Why Being Fragments

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This paper develops a new argument for ontological pluralism - the thesis that being fragments. The argument goes, roughly, as follows. It is conceivable that some beings are ontologically dissimilar. So, it is possible that some beings are ontologically dissimilar. This is sufficient for ontological pluralism. So, being fragments.

1. Sources of Pluralism

Ontological pluralism[1] (hereafter 'pluralism') asserts that there is more than a single way for entities to be, whereas ontological monism (hereafter 'monism') denies this. That is to say, according to pluralism, there are two ways in which entities might differ from each other: with respect to their nature, or what they are like, and with respect to their very being, or how they exist. By contrast, according to monism, entities might only differ from each other with respect to their nature. (I will refer to the difference in being affirmed by the pluralist and denied by the monist as 'ontological dissimilarity'.) But what does it mean for entities to differ with respect to their very being rather than merely with respect to their nature? What does it mean for things to be ontological dissimilar?

Here are two illustrations of what the pluralist might have in mind, each taken from McDaniel's recent defence of the doctrine, *The Fragmentation of Being*.

According to Sprigge (1992: 1), our pre-philosophical view of the reality of time is such 'that the present is fully real, that the past has a kind of secondary reality, and that the future is hardly real at all.' One version of pluralism considered by McDaniel – 'presentist existential pluralism' – cashes this out in terms of the present and the past entities' enjoying different ways of being and the future entities failing to exist at all. Thus, if presentist existential pluralism is

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[1] Cf. Turner 2010.

true, it could be that the beverage I enjoy as I am writing these words is different from the beverage I enjoyed in the morning not only in terms of *what* it is or was (a tea and a coffee, respectively), but also in terms of *how* it is or was (in the manner of being characteristic of the present entities and the manner of being characteristic of past entities, respectively).[2]

Another pre-philosophical intuition has it that there is a fundamental difference between actual entities and merely possible entities. One way to cash this out is to say that, whereas actual entities exist, merely possible entities do not. However, thanks to Lewis (1986), there are well-known arguments advising us against taking this route. McDaniel argues that pluralism gives us a framework, in which we can accommodate Lewis's modal realism and our pre-philosophical intuition both. Following Lewis, we can accept that merely possible entities exist, but, following our pre-philosophical intuitions, we can add that they do not, however, exist in the same way as actual entities – McDaniel (2017: 74) calls this view 'a Bricker-style possibilism.'[3] Thus, if the Bricker-style possibilism is true, it could be that my counterpart in another possible world differs from me not only in choosing to enjoy a different beverage as we are writing these words (another coffee, say, rather than a tea) – he also differs from me in the very way in which he exists.[4]

There are, to my knowledge, two kinds of motivations for pluralism: one characteristic of contemporary pluralists like McDaniel and another characteristic of their illustrious predecessors in the history of philosophy. The contemporary interest in pluralism hinges on its (arguable) ability to help us 'solv[e] or at least ameliorat[e] various [metaphysical] puzzles and

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[2] Cf. McDaniel 2017: Chapter 3.

[3] Cf. Bricker 2001.

[4] Cf. McDaniel 2017: 73-75.

problems.'[5] Besides the aforementioned issues of time and modality, such 'puzzles and problems' may concern

> material objects, […], the nature of ontological categories, ontological dependence and necessary connections more generally, the status of "negative entities" such as holes and shadows, grounding, and essence. (McDaniel 2017: 8)

By contrast, historical pluralists seem to have been drawn to the doctrine by contemplating the sheer diversity of entities which they thought populate the actual world.[6] The differences between them are so profound, they seemed to reason, that filing them under mere differences in nature would be to do them a grave injustice. Rather, they must be thought of as differences in being. Thus, Aristotle thought that substances are so different from their qualities and quantities that beings falling under these (and the remaining) categories[7] just cannot all be in

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[5] McDaniel 2017: 8. But McManus (2013: 653-654) argues that Heidegger's version of pluralism was driven by this concern too and so was Russell's.

[6] But McDaniel (2017: 74) argues that already 'Scotus, Suárez, and Descartes' toyed with the Bricker-inspired possibilism - a variant of pluralism that locates the ontological dissimilarity at the meta-modal level rather than within the actual world.

[7] The number of Aristotle's categories varies from work to work (and sometimes within what is thought to be the same work). Thus, *Categories* and *Topics* list ten categories, whereas there are only eight in *Posterior Analytics* and Book V of *Metaphysics* and as few as four in Book XIV of *Metaphysics*. Cf. *Cat.*: IV, 1b25-2a4; *Top.*: I, 9, 103b22; *APo*, I, 22, 83b15; *Met.*: V, 7, 1017a22-30; XIV, 2, 1089b18-25.

the same way.[8] Aquinas thought the same thing about God and beings he believed to be his creations,[9] Moore and Russell, about concrete and abstract objects,[10] and Heidegger about beings as they show up in their phenomenological scrutiny (some as Daseins, some as ready-to-hand, some as present-at-hand,[11] and so on).[12] (It is worth noting that the historical pluralists diverge in just how strong a version of pluralism is warranted by the onto-diversity of the actual world: whereas Aristotle and Aquinas seemed to think that ways of being are disjoint, Moore, Russell, and arguably Heidegger allowed for the nesting of ways of being within one another.[13])

My aim in this paper is to motivate pluralism in a new way – a way that overlooks both the doctrine's applications to philosophy's heterogenous head-scratchers and the actual world's alleged onto-diversity. By 'motivate' I mean the following: I will in fact argue for pluralism. But, with one exception, I will ignore more[14] and less[15] well known considerations against it,

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[8] Cf. *Met.:* IV, 2. Apart from this, some commentators read Aristotle's argument that being is not a genus (at *Met.*: III, 3, 998b21–27) as a case for pluralism. For an overview (and an account of what's wrong with that reading) see Czerkawski 2022a.

[9] Cf. *ST*: I.3.5; *ST*: I.13.5.

[10] Moore 1903: 111; Russell 1912: 89–100.

[11] For a different reading of the status of presence-at-hand, see McManus 2012: 195-198.

[12] See *SZ*. Cf. McDaniel 2010: 694.

[13] For a case for the nesting-free account of Heidegger's version of pluralism see McDaniel 2013 and for a case for the nesting-friendly account of Heidegger's version of pluralism see Czerkawski 2022b: 234-240.

[14] E.g., van Inwagen's 1998 and 2014; Merricks 2019; Whittle 2020; other objections discussed in Turner 2010.

[15] McManus 2013.

as these continue to be addressed by the doctrine's two defenders-in-chief: McDaniel[16] and Turner.[17, 18]

It is generally assumed that it is pluralism rather than monism that is the stronger doctrine of the two and, hence, that it requires more substantial justification. For, while monism countenances one way of being and is only committed to differences in the nature of entities, pluralism countenances at least two ways of being and is thereby committed to two fundamentally different kinds of differences between entities, namely, differences in their being and differences in their nature. Even advocates of pluralism would seem to tacitly accept the assumption that their view requires more substantial justification than monism, which might explain why they write papers primarily concerned with defending pluralism from objections[19] or papers that argue that pluralism is merely 'rationally permissible to believe.'[20] This strikes me as an oversight, because, as I am going to show here, the relative simplicity of monism is paid for – and dearly - by the relative strength of its modal commitments. I will show, in particular, that monism entails, first, that it is necessarily the case that no entities are ontologically dissimilar, and, second, that it is neither primarily, ideally, and positively[21] conceivable (henceforth 'PIP-conceivable') nor secondarily, ideally, and positively[22] conceivable (henceforth, 'SIP-conceivable') that some entities are ontologically dissimilar. (By

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[16] See especially his 2009 and 2010. Both have since been republished as chapters of McDaniel 2017.

[17] See especially his 2010 and 2021.

[18] And for a possible reply to McManus 2013 see Czerkawski 2022c.

[19] E.g., Turner 2010.

[20] McDaniel 2010: 689.

[21] This nomenclature comes from Chalmers (2002) – I'll decipher it in due course.

[22] *Ditto*.

contrast, pluralism does not even require that it is possible that some entities are ontologically dissimilar nor that it is PIP-conceivable or SIP-conceivable that some entities are ontologically dissimilar.) Now, the argument itself is this. It is, however, PIP-conceivable that some entities are ontologically dissimilar and hence it is not necessarily the case that no entities are ontologically dissimilar. Therefore, monism is false and pluralism true.

I proceed as follows. In Section 2, I look into monism's and pluralism's commitments with respect to possibility (where my claims about them will be defended with reference to the relationship between what, following Heidegger, I will call the 'question of being' and the 'question of the meaning of being') and, in Section 3, into their commitments with respect to conceivability (where I will avail myself of Chalmers' (2002) treatment of the relationship between conceivability and possibility). In Section 4, I argue, drawing primarily on my own experience of reading Heidegger's *Being and Time* and invoking the notion of the utmost generality of our concept of being, that it is PIP-conceivable that some entities are ontologically dissimilar and hence that it is not necessarily the case that no entities are ontologically dissimilar, completing my case for pluralism. In Section 5, I underscore some of its advantages over the motivations for pluralism adverted to above, and in Section 6, I offer a similar – but weaker – argument for a version of pluralism, which countenances infinitely many ways of being.

2. Ways of Being and Possibility

So, why cannot the monist accept that the ontological dissimilarity between entities is possible? Why must she insist that it is necessary that all entities exist in the same way? Is it not the case that what monists generally deny is merely that ontological dissimilarity actually obtains?[23] My argument here proceeds in two steps. First, I will argue that the concession of the possibility

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[23] Cf. van Inwagen's 1998 and 2014; Merricks 2019; Whittle 2020.

of the ontological dissimilarity between entities requires us to conceive of their being in a manner consistent with pluralism and inconsistent with monism. Second, I will argue that the question of how to conceive of being and the question of what it is for beings to be are intertwined in such a way that conceiving of being in a manner consistent with pluralism and inconsistent with monism commits us to pluralism.

Thus, consider the thesis T:

T: It is possible that some beings, *x* and *y*, are ontologically dissimilar.

And now ask yourself this question: what might the term 'being' applied to merely possible beings that are ontologically dissimilar mean? Whatever it means must be capable of somehow accommodating the diversity in being that the monist says is not in evidence in the actual world. For T does pick out some objects which it calls 'beings.' And some of those objects are ontologically dissimilar. Consider that it does not matter where the objects in question are picked out from. That is to say, it does not matter that they are not – if the monist is right - picked out from that region of the domain of our language that we take to be the actual world. For this is a conceptual issue rather than a question of the matter of fact. It could be that modal realism is false and merely possible worlds are convenient fictions, for example. It would still be the case in conceiving that it is possible that some beings, *x* and *y*, are ontologically dissimilar, we conceive of being in a manner consistent with pluralism and inconsistent with monism.

This was the first step of the argument. Now, the second one.

Consider two questions. First, what is the world like with regard to being? For example, is there a single way of being or are there, rather, many? Either way, what ways of being are there and how should they be characterised? Following Heidegger, call this the 'question of being.' And, second, how ought we think about being (in the business of describing the world

as it is)? Call this, also following Heidegger, the 'question of the meaning of being'. The two questions are closely intertwined.[24] For, obviously, we ought to think about being – at least while in the business of describing the world as it is - in a way that accords with how the world is. So, if we start with the question of being, what we have to say in response to it will bear on the question of the meaning of being. But this works in reverse, too. If we start with the question of the meaning of being, as analytic philosophers such as Quine (1963) or Fine (2009) are wont to do, and so, we are primarily interested in arguing that *our* concept of being – the one we care deeply about in philosophy - is really such-and-such (quantificational for Quine and predicative for Fine), this cannot be without interesting consequences for the *Seinsfrage* proper. Because, if we truly *ought to* think of being in terms of being the value of a bound variable (for example), then, granted that we ought to think of being in a way that accords with how the world is, it follows that the world itself somehow accords with that way of thinking.

The second step of my argument is just like that last inference. If we are happy to accept that our concept of being – the one we employ to address issues of philosophical concern – can accommodate the differences in being affirmed by the pluralist and denied by the monist, it follows that the world itself (in a broad sense that covers both the actual world and the ways it might have been) is such as to somehow accord with that concept. Otherwise T - the thesis that it is possible that some beings, *x* and *y*, are ontologically dissimilar - could not be regarded as philosophically adequate. So, the monist needs to deny T. But this is just to say that monism entails that it is necessarily the case that no entities are ontologically dissimilar.

The pluralist commitments with respect to possibility are comparatively light. For one thing, pluralism does not entail that it is necessarily the case that some entities are ontologically dissimilar. But the modal disparity between the two doctrines goes even deeper. Consider that

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[24] And so, Heidegger himself seems to use these phrasings interchangeably. Cf. *SZ*: 2 [1].

pluralism is consistent with what monism entails: pluralism could be true and monism false even if it were necessarily the case that *no* entities are ontologically dissimilar. To see this, recall the Bricker-style possibilism - the view according to which merely possible entities exist, just not in the same way as actual entities.[25] The Bricker-style possibilism is, without doubt, a variant of pluralism. For it is committed to the claim that beings differ not only with regard to their nature – or what they are – but also with regard to their very being – or how they are. And yet, the Bricker-style possibilism allows that no possible world contains any ontological dissimilarities. For the distinctly ontological differences it postulates do not manifest themselves within any single possible world. They can only be discerned by thinking about the modal universe at large. Thus, while monism requires that it is necessarily the case that no ontological dissimilarities between entities exist, this, by itself, does not establish its truth. For pluralism can accommodate even this scenario.

Thus, the relative lightness of the monist ideology with respect to the pluralist ideology (fewer ways of being, fewer ways for things to differ) is balanced by the relative heaviness of the monist commitments with respect to possibility. For it is prima facie implausible that it is necessarily the case that no entities are ontologically dissimilar - why should this be a necessary truth? At any rate, it is a claim that requires substantial defence. Just taking shots at pluralism won't do.

3. Ways of Being and Conceivability

I now want to examine what the two views about being entail with respect to conceivability. I will argue that, whereas monism entails that it is neither primarily nor secondarily, ideally, and positively conceivable (i.e., neither PIP- nor SIP-conceivable) that some entities are ontologically dissimilar, pluralism does not entail that it is PIP-conceivable or SIP-conceivable

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[25] Cf. McDaniel 2017: 74.

that some entities are ontologically dissimilar. So, what we have here is another modal disparity that favours pluralism. And it is pluralism, this time round, with which I begin.

Whether there is any relationship between conceivability and possibility is a contested issue. Since pluralism is not (primarily) a claim about what is conceivable, those who are persuaded that conceivability has nothing to do with possibility – period – will readily accept it as true that the pluralist is not committed to any particular claim with regard to conceivability, including the claim that it is either PIP-conceivable or SIP-conceivable that some entities are ontologically dissimilar. But even those who (like me) are persuaded that conceivability can, at least in some cases, be indicative of possibility will readily accept this. Those philosophers only need to recall that pluralism does not entail that it is possible that some beings are ontologically dissimilar (due to the Bricker-style possibilism). So, even if it were not conceivable that some entities are ontologically dissimilar – in a way we are prepared to accept as indicative of possibility – pluralism could still be true. The first half of my analysis of the relationship between ways of being and conceivability is now complete. Pluralism does *not* entail that it is either PIP- or SIP-conceivable that some entities are ontologically dissimilar. As far as I can see, it simply makes no demands about what we can – and cannot – conceive of.

The second half of my analysis will keep us busy for a longer while. My argument for the claim that monism entails that it is neither PIP- nor SIP-conceivable that some entities are ontologically dissimilar is predicated on my analysis of the monist commitments with respect to possibility from Section 2 above. Since monism entails that it is *not* possible that some beings, x and y, are ontologically dissimilar (i.e., that T is false), it also rules out that the state of affairs T qualifies as possible is conceivable – at least in a certain way. Thus, in order for this argument to be successful, I need to show that at least *some* variant of conceivability is indicative of possibility. I will not chart any new ground here. Following Chalmers (2002), I

will show, first, how the constraints of being primary and secondary, ideality, and positivity address standard counterexamples to the thesis that conceivability entails possibility (call this the 'conceivability-possibility thesis'). Second, I will support the conceivability-possibility thesis with two arguments (likewise lifted from Chalmers' nice paper).

The first class of counterexamples to the conceivability-possibility thesis are inspired by Kripke (1980). It is conceivable (for example) that water was not H_2O. For it is easy to imagine that the transparent liquid in rivers, oceans, and so on, had a different chemical structure. But it is not possible for water to be anything other than H_2O. For science tells us that anything that has a different chemical structure is not water. So, conceivability does not entail possibility.

However, Chalmers argues that the terms 'conceivable' and 'possible' are equivocal – and that the Kripkean counterexamples to conceivability arguments depend on their being disambiguated in an uncharitable way. Relevant here is the distinction he draws between primary and secondary conceivability on the one hand and primary and secondary possibility on the other.

S (a placeholder for a sentence) is *primarily conceivable* when 'it is conceivable that S is *actually* the case.'[26] Thus, whether S is primarily conceivable is an a priori matter, because when we consider whether a possible world in which S is true could be the actual world, 'the true character of the actual world is irrelevant' and so, 'empirical knowledge can be suspended.'[27] It is in this sense that we can say that it is conceivable that water is not H_2O. For it takes an empirical investigation of water to know that it has the chemical structure of H_2O.

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[26] Chalmers 2002: 157.

[27] Chalmers 2002: 158.

By contrast, S is *secondarily conceivable* when 'S conceivably *might have been the case*.'[28] We find out whether S conceivably might have been the case when

> we acknowledge that the character of the actual world is fixed, and say to ourselves: if the situation *had* obtained, what *would have been the case*? If we judge that, had the situation obtained, S would have been the case, then we judge that the situation verifies S when considered as counterfactual. (Chalmers 2002: 158)

Secondary conceivability is thus often a posteriori, because 'the application of our words to subjunctive counterfactual situations often depends on their reference in the actual world, and the latter cannot usually be known a priori.'[29] In this sense it is actually *not* conceivable that water is not H_2O. For it can be ruled out a posteriori that water is not H_2O.

Corresponding to this is a distinction between primary and secondary possibility. S is *primarily possible* if S is true in some possible world considered as actual: i.e., if it is true in any possible world. And S is *secondarily possible* if S is true in some possible world considered as counterfactual: i.e., if it is true in a possible world that shares its character with the actual world.[30] To illustrate, it is primarily possible that water is H_2O. For it could be the case that the liquid in rivers, oceans, and so on, had a different chemical structure. But it is not secondarily possible that water is H_2O. For it is a truth in the actual world that water is H_2O. And it could not be the case that water both is and isn't H_2O.

Thus, Chalmers argues that Kripkean counterexamples merely show that primary conceivability does not entail secondary possibility.[31] They do not endanger our deriving from

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[28] Chalmers 2002: 157.

[29] Chalmers 2002: 159.

[30] Cf. Chalmers 2002: 164.

[31] Cf. Chalmers 2002: 165.

knowledge about what is primarily conceivable knowledge about what is primarily possible as well as deriving from knowledge about what is secondarily conceivable knowledge about what is secondarily (and thus primarily) possible. So, understood in any one of these two ways, the conceivability-possibility thesis is immune to Kripkean counterexamples.

For the illustration of the second class of counterexamples consider Goldbach's conjecture (stating that every even number greater than 2 is the sum of two prime numbers). Because the truth value of Goldbach's conjecture has not been determined, yet, it is conceivable that it is true as much as it is conceivable that it is false. So, the conceivability-possibility thesis suggests that it is possible that every even number greater than 2 is the sum of two prime numbers and that it is possible that it is *not* the case that every even number greater than 2 is the sum of two prime numbers. But all mathematical truths are necessary. So, only one of the two conjuncts can be true. So, conceivability does not entail possibility.

However, Chalmers argues, again, that the counterexamples of this kind are only effective on an uncharitable disambiguation of what it means for S to be conceivable.

The relevant distinction here is between 'prima facie' and 'ideal' conceivability. 'S is *prima facie conceivable* for a subject when S is conceivable for that subject on first appearances.'[32] By contrast, 'S is *ideally conceivable* when S is conceivable on ideal rational reflection.'[33] Chalmers does not define what it is for S to be conceivable on ideal rational reflection. But he does sketch out two ways in which one might develop such a definition. One, taken by Menzies (1998), appeals to the capacities of an ideal reasoner - a reasoner who is free from any cognitive limitations. On this approach, S is ideally conceivable if, for example, such

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[32] Chalmers 2002: 147. Italics are mine.

[33] Chalmers 2002: 147. *Ditto*.

an ideal reasoner could not rule out the truth of S a priori.[34] Another way – favoured by Chalmers (2002: 148) himself – is to 'invoke the notion of undefeatability by better reasoning.'

Either way, it is clear that what the counterexample of Goldbach's conjecture, as it is currently phrased, shows is just that prima facie conceivability is an imperfect guide to possibility. However, the closer we get to the ideal conceivability – either by deferring to better, i.e., less cognitively limited, reasoners or simply by continuing to subject S to further scrutiny – the more reliable a guide to possibility we find in conceivability.[35] So, as long as conceivability is understood to be *ideal* rather than merely prima facie, the conceivability-possibility thesis is immune to counterexamples like Goldbach's conjecture as it is currently phrased.

Still, suitably upgraded, the case of Goldbach's conjecture might underscore another issue with the conceivability-possibility thesis. Suppose that, while it remains objectively determinate that Goldbach's conjecture is either necessarily true or necessarily false (but not both these things at once), neither one or the other could be ruled out a priori even on ideal rational reflection. In this case, the conceivability-possibility thesis would still (absurdly) entail that it is possible that Goldbach's conjecture is true and that it is possible that it is false, regardless of the requirement of ideality having been met.

Chalmers himself doubts whether any cases like the upgraded Goldbach above actually exist. Nevertheless, he introduces another distinction that helps us dismantle even this threat – a distinction between negative and positive conceivability. S is *negatively conceivable* 'when S is not ruled out a priori, or when there is no contradiction in S.'[36] By contrast, S is *positively*

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[34] Cf. Chalmers 2002: 148.

[35] Cf. Chalmers 2002: 159-160.

[36] Chalmers 2002: 149.

conceivable 'when one can coherently modally imagine a situation that verifies S,' where '[a] situation is coherently imagined when it is possible to fill in arbitrary details in the imagined situation such that no contradiction reveals itself.'[37] Applying the constraint of positivity to the conceivability-thesis disarms the threat of the upgraded Goldbach and similar cases. For all they show is that inferences from *negative* conceivability to possibility threaten to support absurd conclusions. They leave inferences from positive conceivability untouched. For it is not the case, in any of the Goldbach scenarios, that our reasoners imagine anything like a complete proof.[38] So, as long as conceivability is understood to be positive rather than negative, the conceivability-possibility thesis is immune even to counterexamples like the upgraded Goldbach.

Thus, two versions of the conceivability-possibility thesis are not subject to standard counterexamples:

The Conceivability-Possibility Thesis*: If it is primarily, ideally, and positively (PIP-) conceivable that S, then it is primarily possible that S.

The Conceivability-Possibility Thesis**: If it is secondarily, ideally, and positively (SIP-) conceivable that S, then it is secondarily and primarily possible that S. [39]

Now let me support them with two arguments, both of which, again, are courtesy of Chalmers.

The first argument appeals to the theoretical virtue of simplicity, afforded by the conceivability-possibility thesis. If it is true that positive and ideal conceivability entails

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[37] Chalmers 2002: 153. Cf. Chalmers 2002: 150-153.

[38] Cf. Chalmers 2002: 160-161.

[39] For how Chalmers' distinctions can be used to address other apparent counterexamples see Chalmers 2002: 189-192.

possibility – that there is no gap between one and the other – possibility is *uniform*. There is no real distinction between what is sometimes called 'logical possibility' and 'metaphysical possibility'. Call this view 'modal monism' - inasmuch as it employs a single modal primitive - and contrast it with 'modal dualism', which equips distinct primitive modalities of logical and metaphysical possibility. The argument is that, granted that 'modal monism can explain all the untendentious phenomena', 'there is no good reason to accept such a modal dualism' since modal monism already covers all modal phenomena that need explaining.[40] The second argument questions whether there is even a 'distinct *concept* of metaphysical possibility for the second modality [of the modal dualist] to answer to.' For his part, Chalmers argues that

> [t]he momentary impression of such a concept stems from a confused understanding of such ontic/epistemic distinctions as that between apriority and necessity and that between concept and property, all of which are easily subsumed under a modal monism […]. (Chalmers 2002: 194)

I have no doubt that each of these arguments requires substantial elaboration. Still, this will have to suffice for our purposes. What I hope to offer in this paper is not a general defence of conceivability arguments, but, ultimately, an argument for pluralism that belongs with the best conceivability arguments.[41]

Thus, we have established that some variants of conceivability are indicative of some variants of possibility. And what does this imply for the monist commitments with respect to conceivability? We already know that monism entails that it is *not* possible – in either primary

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[40] Chalmers 2002: 194.

[41] Thus, I ignore Howell's (2008) and Mizrahi and Morrow's (2015) recent *reductio* arguments against the conceivability-possibility thesis. For a reply to these arguments see Feng 2022.

or secondary way[42] - that some beings, x and y, are ontologically dissimilar (i.e., that T is false). We can now employ the variants of the conceivability-possibility thesis above to infer that monism thus entails that it is neither primarily nor secondarily, ideally, and positively conceivable (i.e., neither PIP- nor SIP-conceivable) that some beings, x and y, are ontologically dissimilar. For, if this was conceivable in any one of these two ways, then, granted the conceivability-possibility thesis, T would come out true and monism false. And this is a comparatively heavy commitment. Although pluralism commits us to a heavier ideology, it entails nothing whatsoever with respect to what is – and what is not – conceivable.

4. The Argument for Pluralism

We already know that if it is PIP-conceivable that some entities are ontologically dissimilar, then it is (primarily) possible that some entities are ontologically dissimilar (cf. Section 3 above) and that this, in turn, entails that monism is false and pluralism true (cf. Section 2 above). So, if we can show that it is PIP-conceivable that some entities are ontologically dissimilar, we would have shown that monism is false and pluralism true. This is just what I will attempt presently, completing my case for pluralism.

First, a confession of a general kind: I can conceive of ontological dissimilarity between entities of the sort postulated by the historical pluralists.[43] Thus, I can conceive of a world where some of Aristotle's categories are instantiated and their instances are indeed ontologically dissimilar. I can also conceive of a world where both ways of being posited by Aquinas are instantiated and some differences between their instances do, indeed, belong in

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[42] Recall that my argument in Section 2 talked about possibility in general and note that it works for each of Chalmers' disambiguations of this notion.

[43] I can also conceive of cases of 'contemporary' ontological dissimilarities, but I set them aside to keep things simple.

the order of being rather than in the order of nature – and of a Moorean-Russellian world where this holds true of concrete and abstract objects. Finally, I conceive of a Heideggerian world – with its ontological differences between Daseins and ready-to-hand and present-at-hand items – every time I read *Being and Time*. This might sound like a boast, but I believe that each of my professed achievements is perfectly mundane. I believe that, with little effort, anyone else could enjoy them, too. Still, they are *my* achievements. So, my claim that I do enjoy these achievements seems to trump the claim of any third-party to the effect that I do not really enjoy them. How could they know better than I do what I can and cannot conceive of? Even so, it still needs to be seen that the conceivability at issue is of the right sort – in fact, of no less than three right sorts.

So, are the aforementioned pluralist worlds conceivable primarily or rather secondarily? When I conceive of the Heideggerian world, for example, do I conceive of it as being the actual world (the true character of the actual world notwithstanding) or do I consider it as a way in which the actual world might have been (holding its true character fixed)? Clearly, it's the former. When I am reading *Being and Time* and just trying to understand what Heidegger is talking about in that book, I am not – or at least not necessarily – comparing the Heideggerian world against the actual world. It might be that what Heidegger says about the actual world is consistent with what I believe is true of the actual world, in which case the Heideggerian world would be secondarily conceivable – at least for me. But engaging in such a comparison is something more than what I have in mind when I assert that it is conceivable that some Daseins and some ready-to-hand items are ontologically dissimilar. I merely assert that, in my view, possible worlds such as the Heideggerian world could be the actual world, regardless of what the actual world is like.

Now, a trickier question. Are worlds like the Heideggerian world conceivable ideally or merely prima facie? Does my conceiving of them bear marks of 'ideal rational reflection' or

am I merely going here by 'first appearances'? I *am* going here by first appearances. Still, I am now going to argue that it is also the case that that is just how things would appear on the ideal reflection.

There is a venerable tradition in philosophy that asserts that, even if being is not the absolutely general concept – this has recently been put in question[44] – it is, certainly, the *most* general concept. Thus, Plato's mouthpiece in the *Sophist*, the Visitor from Elea, claims that 'that *that which is*… blend[s] with all of [the kinds].'[45] That is to say, any possible kind could, in principle, be – even if its instances were radically different from some other entities. This claim is reasserted by Aristotle in his *Metaphysics*, where he says that 'being is the most general concept'[46] and by Aquinas in *Summa Theologiae*:

> For that which, before aught else, falls under apprehension, is *being*, the notion of which is included in all things a man apprehends. (*ST*: II.94.2)

Among the modern greats, it is explicitly endorsed by Pascal, who invokes it to argue that being is indefinable:

> Who can even know what being is, which is impossible to define since there is nothing more general, and in order to explain it to you would have first of all to use that very word, saying, "It is . . .", etc.? (Pascal 2008: 186)

And among the greats who defined the shape of contemporary philosophy, it finds support on both sides of the continental-analytic divide: in Heidegger[47] as well as in Quine (1963: 1), who

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[44] See contributions in Rayo & Uzquiano 2006.

[45] *Soph*.: 259a.

[46] *Met*.: III, 4, 1001a21.

[47] *SZ*: 3 [1]. Cf. Czerkawski 2022c: 11-14.

claims that the 'ontological problem' – 'What is there?' – can be answered in a single word, 'Everything,' 'and everyone will accept this answer as true.'

Why does the (nearly[48]) universally acknowledged utmost generality of being matter for our purposes? Because any person who *cannot* conceive of an ontological dissimilarity between entities operates, in effect, with a concept of being that falls short of the utmost generality. Consider the predicate 'C' standing for entities I say I can conceive of. This predicate applies to everything that that person's concept of being applies to. Why? Because I (rightly or wrongly) maintain that I can conceive of them. But it also applies to some entities the other person's concept of being does not apply to. For, I say I can conceive of some entities that are ontologically dissimilar. So, C is more general than the other person's concept of being. But being is the most general concept. So, the other person's concept of being falls short of the concept of being. So, the other person's failed attempt to conceive of (say) the Heideggerian world – the world in which some entities are ontologically dissimilar - falls short of ideal reflection. Either they are cognitively limited in a way the ideal reasoner is not or their reflection is defeated by better reasoning – in this instance mine (insofar as it is consistent with the utmost generality of being). Conversely, as long as the Heideggerian world is internally consistent, the ideal reasoner could conceive of the Heideggerian world. For, in the light of the utmost generality of being, an inability to conceive of this or any other of our fragmented landscapes - as long as they are internally consistent - counts as a cognitive limitation. And, likewise, the reflection of anyone who enjoys this ability cannot be defeated by better reasoning. For, it could only be defeated by giving up on the utmost generality of being. And this makes any such reasoning worse rather than better. For our concept of being is, at least

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[48] Meinong (1983), I am told, allowed that some entities do not enjoy any way of being at all.

since Plato, the most general one that we have. So, it is not only primarily but also *ideally* conceivable that some beings are ontologically dissimilar.

The last question, less tricky. Are the aforementioned ways in which being might fragment conceivable positively or rather negatively? In other words, when I conceive of them, am I employing my faculty of 'modal imagination' (and indeed in such a way that no contradiction reveals itself) or am I merely finding no contradiction in each of these scenarios? It is true that I can discern nothing contradictory in any of these fragmented landscapes – or, better, I can discern no contradiction that hinges on the fragmentation of being itself.[49] But it is clear that, when I read *Being and Time*, for example, I do *more* than that – I positively imagine the Heideggerian world populated by anxious Daseins, ready-to-hand hammers and tongs, and present-at-hand sticks and stones, each existing in a manner of their own. I might think to myself that this is all a fairy-tale. I might think, more precisely, that the actual world is not a Heideggerian world. Here where I am, I might think, human beings, hammers and tongs, sticks and stones, differ with regard to their nature only - they do not differ with regard to their being. (Perhaps I think this, because monism is an explanatorily simpler theory than pluralism: it commits us to fewer ways of being and fewer ways for things to differ from one another.) But it wouldn't be because I cannot coherently imagine the Heideggerian world. So, it is *positively* conceivable that some beings are ontologically dissimilar.

Thus, it is PIP-conceivable that some entities are ontologically dissimilar. But this entails (as we have seen in Section 3) that it is (primarily) possible that some entities are ontologically dissimilar. And this, in turn, entails (as we have seen in Section 2) that monism

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[49] For some other inconsistencies one can arguably find in the Heideggerian world see, for example, McDaniel 2016 (who attempts to remove the contradiction) and Casati 2022 (who celebrates it).

is false and pluralism true. In other words, 'being fragments,' as McDaniel (2017: 1) puts it, with considerably more swagger.

5. Matters of Economy and Dialectics

The main advantages of my argument for pluralism over extant ones are matters of economy and dialectics.

Let's start with economy. My argument gets the pluralist more bang for the buck than the historical motivations, because it does not hinge on the actual world's onto-diversity (or the absence thereof). We do not need any positive examples of beings that are actually as different from the rest of the world's population as the historical pluralists maintain. It is even more obviously cheaper than McDaniel's recent attempts to warm us to pluralism by working out sophisticated solutions to a number of scattered philosophical problems. Essentially, our work ends here and now.

Regarding dialectics, consider, on the one hand, that every example of the supposed actual onto-diversity offered by the historical pluralist is vulnerable to doubts whether the difference in question is really as impressive as needed to support pluralism. Thus, van Inwagen writes about Sartre's distinction between being 'for-itself' and 'in-itself':

There is, of course, a vast difference between rational beings and mere inanimate objects. I believe this quite as firmly as Sartre does. But to insist, as I do, that this difference does not consist in the one sort of thing's having a different sort of being from the other's is not to depreciate it. The vast difference between me and a table does not consist in our having vastly different sorts of being (*Dasein*, *dass sein*, "that it is"); it consists rather in our having vastly different sorts of *natures* (*Wesen*, *was sein*, "what it is"). If you prefer, what the table and I are *like* is vastly different. This is a perfectly trivial thing to say: that a vast difference between A and B must consist in a vast difference in their natures. But if a distinction can be made between a thing's being and

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its nature, then this trivial truth is in competition with a certain statable falsehood. (van

Inwagen 1998: 234-235)

Van Inwagen might well be right about this. The actual differences between 'for-itself' and 'in-itself' (and so on) might in fact be unusually vast differences in nature. But it is certainly not (PIP-) inconceivable that these *could be* differences in being – as I have argued in Section 4. Note that, crucially, van Inwagen does not deny that Sartre's claim that instances of for-itself and instances of in-itself are ontologically dissimilar is not intelligible (although, strictly speaking, he does not affirm it, either). That is to say, he does not deny that he can (primarily and positively) conceive of an instance of for-itself and an instance of in-itself, each existing in a different way. How could he find Sartre's claim intelligible without his primarily and positively conceiving of some such scenario? What van Inwagen denies is that, granted that Sartre's claim that instances of for-itself and instances of in-itself are ontologically dissimilar is intelligible ('if a distinction can be made between a thing's being and its nature'), it is true. Thus, van Inwagen's objection – if it is legitimate - blocks the argument of a historical pluralist. But it does not block mine, which only requires the intelligibility (to the ideal reasoner) – but not the truth – of some such claim.

On the other hand, the contemporary appeals to the pluralist's capacity to address philosophical problems are double-edged. There is usually a number of competing solutions to any philosophical problem. And, as every *modus ponens* is prone to become someone else's *modus tollens*, monists like van Inwagen will interpret the commitment to pluralism of McDaniel's solutions as a presumption against them (granted competing solutions exist). Of course, the present argument invites the same kind of response: i.e., either rejecting my claim that monism entails that it is necessarily the case that no entities are ontologically dissimilar (for which I argued in Section 2) or my claim that it entails that it is not PIP-conceivable that some entities are ontologically dissimilar (for which I argued in Section 3) – or perhaps my

claim that it is PIP-conceivable that some entities are ontologically dissimilar (for which I argued in Section 4). But it is unclear to me on what grounds these claims might be rejected. For example, the second of these claims is immune to all counterexamples to the conceivability-possibility thesis that I am aware of. And the third of these claims is strongly supported by the utmost generality of our concept of being that forms an important part of our philosophical heritage. And that is another consideration in favour of my argument.

Still, one might object that I am also at a considerable disadvantage - a converse of the two advantages I enjoy over historical motivations of pluralism. I maintain that I do not need any examples of beings that are actually as different from the rest of the world's population as the historical pluralists maintain (economy) and that the PIP-conceivability of such beings is harder to defeat than the claim of their existence (dialectics). The objection is that I will therefore struggle to make sense of the distinction between differences in nature and differences in being that is essential to pluralism. For, to make sense of this distinction, I need some positive examples of beings that differ alongside both these axes. But if so, I lose both my advantages over the historical pluralist. Moreover, since to make sense of my own position, I am thus committed to some variant of the historical pluralism, my argument is redundant – perhaps even circular.

In response, I deny that, in order to make sense of pluralism, my examples of ontologically dissimilar entities must be sourced from the actual world. Examples from possible worlds other than the actual world work just as well – and thanks to the first variant of the conceivability-possibility thesis[50] (the one involving primary conceivability), the PIP-conceivability of the Heideggerian world, for example, provides me with many such examples. Just as to make sense of the difference between having a heart and having kidneys, we do not

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[50] Cf. Section 3 above.

need to wait until a creature endowed with one organ but not the other comes into being, so, in order to make sense of the notion of a difference in being, we do not need to wait until appropriately different creatures come into being. In short, illustrating concepts with reference to merely possible entities is a standard practice in philosophy. Consequently, I see no reason why I could not indulge in it on this occasion.

But may not the monist go further than van Inwagen above and deny that that ontological dissimilarities are as much as possible[51] as well as insist, about any one of my illustrations – such as the difference between Daseins and ready-to-hand items in the Heideggerian world from Section 4 or indeed the differences between past and present existence and between being actual and merely possible from Section 1 - that the relevant difference is in fact a case of a difference in nature?

I did argue myself (in Section 2) that, in fact, any monist is committed to the claim that ontological dissimilarities are impossible. However, I also argued that the monist is thereby committed to believing something *false*. For, as I argued in Section 4, it is PIP-conceivable that some entities are ontologically dissimilar and, as I argued in Section 3, that, from this, we can infer that it is (primarily) possible that some entities are ontologically dissimilar. So, this further denial will be only as convincing as the monist's response to these two arguments. Of course, it might be that they will find a plausible way to reject at least one of them. All I claim – and need to claim - now is that this argument does not engender any *additional* difficulties for the

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[51] Van Inwagen (2014: 23) seems to take this step in a later publication, where he asserts that 'describ[ing] the radically different properties that [vastly different beings] have' is 'everything that *can be done* to describe [vast differences between such beings].' However, he calls this a 'rant' rather than an 'argument.'

pluralist to worry about. I thus remain convinced that my conceivability argument is the cheapest and the most effective way to preach the fragmentation of being.

6. Infinitely Many Ways of Being?

But not only can the interrogation of what's conceivable for us persuade us that being fragments, it also can lead to insights about how many fragments of being there are. Consider the following variant of my conceivability argument:

> 1. If it is primarily, ideally, and *negatively*, conceivable that S, then it is primarily possible that S.
>
> 2. It is primarily, ideally, and *negatively* conceivable that beings exist in an infinite number of ways.
>
> 3. If it is (primarily or secondarily) possible that beings exist in an infinite number of ways, then there is an infinite number of ways of being.
>
> 4. It is primarily possible that beings exist in an infinite number of ways. (1, 2)
>
> Therefore,
>
> 5. There is an infinite number of ways of being (3, 4)

The argument is valid, but should we trust all of its premises?

I believe that our grounds for accepting Premises 2 and 3 are strong.

As for Premise 2, I cannot, of course, have a *positive* conception of beings existing in an infinite number of ways. That is to say, this scenario exceeds the limited capacity of my 'modal imagination'. Still, the scenario seems to involve no contradiction. So, it is negatively conceivable to me that beings exist in an infinite number of ways. Furthermore, it is in fact ideally conceivable that beings exist in an infinite number of ways. The reason? Anything less – granted the scenario is conceivable – will involve a concept of being that falls short of the utmost generality. Finally, the conceivability at issue is, naturally, of the primary kind – we are considering here whether the world in which beings exist in an infinite number of ways could

be the actual world regardless of the actual world's true character – not whether the actual world could accommodate beings existing in an infinite number of ways, the answer to which question is: probably not. So, it is primarily, ideally, and negatively conceivable that beings exist in an infinite number of ways. In other words, we can safely endorse Premise 2.

As for Premise 3, it does seem, again, that its antecedent - it is (primarily or secondarily) possible that beings exist in an infinite number of ways – employs a concept of being that accommodates an infinite number of ways to be. So, granted that the question of the meaning of being and the question of being are interrelated in a way I have described in Section 2, conceding its truth amounts to conceding that the world in a broad sense that includes the actual world as well as its alternatives is such that somehow accords with that infinitely extensible concept of being. So, if it is (primarily or secondarily) possible that beings exist in an infinite number of ways, then there is an infinite number of ways of being. Thus, Premise 3 is in good shape, too.

However, for better or worse, Premise 1 - which replaces positive conceivability we have focussed on earlier with negative conceivability – is more controversial. We have noted earlier that Chalmers himself doubts whether any counterexamples to the conceivability-possibility thesis that contradict Premise 1 (like the 'upgraded Goldbach') actually exist. However, he recognises that some argumentative work still needs to be done to defend 'strong modal rationalism' – a position according to which even 'negative conceivability entails possibility.'[52] He believes that the work of this sort is definitely worth doing, for, jointly with 'weak modal rationalism' (i.e., the claim that '*positive* conceivability entails possibility'[53]), strong modal rationalism would give us the most elegant metaphysics and epistemology of

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[52] Chalmers 2002: 194. Cf. Chalmers 2002: 188-189.

[53] Chalmers 2002: 194. Italics added.

modality.[54] Still, as things stand, I do not regard the argument for the infinite number of ways of being as entirely successful.

Having said that, an argument does not need to be entirely successful to be philosophically instructive. And what is philosophically instructive about the last argument is precisely the connection it makes evident between strong modal rationalism and the thesis there are infinitely many ways of being. Some philosophers might find this thesis absurd. Those philosophers can employ the last argument in a *modus tollens* against strong modal rationalism, increasing the burden that its proponents need to shoulder. But other philosophers, myself included, might find this thesis *merely bizarre*, perhaps even a little amusing. These philosophers will wait with bated breath for the arrival of a champion of strong modal rationalism, ready to tell them where their contribution to the epistemology of modality lands them: in a world with infinitely many ways of being.

Acknowledgments

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[54] Cf. Chalmers 2002: 194-195.

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