

Reply to Maureen Donnelly
Author-meets-critics
Eastern APA 2018

Building without necessitation?

Maureen claims that composition isn't necessitating, because if the particles that now compose her were to reassemble in this exact arrangement a long time in the future, they wouldn't compose her.

She is completely right that I do not want to appeal to 4Dism or any other substantive view of persistence here; recall my content neutrality.

Recipe for replying to any putative example of building without necessitation: ask what *does* necessitate the putatively built entity. If nothing, then it is fundamental, not built; if something, count it as part of the building base.¹

Let's apply the recipe to her example. The issue here is actually not about what composes a certain object, but about what makes a certain composed object *have a certain property*—namely, the property *being Maureen Donnelly*. So the issue here is actually about grounding. Now, the question: what necessitates the fact that this composite object is Maureen, and that future composite is not? If the answer is that nothing does, then the fact is fundamental, not built. If the answer is that X does, then X is part of the grounds. No counterexample here.

Does the generativity clause entail the directedness and necessitation clauses in my characterization of building relations?

Maybe, but a) it's presentationally useful to go through it step-by-step, and b) that it does so is controversial. A variety of recent authors (Barnes, Jenkins, Wilson, etc.) are happy to talk about dependence or grounding relations but deny that they are asymmetric and/or irreflexive.

How best to understand the generativity clause?

In the book, I very purposefully frame the requirement in terms of *language*: the obtaining of building relations licenses generative talk like 'because' and 'in virtue of'. And I am explicit that I do this so that the characterization is compatible with a range of different interpretations as to *why*. At one extreme is the view that there is a primitive *in virtue of* relation somehow at the core of every building relation. At the other extreme is the view that it is purely conventional.

Key question: is this neutrality a cop out?

Yes and no.

No, not for the purposes of the book: it is useful to have a characterization that allows the skeptic to participate.

Yes for me as a philosopher trying to figure out the world.

¹ Or context in which the base builds the built thing. I allow builders to only necessitate-in-context; see §3.3. This doesn't affect the basic issue here.

Criticism of the 5th clause of my definition of the *more fundamental than* relation

The clause is in there to permit non-fundamental things that do not stand in any building relations (or ancestrals thereof) to stand in relative fundamentality relations. Consider, for example, an electron in Ithaca and this table.

I completely concede to Maureen that I have just helped myself to talk of kinds, and to the clearly vexed notion of ‘typicality’.

One can always fight about the details. Complicated, multi-clause definitions beg to be counterexamples, after all. Perhaps clause (5) requires some further tinkering; perhaps there needs to be an additional clause. I do think this definition is, at a minimum, on the right track. But I am frankly not particularly concerned about small counterexamples and consequent tweaks, as long as those tweaks result in clauses that remain formulated in terms of building. Indeed, I rather suspect that there are multiple slightly different ways to characterize the *more fundamental than* relation in terms of building, each of which would in effect count as a competing partial realizer of our ordinary concept. There may be more than one equally good candidate. (See §6.7.4 for closely related discussion.) I am perfectly amenable to such ideas because I care much more about my overall claim than about the precise implementation. My overall claim, again, is a reductionism or deflationism about relative fundamentality—there is nothing more to relations of greater and lesser fundamentality than the obtaining of certain patterns of building. In a world with no building relations, nothing is more fundamental than anything else. (2017, 161-2)

What is the work fundamentality talk is supposed to do? Can my deflationary account of relative fundamentality do that work?

Answer: nothing beyond what we want building to do.

One might react—Maureen sounds like she might—with frustration. Why introduce a complex bit of theoretical machinery that does nothing?!?!?

Response: I didn’t introduce it. That’s not what’s going on here. We *already* have this notion, and deploy it All. The. Time.

What I’m doing in chapter 6 is offering a story about *what it is that people are talking about*. It’s in part conceptual analysis of this notion everyone helps themselves to, and in part substantive metaphysics on figuring out what in the world is a reasonably decent realizer of that notion.

Analogy with personal identity. Suppose with me two claims I find reasonably plausible:

- A. Our concept of a person is a substance dualist one. (Reflect on standard cases from the personal identity literature: body swap, duplication, etc.)
- B. Substance dualism is false.

Important point 1: A and B are perfectly compatible.

Important point 2: if A and B are both true, a task opens up. We need a substantive and somewhat revisionary story about what a person actually is, one that respects our pre-theoretical concept to some degree, but which doesn’t posit souls.

Similarly here. I argue that we ought not take relative fundamentality talk to refer to a primitive relation. I offer my building-based story as an alternative, mildly revisionary answer.