SPATIO-TEMPORAL COINCIDENCE AND THE GROUNDING PROBLEM
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ABSTRACT:
A lot of people believe that distinct objects can occupy precisely the same place for the entire time during which they exist. Such people have to provide an answer to the ‘grounding problem’—they have to explain how such things, alike in so many ways, nonetheless manage to fall under different sortals, or have different modal properties. I argue in detail that they cannot say that there is anything in virtue of which spatio-temporally coincident things have those properties. However, I also argue that this may not be as bad as it looks, and that there is a way to make sense of the claim that such properties are primitive.

1. THE GROUNDING PROBLEM
A lot of people believe in spatio-temporally coincident things. That is, they think that distinct objects can occupy precisely the same place for the entire time during which they exist. The main reason they think this, of course, is Allan Gibbard’s classic case of Lumpl and Goliath.

According to the story, Lumpl (a lump of clay) and Goliath (a statue) are created and destroyed at precisely the same time; they remain colocated throughout their existence. However, it certainly looks as though there are various sorts of changes that only one of them would survive. For example, only Lumpl would survive being squashed into a ball, and only Goliath would survive the loss of the bit of clay that forms his nose. If these modal claims are true, and if their truth indicates that Lumpl and Goliath have different modal properties, then Leibniz’s Law entails that they are distinct.

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1 Drafts of this paper have been kicking around for some time, and I have consequently gotten a lot of feedback from a lot of people. For help on the penultimate version, thanks to Cian Dorr, Adam Elga, Peter Godfrey-Smith, Laurie Paull, Jim Pryor, Ted Sider, and a very helpful anonymous reviewer. I presented an older version at the University of Florida at Gainesville, Cornell University, Stanford University, Pomona College, the University of Texas at Austin, the University of Southern California, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, and Arizona State University. Thanks to those audiences, as well as to John Devlin, Allan Gibbard, Delia Graff, Thomas Hofweber, Mark Johnston, Jim Joyce, Mark Moyer, Greg Ray, Ian Proops, Laura Schroeter, and Steve Yablo.

2 Indeed, the claim that there are spatio-temporally coincident objects keeps getting called things like ‘the Popular View’ (Olson 1996) and ‘the Standard Account’ (Burke 1992, 1994). By now, however, enough dissenters have emerged to render such labels a bit exaggerated.
Yet a lot of other people—including Gibbard himself—don’t believe in spatiotemporally coincident things, and go to some lengths to wriggle out of the above argument. The main reason for this is what might be called ‘the grounding problem’ (e.g. Sosa 1987, Heller 1990, Burke 1992, Zimmerman 1995, Olson 2001). What grounds the alleged modal differences between Lumpl and Goliath, given that they are otherwise so alike? They are the same shape, the same size, made of the same parts, have the same history and future, are the same distance from the bagel store, and so on and so forth. So what exactly makes it the case that they could have different shapes, sizes, etc.? ‘One-thingers’, as I shall call them, suspect that their ‘multi-thinger’ opponents simply have no answer to this question.

My goal in this paper is to explore the grounding problem in detail. I should be clear up front that I think the problem is very real, and that I have strong one-thinger inclinations. However, I do not in fact think that the grounding problem constitutes a knockdown objection to spatio-temporal coincidence. I am quite serious, then, when I say that I want to explore the problem—my goal here is largely to investigate the multi-thinger’s options. But before saying anything more about what I plan to argue, let me try to characterize the grounding problem a bit more precisely. Two points in particular deserve at least quick mention.

The first is just that the question behind the grounding problem is not really specific to the multi-thinger. Anyone who takes de re modality seriously should have something to say about what it is, if anything, in virtue of which things have the modal properties they do. So it is not that the multi-thinger faces a new question that the one-thinger doesn’t; it is rather that she certainly appears to have a more difficult time answering a question that they both face. Although I shall

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3 There are various strategies for doing so. One is to insist, à la Michael Burke (particularly 1994) and Michael Rea (2000), that Leibniz’s Law arguments based on modal properties are systematically unsound—that, despite appearances, one of the premises is always false. A second option is to claim, à la Michael Della Rocca (1996), that such arguments are systematically question-begging. And a third, more popular, option is to accept the truth of the modal premises, and instead insist, à la Gibbard and David Lewis (1971, 1986), that such arguments are invalid. There is actually a fourth option, though it is à la nobody at all. This is to insist on a Myro-esque (1986a, b) restriction of Leibniz’s Law to nonmodal properties. There are many reasons why this last option is a bad idea, but the only one worth pointing out here is that denying the existence of coincidents this way does not actually do anything to avoid the grounding problem. Even if it made sense to say that there is one thing there that both is and is not essentially F, we would be left with a mystery about the ground of essential Fness.

4 I believe I picked up the terms ‘one-thinger’ and ‘multi-thinger’ from Stephen Yablo.
occasionally use the phrase ‘the grounding problem’ to refer to the quite general question, I shall mostly reserve it for the question raised as an objection to the multi-thinger.

Second, I have thus far made it sound as though the grounding problem (in either sense) is just about *de re* modal properties—as though it is just about why things have the persistence conditions they do.\(^5\) This is somewhat misleading. Multi-thingers in fact think that spatio-temporally coincident objects differ in a whole *cluster* of ways, and the grounding problem is really a problem about all of these alleged differences. For example, the multi-thinger will certainly say that Lumpl and Goliath fall under different sortals, or belong to different kinds—she will say that the latter is a statue, while the former is merely a lump of clay. And she might very well also say that the two differ with respect to various other properties, like *being innovative*, *being valuable*, and *being well-made* (Fine 2003). Properly characterizing the grounding problem requires acknowledging that it is not just explicitly modal properties that are at issue.

Yet this is tricky, because doing so threatens to undercut the problem’s force. If the multi-thinger thinks that Lumpl and Goliath differ not just in one way, but in a whole *cluster* of ways, she might well want to use some of their differences to explain the others. Wouldn’t this make the grounding problem go away? No. For one thing, it seems clear that if Lumpl and Goliath differ with respect to how innovative or valuable they are (etc.), such differences are explained by their sortal or modal differences, rather than the other way around (c.f. Olson 2001, 348). And although the relations between sortal properties and modal properties are arguably less clear, it is obvious that they cannot each be used to ground the other. That would be circular. The multi-thinger can say that things have their modal properties in virtue of the sortals under which they fall. Or she can say that things fall under the sortals they do in virtue of their modal properties (e.g. Baker 1997, 2000). But she cannot say *both* of those and claim to have answered the grounding problem. That is, she can push the question to either place, but the issue remains. All that turns on where exactly it arises is whether the questions are of the form ‘in virtue of what would Lumpl (but not Goliath) survive

\(^5\) Note that although there is *a* sense in which dispositional properties are ‘modal properties’, it is not the sense at hand. Fragility isn’t at issue; only essential and accidental fragility are.
being squashed?’ or of the form, ‘in virtue of what is Goliath a statue (and Lumpl only a lump of clay)?’

So the fact that spatio-temporally coincident things differ with respect to a cluster of properties, some of which can be explained in terms of the others, does not make the grounding problem any easier to answer. It just means that the class of problematic properties is bigger than one might have expected. From here on, I will use the label ‘sortalish properties’ to refer indiscriminately to

i) persistence conditions, particularly modal properties like being essentially \textit{shaped about like so},

ii) kind or sortal properties, and

iii) properties that things have partially in virtue of their instantiation of properties in categories i) or ii).\(^7\)

Only in the final section will it matter which of these is in question.

The grounding problem, then, is this: in light of the fact that spatio-temporally coincident things have all of their \textit{other} properties in common, in virtue of what do they have the sortalish properties they do? I think that the multi-thinger has to answer, ‘in virtue of nothing at all.’ I think she has to claim that sortalish properties are primitive. I argue for this claim by rejecting the only other two answers that I can think of. In section 2, I argue that the multi-thinger cannot claim that things have their sortalish properties in virtue of their nonsortalish ones. And in section 3, I argue that she cannot claim that things have their nonsortalish properties in virtue of any facts about us, about our concepts and attitudes. But if the world is not doing the work, and neither are we, then nothing is. The sortalish facts are just brute facts.

\(^6\) Note that there is a reasonably natural sense in which even the multi-thinger can say that Lumpl is a statue too—it is not a \textit{lawnmower}, after all, and it is certainly more statuelike than cube-shaped, plastic-wrapped lumps of clay on the shelf at the craft store. However, she will of course insist that it falls under the sortal ‘statue’ in a rather different way than it falls under the sortal ‘lump’. We can label this distinction how we like. Perhaps Lumpl is only derivatively a statue (Baker 2000, 46-57). Or perhaps ‘Lumpl’ is a name \textit{of} a statue while ‘Goliath’ is a name \textit{for} a statue (Geach 1968, Noonan 1980). Or perhaps we could just invoke a distinction between an ‘is’ of constitution and an ‘is’ of identity (Wiggins 1980 30-35). But whatever the labels, it is obviously the stronger notion of sortal satisfaction that the multi-thinger needs to explain.

\(^7\) This characterization is admittedly a bit handwavvy, and surely not perfect. But hold your counterexamples; it seems good enough for the uses to which I am going to put it.
However, it turns out that this can actually be made out to be a perfectly coherent and defensible view. I explain how to do so in section 4. My goal, then, is twofold: to argue that the multi-thinger has to accept the primitiveness of sortalish facts, and to argue that this may not be as crazy as it looks. I do not endorse the position I outline, but I also do not argue against it fully. My primary intention is rather to clarify the status of the debate. Since I think that there is only one viable position for the multi-thinger to adopt, I think that the debate about the status of spatio-temporal coincidence should become a debate about the status of that position.

2. DETERMINATION BY NON-SORTALISH PROPERTIES

The multi-thinger’s first option, then, is to try to maintain that things have their sortalish properties in virtue of their non-sortalish ones. A lot of people think that this has to be the case, that the way an object actually is determines how it can and must be. 8 Indeed, one-thingers often pose the grounding problem precisely by saying that a) things do have their sortalish properties in virtue of their non-sortalish ones, and b) the multi-thinger cannot make this claim. Now, there are some interesting worries about whether a) is true—that is, worries about whether even the one-thinger should adopt this answer. 9 All I shall argue here, however, is that the multi-thinger really cannot do so.

Something in the vicinity of the point I want to make is often put in terms of supervenience failure—the fact that spatio-temporally coincident things are just alike in their sortalish properties but different in their non-sortalish ones entails that sortalish properties neither weakly nor strongly supervene (Kim 1984) on non-sortalish ones. So, the line of thought continues, usually only

8 See, for example, McGinn 1981, 174; Sosa 1987, 174; Heller 1990, 31; Noonan 1993. And John Divers goes so far as to claim that it is just trivial that the modal at least weakly supervenes upon the nonmodal (1992, e.g. 112). This last is misguided, however. Divers’ reason for claiming that the supervenience claim is trivial is that p □ p is valid in systems T or stronger—but that does not entail that either the essential nor the nonactual possible properties of a thing weakly supervene on its nonmodal properties.

9 The worries primarily have to do with modal properties in particular. For example, it will surely be a bit tricky to characterize the relationship between modal and nonmodal properties in terms of a relation that by its nature has modal import. There is also a worry that explaining modal properties by means of nonmodal ones undermines their very modalness—that the modal, by its nature, ‘outstrips’ the nonmodal (see Blackburn 1987, 53-4; Sidelle 1989, 115-117, and especially 125).
implicitly, the fact that supervenience is surely necessary for determination entails that sortalish properties are not determined by non-sortalish ones.

But the problem with putting the point this way is that doing so obviously invites the response that there are other kinds of supervenience that can hold. Several people have accepted this invitation, and claimed that the existence of such kinds of supervenience defuses the grounding problem (e.g. Rea 1997, Sider 2000, Baker 2000). Now, these people are quite right to think that such kinds of supervenience are available. At least three have been formulated to date—weak global supervenience (Stalnaker 1996, McLaughlin 1997, and Sider 1999), middling global supervenience (author, forthcoming; Shagrir 2002), and what may as well be called ‘coincident-friendly supervenience’ (Zimmerman 1995, 88; Rea 1997). Each of these is perfectly compatible with the existence and non-sortalish indiscernibility of coincident things, as is any form of supervenience that allows what is called ‘intraworld variation’—the existence within a single world of things that have just the same base properties but different supervening properties.

However, this does not itself show anything of interest; it does not count as a solution to the grounding problem. The issue here is whether a thing’s non-sortalish properties determine what sortalish properties it has—and none of the forms of supervenience just mentioned entail that they do. I have argued for the general point behind this claim in more detail elsewhere (author, forthcoming). Here, I will bypass claims about specific forms of supervenience altogether, and just quickly and informally argue that given coincidence, nothing non-sortalish can determine what sortalish properties things have.

The basic idea is pretty straightforward. Goliath’s non-sortalish properties do not suffice for its sortalish properties for the simple reason that Lumpl has just the same non-sortalish

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10 Pace Brian McLaughlin (1995, 19), Kim’s multiple domain supervenience (1988) is not appropriate in this context.

11 Here is a way of fleshing out and formalizing Zimmerman’s suggestion:

For all x and y, and all worlds w₁ and w₂, if x in w₁ is B-indiscernible from y in w₂, then for each thing x* in w₁ to which x is R-related, there is something y* in w₂ that is R-related to y and that is A-indiscernible from x*.

I leave open what relation R is supposed to be, though B-indiscernibility is a good candidate for the case of coincident things. When R is B-indiscernibility, coincident-friendly supervenience entails both middling and weak global supervenience.
properties but does not have the same sortalish ones. And it is not just that Lumpl and Goliath have all the same intrinsic non-sortalish properties. Though the point is often ignored, the fact is that they have all the same extrinsic ones as well; there are no non-sortalish relational properties to appeal to either. What this means is that nothing purely non-sortalish determines what sortalish properties either of them has. Nothing purely non-sortalish is sufficient. Now, it might be true to say that all of the non-sortalish properties instantiated in a world determine what sortalish properties are instantiated there. But that is not good enough, for they certainly do not determine the distribution of those sortalish properties. They do not determine which ones go to Lumpl and which ones go to Goliath (c.f. Zimmerman 1995, 90; Olson 2001, 345-346). The fact that Goliath has its approximate shape essentially is neither settled by its own intrinsic non-sortalish properties, nor even by the entire spread of non-sortalish properties instantiated across its world. So it is not in virtue of anything non-sortalish that Goliath essentially has that shape—and that is the claim at stake. Thus even though there are forms of supervenience that can hold between sortalish and non-sortalish properties in the face of coincidence, none of them can do the job required here.

One upshot of this discussion is that supervenience has less metaphysical utility than is sometimes supposed. The trouble with supervenience is not merely the commonly heard complaint that it says nothing about how or why the subvening properties determine the supervenient ones (Blackburn 1973, 1985; Horgan 1993; Kim 1993, 167, and 1998, 9-15); the problem is rather that

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12 The grounding problem is sometimes mischaracterized as turning on the claim that spatio-temporally coincident things share all their intrinsic properties. This is dangerous. First, they just don’t share all their intrinsic properties if modal properties are intrinsic. Second, there is not obviously any problem about distinct objects that merely share all their intrinsic qualitative properties; imagine items rolling off an assembly line in a factory with idealized quality control. Third, the silence about relational properties can lead people to a) forget that there aren’t any nonmodal relational differences between coincidents either, and b) think that appeal to relational differences, even modal ones, will solve the grounding problem. Consider Baker: “here is the reason that [Lumpl] and [Goliath] differ in their essential properties even though they are intrinsically just alike: There are relational properties that [Goliath] has essentially but that [Lumpl] does not have essentially” (2000, 170). But this is no solution to the grounding problem; we can all agree that some essential properties are relational.

13 Rea wants to solve the ‘which is which’ problem by combining a version of coincident-friendly supervenience and an appeal to ‘lump-determining’ and ‘statue-determining’ microproperties. However, without further elucidation of just what those properties are supposed to be, I do not see how this move counts as saying that nonsortalish properties are doing the work.
some forms of it are compatible with the utter absence of determination (see author, forthcoming).\textsuperscript{14} The mere fact that supervenience of some kind or other holds, then, is not enough to put an end to questions about what it is in virtue of which things have the supervening properties. Only the less cunning varieties of supervenience, such as weak and strong, have a chance of answering the grounding problem for any sort of property.

Nonetheless, we should not ignore the fact that these more complex forms of supervenience can indeed hold. All I have argued is that the non-sortalish properties that constitute their subvenience base cannot be held up as an answer to the grounding problem. I have not argued that such principles cannot be useful to the multi-thinger in any way at all. In fact, they shall reemerge in the next section.

3. CONCEPTS AND CONVENTIONS

So how else might things get their sortalish properties? The next answer that suggests itself—setting aside momentarily whether or not it will help the multi-thinger—is that the sortalish properties things have are somehow or other up to us. On this line, the distribution of sortalish properties across the world is the result of human attitudes, concepts, and conventions.\textsuperscript{15} The central claim here is that we somehow make things have the sortalish properties they do. It is worth being clear from the start that not just any appeal to concepts and conventions counts as a version of the view in question. In particular, the claim that sortal concepts are only needed to achieve determinate reference does not count as ‘conceptualism’ as I will be using the label. All that says is that our concepts help settle which thing we are talking about.\textsuperscript{16} And although—as we shall see in

\textsuperscript{14} Someone might claim that the proper moral is not that there are forms of supervenience that can hold even when neither set of properties determines the other, but is rather that such relations do not count as forms of supervenience after all. This is just a terminological quibble.

\textsuperscript{15} I am clearly assuming for the sake of argument that the claim that sortalish properties are determined by our concepts is somehow not subsumed by the claim that they are determined by non-sortalish properties.

\textsuperscript{16} The view I am (temporarily) setting aside is what Sidelle calls the ‘Picture 1’ way of understanding the link between convention and persistence conditions (1992a, 284-289). I think it is David Wiggins’ view, though I will not defend that interpretation here. Much of the fifth chapter of \textit{Sameness and Substance} is devoted to an explicit rejection of the kind of conceptualism under consideration in the main text (see especially 141-142; also 1986, 179-180).
the next section—that might be an important part of some multi-thinger’s overall story, it is only the former claim that itself counts as an answer to the grounding problem.

A number of people are conceptualists in the relevant sense. Graeme Forbes makes some remarks along these lines (1985, 232-235), and Simon Blackburn (1984, 216-217; 1987) probably falls within this general camp as well. But the view’s most explicit and forceful proponent, by far, is Alan Sidelle (especially 1989,1992b).

So is it a coherent position? Maybe. It sounds fairly plausible for artifact kinds, at any rate. Presumably, the fact that statues cannot survive drastic changes in their shape is not a grand, mind-independent truth about the nature of the universe. And, indeed, there are lots of properties other than sortalish ones that certainly look to be conventional. For example, I am willing to say that being hip is a real property that things like pairs of shoes can have—but whether or not something does have it is entirely at the whim of human notions of fashion. So I am not going to challenge the idea that our attitudes and concepts can somehow add real properties to the world. What I am going to challenge is the claim that the multi-thinger can say that this is how things get their sortalish properties.

The place to start is by noticing that the multi-thinger has to allow our concepts to differentially apply to things like Lumpl and Goliath. This renders the situation rather different than it is with other properties that are plausibly given conventionally, such as being hip. After all, such properties typically respect weak supervenience (at a time)—all otherwise indiscernible pairs of shoes have to be equally hip. So the multi-thinger cannot rely on such analogies; she must provide us with a positive story about how we manage to grant different sortalish properties to otherwise indiscernible things.

17 Whether he does or not depends both upon whether his quasi-realist approach to de dicto modality can be extended to de re modality, and upon how successful the ‘realism’ part of his quasi-realism is—that is, upon whether he manages to successfully recapture the truth-aptitude of modal claims.

18 I do not mean to suggest that it is obvious how best to understand the notion of a ‘conventional property’; I am ducking some tricky issues here.

19 Note that they only respect weak supervenience (not strong). This is because it is contingent just which sets of otherwise indiscernible shoes are hip and which are not.
One natural way to do this—though one that I doubt anybody intends—is by means of what might be called the ‘pointing-and-proclaiming’ model. According to this approach, what we do is (somehow) single out a particular thing, and then (somehow) bestow sortalish properties upon it. The basic picture is that we engage in multiple discrete acts of conceptualizing. We first ‘look’ at Goliath, decide that it has to have that approximate shape, and thereby grant it the sortalish property *being essentially shaped roughly like so*. We then ‘look’ at Lumpl, decide that it does not have to have that approximate shape, and thereby grant it the sortalish property *being accidentally shaped roughly like so*. On this line, the objects of our conceptual activity already exist—otherwise there would be nothing there to single out. So both Lumpl and Goliath preexist any conceptual activity on our part; all we do is settle their modal profiles and what sortals they fall under. Objects exist, in all their non-sortalish glory, before we direct our attention to them and decide, one by one, what their sortalish properties are.

Yet although the pointing-and-proclaiming model would allow Lumpl and Goliath to wind up with different sortalish properties, it can’t be the right way to go. For one thing, *anybody* who thinks that this is how things get their sortalish properties has to move to a modal system weaker than S4. But the real problem is specific to the multi-thinger. This model commits her to the claim that not only are there distinct things that differ merely in their sortalish properties, there are also distinct things that differ in *no way at all*. If each thing antedates the conceptualizing activity that settles its sortalish properties, then coincident things have to be *already* distinct before we do the relevant conceptualizing. The claim would have to be that Goliath and Lumpl both exist, and *then* we settle what sortalish properties they have—and that they have different ones. We are therefore being asked to accept that the world is full of things that are *utterly* indiscernible yet nonetheless distinct. And that is just unacceptable.

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\text{If Goliath exists before we make it essentially shaped-roughly-like-so, then it is at some point essentially shaped-roughly-like-so without at any time being essentially essentially shaped-roughly-like-so, and that cannot be the case in either S4 or S5. That is, the only properties that can be conventionally granted to pre-existing objects are those that the objects have contingently—and S4 and S5 entail that modal properties are not like that.}\]
After all, we are being asked to swallow something rather beyond Max Black’s classic
counterexample to the Identity of Indiscernibles (1954). Black’s counterexample is a world that
contains nothing but two intrinsically indiscernible iron spheres. They are the only two things in
the world, and so have all the same extrinsic properties as well. Nonetheless, as Quine points out,
the spheres do instantiate different relations (1960, 230). Although the first sphere, Castor, is (say)
one mile from the other sphere, Pollux, and *vice versa*, Castor is not one mile from Castor. And, I
submit, it is only that relational difference that allows us to get our heads around the claim that there
are *two* spheres rather than only one. Yet nothing comparable is going on in the postulation of
brutely distinct things; they would not differ *at all*. The pair <Lumpl, Lumpl> instantiates all the
same relations as does the pair <Lumpl, Goliath>. 21

So this line of thought is presumably not going to be what the conceptualist multi-thinger
has in mind. And because the problems here are entirely generated by the idea that things pre-exist
the conceptualizing activity that grants them their sortalish properties, she is going to have to move
to the claim that our conceptualizing activity instead *calls things into existence*. The idea would be
that we make it be the case that Lumpl would survive being squashed, not by giving Lumpl that
property as we might give it a coat of paint, but rather by *making Lumpl*. We make things have
their sortalish properties by making the things themselves. Conceptualists do sometimes talk like
this, especially Sidelle, who claims that “it is not merely the modal facts that result from our
conventions, but the individuals and kinds that are modally involved” (1989, 77; see also 52-57,
157-158, and 1992a, 285-289). And although such talk can easily be made to look like patent
nonsense, we should resist the temptation to do so too quickly.

*Contra* the interpretations of some hostile one-thingers (Heller 1990, 36l; Olson 2001, 347;
Sider 2001, 157), the conceptualist is presumably not claiming that we have magical powers and can

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21 An anonymous reviewer has objected that there *are* properties on which Lumpl and Goliath differ, even before the
pointing-and-proclaiming takes place. Goliath has the property *being at some future time essentially statue-shaped*,
and Lumpl does not. But even if that’s true, it does not affect the spirit of the point in the main text. Goliath is at-
some-future-time-essentially-statue-shaped in virtue of the same (future) proclamation that will make it be essentially
statue shaped. The properties come as a package; we cannot pull out one of them and say that it makes the difference
between the coincidents not be brute. Perhaps we should not understand the proclaiming in straightforwardly
temporal terms. But as long as it is supposed to be granting properties to objects rather than *creating* them,
something like the point in the main text stands.
conjure things from the void. She is claiming something more sensible that that. And to get a grip on what she is claiming, we need to notice that the move away from the idea that we give particular pre-existing things their sortalish properties also requires moving away from the idea that the relevant conceptualizing proceeds on a one-off basis. If that were the way to understand the calling-into-existence talk, then we would indeed have magic powers. It would amount to saying that we can just decide, utterly willy-nilly, that there is a certain sort of thing in a certain place. And although it would be nice if that were true—it would certainly save us trips to the store—it obviously isn’t.

So there must be constraints on the conceptualizing; it has to work by means of general conditional principles that latch onto the world by means of their antecedents. That is, only if the principles have antecedents that are independently satisfied by things in—or at least regions of—the world can the ‘calling into existence’ talk go beyond mere wishful thinking.²²

These conditionals must satisfy three further constraints. First, their antecedents must be purely non-sortalish. Otherwise, the view has no chance at all of providing a solution to the grounding problem—our conceptualizing activity cannot be the genuine source of sortalish properties if it works by means of conditionals that themselves invoke sortalish properties. Second, the conditionals cannot have simple, straightforward sortalish consequents. Like any multi-thinger, the conceptualist has to deny that there are any non-sortalish sufficient conditions for sortalish properties. Third, the conditionals cannot be prefixed by universal quantifiers that range over both antecedent and consequent. If they were—if they said of particular things that those very things get certain sortalish properties—the view would collapse back into the pointing-and-proclaiming model that I have already rejected. So the conceptualist’s principles must instead be formulated so that the sortalish properties do not get attributed to anything that is itself mentioned in the antecedent.

²² This is very much the sort of view that Sidelle endorses. He claims that our conventions create all the objects that there are. But he also emphasizes that his view is not idealist: “the world is all out there, we do not think it up, when we die it does not go away. It’s full of stuff and features—they are just not articulate, that is, pre-individuated… while our conventions determine what Mars would have to contain in order for there to be water there, they are silent about whether these conditions are met” (1992a, 287).
These reflections suggest that the conceptualist multi-thinger’s general principles must look something like the following:

in each place where non-sortalish properties $N$ are instantiated, there is a thing $x$ with sortalish properties $S_1$ and another thing $y$ with sortalish properties $S_2$.

It is by conventionally settling upon the truth of such principles that we call the $S_1$ and $S_2$ things into existence. This is by far the best way (indeed, as far as I can see the only way) to make sense of the idea that we manage to create things by means of our conceptual activity—which is, in turn, the only conceptualist position available to the multi-thinger.

These principles are perfectly compatible with the existence of spatio-temporally coincident things, just as the more complicated forms of supervenience discussed in the last section are. Indeed, they bear a marked resemblance to such forms of supervenience. This is not particularly surprising; after all, there are only so many ways one can concoct principles that link the spread of non-sortalish properties to the spread of sortalish ones while allowing spatiotemporal coincidence. However, the view is crucially different from anything proposed in the previous section. There, the claim was that things have their sortalish properties because of their non-sortalish ones, that it is the non-sortalish properties that are doing the work. Here, the claim is that it is *we* who are doing the work. The principles may be very similar, but the conceptualist multi-thinger does not point to their non-sortalish antecedents as the answer to the grounding problem. She instead points to the concepts and conventions in virtue of which the connections between non-sortalish and sortalish connections hold. *They* are what ground the sortalish facts. Lumpl is possibly squashed, not in virtue of its non-sortalish properties, but rather in virtue of the concepts that make true the generative principles—the principles that bring into existence a thing with that sortalish profile. 23 As best as I can make out, then, the idea is that our concepts give things their sortalish properties by making these existentially generative principles true.

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23 Note that the ‘which thing gets which sortalish properties?’ question from the previous section gets no grip here. The conceptualist is saying that the principles bring the things into existence, replete with their sortalish profiles $S_1$ and $S_2$. To ask why *this* one is $S_1$ and *that* one is $S_2$ assumes that they in some sense preexist their $S_1$ and $S_2$ness, and that there is more to them than being the $S_1$ and $S_2$ things there. But there isn’t. All it is for the $S_1$ ($S_2$) thing to exist at all is to be the $S_1$ ($S_2$) thing in that place where nonsortalish properties $N$ are instantiated.
To be frank, I vacillate about whether or not this is really a way for our concepts to give things their sortalish properties—about whether or not the claim that our concepts render these existentially generative principles true really counts as an answer to the grounding problem. Luckily, however, the point is moot. I can happily grant for the sake of argument that that claim would count as an answer to the grounding problem if it were true—because it is not true. It faces two big problems.

The first big problem is that it is not obvious that the principles can really be existentially generative in the requisite way. Begin by noticing that the antecedent simply says that certain non-sortalish properties are instantiated in a region. Question: does anything instantiate them? I mean does anything initially instantiate them—is there an object whose instantiation of the non-sortalish properties enables the principles to hook onto the world in the first place? If the answer is ‘yes’, then that object has no sortalish properties whatsoever. Remember, the idea here is that things with sortalish properties come into existence only after the instantiation of the non-sortalish properties mentioned in the antecedent. So whatever object initially instantiates them is, as it were, pre-sortalish. But it makes very little sense to say that there are objects that have no sortalish properties at all. Having sensible persistence conditions is surely part of what it is to be an object.24 So it looks as though the answer has to be ‘no’—that nothing initially instantiates the non-sortalish properties invoked in the antecedents of the principles. But since those properties must be instantiated if the principles are not to be vacuous, the multi-thinger conceptualist is stuck with the rather odd claim that properties can be instantiated without being instantiated by anything. Perhaps she would welcome this. But I think it is fair to say that it is less than obvious that it makes much sense to think that we can pull objects out of a sea of “stuff and features” (Sidelle 1992a, 287) in the way that this view demands.

24 Even the notion of an extremely modally robust object that has all of its properties accidentally, and hence which cannot be destroyed, is in better shape on this point than is an object that has all of its properties neither accidentally nor essentially.
But set that worry aside, for there is a second, worse problem—namely, that the crucial principles just are not conceptually true. We have certainly been given no reason to think that they are. It is not even easy to see what the relevant concepts are supposed to be. They certainly are not workaday concepts like ‘lump of clay’ or ‘statue’. Those concepts might well render certain other principles conceptually true—perhaps even including ‘lumps of clay survive squashings’ and ‘statues do not’. It might well be the case, that is, that the ability to survive squashings is part of my concept of a lump of clay. However, it is neither part of my concept of a lump of clay nor of my concept of a statue that wherever such and such non-sortalish properties are instantiated, there is a thing that would survive a squashing as well as a thing that would not. And it is very hard to see what other concepts could be doing the work.

Indeed, it certainly does not look as though any of our concepts are doing the work. Keep in mind that to say that the principles are conceptually true is to say that anyone who denies or otherwise violates them is making a conceptual error. But this is surely not the case. After all, anyone who thinks that Lumpl and Goliath have the same sortalish properties—anyone who thinks that they are identical—is committed to denying the conceptualist’s principles, which have their sortalish differences built in. Yet it hardly seems right to claim that one-thingers are conceptually misguided. They are certainly not making the kind of mistake made by someone who says that one action is right and another, otherwise indiscernible, action is wrong. They are not even making the kind of mistake made by someone who says that a wet lump of clay ceases to exist when it is squashed into a ball. Those mistakes are plausibly conceptual errors; we can echo Hare, and say that “something has gone wrong with [their] use of the word[s]” (1952, 81). But people who deny that each place in which certain non-sortalish properties are instantiated contains two things with incompatible sets of sortalish properties are not making the same kind of mistake. It is not as though they do not know what lumps are, what statues are, what objects are, or what ‘exists’ means.

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25 This is presumably why Burke’s view (esp. 1994), alluded to in the introduction, has gained little currency. Though interesting, it is deeply implausible precisely because it requires saying that some lumps of clay go out of existence when they are squashed.
One-thingers like Lewis might be wrong, but they are not exhibiting incompetence with modal discourse.\textsuperscript{26}

The point, of course, is that the conceptualist has had to move pretty far away from anything that might plausibly be considered to be conceptually true. But the claim that the general principles are conceptually true is absolutely crucial to the position. Merely claiming that they are true is not good enough. As I have already pointed out, it is only their allegedly conceptually true status that makes the proposal here any different from a mere reliance on one of the more complicated forms of supervenience discussed in the last section. Strip that part of the story away, and we are left with the failed attempt to maintain that things have their sortalish properties in virtue of their non-sortalish ones.

The upshot, then, is this. The only way for a multi-thinger to get conceptualism off the ground is to say that we give things their sortalish properties by calling them, with those properties, into existence. And the only way to make sense of that claim is to say that our concepts, conventions and attitudes render certain existentially generative principles true. Which they don’t. Hence, tollens-ing back, there can’t be a sensible multi-thinger conceptualism.

4. HOW TO BE A PRIMITIVIST

At this point, the multi-thinger has been backed into a corner. There is nothing for her to do but say that there just isn’t anything in virtue of which things have the sortalish properties they do. She has to say that sortalish properties are primitive, that they are not in fact grounded in anything at all. This position is arguably better described as a dismissal of the grounding problem than as a solution to it, but that is neither here nor there. All that really matters is that the multi-thinger is forced into the claim that the sortalish facts are simply brute.

\textsuperscript{26} I suppose a multi-thinger might avoid claiming that the one-thinger is making a conceptual error by instead claiming that the one-thinger just has different concepts—and that the principles are conceptually true for the multi-thinger. But since the conceptualist multi-thinger thinks that these principles are creating reality rather than merely describing it, this amounts to saying that what exists (not, note, merely what we dignify with a name) is conceptually relative. It is not obvious to me that such a view makes sense (though see Sosa 1999 for a valiant defense). But even if it does, it does not seem like this is something the multi-thinger should want to say. After all, it entails that she and the one-thinker are not disagreeing about anything.
It might look like this is the end of the line. How could it just be a *brute fact* that I am essentially human, that Al Gore is possibly president, that Goliath would not survive being squashed into a ball? The force of the grounding problem clearly rests on the claim that it couldn’t be. Unsurprisingly, then, those who raise the problem typically take it to be obvious that there must be *something* in virtue of which things have the sortalish properties they do (e.g. Burke 1992, 14; Heller 1990, 31; Sider 1999, 929). Dean Zimmerman even comes out with “surely this is absurd” (1995, 87).

But it’s actually not absurd, not quite. I think that the claim that the sortalish facts are brute can be given a much better run for its money than it has been given to date—and thus that the multi-thinger has not lost yet. However, I am also very sympathetic to the standard one-thinger reluctance to accept the bruteness of sortalish facts. In particular, I certainly do not think that the multi-thinger can simply smile sweetly and announce that brute facts don’t bother *him*. That is no victory. That is not even stalemate.

Quite generally, anyone who wants to claim that some property or fact is primitive bears a significant burden of proof. No one can just proclaim such a thing and expect to be taken seriously. One reason for this is simply that it is appropriate to have an ontological bias against thinking that much is basic and unanalyzable. Another is that primitiveness claims are not exactly susceptible to counterexample, and thus cannot be straightforwardly falsified—so serious defense is required if they are to be responsible to argument at all. Now, a big part of the needed defense is an argument to the effect that there just isn’t anything that could do the relevant work, that nothing could ground the instantiation of the property. I assume that this very paper counts as discharging that part of the burden for the multi-thinger, and thus will say no more about it here. My point is that providing such an argument is not enough. *Any* argument of this kind for *any* primitiveness claim can very easily backfire. This is because any such argument can equally well be taken to show either a) that the property in question does not in fact exist, or b) that some other assumption used in the argument must be rejected. In the case at hand, of course, it is option b) that poses the
real threat; we can always reject spatio-temporal coincidence instead of accepting the primitiveness of sortalish facts. This is, after all, precisely what the one-thinger is after.

What the primitivist needs to do, then, is tilt the balance, and provide some reason to think that accepting the primitiveness of sortalish facts is the right move to make. I think she can do this—or at least can give it a fairly decent go. There are two main things she can say, which, taken together, make her position sound much more plausible. First, she can at least partially explain away the negative reaction that her view provokes. Second, and more importantly, she can explain the primitiveness that she postulates. I discuss each in turn.

First, then, I am inclined to think that one main reason that people react so strongly against the primitiveness line is that they assume that it is analogous to primitiveness claims about other sorts of properties. That is, they take the claim that it is primitive that Goliath is essentially shaped a certain way to be on a par with the claim that it is primitive that Goliath is shaped that way—or is gray, or weighs a pound and a half, and so forth. Since those latter claims are clearly indefensible, so, presumably, are the former.

Yet although this sort of reasoning may well be an important source of anti-primitivist sentiment, it is not a very good source. It is not at all obvious that the claim that sortalish facts are primitive is on a par with the claim that those non-sortalish ones are primitive. It is certainly not the case that the claim that sortalish facts are primitive entails that any non-sortalish ones are. In particular, the claim that it is primitive that \( a \) is essentially \( F \) does not entail the claim that it is primitive that \( a \) is \( F \). After all, the claim is not ‘necessarily, \( a \) is primitively \( F \’) the ‘primitively’ instead takes wide scope with respect to the necessity operator.\(^\text{27}\) Consequently, the claim that it is...

\(^{27}\) It is tempting to put the point in terms of possible worlds, but it really does more harm than good. Nonetheless, the basic translation is as follows: the claim that there is nothing in virtue of which \( a \) is \( F \) in every world in which it exists does not entail the claim that in each world in which \( a \) exists, there is nothing in virtue of which it is \( F \) there. Compare the following. It is true that each particular U.S. President to date is male in virtue of possessing a Y chromosome, but it is certainly not true that it is in virtue of their possessing Y chromosomes that all of the U.S. Presidents to date have been male. What explains why they are all male is instead some kind of complicated socio-historical story. Similarly, it might be true that in each world in which \( a \) (or one of its counterparts) exists, there is something in virtue of which it is \( F \), yet not true that there is anything in virtue of which \( a \) is \( F \) in every world in which it exists (or that all of \( a \)’s counterparts are \( F \)). How exactly that gap might open up depends upon one’s view about modality and possible worlds in ways that I cannot take up here. But two quick points. First, as long as one does not think that what goes on in other possible worlds genuinely grounds modal truth, it surely does not matter how things in other possible worlds
primitive that Goliath is essentially shaped that way is compatible with the claim that it is in fact shaped that way in virtue of its low-level microstructural properties, and the claim that it is primitive that I am essentially human is compatible with the claim that I am in fact human in virtue of my genetic structure and evolutionary history. And a good thing too, because otherwise primitivism would be utterly hopeless. The point here, of course, is that what is allegedly primitive is the essentialness, not the Fness. The primitivist’s claim has nothing to do with Fness, nor even with how a manages to actually be F. And insofar as it is a misunderstanding of this that makes people think that the view is just absurd, the primitivist can brush aside the curt dismissals.

But the primitivist can offer more than this diagnosis of the negative reactions. The second thing she can offer is an explanation of the primitiveness itself. What I mean is this. If it is primitive that some object a has some property F, then clearly nothing can be said about how a manages to be F. But that is perfectly compatible with the claim that there is something to be said about why there is nothing to be said about how a manages to be F. And maybe, just maybe, the primitivist multi-thinger can tell a story that explains the primitiveness of the sortalish facts. It is not just that she has to resign herself to the bruteness of sortalish facts in order to maintain her belief in spatio-temporally coincident things. She can actually tell a positive story about how the world is put together that makes sense of the bruteness of sortalish facts. This is not to say that the position I am going to outline is unproblematic, or even that I endorse it. But it is indeed available—and, as far as I can see, it is the only position that is. The view I am going to describe is one according to which it is in the first instance modal properties that are primitive. Presumably, the rest of the sortalish properties can be explained in terms of them. In what follows, then, I will

manage to have the nonmodal properties they do—that just is not relevant to how things in this world have their modal properties. To think otherwise gets the order of explanation backward. Second, even those who do think that possible worlds genuinely ground modal truth—i.e. modal realists—can arguably make sense of the above gap. What they would need to say, I think, is that even if each of a’s counterparts is nonprimitively F, it can still be primitive that a is essentially F as long as it is primitive which things are a’s counterparts. That would make it primitive why it is just those things whose Fness is relevant to the truth-value of the claim ‘a is essentially F’, and open up room to say that it is primitive that they are all F despite it not being primitive that any particular one of them is F. I am not, of course, claiming that this non-Lewisian modal realism with a primitive counterpart relation has anything to recommend it. It doesn’t. I am simply illustrating how the point in the main text comes out when captured by means of possible world talk.
lay out the story and explain how it manages to make sense of the primitiveness of modal properties.28

The story is really very simple. It is this: every region of space-time that contains an object at all contains a distinct object for every possible way of distributing ‘essential’ and ‘accidental’ over the non-sortalish properties actually instantiated there. A certain principle of plenitude holds; there is an object for each possible combination of modal properties. Each spatio-temporal region is, as my Australian friends would say, *chocka*.29 And precisely because each region is full in this way, there is nothing in virtue of which any particular object has the modal properties it does. There is nothing special about Lumpl in virtue of which it has that property and Goliath does not. It’s just that all the modal bases are covered.

Let me try to explain this a little more carefully. The idea is that because all of the complete modal profiles possible in a given spatio-temporal location are instantiated there, there is no contrast to be drawn between those that are instantiated and those that are not. We cannot expect there to be anything special about some particular modal profile $M$ in virtue of which it (and not others) is instantiated in that place. That is why it is primitive that $M$ is instantiated there.

And it is only a very small step from there to the claim that it is primitive that the thing that has $M$—call it $a$—does so. The plenitudinous primitivist simply needs to say that all it is to be $a$ is to be the object there with that modal profile. She just needs to deny that the many objects that exist in the relevant place could have swapped their modal profiles; it is not as though $b$ instead of $a$ could have been the thing that instantiates $M$, or that $a$ could have had $M^*$ instead of $M$. To think otherwise requires thinking of objects as utterly bare. The much more natural claim for the primitivist is that to be $a$ just is to be the thing there that is $M$. On such a view, there is no further question to be asked about what it is in virtue of which $a$ is $M$, or why it is $a$ that is $M$ rather than $b$.

And given that view, her plenitude entails that there is nothing in virtue of which $a$ is $M$. Her

28 It was some remarks of Allan Gibbard’s that initially got me thinking in this direction, though I am not sure that he holds anything like the view I actually go on to develop. Also, both L. A. Paul (unpublished) and Mark Moyer (unpublished) adopt positions that seem to share certain features with the view I discuss.

29 I.e., ‘chock full’.
plenitude entails that it is primitive that $M$ is instantiated. And since for $M$ to be instantiated just is for $a$ to have $M$, it follows that it is primitive that $a$ has $M$.

The upshot, then, is this. If only some of the possible modal profiles are instantiated in a region, we can always ask why those are so special—which, given the view about objects just described, is just to ask why the things that exist there have the modal properties they do. An answer of ‘they just do’ sounds decidedly mysterious and obfuscatory. But if all of the possible modal profiles are instantiated, the question simply does not arise. Thus the fullness of each spatio-temporal region explains—or at least explains away—the primitiveness of the de re modal facts.

Note, however, there might be some room for disagreement here about what exactly plenitude amounts to. Just what are the possible combinations of modal properties? Just how many possible ways of distributing ‘essential’ and ‘accidental’ over the non-sortalish properties instantiated in a region are there? At one extreme is the view that all consistent distributions are possible—and thus that the principle of plenitude entails that if there are $n$ non-sortalish properties instantiated in a place, then there are something close to $2^n$ objects there. On this line, you may note, there are an awful lot of objects. Of course, we ignore most of them because, for one reason or another, they are not of interest to us. Keep in mind, though, that this is not the conceptualism of the previous section. We do not decide what exists, except insofar as that phrasing might be used as incendiary shorthand for the fact that we decide which things are worthy of names. They are all there; we just pay most of them no attention.

\[\text{\footnotesize \textnormal{30}}\] \text{Compare the fact that no one who accepts unrestricted mereological composition has to answer what Peter van Inwagen calls the ‘special composition question’: when do a collection of objects compose a larger one? Here, the suggestion is that no one who accepts the principle of plenitude has to answer a parallel question: for which consistent assignments of ‘essential’ and ‘accidental’ to the nonsortalish properties instantiated in a region is there an object?}\n
\[\text{\footnotesize \textnormal{31}}\] \text{Thanks to Ted Sider for pushing this point.}\n
\[\text{\footnotesize \textnormal{32}}\] \text{Yablo endorses this idea, (1987, 306-307), but his motivation has nothing to do with explaining or justifying the primitiveness of modal properties. His only goal is to maintain his preferred definition of ‘hypothetical’ and ‘categorical’ properties, namely, that “the categorical properties are exactly those that cannot tell coincident things apart” (306). Now, one way for this to be false is for there to be categorical properties that can tell coincidents apart. But another way for it to be false is for there to be hypothetical properties that cannot tell coincidents apart. Hence Yablo claims that “for every hypothetical property, coincidents can be found that disagree on it” (306).}\n
21
At the other, more ontologically chaste, extreme is the claim that there are actually very few possible distributions of ‘essential’ and ‘accidental’ over the non-sortalish properties instantiated in most regions. The only metaphysically possible combinations of modal properties are those that correspond to the sorts of things that we standardly recognize. The claim is that there simply could not be, for example, an object coincident with Lumpl and Goliath that is basically statue-like except for the fact that it is essentially located on the mantelpiece. On the chaste approach, then, the principle of plenitude merely entails the existence of precisely those objects whose existence we typically acknowledge. Here again, though, we do not decide what exists. It is rather that—either by luck or by cleverness—what we countenance lines up with what exists.

In either case, however, the claim is that all of the possible modal profiles are instantiated. The dispute is simply about which the possible ones are. The two approaches agree that every spatio-temporal region is chocka; they just disagree on how much it takes to fill them up. So does it matter which way the plenitudinous primitivist goes? Do both the chaste two-thinger and the wild bazillion-thinger successfully explain the primitiveness of de re modal facts? They do both get to maintain a version of the no-contrast point. That is, because both claim that all the modal bases are covered, they both get to say that there is no contrast to be drawn between the possible modal profiles that are witnessed by an object and those that are not. There is an object for each, and to be each such object just is to have that modal profile. Perhaps, then, they can both avail themselves of the strategy I have offered.

I do not think so. I do not think that the more chaste, restricted version of the principle of plenitude will do; I do not think that it explains the primitiveness of de re modal facts in the same way as its full-blown cousin. The problem is that the principle adopted by the two-thinger still leaves us with an unanswered question—why exactly are so few modal profiles metaphysically possible? Why is it impossible for an otherwise statue-like object to be essentially located on the mantelpiece, or to have a precisely delineated portion of its left foot essentially? There may no longer be an interesting question about which of the possible modal profiles are instantiated, but there is surely still an interesting question about which the possible modal profiles are. Note that
the plenitudinous bazillion-thinger does not really face this question; he thinks that all of the consistent ones are possible. So it does not look like the restricted principle of plenitude adopted by the inveterate two-thinger really does the needed work. It simply replaces the contrast between instantiated and uninstanciated modal profiles with a contrast between possibly-instanciated and not-possibly-instanciated ones. Yet the main idea behind the strategy I have been suggesting is that explaining—or at least demystifying—the primitiveness of *de re* modal facts is largely a matter of backing away from such arbitrary lines. The plenitudinous two-thinger is still drawing them, just in different places.

Now, there *is* a worry about that line of thought, which is why I have spoken a bit tentatively. The worry is that adopting the full-fledged principle of plenitude *also* requires acknowledging restrictions on the available modal profiles—and strictly logical consistency will not do all the work. The profiles that must be ruled out are not just those containing straightforward contradictions, but also those violating other nonlogical rules. There could not, for example, be an object with the nonmodal properties of Lumpl and Goliath that is essentially gray, and hence would not survive being painted, but which is only accidentally colored. So even adopting the bazillion-thinger’s principle of plenitude requires accepting principles like ‘no object can be both essentially gray and only accidentally colored’. Presumably, the thought is that these will all be uncontroversial analytic truths whose status is rather different from principles of the form ‘no object can be both S-shaped and occupy its location essentially’. They must be, if the plenitudinous bazillion-thinger is to be in any better shape than the plenitudinous two-thinger. And I think they are. But I must admit that it is not obvious how to defend that claim, and I shall not try to do so here.

If it *can* be defended, though, the plenitudinous bazillion-thinger wins. The claim would be that the primitiveness of the *de re* modal facts can only be explained by means of the full-blown principle of plenitude. Since the primitiveness must *be* explained if it is to be palatable, it would follow that only the bazillion-thinger can be a primitivist. Finally, since my argument throughout the paper has been that only the primitivist can be a multi-thinger at all—that primitivism is the only
answer to the grounding problem left standing—the overall upshot would be that only the bazillion-thinger can be a multi-thinger at all. The only live options, then, are to be either a one-thinger or a bazillion-thinger. We must either think that there is only one thing per spatio-temporal location, or else that there are lots and lots of spatio-temporally coincident things.

And even if the bazillion-thinger does not triumph over his more chaste cousin, the fact remains that the multi-thinger must adopt plenitudinous primitivism in some form or other. I cannot see how else to get primitivism off the ground—and it really is the only viable response to the grounding problem. The only way to be a multi-thinger is to be a primitivist, and the only plausible way to be a primitivist is to adopt a principle of plenitude.

Let me be clear that I think that this battle is far from over. I have not argued that plenitudinous primitivism is true, in either its full-blown or chaste version. All I have argued is that it is the best move for the multi-thinger to make. And I am well aware that I have only provided the barest sketch of how exactly it is supposed to go. I have not answered all the questions it raises, and I have not fully defended it against all the objections that can be raised against it. For example, the plenitudinous primitivist should surely say more about the view about the nature of objects that lurks in the background of his view. He needs to sort out the choice between the full-blown and the chaste principles of plenitude. He needs to convince us that his explanation of the primitiveness of the modal facts really is satisfying enough. And, finally, he needs to tell us how we ever manage to determinately refer to anything. This is primarily an issue if he endorses the full-blown principle of plenitude. If every spatio-temporal location contains bazillions of objects, each differing from the next in only minute and modal ways, how can we ever achieve determinate reference to any one of them? This turns out to be a quite interesting question, and I briefly explore it in an informal and inconclusive appendix.

But the real issue that remains is this. Even if plenitudinous primitivism turns out to be fully defensible in its own right, should we adopt it, or should we be one-thingers? After all, if it is fully defensible in its own right, it has no more trouble with the grounding problem than does the view that rejects spatio-temporal coincidence outright. I have not even tried to tally up the score, to
list the trade-offs between one-thingism and this kind of multi-thingism. Of course, I have made my own leanings clear from the beginning. I would prefer to be a one-thinger, at least in part because I simply don’t like the clutter of the alternative. But I make no claim to have resolved the issue here. My primary intention has been to push the debate about multi-thingism to a potentially more fruitful place. Whether we should believe that multiple objects can occupy the same place for the entire time during which they exist largely turns on broader ontological questions about what objects are, and when a region contains any at all.

APPENDIX: BRIEF REFLECTIONS ON FULL-BLOWN PLENITUDE AND DETERMINATE REFERENCE

Recall that the strategy that I have offered the primitivist is really only a strategy for explaining the primitiveness of modal facts, not sortalish facts more generally. Presumably, what the plenitudinous primitivist should say is that things have their modal properties primitively, and that those ground the rest of its sortalish properties. For example, it is in part because Lumpl is possibly squashed into a ball that it counts as a lump of clay.

However, this view is somewhat problematic. The problem is not that it is counterintuitive, though it is; it does seem more natural to go the other way around, and say that it is because Lumpl is merely a lump of clay that it would survive being squashed. Instead, the real problem arises from the fact that full-blown plenitude entails that each spatio-temporal region contains any number of things with awfully similar modal profiles. The Lumpl/Goliath location, for example, contains two things that differ only in that one of them can survive the loss of one more molecule from its nose than the other one can. And if modal properties determine sortal properties, this apparently means that they must both fall under the same sortal. How could they not, given how minute their modal differences are? Not every modal difference can entail a sortal difference; our sortal concepts simply aren’t that fine-grained. There are some clear cases, of course. Statues can survive the loss
of small fragments, and they cannot survive being squashed or smashed. But in between those extremes is a sea of unclear cases; just about everybody agrees that it is vague precisely what persistence conditions are associated with a sortal. So if modal properties determine sort, then many of these marginally modally different things must be of the same sort. Consequently, the plenitudinous primitivist is committed to saying that not only are there many things in that one spatio-temporal location, but also that there are lots of statues there—or, alternatively, that there are no statues there at all.

The problem I am raising bears some fairly obvious similarities to Peter Unger’s ‘problem of the many’ (1980; c.f. also Geach 1980). That problem concerns the idea that the world contains any number of objects with only minutely differing spatial boundaries. The problem here concerns the idea that the world contains any number of objects with only minutely differing modal boundaries. I therefore dub it ‘the modal problem of the many’. Note that it exacerbates the original problem a good deal. Given plenitude, there are lots of things with an equal claim to being a statue—or a cloud, or a cat—within any precisely delineated spatio-temporal region.

We therefore cannot depend upon sortals to help mitigate the apparent strangeness of the sheer number of things there, and we cannot expect them to enable us to achieve determinate reference to one and only one of those objects. Saying that ‘Goliath’ refers to the statue in that place might help it avoid picking out the thing that we intend to refer to with ‘Lumpl’, but it will not do all the work; it will not enable it to latch on to one particular object. How, then, do we manage to achieve determinate reference with names like ‘Lumpl’ and ‘Goliath’—or, indeed, any names at all?

There are two main kinds of move the plenitudinous primitivist might make here. The first is to say that every name is somehow associated with a complete modal profile—with a fully detailed specification of the modal properties of the intended referent. This may not be semantically plausible, but it would obviously guarantee that ‘Goliath’ determinately and uniquely refers. The second is to avail herself of supervaluationism, as many others have done in the face of the original

33 For one thing, it entails that each and every de re modal claim has a determinate truth value, which does not seem true.
problem of the many. The idea would be to say that we simply have not made all the semantic decisions about what modal properties are associated with terms like ‘lump’ and ‘statue’. There are any number of permissible ways to make those decisions, and thus completely specify the extension of the terms. And on any of those admissible precisifications, it is true that there is only one lump and only one statue there. In short, the plenitudinous primitivist could argue that both ‘there is a unique lump in that place’ and ‘there is a unique statue in that place’ are supertrue. If that is right—and I will not argue that it isn’t—we therefore can use sortals to help us achieve determinate reference (or at least something as near as makes no difference). ‘Goliath’ refers to the statue in the relevant spatio-temporal location, and ‘Lumpl’ to the lump there.

So it is not as though the primitivist is at a loss for an answer here; she has two options. But either way, it looks as though she has to say that all true (or supertrue) de re modal claims are something close to analytic. Consider first the suggestion that each name is associated with a complete modal profile. If this descriptive content is part of the meaning of the name, then the inference to something close to analyticity is immediate. ‘Lumpl would survive being squashed’ is straightforwardly synonymous with ‘the thing that would survive being squashed and is F and G and H… would survive being squashed’. Maybe that is not quite analytic; after all, it is not analytic that there is a thing that would survive being squashed and is F and G and H… But it is at least quasi-analytic, in the following sense: once you have managed to successfully refer to something that would survive being squashed and and and…, you are guaranteed to have referred to something that would survive being squashed.

At this point, of course, the primitivist will likely pull out her Kripke (1980), and insist that the complete modal profile is not part of the meaning of the name, but is merely specified in a reference-fixing definite description. But it is not clear that this helps. In S5, at any rate, an

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34 See Williamson 1994, Ch. 5, for a nice overview of supervaluationism and its history. Also see Lewis 1993 for a discussion of the application of supervaluationism to the problem of the many.

35 On this line, ‘Goliath’ doesn’t exactly determinately refer, even though it is true to say that there is only one statue there. It would thus be more accurate to say that supervaluating allows us to use sortals to narrow our reference to a certain subset of the many things there—namely, the ones that are admissible precisifications of ‘statue’.

36 Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.
object’s modal profile is essential to it. Yet the distinction between descriptive content that is part of
the sense of a term, and descriptive content that is merely used to fix its reference, becomes very
murky when the properties specified in the description are essential to the referent. So it does
look as though the plenitudinous primitivist who adopts the first strategy for securing determinate
reference will say that all \textit{de re} modal truths are at least quasi-analytic.

What about the plenitudinous primitivist who adopts the supervaluationist strategy? Although that strategy obviously differs from the first in various respects—notably in that there will
be far fewer true (=supertrue) \textit{de re} modal claims—it, too, seems to entail that those that \textit{are} true are
(quasi-)analytically true. Recall that on this line, ‘Goliath’ refers via the sortal ‘statue’, and
supervaluating on ‘statue’ is what ensures the truth of the claim that there is only one statue
(namely, Goliath) in the relevant location. Here, the name is associated with a sortal rather than a
full modal profile. But it is still associated with descriptive content, and as far as I can see
something similar to the arguments of the previous paragraph go through. It just proceeds in two
stages. A claim like ‘Goliath would not survive being squashed’ is true because 1) ‘Goliath’ picks
out the statue there, and 2) all admissible precisifications of ‘statue’ refer only to things that cannot
survive squashings. Both of these are semantic claims. After all, it is not as though it is an \textit{accident}
that all of the admissible precisifications of ‘statue’ include only things that would not survive
being squashed; that is a constraint on a precisification’s counting as admissible in the first place.
So ‘Goliath would not survive being squashed’ comes out quasi-analytic in just the sense
introduced above. Once you have managed to refer to Goliath, you are guaranteed to have referred
to something that is essentially statue shaped.

Thus there is a fairly compelling case to be made for the claim that the plenitudinous
primitivist needs to say that all \textit{de re} modal truths are at least quasi-analytic—and that all false ones
are (quasi-) self-contradictory. Is this a problem? I am not entirely sure, and am going to leave
further discussion of the virtues and vices of quasi-analyticity to those who actually want to defend

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37 To say that a description is part of the meaning of a term is to say that nothing which fails to have the property
specified by that description can be the referent of the term. To say that a property is essential to an object is to say
that nothing which fails to have that property can be that object. These are obviously closely linked claims.
plenitudinous primitivism. My main goal in this appendix has simply been to get the issue on the table.

I do, however, want to close with one final thought about quasi-analyticity and primitiveness. It may look like it is precisely the quasi-analyticity of *de re* modal claims that is driving the required explanation of the primitiveness of the modal facts. That is, it may look like the reason that there is nothing in virtue of which Goliath would not survive being squashed is that once we have managed to refer to Goliath, we are guaranteed to refer to something that would not survive being squashed. Sure, goes the thought, glomming on to the thing is tricky, but once we’ve accomplished *that*, the game is over. This is true. But it is *not* the reason that there is nothing in virtue of which Goliath would not survive being squashed.

To see this, compare the claim, ‘the actual man on my left is the man on my left’. This, too, is quasi-analytic; once you have managed to refer to the *actual* man on my left, you are guaranteed to refer to the man on my left. But it of course does not follow that it is *primitive* that the actual man on my left—call him Bob—is the man on my left. Bob is neither primitively a man, nor primitively on my left. He is a man in virtue of having a Y chromosome (etc.), and is on my left in virtue of straightforward facts about his spatio-temporal relation to me. So the fact that the claim is quasi-analytic does not itself entail that it is primitively true. It is the principle of plenitude that is generating both the quasi-analyticity *and* the primitiveness. *That* is what is doing the work.
References


