes the generic quantifier to be less than perfectly natural, his reasons for doing so seem to have very little to do with trying to accommodate the perceived ontological differences between things. He denies perfect naturalness to the generic quantifier in order to capture the perceived ontological inferiority of various 'almost nothings' (such as cracks, holes, and shadows). It is thus not as an ontological *pluralist* that McDaniel appears to question the naturalness of the generic quantifier, but as an ontological *elitist*.

⁶ See McDaniel (2010b: 695-7, 2017: 48-54).

⁷ See McDaniel (2009: 297-8, 2017: 19). This is John Duns Scotus' argument from certain and doubtful concepts. See his *Ordinatio* I, d. 3, p. 1, q. 1-2, nn. 27-29. (See also William of Ockham's *Summa Logicae* I, c. 38.) Merricks (2001: 169) alludes to this argument, but attributes it to Benardette (1989: 46-7).

being and are three things. But assuming that there is a deep connection between being, quantification, and number, the pluralist will be unable to say such things unless she adopts a generic conception of being.⁸ It thus seems that if pluralism is to be plausible, it must be combined with a generic way of being.

Trenton Merricks (2019: 601-4) has, however, recently raised three objections to combining pluralism with a generic way of being: the first objection is that such a view conflicts with, what Merricks sees as, the pluralist's core intuition; the second objection is that it is especially vulnerable to the charge that it posits a difference in being where there is simply a difference in kind; and the third objection is that it is in tension with various historically influential motivations for pluralism. These objections are supposed to apply regardless of whether or not we take the generic way of being to be fundamental (see Merricks 2019: 610 n 16). I shall reply to each of these objections in the sections below, but let me first sketch my preferred ontological framework.⁹

I accept modal realism with absolute actuality (see Bricker 2001, 2006, 2008). I believe that, beyond the realm of actuality, there is a vast plurality of concrete but merely

⁸ See McDaniel (2009: 300-1, 2017: 22-3). This is van Inwagen's (1998: 17, 2009a: 61-3, 2009b: 41-2) counting argument. See Turner (2010: 23-5) for further discussion.

⁹ The details of this framework are not essential to my replies. I will only rely upon it, in section 3, to show that there is an intelligible distinction to be drawn between those properties that correspond to ways of being and those that do not. I believe that this distinction could be made intelligible in an alternative framework, although I shall not attempt to prove this here. If, however, it were to turn out that this distinction can only be made intelligible in a modal realist framework, this would provide the pluralist with a novel argument for modal realism.

possible worlds populated by various concrete but merely possible individuals. These concrete possible individuals have intrinsic qualitative characters and serve as the objects of many of our thoughts. But given that actuality is absolute, an object's status as actual is not, as David Lewis (1970: 18-20, 1986: 92-6) would have it, simply a matter of its belonging to our world. The actual and the merely possible are not on an ontological par. There is, instead, a genuine, objective, and peculiarly ontological difference between those worlds and individuals that are actual and those that are not: actual concrete entities enjoy not only *concrete possible existence*, but also *actual existence* as their way of being—they not only exist_c, but also exist_@; while merely possible concrete entities do not enjoy actual existence—they simply exist_c.¹⁰

I also accept a robust form of mathematical platonism (see Bricker 2020). I believe that, beyond the realm of the concrete, there is an abstract realm of mathematical entities. Among these entities are both the 'pure' sets (which have in their transitive closure only other sets) and the *sui generis* natural numbers (which are not themselves set-theoretic constructions of any kind, and thus are not to be identified with either the 'von Neumann' or

¹⁰ The distinction between the actual and the merely possible should, I think, be front and center in any discussion of ontological pluralism. For, as Etienne Gilson (1949: 3) points out, 'the very first and the most universal of all the distinctions in the realm of being is that which divides it into two classes, that of the real and that of the possible'. It is, moreover, one of the clearest possible cases of an ontological difference. Indeed, Kit Fine (2005: 2) takes it to be 'almost axiomatic that . . . there is an ontological difference between actual objects and merely possible objects—between actual people and actual cities on the one hand, and merely possible people and merely possible cities on the other'. An object's status as actual or merely possible thus appears to be absolute: *being actual* and *being merely possible* do not seem to be world-relative properties.

the ‘Zermelo’ numbers). These abstract mathematical entities are causally inert and entirely lacking in intrinsic qualitative character. There is, moreover, a genuine, objective, and peculiarly ontological difference between them and the concrete entities that populate our world: abstract entities enjoy *abstract possible existence* as their way of being—they exist_a; while concrete entities enjoy concrete possible existence as their way of being—they exist_c.

I do not, however, intend to claim that these are the only ways of being. There might, I think, be entities that enjoy still other ways of being, which we are not—and, perhaps, could not be—aware. And there are, I believe, entities that do not seem to enjoy any of these ways of being. For I accept universalism about composition and thus believe that there is an entity which is wholly composed of nothing but Socrates and the number 2. Yet this entity does not strike me as being either abstract or concrete. It does, however, appear to enjoy *generic existence*: the way of being that absolutely everything enjoys (where this generic way of being is not simply to be understood as a mere disjunction of the specific ways of being).

I have combined the two forms of pluralism described in McDaniel (2009: 314-16) and applied them to the ontological framework found in Bricker (2001, 2006, 2008, 2020). The resulting picture should be somewhat familiar.¹¹ Here it is in more traditional dress:

¹¹ A similar picture was developed by Bernard Bolzano, who held that:

in addition to things that have actuality, i.e., the existing ones, there are also others that merely have *possibility*, as well as those which can never become actual, e.g., propositions and ideas in themselves.

[[1837] 2014d: 127 / WL 4: §483, 184-5)

See Schnieder (2007) and Menzel (forthcoming) for discussion. It is not clear, however, whether Bolzano ([1837] 2014b: 44-6 / WL 2: §142, 64-7), who identifies existence, being, and actuality, should be properly thought of as an ontological pluralist. For he seems to hold that the difference between a merely possible object,

actual concrete entities *exist in reality*, possible concrete entities *exist in the mind* (although they enjoy a being that is in no way dependent on their being objects of thought), while numbers and other abstract entities *subsist in a Platonic third realm*.

2 Merricks's first objection

Merricks's first objection to pluralism with generic existence is that it conflicts with the pluralist's core 'conviction or insight or intuition' (2019: 601). But what exactly is the pluralist's core intuition, and how should we understand it?

Entities have both a *being* and a *nature*.¹² An entity's nature consists of both its essential as well as its accidental characteristics. It tells us what this entity is like and provides us with something resembling its complete concept. The pluralist holds that entities can differ not simply in their nature, but also in their being. The core pluralist insight, as I see it, is thus that there are peculiarly ontological differences between certain entities (where

an object that is not but could become actual, and an abstract object, an object that is not and cannot become actual, is not a difference in their being, but rather in their non-being. He thus appears to be, what we might call, a *meontological* pluralist, that is, someone who holds that there are different ways of non-being (μη ὄν). See McDaniel (2017: 38) for discussion.

¹² This distinction could be drawn in a number of ways: between an entity's being, existence, thatness, or *Dasein*, on the one hand, and its nature, essence, whatness, or *Sosein*, on the other. I here follow van Inwagen in my choice of terminology (see his 1998: 15, 2001: 4, 2009: 54-6, 2014: 21-2, 2018: 216). I should stress that the (complete) nature of an entity should be taken to include both its intrinsic as well as its extrinsic nature. We can thus say, for example, that a house cat and an alley cat have different natures.

we can say that there is an *ontological difference* between two entities just in case one of those entities enjoys a way of being that the other does not).¹³

I will focus here on two such differences.¹⁴ Take, first, the difference between an actual and a merely possible silver dollar. This difference is utterly unlike the difference between a cat and a canary, a mountain and a molehill, or a table and a tablet. For these things differ in their nature. But an actual and a merely possible silver dollar need not differ in their nature. They might have exactly the same size, shape, weight, and chemical composition. Yet, for all their similarities, there still seems to be an important and fundamentally ontological difference between them: one is actual, the other is merely possible. Take, next, the difference between a number and a nightingale. A nightingale has a determinate size, shape, and weight. These properties help to make up its nature. But while a number appears to determinately lack any of the properties that help make up the nature of a nightingale, the true extent of the difference between them does not seem to be captured solely by a difference in their natures. There is a further and, it seems, fundamentally ontological difference between them: one is abstract, the other is concrete.

¹³ Talk of ontological differences owes, as far as I can tell, to the second edition of Edmund Husserl's *Logical Investigations*. See Husserl ([1901/ 1913] 2001: 17/ HU XIX/1 252). I believe that the intuitive, pre-theoretical phenomenon which the positing of ways of being is intended to explain is that of ontological difference. I thus prefer to describe the pluralist's core intuition directly in terms of ontological differences as opposed to indirectly in terms of the enjoyment of different ways of being.

¹⁴ I shall introduce a third potentially ontological difference in section 3 below: namely, the difference between a past and a present entity.

I take both the difference between the actual and the merely possible and the difference between the abstract and the concrete to be ontological differences.¹⁵ I take, moreover, the recognition of either of these differences to be—all on its own—sufficient for pluralism. Thus, to be a pluralist is, at least as I understand it, to be minimally committed to the claim that there are ontological differences between certain entities, differences which lie not in what these entities are, but in the ways of being these entities enjoy.¹⁶

¹⁵ I shall attempt to explain what it is about these differences that is peculiarly ontological in section 3 below, but for now it should be sufficient to note that they are plausibly taken as ontological.

¹⁶ Genuinely ontological differences should, I think, be distinguished from mere categorial differences. Some philosophers accept categorial differences, but deny that there are different ways of being. Take, for example, Peter van Inwagen (2012). He accepts a two-category ontology, according to which everything is either a substance or a property. But he does not thereby endorse ontological pluralism. For, on his view, categories are, roughly, natural classes whose membership comprises a significant portion of reality, which are not themselves subclasses of any other natural classes (see van Inwagen 2012: 193-4). Or take, for a different example, E. J. Lowe (2006). He accepts a four-category ontology, according to which everything is either an individual substance, a substantial universal, a property universal, or a trope. But he does not thereby accept ontological pluralism. For, on his view categories are, roughly, kinds of entities whose membership is ‘determined by certain distinctive existence and identity conditions whose nature is determinable *a priori*’ (Lowe 2006: 20). Entities belong to different categories, on this view, because of their different existence or identity conditions. These conditions tell us something about what these entities are. But, given either of these accounts of the nature of the categories, there needn’t be anything genuinely ontological about the so-called ‘ontological’ categories; they might, for all van Inwagen and Lowe have said, simply carve out differences in the nature of the entities that belong to them. Ontological categories are, on these accounts, ontological in name only.

This is not how Merricks understands pluralism. He sees the pluralist's core insight not as a simple recognition of ontological difference, but as a complete denial of ontological similarity (where we can say that there is an *ontological similarity* between two entities just in case there is some way of being that these entities alike enjoy). For he thinks the pluralist is best understood as denying that there is a way of being that certain entities alike enjoy.¹⁷ If he's right about this, then there is no hope of combining pluralism with generic existence. For if a number and a nightingale were both to enjoy generic existence, they would thereby be ontologically similar in this respect—there would be a way of being that they both enjoyed—and that would contradict the pluralist's intuition as Merricks understands it.

But if the pluralist's core insight is, as I claim, simply that there are ontological differences between certain entities, then it does not exclude the possibility of there being other ontological similarities between those entities as well. This becomes especially clear, I think, when we focus not on the difference between the abstract and the concrete as Merricks does, but on the difference between the actual and the merely possible. There is, as I see it, an ontological difference between an actual and a merely possible dollar: the former enjoys actual existence, the latter does not. But there is also an ontological similarity between these two dollars: both enjoy what I call concrete possible existence. What this shows is that, given

¹⁷ Merricks takes Moore and Russell to 'give voice to the conviction. . . that it is false that there is a way of being that concreta and abstracta alike enjoy' (2019: 601). He says nothing to indicate that this conviction should be taken to be restricted to the case at hand as opposed to being perfectly general. Indeed, the general form of the pluralist's intuition would need to be understood as a complete denial of ontological similarity in order for the objection to apply, as Merricks claims it does, to all forms of pluralism.

my preferred ontological framework, we can take there to be an ontological difference between these entities without thereby denying that there are any ontological similarities between them.¹⁸ But if that's right, then pluralism—understood merely as the recognition of ontological differences and not as the denial of ontological similarities—appears to be compatible with a generic way of being enjoyed by absolutely everything there is.

How should we adjudicate this dispute? We must look, it seems, at what various pluralists say to motivate their view. I shall focus my attention on the passages from G. E. Moore and Bertrand Russell that Merricks thinks 'give voice to the conviction. . . that it is false that there is a way of being that concreta and abstracta alike enjoy' (2019: 601).¹⁹ I will attempt to show that, when properly understood, these passages do not in fact give voice to this conviction. But if we take, as Merricks does, the intuitions evoked in these passages to be representative of the convictions of pluralists generally, then that would seem to suggest

¹⁸ I believe that the distinction between the actual and the merely possible is best captured in a modal realist framework supplemented with absolute actuality. But the details of this framework are not essential to the distinction itself. It can, I think, be endorsed by someone who holds that there are true essentialist claims about entities that do not actually exist. To have an essence or nature, on this possibilist view, is to enjoy what Henry of Ghent calls essential being (*esse essentialiae*). But not everything that has an essence thereby enjoys actual existence (*esse existentiae*). For while I enjoy actual existence, my merely possible brothers and sisters do not. There is thus an ontological difference between us. But there is an ontological similarity between us as well: we all enjoy essential being. See McDaniel (2017: 263) for discussion.

¹⁹ Merricks (2019: 611 n 20) sees the claim—allegedly stemming from Heidegger, Husserl, and Meinong—that 'the relevant conviction is justified (or caused by) the phenomenology of certain experiences' as another 'species of this motivation'. I will briefly discuss this phenomenological motivation for pluralism in section 4 below.

that the pluralist's core insight is not, as Merricks thinks, that there are no ontological similarities between certain entities, but rather, as I claim, that there are certain ontological differences between those entities.

Let's start with the passage from Moore:

It is quite certain that two natural objects may exist; but it is equally certain that two itself does not exist and never can. Two and two *are* four. But that does not mean that either two or four exists. Yet it certainly means *something*. Two *is* somehow, although it does not exist. (1903: 111)

What should we make of Moore's avowed certainty that natural objects enjoy existence—or concrete existence—as their way of being, while numbers such as two and four do not enjoy this way of being? It appears to spring from a conviction about the nature of (concrete) existence. For Moore tells us that natural objects such as narwhals, neanderthals, and nightingales 'can exist in time—can have duration, and begin and cease to exist—can be objects of *perception*' (1903: 110-11), while numbers belong to a class of objects 'which certainly do not exist in time, are not therefore parts of Nature, and which, in fact, do not *exist* at all' (1903: 110). But while this gives us good reason to think that existence—or concrete existence—can be enjoyed by nightingales but not by numbers, it doesn't give us any reason to think that being—or generic existence—cannot be enjoyed by numbers and nightingales alike. Indeed given his praise for those 'who have recognized most clearly that not everything which *is* is a "natural object". . . [and] have, therefore, the great merit of insisting that our knowledge is not confined to the things which we touch and see and feel' (1903: 110), Moore seems to leave open the possibility that there is a generic—perhaps even

fundamental—way of being enjoyed by absolutely everything ‘which *is*’ (1903: 110), every possible ‘[object] of knowledge’ (1903: 111).²⁰

Let’s turn next to the passage from Russell:

Suppose, for instance, that I am in my room. I exist, and my room exists; but does ‘in’ exist? Yet obviously the word ‘in’ has a meaning; it denotes a relation between me and my room. This relation is something, although we cannot say that it exists *in the same sense* in which I and my room exist. ([1912] 1959: 90)

What should we make of Russell’s assertion that we ‘cannot say’ that a relation exists in the same sense in which a person or a place exists? We might read this claim in one of two ways: first, as the claim that there is no way in which a relation, a person, and a place all exist; or, second, as the claim that there is a way in which a person and a place both exist, but we

²⁰ He thus seems to be in agreement with the Russell of *The Principles of Mathematics*, who holds that ‘[b]eing is that which belongs to every conceivable term, to every possible object of thought’ whereas ‘[e]xistence. . . is the prerogative of some only amongst beings’ (1903: 449). This should, of course, come as no surprise given that Russell’s early views on being and existence appear to have themselves been strongly influenced by Moore—as Russell (1903: viii, 1904: 204 n 2) himself readily admits. Indeed, Moore tells us that up until the winter of 1910-11, he held:

very strongly. . . that the words ‘being’ and ‘existence’. . . stand for two entirely different properties; and that though everything which exists must also ‘be’, yet many things which ‘are’ nevertheless emphatically do *not* exist. (1953: 300)

But if Moore believes that existence is nested in being and that everything that exists has being, but not vice versa, then it should be clear that we can be, as Merricks (2019: 601) puts it, “quite certain” that natural objects enjoy a way of being and “equally certain” that that way of being is not enjoyed by two or four’ without also thinking that ‘it is false that there is a way of being that concreta and abstracta alike enjoy’.

cannot say that a relation exists in this way as well. If we were to read Russell's assertion in the first way as Merricks appears to do, then it would indeed give voice to the intuition that abstracta and concreta are in no way ontologically similar to each other. But this reading is not supported by the text. For, a page later when Russell refers back to this discussion, he says only that we have seen that 'such entities as relations appear to have a being which is *in some way different* from that of physical objects' ([1912] 1959: 91, emphasis added). But if the above considerations are only supposed to show that the being of a relation is in some way different from the being of a person or a place, then they shouldn't be taken to show that the being of a relation is in no way similar to the being of a person or a place. This provides some negative support for the second reading. But is there any positive support for the second reading? I believe there is. For Russell, like Moore, thinks that persons enjoy existence—or concrete existence—as their way of being because they can exist in space and time. But relations are, he thinks, fundamentally different in this respect; they cannot exist in space or time.²¹ He thus appears to leave room for a generic—perhaps even

²¹ This comes out pretty clearly in Russell's attempts to explain why it is that the relation 'north of' does not seem to exist in the same way in which Edinburgh and London exist. For, he writes,

[i]f we ask 'Where and when does this relation exist?' the answer must be 'Nowhere and nowhen'. There is no place or time where we can find the relation 'north of'. It does not exist in Edinburgh any more than in London, for it relates the two and is neutral as between them. Nor can we say that it exists at any particular time. Now everything that can be apprehended by the senses or by introspection exists at some particular time. Hence the relation 'north of' is radically different from such things. It is neither in space nor in time, neither mental nor material; yet it is something. ([1912] 1959: 98)

It seems clear that the reason we cannot say that a relation exists in the same sense as a place exists is that relations are not in space or time. This marks, Russell thinks, an important ontological difference between

fundamental—way of being enjoyed by everything that ‘is something’, everything that ‘we can think about and understand’ ([1912] 1959: 90).²²

Moore and Russell simply claim that there is an ontological difference between abstract and concrete entities. They do not give voice to the conviction that there are no ontological similarities between these entities. Thus, they do not give voice to what Merricks takes to be the pluralist’s core insight: namely, ‘that it is false that there is a way of being that concreta and abstracta alike enjoy’ (2019: 601). But Merricks doesn’t just take this to be the pluralist’s core intuition, he also thinks it is ‘the best motivation for pluralism’ (2019: 602). It should be clear that the pluralist’s intuition as Merricks understands it provides a *strong* motivation for pluralism, but it’s not entirely clear why it is supposed to provide the *best* motivation for pluralism. I suspect, however, that the reason Merricks thinks it does is because he thinks that if we deny that there are any ontological similarities between abstract and concrete entities, then we will be best suited to avoid the objection that these entities differ simply in kind, not in being. Let’s turn to it now.

3 Merricks’s second objection

Merricks’s second objection to pluralism with generic existence is that it is ‘particularly vulnerable’ to the objection that pluralism posits ‘a difference in being where there is instead but a difference in kind among entities that exist in the same way’ (2019: 602-3). The basic

relations and places. But it leaves open the possibility that there is still a kind of ontological similarity between them.

²² White (1956: 63-6) makes a similar observation.

problem, as Merricks sees it, is supposed to be with the pluralist's claim that the difference between, say, an actual and a merely possible dollar or a number and a nightingale is peculiarly ontological. Yes, the objection goes, these entities are different, but that's all there is to it. Once we say that one is actual and the other is not or that one is concrete and the other abstract, we have said all that needs to be said. We don't need to—and we should not try to—express this difference by adding that it is peculiarly ontological.²³

My response here is purely defensive. I deny that once we've said that an actual and a merely possible dollar are different, we've said all that needs to be said. For, as I pointed out in section 2 above, the difference between an actual and a merely possible dollar is utterly unlike the difference between a cat and a canary, a mountain and a molehill, or a person and a penguin. The latter all differ in their nature. Yet an actual and a merely possible dollar need not differ in nature. The way in which an actual and a merely possible dollar differ is itself different from the way in which a cat and a canary, a mountain and a molehill, or a person and a penguin differ. But to say, as Merricks and van Inwagen suggest, that the difference between an actual and a merely possible dollar is just a difference in kind does

²³ Merricks (2019: 602) attributes this objection to van Inwagen (2014b: 23). But van Inwagen, as I read him, is concerned with a slightly different objection: namely, that the pluralist appears to take the observation that there is a *vast* difference between, say, a number and a nightingale to motivate the claim that there is an ontological difference between these entities as well. This, van Inwagen thinks, constitutes 'a fundamental meta-ontological error' (2014b: 21). For 'a vast difference between [two things] must consist in a vast difference in their natures' (1998: 15, 2009: 56). But, van Inwagen claims, once we have described the vast difference in the nature of these two things, we 'have done everything that can be done to describe [the difference between them]. That's what describing a vast difference is' (2014b: 23, cf. 2018: 216). See Williams (1962: 757) and Grossmann (1984: 169-70, 1992: 95-6) for similar criticisms.

nothing to explain the peculiar nature of this difference. Thus, it does not seem to be unreasonable to suggest that the difference between an actual and a merely possible dollar is itself somehow ontological, that it should be understood not as a difference in nature, but as a difference in being.

A similar point could be made by focusing not on modal but rather on temporal ontology. For, if we take the A-theoretic intuition that time ‘flows’ or ‘passes’ seriously, there would appear to be an objective difference between past and present entities: the latter bask in the glow of the present, the former do not. But, on this moving spotlight view of time, the light of the present does not appear to contribute to an entity’s nature. A past and a present dollar would seem to have the same nature—indeed, they might even be perfect qualitative duplicates. Thus, it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that the difference between them is itself somehow ontological.

Merricks believes, however, that by accepting generic existence, I have left myself particularly vulnerable to this objection. For I must now accept the following claims:

x exists_a if and only if x generically exists and x is abstract.

x exists_c if and only if x generically exists and x is concrete.

Yet, once I have done this, I have agreed with the monist that there are entities—such as numbers and nightingales—which enjoy a shared way of being but differ with respect to whether they are abstract or concrete. And if I agree with the monist about this, I must also agree with the monist that there is a difference in kind between two entities—a number and a nightingale—which generically exist: the number is abstract, while the nightingale is concrete. But then, Merricks thinks, it seems like a mistake to add that the number exists_a

and the nightingale exists_c and to, thereby, insist that the difference between them is ultimately ontological.

My response is, once again, purely negative. I do not see why granting that numbers and nightingales enjoy a shared way of being should leave me particularly vulnerable to the original objection. For I can agree with the monist that there is a difference in kind between a number and a nightingale. But I still think that we need to explain the peculiar nature of this difference. It does not, as I suggested in section 2 above, simply appear to be a difference in the nature of these entities, but instead appears to transcend all such differences. Thus, assuming that we already have reason to believe that there are ontological differences between certain entities, it does not seem to be unreasonable to suggest that the difference between a number and a nightingale is somehow ontological as well.

Merricks would not, I take it, be satisfied with this purely negative response. For he appears to think that the pluralist arbitrarily selects certain differences among generically existing entities—such as the difference between the abstract and the concrete or the difference between the actual and the merely possible—and calls them ontological.²⁴ But he also seems to think that there is no principled reason to select these differences as opposed to others.

I have tried to suggest that the selection process is not completely arbitrary: mere differences in the natures of things should not be taken as ontological. The difference between a cat and a canary is, for example, solely a difference in the nature of these things

²⁴ This, I take it, is the point that Merricks (2019: 602) intends to make by asking the following rhetorical question: ‘why pick ways of being that are correlated with those particular differences among generically existing entities, as opposed to others?’

and thus fails to be properly ontological. But it will not always be clear when a vast difference in the nature of certain entities is merely a difference in their natures and when there is, in addition to this, a difference in their being as well. For while a number and a nightingale have vastly different natures, the same can presumably also be said about a boson and a fermion. But while there appears to be an ontological difference between a number and a nightingale, there does not appear to be an ontological difference between a boson and a fermion. I thus grant that in order to allay the arbitrariness worry, the pluralist needs to explain what it is that is peculiarly ontological about the properties that underwrite ontological differences. I will here offer only a sketch of what I think makes the properties of *being actual*, *being concrete*, and *being abstract* properly ontological.

Being—or generic existence—is the most general of all concepts, it is empty of qualitative content, and it does not admit of real definition.²⁵ This, I take it, is more or less

²⁵ These three features are drawn from Heidegger's ([1927] 1962: 21-24/ SZ 2-4) discussion of the three traditional 'presuppositions' (or 'prejudices') about the nature of being: namely, that being is the most universal of all concepts, that it is indefinable, and that it is self-evident. I have collapsed being's indefinability and self-evidence under a single heading and have attempted to draw attention to Heidegger's claim that being is traditionally taken to be 'the emptiest of concepts'. See Williams (1962: 752-4) for a helpful discussion of the emptiness of being.

It is this emptiness that comes to the fore in van Inwagen's paraphrase of what he calls 'an incidental remark of Hegel's', which he takes to provide a capsule summary of Heidegger's three theses: namely, that being is 'the most barren and abstract of all categories' (2009a: 51, see also van Inwagen and Sullivan 2014: sect. 2.1). Van Inwagen does not provide a citation for this paraphrase, but it would appear to be drawn from Hegel's claim in the *Encyclopedia* that being is 'the poorest and most abstract determination' ([1827/ 1830] 2010: 101/ GW 20: 92). Hegel elaborates on this claim in his *Science of Logic*:

what van Inwagen (2001: 4-5, 2009a: 56) calls the ‘thin’ conception of being according to which the being of an entity does not at all contribute to the nature of that entity. It constitutes a fairly traditional answer to the question: ‘What is being?’ But if the pluralist accepts both this account of the nature of being and the ontological framework that I laid out in section 1, she can easily capture the peculiarly ontological nature of the properties of *being actual*, *being concrete*, and *being abstract*. For these properties are, I believe, importantly analogous to being. They are highly general because they are pervasive: anything that is properly related to something that enjoys a given way of being, enjoys that way of being as well.²⁶ They are empty of qualitative content because they are non-qualitative: they do not

Being, pure being—without further determination. In its indeterminate immediacy it is equal only to itself and also not unequal with respect to another; it has no difference within it, nor any outwardly. If any determination or content were posited in it as distinct, or if it were posited by this determination or content as distinct from an other, it would thereby fail to hold fast to its purity. It is pure indeterminateness and emptiness. —There is *nothing* to be intuited in it, if one can speak here of intuiting; or, it is only this pure empty intuiting itself. Just as little is anything to be thought in it, or, it is equally only this empty thinking. Being, the indeterminate immediate is in fact *nothing*, and neither more nor less than nothing. ([1812/ 1832] 2010: 59/ GW 21: 68-9).

Being can, I take it, be said to be the most barren and abstract of all categories because it is ‘the indeterminate immediate’, ‘[t]here is *nothing* to be intuited in it’, and ‘[i]t is pure indeterminateness and emptiness’.

²⁶ The properties of *being actual*, *being concrete*, and *being abstract* are, given my preferred ontological framework, pervasive across the relations that unify concrete possible worlds and abstract possible structures. They are all or nothing. This ensures that these properties enjoy a high degree of generality and can be had by a variety of different entities with a variety of different natures.

play, and are not grounded in properties that play, fundamental causal roles.²⁷ And they do not admit of real definition because we can only form indexical or demonstrative concepts of them: our concept of something's being actual is, for example, that of its being exactly ontologically like me and everything at my world.²⁸ It is, I believe, this generality, qualitative emptiness, and indefinability which accounts for the intuitive thinness of these ways of being and explains why their corresponding properties are properly taken to be ontological. There is thus an intelligible and non-arbitrary distinction that can be drawn between an entity's being and its nature.

The pluralist should, I think, accept this account of what makes these properties peculiarly ontological even if she intends to hold onto the central pillar of neo-Quinean orthodoxy: namely, that being is perspicuously expressed by particular—or existential—quantification.²⁹ For without such an account, this quantificational pluralist cannot avoid the

²⁷ Teller (1984: 148) plausibly attributes a similar account of the nature of the qualitative properties to David Lewis (1983a).

²⁸ But note that while the *concept* of actuality might be indexical, the *property* of actuality is not. See Bricker (2006: 63-6).

²⁹ This orthodoxy can, I think, be adequately captured by the following three theses:

The Neo-Quinean Thesis: being is perspicuously expressed by particular—or existential—quantification.

The Monistic Thesis: being is unitary: there are no ontological differences between any entities.

The Equivalence Thesis: being is the same as existence.

This list is inspired by a similar list due to van Inwagen (1998, 2009a). But I have attempted to isolate, what I take to be, the core neo-Quinean commitments. The neo-Quinean thesis corresponds to van Inwagen's Thesis 4 according to which the meaning of 'existence' is adequately captured by the existential quantifier of formal

charge of ascribing to the being of an entity what property belongs to the nature of that entity, and thus of accepting a ‘thick’ conception of being.³⁰ To see this, consider the following claims:

x is abstract if and only if and because $\exists_a y (y = x)$.

x is concrete if and only if and because $\exists_c y (y = x)$.

Suppose that *being abstract* and *being concrete* were to fail to be thin in the relevant respects: that is, suppose they were to somehow lack adequate generality, contain qualitative content,

logic, but removes its apparent commitment to both the claim that being is the same as existence and the claim that being is unitary. This thesis is shared by both neo-Quinean monists and quantificational pluralists alike. Indeed, where these two views differ is over the monistic thesis, which corresponds to van Inwagen’s Thesis 3 according to which existence is univocal, but again removes its apparent commitment to the claim that being is the same as existence and ensures that the thesis concerns being rather than ‘being’. Monists about being hold that being is unitary, while pluralists take it to be fragmentary. This is their main point of disagreement. The equivalence thesis is, however, just the same as van Inwagen’s Thesis 2. It is something that pluralists can, but do not need to deny. Its denial strikes me as fairly plausible if we take existence to be the same as actuality, for being does not seem to be the same as actuality.

³⁰ Suppose, for example, that the quantificational pluralist were to claim that for every perfectly natural qualitative property, there is a fundamental way of being enjoyed by all and only the entities that have that property. This pluralist might take the quantifier \exists_b to range over all and only those entities that are bosons, and thus hold that:

x is a boson if and only if and because $\exists_b y (y = x)$.

This would, I think, load the quantifier \exists_b with whatever qualitative content is had by the predicate ‘is a boson’. It would attribute to the being of a boson what seems to properly belong to its nature.

or admit of alternative definitions.³¹ These features might, given their presumed thickness, be taken to belong to the nature of the entities that have them. In that case, the corresponding ways of being expressed by the quantifiers \exists_a (which ranges over all and only those entities that are abstract) and \exists_c (which ranges over all and only those entities that are concrete) would themselves fail to be thin. For, on this account, these ways of being are each a kind of one over many: they account for and explain the objective similarities between the entities that enjoy them. But if that's right, then any lack of generality, qualitative content, or definitional admissibility of the properties *being abstract* or *being concrete* would have to somehow derive from these ways of being themselves. The quantificational pluralist would thus appear to be guilty of ascribing to the being of things what properly belongs to their natures.³²

³¹ I am assuming that for the quantificational pluralist, to say that an alleged ontological property is appropriately indefinable is to say that it can only be defined in terms of its corresponding way of being, and that that way of being is perspicuously expressed by a semantically primitive existential quantifier.

³² Note that this criticism carries over to the neo-Quinean monist as well. For the neo-Quinean monist will presumably admit that:

x has being if and only if and because $\exists y (y = x)$.

But if being were to fail to be appropriately thin, then its thickness would have to somehow derive from the generic way of being perspicuously represented by the absolutely unrestricted existential quantifier. The universality—or absolute generality—of being is not in itself enough to ensure that being is appropriately thin. For, as D. C. Williams (1962: 753) points out, the fact that being ‘applies to everything is quite compatible with its being nevertheless the “richest” of principles, with more “content” than all the ordinary characters put together’. The desired thinness of being must, it seems, not simply derive from its generality, but also from its

I have shown that the pluralist can accept a fairly thin conception of being, and that the intuitive thinness of this conception does not simply derive from taking ways of being to be best expressed in terms of existential quantification: the properties corresponding to the domains of these quantifiers must themselves be appropriately thin. But if that's right, then the pluralist shouldn't worry that she has ascribed to the being of an entity what properly belongs to the nature of that entity. It should now be clear why, by the pluralist's lights, it is not a mistake to add that numbers exist_a and nightingales exist_c once we have granted that they generically exist and are abstract and concrete respectively. For while the predicates 'exists_a' and 'exists_c' apply to all and only those entities to which the predicates 'is abstract' and 'is concrete' apply, only the predicates 'exists_a' and 'exists_c' make salient the fact that the differences expressed by these predicates are ontological. But, if we assume—as McDaniel and Turner assume—that ontological differences are quantificational differences, this will not be the end of the story. A complete explanation of these differences will also need to invoke the quantifiers \exists_a and \exists_c .

4 Merricks's third objection

Merricks's third objection to pluralism with generic existence is that it 'is clearly in tension with the sorts of views that virtually all pluralists have tried to articulate and defend' and that this tension can be illustrated by the fact that 'historically influential motivations for pluralism are inconsistent with the claim that all entities generically exist' (2019: 604). But

qualitative emptiness. The neo-Quinean cannot, I think, simply rest content by offering a quantificational account of being, but must also account for the intuitive thinness of being itself.

why exactly is this supposed to be a problem? Merricks doesn't really say. I suspect, however, that the problem is supposed to go something like this: recent defenders of ontological pluralism—such as McDaniel (2009) and Turner (2010)—often bill their view as part of a historically prominent tradition that has only recently fallen out of favor (due primarily and no thanks to Quine 1948); but if the view being put forward is genuinely part of this now forgotten tradition, then it had better be consonant with that tradition or else it will lose one of its biggest selling points. I take this criticism very seriously. If the historically influential motivations for pluralism are all inconsistent with the claim that absolutely everything enjoys a shared way of being, then pluralists who endorse generic existence would be making a radical break with a tradition they are otherwise attempting to revive. But I don't think that this criticism can be made to stick. I will focus on what McDaniel (2017: 5-8) calls the three dominant historical motivations for ontological pluralism: namely, the phenomenological, logical, and theological motivations.³³ I am willing to grant that some of these motivations might be inconsistent with a generic way of being, but I do not believe that all of them are.

Let's start with the *phenomenological* motivation.³⁴ The basic idea—allegedly stemming from Martin Heidegger, Edmund Husserl, and Alexius Meinong—is that different ways of being are given to us in our experience. Merricks (2019: 611 n 20) seems to suggest

³³ Merricks (2019: 603-4), when presenting his third objection to pluralism with generic existence, focuses on the arguments that McDaniel classes as logical and theological. He does not mention the phenomenological motivation in this context, but briefly mentions it in a footnote when discussing the pluralist's core intuition (see Merricks 2019: 611 n 20).

³⁴ See McDaniel (2010b: 694-5, 2017: 6-7).

that the best way to understand the supposed content of this experience is as presenting, say, a number and a nightingale as in no way ontologically similar to each other. The thrust of the phenomenological motivation—as Merricks understands it—is that experience provides us with a phenomenological justification of the claim that there are absolutely no ontological similarities between certain entities. But this claim not only motivates pluralism about being, it also motivates the claim that there isn't a generic way of being that absolutely everything enjoys.

It is clear, however, that the proponents of the phenomenological motivation do not all interpret what is immediately given in experience as Merricks does. Meinong, for example, claims that 'one apprehends [the difference between existence and (mere) subsistence] as immediately as the difference between blue and yellow' ([1910] 1983: 58/AMG 4: 73). But since what is immediately given regarding an entity's blueness or yellowness is consistent with the claim that blue things and yellow things are similar insofar as they have color, what is immediately given regarding an entity's existence or (mere) subsistence should also be consistent with the claim that existent things and (merely) subsistent things are similar insofar as they have being. Indeed, when Meinong turns to considerations of mediate justification, it becomes clear that he thinks that existence and subsistence are nested, not disjoint: 'what can exist must, as it were, first of all subsist' ([1910] 1983: 58/AMG 4: 74).³⁵ The phenomenological motivation is best understood as the claim that the contents of our experience should only be taken to provide immediate justification for the claim that there are ontological differences between certain entities, and thus it does not

³⁵ See also Meinong (1921: 18, trans. in Grossmann 1974: 228/AMG 7: 20).

appear to be inconsistent with the acceptance of a generic way of being enjoyed by absolutely everything.³⁶

Let's turn next to the *logical* motivation.³⁷ The basic idea is that various logical considerations lead to pluralism. Consider, for example, Aristotle's argument that being is not a genus: roughly, if being were a genus, then no differentia would have being (for a genus cannot be predicated of a differentia taken apart from its species); but since the differentia of any genus must have being, being cannot be a genus.³⁸ The familiar Aristotelian dictum that being is said in many ways appears to be a corollary of this argument: for if being is not a genus and yet is predicated of absolutely everything there is, then it cannot be so predicated univocally.³⁹ But, Merricks thinks, the claim that being cannot be univocally

³⁶ Mulligan (2019: 192-7) argues that many phenomenologists were attracted to a correlationist thesis according to which different ways of being are correlated with different types of mental acts. But since one and the same object can be the target of different types of mental acts, the phenomenological motivation should be consistent with both the claim that many objects enjoy multiple ways of being as well as the claim that there is a type of mental act that can take any object whatsoever as its target.

³⁷ See McDaniel (2017: 7-8).

³⁸ See Aristotle's *Metaphysics* B.3, 998b22-7.

³⁹ Note that a different argument for the claim that being is not a genus can be found in Porphyry:

if the existent were a single genus common to everything, all things would be said to be existent synonymously. But since the first items are ten, they have only the name in common and not also the account which corresponds to the name. (*Isagore* 6.9-11, trans. Barnes 2003: 7)

But the argument here appears to proceed from pluralism—from the claim that there are ten primary ontological categories and, hence, ten corresponding ways of being—to the claim that being is not a genus. Porphyry seems to think that if being were a genus, there would be a single primary category to which

predicated of absolutely everything should not only be taken to motivate pluralism, it should also be taken to motivate the claim that there isn't a generic way of being that absolutely everything enjoys.

I cannot challenge the claim that if being is not a genus, then it cannot be univocally predicated of absolutely everything without also undermining the logical motivation for pluralism. It is, however, not exactly clear how we should interpret this claim. Is a genus supposed to be fundamental or not? I assume for the sake of argument that, in the Aristotelian framework, to be a genus is to be fundamental. But if that's right, then all the argument shows is that no fundamental mode of being can be univocally predicated of absolutely everything, it doesn't show that no non-fundamental mode of being can be univocally predicated of everything there is. Thus the logical motivation doesn't seem to rule out—and, more important, isn't inconsistent with—the claim that all entities generically exist. It does, however, seem to show that the generic mode of being should not be taken to be fundamental.

Let's turn finally to the *theological* motivation.⁴⁰ The main considerations here concern different features of God. Consider, first, divine transcendence: God appears to be so radically different from all of His creation that univocal predication between God and created things is impossible.⁴¹ But if being cannot be univocally predicated of God and His creatures, then it seems that absolutely any way of being that God might enjoy must be radically

absolutely everything belongs. But since there is no such ontological category and, hence, no generic way of being, being is not a genus.

⁴⁰ See McDaniel (2010b: 693-4, 2017: 5-6).

⁴¹ See Aquinas's *Summa Contra Gentiles* I, c. 32, and *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 13, a. 5, co.

different from the ways of being that created things can enjoy. This would seem to show that there are absolutely no ontological similarities between God and His creatures, and thus that there isn't a generic way of being that absolutely everything enjoys. Consider, next, divine simplicity: God appears to be absolutely simple. He has no parts and cannot be distinguished from any of His properties.⁴² But if God is numerically identical to His way of being and the ways of being enjoyed by God's creatures are not numerically identical to God, then any way of being enjoyed by God must be radically different from the ways of being enjoyed by created things. This would clearly show that there are absolutely no ontological similarities between God and His creatures, and thus that there isn't a generic way of being that absolutely everything enjoys.

I think I could grant that the considerations at play in the theological motivation establish a strong form of pluralism.⁴³ But they seem to be due more to the nature of God than to the nature of pluralism. First, I don't think these considerations carry over to other cases. God is supposed to be radically different from everything else there is. It thus seems plausible to think that there are absolutely no ontological similarities between God and anything else. But we don't have reason to think that an actual dollar is radically different from a merely possible one. Second, I take it that the ontological difference between God and everything else is also supposed to be more extreme than the ontological difference between an abstract and a concrete entity or an actual and a merely possible entity. It would, however,

⁴² See Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 3.

⁴³ Note that we might be able to avoid the argument from divine transcendence by restricting to fundamental (as opposed to positive intrinsic) similarities. But no such restriction would seem to allow us to avoid the argument from divine simplicity.

be difficult to capture the extremity of this difference if there were no more ontological similarities between a number and a nightingale or an actual and a merely possible dollar than between God and creation. For the difference would then be just as extreme in each case.

Let's take stock. Only one of the historically influential arguments considered in this section supports a version of pluralism that is inconsistent with a generic way of being. It thus appears to be a gross overstatement to claim, as Merricks does, that generic existence is 'in tension with the sorts of views that virtually all pluralists have tried to articulate and defend' (2019: 603). I thus see no reason to think that recent pluralists need to fear that they have, by adopting a generic way of being, thereby broken with a broader and historically prominent pluralistic tradition.

5 Conclusion

We are now in a better position to appreciate the nature and varieties of pluralism about being. The pluralist maintains that there are ontological differences between certain entities. What makes these differences peculiarly ontological is that they lie in the being and not in the nature of these entities. This makes ontological differences distinct from mere categorial differences. For while there might be a broad categorial distinction between composites and simples, between entities that have and entities that lack proper parts, this distinction merely captures a difference in the nature of these entities, not a difference in their being. It is thus possible to be committed to categorial distinctions—or to what we might describe as merely ontic differences—between entities without thereby being committed to genuinely ontological differences in the being of these entities. To be a pluralist, I have argued, is to be

minimally committed to the claim that there are peculiarly ontological differences between certain entities, differences which lie not in what these entities are, but in the ways of being these entities enjoy. There have certainly been pluralists motivated by considerations of divine simplicity or divine transcendence, who have accepted stronger and more extreme versions of pluralism according to which there are no ontological similarities between certain entities. But these pluralists have simply gone beyond what is minimally required of pluralism as such: namely, the recognition of various ontological differences.

The plausibility of the pluralist's claim that there are peculiarly ontological differences between certain entities relies upon the further claim that there is an intelligible distinction to be drawn between the being and the nature of an entity. To maintain this distinction, the pluralist should adopt a thin conception of being according to which the being of an entity does not at all contribute to the nature of that entity. I have suggested that ways of being that are adequately general, qualitatively empty, and appropriately indefinable do not contribute to the nature of the entities that enjoy them. If that's right, then the pluralist who only admits such ways of being can accept a sufficiently thin conception of being. There have been pluralists who have held that the being of certain entities contributes to the nature of those entities and have thus accepted a thick conception of being. But these pluralists have, I think, thereby transgressed against the very distinction that ought to serve as their fundamental charter.

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