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## Identity, Nature and Ground

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By Joel Katzav

What does the qualitative identity of objects consist in? A standard response is that it consists in the possession of properties and relations. If all of an object's properties and relations are specified, all there is to be specified about its qualitative as opposed to its numerical identity will have been specified. Another response adds that kinds, conceived of as an irreducible category of entity, also play a part in fixing the qualitative identities of objects. In what follows, two arguments are offered according to which these views are insufficient. Both lead to the conclusion that the qualitative identities of objects consist in part in their natures being grounded in what differs from entities, that is to say in something like conditions for the possibility of entities. The idea of such grounding will be clarified, and some of the criteria of adequacy for theses about it will be spelled out. Further, the implications of the claim that the natures of objects are grounded for the problems of the one and the many will be discussed.

### I. Identity, Properties, Relations and Kinds

*Properties* are (or can be) possessed by objects, and are (or can be) ways in which objects differ or are alike. *Relations* are (or can be) possessed by objects, and are (or can be) ways in which ordered  $n$ -tuples of objects differ or are alike.<sup>1</sup> It is common to suppose that the qualitative identity of an object consists just in all its properties and relations.

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<sup>1</sup> The possibility that there are properties of properties that are not possessed by objects is not considered here. Nothing of significance will turn upon this.

This view is inevitable given two recently pervasive conceptions of objects. The first conceives of objects as bundles of properties united by what Bertrand Russell called a relation of compresence.<sup>2</sup> Thus, it allows only properties and relations to contribute to the qualitative identities of objects. The second conceives of objects as comprising *bare particulars*, that is to say substrata devoid of properties, and the properties and relations that these possess.<sup>3</sup> While this view does recognize bare particulars over and above properties and relations, it too can recognize only properties and relations as contributing to the qualitative identities of objects. Bare particulars are, by definition, devoid of features. They are merely supposed to individuate objects, and thus to allow an account of numerical diversity.

But not all agree that properties and relations exhaust the qualitative identities of objects. Some follow Aristotle in supposing *kinds* to be an irreducible ontological category. Objects, they claim, are *instances* of kinds. On the other hand, they claim, objects *possess* properties and relations.<sup>4</sup> For these Aristotelians, then, the qualitative identity of objects consists not only in their properties and relations but also in the kinds that they are instances of.

For brevity, let us say that an object's *nature* includes just its properties, its relations and, if kinds are to be acknowledged as a distinct category, the kinds it is an instance of. The present paper's claim will then be that the qualitative identities of objects consist in more than their natures. The view that dominates the current debate about the

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<sup>2</sup> Proponents of the bundle view include G. F. Stout (1921-3), Russell (1948), B. Blanshard (1962), D. C. Williams (1986) and K. Campbell (1990).

<sup>3</sup> Proponents of the substrate view include C. B. Martin (1980) and D. M. Armstrong (1997).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, M. J. Loux (1978) and E. J. Lowe (1998).

qualitative identities of objects is that their qualitative identities consist just in their natures.

## II. Ground and Nature

How could the (qualitative) identities of objects consist in more than their natures? If their natures are grounded in what differs from *entities*. This idea needs to be clarified somewhat before it can be argued for. To begin with, we can acquire something of a negative idea of grounds that differ from entities by delimiting the class of putative entities. This class includes anything that, on some interpretation of the terms ‘property’ and ‘relation’, possesses (or can possess) properties or relations, or which is (or can be) an instance of a kind.<sup>5</sup> Properties, relations and kinds also count as putative entities, even if they themselves are not supposed to possess properties or relations. The class of putative entities thus includes particulars, whether objects or tropes, abstract or concrete, existent or subsistent; it also includes universals, whether determinate or determinable, properties or relations or kinds.

Something of a positive grip on the idea of grounds that differ from entities – henceforth simply grounds – can be acquired by considering one view about how the natures of objects and other entities might be grounded.<sup>6</sup> Thus, consider the view that a ground is a condition for the possibility of the natures of entities. Each ground or condition would, on this view, contribute a distinct feature to entities’ identities, one that consists in their being grounded in a certain way. For example, one could hold that what

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<sup>5</sup> The question of which interpretations of ‘property’ and ‘relation’ are allowed here will be discussed below.

<sup>6</sup> One can think of the natures of entities other than objects in the same way as the natures of objects, that is to say in terms of properties, relations and kinds. However, nothing significant turns upon this in what follows.

conditions the possibility of entities conditions them so that, among other things, they have determinate spatio-temporal properties and relations. An entity's spatio-temporality would then consist, in part, in its being subject to constraints that its condition imposes upon what it is for it to possess properties and relations, and upon which properties and relations it possesses.<sup>7</sup> It would be wrong, on this view, to think of spatio-temporality as supervening on the determinate spatio-temporal relations and properties of entities. Rather, spatio-temporality is supposed to be a condition to which entities are subject, one that thus confers upon them the feature of being conditioned or grounded in a certain way.

Notice that the use of the term 'feature' is here being extended to cover whatever is part of the identity of an entity, including those of its features that consist in its being grounded and thus that are not part of its nature. 'Feature' is not being used a synonym for 'property'. Notice also that 'condition for the possibility of' is here supposed to be asymmetrical. If *A* conditions the possibility of *B*, *B* does not condition the possibility of *A*. This ensures that no entity can condition its own possibility, and thus that no entity can condition the possibility of entities in general. As is required, conditions for the possibility of entities are distinct from entities.<sup>8</sup>

A few further comments in clarification are still in order. To begin with, the idea that the natures of objects are grounded can now be related to a number of familiar

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<sup>7</sup> Humeans such as D. Lewis (1983, p. 366) and B. van Fraassen (1989, p. 182) tend to be sceptical about the very idea of such constraints. But since they suppose that an understanding of objects' natures is available, they presuppose an idea of such constraints. As will be argued, a grasp of objects' natures presupposes a grasp of their grounds.

<sup>8</sup> Some might suppose an entity that necessitates both its own existence and that of all other entities, and thus an entity that is, in a sense, arguably a condition for the possibility of entities. Although I deny this is a real possibility, I need not maintain so here. I need only maintain that 'being a condition for the possibility of entities' can be understood in a way that allows us to further get a grip on how what differs from entities might ground entities.

ontologies. The above description of grounds as conditions for the possibility of entities will, of course, bring Kant to mind. On one reading of Kant, what he calls the transcendental subject is nothing but such a condition. As such, it cannot be an object. Moreover, and the significance of this will become evident as we proceed, it can neither be known nor have its features truly or falsely described. It cannot be known since, for Kant, knowledge is limited to knowledge of objects (1996, B267-74 & B295-315). And, nothing true or false can be said of its features since, on his view, truth consists in agreement of knowledge with its objects, and falsity in the disagreement of knowledge with its object (1996, B82-3).

The above reading of Kant will not be further defended or elaborated on in detail. It is offered merely in order to assist in clarifying, and in orienting the reader to, the idea that the natures of objects are grounded. At the same time, care should be taken not to assimilate this idea to transcendental idealism. There are non-idealist views according to which the natures of objects are grounded. For example, Plato, who is traditionally interpreted as a metaphysical realist, writes that the Good is beyond essence, and further that it is the source of being and essence (1935, 509b). Here a case can be made, as Neoplatonists have, for thinking of the Good as what Plato supposes grounds the natures of entities, including the Forms and Sensible objects.

Some, however, will be skeptical about the idea of grounds. In order to state that natures, and thus properties, are grounded, properties have been distinguished from those features of objects that consist in their being grounded. This, however, seems to presuppose a substantive account of what it is for something to possess properties. What, it might be asked, if the truth of “*a* has property *F*” merely consists in something’s being

true of  $a$ ? Michael Devitt, for example, claims that “ $a$  has property  $F$ ” is equivalent to “ $a$  is  $F$ ”. He further endorses a semantics according to which “ $a$  is  $F$ ” is true if and only if there is an  $x$  such that “ $a$ ” designates  $x$  and “ $F$ ” applies to  $x$  (1980, p. 435). If Devitt is correct, then insofar as subject terms designate objects and predicates apply to them, that is to say insofar as something is true of them, they possess properties. It would thus be incoherent to maintain that some truths about objects are about their features but not their properties.

However, the views put forward in this paper are not in competition with positions such as Devitt’s. The present paper is concerned with the question, “What do the identities of objects consist in?” The claim that some of the features of objects are not properties is a partial response to this question. It is thus only in competition with positions that interpret “ $a$  has property  $F$ ”, and indeed “ $a$  and  $b$  possess relation  $R$ ” and “ $a$  is an instance of kind  $N$ ”, in ways that tell us something about what the identities of objects consist in. Such interpretations include class, concept and predicate nominalism, and various forms of realism about tropes and universals. They do not include interpretations such as Devitt’s, even if some such interpretation somehow reflects standard usage. This is so since positions such as Devitt allow the term ‘property’ to apply to any feature of objects, and therefore imply nothing about what the identities of objects consist in.

It is, then, accepted that the features of objects that consist in their being grounded are properties in Devitt’s sense of ‘properties’. At the same time, it is insisted that some truths about objects are about features but not about properties, relations or kinds. To allow this, suffice it that the terms ‘property’, ‘relation’ and ‘kind’ are here assigned - if



necessary, by stipulation - a rough extension, one that suffices in order to make sufficiently clear what is and what is not being rejected when the view that properties alone constitute the identities of objects is being rejected. The allowable interpretations of “*a* has property *F*”, “*a* and *b* possess relation *R*” and “*a* is an instance of kind *N*” are, therefore, taken to include only those that tell us something about what the identities of objects consist in.

So far, an attempt has been made to clarify how it might be that the identities of objects consist in more than their natures. To this effect, it has been said that some of the features of objects might consist in their being grounded in certain ways. Further, it has been said that one way of thinking of grounds is in terms of conditions for the possibility of entities. However, it still needs to be asked how, if grounds differ from entities and thus do not have natures, anything can be said of them. For example, is it not the case that, in saying of a ground that it conditions the possibility of objects, properties are being ascribed to it? There is no easy solution to this difficulty and some, including some Neoplatonists, go so far as to maintain the ineffability of grounds.

Nevertheless, enough will be said about discourse about grounds in order to show that it is not, on the face of things, meaningless. To begin with, notice that there is no problem with saying of objects that they are grounded in this or that way. In such statements, grounds are mentioned, but only in ascribing a feature to objects. Further, such statements need not imply that grounds have properties. They do imply that grounds ground objects in certain ways, but grounds can do so without possessing properties. One way of seeing that this is possible is by considering informative identity statements. Granting that grounds do not have natures leaves open the possibility that such identity

statements apply to them. For example, consider the possibility that the natures of objects are grounded in being. Endorsing this possibility does not preclude saying that grounding is numerically identical to being, and it allows identifying being with representing. In other words, it allows holding that grounding is being and that being is being represented.

Of course, while identity statements about objects, e.g. that the evening star is the morning star, are true of objects partly in virtue of their natures, this cannot be supposed about grounds. In the case of grounds, identity statements have to be accepted as primitive. Thus, it is a mistake to interpret them as being about entities, whether these are supposed to be objects, properties, relations or kinds. Consider the following identity statements:

- (1) Being is being represented
- (2) To be is to be represented
- (3) For any object, its being is its being represented.

It is tempting to think of (1) as being about a property, and perhaps as supervening upon statements such as (2). Further, it is tempting to think that (2), a statement about anything that has being, supervenes upon statements such as (3). However, the suggestion here is that (1) can be understood as an identity statement about grounds, one that is not reducible to other statements. Indeed, in establishing that objects are grounded, the present paper establishes that some statements that are akin to (1) are neither about properties nor reducible to statements such as (2) or (3). Moreover, since statements such as (1) entail statements such as (2) and (3), we can thus begin to see how statements about grounds can play a role in explaining certain truths about objects without implying

that grounds have properties. We can, accordingly, start to see how grounds might ground objects without possessing properties.

Notice that, if primitive identity statements apply to grounds, even statements with other forms can also do so. Indeed, they can do so if they supervene, or if they are reinterpreted so that they supervene, upon primitive identity statements. This claim will be illustrated in section VII.

Finally, notice that, when it comes to grounds, it may well be that nothing true or false can be said of them, and thus that they cannot even be said to have properties in Devitt's sense of 'properties'. This would be the case if, as noted in describing Kant's position, 'true' is understood in terms of something like statements' agreement with objects and 'false' in terms of something like their disagreement with objects. We could then only meaningfully say that statements about objects presuppose, or do not presuppose, this or that claim about grounds.

### **III. The Being of Entities**

Some sense has been made of the idea that the natures of objects and, more generally, of entities, are grounded. Thus it is appropriate to consider arguments for this idea. Two such arguments will be discussed. The second, which will be examined in section V, focuses on objects alone. The first, which will be called the Platonist argument, is more general and draws the conclusion that the natures of all entities, and therefore of all objects, are grounded.

The Platonist argument suggests that the word 'is', as it is used both in predication and in expressing existence, stands for *being*, and that being grounds the

natures of all entities. This, for example, roughly seems to be Plotinus' position. Plotinus thinks of the One as being beyond all predicates (1966, III.8.10.29-35). Moreover, he equates the One with existence, and says of it that it is that in virtue of which entities are entities (1966, VI.9.1.1 & 2.20).<sup>9,10</sup> It also seems to be Martin Heidegger's position. Heidegger equates being with what differs from entities (1996, 6 & 2000, 23-6, 67). He further maintains that the being of entities is relevant to what entities are: it is "that which determines beings as beings" (1996, 6).<sup>11</sup> There are, to be sure, some senses of the word 'ground' that are such that Heidegger may be seen as offering a critique of the claim that the natures of entities are grounded. In particular, Heidegger is read as worrying about and trying to overcome the idea of ground as substance or permanent presence.<sup>12</sup> But the present investigation makes no such supposition about grounds.

What, then, is the Platonist argument according to which being grounds the natures of entities? To begin with, it must be established that being is not an entity. Among others, Plotinus (1966, VI.9.1-3) and Heidegger (1996, 3-4 & 2000, 61-2), argue for this conclusion essentially thus: (1) Being is what the word 'is' expresses, whether when used in predication or in expressing existence. But since (2) 'is' applies to every entity, (3) an understanding of being, including an understanding of each entity's being, is involved in any understanding of entities. Thus, (4) being cannot be identified with any entity.

Why does (3) imply (4)? Perhaps it can instead be supposed that there is some entity an understanding of which is involved in any understanding of entities. This seems

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<sup>9</sup> Platonists claim to find their ideas and arguments in Plato's work, most notably in his *Parmenides*.

<sup>10</sup> L. P. Gerson argues that Plotinus identifies the One with existence itself (1990, p. 206).

<sup>11</sup> Translations of Heidegger's work use the phrase 'the being of beings' rather than 'the being of entities'. No distinction is intended here.

<sup>12</sup> See I. Thomson (2000).

wrong. It implies that there is a real distinction between that entity that is being and those other entities that are. But if there is such a distinction, the being of those other entities can be ‘put aside’ or conceptually abstracted from them while nevertheless leaving some of their features to be identified. In other words, it implies, contrary to (3), that we have an understanding of entities that does not involve an understanding of their being.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, for example, if being were supposed to be a property that is involved in any understanding of entities, it would follow that there is a real distinction between the property that is being and other entities. But if there is such a distinction, the property that is being can be abstracted from those other entities while nevertheless leaving some of their features to be identified. In other words, it would be the case that, contrary to (3), we have an understanding of entities that does not involve an understanding of being.

It may, of course, be claimed that there is a property *F* of an object *D* that is involved in any understanding of *D*. Thus, there would be an entity that is involved in any understanding of another entity. Nevertheless, there would, in this case, be properties other than *F* that are properties of *D* and that can be grasped without a grasp of *F*. By contrast, in the case of being we are supposing that there are no entities that can be grasped without a grasp of it.

Being, it seems, is not an entity. This allows the Platonist argument to proceed to its conclusion. If any entity is to be, what the ‘is’ of predication and of existence stands for must let it be what it is. Since it does not stand for an entity, then some non-entity, the being of entities, must let them be what they are. In the terminology of this essay, being must ground the natures of entities.

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<sup>13</sup> Heidegger’s strategy is not quite that of the Platonist. He proceeds from (3) to (4) using a number of Aristotelian assumptions, including the assumption that if something is not definable through the proximate genus and the specific difference, it is not an entity.

How, then, is the Platonist argument to be responded to? To begin with, the Platonist appeal to the word 'is' is (knowingly) indifferent in that it covers its use in predication and in expressing existence. But if different uses of 'is' correspond to distinct meanings, perhaps it cannot, without equivocation, be said that all understanding of beings involves an understanding of being.

Even so, the conclusion that natures are grounded is likely to follow. If there are distinct senses of 'is', it is still likely that an understanding of at least one of its senses is involved in all understanding of entities. Specifically, the 'is' in 'there is' seems to be involved in all understanding of entities, even if its meaning is distinct from the meaning or meanings of the 'is' of predication. If this is correct, the Platonist argument will lead at least to the conclusion that existence, or whatever 'there is' stands for, grounds the natures of entities. But what if there is no single sense of 'is' that is involved in an understanding of all entities? The Platonic argument may yet be modified and made to work with respect to each of these senses, each one leading to the supposition of a distinct ground for the natures of entities.

However, there is little point to thus modifying the Platonic argument here. It is subject to more fundamental worries. As Heidegger loved to write, it is tempting to put the word 'is' aside (2000, 24). It is tempting to think that the grammar of English and other languages requires its pervasive presence, but that one should not be too quick to draw ontological conclusions from this. Consider the 'is' of predication. In statements of the form "*a is F*" the word 'is' seems to stand for what is distinct from *a* and *F*. However, as we saw in discussing Devitt's conception of statements of the form "*a is F*", it is by no means clear that this word brings any ontological baggage with it. Perhaps, as

Christopher Williams would have it, the word 'is' is a superficial feature of English, one to be discounted (1992, p. 210).

So too with respect to 'exists' and 'there is', perhaps one should not be misled into thinking that because one is presented with a word, it must describe something. For example, if 'exists' had a similar meaning to 'is part of my world', it would not do so. Rather, it would be an indexical the function of which is to pick out or refer to the world in which it is used. To say that Napoleon exists, for instance, would be just to say that Napoleon is part of *this* world. It would not be to postulate an additional non-entity (being) over and above Napoleon.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, Herman Philipse rejects Heidegger's concern with the being of beings on the ground that 'exists' does not have a descriptive or referential function (1998, p. 334). He supports this claim with the familiar argument that if a description is given to an imaginary object *E*, adding that *E* exists does not involve attributing an additional feature to it. After all, he claims, it would be absurd to say that *E* just as initially described could not exist.

However, it is in fact not absurd to say that *E* as initially described could not exist. If *E* is initially described as something imagined and non-existent, it would be contradictory to say that it could exist as initially described. If, on the other hand, *E*'s initial description is neutral on the issue of *E*'s existence, it cannot be equivalent to a description that adds of *E* that it exists. Moreover, this has nothing to do with the meaning of 'exists'. It merely reflects what was not initially said about *E*. Thus, if an initial description of *E* is neutral about *E*'s colour, it cannot be equivalent to another that

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<sup>14</sup> The suggestion that 'exists' is an indexical is modelled on Lewis's suggestion that 'actuality' is an indexical (1973, pp. 85-6).

adds that *E* is blue. Here too, *E* when supposed to be blue cannot be just as initially described. Of course, giving a description to some imaginary object and then going on to say that it exists does not involve a contradiction. But this is precisely because in doing so it is not being supposed that the object just as initially described exists.

Nor is the view that ‘exists’ is non-descriptive without serious worries. Panayot Butchvarov, for example, has argued at length that ‘exists’ is a descriptive term (1979, pp. 86-131). In any case, the considerations so far outlined according to which ‘is’ in its various uses does not have a descriptive function merely repeat Heidegger’s observation that it is for us an empty label, an observation that is but the starting point for much of Heidegger’s writing. Heidegger further tries both to explain why the word ‘is’ seems to be an empty label and to show that it nevertheless has a determinate meaning (2000, 38-41 & 154). He also argues that it has a referential function (2000, 67). Thus, the above considerations cannot, in themselves, count against Heidegger’s appeal to the word ‘is’. Heidegger’s specific arguments to the effect that the word is not an empty label would have to be examined in detail. Moreover, they would have to be examined in terms that are fair to Heidegger’s position, that is to say in terms that do not involve accepting the obvious about the word ‘is’.<sup>15</sup>

Such an examination cannot be undertaken here - the concerns and modes of thinking at stake are too far apart - and nor is there an available sustained attempt to evaluate the two in terms that are fair to each. Thus, it will be no surprise that the issue of the meaning of the word ‘is’ will not be settled here, even if the Platonist argument can eventually be made to succeed.

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<sup>15</sup> Plotinus too claims that, and tries to explain why, the One has been forgotten (1966, V.1.1).



There may be an additional reason for worry about the Platonist argument. It may, after all, be argued that (2) is false, that is to say that the word ‘is’ does not apply to every entity. Levinas, for example, maintains that a human’s obligation to another human he or she encounters consists in an ethical relation that presupposes nothing about being (1981). Here too, however, the issue will not be settled, even if talk of an ethical relation that presupposes nothing about being does not and cannot, in the end, be made sense of.

#### IV. Being and Ground

Something significant can nevertheless be gleaned from the Platonist argument at this point. While it leaves open the issue of whether being grounds the natures of objects, it still supports the conclusion that objects’ natures are grounded. To begin with, if there are one or more terms that have a descriptive function and that apply to all entities, a grasp of what these terms stand for will be required in all understanding of entities. These terms will thus stand for one or more grounds. If there is only one such term, being may yet turn out to be what grounds the natures of entities. If not, it will be misleading to apply the term being to what does so. Nor is it hard to think of terms other than ‘is’ that might be thought to apply to all entities; candidates include the terms ‘unity’, ‘existent’ and ‘entity’.

It is hard to envisage how there could be no terms with a descriptive function that are involved in all understanding of entities. After all, they are all *entities*. Still, what if, as Aristotle thought, it is so?<sup>16</sup> It will then be possible to divide entities into two or more classes such that the Platonic argument can be modified and run with respect to each.

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<sup>16</sup> It seems that when Aristotle claims that there are many ways of being, he is, among other things, denying that everything has something in common (1924, B.1, 1059<sup>b</sup>31-34).

Take the class of all entities and divide it into classes such that it is true of each that (1) there is at least one descriptive term that applies to all and to only its members, and that (2) every property of any of its members is itself one of its members. This will always be possible. Clearly, we can divide the class of all entities into classes that are such that (1) applies to each of them. Further, the members of any class to which (1) applies can be conceptually modified by abstracting those of their properties that are not among the class's members from them. The entities being conceived after such properties have been 'removed' will form a class that conforms to both (1) and (2).<sup>17</sup>

For each resulting class, it will be the case that there is at least one descriptive term the understanding of which is required for an understanding of any member within it. Use  $\Phi$  to denote this term,  $a$  to denote what this term represents and  $C$  to denote the class that  $a$  is associated with. Then the Platonic argument can be run as follows: (1)  $a$  is what  $\Phi$  represents. But since (2)  $\Phi$  applies to every entity within  $C$ , (3) an understanding of  $a$  is involved in any understanding of entities within  $C$ . Thus, (4)  $a$  cannot be identified with any entity within  $C$ . Nor (5) can  $a$  be identified with any entity outside of  $C$ . Thus,  $a$  is not an entity. Rather, it grounds the entities within  $C$ .

Why does (3) imply (4)? Because otherwise there would be a real distinction between  $a$  and other entities within  $C$ . But this would imply, contrary to (3), that after excluding  $a$  from  $C$  there remain within it entities that can be grasped without an understanding of  $a$ . Why accept (5)? Because if  $a$  were an entity outside of  $C$ , the fact that  $\Phi$  applies to entities would imply that they have a property that is not itself a member

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<sup>17</sup> It is, of course, not assumed that the entities being considered prior to the operation of abstraction are those being considered after abstraction. Entities need not survive the required loss of properties. So too, it is not assumed that the entities being considered after abstraction could exist without the properties that have been abstracted from them. The concern here is merely with their conceivability.

of  $C$ . But, by hypothesis,  $\Phi$  applies only to the members of  $C$ , and its members include all the properties of its members.

Here is an example: a dualist might argue that there is no single term a grasp of which is required for any understanding of entities. The dualist could maintain that an understanding of mental entities is possible using terms that are in no way involved in any understanding of physical entities. Even the term ‘entity’ would have to be limited so that it is used only within either the mental or the physical domain, or else its use would have to involve equivocation. Nevertheless, such a dualist would, it seems, have to accept that a grasp of at least one term, call it  $\Psi$ , is required for any understanding of mental entities, including their properties.  $\Psi$  would not stand for a mental entity. For, if it did, there would be a real distinction between what it stands for and other mental entities; and we could thus grasp some mental entities without a grasp of what it stands for. Nor would  $\Psi$  stand for a non-mental entity. For, if it did, the fact that it applies to mental entities would imply that such entities have a property that is not itself a mental entity. But if  $\Psi$  stands neither for a mental nor for a non-mental entity, it stands not for an entity but for what grounds mental entities.

It is concluded that entities’ natures are grounded. At the same time, the question as to what grounds entities’ natures is left open. Here, note, is one reason to prefer a concern with what grounds entities’ natures to a concern with the being of entities. The latter prejudices what grounds entities’ natures in that it tells us that this ground is being. Yet it may well be that this prejudgment is false.

## V. Sameness and Ground

It has been concluded that the natures of entities are grounded. This yields, as a special case, the desired result that the natures of objects are grounded. The next argument focuses on objects alone and aims to establish directly that their natures are grounded. It proceeds by considering aspects of difference and sameness between objects.

Consider what is often referred to as the problem of the one over the many: how can numerically different objects share a common nature?<sup>18</sup> How, for example, can different fascists share the property of being ruthless or different philosophers that of being thinkers? Only a certain ‘kind’ of sameness and difference is being considered here, namely sameness and difference between objects that are alike in what it is for them to share a nature. However, a more fundamental question about sameness may be asked: how can objects that differ in what it is for them to share a nature be the same?

The question just posed does not presuppose that there actually are classes of objects that differ in what it is for them to share a nature. For example, it is not assumed that some actual objects conform to the strictures of resemblance nominalism and that other actual objects conform to the strictures of trope theory. Indeed, it is not even assumed that the objects in question are possible existents. It is only assumed that classes of objects that differ in this radical way and yet are alike are conceivable. Moreover, it is worth noting, saying that such resembling objects are conceivable is not the same as saying that they can conceivably coexist. Since all that is important here is that they are conceived of as being alike, the conceivability of their coexistence is beside the point. Granted only that such radically differing objects are conceivable and are understood to

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<sup>18</sup> More accurately, the problem is usually formulated in terms of the sharing of common properties rather than in terms of the sharing of common natures. The term ‘nature’ is used here as it is neutral about whether the identities of objects are comprised of properties alone or whether relations and kinds also play a part in their composition.

be alike, it may be asked what their being alike is supposed to consist in. So too, it may be asked about actual objects what it is about their identities that makes them akin to objects that are conceived as differing from them in what it is to share a nature.

That objects conceived in accordance with different conceptions of what it is to share a nature can be alike is easy to see. Consider, for example, two views about what it is for an object to possess a nature: natural class nominalism and realism about universals. According to natural class nominalism, naturalness is a primitive feature of some classes of objects, and for an object to possess a property is just for it to belong to such a class.<sup>19</sup> According to realism about universals, the possession of a property consists in the instantiation of a universal or repeatable.<sup>20</sup> Now, objects conceived in accordance with these positions are the same in that they conform to metaphysical realism, that is to say (very roughly) to the view that to be is to be independent of interpretation or belief. In what, then, does this sameness of identity consist?

Since we are considering objects that conform to different conceptions of what it is for objects to share a nature, the sameness in question cannot consist in the sharing of some nature. So long as there is no equivocation in the use of the terms 'property', 'relation' and 'kind', such objects cannot have the same properties and relations; and they cannot be instances of the same kinds. The sameness in question cannot, for example, consist in the sharing of one or more universals. Nor can it consist just in the objects in question belonging to the same natural class. There must, therefore, be more to the identities of objects than their natures.

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<sup>19</sup> Lewis offers an example of natural class nominalism (1983).

<sup>20</sup> Armstrong offers an example of realism about universals (1997).

It might be objected that the above merely reveals that both natural class nominalism and realism about universals are misguided. If either of these conceptions of objects' natures is accepted, one is left with the difficult conclusion that sameness in identity is not merely sameness in natures. But if a minimalist conception of properties is adopted, this conclusion can be avoided. Consider, once again, a view of properties that is akin to Devitt's. On this view, recall, all there is to an object's having a particular property is its having something true about it. But granted this view, objects that conform to natural class nominalism and objects that conform to realism about universals do share properties simply in that there are some statements that are true of both classes of objects.

However, the present concern is with the identities of objects. Thus, the question of how objects that differ in what it is for them to share a nature can be the same is here identified with the question of what it is about the identities of such objects that allows them to be the same. But, as was pointed out in section III, positions such as Devitt's are neutral about such questions. To be sure, it is now appropriate to observe that this neutrality is subject to the condition that there is a single sense of 'true' that applies to objects that differ in what it is for them to share natures. However, if this condition is not met then, once again, sameness between objects that conform to different views about what it is for objects to share natures will not consist in the sharing of natures.

Nor does anything significant turn upon the fact that natural class nominalism and realism about universals have been chosen in order to establish that sameness is not merely sameness of natures. Other conceptions of what it is for objects to share natures will do. Compare, for example, Kant's position on this issue with Plato's. On Kant's view, what objects are is dependent upon the transcendental subject along with its

categories and forms of intuition. On Plato's view, at least during his middle period, one cannot even say of objects that they are, but only that they become. Moreover, their becoming depends upon the Forms, including the Form of the Good, and upon the Receptacle of becoming. Plato does admit that the Forms are. However, these are (roughly) conceived in accordance with metaphysical realism, and thus do not have natures in the same sense as Kantian objects do. Clearly, then, Plato and Kant differ on what objects' sharing of natures consists in. Nevertheless, some of the objects they suppose are, in some ways, the same. For example, both Kant's objects and Plato's are dependent objects. Further, there are ways in which Kant's objects are like Plato's Forms. For example, both Kant and Plato agree that what is is essentially intelligible. For Kant, objects are, and are intelligible. For Plato, the Forms are, and are intelligible. By hypothesis, this sharing of intelligibility cannot be interpreted as sharing of properties or relations, or as consisting in the instantiation of common kinds.

Thus, in conceiving of sameness between objects that differ in what it is for them to share a nature, sameness between objects is seen not to be merely sameness in natures. Once again, the conclusion that the identities of objects consist in more than their natures must be drawn. But this is merely to say that the natures of objects are grounded. Natures are all that entities can contribute to the identities of objects. After objects' properties and relations have been specified, along with the kinds of which they are instances, all entities that are relevant to their identities have been specified. The only remaining option, then, is that the identities of objects also consist in their natures' being grounded.

How, exactly, does being grounded solve the problem of sameness between objects that differ in what it is for them to share natures? The suggestion is that such

objects share some features, even if they do not share properties or relations, and are not instances of the same kinds. More specifically, the natures of the objects in question are grounded, and they are grounded in similar ways. This sameness of grounding is what the objects' sameness consists in. To return to Plato and Kant, the intelligibility that Kant's objects and Plato's Forms share is to be understood in terms of their being similarly grounded. According to Plato, the Form of the Good makes things intelligible. According to Kant, the transcendental subject does so.

But what, it might be worried, if there are ways in which objects are the same as grounds? Would not this sameness also consist in sameness of grounding, and thus lead to the supposition that grounds are grounded? After all, this sameness could not consist in sameness of natures since entities alone possess natures. But, then, it might seem, a vicious regress threatens. Would not objects be, in some ways, the same as what grounds grounds, leading to the supposition of yet further grounds, and so on?

There is, however, no reason to suppose that a problematic regress arises here. It may be that what grounds the natures of objects itself requires, in some sense, grounding. This possibility will be briefly illustrated in section VII. But whether or not grounds are grounded, objects should not be supposed to be in some way the same as grounds. Moreover, this much should follow from the assumption that grounds do not have natures.

It might not be obvious that the assumption that grounds do not have natures can ensure that objects are in no way the same as them. Recall that one way of describing grounds without ascribing natures to them is through the use of informative identity statements that apply to grounds, and that are, supposedly, primitive or not reducible to



other statements. But, even granting this suggestion and thus that grounds do not have natures, if the 'is' of identity also applies to objects, it would seem to follow that grounds are akin to objects in whatever this 'is' ascribes to them. So too, it would follow that, in at least one sense, grounds *are*.

Nevertheless, if the suggestion that primitive identity statements apply to grounds suffices to illustrate how grounds might not have natures, it suffices to illustrate how a ground might differ from objects to such an extent that they are in no way the same as it. Assume that primitive identity statements completely describe grounds. It follows that, if there are ways in which grounds and entities are alike, these will, ultimately, be specifiable in terms of identity statements that apply both to grounds and to entities. But since identity statements that apply to entities ascribe natures to them, no identity statement will apply both to entities and to grounds. Hence, it is not the case that grounds and entities are in some ways the same. And where a term applies to grounds, say where 'being grounded' does so, it cannot also be applied to entities without equivocation. For in the case of grounds, but not in the case of entities, its application would ascribe to grounds what can be described using primitive identity statements.

The observation that identity statements that apply to grounds never apply to entities also assists in dealing with an as yet untouched upon issue that the Platonist argument gives rise to. The Platonist argument attempts to establish that terms that are involved in any understanding of entities, or in any understanding of some class of entities, stand for grounds. Since the 'is' of identity is arguably involved in any understanding of entities, the Platonist argument can be run with respect to it.<sup>21</sup> But if the

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<sup>21</sup> Heidegger, of course, does not fail to include the 'is' of identity (that applies to entities) among those that he supposes stand for being (1960, p. 16).

'is' of identity stands for grounding, it would seem that identity statements affirm that what they apply to is grounded. If this were accepted with respect to the identity statements that apply to grounds, the worrying conclusion that all grounds are grounded would follow. But if the 'is' of identity that applies to entities stands for grounding, it is a descriptive term that applies to entities. As such, it cannot feature in identity statements that apply to grounds. That it stands for grounding, then, would imply nothing about what primitive identity statements stand for.

## **VI. Problems with Conceptions of Grounds**

The argument of the previous section aims to establish that the natures of objects do not suffice to fix what it is for objects to share a nature, and thus that they do not suffice to fix the identities of objects. It does so by considering conceivable cases of sameness between objects that differ in what it is for them to share a nature. Perhaps, however, focusing on what it is for existing objects to share natures would allow the same point to be made. After all, it seems implausible to suppose that what it is for an object to have a nature should depend upon which objects happen to exist.

But enough has been said in support of the view that the natures of objects are grounded. What remains now is to consider a number of additional problems that are faced by this view. The aim in doing so will not be to solve these problems but to further clarify the conclusions of this paper, and to partly clarify what an adequate conception of grounding for object's natures consists in. It will also be to recast the problems of the one over the many and of the many over the one in light of the supposition that objects' natures are grounded.

To begin with, consider the ‘relation’ between objects’ natures and their ground or grounds. It is the whole of an object’s nature that is grounded. While grounds differ from entities, one cannot as it were consider objects’ natures or some aspect of objects’ natures apart from their grounding. One problem, then, is to clarify the sense in which objects are thus immanent in their grounds.

Of course, the task of determining the sense in which objects’ natures are immanent in their ground or grounds is only one part of the task of determining what grounds the natures of objects. Another is that of determining which terminology, if any, is appropriate to describing such grounds. Kant’s terminology of conditions for the possibility of entities is only one option here. Another would involve following up Plato’s designation of the Good as what grounds the natures of entities by attempting to understand grounds in normative terms.<sup>22</sup>

As to the possibility that no terminology is appropriate to grounds, the radical differences between entities and grounds make it quite real. However, so long as some such suggestion as that primitive identity statements apply to grounds is in the running, it seems more plausible to accept that the reasons for supposing that the natures of objects are grounded are reasons for supposing that something like primitive identity statements apply to grounds.

Consider another issue that the discussion of grounds raises: what is at stake in investigation into what grounds the natures of objects? Simply saying that the truth about such grounds is at stake may not do. For one thing, it may, as has been seen, be that claims about grounds are neither true nor false. Further, it is far from clear that there is any sense of ‘true’ and ‘false’ that is neutral between views that differ on what grounds

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<sup>22</sup> This seems to be Levinas’ position.

the natures of objects, and thus which will allow one to maintain that one such view is true and another is false. Nor would it do to suppose that what is at stake is what there is. There can be no supposition that the term 'exists' applies to grounds, even if the natures of objects are grounded. This is so partly because existence may well be what grounds objects, and it may make no sense to say of existence that it exists. More generally, given the difference between grounds and entities, it cannot simply be assumed that the term 'exists', a term that applies to entities, also applies to whatever grounds objects.

## **VII. The One and the Many**

How should the problem of the one over the many be formulated in light of the conclusion that the natures of objects are grounded? The problem that is usually referred to as the problem of the one over the many is that of how numerically different objects can share a common nature. What is hidden in this problem can now be made clear. It is, in fact, a problem about objects that share a common ground. It thus presupposes a solution to the more fundamental problem of how it is possible for the natures of different objects to share the same ground. Sameness of and difference between objects presupposes a more fundamental, different, sameness and difference.

Note that the problem of how the natures of different objects can share the same ground is intimately tied to the already introduced problem of clarifying the sense in which objects are immanent in their grounds. A solution to one would be a solution to the other.

Recall, once again, the view that grounds are conditions for the possibility of the natures of objects and other entities. This view does not, in itself, explain how such

conditions could constrain the natures of diverse objects. Indeed, as it stands, this construal is incomplete in that it does not specify how objects are, or indeed that they are, immanent in what conditions them. More, then, needs to be said about grounds construed as conditions. Taking another leaf out of Kant's conception of grounds illustrates what this more might be. One can suggest that (1) for objects to be is for them to be represented from a (numerically) unique perspective, and that (2) for objects to be represented from a unique perspective is for them to be represented in accordance with certain rules.<sup>23</sup> (1) and (2) are informative identity statements, each of which offers additional information about what differs from entities and conditions the possibility of objects' natures. Thus, an object's being represented from a unique perspective is its being grounded. It is neither one of its relations nor an abstraction from one of its relations. This allows us to say that an object is immanent in its ground in that it cannot exist apart from its being represented from a certain unique perspective. It also offers an explanation of how different objects can share a common ground. They can do so because different objects can be represented from the same perspective.

This 'Kantian' position requires further elaboration. However, it will do for present purposes, that is to say as a tool for bringing into better focus the problem of how diverse objects can share a common ground, and for illustrating how this problem might be solved. To return to the problems of the one over the many, there is a third such problem. In what, it might be asked, does sameness between different grounds consist? This problem arises because, as was argued in establishing that objects' natures are grounded, grounds that differ while nevertheless being the same are conceivable. It may

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<sup>23</sup> These examples are formulated in terms of the view that being grounds the natures of entities. Nothing turns on this. One can modify the exams so that 'unity' or some other term designates the ground in question.

also arise because it is conceivable that different existing objects have different grounds. For example, what grounds the natures of persons may differ from what grounds the natures of material objects. But these different grounds would nevertheless be alike in that they are grounds.

The above is particularly worrying because saying of grounds that they are alike seems to involve attributing natures to them. And this worry would be aggravated if, in addition, the Platonist argument were successfully extended so that it established that the natures of objects are, after all, grounded by being. If they are so grounded, then it seems that one cannot say of grounds that they *are* alike in some respect. To do so would seem to distinguish them from being.

Once again, the idea that grounds may be described through primitive identity statements is the easiest way of trying to avoid attributing natures to grounds even when they 'are alike'. On this suggestion, differing identity statements apply to different grounds. But where such grounds 'are alike', the identity statements in question presuppose, but are not presupposed by, a common further identity statement. Differing grounds thus presuppose a common ground. Here is a very rough example of how this might work:

- (1) Being is being intelligible
- (2) Being immaterial is being for oneself
- (3) Being material is being for another

(2) and (3) purport to capture respective grounds for the natures of objects that differ in what it is for them to share a nature, and thus in their grounding. (1) purports to capture part of what (2) and (3) presuppose, namely their common ground. And since these

grounds are grounded in being, there is no problem in saying of them that they *are* grounded in the same way.

There remain complementary problems to the problems of the one over the many, namely those of the many over the one. The problem of how an object can have different properties is often said to be the problem of the many over the one. However, given that objects are grounded, it is conceivable that the nature of a given object is grounded in diverse grounds. If so, there will be a problem of how a single object can have different grounds. For example, it is conceivable that the difference between having a moral obligation and having red hair is no mere difference in natures, but is also a difference in grounding. If so, what grounds having a moral obligation in a given person would be different from what grounds having red hair in that person, and the issue of how this is possible will have to be dealt with.

Finally, there may yet be a further layer to the problem of the many over the one. What grounds the natures of objects may, in some sense, have a structure. In other words, what grounds the natures of objects may contain diversity in unity. The above example of how diverse grounds might share a common ground may be reinterpreted in this way. So too, Kant's transcendental subject somehow contains within it the diversity of categories and corresponding conditions for the possibility of experience. The result of such complexity would be a problem of how one ground can contain a diversity of grounds.

In sum, it is alleged that there are three problems concerning the one over the many. First, there is the problem of how numerically different objects can share properties. Second, there is the problem of how numerically different objects can share a common ground. Third, there is the problem of how different grounds can be the same in

respect of their being grounds. It is further alleged that corresponding to each of these worries about the one over the many there is, or at least threatens to be, a problem about the many over the one.

It is not, however, the case that there are now up to six independent problems. Rather the problems under consideration form a hierarchy, thus allowing that a solution to a more fundamental problem will yield a solution to less fundamental ones. Indeed, perhaps a solution to the most fundamental of these problems will yield a solution to all the rest. For example, the most superficial of the above problems, namely those of how numerically different objects can share properties and of how a single particular can have different properties, are likely to be solved through an understanding of how different objects can share a common ground. After all, such an understanding would include an understanding of what it is for an object to share a nature.

### **VIII. Concluding Remarks**

The natures of objects are grounded, even if what such grounding consists in is an open issue. Settling this issue requires settling the problems of the immanence of objects in their grounding, of the terminology appropriate to grounding and of the nature of disputes about such grounding. It also requires dealing with the various problems of the one over the many and the many over the one. There are, however, additional problems for conceptions of grounding. Among these is the problem of the methodology appropriate to investigation into what grounds the natures of objects. All discourse about objects presupposes claims about their grounds. Thus, it is hard to see how one could ask, “What grounds the natures of objects?” as opposed to, “What is presupposed about what grounds



the natures of objects?” The question, then, is whether there is a method that allows one to ask what grounds the natures of objects. And if not, perhaps, as has been suggested was Kant’s view, knowledge of what grounds the natures of objects is not possible. There are also additional points of contact between recent debates in metaphysics and the observation that the natures of objects are grounded. The points of contact already discussed are the debates about the nature of identity, and about the one over the many and the many over the one. Another point of contact is the problem of the nature of laws of nature. Whatever grounding the natures of objects have, it explains, or they explain, some of the features of objects. It is thus natural to identify some laws of nature with what grounds, or with statements about what grounds, the natures of actual objects. The reader will, no doubt, see additional issues relating to grounds. But, it is hoped, enough has been said to indicate that grounds should be an ongoing concern for metaphysicians.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Thanks to Christopher Hill, Sam Inglis and Eric Olson for their comments on this paper.

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