

Pluralism and the problem of purity

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1. Introduction

Does everything exist in the same way as everything else? *Monists about being* (or ‘Monists’ for short) say ‘yes’, and *Pluralists about being* (or ‘Pluralists’ for short) say ‘no’. Pluralism has been (at least allegedly) defended by such notable figures as Aristotle,¹ Aquinas,² Descartes,³ Russell (1912: 89–100), Moore (1903: 29, 111), Husserl (2001: 249–50) and Heidegger (1962). For example, Bertrand Russell thought that the relation *to the north of* exists in a different way than London does. Aquinas claimed that God exists in a different way than his creations. Aristotle perhaps thought that entities in different categories exist in different ways. Even today, many undergraduate students in their first metaphysics class are inclined to think that numbers exist in a different way than tables do.

Trenton Merricks (forthcoming) presents a dilemma against Pluralism. He argues that both horns of the dilemma are unacceptable, and so Pluralism must be false. The purpose of this paper is two-fold. First, I will argue that one particular horn of Merricks’s dilemma is unproblematic for the contemporary version of Pluralism defended by Turner (2010) and McDaniel (2009, 2010, 2017), and so Merricks’s argument against Pluralism, as stated, is unsound. However, my second task is to provide a new dilemma against Pluralism, which, when combined with Merricks’s arguments, constitutes a powerful new challenge to every form of Pluralism.

Before starting, let us establish some notation. For simplicity’s sake, I will join Merricks in considering a version of Pluralism according to which there are exactly two ways of being, which I will symbolize as ‘ \exists_1 ’ and ‘ \exists_2 ’ (together with the corresponding ‘ \forall_1 ’ and ‘ \forall_2 ’). I will also join Merricks in sometimes using the phrases ‘ exist_1 ’ and ‘ exist_2 ’. For example, perhaps concrete objects exist_1 and abstract objects exist_2 .⁴ Everything in this paper (and Merricks’s paper) generalizes to varieties of Pluralism with more than two ways of being. I will use the usual ‘ \exists ’ and ‘ \forall ’ to symbolize the Monist’s generic way of being which everything (supposedly) enjoys.

1 See Frede 1987: 84–86 for a defence of the claim that Aristotle was a Pluralist.

2 See McCabe 1969: 90–91 for a defence of the claim that Aquinas was a Pluralist.

3 See Descartes’s (1992: 210) 51st principle in the *Principles of Philosophy*.

4 Russell (1912: 89–100) and Moore (1903: 29, 111) advocated this version of Pluralism.

2. Merricks's dilemma

Merricks's dilemma against Pluralism goes roughly as follows. Either the Pluralist says that everything enjoys a generic way of being (in addition to the more specific ways of being) or not.⁵

Merricks gives three criticisms for Pluralists who take the first horn of the dilemma by agreeing that everything enjoys a generic way of being. First, it contradicts the standard motivation for being a Pluralist, which is that, say, numbers and tables do not enjoy a similar way of being. Second, this version of Pluralism strengthens a standard objection to Pluralism. According to this version of Pluralism, we can say that something exists₁ iff it generically exists and is concrete, and something exists₂ iff it generically exists and is abstract. Given that we can already capture the supposed distinction offered by different ways of being using only generic being along with the abstract/concrete distinction, postulating different ways of being seems superfluous. Third, this version of Pluralism is inconsistent with historical motivations for Pluralism. In the words of Merricks, a Pluralist view which 'implies that all entities – properties, numbers, mountains, God, creatures, everything – generically exist ... is clearly in tension with the sorts of views that virtually all Pluralists have tried to articulate and defend' (12).

As for the second horn, Merricks argues that Pluralists who do not accept that everything enjoys a generic way of being cannot state their own view. The rough idea is as follows. Informally, two-ways-of-being Pluralism says that *everything* either exists₁ or exists₂, and something exists₁ and something exists₂. More formally, the following sentence expresses two-ways-of-being Pluralism:

$$(1) \quad \forall x(\exists_1 y(y = x) \text{ or } \exists_2 y(y = x)) \text{ and } \exists_1 x(x = x) \text{ and } \exists_2 x(x = x)^6$$

It is crucial that the italicized *everything* is the generic quantifier that ranges over absolutely everything, including things of all the different ways of being. Without the generic way of being, the Pluralist might try something like:

$$(2) \quad \forall_1 x(\exists_1 y(y = x) \text{ or } \exists_2 y(y = x)) \text{ and } \forall_2 x(\exists_1 y(y = x) \text{ or } \exists_2 y(y = x)) \\ \text{and } \exists_1 x(x = x) \text{ and } \exists_2 x(x = x)$$

5 It is important to note that the generic way of being at issue here is not to be understood as mere disjunction of more particular ways of being. So, for example, ' $\exists xF(x)$ ' cannot be definitionally equivalent to ' $\exists_1 xF(x)$ or $\exists_2 xF(x)$ '. If the generic sense of being were understood this way, it would be trivial for the Pluralist that everything enjoys a generic sense of being.

6 If one thinks that Pluralism would still intuitively be true if there were no abstracta or no concreta, one may drop the latter two conjuncts of this formulation.

However, (2) does not capture two-ways-of-being Pluralism, since a three-ways-of-being Pluralist can accept (2).⁷ Merricks runs through many different ways of trying to formulate two-ways-of-being Pluralism without the generic quantifier, and he argues that they all fail. The reason why they all fail is that the Pluralist is in need of something like a ‘totality’ fact. To take a mundane example, suppose I wanted to claim that there are exactly two kinds of horses, horses₁ and horses₂. I can’t merely say that there are some horses₁ and some horses₂. I need to say that all of the *horses* are horses₁ or horses₂.

In any event, I will not be objecting to the power of the second horn of Merricks’s dilemma. I believe that Merricks has made a very important point by arguing that the Pluralist cannot state their own view without saying that everything enjoys a generic sense of being. However, I will be arguing that the first horn of the dilemma is unproblematic for contemporary versions of Pluralism.

3. *How the Pluralist should respond*

Contemporary versions of Pluralism, described in Turner 2010 and McDaniel 2009: 305–10, are formulated in the framework of Sider 2011. It is a familiar thought from the work of David Lewis and others that certain predicates are more natural than others. One paradigmatic case is that ‘green’ is more natural than ‘grue’. Certain predicates, perhaps those of fundamental physics, are perfectly natural.

According to Sider, we need not restrict naturalness talk to predicates. We can, for example, ask whether modal or tense operators are fundamental or perfectly natural. Turner and McDaniel describe Pluralism as the thesis that the quantifiers \exists_1 and \exists_2 are perfectly natural. According to this version of Pluralism, the world itself makes a fundamental distinction between different modes of being that the Monist is simply not capturing. Meanwhile, Monists believe that the only perfectly natural quantifier is the usual generic quantifier expressed by ‘ \exists ’.

Given this framework, it is clear how contemporary Pluralists should respond to the first horn of Merricks’s dilemma. Contemporary Pluralists should *deny* that the generic quantifier is perfectly natural; however, they should still *accept* that everything enjoys a generic way of being captured by the generic quantifier. The generic way of being is simply not perfectly natural. It doesn’t ‘carve nature at its joints’. Call this version of Pluralism ‘Pluralism*’.

7 This brings out why the generic way of being at issue here cannot be a mere disjunction of the particular ways of being, or else (2) would be definitionally equivalent to (1). See footnote 5.

Let's consider a less metaphysical case. Suppose, as physicists tell us, that all particles are either bosons or fermions. One might think that *being a boson* is a perfectly natural expression and *being a fermion* is also a perfectly natural expression. However, the generic notion of being a particle – that is being a particle of some kind or other – is likely not perfectly natural. But there clearly are particles in this generic sense! In addition, note that being-some-particle-or-other is *not* merely the disjunction of *being-a-boson-or-being-a-fermion*. It was a substantive empirical discovery that all particles are bosons or fermions, not merely a definitional stipulation! So, just as one should think that there is some non-fundamental and not-merely-disjunctive sense in which there are (generic) particles, the Pluralist* should accept that there is a non-fundamental and not-merely-disjunctive sense in which everything generically exists.

This view is very much in the spirit of the view set out in [McDaniel 2010](#). In that paper, McDaniel explores the concept of an 'analogous feature'. According to McDaniel, we are familiar with features that are 'something akin to disjunctive properties, but they aren't merely disjunctive. Analogous features enjoy a kind of unity that merely disjunctive features lack: they are, to put it in medieval terms, unified by analogy' (696). Consider the example of being healthy. There are many different *ways* of being healthy. To take an example of McDaniel's, 'I am healthy, my circulatory system is healthy, and broccoli is healthy' (695). While these are certainly healthy in different ways (just as there are many ways of being!), we do seem to have a grip on a concept of *being generically healthy* (just as we have a grip on generic existence!) that all of these examples enjoy. Note also that being healthy is not merely disjunctive. Or at least, I can see no plausible disjunction that is definitionally equivalent to being healthy that captures all of our talk of healthiness. Rather, we possess the concept of generic healthiness by a kind of analogy with particular ways of being healthy. For the Pluralist*, we do the same thing for generic existence.

Let us turn to Merricks's three objections to taking the first horn of his dilemma. Take the first objection: that Pluralism* violates the core Pluralist intuition that, say, numbers and tables do not enjoy a similar way of being. In response, Pluralists* should accept that they do not respect this intuition, but they should deny that this is much of a cost. Instead of accepting the thesis that there is *no* way of being shared by numbers and tables, Pluralists* accept the closely related thesis that there is *no fundamental* way of being shared by numbers and tables. The mode of being they share is a merely derivative one.

The response to Merricks's third objection is similar. According to the third objection, extant Pluralistic theories that have been developed by prominent historical figures are inconsistent with there being a mode of being that everything shares. Here, we must make the same distinction as we did for the first objection. If these historical figures maintained that there is no

fundamental mode of being which everything shares, there is no problem. If they maintained that there is no non-fundamental mode of being which everything shares, there is a problem. Or, perhaps more plausibly, some of these historical figures would reject the fundamental/non-fundamental distinction in the first place. I certainly cannot adjudicate this interpretational matter here, but I do not see why contemporary Pluralists should be worried if historical Pluralist theories imply that there isn't a non-fundamental mode of being which numbers and tables share.

Lastly, consider the second objection. According to the second objection, if the Pluralist* says that there is a generic mode of being that everything shares, then they should say that something exists₁ iff it generically exists and is concrete, and something exists₂ iff it generically exists and is abstract. This seems to make the distinctions between ways of being superfluous. In response, consider the physics example above. Physicists endorse the biconditional that x is a boson iff x is a particle and x is a non-fermion. Similarly, x is a fermion iff x is a particle and x is a non-boson. Does this give physicists any reason to doubt the claim that 'is a boson' and 'is a fermion' are fundamental, and 'is a particle', 'is a non-boson' and 'is a non-fermion' are non-fundamental? It certainly does not. Mere biconditionals are silent on questions of naturalness.

4. *A new dilemma*

So, Pluralists* seem to avoid Merricks's dilemma without too much cost. Nonetheless, I think that Pluralism* faces a different dilemma that cannot be avoided so easily.

To get the dilemma on the table, we need to consider two different theses about fundamental facts, both of which are defended in Sider 2011. First, we have the following:

Purity: Fundamental facts only contain fundamental notions.

The thesis is very intuitive. In defence of the thesis, Sider writes, 'when God was creating the world, she was not required to think in terms of non-fundamental notions like city, smile, or candy' (106). According to Purity, if one thinks that expressions like 'laptop', 'Possibly, ...' and 'umbrella' are not fundamental notions, then every fact involving them must be non-fundamental.

The second thesis we will be appealing to is the following:

Completeness: Every non-fundamental truth holds in virtue of some fundamental truth.

Sider writes, 'Completeness seems definitive of fundamentality. It would be a nonstarter to say that the fundamental consists solely of one electron: thus

conceived the fundamental could not account for the vast complexity of the world we experience' (105).

More needs to be said about the locution 'in virtue of' in Completeness. Sider's final formulation of Completeness is: 'Every sentence that contains expressions that do not carve at the joints has a metaphysical semantics' (116).⁸ For Sider, a metaphysical semantics consists of claims of the form: 'Sentence S of L is true in L iff ϕ ', where ϕ expresses a fundamental fact that is meant to capture the truth conditions of S (113). For example, the metaphysical semantics for the sentence 'there are cities' will presumably be of the form ' $\exists xC(x)$ ', where 'C' is a complex predicate that describes what it is to be a city at the microphysical level in complete detail.

We can now formulate our new dilemma for the Pluralist*. Recall that Pluralists* endorse the following:

- (1) $\forall x(\exists_1 y(y = x) \text{ or } \exists_2 y(y = x)) \text{ and } \exists_1 x(x = x) \text{ and } \exists_2 x(x = x)$.

Let us focus on the first conjunct of (1):

- (3) $\forall x(\exists_1 y(y = x) \text{ or } \exists_2 y(y = x))$.

Our new dilemma simply asks: *is (3) a fundamental fact?* I believe answering 'yes' and answering 'no' are both problematic for the Pluralist*. If the Pluralist* says 'yes', then they will have to deny Purity. If (3) is fundamental, then by Purity all the expressions in (3) must be fundamental notions. However, the Pluralist* explicitly denies that the generic quantifiers ' \forall ' and ' \exists ' are fundamental notions. I take Purity to be very plausible, so I believe taking this horn of the dilemma comes at a high price.

Taking the other horn is in tension with the conjunction of Purity and Completeness. Suppose the Pluralist* says that (3) is not fundamental. By Completeness, (3) must have a metaphysical semantics. In other words, there must be some sentence ϕ expressing a fundamental fact that captures the truth conditions of (3). Moreover, by Purity, ϕ can only contain fundamental notions. So, in particular, ϕ cannot use the generic quantifiers \forall and \exists . It can only use quantifiers \exists_1 and \exists_2 .

So, the Pluralist* must give the truth conditions for the claim that *everything either exists₁ or exists₂* using only fundamental notions that do *not* include the notion of generic existence. But wait – this is the very task that Merricks argued that Pluralists *cannot* do! All the facts about what exists₁ and what the existent₁ things are like and all the facts about what exists₂ and what those existent₂ things are like will never be able to faithfully account for

8 Another popular way to flesh out Completeness is to say that every non-fundamental fact is fully *grounded* by some fundamental facts. For more on the notion of ground, see [Fine 2012](#) and [Rosen 2010](#). I am choosing to work in Sider's framework since contemporary Pluralists* themselves work in Sider's framework. It should be noted, however, that the dilemma I will be formulating can also be formulated in a grounding framework.

the truth conditions of *everything either exists₁ or exists₂*. For all the facts about what exists₁ and what exists₂ are consistent with there being some additional things that exist₃.

If there were *any* sentence ϕ that faithfully expressed the truth conditions of the claim that *everything either exists₁ or exists₂* that did not use the generic notion of existence, then Merricks's original dilemma would have had no force.⁹ There would have been no need for the Pluralist to accept a notion of generic existence and become a Pluralist* in the first place. Pluralists could have just used ϕ to express their view without needing any generic notion of existence.

In conclusion, I hope to have shown that the most promising way of getting out of the second horn of Merricks's dilemma, by switching from Pluralism to Pluralism*, does not help. It only helps if one is willing to deny Purity or Completeness.

5. A hybrid view?

I have argued that Pluralists* must either give up Purity or Completeness. In response, one might wonder: is it even possible for a view that recognizes multiple fundamental ways of being to satisfy Purity and Completeness? Might there be some other view, Pluralism**, that has been overlooked? Technically, there is such a view. Consider a view, call it Hybridism, in which both the generic quantifier \exists and the specialized quantifiers \exists_1 and \exists_2 are fundamental modes of being. Such a view can invoke generic quantifiers in fundamental facts, and so such a view does not face Purity violations.

Is such a view plausible? One strong argument against Hybridism is that both standard Monism and standard Pluralism are strictly better than Hybridism in terms of ideological parsimony. Hybridism just has strictly more fundamental notions than both standard Pluralism and standard Monism.¹⁰

Secondly, I think that Merricks's three objections against the first horn of his original dilemma apply in full force to Hybridism. First, the core insight/intuition favouring Pluralism, that generic being is less natural than \exists_1 or \exists_2 , or that there is only a loose sense arrived at by analogy for which we can say, 'London and the relation *to the north of* both exist', does not support Hybridism. Secondly, Hybridism incurs the cost of having redundancy at the *fundamental* level, given that x exists₁ iff x exists and is concrete, and x exists₂ iff x exists and is abstract. The Hybridist may get out of this redundancy by denying that 'being concrete' and 'being abstract' are perfectly

9 In the grounding version of the dilemma (see footnote 8), the point here would be that there is no available pure ϕ that grounds the claim that *everything either exists₁ or exists₂*.

10 For some reason to think that standard versions of Pluralism do not face this worry with respect to Monism, see Turner 2010.

natural. However, for a two-ways-of-being Pluralist who thinks that the world fundamentally divides into two – the abstract and the concrete – it is very natural to think that ‘being concrete’ and ‘being abstract’ are perfectly natural. Thirdly, no historical or contemporary Pluralist has ever endorsed Hybridism. In sum, the best response the Pluralist* had to Merricks’s three objections was to emphasize that generic being is *non-fundamental*. Once a Pluralist goes so far as to say that generic being is *fundamental*, there is no way to counter Merricks’s three objections.

So, in conclusion, we all have three options on the table: Monism, Pluralism and Hybridism. I have argued that Pluralists must reject either Completeness or Purity. Hybridists incur the cost of ideological economy, as well as Merricks’s three objections above. Given that this is so, I believe that Monism is the most plausible meta-ontological position.¹¹

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Abstract

Ontological Pluralism is the thesis that there are different ways of being. In his recent paper, 'The only way to be', Trenton Merricks has presented an important challenge to Pluralism in the form of a dilemma. The purpose of this paper is two-fold. First, I argue that Merricks's argument against Pluralism, as stated, is unsound. I will argue that one horn of the dilemma is unproblematic for contemporary versions of Pluralism, defended by Jason Turner and Kris McDaniel, that are formulated in the framework of Ted Sider. However, my second task is to provide a new dilemma against Pluralism, which, when combined with Merricks's arguments, constitutes a sound argument against all forms of Pluralism. The new dilemma will reveal that the real problem with Ontological Pluralism is its conflict with Ted Sider's principle of Purity.

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