

Essence and Existence

10 years of *eidōs*, Geneva, November 23-24 2017

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Metametaphysical prologue

Cast: the warrior, the soldier, the policeman, the bean-counter, the weasel, the naturalist, the carver, the builder, the definer.

Two relations

Some things **produce** others, under certain circumstances, out of something:

- The sparkle and the dynamite produce an explosion.
- The builder and the bricks produce the house.
- The noise and my sensibility to it produce a headache.
- Some events in my brain produce a thought.

Typically, the circumstances are contingent; when they are not, we have production of a special type: the producer is then always active. Sometimes, no conditions are necessary: the producer is then **generator** of his product all by itself. Typically, that out of which something is produced is external to the producer: when it is not, we have not just production, but **emanation**: out of itself, with no external input, the producer produces its product.

A certain conception of grounding applies to the intersection case: when the production is both a generation and an emanation, the existence of the producer is sufficient for the existence of the product, and the latter is explainable in terms of the former and the fact that the product is produced by the producer, all by itself, and out of itself.

The match is not perfect, however. Mixtures are both generated by their ingredients and emanate from them, but it does not always seem to be the case that they are grounded in them, at least not fully grounded. Mixtures emanate from their ingredients because this is what the ingredients are – the ingredients of this mixture. They are generated by their ingredients because the process of their mixing is not something additional to be added to the mixture, it is not a way for the ingredients to be related to each other (for the ingredients no longer exist when the mixture does). Are mixtures grounded in their ingredients? Not on a necessitarian picture of grounding: the existence of the mixture is not entailed by the existence of the ingredients. Even with contingent grounding, if there is such a thing, the answer is not clear: certainly, the mixture is something over and above its ingredients, it does not owe its existence to just them, they do not make it (but the mixer does).

Necessitarian grounding differs from self-sufficient and spontaneous production (i.e. production which is both generation and emanation) also with respect to its dependency on *ceteris absentibus* clauses: if “*p*” stands for the conjunction of all positive atomic facts (if there is such a thing), then the fact that there are no unicorns (or their absence) is both generated by and emanates from the fact that *p* – the atomic facts, all by themselves, generate this absence (by not including any positive atomic fact about unicorns), and

the absence emanates from them, because the totality fact, whatever this is, is neither positive nor atomic. The absence of unicorns is not grounded in the positive facts, however, because it is something over and above them, it is not explainable in terms of them, for they do not exclude unicorns, only their totality fact does.

Both generation and emanation are relations that may hold between different things and between a thing and itself. The butterfly emanates from the caterpillar, but they are not identical. The fire generates the smoke, but it is not it. We also have cases of self-generation and self-emanation, however. The fresh apple generates the rotten apple, but they are one and the same. The waves emanate from the water, but are not numerically distinct from it.

When restricted to facts, “make it the case” seems appropriate to express cases of production that are both generations and emanations: the fact that p makes it the case that (there is a fact that) $p \vee q$; the fact that p makes it the case that it is true that p ; and so on.

Phenomena of production are sometimes aptly described in terms of priority, levels and fundamentality: the producer is prior, at a lower level, more fundamental than the product, the product is posterior, emergent, derivative. This by itself, I think, does not give us a reason to believe that production is or entails or should be modelled by a strict partial order. Suppose Sam believes, as some neoplatonist Christians do, that the entire world is an emanation of the mind of God, out of which it was produced spontaneously and entirely, without external cause or ingredient. Is this, by itself, enough to ensure that Sam is not a pantheist, or might he be a panentheist instead? Clearly, more has to be said, and it will depend on these additional theory elements what (and possibly: who) is at stake.

Even when under circumstances and out of something, production is quite different from another relation which is also, in some sense of this word, ‘generative’. Some other things **found** others, under certain circumstances, ‘underlie’ them as foundations, as something on which the founded thing is built:

- The basement founds the building, it is its foundation.
- The soil founds the plant, it nourishes it and the plant arises from it.
- The Swiss National Science foundation funds, and founds, our research; our careers are built on it.
- The fundament, e.g. Maria’s face, founds the moment, e.g. Maria’s smile.
- Socrates’ snub is founded in his nose, his snubnosedness in his having the particular nose he has.
- The amorality of this act is founded in its consequences.

The founding of something a by something else b may be full or partial: it is partial, if b also has a foundation different from a , and it is full if a is its only foundation. Socrates’ snubnosedness is fully founded in his having a concave nose, i.e. in his nosedness and the shape of his nose, but only partially founded in his nosedness. The founding of something a by something else b may be transparent or opaque: it is transparent if a wears its being founded in b ‘on its sleeve’ as it were, and opaque if not. The foundation of x on y is transparent iff the very existence of x entails that it is founded on something like y . Someone’s bachelorhood, we may perhaps assume (excluding the pope, transgender cases and a lot more), is transparently founded in his being an adult unmarried male, whereas someone’s knowledge, if at all, is certainly not transparently founded in her justified true belief.

Full foundation may be called “basing”: what fully founds a thing is its basis, it that on which something is based. A basis, a full foundation provides all the elements needed for the founded thing to ‘arise’, though it will of course not always necessitate it (cf. below). It provides for the possibility, not the actuality of the founded thing.

Transparent founding may be called “manifestation”, and the founded thing an “aspect” of its foundation. Sometimes, transparency comes about because the connection is conceptual: the (primary) concept of the founded thing already characterises it as founded in a certain way on something else.

Both full foundation and transparent foundation may hold between different things, and between a thing and itself. Full self-foundation is the mark of well-constructed foundations: they hold themselves up and do not need further propping to stand. Such self-foundation need not be transparent: something may be a foundation, even a full foundation, of itself, but only accidentally so; sometimes foundations may be, and even need to be, further founded by other foundations. Transparent self-foundation is the mark of the obvious cases of foundation: the truth that $p \wedge p$ is founded in the truth that p , and obviously so, by conjunction-elimination and conjunction-introduction. But neither full nor transparent foundation are reflexive: Maria's smile is not Maria's face, even though it is both fully and transparently founded in it.

Foundation and production may occur together, of course. A certain disease, a biological condition of my body or a virus, may both found and produce the rash spreading over it: it underlies the rash because the rash is a symptom of it, and produces it – both causally and metaphysically.

Conceptually, being-built-out-of and being-built-on are two very different things: you can, of course, be built out of something that is entirely in the past, but you cannot be built on and stand on something that is no longer there; you can be built on something that cannot be itself be input to some building, because, for example, it is unchangeable or even immutable.

Even when something is both founded and produced, it may stand to different things in these two relations. Take the aesthetic properties of some painting, say its beauty. The beauty of the painting is founded on its visible features: because it is a painting (rather than e.g. a symphony), its beauty is there to be seen. It is, however, produced by many other things besides, inter alia the way it represents Jesus quite differently than is normally done in the Caravagesque tradition. That this is a one-franc piece is founded in its having the right material properties and its being accepted as currency, but it is produced by the national bank that issued it.

Sometimes, it seems to me, foundation and production may even hold between the same relata, but in converse directions. The intrinsic profile of my body is then produced (and 'grounded'), in part, by the intrinsic profile of my hand, at least as long as my hand is part of me. Suppose that it is intrinsic to my right hand that it is alive. The intrinsic profile then includes the property of having a living right hand, hence necessitates the fact that my hand is alive. Plausibly, it funds it: my hand is alive in virtue of being appropriately connected to my body, it is alive insofar as it is my hand, i.e. one of the hands of my body.

A number of important features of all relations discussed – of production, generation, emanation, foundation, basing and manifestation – should be noted.

All of them hold between existents: the non-existent does not need to be and cannot be produced or founded. It cannot be generally the case that what is produced or founded has less reality than what produces or founds it, because both relations may hold between a thing and itself. In general, we certainly cannot say that what is produced or founded is 'nothing over and above' what produces or founds it. What foundation and production 'add' are very different things: production explains present existence by showing where it comes from, both logically and temporally and also in the order of dependence; foundation explains present existence by showing what it consists in, what its present preconditions are. There may be cases where no such things are added: cases where something is produced out of and by nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*) and cases where something is founded upon nothing. In addition to self-production and self-foundation, we may allow for such zero-production and zero-foundation. Clearly, then the 'nothing but' and 'nothing over and above' locutions are inappropriate. As has been said *ad nauseam*, there are no free lunches to be had.

All of them are, at least logically, many-one. Clearly, even if y has been produced by x , it is possible, at least in principle, that it be produced by some z , different from x . This holds even if the production was spontaneous (generation) and out of x itself (emanation). In the same way, y 's being founded upon x does not exclude the possibility that there be some z different from x that founds y , even when the

foundation is full and thus a base. Not even transparent foundations allows for a “route back”: when y is the manifestation of x , knowledge of y will give us knowledge of x , but only for the general sort, as knowledge of things (relevantly) like x .

This has the important consequence that none of the relations discussed is a relation of dependence, even when it itself holds with necessity. As many have noted, the confusion of determination and dependence is endemic in the grounding literature. It seems that people just cannot help thinking that, if x is the ground of y , then y ‘needs’ x , ‘relies’ on x or is in some other way dependent on x . The discussion of multiple realisability should have taught us already fifty years ago how wrong this thought is, and that the fact that $p \vee q$ is fully grounded in either disjunct may remind us of this.

It is a natural and attractive thought to explain the confusing of determination with dependence as a subtype of the also endemic confusing of sufficient with necessary conditions. If he does ϕ in order to ψ , then certainly, if he ψ s, he must have ϕ ed! Determination, on this picture, provides for sufficiency, dependence accounts for necessity. If we think of ‘grounding’ generally (production and foundation) on the model of providing sufficient conditions, then it is natural to look for the dual: what provides necessary conditions? the answer, it has seemed to many, is: essence.

Essence: What is it to be x ?

Asking about some thing’s essence is asking about which ones, among the many properties it has, make it the thing it is. The essential properties of a thing are those that matter, esp. when it comes to that thing’s existence, identity, nature or being. The question has to be further refined, however: in one sense, *each one* of its properties makes the thing the thing it is (i.e. the thing with these properties). We need not only to restrict, however, but also to broaden: what makes the thing the thing it is does not have to be a property. Intuitively, at least, it could come from a wide range of ontological categories: what makes Socrates the thing (or man) he is, we may think, is his humanity, that he taught Plato, the fertilised egg that grew into him, his very particular method of questioning, his Socratising or his death of hemlock in 399 BC at the hand of the Athenian democrats.

One problem about Fine’s sententialist account of essence is that it answers the wrong question. The question is what it is to be the set $\{a, \text{the morning star}, \dots\}$ and not what it is to be identical to this set. The answer to the latter question, when asked of e.g. $\{a, \text{the evening star}, \dots\}$ will concern what it is for the morning star to be (identical to) the evening star, but the answer to the first will not. Also, the picture he gives us is not symmetric: what the essence explains is the identity, but what is grounded is the existence.

One problem about generalised identity statements is that many of them are neither statements of grounding nor of essence: to be red is to be of my favourite colour, suppose, but colour-preferences and colours do not share grounds nor are involved in each others’ essences. Statements of generalised identity are symmetric – if to ϕ is to ψ then to ψ is to ϕ –, but statements of essence are not: even if F includes all and only the essential properties of x and we may say that to be x is to be the F , the converse, that to be the F is to be x does not follow: even objectual essences, as we will see below, do not need to be individuating.

What is it to be Socrates? A difficult question, but here is a start: to be a human being. What else? To be a man? Perhaps not, not even in the sex sense, if he could have survived a certain type of operation. To have a certain body, or a body at all? Perhaps not, if it really is Socrates who populates Dante’s limbo.

Will the answer to the question what it is to be Socrates be different from the answer to the question what it is to be Plato? It may or it may not. In any case, however, the answer to this question is very different from the answer to the question what is it to be Socrates rather than Plato? This latter question may be readily answered: it is to be married to Xanthippe rather than a bachelor, for example. Even the latter

question is not always answerable, however: there is no good answer to the question what it is to be this rather than that electron in the orbit of a helium atom, for example.

What is it to be a human being, a set, a British royal, a work of art? Here again, answers may be very diverse: to be a rational animal, to have members or being the empty set, to have a certain ancestry. Note that these answers are very imperfect: the first is intrinsically vague (human vegetables, human angels, humanoid robots?), the second uninformative because “set” reoccurs both in “empty set” and in “standing in the set-membership relation”, the third is objectively indeterminate, because there is no fact of the matter who is a royal and who is not and the fourth is dis-unified: what it is to be a work of art is a possibly open-ended list, containing items at best related by some kind of family resemblance. Here, as in the objectual case, it is not to be expected that the best possible answer to essence questions will narrow down the range of candidates instantiating the kinds in question, or even those instantiating them essentially, to just one single member. Perhaps what it is to be a state of knowledge that p really just is what it is to be a justified true belief that p , but they are still not identical, as the paradox of analysis shows.

What is it to be white, walking, surprising? Here we may be asking about the nature, or real definition of a property (though we will probably have to ask back: phenomenal white or reflectance white? white for a surface or for a light beam?), for an account of an activity performable only under certain circumstances and by certain actors (if someone else moves your limbs, you’re not walking, even though robots walk; you may be walking on a treadmill, without changing place, but you are not walking at the moment where you stand still to change direction), or an explanation of why some events have the features they have (the b-flat is surprising within this melody, but would not be so in another; it is surprising to classically habituated ears, but perhaps not to atonalists). Again, individuating essences are not to be expected: even if to be white is to reflect, or to be disposed to reflect, light of a certain type of wave-lengths, it seems possible for colours to be differently realised

What is it to be the fact that p , the fact that $q \wedge q$ and the fact that there is a fact? As long as not more is said about what facts are, there is no good answer to these questions. If facts are true propositions, the answer is simple and unhelpful: to be a proposition (perhaps a possible object of belief?) that so-and-so and to be true. If facts are states of affairs, predicationally and logically complex ‘combinations’ of particulars and universals, then they presumably have their intrinsic structure essentially. If facts are requirements on reality, answers will depend on the ‘fact-content’, i.e. on the requirement imposed. Perhaps what it is to be the fact that p will then be what it is to make it true that p , and what it is to be the fact that p will be the very same thing as what it is to be the fact that $p \wedge p$ and also be the very same thing as what it is to be the fact that $p \vee p$.

“What is it to be x ” questions often contain an indexical or demonstrative element in the way they pick out x or the X s about the essence of which they inquire. In these cases, even a full answer will not provide us with a ‘blueprint’ of, or a recipe for, either x or the X s: essences are not ideas in God’s mind, or slots in a fully determinate matrix of possibilities, which only have to be realised or filled for the things to exist. It is in this sense that my notion of essence is existentialist in Prior’s and Plantinga’s sense: existence is prior to essence, because existence is presupposed in the very project of determining essence. To ask what it is to be a is a way of asking what a is and we cannot ask such a question about a if a does not exist. We may, of course, ask what it is to be something like a which is a way of asking what a is like and this question can be answered even in a ’s utter absence. But it is not the question about a ’s existence.

Even if existence presupposes essence, this would be a synthetic a priori truth, if a truth at all. It may also be an a posteriori falsehood if among the really elementary particles we find things which do not have essences at all. That essence presupposes existence, on the other hand, is analytic: if a does not exist, there just is nothing, and could not be anything it is to be a (there could be, of course, but there is not). That essence and existence come apart does not mean that we cannot learn about the one from the other. Here are some connections:

impossibility: if there is no answer to the question what it is to be an F , we may reasonably conclude that there are no F s and that there could not be any: round squares are impossible *because* there is no answer what it is to be a round square;

category mistakes: if there is no answer to the question what it is, for an F , to be a G , we may reasonably conclude that no F s are, or could be G : coloured things cannot be unextended and Caesar is neither odd nor even *because* there is no way for unextended things to be coloured, there is no way for Caesar to be odd and there is no way for him to be even;

non-existence: if every answer to the question what it is to be an F is incompatible with the existence of F s, we may reasonably conclude that there are no F s: Pegasus does not exist and there are no unicorn *because* part of what it is to be Pegasus or a unicorn is to be a mythical creature.

existence-entailment: if every answer to the question what it is to be an F gives rise to the question what it is to be a G , then nothing could be F without something being G : stars depend for their existence on some public *because* part of what it is to be a star is to be popular and part of what it is to be popular is to be well-liked by some public.

All three relations – production, foundation and what-it-is-to-be – are contingent, in the following sense. Suppose (sequentially) that y produces x , y founds x and y is what it is to be x . On just this basis, we cannot exclude, for some $z \neq x$, the possibility of any of the following:

- (i) x and y exist, z produces x , z founds x and z is what it is to be x
- (ii) x and y exist, y does not produce x , y does not found x and y is not what it is to be x
- (iii) x and y exist, x is not produced, not founded and there is nothing it is to be x

(i) follows from the relations being many-one, (ii) is the denial of necessitarianism, and (iii) is the more radical view that metaphysical structure itself is possibly contingent. It is important to add “possibly” as an epistemic modality here, for there may be special cases (instances of x and y) where we can confidently exclude these possibilities, and there may be extraneous metaphysical considerations (e.g. there being a God who necessarily chooses the best possible world) that rule out some, or even all of these possibilities. But just the ‘logic’ of the relations themselves (if there even is such a thing) does not exclude them.