

Review of Kris McDaniel, *The Fragmentation of Being*.

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017: ix + 320 pp.

Draft: May 22, 2019

According to *ontological pluralism*, being isn't univocal—there is more than one kind of being or way to exist. And let *ontological degreeism* be the view that being is gradable—some entities enjoy more being or a greater degree of existence than others. Being *fragments* just in case either ontological pluralism or degreeism is true. While the idea that being fragments has played an important role in the history of philosophy, it's perhaps an understatement to say that it hasn't held much currency in contemporary analytic metaphysics. In his book *The Fragmentation of Being*, Kris McDaniel argues, however, that both ontological pluralism and degreeism are reasonable and fruitful views deserving of our consideration.

The first six chapters of *The Fragmentation of Being* are devoted to ontological pluralism. In the first chapter McDaniel develops a version of this thesis that combines elements of views articulated by Heidegger and Theodore Sider. According to this Siderian view, while the unrestricted quantifier captures a generic notion of being, there are special restricted quantifiers that both capture more specific notions of being and are more natural (i.e. carve reality closer to the joints) than the unrestricted quantifier. (Importantly, these special restricted quantifiers aren't *mere* restrictions of the unrestricted quantifier, for in this case the latter would be more natural than the former.) The view follows Heidegger in taking there to be both various specific modes of being in addition to a general, overarching form of being. And the view follows Sider in extending David Lewis' notion of naturalness from predicates and their semantic values to other linguistic items such as quantifier expressions and their semantic values.

The second chapter focuses on the broadly Aristotelian idea that there is a metaphysical form of analogy. According to McDaniel, analogous properties are general properties that, while more natural than disjunctive properties, are less natural than their various "specifications" or "analogue instances" (52). (And analogousness, like naturalness, is also said to apply to ingredients of reality in addition to predicates and properties.) McDaniel sketches what he takes to be reasonable ontological views relative to which existence is plausibly regarded as being analogous in nature. He discusses views, for example, that distinguish between concrete and abstract existence as well as atemporal and temporally relativized existence.

Chapters three through six are devoted to arguing that ontological pluralism is useful to our theorizing about time, ontological categories, “almost nothings,” and persons, respectively (140). Each chapter appeals to a special case of the Sidiggerian view: while the unrestricted quantifier isn’t perfectly natural, there are various perfectly natural restricted quantifiers. As for time, McDaniel formulates an A-theory of time (a theory according to which the present is in some way metaphysically distinguished) according to which existence is analogous. According to McDaniel, two specifications of existence are “past existence” and “present existence” (78). Among the perfectly natural restricted quantifiers, one ranges over past entities and another over present entities.

Turning to ontological categories, McDaniel articulates a novel version of the view that ontological categories are ways of being. The perfectly natural restricted quantifiers represent ontological categories, so to belong to an ontological category is to fall within the range of one of these special quantifiers.

With respect to almost nothings such as holes, cracks, and shadows, McDaniel claims that they are “beings by courtesy,” where being-by-courtesy is another specification of existence understood as an analogous property (146). An entity is a being by courtesy just in case it falls within the range of the unrestricted quantifier but not any perfectly natural quantifier.

Turning to persons, McDaniel states that we’re metaphysically distinguished—we’re “fully real” in particular—just in case we fall within the range of one of the perfectly natural restricted quantifiers (170). For McDaniel, a sufficient condition for being fully real in this sense is to instantiate some perfectly natural property. McDaniel canvases various proposals according to which we instantiate such properties, though he ultimately doesn’t endorse any particular proposal.

The remaining chapters are devoted to ontological degreeism. In the seventh chapter McDaniel clarifies the notion of degrees of existence by considering various accounts of its relation to the notion of degreed naturalness. One proposal flows from the Sidiggerian take on ontological pluralism: for  $x$  to exist to degree  $n$  is for the most natural quantifier that ranges over  $x$  to be natural to degree  $n$ . Another proposal, one that McDaniel prefers, reverses the direction of definition: for  $x$  to be natural to degree  $n$  is for  $x$  to exist to degree  $n$ .

The eighth and ninth chapters are devoted to arguing that ontological degreeism is useful to our theorizing about grounding and essence, respectively. Supposing that grounding is a relation between facts and degreed existence is one measure of “ontological superiority” among many, McDaniel proposes that we define grounding

roughly as follows: for one fact to ground another is for the former to be ontologically superior to the latter (e.g. the former exists to a higher degree than the latter), and for these facts to stand in a “connective relation” or a chain of such relations (237, 239, respectively). The connective relations are characterized by the fact that they induce relations of ontological superiority on their relata—a two-place relation R is a connective relation just in case it’s necessary that x bears R to y just in case x is ontologically superior to y. The connective relations at issue in the definition of grounding are relations between facts in particular—McDaniel suggests that *modal entailment between facts*, *fact determination*, *fact constitution*, and *disjunction formation between facts* are candidate connective relations between facts.

Turning to essence, McDaniel’s discussion is wide-ranging. One of the many proposals he considers is this: the particular essence facts (e.g. part of what it is to be Ranger is that x is Ranger only if x is a dog) are grounded by general facts about the essences of different types of things, and these general essence facts in turn are grounded by facts concerning the ontological categories, which are represented by the special perfectly natural restricted quantifiers.

As my selective summary of the book indicates, this is an ingenious work replete with interesting and often surprising proposals and distinctions. And, while I didn’t stress this above, another virtue of the book is its sustained and fruitful engagement with a host of historical figures, some of which (happily) are outside of the western tradition. As McDaniel states in the postscript, his project involves taking some “old ideas”—that there are modes and degrees of being—and putting them in “new clothing,” so as to connect them to the concerns of contemporary analytic metaphysicians (290). In my view McDaniel has succeeded in this task.

I’ll end with some brief critical remarks that focus on ontological degreeism. I worry about the proposed theoretical applications of this thesis, particularly the definition of grounding. And, as we will see below, McDaniel has his own concerns about the proposal, ones that I think he might underestimate. I have three general concerns.

First, it strikes me that the notion of a connective relation is underdeveloped. McDaniel claims that the inventory of connective relations between facts is to be established by doing (first-order) metaphysics—if we think, for example, that there are determinable and determinate properties, then we should also think that there is a connective relation—fact determination—holding between facts concerning the instantiation of these properties. Now, metaphysics is hard, so I don’t expect McDaniel to propose what is in his estimation an exhaustive list of the connective relations between facts. Still, without having at least some idea (however provisional) of what such a list might look like, it’s hard to evaluate the plausibility of McDaniel’s

proposed definition of grounding, specifically whether there are cases of bare grounding (cases in which one fact grounds another yet these facts don't stand in connective relations or chains of such relations).<sup>1</sup>

The second concern is related to the first—as McDaniel himself notes, there are straightforward grounding claims that, if true, apparently involve bare grounding. McDaniel mentions the following case: the fact that *x* is intrinsically desired by God grounds the fact that *x* is intrinsically good. By way of response, McDaniel suggests that you might think that fact constitution is the connective relation in play here. But, while I understand what *material* constitution is, I confess that I don't have a good grip on what *fact* constitution comes to, if this relation is understood to be distinct from grounding itself.

McDaniel recommends that we “...seriously consider the assumption [that there is no bare grounding] but neither decisively accept nor reject it independently of doing other first-order metaphysical explorations” (244). My impression is that here McDaniel underestimates the problem of bare grounding for his proposal, as there are many rationally permissible if not plausible views formulated in terms of grounding that seem to commit us to claims that involve bare grounding. Here are two examples: given essentialism about modality, the fact that Ranger is essentially a dog grounds the fact that it's necessary that Ranger is a dog; and, given mathematical structuralism, the fact that thus-and-so abstract structure has thus-and-so features grounds the existence and nature of the number 4. It's unclear what connective relations might be operative in such cases. Now, we could always cook up some candidate connective relation to cover these cases, but this would run counter to McDaniel's methodological recommendation to let (first-order) metaphysics decide which relations are the connective relations.

The third issue concerns McDaniel's characterization of the connective relations in terms of ontological superiority. It's fairly standard to understand the implementing mechanisms for causation partly in terms of causation itself. Part of what it is to be a causal mechanism is to be a structured entity that induces particular patterns of causation. I'm inclined to think that we should say something similar about McDaniel's connective relations, which he claims are relations that implement

---

<sup>1</sup> And it may be that some of McDaniel's potential connective relations between facts aren't genuine candidates for him given his other commitments. Regarding fact determination, McDaniel claims that determinate properties aren't ontologically superior to their determinable properties. This suggests that facts concerning the instantiation of the former aren't ontologically superior to facts concerning the instantiation of the latter either, which in turn suggests that fact determination isn't a connective relation after all (see pg. 240, note 42 for discussion of this matter).

grounding. Don't say that to be a connective relation is to be a relation that induces certain patterns of *ontological superiority*; say instead that these relations by their nature induce particular patterns of *grounding*.<sup>2</sup>

*Kelly Trogdon*

Virginia Tech

---

<sup>2</sup> Thanks to Sam Cowling and Kris McDaniel for helpful discussion.