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Précis of Making Things Up

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A certain kind of talk is ubiquitous both inside and outside the fabled 'philosophy room': talk of some things or phenomena being *made of* or *accounted for by* or *obtaining in virtue of* others. Whether we want to say that the table is made of atoms, or that modal facts obtain in virtue of nonmodal facts, or that the meaning of this sentence is generated by the meaning of its constituents—these are all claims about what I call *building*. Prima facie good candidates for building relations include composition, constitution, grounding, property realization, and the like. The goal of *Making Things Up* is to get clearer about what building relations are, how they are related to each other, and how they are related to fundamentality and causation. More generally, the goal is to articulate a detailed picture of a structured world.

Soon, I will sketch the book chapter by chapter. But I want to start by flagging three core commitments that color the project in a variety of ways, and by frontloading what I suppose are the two biggest claims in the book. The first core commitment is agnosticism about whether there is a single most fundamental building relation. Throughout the book, I instead talk in terms of a plurality of building relations, and intend talk of 'building' in the singular as shorthand for quantificational or generic claims. The second core commitment is agnosticism about metaphysical foundationalism: agnosticism, that is, about the claim that the world has a bottom level, that all chains of building terminate in something fundamental. The third core commitment is what I hereby call 'content neutrality', though I do not use that label in the book. I do not intend to assert substantive claims about what in fact builds what, or what is in fact fundamental, if anything is. My goal is instead to sketch a kind of *framework* view that can be shared by people who disagree with me, and with each other, about particular building claims.

I take the most important claims in the book to be these. First, talk of what is fundamental, as well as talk of what is more fundamental than what, is best understood as reducing to talk about what building relations obtain or fail to obtain. To help oneself to the notions of fundamentality and relative fundamentality is not to take on board additional ontological or ideological commitments beyond the commitment to building relations. Second, causation is much more intertwined with allegedly synchronic vertical building than ordinarily supposed. After a brief introduction in chapter 1, I spend chapter 2 ostending the kind of relation I have in mind, clarifying what I mean when I say that building relations 'form a unified family', and exploring whether there might be a single most fundamental building relation. I argue that although building relations differ in various ways, they are similar in others, and I claim that they form a unified family in the sense that they form a reasonably natural resemblance class.

In chapter 3, I turn to the task of characterizing the features that they have in common, the features that make a relation count as a building relation. I defend a characterization according to which building relations are:

Directed, in that they are antisymmetric and irreflexive

Necessitating, roughly in that builders necessitate what they build

Generative, in that they license 'in virtue of' talk and 'because' claims.

As always, the devil is in the details, and I offer extended discussion of each of these three requirements.

In chapter 4, I argue for two distinct claims about the relation between causation and building. First, I argue that it is appropriate to characterize the resemblance class in a way that includes causation as well as 'ordinary', 'vertical', putatively synchronic building relations. This broad class is reasonably natural and theoretically interesting. Second, I argue that often, what it takes for 'ordinary' building relations—relations like composition or grounding—to obtain is, in whole or in part, for some causal facts to obtain.

The second claim actually involves a more significant intermingling of causation and 'canonical' building than the first does. That's because the first claim merely says that the broad class that includes causation is reasonably natural and theoretically interesting; it does not say that the broad class is more natural than the narrower subclass of 'ordinary' building relations that does not. But the second claim complicates matters. Compare the set of all the instances of building relations with the more restricted set of only those instances of building that do not obtain in virtue of anything causal. The latter contains some but not all instances of composition, some but not all instances of grounding, etc. It is therefore less natural than the former.

In chapter 5, I turn to absolute fundamentality. What does it mean to say that something is fundamental? This question can and should be addressed even in the absence of reason to believe that anything *is* fundamental. I distinguish 3 different notions of fundamentality that are tangled together in the literature:

Independence: x is independent if and only if x is not built by anything.

Completeness: the set of the xxs is (or the xxs plurally are, or some single x alone is) complete at a world w just in case its members build (...) everything else at w.¹

1

The parenthetical complexity is required due to my commitment to content neutrality. What is/are the complete entities? Perhaps it's several kinds of particle or force. Perhaps it's God. The characterizations of different notions of fundamentality should not prejudge such matters.

Naturalness: the perfectly natural properties are those such that "sharing of them makes for qualitative similarity, they carve at the joints, they are intrinsic, they are highly specific, the sets of their members are ipso facto not entirely miscellaneous" (Lewis 1986, 60).

I then investigate the relations among these notions, and argue that the best conception of fundamentality is independence.

My arguments for independence over completeness are largely pieces of conceptual analysis, and my arguments for independence over naturalness partly are as well. They also involve internal tensions I see between various strands of naturalness, and skepticism about fully extending the notion to apply to things other than properties. Still, let me be clear about something that I perhaps was not clear enough about in the book. I don't think naturalness is a *garbage* notion, not to be used at all. While I do think it should probably be unpacked into some of its constituent strands, naturalness—or its constituent notions—is a reasonable notion for talking about kinds or properties. I primarily deny that it is a notion of fundamentality.

In chapter 6, I turn to relative fundamentality, or ontological priority. What is it for one thing to be more or less fundamental than another? Or for two things to be equifundamental? I argue against taking relative fundamentality to be an undefined primitive, so that the relative fundamentality facts are themselves fundamental. I argue that relative fundamentality, like absolute fundamentality, can be understood in terms of building. For one thing to be more fundamental than another is for certain patterns of building relations to obtain. I characterize this as a deflationism about relative fundamentality. To talk about what's more fundamental than what is just to talk about the building structure of the world.

It turns out that providing an actual definition of a relative fundamentality relation like *more fundamental than* gets complicated. For example, neither of the following nice, tidy accounts work:

x is more fundamental than y just in case x builds y

x is more fundamental than y just in case x is closer to the bottom of its building chain than y is to its.

The first fails because it does not allow building separated things—like an electron in Ithaca and a water bottle in Arizona—to stand in relative fundamentality relations. The second fails in part because it assumes metaphysical foundationalism, and in part because it assumes that there is a univocal way to count distance from the bottom. I instead propose a much more complex definition of the *more fundamental than* relation, but I am less wedded to the details of that proposal than I am to the basic deflationary picture according to which relative fundamentality reduces to building.

The combination of that picture with other commitments of mine has several important consequences. One is a pluralism about ontological structure. It falls out of my pluralism about building relations that there is no single building structure of the world, and that claims about relative fundamentality are implicitly indexed to particular building relations. Another important consequence is the equalization of ontological priority and causal priority—a demotion for the former or a promotion of the latter, whichever way you like to think of it.

Let me explain this second consequence. When my building-based understanding of relative fundamentality is conjoined with my claim that causation is a building relation, it emerges that causal claims give rise to claims of relative fundamentality: causes are more fundamental than their effects. I accept this seemingly counterintuitive consequence. However, I could have avoided it by claiming that only building relations other than causation generate relative fundamentality facts. I certainly agree that our ordinary concept of relative fundamentality is more closely tied to grounding and some other building relations than to causation. But I like the rhetorical force that is carried by the claim that causes are more fundamentality (ontological priority) is not special, mysterious, or in any interesting way different than causal priority. Causal priority is just a matter of being towards the input side of a causal structure. Ontological priority is not different.

In chapter 7, I take up the question of whether the building facts are themselves built, and if so, how. That is, suppose a builds b. Then we have the fact that a builds b. Does that fact obtain in virtue of anything? I argue that it obtains in virtue of the existence and nature of a. This chapter builds (sorry) on my 2011, and engages in detail with Shamik Dasgupta's objections to that paper (2014). The discussion involves reflection on the role of *generalizations* or *principles* or *laws* in building the building facts.

In chapter 8, I finally turn my attention to an assumption that runs throughout the book—namely, that there indeed are nonfundamental things. I argue that there is no parsimony-based reason to deny the existence of nonfundamentalia, because parsimony considerations simply do not apply to them. Nonfundamental things do not contribute to the complexity of a theory that posits them in a way that makes that theory less likely to be true. (This chapter was originally written contemporaneously with Jonathan Schaffer's 2015, in which he makes the same claim.) I go on to defend a conception of metaphysics according to which it is not the study of fundamental reality, but rather on which some nonfundamental things are perfectly good topics of metaphysical inquiry.

Making Things Up is an extended articulation of what is sometimes called the 'layered model of reality', except that I do not have much use for the thought that there are clean precise layers. On the picture I offer, the world contains a rich array of nonfundamentalia, structured by building relations amongst them and between them and the fundamentals, if there are any.

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