

# Grounding and Creaturely Participation in God

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This chapter aims to explore the intersection of Christian theism, a neo-Aristotelian gloss on metaphysical grounding, and creaturely participation in God. In section one, I aim to develop several core tenets at the heart of a theistic participatory ontology as it is found in the Christian tradition, what I call *minimal participatory ontology*. In section two, I examine the contemporary notion of metaphysical grounding, namely the formal and structure features of the grounding relation, and offer a grounding-theoretic framework for understanding a minimal participatory ontology. Finally, in section three, I put forward a neo-Aristotelian account of metaphysical grounding in particular, one that is uniquely suited to capture the central tenets of minimal participatory ontology.

## 1 Minimal Participatory Ontology in the Christian Tradition

At its most basic level, a Christian participatory ontology pertains to the notion that all creaturely being is received being; every aspect of non-God reality finds its ultimate source, foundation, and proper end in the plenitudinous life of the Triune God (Rom.11:36). *That* individual creatures exist at all and are what they are is, in some way or other, metaphysically derivative on God. Of course, a fully-orbed doctrine of creaturely participation in God will include much more besides the mere creaturely reception of being and essence from the Triune Creator. A fully-developed Christian doctrine of creaturely participation will identify and develop the various ways in which the Triune God is the distinctively (efficient) causal source of all creaturely reality, as well as participatory themes throughout the wider theological and philosophical landscape with respect to value (natural law, virtue, evil, beauty), theological anthropology (*imago dei*), Christology, and soteriology (atonement, consummation, salvific and sanctifying grace, etc.), to name a few.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, getting clear on the precise ontological commitments of what I will call a “minimal participatory ontology” is vitally important for at least two reasons. First, it is arguably the case that more fine-grained notions of soteriological participation in God (e.g., deification, union with or participation in Christ) are predicated upon a minimal participatory ontology, the view that creatures derive their very existence and natures from God. While soteriological participation in God cannot plausibly be reduced to minimal participatory ontology, it is arguably

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<sup>1</sup>An excellent introduction to a participatory framework applied to a broad range of theological and philosophical areas is Davison (2019).

founded upon it. Thus, before one builds upon a minimal participatory ontology across the various theological loci, it is important to first get clear on the minimal metaphysical commitments of creaturely participation in God.

Second, among friends of creaturely participation in God, there has been a call for “greater precision” regarding the metaphysics of participation.<sup>2</sup> In section two, I aim to heed these calls for “greater precision” regarding participatory metaphysics by employing a neo-Aristotelian conception of metaphysical grounding at play in contemporary analytic metaphysics. While much work remains to be done concerning the various dimensions of a robust, theistic participatory ontology, my hope is that a contemporary neo-Aristotelian framework can help elucidate and shore up the philosophical foundations of such an idea.

What, exactly, is the minimal metaphysical content of a participatory ontology at work in the classical Christian tradition? Towards this aim, it may be helpful to briefly rehearse what such an ontology is *not*, according to classical Christian theism. First, creatures do not participate in God by way of parthood, by becoming proper parts of the divine nature.<sup>3</sup> From the perspective of classical Christian theism, there is one rather obvious reason why creatures do not participate in God by way of becoming proper parts of the divine nature. Classically understood, the divine nature is absolutely indivisible, and thus metaphysically and mereologically simple; the divine nature is not distributed or divided out into separable ontological bits. Thus, divine simplicity rules out what has been called “mereological panentheism,” the view that the created order is ‘in’ God by way of being a proper part of God (or even contained in God in a more general sense).<sup>4</sup>

Second, one might appeal to divine aseity or ultimacy in order to preclude a second sense in which creatures participate in God, by God’s being a proper part of creatures. Just as I might participate in the activity of hand-clenching by way of the activity of one of my proper parts (my hand), so too I might participate in God by way of the activity of one of my proper parts, God. Against this, Thomas Aquinas (2012: 35) argued (quoting Dionysius) that “There can be no touching Him, i.e. God, ‘nor any other union with Him by mingling part with part.’” In other words, God in no way enters into the composition of any creaturely being, whether as form, matter, or any other type of metaphysical constituent. To do so would, on Aquinas’s view, compromise the absolute metaphysical primacy of God as the *prima causa* of all creaturely reality.<sup>5</sup>

With these two mereological notions of creaturely participation in God set aside, what positive content is there to a minimal participatory ontology according to the classical Christian tradition? For one, creaturely participation in God minimally involves the view that creatures depend for their very existence on God; all non-God reality *is* in virtue of the existence and activity of the Triune God. This minimal claim of creaturely existential dependence is richly attested throughout the span of the Christian tradition, East and West alike. Here, a representative sampling from the Christian tradition will suffice. John of Damascus (1958: 202), for instance, underscores this aspect of creaturely participation in God when he says, “For, toward Him all

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<sup>2</sup>See in particular the work of Gavriluk (2009).

<sup>3</sup>Where  $x$  is a proper part of  $y$  iff  $x$  is a part of  $y$  and  $x$  is not identical to  $y$ .

<sup>4</sup>This would exclude certain forms of panentheism. See Crisp (2019).

<sup>5</sup>For more on the bearing of divine simplicity on contemporary mereological metaphysics, as well as this second line of reasoning developed in more detail, see Inman and Pruss (2019).

things tend, and in Him they have their existence, and to all things He communicates their being in accordance with the nature of each.”<sup>6</sup> Moreover, in his *Monologion* 3, Anselm (2007: 9) argues for the existence of a supreme nature through which all created things exist. He notes, “[T]here must be one thing through which all existing things exist. Therefore, since all existing things exist through that one thing, undoubtedly that one thing exists through himself. So all other existing things exist through another; he alone exists through himself.” For Anselm, it is characteristic of all creatures that they exist *through another*, in this case, through God as the sole, ultimate reality that exists through Himself.

Not only do all creatures exist through the one supreme nature, Anselm (2007: 40) further emphasizes in *Monologion* 31 the radically qualified and attenuated nature of creaturely existence by saying that “the truth of existing is understood to be in the Word, whose essence exists so supremely that in a certain sense it alone exists, whereas in the things that by comparison with him in a certain sense do not exist...” In a similar manner, the Angelic Doctor (2012:451-52) underscores in *Summa Theologiae* I.44.1 the derivative nature of creaturely existence as follows:

It must be said that every being in any way existing is from God. For whatever is found in anything by participation, must be caused in it by that to which it belongs essentially, as iron becomes ignited by fire...God is the essentially self-subsisting Being...Therefore all beings apart from God are not their own being, but are beings by participation.

In short, the existence of creatures is wholly metaphysically derivative; God, by contrast, is wholly metaphysically underived or fundamental in His Being. We can formulate this first tenet of a minimal participatory ontology simply as follows:

(CED) *Creaturely Existential Dependence*: creatures metaphysically depend on God for their existence.

Ultimately, according to CED, the existence of all creaturely being is continuously and graciously received from the hand of God (Rev.4:11); creaturely being *per se* is being by participation in or through the supreme being.

While CED captures a crucial dimension of creaturely participation in God, it does not exhaust the distinctive ways that creatures metaphysically participate in God according to the Christian tradition. Traditionally, creatures not only derive their existence from God, they also derive *what* they are, their natures, from God. According to minimal participatory ontology, both the existence and content of creaturely natures are metaphysically explained, in some fashion, by God. Each and every dimension of created reality is derivative on God in that the rich plenitude of the divine nature itself provides the intelligible content of all creaturely natures.

This additional dimension of creaturely participation as it pertains to the content of creaturely natures in particular is also amply attested in the Christian tradition. Divine exemplarism, the idea that the divine nature itself is the exemplar or pattern after which all creaturely natures

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<sup>6</sup>I owe this citation to Davison (2019: 43).

are produced, has a longstanding precedent in the Christian tradition.<sup>7</sup> Again, consider a few representative examples.<sup>8</sup> According to Origen (1973: I.2-3), in Christ, the Wisdom and eternally begotten Word of God, “there was implicit every capacity and form of the creation that was to be...she [Wisdom] fashions beforehand and contains within herself the species and causes of the entire creation.”<sup>9</sup> Likewise for Augustine (1982: 80-81), all creaturely natures are “created in accord with reasons unique to them,” reasons that “must be thought to exist nowhere but in the very mind of the Creator.” Indeed, Augustine goes on to underscore, “it is by participation in these that whatever is exists in whatever manner it does.” As Andrew Davison (2019: 97-98) points out concerning Augustine’s exemplarism, “the origin and archetypes of human beings, or of trees or beds, or of goodness or justice, do not lie in some eternal and free-floating forms of human beings, trees or beds, goodness or justice. According to Augustine, their origin is in God.”<sup>10</sup>

Additionally, Anselm (2007:17), in underscoring the rationale for divine exemplarism with respect to its connection to creation, notes that “there is no way anyone could make something rationally unless something like a pattern (or, to put it more suitably, a form of likeness or rule) of the thing to be made already existed in the reason of the maker.” Indeed, Anselm (2007: 40, 128) says elsewhere that when it comes to created things that “have been made something through him and in accordance with him, there is judged to be an imitation of that supreme essence” and “whatever is, truly is, insofar as it is what it is in the supreme truth.” Thomas Aquinas (2012:180) also echoes this rich divine exemplarist tradition by claiming that “In the same way natural things are said to be true in so far as they express the likeness of the species that are in the divine mind. For a stone is called true, which possesses the nature proper to a stone, according to the preconception in the divine intellect.” While, for Aquinas, particular creaturely natures are expressions of a mere likeness of the mode of existence those natures have in the divine nature, such natures truly imitate or resemble the rich, qualitative plenitude of the divine nature itself. Lastly, one can find clear articulations of divine exemplarism in a host of sixteenth and seventeenth century Protestant divines.<sup>11</sup> Consider one such Protestant divine, William Ames (1968: 95):

The idea of all things is the divine essence, meaning that essence understood by God himself and imitable by his creatures—at least the image or vestige of that perfection may be expressed in some way in creatures. That is, the creatures themselves, so far as they are conceived in the divine mind, are the idea or image of that nature which they have in themselves...therefore all things are first in his mind before they

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<sup>7</sup>For outstanding treatments of divine exemplarism in the Christian tradition see Boland (1996), Doolan (2014), Te Velde (1995), and Ward (2020). See Davison (2019: ch. 4) and Ward (2020: section 7) for the explicit connection between divine exemplarism or the theory of divine ideas to a participatory ontology in particular.

<sup>8</sup>My aim in offering these samples from the Christian tradition is to merely point the reader to a longstanding and deeply entrenched pattern in Christian reflection on the nature God and creation. I make no attempt to be comprehensive here.

<sup>9</sup>I owe this citation to McIntosh (2012: 368).

<sup>10</sup>Davison (2019:97-98).

<sup>11</sup>The tradition of divine exemplarism spans the post-Reformation and Enlightenment periods, and extends well into the nineteenth century. See Ames (1968:95), Muller (2017), van Mastricht (2019: 258), Crisp (2020), and Bavinck (2004: 206), respectively.

are in themselves. In us the things themselves are the pattern and our knowledge is the image of them. But in God the divine knowledge is the pattern and the things themselves are the image or express likeness of it.

Consequently, given the centrality of the notion that God is the exemplar or pattern for all creaturely natures in the Christian tradition, we can add the following additional tenet to minimal participatory ontology:

(CND) *Creaturely Nature Dependence*: creatures metaphysically depend on God for their natures.

With respect to both CED and CND, then, God is the ultimate metaphysical fount of created being and essence; all chains of creaturely existential and essential dependence ultimately terminate in the triune God.

A minimal participatory ontology consisting of CED and CND arguably gives rise to the following additional tenet of minimal participatory ontology regarding God's metaphysical ultimacy and priority to all created reality:

(DF) *Divine Fundamentality*: God is absolutely fundamental and metaphysically prior to all created reality.

To say that God is absolutely fundamental in this sense is to say that God is the ultimate ontological terminus for all chains of creaturely existential and essential dependence. Ultimately, both the existence of the creaturely order itself, as well as its diverse qualitative essential structure obtain *in virtue of* the nature and activity of God. As such, the kind of metaphysical dependence relation operative in CED, CND, and DF is asymmetric in that it carves out a distinctive metaphysical ordering relation between creatures and God; God alone *exists* and is *what* God is in an unparticipated manner, we might say. As metaphysically fundamental in every way, God is metaphysically prior to creatures; as metaphysically derivative in every way, creatures are metaphysically posterior to God.

Lastly, it is important to identify several theistic explanatory theses that follow quite naturally from the conjunction of CED, CND, and DF, theses that could be included either as an essential tenet of minimal participatory ontology, or perhaps as a natural corollary to it.<sup>12</sup> Note that all three tenets of a minimal participatory ontology (CED, CND, and DF) carve out the necessary metaphysical structure needed to back metaphysical explanations concerning *why* creatures ultimately exist and are what they are, explanations that ultimately terminate in facts about the existence, nature, and activity of God.<sup>13</sup>

Intuitively, metaphysical explanation holds between at least two propositions or facts and is thought to be a non-causal variety of explanation; arguably, not all ontological explanatory

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<sup>12</sup>If one thinks that facts are the primary (perhaps sole) relata of the grounding relation, then the explanatory theses to follow will play a more central role in outlining a minimal participatory ontology. On my own view, as facts are less fundamental than their constituent entities, it is the grounding relations that hold between entities that determine which facts obtain.

<sup>13</sup>That is, assuming what Jaegwon Kim (1988) has called "explanatory realism", the view that explanations track objective dependence relations in the world.

structure in reality is carved out by (efficient) causal relations. Some fact F, say the apple's exemplifying a redness trope or the universal *redness*, metaphysically explains some fact G, say the apple's being red, only if G obtains *because* of F and not vice versa, where the sense of 'because' here is commonly believed to track something deeper than an (efficient) causal explanatory relation (though it may share similarities with such a notion).<sup>14</sup>

If all creaturely dimensions of reality are ontologically dependent on God along the lines of CED, CND, and DF, it is a natural step to think that all *metaphysical explanations* concerning facts about creaturely existence and the content of creaturely natures also terminate in theistic facts about God. Call an "existence-fact" ( $[x]$ ) a fact pertaining to the existence of a creature  $x$ , and an "essential-fact" ( $[\Box_x]$ ) a fact concerning the nature or essence of  $x$ . We have, then, the following expansive, theistic explanatory thesis:

(TEB) *Theistic Explanatory Breadth*: Necessarily, for any creature  $x$ , and for any  $[x]$  and  $[\Box_x]$  that obtains, there is some theistic fact (or set of facts)  $[G]$  that obtains such that the obtaining of  $[G]$  metaphysically explains the obtaining of  $[x]$  and the obtaining of  $[\Box_x]$ .

As a thesis about the order of metaphysical explanation between facts about God and facts about creaturely existence and creaturely natures, TEB fits quite naturally within a minimal participatory ontology that includes objective, metaphysical ordering relations between God and creatures along the lines of CED, CND, and DF. If asymmetric relations of metaphysical dependence hold between creatures and God, and God is metaphysically prior to creatures (and not vice versa), then such structure plausibly supports metaphysical explanatory relations between God and creatures as well; facts concerning the existence and natures of creatures are explained in terms of facts about God, whether facts about His nature or activity (or some combination thereof). For instance, the fact that tigers and tulips exist and have the biological natures they do (including the diverse, qualitative content of those natures) is explained by some fact or facts about God.

Since all creaturely beings and natures are derivative on God according to CED and CND, theistic facts about God's nature and activity serve to metaphysically explain the existence and qualitative nature of each creature. We might even go so far as to say that on a robust theistic participatory ontology, perhaps all "explanation-eligible"<sup>15</sup> facts about creatures are metaphysically explained by facts about God; there are no non-divine facts that fall outside of the explanatory scope of the existence, nature, and activity of the Triune God (Rom. 11:36).

To be clear, TEB is a thesis about explanatory *scope*, not explanatory *completeness*.<sup>16</sup> The aforementioned claim at the heart of TEB is that among the explanatory grounds for why some creaturely fact obtains will be some theistic fact or set of theistic facts. As far as I can tell, TEB in no way rules out the additional claim that some creaturely facts are also explained by other

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<sup>14</sup>For those who gloss metaphysical grounding or explanation in terms similar to causation, i.e., "metaphysical causation", see Schaffer (2016) and Wilson (2018).

<sup>15</sup>I owe this fine phrase to Murphy (2011:62).

<sup>16</sup>This distinction is helpfully emphasized by Murphy (2011:62).

creaturely facts. For example, one might think that among the explanatory grounds for the obtaining of facts concerning free creaturely actions are also facts about the existence and activity of free agents.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the theistic explanatory thesis in question does not entail that facts about God are the *sole* explanatory grounds for each and every creaturely fact.<sup>18</sup>

We can supplement TEB, as a thesis concerning explanatory scope, with a thesis of theistic explanatory *immediacy* that also fits well within a minimal participatory ontology: the way in which theistic facts metaphysically explain all existence-facts and essential-facts concerning creatures is in no way mediated. More specifically, we can supplement TEB above to generate the following:

(TEI) *Theistic Explanatory Immediacy*: Necessarily, for any creature  $x$ , and for any  $[x]$  and  $[\Box_x]$  that obtains, there is some theistic fact (or set of facts)  $[G]$  that obtains such that the obtaining of  $[G]$  metaphysically explains the obtaining of  $[x]$  and the obtaining of  $[\Box_x]$ , and there is no creaturely fact or set of facts  $[S]$  (not including  $[x]$  or  $[\Box_x]$ ) that obtains such that God metaphysically explains  $[x]$  or  $[\Box_x]$  by way of metaphysically explaining the obtaining of  $[S]$ .

On TEI, for each and every existence and essential fact about creatures that obtains, God is immediately explanatorily relevant to its obtaining. TEI helps ground the notion that God plays an up-front, non-instrumental ontological role in explaining facts concerning the existence and qualitative natures of creatures. Kathryn Tanner (1988:84), in the spirit of both TEB and TEI, puts this emphatically as follows, “[E]verything non-divine must be talked about as existing in a relation of total and immediate dependence upon God.”<sup>19</sup>

## 2 Metaphysical Grounding and Minimal Participatory Ontology

We have thus far seen how a minimal participatory ontology can be stated in terms of relations of existential and essential metaphysical dependence (CED, CND, and DF), as well as two metaphysical explanatory theses backed by these relations (TEB and TEI). I now want to aim to show how a contemporary, neo-Aristotelian account of the nature of metaphysical grounding in particular can help support each of these ontological claims at the heart of a minimal participatory ontology.

In recent years, the notion of metaphysical grounding has received renewed attention by analytic metaphysicians and considered by many to be a helpful piece of metaphysical machinery. It has been argued that an appeal to grounding as a form of non-causal, metaphysical dependence improves our understanding of truthmaking (Schaffer 2009; Lowe 2009b, Inman 2012), physicalism (Schaffer 2009; Loewer 2001: 39), intrinsicity (Witmer et al. 2005), objective similarity

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<sup>17</sup>For more on the claim that both God and creatures provide dual, non-competitive metaphysical explanations for certain facts regarding creaturely action, see Davison (2019: ch. 9), Grant (2019), and Koons (2002).

<sup>18</sup>This, perhaps, is enough to safeguard against the charge of occasionalism. See Grant (2019).

<sup>19</sup>For a defense of something similar to TEI see Philip Quinn (1988:87,98). I owe these citations to Robert Garcia (2015: 114).

(Sider 2012), perfectly natural properties (Schaffer 2004), the nature of non-causal explanation (Audi 2012), trope inherence (Lowe 2006), and an overall realist approach to metaphysics (Fine 2001; Schaffer 2009).

As a result, grounding has been hailed as a unified and theoretically fruitful notion that undergirds a variety of concepts in metaphysics. As the literature on metaphysical grounding is expansive, ever-expanding, and fraught with disagreement, it is beyond the scope of this chapter to argue for the specific account of metaphysical grounding I offer below. Rather, my aim is to unpack a neo-Aristotelian view of grounding that can be put to use in illuminating the minimal participatory ontology outlined in section 1.

## 2.1 The Nature of Metaphysical Grounding

In the broadest sense, I am inclined to think that the relation of “metaphysical grounding” picks out a general type of structure-making relation, one that serves to carve out the distinctively metaphysical structure of reality. Along these lines, I adopt a version of what is known as *grounding monism*, the view that there is a single, fundamental grounding relation.<sup>20</sup> Following Bradley Rettler (2017:13-14), this single, fundamental grounding relation, call it Grounding for short, is essentially defined by its structure-making role of carving out the distinctively metaphysical (non-causal) structure of reality. According to Rettler (2017: 13-14), Grounding “relates the fundamental to the non-fundamental, relates the relatively more fundamental to the relatively less fundamental, lays out the structure of the world, says which things depend on which other things, explains why something exists, and explains why something has a property.”<sup>21</sup>

As such, Grounding is a specification relation that admits of various species (or determinates); there are plausibly many ways of being Grounded. Relations such as ontological dependence, truthmaking, and metaphysical explanation are all plausibly considered to be structure-making relations that carve out the metaphysical structure of reality. What unifies each of the above relations and makes them all species of Grounding is that each is characterized by its role of carving out metaphysical structure in some way. As Rettler (2017:12) puts it,

The essence of truthmaking is that it’s the grounding of a thing’s truth in an object. The essence of metaphysical explanation is that it’s the grounding of a thing’s truth in other, usually more fundamental, truths. The essence of ontological dependence is that it’s the grounding of a thing’s existence in another thing’s existence.

Consequently, “grounding” is multivocal in that it picks out different species of Grounding in different contexts, whether ontological dependence, truthmaking, or metaphysical explanation.

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<sup>20</sup>See Fine (2012).

<sup>21</sup>Bennett (2017) takes a genus-species approach to what she calls “building relations”. This view also has precedent in Rodriguez-Pereyra (2015). Rodriguez-Pereyra (2015: 519) notes, “Grounding is the non-causal generic relation of *being F in virtue of* (or, equivalently, the generic relation of *being F non-causally in virtue of*) Thus a relation is a case or species of grounding if it is a specification of the non-causal generic relation of *being F in virtue of*. Therefore, truthmaking is a case or species of grounding since it is the non-causal relation of *being true in virtue of*: the proposition <Socrates is white> is true in virtue of the fact that Socrates is white. Similarly, *being right in virtue of*, *being blue in virtue of*, *existing in virtue of*, and many other such relations are also cases or species of grounding.”



If “grounding” is multivocal in this way it is important to specify which particular species of Grounding one has in view when it comes to explicating a minimal participatory ontology in ground-theoretic terms. As we have seen in section 1, CED and CND together carve out several deep metaphysical dependence relations that hold between creatures and God. Consequently, as a particular species of Grounding that holds between entities in particular, the relation of ontological dependence seems to nicely fit the bill when it comes to explicating CED and CND within a contemporary grounding-theoretic framework.

Moreover, in section 1 we outlined two explanatory theses, TEB and TEI, that are founded upon CED and CND and are perhaps corollaries of a minimal participatory ontology. Since TEB and TEI are distinctively explanatory theses about creaturely facts (truths or states of affairs) and their relation to facts about God, it is natural to think that the species of Grounding involved here is that of metaphysical explanation. Accordingly, the created order is metaphysically grounded in God along the lines of TEB and TEI in the sense that facts about the existential and essential structure of the created order immediately obtain in virtue of theistic facts, and not vice versa. Along these lines, God is explanatorily ultimate in that the class of absolutely fundamental facts or truths are coextensive with theistic facts; there are no non-theistic facts that are absolutely, metaphysically fundamental or ungrounded.<sup>22</sup>

By my lights, a comprehensive account of a minimal participatory ontology in ground-theoretic terms should invoke both species of Grounding, ontological dependence and metaphysical explanation. But, for my limited purposes here, I’ll aim to unpack a minimal participatory ontology within a grounding framework exclusively in terms of ontological dependence. Thus, I speak of “metaphysical grounding” in what follows, I mean to pick out the relation of ontological dependence whose relata are entities, broadly construed.

## 2.2 The Structure of Metaphysical Grounding

According to our minimal participatory ontology outlined in section one, creaturely beings *exist* (CED) and *are what they are* (CND) ultimately in virtue of the existence, nature, and/or the activity of the Triune God.<sup>23</sup> *That* creatures exist at all, *which* creatures exist, and *what* individual creatures are fundamentally is metaphysically grounded in God. Moreover, creaturely beings and the content of their creaturely natures are metaphysically grounded in God, *and not vice versa*; God is the ultimate metaphysical ground of all non-God reality, according to DF. In offering a grounding-theoretic framework as a helpful guide to unpacking a minimal participatory ontology, it is absolutely vital to identify a particular species of metaphysical grounding that supports this crucial ontological asymmetry between God and creatures.<sup>24</sup> As we will see in section three,

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<sup>22</sup>Of course, one might take one particular species or determinate of Grounding to be more fundamental than another, say grounding relations between facts or truths as more fundamental than grounding relations between entities.

<sup>23</sup>Additionally, all facts pertaining to the existence, nature, and activity of creatures is in some way grounded in the being, nature, and activity of facts about God and his causal activity. I will leave aside this aspect of creaturely participation in God at the level of facts.

<sup>24</sup>Davison (2019:148) helpfully unpacks this asymmetry in the context of what I am calling Creaturely Nature Dependence: “Here, we can also usefully note that the relation between exemplar and likeness runs differently in

not all varieties of this particular species of grounding (again, understood in terms of ontological dependence) support the needed asymmetry for creaturely participation in God.

What might we say about the general formal structure of the type of metaphysical grounding needed to support a minimal participatory ontology along the lines of CED, CND, and DF? To start, I take the domain of entities that can be related of the grounding relation in this context to be maximally general; entities of any ontological category are able to stand in metaphysical grounding relations:

G1: *Topic Neutrality*: entities of any ontological category can serve as the relata of grounding.

Intuitively, created beings of diverse ontological categories such as substances (living organisms), events (baseball games), kinds (horseness), modes (redness), and relations (taller than) are potential relata of the grounding relation.

Moreover, in light of the topic-neutrality of grounding as per G1, the logical form of grounding in this context is best expressed by a two-place predicate “ $x \triangleright y$ ” (which stands for “ $x$  is grounded in  $y$ ”):

$x \triangleright y = x$  is grounded in  $y$

As noted above, grounding is thought to be a type of structure-making relation that carves out (in various ways) the metaphysical structure of reality. Thus, it is plausibly construed as a metaphysical ordering relation that generates a strict partial order over a domain of entities. More precisely,

G2. *Irreflexive*:  $\neg(x \triangleright x)$

G3. *Asymmetric*:  $(y \triangleright x) \rightarrow \neg(x \triangleright y)$

G4. *Transitive*:  $(y \triangleright x \wedge z \triangleright y) \rightarrow (z \triangleright x)$

G2-G4 are formal features of metaphysical grounding that are vital for preserving the core tenets of minimal participatory ontology, in particular, God’s ultimate metaphysical priority with respect to creaturely reality. However, as we will see shortly, arguably not all varieties of this particular species of grounding carve out strict partial ordering relations. Suffice it to say at this point that in order for metaphysical grounding to help elucidate a minimal participatory ontology it is important to preserve grounding as a partial-ordering relation in terms of G2-G4.

Metaphysical grounding can also be either total or partial. To briefly illustrate the difference between total and partial grounding, consider a rather common analysis of the nature of events in terms of the triple  $[o, P, t]$ , where ‘ $o$ ’ stands for some object or objects, ‘ $P$ ’ a property (whether monadic or polyadic), and ‘ $t$ ’ a time. On this account of events, the event  $[o, P, t]$  exists just in

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tis two directions. It is asymmetrical. We say that the image is like the exemplar, which is what likeness means. We only perversely say that the exemplar is like the image: my portrait is like me; I am not ‘like my portrait’. The world bears some of God’s likeness but God is not like the world, not least since the act of creation is constitutive of the creature, but not to the creator.”

case  $o$  has  $P$  at  $t$ . The total grounds for the event of the *the collision of the Titanic with the iceberg on April 14, 1912*, for example, include the objects of the Titanic and the iceberg, the dyadic relation *colliding with*, and the particular time of April 14, 1912. The event is totally grounded in the items that are among its constituents in the sense that no additional creaturely being needs to be added to these three items to fully explain what grounds the event in question. Partial grounding, by contrast, is often defined in terms of total grounding in that while some item, say  $o$ , does not fully ground  $[o, P, t]$  on its own,  $o$ , together with other entities (in this case  $P$  and  $t$ ) provide full grounds for the triple  $[o, P, t]$ . In this way, as a partial ground,  $o$  *contributes* to (but does not exhaust) the grounds of  $[o, P, t]$ .

By my lights, a commitment to minimal participatory ontology along the lines of CED, CND, and DF (together with the auxiliary explanatory theses of TEB and TEI), lends credence to the following claim about God's being at least a partial ground for the existence and nature of any creaturely being:

(TPG) *Theistic Partial Grounding*: For any existing entity  $x$  that is not identical to God,  $x$  is partially grounded in God.

TPG affirms that God is, at the very least, among the metaphysical grounds for any being that is not-God. Of course, God, as universal primary cause, will be the principal ground among the partial grounds of  $x$ .<sup>25</sup>

Whether one opts for TPG or the much stronger thesis that God is the *total* ground for the existence and nature of any creaturely being, will largely depend on one's wider metaphysical and theological commitments. For instance, if one goes for the stronger claim that every being that is not identical to God is totally grounded in God, then this would seem to preclude the view that any creature, understood in the broad sense as any existing entity that is not identical to God, has another creature among its total or partial grounds. Consequently, on this stronger view, there would be no creature-to-creature grounding relations. This would seem to preclude the idea that creaturely agents are at least among the partial grounds for the existence and explanation of events brought about by free creaturely acts of will. But if there are creature-to-creature grounding relations and creatures can serve as the partial grounds for other creatures (as seems plausible), then TPG preserves this possibility while ascribing God metaphysical pride of place as the chief partial ground of every creaturely being; every creaturely being has, at bottom, a theistic ground.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>See Kenneth Pearce (2017) for an interesting grounding proposal that God is the "foundational ground" for the entire sequence of causal events he calls "History". Pearce contends that primary causation in this sense is not a causal relation at all (except perhaps analogically). In a similar vein, Caleb Cohoe (2013: n. 4) remarks, "Aquinas's account of causality is therefore closer to contemporary theories of ontological dependence than it is to the predominant contemporary theories of causality."

<sup>26</sup>TPG, as well as minimal participatory ontology in general, can also serve to provide the ontological scaffolding for a theistic metaethical theory that accounts for creaturely goodness (and perhaps the convertibility of being and goodness) in the fact that all creaturely existence and essence is metaphysically grounded in God. As Mark Murphy (2011:165-66) points out along these lines, "For on this concurrentist view, all created goodness is merely a participation in, a resemblance to, God's goodness. One cannot properly contrast the love appropriately given

In addition to being total or partial, I consider grounding to be both an existence entailing relation and one that holds of necessity. Taking ‘E’ as the existence predicate,<sup>27</sup> grounding is:

G5. *Existence Entailing*:  $\Box(x \triangleright y \rightarrow (Ex \wedge Ey))$

as well as a relation that obtains of necessity (if it obtains at all):

G6. *Necessity*:  $(x \triangleright y \rightarrow \Box(Ex \rightarrow x \triangleright y))$

G5 states that necessarily, if  $x$  is grounded in  $y$  then both  $x$  and  $y$  exist. If creatures are metaphysically grounded in God, then both God and creatures exist. Regarding G6, if  $x$  is grounded in  $y$ , then it is necessarily the case that if  $x$  exists, then  $x$  is grounded in  $y$ . G6 tracks the intuition that an entity’s depending on another entity for its existence is a non-contingent feature of that entity. The very concept of creatureliness, we might say, essentially involves the notion of received or participated being, both the existence and the natures of creatures are metaphysically derivative on God. On G6, if the existence and nature of Fido the dog is metaphysically grounded in God, then it is necessarily the case that if Fido exists, then Fido is grounded in God in such a way.

Let us now turn to the question of the well-foundedness of grounding, which has immediate bearing on our proposed grounding-account of a minimal participatory ontology. We first need to get clear on the relationship between grounding and metaphysical fundamentality. For our purposes here, it will be important to distinguish between the notions of *relative* and *absolute* fundamentality. Something,  $x$ , is relatively fundamental to  $y$  just in case  $x$  grounds  $y$ , and not vice versa. In this case, since  $x$  grounds  $y$ ,  $x$  is more metaphysically fundamental than  $y$ ; likewise, since  $y$  is grounded in  $x$ ,  $y$  is less metaphysically fundamental than  $x$ . The notion of relative fundamentality carves out a hierarchically (asymmetrically) ordered conception of reality where some beings are more or less metaphysically fundamental than others. In general, the notion of metaphysical fundamentality should march in step with the direction of metaphysical grounding. With this notion of relative fundamentality in hand, we can go on to define absolute fundamentality such that,  $x$ , is absolutely fundamental if and only if there is nothing distinct from  $x$ ,  $y$ , such that  $y$  is relatively fundamental to  $x$ . Absolutely fundamental beings are those that are metaphysically ungrounded, full stop.

Now, to say that grounding is well-founded is to say that for any non-empty grounding domain  $D$  there must be at least one metaphysically ungrounded entity in  $D$ .<sup>28</sup> To unpack this idea, call a *minimal element*,  $e$ , of a non-empty grounding domain  $D$  one such that there is no  $y$  in  $D$  such that  $e$  is grounded in  $y$ . A minimal element of  $D$  is one that is not grounded by anything else in  $D$ ;  $e$  is absolutely metaphysically fundamental and foundational with respect to  $D$ . With

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to God and the love appropriately given to created goods if the goodness of created goods is thus derivative of the divine goodness; all love of created goods is, in a way, a love of the divine goodness. This does not entail horrifying instrumentalization or nihilism with respect to created goods...it does, rather, acknowledge that created goods have their goodness through another.”

<sup>27</sup>Where ”Ex” is defined as  $(\exists y)(x = y)$ .

<sup>28</sup>Where a grounding domain  $D$  is *non-empty* just in case there are at least two existing entities in  $D$  (as per G2 and G5) that stand in the grounding relation with respect to one another (remaining neutral as to which grounds which).

this notion of a minimal element for a domain in hand, we can state the well-foundedness of grounding as follows:

*G7: Well-Foundedness:* for any non-empty grounding domain D there is, of necessity, at least one minimal element in D.

G7 is the metaphysical analogue of the axiom of foundation in set theory, that every non-empty set contains a minimal element (as a member), as well as the metaphysical analogue of foundationalism in epistemology, that every chain of epistemic justification terminates in a set of basic beliefs that are non-inferentially justified. The denial of G7 amounts to the possibility that the exhaustive inventory of reality consists entirely of grounded entities: its just one grounded thing after another such that *a* exists in virtue of *b*, *b* exists in virtue of *c*, *c* in virtue of *d*, and so on ad infinitum. On the denial of G7, there is no minimal grounding element and thus no ultimate metaphysical foundation or bedrock to D. By my lights, a minimal participatory ontology entails the metaphysical impossibility of what Bohn (2018:8) calls “infinite descent” in this context, the view that “it is possible that there is no fundamental ground at all.”<sup>29</sup>

Of course, G7 is directly relevant to a core tenet of minimal participatory ontology, that God is absolutely metaphysically fundamental and prior to all created reality (DF).<sup>30</sup> How might we think about DF in ground-theoretic terms along the lines of G7? Suppose we consider the maximally inclusive grounding domain,  $D_I$ , to include not only the creature-to-creature grounding relations that obtain but also the (asymmetric) grounding relations that obtain between God and creatures. We can then formulate DF in ground-theoretic terms along the lines of G7 as follows: God is the minimal element of the most inclusive grounding domain,  $D_I$ . God is the absolute metaphysical foundation of and metaphysically prior to all non-God reality; God alone is the sole (absolutely) ungrounded reality.

In addition to the above theistic reason for affirming G7 as part and parcel of a ground-theoretic account of a minimal participatory ontology, there are additional theoretical reasons why one might endorse G7 as a constraint on metaphysical grounding. Many metaphysicians who feel the pull of G7 justify their acceptance of it on the basis of its naturalness or intuitiveness; G7 strikes them as a reasonable thesis that, in the absence of overriding considerations to the contrary, is more plausible than its denial.<sup>31</sup> Some proponents of G7 take its underlying motivation to be that if there were no lower-bound to the grounding domain of reality, then nothing would exist in reality. Leibniz, for instance, in his June 30, 1704 letter to de Volder stated thus: “Where there is no reality that is not borrowed, there will never be any reality, since it must belong ultimately to some subject.”<sup>32</sup>

Jonathan Schaffer (2010: 62) shares the Leibnizian intuition in that “endless dependence conflicts with the foundationalist requirement that there be basic objects...Being would be infinitely

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<sup>29</sup>In contrast to Bohn (2018:8) who employs the possibility of infinite descent as a potential defeater to the necessity of what he calls “(strong) divine foundationalism” (the view that “anything distinct from God is existentially grounded by God”), I employ the (conditional) necessity of DF as evidence against the possibility of infinite descent.

<sup>30</sup>In fact, several recent versions of the cosmological argument, as in the work of Deng (2020) and Pearce (2017), have appealed explicitly to God as metaphysically foundational in this sense akin principle akin G7.

<sup>31</sup>See Fine (1991: 267).

<sup>32</sup>Quoted in Adams (1994: 335).

deferred, never achieved.” Others simply report their inability to comprehend the denial of G7. On this score, Lowe (1998: 158) candidly states “all real existence must be ‘grounded’ or ‘well-founded’. Such an ‘axiom of foundation’ is quite probably beyond conclusive proof and yet I find the vertiginous implications of its denial barely comprehensible.”

Wholly apart from a commitment to a minimal participatory ontology, then, one can argue that accepting G7 has a certain theoretical utility in that it offers a unified explanatory ground for the existence of each grounded entity in a domain.<sup>33</sup> In a domain deprived of a minimal element, the existence of each grounded entity is explained in terms of a distinct (albeit immediate) ground or collection of grounds, which are themselves grounded entities. Accepting the well-foundedness of grounding, on the other hand, allows the ungrounded entity to serve as one and the same explanation for the existence of each grounded entity in that domain. This preserves the theoretical principle that it is better to have a single explanatory ground for each phenomena (the phenomena here is the existence of each individual grounded entity) than to have a distinct explanatory ground for each phenomena.

Even more, positing at least one ungrounded entity in a grounding domain lends an explanation for not only the existence of each grounded entity in that domain, but also for the existence of grounded entities *per se* in that domain. It is one thing for there to be an explanation for the existence of each grounded entity in a domain, quite another for there to be an explanation for why the class of grounded entities exist in that domain *in the first place*.<sup>34</sup> Accepting G7 affords both theoretical simplicity as well as explanatory power with respect to the existence of grounded entities. Of course, such theoretical simplicity and explanatory power provide independent, theoretical warrant for the core tenets of a minimal participatory ontology (CED and CND) and its natural corollaries (TEB and TEI).

### 3 Neo-Aristotelian Grounding for Creaturely Participation

We have been concerned up to this point with getting clear on the formal and structural features of a particular species of Grounding, viz. ontological dependence, and how exactly it relates to minimal participatory ontology. However, it is important to point out that ontological dependence, as a particular species of Grounding, is also a genus that itself admits of a variety of different species, not all of which are equally suited to secure CED, CND, and DF as core tenets of minimal participatory ontology. And since our immediate context in this chapter is the claim that creatures participate in God by way of both their existence and natures being asymmetrically grounded in God, it is important to identify a particular species of metaphysical grounding that fits the bill in question.<sup>35</sup> What we are looking for, then, is a species of metaphysical grounding that is both fine-grained enough to account for both existential and essential dependence of

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<sup>33</sup>See Cameron (2008) for instance.

<sup>34</sup>See Pearce (2017) for further argumentation on this point.

<sup>35</sup>My discussion of the varieties of metaphysical grounding follows closely the work of Lowe and Tahko (2015). See Koslicki (2013) for an excellent overview of the varieties of ontological dependence in the neo-Aristotelian literature.

creatures on God (CED and CND), as well as one that supports the metaphysical priority of God with respect to creatures, thus securing the crucial asymmetry between God and creaturely being at the heart of a theistic participatory ontology. By my lights, only a neo-Aristotelian account of grounding is suited for the task.

### 3.1 Modal-Existential Grounding

It is commonplace in contemporary metaphysics to find ordinary grounding claims such as “ordinary composite objects are grounded in their proper parts” and “tropes are grounded in their bearers”. These ordinary grounding claims naturally give expression to the idea that, at the very least, the existence of the one is grounded in the existence of the other(s). Ordinary composite objects exist *in virtue of* the existence and structure of their proper parts; or particularized properties or tropes exist *in virtue of* the existence of their bearers. These grounding claims are very often explicated in modal-existential terms such that it is metaphysically necessary that composite objects (or tropes) exist only if their proper parts (or bearers) exist.

One common way of formulating this variety of existential grounding is in the following modal terms:<sup>36</sup>

$$(RG) \text{ } x \text{ is rigidly existentially grounded in } y =_{def} \Box(Ex \rightarrow Ey)$$

As a rigid form of existential grounding, RG captures the insight that one thing ( $x$ ) may depend on another *specific* entity ( $y$ ) for its existence: it is metaphysically impossible for  $x$  to exist unless  $y$ —*that very entity*—exists.

It would seem that RG naturally fits the bill when it comes to elucidating CED as a core tenet of minimal participatory ontology, the claim that creatures metaphysically depend on a specific entity for their existence, namely God. Surely, it is metaphysically impossible for creatures to exist unless God Himself existed. Yet, there are several good reasons for thinking that RG fails to adequately account for the species of grounding at work in a minimal participatory ontology.

First, recall that creaturely participation in God is asymmetric, creatures *exist* and *are what they are* in virtue of God, not vice versa. Yet, there are plausible instances of RG that are *symmetric*.<sup>37</sup> If so, then  $x$ 's being rigidly existentially grounded in  $y$  doesn't guarantee that  $y$  fails to be rigidly existentially grounded in  $x$ , which would be needed in order to secure the claim that  $y$  is more fundamental than  $x$ .

Consider the following examples of mutual or symmetric existential grounding along the lines of RG. On one particular brand of trope-bundle theory defended by Peter Simons (1994), objects consist of a two-tiered bundle of tropes. On the one hand, the essential features of an object are determined by a particular bundle of mutually dependent tropes (what Simons calls the “nucleus”), while the non-essential features are determined by a further bundle of tropes that inhere in the nucleus. Or consider the grounding relations that obtain between Socrates and his biological life, taken as a temporally extended event. Arguably, the existence of Socrates'

<sup>36</sup>As per section 2.2, here I use the sentential operator ‘E’ for the existence predicate and define it in terms of the existential quantifier:  $Ex =_{def} (\exists y)(x = y)$

<sup>37</sup>See Barnes (2018) and Thompson (2016).

life is rigidly existentially grounded in Socrates (necessarily, it exists only if Socrates exists), and Socrates is rigidly existentially grounded in his biological life (necessarily, he exists only if his life exists). Consequently, it would seem that RG is unable to secure the asymmetry of creaturely existential dependence on God as per CED.

A second, more fatal worry is that RG, as a purely modal-existential species of grounding, is ill-suited to capture an integral dimension of creaturely participation in God, namely, the *essential* dependence of creatures on God along the lines of CND. Recall that minimal participatory ontology consists of the view that creaturely natures are patterned after God along the lines of divine exemplarism; both the existence and the content of creaturely essences are metaphysically grounded in God.

However, following the contemporary influential work of Kit Fine (1994, 1995) and other neo-Aristotelian-minded philosophers, the essence or nature of a thing is arguably not reducible to what is modally required for its existence. In other words, what is true of a creature in every possible world in which it exists does not adequately capture its essence, *what* it is fundamentally. If so, then a purely modal-existential account of grounding along the lines of RG will not suffice to adequately capture the way in which the essences of creatures are grounded in God.

While a neo-Aristotelian defense of the irreducibility of essence to modality is well-beyond the scope of this chapter, let me offer one Finean counterexample to a purely modal account of essence.<sup>38</sup> While modal requirement for existence may be necessary for a thing's essence (after all, how could a creature be essentially F if it didn't have F in every possible world in which it exists?), it is not sufficient to adequately capture what a particular creature is fundamentally.

Consider Fine's (1994) now well-known counterexample involving Socrates (*s*) and his singleton set {Socrates}, the set whose sole member is Socrates. On standard modal set theory, necessarily, if Socrates exists then he is a member of his singleton set:

$$(a) \Box(Es \rightarrow s \in \{Socrates\})$$

If modal requirement for existence were both necessary and sufficient to capture the essence of Socrates, then (a) would be equivalent to the following essentialist thesis, where " $\Box_s$ " is to be read as the essentialist operator "it is part of the essence of *s* that:"

$$(b) \Box_s(s \in \{Socrates\})$$

But, argues Fine and others, (b) seems deeply implausible. It is difficult to see how Socrates's essence, *what* Socrates is fundamentally, involves reference to any set-theoretic entity whatsoever. As Fine (1994) puts it, "There is nothing in the nature of a person, if I may put it this way, which demands that he belongs to this or that set or which demands, given that the person exists, that there even be any sets."

More precisely, the worry here is that there is an important *modal symmetry* between Socrates and his singleton across possible worlds where Socrates exists; necessarily, if Socrates exists then his singleton exists (and vice versa). Yet, there is arguably an *essential asymmetry* between Socrates and his singleton regarding their fundamental nature or identity; while the essence of

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<sup>38</sup>For further detail see Fine (1994), Oderberg (2007), and my (2018).



{Socrates} is what it is in virtue of Socrates, the essence of Socrates is not what it is in virtue of his singleton, {Socrates}. What {Socrates} is fundamentally seems wholly irrelevant to what Socrates is fundamentally. Thus, to reduce *what* a creature is fundamentally to what is true of a creature in every possible world in which it exists is wholly inadequate. In the place of a purely modal account of essence, Fine recommends a primitive, non-modal account of essence that is best unpacked in terms of the more traditional notion of Aristotelian real definition.

### 3.2 Essential-Existential Grounding

If RG is ill-suited to account for the core tenets of minimal participatory ontology, CED and CND in particular, what might we offer in its place? I'm inclined to think that it is only if we take the neo-Aristotelian turn and opt for a non-modal or essentialist notion of existential grounding that we can adequately make progress in our attempt to formulate a ground-theoretic framework of a minimal participatory ontology in terms of CED, CND, and DF.

With the notion of essence as primitive, we can formulate the following non-modal species of existential grounding, call it “essential<sub>E</sub> grounding”:

$$(REG) \ x \text{ is rigidly essentially}_E \text{ grounded in } y =_{def} \Box_x (Ex \rightarrow Ey)$$

REG states  $x$  is rigidly essentially<sub>E</sub> grounded in  $y$  if and only if it is part of the essence of  $x$  such that if  $x$  exists, then  $y$  exists. In important ways, REG improves on RG as a species of metaphysical grounding that aims to capture the notion of creaturely participation in God along the lines of CED and CND. For one, it is crucial to note that REG is more fine-grained than RG precisely because it entails (but is not entailed by) its respective modal counterpart (RG); that is, while every case of rigid essential<sub>E</sub> grounding is a case of rigid existential grounding, the converse does not hold. More specifically, if it is part of the nature or essence of Socrates' singleton that it exist only if Socrates exists (REG), then it is necessary that if Socrates' singleton exists then Socrates exists (RG). In general, since the essence or real definition of a singleton set involves reference to the existence of its sole member, the existence of the singleton both *essentially* and *existentially* necessitates the existence of its sole member.

Likewise, as a non-modal species of grounding, REG does not entail that the essence of the ground is wholly *irrelevant* to the existence of that which is grounded. Recall that according to RG, since it is necessarily the case that in every world in which Socrates exists his singleton exists, Socrates is rigidly existentially grounded in his singleton; Socrates, the grounded, necessitates the existence of his singleton, the ground. Yet intuitively, as we noted above, the existence of a set-theoretic entity seems wholly irrelevant to whether or not Socrates exists.

In contrast to RG, the neo-Aristotelian move to REG has no such implication. According to REG, from the fact that it is necessarily the case that in every world in which Socrates exists his singleton exists, it does not follow that Socrates is rigidly essentially<sub>E</sub> grounded in his singleton; it is no part of the *essence* of Socrates that he exists only if such a set-theoretic entity exists. Again, the relevant grounding ordering intuitively runs *from* Socrates *to* Socrates' singleton, not the other way around. Similarly, from the fact that it is necessarily the case that in every world in which Socrates exists the temporal event that is his life exists, it does not follow that therefore

Socrates is rigidly essentially<sub>E</sub> grounded in his life; arguably the event exists and *is what it is* (and *which* particular event it is) in virtue of Socrates, not the other way around. In so far as REG entails but is not entailed by RG, it rightly models the order of grounding as Socrates is arguably more fundamental than either his singleton or the temporally extended event that is his life.

There is, however, reason to think that even the above non-modal species of grounding in terms of REG is neither fine-grained enough nor suited to support all three core tenets of a minimal participatory ontology (CED, CND, DF). First, some have argued that there are plausible cases of essential<sub>E</sub> grounding that are symmetric, and that arguably *all* forms of existential grounding, whether modal or non-modal, are best characterized as *non-symmetric*. For instance, on certain (realist) structuralist mathematical ontologies that explicate numbers as nodes in a structural network, it is part of the essence of each number that it exists in virtue of the other nodes in the network. If so, then structuralist views in the philosophy of mathematics offer plausible examples of symmetric essential<sub>E</sub> grounding.<sup>39</sup> Thus, REG doesn't appear to be suited to support the crucial asymmetry of creaturely participation in God, nor the core claim outlined in DF that God is absolutely fundamental and metaphysically prior to creatures.

Second, as Kit Fine (1995: 274) and Katherin Koslicki (2013: 51-60) have argued, all forms of existential grounding, whether modal or non-modal, are too weak in so far as they characterize grounding solely in terms of what an entity requires for its existence. There certainly seems to be more to the nature or essence of a thing than what that thing requires for its existence. Perhaps, for instance, there's more to the essence of a lion than what a lion modally requires for its existence (think Aslan).

Some philosophers, for instance, have argued that there are plausible cases where *x* is essentially<sub>E</sub> grounded in *y*, where nevertheless the *identity* of *x* fails to be grounded in the *identity* of *y*. Lowe (2006: 199-200), for instance, has argued that “[v]ery plausibly, an entity can, for example, depend essentially for its *existence* on one or more other entities, without necessarily depending essentially for its *identity* upon those other entities.” Lowe points to an Aristotelian immanent universal, *roundness*, as an example. As an immanent universal, *roundness* is such that it is part of its essence that it exist only if some instance or other exists and is round; thus immanent universals are entities that are essentially<sub>E</sub> grounded in a more broad sense than REG. However, the essence of the universal *roundness*—*what* it is fundamentally and *which* entity it is—does not involve reference to any single round object nor to the totality of all actually existing round objects.

Along similar lines, Fine (1995a: 274) presses the point further,

The present examples [viz. impossible objects and identity properties] highlight a problem that besets any existential account of dependence, whether it be modal or essentialist in form. For, it does not seem right to identify the ‘being’ of an object, its being what it is, with its existence. In one respect, existence is too weak; for there is more to what an object is than its mere existence. In another respect, existence is

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<sup>39</sup>Barnes (2018). Although see Lowe (2012) for a critical discussion of alleged cases of symmetrical identity grounding or dependence (see below) in structuralist ontologies.

too strong; for what an object is, its nature, need not include existence as a part.<sup>40</sup>

It would seem, then, that any form of existential grounding, whether modal or non-modal, is ill-suited to capture the full range of ways in which creaturely natures are grounded in God, not merely in terms of what such natures require for their existence. If so, then a neo-Aristotelian-grounding framework for minimal participatory ontology may want to carve out an even more-fine grained notion of essential grounding strictly in terms of what the thing requires for its *identity* and not merely its existence.

### 3.3 Essential-Identity Grounding

For neo-Aristotelians like Lowe (2005) and Koslicki (2013), essentialist (non-modal) species of grounding admit of further classification to include *identity grounding*, cases where the *identity* of  $x$  and *which* thing of its kind  $x$  is are grounded in the *identity* of  $y$  and *which* thing of its kind  $y$  is. Mark Johnston (2006: 676) captures this more robust connection between essence and grounding nicely,

Associated with the ideas of real definition and essence is the idea of the ontological dependence of one item on another; where an item  $x$  is ontologically dependent on an item  $y$  just when  $y$  features at some point in the full account of the essence of  $x$  (the real definition of  $x$ ), but not vice versa.

In the same vein, Fine (2010:582) notes “One object may be (*ontologically*) *prior* to another in the sense that it is possible to provide an explanation of the identity of the one object, to explain *what it is*, with the help of the other object.”

Following Lowe (1998: 149) we can formulate this further species of essential grounding in the following manner, call it “essential<sub>I</sub> grounding:”

(IG)  $x$  is *essentially<sub>I</sub> grounded* in  $y =_{def}$  there is a function  $\phi$  such that  $\Box_x(x=\phi(y))$ .<sup>41</sup>

IG moves beyond purely existential grounding, whether modal (RG) or non-modal (REG), in the sense that it specifies what is required not simply for  $x$ 's existence per se but what is required for  $x$ 's identity, *what*  $x$  is and *which* thing of a certain kind  $x$  is. The set {Fido, Wilber}, for example, is essentially<sub>I</sub> grounded in its members, Fido and Wilber, in that there is function, the set-formation function, and it is part of the essence of {Fido, Wilber} that it be formed by Fido and Wilber as its members; the identity of the set {Fido, Wilber}, *what* the set is and *which* set it is, is grounded in its specific members.

Along with Lowe (2012), I take essential<sub>I</sub> grounding to be a relation of individuation; if  $x$  essentially<sub>I</sub> grounds  $y$ , then the individuality of  $y$  is fixed by the individuality of  $x$ , where  $x$  serves as the individuator of  $y$ . Since sets are at least partially essentially<sub>I</sub> grounded in their members, Fido and Wilber individuate the set {Fido, Wilber}; *which* set {Fido, Wilber} is fixed by Fido and

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<sup>40</sup> As quoted in Koslicki (2013).

<sup>41</sup> I owe this formulation of Lowe's account of essential-identity dependence to Koslicki (2013: 51).

Wilber.<sup>42</sup> Or, consider once again an ontology of events that construes events as a triple  $[o, P, t]$ , where ‘ $o$ ’ stands for some object or objects, ‘ $P$ ’ a property (whether monadic or polyadic), and ‘ $t$ ’ a time. If  $[o, P, t]$  is essentially<sub>I</sub> grounded in  $o$ ,  $P$ , and  $t$  as its constituents, then the latter ground not only the essence of  $[o, P, t]$  generally qua event, but also *which* individual event it is, say the sinking of the Titanic (as opposed to the Battle of Hastings). *Which* event  $[o, P, t]$  is fixed by its essential<sub>I</sub> grounds, its individual constituents.

As before, IG entails but is not entailed by the broader species of essential grounding in terms of REG. If a set {Fido, Wilber} is essentially<sub>I</sub> grounded (IG) in its individual members Fido and Wilber, then it is rigidly existentially (RG) as well as rigidly essentially<sub>E</sub> grounded (REG) in Fido and Wilber as its members. Since IG moves beyond mere modal and non-modal *existential* grounding, it is uniquely situated to account for the core tenet of CND, that each and every aspect of creaturely essences are metaphysically grounded in God. Moreover, since IG entails both forms of existential grounding, both modal (RG) and non-modal (REG), IG also secures CED, that the existence of creatures is metaphysically grounded in God.

We are left with the question of whether this neo-Aristotelian conception of grounding in IG secures the needed asymmetry at the heart of a minimal participatory ontology. As a species of non-modal grounding, essential<sub>I</sub> grounding moves beyond a view of grounding in purely existential terms (whether modal or non-modal) and arguably provides the requisite asymmetry we are looking for when it comes to God’s supreme existential and essential priority over creatures. While two entities may be mutually essentially<sub>E</sub> grounded in one another, this is arguably not the case for essential<sub>I</sub> grounding.<sup>43</sup>

As a strict partial ordering relation (G2-G4), IG is well-suited to carve out relations of metaphysical priority and posteriority and support the notion of one concrete entity’s being more or less fundamental than another. For instance, an event’s being metaphysically posterior to or less fundamental than its constituents is understood in terms of the fact that the event is essentially<sub>I</sub> grounded in its constituents, and not vice versa. Similarly, an occupant of spacetime is metaphysically prior to its spatial boundary precisely because the former metaphysically fixes *what* the boundary is in general, as well as *which* boundary it is in particular, and not vice versa. Lastly, since tropes or modes are essentially<sub>I</sub> grounded in their bearers, the very identity of a mode—*what* a redness trope of an apple is in general, as well as *which* redness trope it is in particular—are grounded in the identity of its bearer and not vice versa. We could multiply examples.

The idea that all creatures, great and small, are essentially<sub>I</sub> grounded in God seems to encompass everything we want in a minimal participatory ontology. In virtue of being essentially<sub>I</sub> grounded in God, the very existence (CED) and content of all creaturely natures (CND) is what it is in virtue of being so grounded.

Let me at least attempt to offer a preliminary sketch of a more fine-grained theistic gloss on how all creaturely natures are asymmetrically grounded in God (CND) along the lines of IG, using the example of a particular lion named Rory. The complete essential profile of Rory the

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<sup>42</sup>However, if one opts for TPG as stated in section 2.2 (for any existing entity  $x$  that is not identical to God,  $x$  is partially grounded in God), God is also a partial ground of {Fido, Wilber}; in fact, on TPG, no existing entity that is not identical to God has wholly non-theistic grounds.

<sup>43</sup>See Lowe (2012) for further defense of the asymmetry of essential<sub>I</sub> grounding.

lion—those leonine features that constitute the identity of a lion in general (its being living, mammalian, carnivorous, etc.) as well as Rory in particular (Rory being the very lion that she is)—are all grounded in and resemble the rich plenitude of the divine nature as per divine exemplarism.

More specifically in terms of IG, suppose we take the primitive “creaturely resemblance to God” function as a function ( $\phi$ ) from existing creatures to divine ideas of existing creatures, and let “ $I_R$ ” stand for God’s idea of Rory the lion in particular ( $y$ ), which includes all general leonine features that are constitutive of the identity of a lion (living, mammalian, carnivorous, etc.) as well as the particularity that is definitive of Rory as an individual instance of the general leonine kind. On divine exemplarism, each and every existing creature resembles a particular intentional aspect of the divine mind in precisely this way. Thus, Rory the lion is essentially<sub>I</sub> grounded in  $I_R$  along the lines of IG in so far as there is a function  $\phi$ —“the creaturely resemblance to God” function—such that it is part of the essence of Rory that she (and she alone) resembles God with respect to  $I_R$  in particular ( $y$ ). Rory, we might say, is the unique creaturely expression of that particular intentional aspect of the divine mind.<sup>44</sup> Another way of saying this is that it is part of the essence of Rory that she is the unique creaturely being she is in virtue of resembling  $I_R$ , God’s idea of Rory. It is not part of the essence of a distinct lion, say Leo the lion of MGM fame, that it resemble God by way of  $I_R$ , just as it is in no way part of the essence of the set {Fido, Wilber} that it resemble God by way of God’s idea of the set {Larry, Moe, Curly}.

Since essential<sub>I</sub> grounding is arguably a relation of individuation, not only is the general essence of Rory (what it is to be a lion) essentially<sub>I</sub> grounded in  $I_R$ , but so is Rory’s creaturely particularity, *which* particular lion Rory is of the general leonine kind. God himself is (at the very least) a partial essential<sub>I</sub> ground for the existence and essence of each existing creature (as per TPG in section 2.2). The asymmetry of IG here is crucial in the case of creaturely participation: Rory exists and is the way she is essentially—indeed is the very lion she is—ultimately in virtue of the particularity and plenitude of God’s mental life, and not vice versa. Echoes of a broadly similar conception of creaturely participation in God along the broad lines of IG can be found throughout the Christian tradition. Recall once again Augustine’s previous remark that all creaturely natures are “created in accord with the reasons unique to them,” reasons that “must be thought to exist nowhere but in the very mind of the Creator.” Along the same lines, Aquinas notes that “all creatures are nothing but a kind of real expression and representation of those things which are comprehended in the conception of the divine Word.”<sup>45</sup>

In conclusion, I have tried to show how a distinctively neo-Aristotelian gloss on metaphysical grounding is best suited to provide the most promising ground-theoretic framework for a minimal participatory ontology along the lines of CEN, CND, and DF. The neo-Aristotelian move from a modal (RG) to a non-modal species of grounding (REG), which assumes the irreducibility of essence to purely modal notions, provided the proper ontological framework to account for the dependence of both the existence *and* essence of creatures on God (CND). Second, the further neo-Aristotelian move from a mere essential-existential variety of grounding (one that

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<sup>44</sup>For discussion of whether a view like this is compatible with a full-blooded doctrine of divine simplicity see Pruss (2011: 274-276) and Ward (2020: 33-38).

<sup>45</sup>I owe this citation to Davison (2019:103). For a similar account see Ames (1968:95) and Anselm (2007: 40).

limited essential grounding to what a thing requires for its existence by nature) to the notion of essential-identity grounding (IG) provided a fuller conception of essential dependence as well as the requisite asymmetry at the heart of a minimal participatory ontology; God alone is absolutely metaphysically fundamental in that, for God, there is no distinct entity in which God is essentially<sub>I</sub> grounded, and all non-God reality is essentially<sub>I</sub> grounded in Him.

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