

The Determination First Approach to Plexology¹

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Draft of May 2025

Forthcoming in *The Australian Philosophical Review*

Abstract: I begin by locating Wilson’s Fundamentality First Approach on a novel map of the terrain. I then introduce what I call the “Determination First Approach” to serve as its primary competitor, and distinguish a generic version from more specific implementations thereof. I argue that Wilson miscalculates the cost/benefit comparison between the Fundamentality First and Determination First Accounts, both by underappreciating what possibilities the Determination First Account can accommodate, and by undercounting the ontological costs of the Fundamentality First Account. The Determination First Account emerges as the clear winner.

Keywords: grounding, fundamentality, priority, determination, dependence, building

¹ Thanks to Jonathan Schaffer for discussion.

1. Introduction

Jessica Wilson characterizes her *Fundamentality First Approach (FFA)* to metaphysical structure as consisting of two main ideas:

*Pluralism*²: There are multiple relations that make for metaphysical determination when conjoined with a specification of what is fundamental.

Primitivism about absolute fundamentality: what is fundamental at a world is itself a fundamental fact. Fundamentality is a primitive notion.

Pluralism is what Wilson is known for. But two other aspects of this view are at least as central, and will play a much larger role in my discussion here. One is the primitivism. The other is the idea, baked into this Wilsonian formulation of pluralism, that fundamentality plays a role in characterizing determination, but not *vice versa*. While these ideas appear in her earlier work arguing against grounding (2014, 560-2; 2018, 497-498), they have now been made front and center, perhaps partly prompted by some of my remarks about her primitivism (Bennett 2017, 135; Wilson 2019, Bennett 2019c, 520-1). I welcome the opportunity to engage with Wilson's evolving views.

What Wilson is trying to do is account for the suite of grounding / fundamentality / priority notions in terms of *a different primitive* than everyone else. The current orthodoxy is to start with a primitive grounding relation, maybe supplement it with a primitive notion of essence, and characterize the rest of the family in terms of it. Wilson instead wants to start with a primitive notion of fundamentality, and use *that* to characterize the rest of the notions pertaining to metaphysical structure.

² Wilson actually describes her pluralism as being about *dependence* rather than determination. But I take 'dependence' to refer to a necessity-ish notion and 'determination' to pick out a sufficiency-ish notion, and I am fairly sure she means 'determination'. See §2.2 of the unabridged version.

This quick set-up isn't quite right, in ways I will address in §2, but it's good enough to reveal the primary conflict at issue in this paper: that between Wilson's *Fundamentality First Account (FFA)* and an alternative that I will call the *Determination First Account (DFA)*. The basic commitments of the *DFA* are shared by nearly all of her current opponents, including both what she calls "the grounding-based account" and the "building-based account".

Wilson's argument for the *FFA* is a cost-benefit one; she claims that it provides more bang for the ontological buck. I will argue that Wilson's math is off. She both overestimates how much more the *FFA* provides and underestimates how much more it costs.

In §3 I spell out the *Determination First Approach*. I then turn to Wilson's cost-benefit argument for the *FFA*. In §4, I focus on the particular benefit that Wilson thinks the *FFA* secures and the *DFA* does not, namely *ecumenicality*. While I agree with—and further defend—Wilson's claim that ecumenicality is a theoretical virtue, I argue that the *DFA* can handle almost all of the cases about which she wants to be ecumenical. This reduces the *FFA*'s putative extra bang to a whimper. Finally, in §5 I argue that the costs of Wilson's version of the *FFA* are much greater than she has suggested, and certainly higher than those of the *DFA*.

The end result is that Wilson is asking me to pay Rolls Royce prices for a car that is no better than the Toyota I already have. This is not merely to say that her cost-benefit argument fails to show what she wants it to show, but to say that it shows something else entirely. Come to my dealership and check out some sweet Camrys and Highlanders! \$0 due at signing!

One final note before we head out to the lot to look at the vehicles. There is so much going on in Wilson's rich paper that I had trouble adhering to the journal's word

limit. My “solution” has been to publish a stripped-down version that leaves out chunks of argument as well as further clarification of my own view from *Making Things Up* (2017). The result is brusque in places. I apologize, and point you to the unabridged version available on my website.³

2. Locating Wilson’s *Fundamentality First Approach* on a New Map

The thing about the competition between the *FFA* and the *DFA* is that it actually takes place on a very particular spot on a not-very-well-mapped landscape. In this section, I offer some new terminology and taxonomy (see also ms).

2.1 *Introducing ‘plexology’ (but not plexology)*

A moment ago, I glibly referred to the “suite of grounding/fundamentality/priority notions”, and I doubt anyone blinked. Yet it is an odd fact that neither ordinary English nor analytic philosophy has a word for this family of ideas. I argue elsewhere (manuscript) that it is important to have a label for it—a label that picks out the notions by subject matter rather than any claimed features of their behavior or deeper nature⁴—and introduce the neologism *plexic* for them, from the Greek *πλεκτω* meaning ‘to braid or weave’ (the same root as ‘complex’).

³ www.karenbennett.org The current paper is actually not a straight *cut* from the long version, because it contains additional material. The longer version does not contain the §2 discussion of Wilson’s place on the plexological map (§2). (Between writing the long version and this short version, I started work on “Finding Dry Ground,” which contains further taxonomy.)

⁴ In particular, we should not call them ‘hyperintensional notions’. Not because they fail to be hyperintensional; I agree with orthodoxy that they are. But *even so*, there are two reasons not to name the family after this bit of their logical behavior.

The first is that the *plexic* notions are not the only hyperintensional notions, so calling them that would be just as confusing as calling the class of squares ‘the rectangles’. The second is that labeling the class by the members’ logical behavior makes it *analytic* that they have that logical behavior: ‘the hyperintensional notions are hyperintensional’ is trivial, but ‘the *plexic* notions are hyperintensional’ is not. It is better to characterize the notions with a label for their subject matter than with a label for their logical behavior. (See ms for more detail).

To call a property or expression ‘plexic’ is just to say something about its *intended subject matter*. It has to do with putting together, and how that putting together might or might not result in some sort of hierarchy(ies), which might or might not have a fundament. The label ‘plexic’ is supposed to work in the same rough gestural way as labels like ‘normative’ or ‘modal’, where that rough gestural meaning is not compromised by disagreements about either a) exactly which notions count, or b) the nature of the relevant domain of concepts and expressions, including whether or not anything worldly or fundamental answers to them.

This brings us to some obvious questions: *does* anything worldly or fundamental answer to them? What, exactly? Is it just one thing, or multiple? Why those? All such questions are part of plexology.

It will be clear in a moment why I need words like ‘plexic’ and ‘plexology’ to situate Wilson’s view. Do note one more general benefit of having them ready to hand: they provide a more elegant and more accurate way to describe many people’s research, including both mine and Wilson’s, than ‘working on grounding’ does. We work on plexology, not grounding *per se*.

2.2 Two orthogonal questions about the plexic

Properly understanding Wilson’s take on plexology requires seeing that her *Fundamentality First Account (FFA)* constitutes an answer to two different questions at once:

The question of robust realism: are there any fundamental plexic entities (properties, relations, etc.)?

The question of priority amongst the plexic: are any plexic notions fully characterizable in terms of other plexic notions?

Call any view that answers ‘yes’ to the first a form of *robust plexic realism*,⁵ and call any view that answers ‘yes’ to the second a *structured*⁶ view of the plexic.

These questions are independent of each other in the sense that all four possible intersections of ‘yes’ and ‘no’ answers are coherent. It is worth noting in particular that the second question arises even if one does not answer ‘yes’ to the first one, which matters for my own idiosyncratic purposes.⁷ Still, the second question is more pressing for those who do answer ‘yes’ to the first one. That’s simply because for robust realists, the second question is effectively about how many fundamental plexic entities they need to posit, and they will aim for as few as possible.

All that really matters for present purposes is that Wilson answers ‘yes’ to both. Her *Fundamentality First Approach* posits fundamental absolute fundamentality, and says that the rest of the plexic will come along from that one primitive plus nonplexic proto-determination relations. The *FFA* is a structured version of robust plexic realism.

But wait a second... **so is the canonical Grounding-based view!**

2.3 *Two important takeaways about who Wilson is fighting with here*

The canonical Grounding-based view is also a structured version of robust plexic realism. It, too, answers ‘yes’ to both questions. The main difference between them is instead in the details of what they say about *how* the plexic is structured—what they say about which plexic notion(s) gives rise to the others.

⁵ I model the label ‘robust plexic realism’ on ‘robust moral realism’. It is baked in to the ‘robust’ that the plexic entities it posits are both worldly and fundamental.

⁶ To say ‘yes’ to the second question is to say that it is not the case that all plexic notions are on a par.

⁷ My 2017 book is, effectively, a defense of the *Determination First Approach* that is explicitly, if passingly and cop-out-ingly, neutral about the question of robust plexic realism. See 2017, 58-9 and 184-5; also see manuscript.

One takeaway lesson is that Wilson is not the kind of skeptic that people frequently take her to be. Her view is robustly realist, and offers nothing for those who aspire to a desert landscape view that recognizes no plexic primitives at all. (I call such people ‘true xerophiles’ in my ms, and offer them some suggestions.) On this point, Wilson and canonical groundhogs are on the same team. What her view *does* offer is a different kind of robust plexic realism, one that takes absolute fundamentality rather than grounding to be basic (c.f. Schaffer 2016, pp. 157-8).

Another takeaway lesson is that the primary argumentative action in Wilson’s paper takes place several moves in. She’s not really arguing for realism here, though along the way she does tussle a bit with what she calls ‘deflationism’. And she’s also not really arguing for a structured view of the plexic, which is fair enough because it is a natural view that doesn’t have any opponents of which I am aware. Rather, Wilson is more or less assuming structured robust realism, and has her primary sights set on other versions of the same view.

2.4 *Assuming robust plexic realism*

Wilson has zoomed in tightly, and for the rest of the paper I will as well. When I take the final tally of costs and benefits (§§5 and 6), I will just assume that *some* kind of structured robust plexic realism is true. This is fair to Wilson, and streamlines things. But it is a big assumption that needs to be highlighted with a bright yellow marker.

It needs to be highlighted because it would be a mistake to assume that only a robust realist can answer the plexic priority question. It would also be a mistake to take robust realism to be so obvious as to require no defense at all. *If* a decent non-robust-realist alternative could be developed, the scoreboard of the cost-benefit game would almost certainly look rather different. This is, of course, a big ‘if’; this territory is badly

underexplored (though see my (manuscript), (Thompson, 2022) and Hall 2023). Simply restricting the discussion to robust realist views dodges the issue, but we should not forget that there may be viable views outside this restriction.

2.5 Candidate views about which plexic notions are most fundamental

Wilson's *Fundamentality First Approach* is the result of combining robust realism with the idea that absolute fundamentality is the most fundamental plexic notion, which in conjunction with non-plexic facts settles all the plexic facts. (Yes, we are talking about plexic relations among plexic notions. Such is the nature of this topic.)

Alternate views could emerge from taking any of the other plexic notions as most fundamental: perhaps grounding/determination, perhaps essence, perhaps relative fundamentality (i.e. ontological priority). There may be other candidates, and there is room for combination views that say that more than one are tied for most fundamental (e.g. grounding and essence). Following the Wilsonian nomenclature, these views could be called the *Determination First Approach*, the *Essence First Approach*, the *Ontological Priority First Approach*,⁸ and so on.

I only discuss the *Determination First Approach* here. I begin by characterizing it in generic terms, and then point towards several more specific versions that take on additional commitments.

⁸ An *Ontological Priority First Approach* would take the *more fundamental than* relation as basic. This is not the same as taking grounding/determination as basic, because—as I have argued in the past—the *more fundamental than* relation can hold between facts and entities that do not stand in any determination relation (2011, 2017).

3. The Determination First Approach to Plexology

The central idea of the *Determination First Approach (DFA)* is exactly what the name suggests: determination is prior to fundamentality and ontological priority. It can be characterized by means of the following three schematic claims:

1. *Determination*: there is at least one determination relation.⁹
2. *Reductionist treatment of absolute fundamentality*: some or other account of absolute fundamentality in terms of the metaphysical determination relation or relations committed to in 1.
3. *Reductionist treatment of relative fundamentality/ontological priority*: some or other account of ontological priority in terms of the metaphysical determination relation or relations committed to in 1.

This most generic version of the *DFA* only commits to the bare-bones of what the name “Determination First” requires: the priority claim that all fundamentality facts fall out of facts about what determines what. Do note that the *DFA* explicitly requires this not just of absolute fundamentality facts, but also *relative* fundamentality facts. (Wilson’s own formulation of the *FFA* leaves this out.)

There are two distinct axes along which the generic *DFA* is generic. The first axis concerns determination: it does not say how many determination relations there are, and indeed does not even require saying that determination is fundamental. It therefore can be implemented in a number of more specific ways by replacing the merely existential *Determination* with something more committal that entails it. Replacing *Determination* with the claim that there is exactly one fundamental determination relation yields a non-pluralist, robust realist version of the *DFA* worth calling the *grounding-based DFA*, or the *GDFA*. Replacing *Determination* with the claim that there are multiple equifundamental determination relations yields a pluralist *DFA*, which I will call the *PDFA*. The *PDFA* itself can in principle also be implemented in

⁹ This is neutral about whether this determination relation is fundamental.

different ways, notably robust realist ways and not. (My 2017 view is a *PDFA* that tries to remain neutral about robust realism.)

The other axis on which versions of the *DFA* can differ is in just how, exactly, they propose to flesh out the two placeholder reductionisms. Just what *is* the promised characterization of absolute fundamentality in terms of determination? What about relative fundamentality, i.e. ontological priority? (See 2017, chapter 6). There might even be room for partial *DFA*s that only endorse one of the two reductionist claims required by the full *DFA*.

I spell out some of these more specific *DFA* accounts in the unabridged version. For now, I will just leave you with the following three take-home lessons, stated starkly:

- The *DFA* is neutral about how many determination relations there are. Both the grounding-based view and the pluralist view I defended in *Making Things Up* (2017) are versions of the *DFA*.
- The *DFA* is neutral as to exactly how absolute and relative fundamentality are to be reduced to determination. (My 2017 version is not, which will matter in §4.3.)
- The *DFA* is neutral about robust realism—about whether any determination relations are fundamental. (So is my 2017 view.)

With the overarching idea of the *Determination First Approach* in hand, I can finally turn to Wilson's cost-benefit argument.

4. The FFA's Alleged Benefit: Ecumenicality

Wilson thinks the *FFA* offers more for the money than the *DFA* does. As always, the money is ontology. But what is the 'more' here? While this style of argument usually appeals to explanatory power, Wilson appeals to a different theoretical virtue—ecumenicality. Her claim is not that the *FFA* *explains* more with the same or fewer ontological commitments as the *DFA*, but rather that it *allows* or *accommodates* more.

Wilson thinks the *FFA* is compatible with a wider range of views about what is more fundamental than what.

She is wrong about this. But she is not wrong to think that ecumenicality can count as a theoretical virtue when choosing among rival plexologies. In §4.1, I argue for this latter point on her behalf. (See my 2017, 32-8 for an earlier take.) In §§4.2 and 4.3 I return to attack mode: I lay out the particular views that Wilson wants to accommodate, and argue that the *DFA* can handle all but one of them.

4.1 *In defense of ecumenicality*

I am sympathetic to the thought that ecumenicality has some value in plexology, and have explicitly aimed for a degree of it myself (2017, 15-16; 2019a, 287-288; 2019b, 478). I will somewhat perversely defend this idea by introducing an objection to it.

The objection is that ecumenicality isn't considered a theoretical virtue in *science*. We don't expect scientific theories to accommodate all data that have ever been put forward, and we certainly don't expect them to accommodate contradictory data. No one thinks a scientific theory gets points for being compatible with data that cannot all be correct. Why should a plexological theory—i.e., a theory of metaphysical structure?

Now comes the helpful part: because of two important differences between science and plexology (well, metaphysics generally).

The first is that the targets of plexological theories are *toolbox notions*, notions that are themselves used to formulate substantive theories of the world (Bennett 2016, 32-33). There is something to be said for the idea that toolbox notions like grounding and fundamentality (others include property, cause, event, etc.) ought to be deployable in the formulation of a variety of theories regardless of the truth-value of those theories.

This seems to be Wilson's thought too, in her approving quotation of Fine (ms 8-9). I'm not sure how much weight this idea can bear, but it belongs in the mix.

The second relevant difference between science and metaphysics is an epistemic one. The point of ecumenicality is to *err on the safe side* when we are uncertain about the legitimacy of the purported data. The better our epistemic access to the target phenomena, the less we need to be ecumenical about what the correct data is. And it can at least be argued that we have better epistemic access in the typical scientific case than in the case at hand.

In the scientific case, the data can be empirically verified, perhaps by checking the instruments or repeating the experiment. Not so with plexological theories. Here, the 'data' Wilson wants to accommodate are *possibilities*—ways in which determination relations can hold. But epistemic access to possibility is famously fraught. It's not like we have, say, seismograph readings that decisively show us that determination can or cannot hold symmetrically. We must rely on our usual non-empirical philosophical tools, notably conceptual analysis and cost/benefit reasoning, and neither of them can justify dismissing the alleged possibilities out of the gate.

As for intuitions and conceptual analysis: I can say that determination seems pretty asymmetric to *me*, and Wilson can say that it doesn't to *her*, nor to the members of certain entrenched religious traditions. I can say that the fact that someone believes that determination can hold symmetrically doesn't show that it really can, any more than the fact that someone believes that not everything is identical to itself shows that identity is not reflexive (2017, 36). And very quickly we are either arguing about whether conceivability entails possibility, or about what it takes to properly conceive something, but either way all the players have just landed on an absolute tarpit of a

square. We all lose our turns in perpetuity until someone gives up and knocks the gameboard over.

And while cost-benefit reasoning is absolutely relevant to the question of whether the alleged possibilities should be taken as genuine, it can't be used to dismiss them *out of the gate*. We need to see what they cost first. And the way to figure out what they cost is suppositional reasoning, which is what I will do in what follows.

So I agree with Wilson that ecumenicality can be a positive in this context. But before I move on to calculate the overall scores, I want to be clear: I do *not* claim that a particular plexological theory is more likely to be true the more ecumenical it is. This is nothing special about either ecumenicality or plexology, but a general point about all theoretical virtues: more is not always better. Ontological simplicity is a virtue, and "nothing exists" is maximally simple, but it is not the best theory of the world because it scores so poorly on other theoretical virtues like predictive power. Similarly for ecumenicality. "Everything is allowed" is maximally ecumenical, but scores poorly on content (c.f. Schaffer, this volume).

4.2. *The alleged possibilities that Wilson wants to allow*

Again, the way forward is to suppose that Wilson is right that certain patterns of determination and fundamentality really are possible, and see what it costs to accommodate them. Here are the patterns:

Symmetry and Reflexivity: it is possible for determination to hold symmetrically and reflexively,
Fundamental yet Determined: it is possible for something to be simultaneously absolutely fundamental and partly determined, and
Unfixed Priority: it is possible for different instances of the same determination relation to be associated with different directions of priority. That is, at least some determination relations D are such that it is possible for some a and b to be such that Dab and a is more

fundamental than b , and some other c and d to be such that Dcd and d is more fundamental than c (ms 10, 14-15, 28).

What we need to decide is i) whether it is really true that the *DFA* cannot accommodate these alleged possibilities, and ii) whether it is really true that Wilson's *FFA* can accommodate them without incurring significant extra costs. These questions are independent of each other, and a negative answer to either constitutes a serious challenge to Wilson's cost-benefit argument. I will answer 'no' to both.

4.3 *The DFA in fact allows two of the three alleged possibilities*

The *DFA* can perfectly well allow the first two of these patterns. That's because, as I have said, the *DFA* itself is neutral about just *how* to characterize fundamentality in terms of determination. There are ways to do it that allow for both *Symmetry and Reflexivity* and *Determined Yet Fundamental*. That is to say: there is room for a Wilsonian version of the *DFA* that allows for everything she wants except for *Unfixed Priority*. Priority-flipping goes deeply against the spirit of the *DFA*.

I unpack all this in the unabridged version. All I will say here is that while Wilson is correct that *my* version of the *DFA* (2017) is incompatible with both *Symmetry and Reflexivity* and *Determined Yet Fundamental*, this is entirely due to two specific claims I make in the service of reducing fundamentality to determination. One is that I characterize absolute fundamentality as follows:

Independence: to be absolutely fundamental is to be undetermined in any way, and

and the other is that the following principle is one piece¹⁰ of my characterization of relative fundamentality:

$D^{11} \rightarrow MFT$: if x determines y , then x is more fundamental than y (i.e., ontologically prior to y).

It is these specific claims, *not the generic commitments of the DFA*, that rule out reflexive and symmetric determination, and entities that are both fundamental and determined. A Wilsonian *DFA* would simply need to replace them with something else; I offer a proposal in the unabridged version.

Matters are more complicated with *Unfixed Priority*. No implementation of the *DFA* can allow priority-flipping, because it goes directly against the heart of the view—namely, that *determination settles ontological priority*. So the *DFA* has to bite the bullet here and accept the impossibility of priority-flipping. Luckily, this is not a very big bullet to bite. As I argue in the longer version, Wilson’s arguments in favor of priority-flipping miss the mark.

The upshot so far is that even allowing ecumenicality to count as a theoretical virtue, the only ‘benefit’ that the *FFA* actually provides that the *DFA* cannot is *Unfixed Priority*. This is not a benefit at all, as far as I can see. So what does allowing it cost? It is time to compare the parsimony of the two approaches.

5. The Price: Primitive Priority (in addition to Primitive Fundamentality)

One might expect that the way to compare parsimony is to count up each view’s plexic primitives. This is indeed how I will proceed, but only given two simplifying assumptions.

¹⁰ One piece. This is a sufficient condition that I have argued is definitely not a necessary condition. See 2017, chapter 6.

¹¹ In the book, I use ‘*B*’ for building rather than ‘*D*’ for determination.

The first simplifying assumption is robust plexic realism. As I pointed out in §2, neither the *DFA* nor the core of the *FFA* is strictly speaking committed to this. But Wilson is, and so are most of her opponents, so it is fine to pretend that the dispute between the *DFA* and the *FFA* is about which plexic notion is fundamental full stop, not just which is more fundamental than the others.

The other simplifying move is to set aside pluralist views of either a *DFA* or *FFA* stripe. Clearly a version of the *DFA* with 17 fundamental determination relations will have more ontological commitments than a version of the *FFA* with just one primitive notion of fundamentality, and equally clearly *vice versa*, too. I will hold this parameter fixed, and just look at the comparison between non-pluralist versions of the *DFA* and *FFA*.¹²

These two simplifications make the parsimony comparison look i) totally straightforward, and b) like a tie. Here at Discount Determination Deals, I try to sell you primitive determination. Next door is Wilson's Wheels, where she instead tries to sell you primitive absolute fundamentality. Who cares; they cost the same!

Nope. The parsimony comparison is not *this* straightforward, and it is not a tie. That's because determination and absolute fundamentality are only two of the places where plexic primitives might lurk.

Other places are, well, any of the plexic notions I flagged in §2.5. A notable one for my purposes is *ontological priority* (or relative fundamentality; I use these terms

¹² At this point someone objects, "you can't assume the falsity of pluralism in the middle of a debate with Wilson, a noted pluralist!" Perhaps she will continue, "and aren't *you* a pluralist too?" This is a location where the mapping has been poor, and led to confusion. Wilson thinks there are a number of small-'g' grounding relations, but she expressly denies that any of them intrinsically involve anything plexic. The direction of priority has to be 'added later', as it were, with reference to the absolutely fundamental. And while I argued that there are a number of building relations that *are* by nature tied to the plexic, I never said that they were all fundamental. Indeed, I explicitly refrained from saying any are primitive.

interchangeably). I shall argue that ontological priority is the tie-breaker: the *FFA* needs to posit an additional plexic primitive here, and the *DFA* does not.

Every (robust realist) *DFA*-ist has the following crucial item in his toolbox: a primitively directed determination relation, where the directedness is part of what it takes for them to count as determination relations in the first place. (The big challenge for a non-robust-realist *DFA*ist is to come up with a way to account for the directedness, to not leave it primitive.) This relation, plus either the $D \rightarrow MFT$ principle or a suitable replacement, is the core of the solution, and the rest is largely a matter of sorting out how the pieces fit together. In chapter 6 of my 2017, I offered a starter version; I invite other *DFA*ists to tinker with the details.

Wilson is in a completely different position. For her, the task of accounting for priority is *not* that of using a directed relation(s) in combination with other ontologically kosher (i.e., nonplexic) ingredients to capture the entire relative fundamentality structure of the world. *Wilson also has to account for the directedness of instances of her non-directed relations.* Remember, she denies that her “small ‘g’ grounding relations” have a fixed direction of priority, instead insisting that priority-flipping is possible. They are more aptly named *proto*-determination relations.

So, all Wilson has is the array of proto-determination facts, and the primitive specification of what is absolutely fundamental. How on earth can those two things settle the relative fundamentality structure of the world?

Wilson rightly points out that the stipulation of the fundamentals does generate *some* relative fundamentality facts, because all fundamental things are more fundamental than all nonfundamental things. This is true. Those relative fundamentality facts do come for free with the comparative nature of *more fundamental*

than, in the same way that dividing a group of rocks into the heaviest and the not-heaviest imposes a *heavier than* ranking upon some of them: namely, any pair such that one is among the heaviest and one is not. But, crucially, the binary division does not impose a heavier-than ranking on all of the rocks! It is silent about heavier-than relations among the not-heaviest things. Similarly, the mere binary division between fundamental and not-fundamental is silent about more-fundamental-than relations among nonfundamentalia.

Wilson is aware of this (§2.2.1). And while she has previously been skeptical that there could be an “algorithm” specifying how the relative fundamentality facts among nonfundamentalia are fixed, she embarks upon the project here. She suggests that her two building blocks—the primitive stipulation of what is absolutely fundamental, plus facts about how the small ‘g’ proto-determination relations obtain—do indeed settle facts about how the relative fundamentality relations obtain among nonfundamentals.

Unfortunately, however, what she offers in §2.2.1 falls well short of plausibility. That verdict is what matters, more than the grubby details, so I have once again relegated them to the unabridged version. You’ll have to trust me: Wilson has not yet provided a successful *FFA*-friendly account of what she calls the ‘direction of priority’—of how one nonfundamental thing could be more fundamental than another.

And I am not sure how she *could*, with the tools she has. It’s not just that her particular proposal fails. It’s also that the whole attempt depends upon ignoring the well-known difficulty of making sense of plexic directionality. It is by now received wisdom that the modal does not give us the plexic: the existence of {Socrates} necessitates but does not ground the existence of Socrates. Wilson’s suggestion is, in effect, that maybe we can get the (rest of the) plexic by supplementing the modal with a specification of the absolutely fundamental.

But this stipulation is totally inert in the Socrates case: Socrates and {Socrates} coexist with all the same fundamentalia, and neither is fundamental itself. And while Wilson might want to latch on to the fact that they seem to be differently *related* to the fundamental—the singleton seems to be one step further from the bottom than the person is—nothing in her current framework entitles her to say anything like this. It's a *Determination First* move that requires taking directed determination to be more basic than fundamentality. (Not to mention other difficulties with measuring 'distance from the bottom'. See my 2017, §6.4.)

As far as I can tell, Wilson only has two options. She can either i) embrace the claim that all nonfundamentalia are equifundamental, or ii) posit another plexic primitive. The first option would be pretty revisionary of both folk wisdom and science, and Wilson has never seemed tempted by it. But her attitude towards the second is more welcoming, even in light of the fact that the whole project of §2.2.1 is to avoid doing so. In fact, she twice suggests that some determination-ish relations, including set membership, have a "*built-in direction of priority*" (14, 18; italics mine), which sure sounds like primitive priority to me.

But that, of course, means that the result of the ontological commitment comparison is not a tie. The *FFA* has primitive fundamentality and primitive priority. The *DFA* has only primitive determination.

6. The Final Itemized Bill

Wilson says that her *Fundamentality First Approach* to plexology offers more bang for the buck than does the *Determination First Approach*, in either its building-based or grounding-based form. She says that her *FFA* comes out ahead in the cost-benefit comparison because it offers much greater ecumenicality at no additional ontological

cost. I say this is wrong. The *FFA* offers a *smidge* more ecumenicality at a very high cost.

I argued in §4.3 that the generic *DFA* can perfectly well allow reflexive determination, symmetric determination, and strong emergence. In the unabridged version, I even sketch a Wilsonian version of the *DFA*. What the *DFA* cannot be ecumenical about is whether a single determination relation can point in different directions on different occasions. That is all Wilson's *FFA* really buys: priority-flipping.

And at what cost? The *FFA* has a primitive notion of absolute fundamentality *and* is committed to either postulating primitive priority or denying that any nonfundamental entity is ever more fundamental than any other. The *DFA* offers an account of both absolute and relative fundamentality in terms of determination. The *DFA* is clearly the more parsimonious theory. All told, priority-flipping is awfully expensive.

At the beginning of the paper, I suggested that Wilson was asking me to pay Rolls Royce prices for a car that isn't much better than the Toyota I already have. Now, at the end of the paper, I have earned the right to lean further into this analogy: she is asking me to buy a Toyota a lot like my own, but twice as expensive because it has been equipped with a wiper fluid reservoir made out of top-grade platinum. I don't need or want that, so will stick with what I have.

Instead, I invite Wilson over to *my* dealership, Discount Determination Deals, to take one of my cars for a test drive. The heated seats are nice in this weather, and we can bicker affably about option packages over vending machine coffee.

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