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An argument for ontological nihilism

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ABSTRACT

This paper has two main aims. I first argue that ontological nihilism, that is, the view that there are no things is a consistent position. Second, I discuss an argument for the view that nihilism is not just possible but actually true, that is that there actually are no things (This paper is not meant as an addition to the considerable literature on the question of why there is something rather than nothing. Of course, any attempt to answer this question would have to presuppose the conclusion of the first section, that is, that nihilism is a consistent position. But if the argument in the second section goes through the question we would then have to answer is not why there is something rather than nothing, but why there is nothing rather than something). My argument is based on two main premisses, eliminativism ('only the fundamental exists') and non-foundationalism ('it's dependence all the way down') which jointly entail ontological nihilism. I conclude with some reflections on the consequences of the nihilist position for the project of constructing a fundamental metaphysical theory.

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Introduction

1.1. Some terminological matters

Like many philosophical terms, 'nihilism' is a word with many meanings. As the adjective 'ontological' indicates I am here only interested in the kind of nihilism connected with the notion of existence, and not specifically with the kind pertaining to moral values¹ (except insofar as moral values are considered as things that exist).

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¹See, for example, the usage of the term in Rosenberg (2011).

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Ontological nihilism is of course the view that there are no things.² It is an unfortunate fact that in the recent philosophical discussion the term ‘metaphysical nihilism’ (Lowe 2002) has been used to describe a set of exclusively *modal* theses, such as the claim that there might be no things, or that there might be no concrete things.³ This discussion is not a contribution to that debate; I am rather interested in the actualist equivalent of the modal thesis ‘metaphysical nihilism’ asserts, that is, the thesis that there *actually* are no things.⁴ The view of ontological nihilism is that, quite literally, nothing exists at all. It is not a position saying that there are no ‘things’ (understood in a specific way), while there are still things understood in another way.⁵ Ontological nihilism claims that there are no objects, no properties, no events, no space–time, no structures, no facts or states of affairs, no appearances, no anything.⁶

1.2. Aim of this paper

Ontological nihilism thus understood⁷ is likely to produce incredulous stares. How hard these stares are, however, depends to a certain extent on one’s philosophical agenda. In the course of this paper, I shall argue

²(‘Nada. Zip. Zilch.’ (Turner 2016, 323)).

³van Inwagen and Lowe (1996, 96). I do not agree with van Inwagen’s claim that the disjuncts are to all intents and purposes identical since ‘if the only objects were abstract objects, there is an obvious and perfectly good sense in which there would be nothing at all’. A world in which only pure sets existed would still contain an infinity of things. See also Baldwin (1996); Rodriguez-Pereyra (1997); Efrid and Stoneham (2005) and Hansen (2012, 225).

⁴We sometimes find the term ‘ontological nihilism’ applied to attempts of providing semantics for a language without ontological commitments (Turner 2011, 2016, 322–327). For O’Leary-Hawthorne and Cortens (1995, 154–157) ontological nihilism amounts to the claim that a perspicuous description of reality does not employ the concept of an object, but instead avails itself of a feature-placing language (‘in circumstances in which we English speakers would normally say “There is a pebble”, the members of this community would say “It is pebbling”.’ 148). Apart from the fact that it is not clear whether such a feature-placing language does not commit us to the existence of places where it is pebbling (Turner 2011, note 28) and thereby introduces objects by the back door this understanding of nihilism is not one I am presently interested in. Nor do I adopt Turner’s conception of ontological nihilism which is characterized by the rather un-nihilist claim that ‘the rich texture of our experiences is grounded in some external facts about how the world is and isn’t’ (2011, 6). Finally, the version of nihilism discussed here is not identical with the ‘radical nihilism’ (Unger 2006a, 69) discussed by Peter Unger in a variety of papers (2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2006d). For an argument similar to Unger’s see Wheeler 1979). Unger’s sorites-based nihilism is in fact not that radical after all; despite his rejection of everyday entities like tables, chairs, and persons, he does not deny ‘the existence of most molecules, even some “quite large ones”, nor, perhaps even certain crystal structures’ (2006c, 43). His theory is actually better conceived of as a tough-minded eliminativism on a foundationalist basis.

⁵As, for example, ‘Every thing must go’ (Ladyman and Ross 2007) understands ‘things’ as objects, but does not include structural properties.

⁶A brief (though necessary) terminological qualification: in this paper I use the term ‘ontology’ for the theory that describes the things that constitute the rock-bottom of reality (Westerhoff 2005, 12). I use ‘metaphysics’ to mean the study of the most basic features of the world. This may entail that there is no rock-bottom, so there can be a metaphysics without an ontology, though there can’t be an ontology without a metaphysics.

⁷For the sake of brevity I shall drop the adjective ‘actual’ in the following discussion.

that ontological nihilism is a consistent position entailed by a set of independently plausible premisses. Whether this then constitutes an argument for the truth of ontological nihilism is a separate question; one man's *modus ponens* being another man's *modus tollens* it might equally be interpreted as suggesting that at least one of the premisses involved has to be rejected.

2. The consistency of nihilism

There are very few knock-down arguments in philosophy, which make cases where there is one (or at least seems to be one) all the more interesting. Ontological nihilism appears to be a case in point. Here is the argument: If ontological nihilism holds, the thought (or sentence or proposition) 'nothing exists' is true. But in this case, there is this very thought (proposition, sentence), so there is something. So ontological nihilism can't hold.⁸ But knock-down does not have to be knock-out. The nihilist can reply that all this shows is that nihilism, if true, is inexpressible.⁹ For if there is nothing at all, there are also no thoughts, propositions, sentences, statements or any other intentional items that say so. The existence of a thought (or of any other representation) expressing ontological nihilism entails its falsity,¹⁰ but that does not mean that its truth implies its falsity, which is what is required for inconsistency.

But can't we run the argument we have just given with the *fact* that nothing exists?¹¹ Surely if ontological nihilism is true, this fact obtains thereby falsifying nihilism? This is better, but again not decisive. The nihilist can consider 'the fact that' talk to be a mere *flatus vocis* and refuse to take it seriously. In the everyday talk (or rather in philosophers' everyday

⁸This difficulty does not affect the modal thesis of metaphysical nihilism, since the thought or sentence asserting it is not supposed to be part of the empty world.

⁹The claim that nihilism is inexpressible does not, of course, entail that there is some thing such that it is inexpressible. All this claim amounts to is the negative existential statement that there is no possible language L such that any expression in L asserts ontological nihilism.

¹⁰The claim of nihilism would thus be the opposite of the statement 'I exist', which, at least according to Ayer (1956, 50), if made, must be true:

The sentence 'I exist' [...] differs from most other statements in that if it is false it cannot actually be made. Consequently, no one who uses these words intelligently and correctly can use them to make a statement which he knows to be false. If he succeeds in making the statement, it must be true.

¹¹As pointed out by Parfit (1998):

When we imagine how things would have been if nothing had ever existed, what we should imagine away are such things as living beings, stars and atoms. There would still have been various truths, such as the truth that there were no stars or atoms, or that 9 is divisible by 3.

talk) we use the ‘the fact that’ operator in order to turn a sentence into a noun phrase, and, on the assumption that noun phrases denote things, hypostatize a thing into existence which we then call a fact or state of affairs. This is all strictly language-dependent, the nihilist continues, and does not have any repercussions at the ontological level.¹² So if ontological nihilism obtains there is no fact such that ontological nihilism obtains, in the same way as in a world without intentional items there is no thought or sentence ‘there are no intentional items’. At this point in the debate, the nihilist and his opponent would then have to settle the subsidiary point of the ontological status of referents of ‘the fact that’ locutions.¹³ And this issue is sufficiently complex to keep any resolution we arrive at from being a knock-down argument.

It thus appears that attempts to regard ontological nihilism as the metaphysical equivalent of the liar paradox are unsuccessful. The nihilist position is not immediately self-contradictory in a way that makes its truth entail its falsity.

2.1. *The actuality of nihilism*

So much for the consistency of ontological nihilism. What about its truth? I now want to look at an argument aimed at establishing that ontological nihilism *actually* obtains. This might seem peculiar. Assuming that we can assert the truth of nihilism we can be assured that it must be false, for there must now at least be the statement that asserts nihilism. It seems to me that the assumption of nihilism’s assertion entailing its falsity is something we might want to revisit. What the difficulty with this assumption is will become clear in a moment. But let us first look at the argument for the actuality of nihilism.

The argument rests on a combination of eliminativist and non-foundationalist premisses. Eliminativist theories of *x* hold that *xs* do not exist. Eliminativists about mental objects hold that there are no things like pains, beliefs, desires etc (Churchland 1981), eliminativists about macroscopic objects believe that there is nothing like tables, chairs, or galaxies (van Inwagen 1990), eliminativists about mathematical objects believe that there are no such things as numbers (Field 1980). Reasons for denying their existence vary; in the present context we are primarily interested in eliminativists who believe that only the fundamental exists, where ‘fundamental’ is to be

¹²Facts would thus be taken to be of the same ontological standing as *sakes*: useful turns of phrase, but without anything ‘out there’ corresponding to them.

¹³For some proposals of theories of truthmaking without truthmakers such as facts see Hornsby (2005) and Melia (2005). See also Efrid and Stoneham (2009, 219–222).

understood as ‘not depending on anything else’.¹⁴ ‘Dependence’ is here construed as existential dependence.¹⁵ Some entity *a* existentially depends on some entity *b* iff *b*’s failing to exist entails *a*’s failing to exist. Obvious cases of existential dependence are the table’s dependence on its legs (the whole depending on the parts), my dependence on my parents (the effect depending on the cause), or the concept of a contradiction depending on that of a negation (we could not have one without the other).

Eliminativists do not hold that the entities to be eliminated exist *in some sense*, perhaps as useful fictions of merely transactional utility that fall short of the metaphysical gold standard of full or most fundamental existence, but that they are non-existent in the full sense of the word.¹⁶

At this stage, it might be useful to add a brief terminological aside to say something about how I see the relation between eliminativism and reductionism. There is, of course, some disagreement among philosophers about how the difference between the two terms is best to be characterized, but here is a version that expresses at least one common way of drawing the distinction.¹⁷ Eliminativists about *x*s hold that (a) *x*s do not exist and (b) talk about *x*s should be discontinued, reductionists about *x*s hold that (a) *x*s do not exist but that (b) talk about *x*s is useful, because the reductionist believes that even though the *x*s as *ordinarily conceived* do not exist, they do exist *conceived in some other way* (a reductionist about mental states may thus continue to talk about these states, though he considers such talk really to refer to states of the brain). The reason why the eliminativist argues that talk about *x*s should be discontinued is that he does not believe there is any sufficiently unified phenomenon out there to make usage of the term *x* even practically useful.¹⁸ It turns out that when we understand the terms ‘eliminativism’ and ‘reductionism’ in this way, the eliminativist about non-fundamental things actually shares the reductionist’s assumption that even though there are

¹⁴For an example of this conception of fundamentality see Schaffer (2009, 373).

¹⁵Sometimes also referred to as ‘ontological dependence’, see, for example, Simons (1987), chapter 8; and Cameron (2008, 3). I do not share Cameron’s intuition that existential dependence is necessarily asymmetric.

¹⁶One might think that these kinds of eliminativists have a problem insofar as they postulate a relation between a dependent level (e.g. an instance of pain) and the base level (the brain), and then say that one of the relata does not exist. This difficulty is simply a result of loose talk on the side of the eliminativist. Strictly speaking they do not want to say that the base level stands in relation to something nonexistent, but that the base level has properties that give rise to the mistaken impression that it stands in a relation to something. See chapter 11 of van Inwagen (1990) on replacing talk about tables by talk about the ‘tablewise’ arrangements of simples.

¹⁷See e.g. the distinction drawn by Lycan and Pappas (1972, 152).

¹⁸A good example of a term we should be eliminativist about is the so-called phantom of Heilbronn. This ‘criminal’ turned out to be an artefact of investigative methods, there was no single person committing all the crimes associated with the phantom. For this reason continued use of this term does not help us when investigating who actually committed the crimes.

no fundamental things, talk about them is still useful in a variety of philosophical contexts. He shares it, however, for a different reason, not because he believes as the reductionist does, that even though the fundamental things *as ordinarily conceived* do not exist, they do exist *conceived in some other way*,¹⁹ but simply because he holds that there are some contexts where reference to non-existent things²⁰ is not only permissible, but theoretically useful. This leaves me with the problem that the eliminativism about non-fundamental things I refer to differs both from eliminativism as commonly understood (since we are still allowed to talk about non-fundamental things) and from reductionism (since the non-fundamental things do not exist in some other way). Rather than introducing a neologism, I have opted for sticking with the term 'eliminativism' (understood in the light of the qualification just given) as the option least likely to give rise to misunderstanding.

To return to the main point of our discussion: if we now combine the eliminativist view that only the fundamental exists with the non-foundationalist assumption that there is nothing fundamental (perhaps because it is dependence all the way down, or because levels are arranged in a circular structure) we reach the conclusion that nothing exists.²¹

Many readers might understand the claim 'that there is nothing fundamental' against the background of the presently burgeoning literature on fundamentality and grounding.²² Even though the present discussion

¹⁹The nihilist, like the eliminativist, runs the risk of being understood as saying something he does not say. van Inwagen (1990, 99) puts it well:

Many philosophers, in conversation and correspondence, have insisted, despite repeated protests on my part, on describing my position in words like these: 'Van Inwagen says that tables are not real'; '... not true objects'; '... not actually things'; '... not substances'; '... not unified wholes'; '... nothing more than collections of particles'. These are words that darken counsel. They are, in fact, perfectly meaningless. My position vis-à-vis tables and other inanimate objects is simply that there are none.

In the same way the nihilist does not say that things are not real, not substantial, that they are mere superimpositions, and so forth, but that there are no things.

²⁰The eliminativist's underlying philosophy of language obviously has to allow for reference without existence assumptions. For some discussion of the formal mechanics see Schöck (1968).

²¹Morganti (2015) argues that nihilism need not follow even given the joint presence of non-foundationalism and eliminativism if existence is allowed to emerge from an infinitely descending chain of dependence relations. Morganti sees this as the ontological equivalent of the emergence of epistemic justification from chains of reasons that stretch infinitely backwards as discussed by Peijnenburg and Atkinson (2013). He argues (566) that 'any particular composite represents no addition to the being of its constituent parts', that is, that any particular object disappears through the combination of eliminativism (as the whole adds no ontological commitment to what we already have, given the parts) and non-foundationalism (or, in his terminology, metaphysical infinitism), but this does not mean that everything disappears, since 'reality as a whole' or 'Being' somehow emerges from all the particular objects that have disappeared, as 'the emergent sum of an infinite number of dependent entities'. Whether it is possible to transfer Peijnenburg's and Atkinson's epistemological result to the ontological case is, however, unclear. See Lubrano (2018) for some criticism of Morganti's approach.

²²For an introductory survey see Raven (2015).

does not rely on this literature, it might still be useful to briefly characterize the non-foundationalist assumption from this perspective. Assuming a grounding relation between two objects (the precise ontological status of these objects need not concern us here) the non-foundationalist claims that by tracing back the grounding chain from a given grounded entity to its ground, and then to the ground of this ground, and so forth, we will never, after a finite or indeed an infinite number of steps, arrive at an entity that is itself ungrounded.²³ That non-foundationalism about grounding is false, and that the grounding relation is well-founded is an assumption that has dominated a large part of the literature on fundamentality and grounding, a fact that is somewhat surprising given the absence of any strong argument for the well-foundedness of grounding.²⁴ Recently several authors have pointed out that well-foundedness of grounding should not simply be assumed, especially given the existence of *prima facie* plausible examples of symmetric grounding structures (Thompson 2016; Barnes 2018).

2.1. Why should we believe the premisses?

Like most philosophical theories, neither eliminativism nor non-foundationalism is uncontroversial; in fact, neither of them can even be regarded as widely accepted. But they are also not views that in any clear sense face greater difficulties than rival positions. This paper, which is concerned specifically with implications of eliminativist and non-foundationalism put together is not the place for giving a detailed defence of either position. I just want to indicate briefly the kinds of reasons philosophers usually refer to when arguing for eliminativist or non-foundationalist conclusions.

2.1.1. Eliminativism

2.1.1.1. Parsimony. One reason for eliminativism is based on considerations of parsimony. The idea is that a theory postulating only the base level entities, but not the dependent entities is more parsimonious and therefore to be preferred. It avoids ontological double counting. Given

²³In fact defining what it is for a grounding structure to be non-well-founded is more complicated than might be thought initially. There is at least one example of a well-founded structure with a foundation that is neither reachable in a finite number of steps, nor a lower bound of a descending chain of grounds (see Rabin and Rabern 2016, 364–367, as well as Dixon 2016). For the sake of the present discussion, however, we can ignore this complication.

²⁴See Wilson (2014, 570). Bliss (2015, 414) makes the interesting point that this is something of a peculiarity of this metaphysical discussion. A structurally similar foundationalist claim is certainly not assumed in the same uncritical manner in epistemology.

that ontology is not the study of all there is, but only of what there is in the most fundamental sense of existence, it is theoretically redundant to include the objects at the most basic level into our ontology, and *also* the derived entities that come ‘for free’ once the basic entities are established. In the same way, as we do not want to include theorems amongst the axioms of some formal system, the eliminativist does not want to include anything derivable in the sphere of existence.

Obviously, parsimony or simplicity can refer to various different properties of a theory such as the number and types of theoretical entities assumed, the kind of laws postulated, or the explanations that it supports, and equally obviously these factors can be in conflict with one another. A theory that is parsimonious relative to one criterion need not be so relative to another. In the context of this discussion, I am only looking at one of the possible ways of spelling out parsimony: the number of kinds of unobservable entities a theory postulates. A theory is, therefore, simpler than another if it assumes the existence of a smaller number of kinds of unobservables.²⁵

But why should we be swayed by appeals to parsimony in the first place? It is often claimed that reference to parsimony is at best a *ceteris paribus* consideration, a potential tie-breaker appealing to a vague aesthetics of simplicity and preference for desert landscapes that lets us choose between two theories that perform equally well, much in the same way in which we may choose between two lawnmowers identical in price, internal structure, and performance, by selecting the one with the simplest silhouette. But if this is all there is to it, appealing to parsimony at a crucial stage of a meta-physical argument, especially in a case where the defence of a highly counterintuitive theory is involved can hardly be considered satisfactory.

What is needed are some considerations that provide a bridge between the parsimony of a theory and its truth. One way in which this gap has been bridged in the past is by appeals to theology. Why do the simpler theories have a greater chance of being true? Because God made the world simple. And why is that? Because God wanted his creatures to be able to understand His creation using their limited intellectual capacities.²⁶ These considerations manage to close the gap but are not

²⁵I remain neutral on whether the number of entities (as opposed to the number of kinds of entities) postulated has consequences for a theory's parsimony as well. For some discussion of this see Nolan (1997); for an attempt to use of considerations of parsimony in defending mereological nihilism see Sider (2013 238–245).

²⁶See Sober (2015), chapter 1 for a discussion of different theological justifications of the principle of parsimony. For attempts to replace God by evolutionary considerations in justifying the principle see Mitchell (1997, 66); Duda, Stork, and Hart (2000, 465).

going to convince non-theists, and might be treated with caution by some theists as well.²⁷

Fortunately, there are other ways of providing such a bridge. Some of these present a probabilistic story, offering a reason why the more parsimonious theory is more likely than the less parsimonious one.²⁸ The possible bridge I want to suggest here is based on a general pessimism regarding hypostatizations.²⁹ Hypostatizations are theoretical constructs that are taken ontologically seriously. Instead of treating them simply as part of a theory used to explain a certain subject-matter, these constructs are taken to correspond to parts of the world. If we are pessimists about hypostatizations, the fewer hypostatizations a theory contains, the better. And as fewer hypostatizations mean fewer unobservable entities postulated by the theory, and as we spelt out parsimony in terms of the number of such entities postulated, the fewer hypostatizations a theory contains, the more parsimonious it is.

But why should we be pessimists about hypostatizations? Hypostatizations are mind-made shadows that we project onto the world in order to make sense of it. While some of these projected shadows might correspond to real fissures in the things out there, we would not want to make it a default assumption that they do. Rather, the default assumption should be that they do not,³⁰ and that hypostatizations are ancillary constructs we need to have recourse to in order to understand the world, because we have the kind of mind we do – unless some other reason convinces us otherwise.

Of course, attempting to develop a theory of the world without hypostatizations would be a fool's errand; we cannot conceptualize without using concepts. For this reason, the principle of parsimony does not say that hypostatizations are a bad thing, but that we need to find the 'sweet spot' that provides the best balance between two forces that pull into different directions: on the one hand, the ability to explain a

²⁷Theists may believe that a maximally complex mind must create a maximally complex world and therefore deny that the fundamental features of reality are accessible to human reason.

²⁸See Sober (2015), chapter 2 for a discussion of some of these attempts.

²⁹An argument in support of parsimony that goes somewhat in the same direction has been proposed by Bob Fischer. Fischer argues that one likely reason for selecting a more complex over a less complex theory, even though both are explanatorily equivalent is that the more complex theory resulted from adjusting a theory held already in the face of contradictory data. The preference for the more complex theory might come out of a desire to save one's pet theory, while the simpler theory might require re-constructing one's theoretical approach from scratch. "Prefer the simple" checks the temptation to resist theoretical upheaval' (Fischer 2017, 69). For a formal argument that the principle of parsimony is always the most efficient way at arriving at the truth, even though the truth may be arbitrarily complex see Kelly (2006, 2007).

³⁰For further discussion of my general pessimism about hypostatizations see Westerhoff (2020, 58–63).

set of data using some theory and, on the other hand, our confidence that the theory in question is, in fact, tracing the joints of nature, rather than the artificial divisions of an anatomy of reality that is the mind's handiwork. As we maximize the hypostatizations, the former goes up,³¹ while the latter goes down; as we minimize them, the latter goes down, while the former goes up. The principle of parsimony urges us to find the best balance between them: a theory that explains as much as possible, while postulating a minimum of unobservables, thus maximizing our confidence that we are, in fact, dealing with a theory of the world, and not with a theory of the world's image in the mind.

For this reason, the mereological nihilist appeals to parsimony to reject the existence of wholes, since (he argues) their postulation does not confer any explanatory advantage. We cannot explain anything more about the world by assuming that there is a whole bicycle over and above its parts arranged bicycle-wise. Wholes are mind-cast shadows that have no cracks in the world corresponding to them. On the other hand, a mathematical Platonist could counter a nominalist attack based on the principle of parsimony by arguing that nominalism is not able to explain all aspects of mathematical practice that Platonism is (such as the Gödelian observation that mathematical truth outruns mathematical proof). As such nominalism does not achieve the best balance between maximizing explanatory power and maximizing our confidence in the theory's ability to track features of the world.

The eliminativist justifies his position by appeal to the principle of parsimony by pointing out that the base level is sufficient for explaining everything that needs explaining. To introduce further higher-level entities that are wholly dependent on the base level does not allow us to predict or explain anything we could not predict or explain before. As such a theory that postulates only the base level is closer to the 'sweet spot' than one that postulates the dependent level as well.

Sober distinguishes two different ways of employing the principle of parsimony, which he calls the 'razor of silence' and the 'razor of denial' (Sober 2015, 12). The former suggests that we simply do not talk about entities ruled out by parsimony, the latter that we actively deny their existence. The understanding of parsimony in terms of skepticism of hypostatizations described here seems to favour the razor of denial. It

³¹I am here ignoring the fact that the more hypostatizations are introduced by a theory, the greater the need to devise explanations for problems caused by theoretical entities only introduced to solve the initial problems the theory was meant to address – as a stronger carriage can carry more weight, but will also need to be able to carry more of its own weight.

is not that we have no view on whether some hypostatization actually corresponds to something in the world or not, but we have strong reasons to suspect that it does not, unless there is evidence to the contrary in terms of its explanatory or predictive power. For this reason, the eliminativist will not simply be agnostic about anything over and above the base level, he will argue that we have good reasons to deny that anything above the base level exists.

2.1.1.2. Causal overdetermination. A second consideration in favour of eliminativism is connected with worries concerning causal overdetermination.³² If a snowball breaks a window, there are various ways of telling the causal story of what happened: one object, the snowball, shattered the window, or a collection of ice-crystals did so, or an assembly of water molecules, or an aggregation of atoms and so on. But are these just different ways of *describing* a causal event, or did these instances of causation all take place simultaneously? If so, the breaking of the window was massively overdetermined, since each individual one of these events would have been sufficient to break the window. Yet anyone sceptical of hypostatizations is likely to suspect that this is an instance of turning entities of explanatory relevance for human minds (namely causal descriptions at different levels of depth) into entities with an objective ontological status (multiple causal sequences ‘out there’). In fact the only level we would need to account for the snowball breaking the window is one telling a causal story about a collection of whatever are the smallest things the snowball is made up of.³³ All the other levels over and above these ‘fundamentrons’ are simply useful fictions. Now we might also believe that to exist is to make some specific causal difference to the world. What it means to say that the (imaginary) hammer in my desk does not exist, while the one in my shed does exist, is that the latter, but not the former, can accomplish the hammer-specific causal task of driving a nail into the wall. This leads us then to the eliminativist position that *only* the level of fundamentrons exist, since it alone is the repository of all the causal powers there are.

2.1.1.3. The non-existence of appearances. A third reason for eliminativism will be discussed in Section 4. Very briefly, the idea is that if we

³²See Merricks (2016, 138): ‘[A]ny reason for believing that any particular wholly causally redundant physical object exists that turns on some causal effect of that object is a bad reason’.

³³It does not affect the argument if we instead believe that a level different from the level of the smallest things (say, the level of the smallest things perceptible by humans) carries all the causal powers.

cannot assign any ontological status to appearances, any appearance/reality scenario will have to be interpreted along eliminativist lines, as only the underlying reality, but not the appearance, can be taken to exist.

2.2. *Non-foundationalism*

Considerations of parsimony are also sometimes brought in to support non-foundationalism (the non-foundationalist only has to postulate one kind of thing instead of two, namely fundamental and non-fundamental items), as are appeals to Goodmanian beliefs in multiple ‘versions’ of the world, with no foundational version on which all other versions depend (Goodman 1978, 1980, 1983). As we have already discussed matters of parsimony, and since an assessment of Goodman’s position would lead us too far away from the main focus of our discussion I want to mention instead three other groups of arguments the non-foundationalist can use in order to support his position.

2.2.1. *Explanatory practice*

The first is based on a conception of non-foundationalism that sees it as mirroring general scientific and explanatory practice. In science, each level of entities appears to be explicable in terms of a more basic one, and each explanation can be required to provide a further explanation of its *explananda*. The reason for this, the non-foundationalist may argue, is that below every level of entities there is a further level of entities the former entities depend on, and it is these entities the further explanation refers to. The why-regress can continue indefinitely because there is a dependence-regress that also continues indefinitely, and the existence of the explanatory regress is a good indication for the existence of this ontological regress.³⁴

Readers familiar with the literature on ontological dependence may be aware of the fact that considerations connected with the notion of explanation are sometimes appealed to in order to argue for the existence of a fundamental level (see e.g. Cameron 2008). Consider two worlds, such that there is an appearance of A in one world, and an appearance of not-A in the other. Why is there a difference? If there is no underlying fundamental level

³⁴See Sider (2013, 271–274) for some interesting discussion of the connection between explanatory practice in science and non-fundamentalist metaphysics. Sider is not convinced that we can argue from the former to the latter, though his argument relies crucially on the assumption (not backed up by argument, as far as I can see) that ‘it cannot be that for each feature there is a more fundamental feature’ (274).

consisting in something the appearances are appearances *of*, there is nothing the non-foundationalist can say to account for the difference. Of course, he can appeal to whatever acts as the basis of each individual appearance to account for it, but he can never give a metaphysically unified explanation. And it seems that only an appeal to an ontological foundation could deliver the explanation of why there is a difference between the two worlds.³⁵

Let us assume the link between metaphysically unified explanations and the existence of a fundamental level at least for the sake of argument. Still, the non-foundationalist will point out, we do not want to make the claim that there has to be some underlying metaphysical story explaining the level below the appearances to be constitutive of the metaphysical enterprise. If we do so, and regard the existence of some metaphysical story as a kind of framework assumption, as a baseline presupposition of doing metaphysics at all, it will be as secure as it could be, but it will also be no more significant than the claim that we play chess on an 8×8 board. It ends up being a statement purely about us and our games, not about the world beyond.

So the best we can hope for is to construe the existence of a metaphysically unified explanation, and the existence of a fundamental level that answers to it as an ideal our theories may strive for: it might be nice if there were such things, but so far nobody has determined what they are, and so it is unclear whether there could be any. The fact that earlier set theorists strove for a proof or refutation of the continuum hypothesis from the ZFC axioms did not entail that such proof or disproof could ever be achieved, and we now know that it could not.

In the present case, we face a situation where the ontological implications drawn from appeals to explanatory practice (the *why-regress*) contradict those drawn from appeals to explanatory ideals (a metaphysically unified explanation), ideals that may, for all we know, be unachievable. As our beliefs about explanatory practice are not subject to doubts of similar strength I submit that in this case explanatory practice should be given greater weight than explanatory ideals.

³⁵Cameron (2008, 12):

If you believe in metaphysical explanation, you should believe it bottoms out somewhere. [...] it is better to give the same explanation of each phenomenon than to give separate explanations of each phenomenon. [...] if there is an infinitely descending chain of ontological dependence, then while everything that needs a metaphysical explanation (a grounding for its existence) has one, there is no explanation of everything that needs explaining. [...] [A common metaphysical explanation for every dependent entity can be given] only if every dependent entity has its ultimate ontological basis in some collection of independent entities.

2.2.2. *Intrinsicality*

A second set of arguments concerns the existence of intrinsic properties. Some object has a property intrinsically if it does not 'borrow' the property from anything else, that is, if having that property does not depend on other objects existing or being in a certain way. It is a property an object could have if only it, but nothing else was around. A clear case of something that is not an intrinsic property is 'being an uncle' – nothing could have that property unless some other people in one's family stand in specific relations. A plausible example of an intrinsic property is having a specific rest mass – there do not need to be any other objects around for anything having the rest mass that it has.

It is reasonable to assume that a fundamental object has at least one of its properties intrinsically, for if it did not, the fact that this object was how it is in itself would depend wholly on other objects – and it is precisely this dependence that the notion of fundamentality rules out. Independent of what is happening to the object itself, other objects could change such that it loses all of its properties, leaving nothing but a bare particular behind, and the ability of bare particulars to play the role of fundamental objects is at least questionable.³⁶

If it turned out that there were no intrinsic properties this would be highly problematic for the idea of a fundamental level of objects, so one route to non-foundationalism goes via the denial of intrinsic properties. The critic of intrinsic properties may either focus on the examination of specific cases that have been proposed as examples of intrinsic properties (this approach is invariably piecemeal),³⁷ or they may try to come up with a more general criticism of the notion of intrinsicality. One way of developing the latter would be to argue that properties are to be identified by their nomic roles (e.g. that being an electron is just the role electrons play in the various laws that involve them) and that for this reason, we could not even coherently formulate what an intrinsic property, a property that is not by its very nature linked to various other properties might be (see Borghini 2007, 160).

2.2.3. *Structuralism and contextualism*

A third set of arguments for non-foundationalism is based on structuralist and contextualist considerations. Those convinced of arguments for

³⁶Apart from unclear identity conditions and the threat of a regress (what about the property 'being a bare particular?') bare particulars appear to be so clearly the product of the mind's handiwork that postulating them as the mind-independent rock-bottom of all existence is somewhat disingenuous.

³⁷For two arguments that rest mass cannot be an intrinsic property see Blackburn (1990) and Black (2000).

structuralism might find that some of these also support being structuralists about structuralism itself.³⁸ They may no longer be content with being structuralists only about individuals (which are to be replaced by structures), but also want to apply structuralist considerations to the structures themselves. Putting matters very simply, if you believe that everything depends on some other thing you might then be wary to accept that *this fact* depends on nothing whatsoever. Once this is denied, however, foundationalism can no longer be maintained, for every statement about the world will depend on some other statements, and there can be no base level that exists in an independent manner.

Non-foundationalism is also occasionally motivated by considerations derived from semantic contextualism.³⁹ If, as the contextualist believes, each assertion can only have a truth value against a background of other assertions that are held fixed, no assertion can be truly independent of all other assertions, and as such there can be no description of an ultimate level of existence phrased precisely in terms of such assertions.

There are thus substantial considerations one can appeal to in order to motivate the eliminativist and non-foundationalist positions, moreover, these motivations are not (or at least not obviously) in tension with one another. Also, note that my argument is not that because eliminativism and non-foundationalism are coherent positions in certain areas of philosophical discourse they should therefore be conjoined in our metaphysics. Even if eliminativism is a viable option, say, in the philosophy of mind, this does not entail that we should adopt it as a metaphysical position. Rather, the argument is as follows: the considerations just mentioned provide some reasons why a *metaphysician* might adopt eliminativism or non-foundationalism. If one is taken in by both sets of reasons, one should adopt both. If one does so, nihilism will follow. Moreover, the resulting nihilist conclusion is not a paradox: we are not forced to give up either eliminativism or non-foundationalism to avoid contradiction or absurdity. At the end of the paper, I also argue that despite its unintuitive nature the nihilist position has some features that make it a philosophically attractive position.

2.3. *The compatibility of appearance with non-existence*

Yet the fact remains that a position claiming that, despite perceptual evidence to the contrary, nothing exists hardly seems to be a view we want

³⁸For a formal model of what such higher-order structuralism looks like see Priest (2009, 2014 175–193).

³⁹For an overview of different kinds of semantic contextualism see Recanati 2005, for its connection with non-foundationalism see Westerhoff (2020, 267–277).

to take on board. Nevertheless, this view is implied when the two theories are combined.⁴⁰ How might one resolve this difficulty?

The defender of nihilism might reply that the view that nothing exists is not obviously absurd. For example, we grant the eliminativist about the mental that it can be the case that

There appear to be beliefs (or other kinds of mental phenomena)

and at the same time it can be the case that

No beliefs (or other kinds of mental phenomena) exist.

So the appearance of something is not incompatible with the something's non-existence.⁴¹ Therefore, the nihilist will argue, just because a variety of things appear in the world, this does not mean that a variety of things (or indeed any things) exist in the world.⁴² If the eliminativist is correct in arguing that despite its appearance some *x* can fail to exist in any sense, the nihilist can argue that despite their appearance the objects in the world can fail to exist in any sense.⁴³ But perhaps this is

⁴⁰We might think that once eliminativism has entered the picture, we can no longer characterize non-foundationalism in terms of ontological dependence, since ontological dependence is always considered to be a relation between two existent relata. Yet eliminativism does not allow you to regard the ontologically dependent level as existent, so there could be no dependence relation between the dependent and what it depends on. However, as we have noted above the eliminativist can still talk in terms of ontological dependence, as long as he does not take such talk literally. That the dependent level depends on the base level is just shorthand for 'we have the wrong belief that there is some entity such that it depends on the base level, though in fact there is not'. As a consequence, dependence talk is strictly speaking false, though we sometimes find it useful to engage in it. So even if eliminativism pulls the rug from under non-foundationalism (since the upper part of the dependence chain, and hence the dependence relation cannot exist), and non-foundationalism pulls the rug from under eliminativism (since the basis on which the elimination proceeds is no longer fundamental) we can still bring the two positions together since talk about the upper part of the grounding chain, or about the independent basis, is still possible, even though such talk is strictly without a reference, and can only be justified in pragmatic terms.

⁴¹Ontological nihilism can be conceived of as a peculiar form of fictionalism if we interpret 'it appears that *p*' in terms of 'according to the fiction, *p*'. It differs from other forms of fictionalism usually discussed in not assuming that 'talking about stories, theories, and other representations as he does, the fictionalist takes on a commitment to these entities' (Rosen 1990, 338). As there is no commitment to appearances for the ontological nihilist, there is no commitment to fictions for this kind of fictionalist, since every fiction only exists as part of another fiction. Boghossian and Fear of Knowledge (2006, 56) argues that this absurdly entails that there are 'infinitary propositions that we could neither express nor understand'. Somewhat strangely he seems to presuppose that he has expressed an intelligible example of such a proposition on the very same page.

⁴²Pace Bradley:

We shall have hereafter to enquire into the nature of appearance, but for the present we may keep a fast hold on this, the appearances exist. This is absolutely certain, and to deny it is nonsense. And what exists must belong to reality. [...] What appears, for that sole reason, most indubitably *is*, and there is no possibility of conjuring its being away from it. (1916, 131–132).

⁴³Arguing that nihilism is logically consistent with experience is not intended to show the truth of nihilism, but merely that it is not absurdly in contradiction with the manifest image of the world (as it is commonly assumed to be). Of course showing that a position is not absurd does not amount to demonstrating its truth.

moving a bit too fast. All the eliminativist claims is that there isn't any *x*, but that there is *rather* a *y*, some other, more fundamental kind of thing. But the nihilist does not conform to this pattern. His elimination is no elimination *in favour* of something else, but the denial of any existential pronouncement.

Yet locating the problem in the denial of any existential pronouncement cannot identify the source of the difficulty, since this is just the assertion of nihilism. In other respects, the argumentation of the eliminativist and the nihilist work exactly in parallel. Let us consider once more the case of the eliminativist concerning mental states. He argues that there are no mental states such as beliefs, desires etc. Faced with the objection that it still *appears* to us as if there are beliefs, desires and so forth he will respond that the appearance of desire is no more a desire than a fake Rembrandt is a Rembrandt. Now consider the nihilist, who claims that no things whatsoever exist. Faced with the objection that it still *appears* to us as if there are shoes and ships and sealing-wax he will respond that the appearance of a thing is not itself a thing.⁴⁴ We are tempted to apply high-level ontological categories such as thing, object, entity, individual, existent and so forth in a very promiscuous manner so that nothing with any positive existential status can avoid being subsumed under them. But, the nihilist argues, it is questionable whether we should take such linguistically generated 'things', where more or less any referent of a piece of language can be included amongst them, ontologically seriously. For if their mode of existence is basically that of a linguistic hypostatization, why should we accord them membership in a fundamental ontological category?

At this point the opponent⁴⁵ will object that even if we grant that the appearance of an object is not an object, and that we are merely mistaking language for ontology, the nihilist's position is still not viable. For consider the nihilist developing his theory, saying that belief in appearances does not justify belief in things and so forth. Surely having introduced these sentences or at the very least these thoughts which express these sentences we are now dealing with some existent things which refute the nihilist's thesis that nothing actually exists?

⁴⁴What about the *set* of all appearances? If the appearances do not exist, this is just going to be the empty set. If this is only an appearance itself we are clearly not talking about the set of *all* appearances, since the empty set does not contain itself. If it does contain itself, on the other hand, we are no longer operating in the framework of standard set theory.

⁴⁵Unfortunately there is no established label for the philosopher who thinks that something exists. Koons and Pickavance (2017, 229) suggest 'aliquidist', I prefer the somewhat simpler 'reist'.

2.4. Moving up through the levels

The nihilist can escape this charge by moving one level up. 'Of course', he will reply,

I think these thoughts, utter these sentences, and make these logical inferences in order to establish the thesis of nihilism. However, why should we assume that these thoughts, words, and inferences are anything more than mere appearances themselves? We have argued earlier that the appearance of a tomato is perfectly compatible with the non-existence of tomatoes *tout court*. So why do you now think that the appearance of me making a statement is incompatible with the thesis (implied by nihilism) that there are no statements?

Of course, this chase through increasing levels can continue indefinitely, with the nihilistic hedgehog being always one step ahead of the ontophile hare, since whenever the hare declares some item appearing to both of them as a refutation of the hedgehog's universal denial of everything, the hedgehog just declares this as yet another appearance which, like all the other appearances previously encountered does not imply the existence of anything ontologically weighty.⁴⁶

We might object at this stage that there is something fishy about always 'moving up one level' as the nihilist suggests. The opponent could raise the following worry:⁴⁷

Every time you go up a level there is a contradiction at that level. I say there is a contradiction in your position, since you say 'there is nothing', and there must at least be the appearance of that statement. Then you reply that the appearance is not a real appearance but merely an apparent appearance. But having gone to the level of apparent appearances, we immediately have the same problem: that there is the apparent appearance. So it does not look as if any problem has actually been solved. If you fix a problem by going to the next level, and at that level you still have a problem (else, why would there be a need to go a third level after that?) you have not fixed anything. All the problems of one level are simply going to be inherited by the next level up. What the defense of consistency should show is that you go up a level and then there is *no* contradiction.

I do not deny that this objection has a considerable intuitive force and is successfully employed in some philosophical arguments, such as McTaggart's argument for the unreality of time.⁴⁸ Yet if we are

⁴⁶One might consider appearances to be identical with the 'features' feature placing languages talk about, so that 'it is pebbling' means that an appearance of a pebble occurs. This can only be done, however, if the 'features' are not considered to be part of a familiar referential semantic theory where instead of a domain of objects we are now talking about a domain of features.

⁴⁷I thank Martin Pickup for raising this point.

⁴⁸We cannot resolve the incompatibility of two temporal properties (such as that my 30th birthday is both present and past) by 'moving up one level' and embedding the temporal predicates in other

sympathetic to this objection, we should also be sympathetic to the following defence of the existence of a first cause:

I say there is a contradiction in your position, since you say 'there is no first cause', and there must be a cause of what presently exists. Then you reply that you can present me with a cause of what presently exists, but having moved to this, we immediately have the same problem: you have not stated the cause of that cause. So it does not look as if any problem has actually been solved. If you fix a problem by stipulating the cause of the cause of the presently existent you still have a problem (else, why would you keep going back in the causal chain?) All the problems at one stage are simply going to be inherited by the preceding stage.⁴⁹

Those who are convinced by this reply and accept the existence of a first cause are unlikely to be convinced by an argument for ontological nihilism in the first place. But for the others, who, like me, do not believe that this defence of the existence of a first cause is a strong one, and who hold that the defender of the infinite regression of causes is, in fact, giving a satisfactory reply by providing a cause at each specific step, need to specify why the same kind of reply is deemed deficient in the causal case, and not when directed against the argument for ontological nihilism. My response is, unsurprisingly, that there is no difference: both responses are equally unsatisfactory, and for this reason, the worry about the nihilist continuously 'moving up one level' is unfounded.

For the eliminativist about the mental, talk about entities to be eliminated is strictly non-referring. It is not that there are some kind of ersatz entities, such as the *idea* or *concept* of a belief, the *superimposition* of a belief on a neurophysiological basis, the *mere appearance* of a belief and so on, which provide a reference for talk about beliefs. There are no such things, and as such talk about beliefs and so on is strictly meaningless. It seems that as long as we grant this interpretation to the eliminativist we have difficulties withholding it from the ontological nihilist who wants to deny that talk about 'objects', or even talk about 'appearances of objects' immediately generates (via its associated semantics) some collection of objects, not necessarily the objects we believed we were referring to, but a kind of object nevertheless, the existence of which is sufficient for refuting the nihilist's basic claim. If the eliminativist can

temporal predicates ('it was present and is now past') since the same problem simply recurs with these new predicates.

⁴⁹The same argument can be used to argue for an ultimate, unexplained explanation.

engage in entirely world-free talk *within a restricted domain*,⁵⁰ and make sense of others engaging in such talk regarding the entities he considers as eliminable it is not clear why the nihilist should not engage in the same, but using an expanded domain encompassing everything.

Using this idea the nihilist can defend himself against the Moorean criticism that a claim being common sense counts in favour of its being true, and it being unintuitive counts against it, so that if the pronouncements of common sense and of philosophical arguments diverge, we have a better reason to follow the former.⁵¹ Yet if we can distinguish between a notion of truth used in metaphysical contexts, and a different one used in the ordinary contexts of everyday life, we can make all the commonsensical statements about the existence of objects we like, without this affecting in any way the metaphysical position of ontological nihilism.

Another criticism of nihilism that may arise at this point concerns the self-refutation supposedly resulting from both the actual utterances or thoughts the nihilist employs (by considering them to be mere appearances) and from the referents of these utterances or thoughts (by considering them to be strictly non-referential).⁵² Nevertheless, even with regard to pieces of language where there is uniform agreement to read them in an

⁵⁰Such statements would then be literally false but could still be considered as if they were true for purposes of daily interaction. van Inwagen (1990, 103) notes:

If, I say, I accepted this austere philosophy of language, then I [...] should not be willing to say that people who uttered things like 'There are two very valuable chairs in the next room' very often said what was true. I should be willing to say only that they very often said what might be treated as truth for all practical purposes.

See also O'Leary Hawthorne and Cortens (1995, 146):

[S]uppose that we realist metaphysicians were to reach the conclusion that our final ontology of the world has no place in it for raindrops. Would that indicate that someone who (in the usual circumstances) says 'It is raining' thereby says something false? Again, suppose that scientific inquiry were to reveal that molecular theory is radically mistaken, there being no molecules. Would that entail the falsity of such causal reports about the weather? It seems likely that in both cases the answer is 'No'.

Instead, they argue, objects such as raindrops should be admitted 'loosely speaking' (152), expressing truths 'in an unobtrusive way' (156), but without such talk entailing any ontological commitment. Sider (2013, 248–253) draws a distinction between truth and correctness, such that for the mereological nihilist, statements about wholes can be untrue yet correct: 'Correct utterances, even if untrue, play a role in communication and thought that is similar to the role played by true ones' (249). 'There is an apple on the table' and 'There is an orange on the table' are both untrue (since for the mereological nihilist there are neither apples nor oranges), but in a situation where only a specific kind of citrus fruit is displayed on particular pieces of furniture only the latter sentence is correct and acts in a way similar to a true one. French (2017, 173) draws a similar distinction in terms of 'contextually operative standards governing common usage' that make 'there are tables' come out true, and 'much rarer semantic standards that apply to "direct correspondence", where this involves the standard Tarskian account of truth' that make it come out false.

⁵¹See also Sider (2013, 245–246, note 23).

⁵²Note also that the nihilist conclusion does not undermine the validity of the inference leading to it (or that of any other arguments, for that matter). Of course this validity is only apparent, but this is all the validity we could ever get or need, and it is not the same as apparent invalidity.

eliminativist manner (such as ‘the sun climbs over the horizon’) it seems that we are always able to find something corresponding to the appearance (such as the geometric relations between sun, earth, and observer, or the perceptual data we process when it appears to us that the sun climbs over the horizon). So is there not a problem with the nihilist position due to its incompatibility with the existence of such appearances?

It is worth noting in this context that what we find is not actually the appearance, but some existent that gives rise to the appearances, such as a certain astronomical constellation, or a sequence of brain events. In fact, it is not entirely clear what *finding* an appearance would actually amount to, for anything that we could find would not be an appearance, but some existent thing that gives rise to an appearance that might or might not represent it faithfully. In this case, however, the nihilist need not be worried unduly. For now, the point is not that once something appears to be in a certain way we have an existent thing, the appearance to be in this way. It is rather the point that behind a given appearance we may find something else which is the source of this appearance. But this does not bring with it any existential commitments which the nihilist would want to avoid, for there is nothing to rule out an appearance that has another appearance as its source. So as long as the nihilist is happy to postulate appearances all the way down,⁵³ and as long as his opponent has not established an argument that an infinitely descending sequence of appearances is inconsistent there is no reason why our ability to identify *sources* of appearance should be considered to be particularly problematic for the nihilist.

3. A closer look at the underlying principles

3.1. Consistency

In order to investigate the argument for nihilism more closely, it is necessary to examine its underlying assumptions in some more detail. There are two of these; the first, non-foundationalism, is the denial of what I want to call the ‘base principle’, the second is eliminativism. First of all, note that the two principles are consistent. Consider the following arithmetical

⁵³Note that the nihilist’s opponent need not have a problem with ‘appearances all the way down’ in general, as long as this is not a universal feature of reality. In fact it would be perfectly compatible with a rejection of nihilism if some or indeed most downwards-dependence chains involving appearances did not terminate at all, as long as there is at least one case where an appearance is based on a non-appearance, since this would entail the existence of at least one thing.

model. Let R be the property of being the smallest number and take the following two axioms:

E (Eliminativism): No number with a predecessor has property R .

NF (Non-foundationalism): Every number has a predecessor.

The set Z of integers jointly satisfies them, and as there is no smallest number in the set they entail:

N (nihilism): Nothing has the property R .

We might still worry that even though there is an arithmetical model that jointly satisfies our two premisses, the premisses would still come out as inconsistent once the meaning of key terms in the premisses (such as existence and dependence) is taken into account. In order to address this worry, note that the argument presented here is only one of several arguments based on the same form. Consider its formal structure. We can formalize the two premisses in a first-order inclusive or universally free logic⁵⁴ with a primitive existence predicate \mathcal{E} . Rxy stands for ' x depends on y '.

Eliminativism: $(\forall x \forall y)(Rxy \rightarrow \neg \mathcal{E}x)$

Non-foundationalism: $(\forall x \exists y)(Rxy \wedge x \neq y)$

Together these entail:⁵⁵

Nihilism: $\neg(\exists x)(\mathcal{E}x)$

The different, formally identical arguments I have in mind here are distinguished by different interpretations of the relation R . Most straightforwardly, if we take Rxy as ' y is a proper part of x ', $(\forall x \forall y)(Rxy \rightarrow \neg \mathcal{E}x)$ is the thesis of mereological nihilism ('no wholes exist'),⁵⁶ and $(\forall x \exists y)(Rxy \wedge x \neq y)$ postulates that the world is gunky ('everything has parts') (Sider

⁵⁴See Meyer and Lambert (1968) for a simple axiomatization of universally free quantification theory. One might worry that their system includes $(\forall x)(\mathcal{E}x)$ as an axiom — though note that not only does this axiom fail to contradict $\neg(\exists x)(\mathcal{E}x)$, in fact both statements are equally made true by the same (empty) domain. Our intended domain of quantification is the set of appearances which, given the non-existence of appearances, is empty.

⁵⁵Proof:

1. $(\forall x \forall y)(Rxy \rightarrow \neg \mathcal{E}x)$ Premiss
2. $(\forall x \exists y)(Rxy \wedge x \neq y)$ Premiss
3. $(\exists x)(\mathcal{E}x)$ Assumption for *reductio*
4. $\mathcal{E}a$ 3, \exists elimination
5. $(\forall x \forall y)(\mathcal{E}x \rightarrow \neg Rxy)$ 1, contraposition
6. $(\forall y)(\mathcal{E}a \rightarrow \neg Ray)$ 5, \forall elimination
7. $(\forall y)(\neg Ray)$ 4, 6 *modus ponens*
8. $(\exists y)(Ray \wedge a \neq y)$ 2, \forall elimination
9. $Rab \wedge a \neq b$ 8, \exists elimination
10. Rab 9, \wedge elimination
11. $\neg Rab$ 7, \forall elimination
12. $\neg(\exists x)(\mathcal{E}x)$ 3, 10, 11, *reductio*

⁵⁶For a defence of this thesis see Unger (2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2006d) and Sider 2013. van Inwagen (1990, 73) questions whether Unger is really a nihilist or whether he still concedes the existence of composite objects in some form. See also Rosen and Dorr (2002).

1993, 2013, 270–274, Zimmerman 1996 and Schaffer 2003). In conjunction, they entail that there is nothing at all.⁵⁷

A second case is Graham Priest's theory of loci (2009, 2014, 175–193). This is an approach that aims to demonstrate the consistency of a pure relationist picture, that is, an ontology in which there are only relations but no non-relational relata. It proceeds by taking some individuals and some relations on them, closes the relations under complementation (so that whenever some relation *S* connects some individuals, we postulate that there is a different relation, *S'*, such that *S'* relates all the individuals that *S* does not relate) and then, since now everything is related to everything else by some relation, simply replaces the individuals by loci, that is, by the set of relations they bear to other individuals.

If we read *Rxy* as 'y is the locus of x' then Priest's construction satisfies both of our premisses. Priest adopts an eliminativist position towards individuals, so that when y is the locus of individual x, x can be 'thrown out'. Furthermore, for every locus, we can construct a locus of that locus that is not identical with it.⁵⁸

A third example, which bears a certain similarity to Priest's, though it does not require his theory of loci is based on structuralist considerations. The idea is that if we have a complete account of entities in terms of their relations to other entities, we can dispense with any ontological commitment to the entities. This point is sometimes made to explain how

⁵⁷Sider (2013, 270) argues that 'nihilists must obviously reject talk of gunk in fundamental languages, since they think those languages do not contain the term "part"'. The idea seems to be that mereological nihilism and assuming gunk must be mutually exclusive, since the mereological nihilist does not allow part-talk in his fundamental theory, whereas the defender of gunk needs it to express his thesis that everything has parts.

Yet we need not construe mereological nihilism as the claim that the fundamental language does not contain 'part'. The mereological nihilist can accommodate part-talk and express his position as saying that entities with proper parts do not exist. In this case the position of the defender of gunk could be expressed as well ('Each part of an object (including itself) has proper parts'). Both positions can be held together, of course they jointly entail that nothing exists to which mereological vocabulary can be applied. It is not the case that 'nihilists simply cannot admit gunk' (Sider 2013, 270), but rather that mereological nihilists who admit gunk must also be ontological nihilists. (Assuming that part-talk is applicable to all there is. If there are some things such that it does not make sense to speak of their parts (some abstract or mental entities, perhaps) full-blown ontological nihilism would not follow, but only a more restricted version according to which the domain of part-talk is entirely empty).

⁵⁸We should note that Priest explicitly claims that his construction does not lead to nihilism (2014, 191–193). What he means by nihilism is that only the empty set exists, and the structure we get by replacing individuals by loci, replacing these by their loci in turn, and so on, is indeed not the empty set, but infinitely complex. I do not consider a theory only committed to the empty set as nihilistic. (First, because an abstract object is an object too. Second, because we cannot have the empty set without set-formation, and from these two we can build extremely complex structures. It is hardly plausible to describe a world containing all these structures as one in which there is nothing at all.) I would argue that Priest's ever-expanding set-theoretic constructions should be given no more ontological weight than is given to appearances in the present approach.

structuralism saves us from having an ontology of mathematical objects. If all we ever want to say about things like numbers, points, planes and so on can be cashed out in terms of their relations with one another, we do not have to assume that these are self-standing entities in the first place, but can understand them as simple placeholders. If we add to this eliminativist premiss the thought that *all* entities, including relations, can be regarded as objects that stand in relations to other objects and can be exhaustively characterized by such relations, we can dispense with ontological commitment to any entities.⁵⁹

Given the structural identity between our argument and other arguments found in the philosophical literature the charge of inconsistency of its premisses appears to decrease in plausibility. Nevertheless, even if we accept that no formal contradiction can be derived from putting the two premisses together, is there not still a tension between them? In particular, does the latter not disarm the former? Would a non-foundationalist have any motivation to embrace eliminativism? One might argue that the eliminativist casts aspersions at the eliminated objects because they are not fundamental. Because they are not part of the ultimate furniture of the world, he argues, our theory would be better off without them. What makes a theory like eliminativism about mental states plausible is that we can tell a brain-based story about the elimination of beliefs, but once we take this basis away, the theory looks a lot less plausible.

Once we give up foundationalism, what reason remains to doubt the ontological standing of the objects higher up in the chain as opposed to those lower down?⁶⁰ As there is nothing fundamental, metaphysical distinctions in terms of fundamentality can no longer be drawn. As Jonathan Schaffer notes (2003, 507):

In an infinite descent there is nothing ontologically interesting about the divide [...] between any two levels. [...] Without a fundamental level there is no *joint* in the descending hierarchy to put the line between the primary and the derivative.

⁵⁹An example of a form of universal structuralism covering all that exists is Tegmark 2014 (267: 'at the bottom level, reality is a mathematical structure, so its parts have no intrinsic properties at all'). Tegmark does not embrace the nihilistic conclusion suggested here, for him the mathematical level is what is fundamentally real.

⁶⁰The statement $(\forall x \exists y)(Rxy \wedge x \neq y)$ we have just used to express non-foundationalism is equally satisfied by models in which the dependence relation goes all the way down, as well as by those where it goes all the way round, i.e. where the dependence structure forms a loop. In this case it makes no sense to speak of objects 'higher up in the chain'. I just mention this additional complication in order to put it aside, nothing in the following exposition hangs on it.

For the non-foundationalist, it seems, there are just all the levels, and that is the end of the metaphysical story. There is no motivation to embrace eliminativism and therefore no danger of slipping into nihilism.⁶¹

In response to this, we first have to note that the non-foundationalist is also able to differentiate between levels in different ways without having to rely on the notion of fundamentality. First, although there is no bottom level for the non-foundationalist, as long as there is a top level, levels can be distinguished in terms of their distance from the top level. This top level is considered to contain the entities that depend on other ones, but do not have others depending on them. Furthermore, differentiation between levels would still be possible in the absence of a top level, as long as the dependence relation is not symmetric, and thus only ever holds in one direction. Even in a lift in a skyscraper infinite in both directions, we would be able to tell which floors are higher than others if we know whether the lift is going up or down. A version of level-talk could even be rescued in a scenario where the dependence relation is symmetric. If we have dependence-circles such that A depends on B and B depends on C and C depends on A, assuming transitivity, the dependence relation will hold in either direction between any two objects.⁶² But, assuming finitude, we would still be able to measure the distance between two objects in terms of how many steps are between them in the dependence chain, and then define 'A is more fundamental than B' as 'B depends on A in fewer steps than A depends on B'.⁶³ Another possibility is to 'break up' the dependence-circle into a set of dependence-chains (which a different object coming out top in each) and to define fundamentality in terms of this set of chains.⁶⁴

While the question of how to differentiate levels in non-foundationalist scenarios merits further discussion, the important point in the context of our argument is this: the simple absence of a fundamental level does not rule out discriminating against higher levels in favour of lower ones. As long as an ordering of the levels can be established, we can construct

⁶¹I thank Peter Sullivan for bringing this problem to my attention.

⁶²For further discussion of such loops of existential dependence see Nolan (2018).

⁶³Assume a world where this glass of water depends on water molecules (as it does in our world) but where the water molecules turn out to depend, via some complicated chain, on the glass of water again (see Rucker 1982, 33–34; 1981 for a description of similar scenarios). We would take the water to depend on the molecules, rather than the molecules to depend on the water because the former dependence chain is more straightforward.

⁶⁴For some development of this idea see Parsons (n.d.). Nolan (2018) discusses how existential dependence structures that are locally irreflexive, anti-symmetric, and transitive could be embedded in loops of existential dependence. Further philosophical discussion of Borges's aleph can be found in Sanford (1993, 222) and van Inwagen (1993).

an argument for why a given level 'upstream' should be eliminated in favour of one 'downstream'.

Consider the following scenario: I want to retrieve some debt from my friend A. A actually does not have any cash, but writes me a cheque drawn on B's funds. I, therefore, try to retrieve my money from B, who, as it turns out, can only cash the cheque with another one drawn on C's funds and so on. Independent of whether there is any end to this chain⁶⁵ (and therefore any chance for me to recoup my money) it is still the case that I regard A as financially impotent as compared to B, then move on from B to C and so on. In the same way, the non-foundationalist can argue that some level of appearance A can be wholly accounted for by level B. Level A can therefore be discarded⁶⁶ as making no contribution to what there is (it is ontologically impotent), the entire existential contribution is made by B. B might then later be discarded in favour of C, but at no point does this process of successive moves away from the top of the hierarchy presuppose that there is a fundamental level where this process has to stop.

The same consideration can be appealed to in the case of explanations. Suppose a scientist believed that for every explanation of some phenomenon there was a better, deeper one. The fact that there was no ultimate explanation, no explanation in the divine mind, so to speak, would not have to stop the scientist to discard every explanation he can come up with in the search of an alternative, more fundamental one. Just the fact that explanations can be ordered in terms of depth is sufficient to justify the elimination of more shallow in favour of deeper explanations.

Alternatively, consider the case for eliminativism based on considerations of causal overdetermination. It might be argued that this case dissipates once non-foundationalism is introduced. For in this case, what reason would the eliminativist have for eliminating higher-level causal processes in favour of lower ones, as the lower ones can no longer be considered to get closer to the causal processes at the fundamental level, there being no such level? Yet even in the presence of both eliminativism and non-foundationalism, we may still pursue, for every causal explanation provided, the causal story underlying it, even though there is, in this case, no causal story underlying everything. Equally, we may then dispense with the causal explanations at the higher levels (or treat them as mere heuristics, without assuming that

⁶⁵As Schaffer (2016, 95) claims there must be. See also Trogdon (2018).

⁶⁶Note that the issue here is not whether the eliminativist is justified in thus 'discarding' the dependent level but whether eliminativism (assuming it was justified in the foundationalist framework) would be justified in the non-foundationalist framework as well.

they correspond to anything in the world), since causal overdetermination entails that all our explanatory needs are met by theories at the lower level.⁶⁷

It, therefore, becomes apparent that tension between eliminativism and non-foundationalism results from overlooking that the eliminativist does not reject the eliminated objects simply because they are not fundamental.⁶⁸ He rather says that because we can account for everything we want to account for without referring to the eliminated, we should not include them in our list of what there is. The non-foundationalist will similarly realize that talk about some *ps* can be wholly accomplished by just talking about *qs*, and for that reason strive to eliminate the *ps*. That the *qs* can in turn be fully reduced to some *rs* does not affect the fundamental point made. Of course, this does not say that it would be inconsistent for a non-foundationalist to reject eliminativism. The two positions are logically independent and (considerations of nihilism apart) it is perfectly possible for the non-foundationalist to go either way.⁶⁹

3.2. Denying the base principle

The base principle claims that whenever there is some appearance there must be something else that is *not* an appearance on which the

⁶⁷Note also that an argument against an eliminativist position motivated by worries about causal overdetermination is frequently countered by the observation that if there did not turn out to be any fundamental level, nothing would cause anything, and we would end up being unable to say, for example, whether smoking really did or did not cause lung cancer (Block 1990, 168, note 9; 2003, 238–240). Even though no formal contradiction ensues, the causally motivated eliminativist would better not also hold non-foundationalism, if he wants to be able to speak about causation at all. But this is not the case. In eliminativism and non-foundationalism were both true, causal relations would still appear (though there would of course not be any causal relations, as only the fundamental can be causal, and there is nothing fundamental). But once causal relations appear, we can sort them into the genuine and the spurious, very much in the same way in which we currently sort supposed causal relations into those that are actual causal relations, and those that are merely coincidental regularities. And note that in whichever way we currently do so, we do not do it by conceptually drilling down into the rock-bottom of reality in order to find out which supposed causal relations do actually have their source in causal goings-on at the most fundamental layer. So even if causality is wholly confined to appearances, we would still be able to provide a coherent account of why lung cancer is, *inter alia*, caused by smoking, but not by chewing gum.

⁶⁸I do not deny that there are some ways of understanding eliminativism and non-foundationalism that lets them come out as in tension, or even as inconsistent. What I have argued for here is that in the way these views are understood in the present context, on the basis of the motivations suggested for either view, they are neither inconsistent nor in tension.

⁶⁹To put the matter another way: if you are an eliminativist foundationalist (such as Wheeler 1979, 164, 171) advocating to remove some objects such as mental states or pieces of furniture from what there is, would you take back your judgement about these objects if you learned that foundationalism was false and there are no foundational objects (in Wheeler's case: if there were no objective necessities governing the behaviour of micro-particles)? This seems unlikely, given that your reasons for rejecting the mental states or pieces of furniture in the first place were not really dependent on the claim that there are some objects that do not depend on others for their existence.

appearance existentially depends. This is just the claim that all appearances must be well founded and it seems to be readily supported by common sense. The appearance of a red rose in front of me depends either on the existence of a (real, not just apparent) red rose in front of me, or on a hologram, a series of mirrors, a *trompe d'oeil* painting and so forth, all of which are, though not a rose, also not just appearances. The appearance of a thought in my mind depends on my brain, or on its existence in a kind of Berkeleyan divine mind, the appearance of a character in a story depends on ink on paper, or on soundwaves in the air. Yet despite its obviousness, coming up with an argument for the truth of the base principle is not straightforward. There are certainly cases where what underlies one appearance is another appearance.

Many people are aware of the extent to which the colour an object appears to have is dependent on the colours of other objects around it. There is a famous example of a cube made of smaller, multi-coloured cubes (Seckel 2003, 72). A small cube on the top appears to be dark brown, while one on the side appears to be orange. Yet when we take these cubes out of their different-coloured surroundings they turn out to have the very same colour. In this case, the colour switch of the cube is of course only an appearance: it has not been repainted, no fancy lighting has been used, the internal qualities of the cube have not been changed in any way. Now imagine that you are watching the experiment with the cube on television, where the block has been presented not by using real blocks and paint, but by a computer animation. So the 'real fact' behind the colour changing cubes (namely that a cube with the same colour was presented in two different surroundings) turned out to be an appearance too. There was no cube at all, the cube was merely an appearance which was in turn based on a rapidly changing display of coloured dots of light that appeared on your television screen. So in fact we can have an appearance, and then if we dig a little deeper to find out what is behind it we discover yet another appearance. We could now even imagine that we actually dreamt of watching television, pushing the first appearance yet a further level into irreality.

This seems to imply that the opponent of the base principle could just hold that even though the example of the red rose indeed shows that we can always find a basis, it could be the case that this basis is just another appearance, as in the previous example. So what the proponent of the base principle has to show is not only that there is always a basis, but that there always is or always has to be a basis which itself is not an appearance.

How to argue for this is far from obvious, however. A denial of the base principle is not inconsistent with the claim that a basis can be found *in each particular case*, but only with the stronger claim that at some time we have to reach a basis that is not an appearance itself. What the opponent would need is a derivation of an explicit contradiction from the assumption that it is ‘appearances all the way down’. Given the demonstrable consistency of some non-well founded theories involving dependence structures (such as anti-founded set theory) it is at least not obvious where the derivation of this contradiction is supposed to come from.

The denial of the base principle may also be supported by considerations of parsimony.⁷⁰ If it is an advantage for a theory to postulate fewer kinds of entities the denial of the base principle has an advantage over its assertion. For the defender of the base principle will have to admit the existence of at least two kinds of things, the appearances and the non-appearance that constitutes the basis of all appearances, while his non-foundationalist opponent only admits the appearances (as long as he is not also an eliminativist, of course). It is uncontroversial that such appeals to parsimony only hold *ceteris paribus*, and the opponent of ontological nihilism might well argue that in this case, other things are *not* equal. Yet if minimizing our ontological commitments is regarded as an important goal, as long as ‘cognitive suicide’ (O’Leary Hawthorn and Cortens 1995, 158) is avoided ontological nihilism appears to possess important theoretical virtues.

3.3. *Eliminativism*

The second principle to consider concerns eliminativism about appearances. The eliminativist argues that there is no need to postulate a base level *and* an appearance level as well. If we watch a film about a tiger in the cinema there is the light flickering on the screen, which is the basis of the appearances, but there is not also the appearing tiger as a distinctly existent entity. The eliminativist’s opponent, in this case, is unlikely to be a dualist, who holds that there is the appearance of the tiger that could potentially exist without the flickering light, but a reductionist who claims that tiger-talk is still useful, and that it has some sort of reference that is not just the flickering light. Yet there are two points we might want to bring to the reductionist’s attention:

⁷⁰For discussion of ontological nihilism as ‘the intrinsically simplest of all possibilities’ see Carlson and Olson (2001: 205).

First, parts of a sentence being without a referent does not always prevent the sentence from being meaningful. The statement 'the conmen got rich by selling new clothes to the emperor' can fulfill its purpose in a discussion of the cause of the conmen's financial status, even though the phrase 'new clothes' lacks a referent. So the eliminativist could take the position that tiger-talk is *mere talk*, and that it does not commit us to the existence of some kind of 'thing' that is the appearance of the tiger.

Second, if the appearance existed in a way that is distinct from (though not independent of) the tiger, we should expect to be able to find it somewhere. Yet as we just mentioned, the very idea of finding an appearance is peculiar. Whatever we find is no longer going to be an appearance but what underlies the appearance as a basis. The appearance itself, if it is supposed to exist, remains elusive. It does not have a clear spatial location (we do not see the appearance of the tiger on a white screen, but rather in the jungle, or wherever it is portrayed in the film). Its temporal location is not much clearer either. It cannot just exist when the tiger pattern flashes on the screen. Suppose that in the film the moon suddenly disappears behind the clouds and the tiger is enveloped in darkness. The tiger still appears, members of the audience afraid of the tiger will not suddenly breathe a sigh of relief, even though it is now invisible. It cannot be a mere psychological event, since the appearance is presumably experienced by all the movie-goers, yet psychological events are private. It cannot be an abstract object, since fitting these into a causal theory of perception is extremely difficult. So it seems that considering the appearance of the tiger as a distinct entity leaves us with a queer kind of object. Becoming an eliminativist about appearances absolves us of this problem.

4. The non-existence of appearances

We might wonder whether the term 'nihilism' for the position described here is not somewhat inadequate. We would usually think that the nihilist is somebody who takes the ideal of ontological desert landscapes to the extreme: for him, there is nothing whatsoever. But on the account described so far the world does not seem to be empty, but full. It is full of appearances. Is it not misleading to describe such a theory as one claiming that there is nothing?

In order to understand the source of this difficulty, it is useful to consider the following two points.

- (1) When we realize that something is only an appearance we realize that something does not exist. When the bent stick in water, the mirage in the desert and the pink colour in the neon colour illusion (<http://www.michaelbach.de/ot/col-neon/index.html>) are properly understood as mere appearances this understanding entails that there is no bent stick, no water, and nothing pink. These things are non-existent in the fullest sense.⁷¹ This does not contradict the fact that we find other things when investigating such appearances (straight sticks, refracting light waves, black and red lines on white paper).
- (2) The process of dissolving appearances obviously takes place in time. It is something humans do, and is as such temporally stretched out. It is this temporal sequence that allows the nihilist's opponent to respond that he never manages to deliver an empty world. Whenever some object A is shown to be only an appearance, this is done by showing what there really is B. That B must then equally be replaced by C (that it, too, is only an appearance) is immaterial, the opponent claims. What matters is that there is always some thing or other around, and this is sufficient to refute the nihilist.

The nihilist should respond to this by pointing out that the non-founded dependence structure and his eliminativist views do not refer to a process that takes place in time, but rather to an atemporal structure. The opponent's response looks like somebody claiming that there is a smallest number because when counting down there is always some negative number we have just uttered. That this must immediately be replaced by its predecessor is immaterial, the argument goes, as long as there is always some number or other around that we can refer to.

If we accept the nihilist's eliminativist and non-foundational premisses it will not help us to point out that any claim that some object A does not exist can always be countered by pointing out that there is B, its basis of appearance, instead, simply because B, and any other example we can come up with will equally fail to exist. And since this is not conceived of as a gradual process the entire hierarchy of dependence collapses into non-existence at one time (if we are still permitted to use the temporal metaphor). In the same way, as it is a truth about the structure of the integers that none of its members is the smallest, it is a truth about the structure of being (given the nihilist's premisses) that none of its members exists.

⁷¹For a nice example of the puzzlement this position can generate see the dialogue in Dennett (1991, 362–368).

The opponent's claim that there are always some appearances or other no more contradicts the nihilist's claim that there are no things than the fact that we can always make claims about some number or other being the smallest (since that is as far as we got in counting) contradicts the mathematician's claim that there is no smallest integer.⁷²

The remarks about the non-existence of appearance supply us with another reason in support of the eliminativist premiss, a reason that has nothing to do with general worries about parsimony and ontological double counting, or causal overdetermination we mentioned in Section 2.1 above. If it is unclear what 'finding an appearances' could even mean, declining to accord appearances any existential status seems to be the way to go. In the case of the neon colour illusion, we see a pinkish glow, but this appearance has no ontological status. There is nothing pink on the page, in our brains, or anywhere in between. To this extent, we can never find the appearance, though we can find the source of the appearance, a network of red and black lines on a white background. What appears to us as a pinkish glow is wholly non-existent in the most literal sense. There is no pinkishly glowing representational item flying around that we could identify with the appearance. If we accept this it is hard to see how we could be anything but an eliminativist about appearances.

5. Metatheoretical implications

It is useful to include some discussion here of the meta-theoretical implications of ontological nihilism, especially those resulting from the denial of the base principle. As we saw, this claims that there is no *ultimate* basis for any appearance (even though there might well be bases that are themselves appearances). Yet the base principle applies not only to appearances like a tiger in a film, but to representations more generally. If we consider true sentences or other theoretical representations as appearances in this respect, according to the base principle

⁷²A question I do not have the space to discuss here is that regarding the modal status of nihilism. Assuming its truth, is it contingently or necessarily true? Could there have been something rather than nothing? If we counterfactually assume a world with objects in them, this world would look just like this one. So whatever support we have in the present world for the premisses of the argument just given, we would have in that other world. The argument would go through, yet in that other world nihilism would be false. In order to avoid this conclusion we need to assume that nihilism is necessarily true. For those enticed by considerations of parsimony, this might be attractive as the maximally parsimonious position. We need to be aware, of course, that in the nihilist scenario possibilities could not existentially depend on anything actual or real. We would have to adopt a fictionalist way of spelling out modal notions.

their ultimate basis would be whatever non-representational objects in the world there are that make them true.

This kind of basis is what Tim Maudlin (2004, 30–31) refers to in a graph-theoretic analogy:

The truth values of sentences on the boundary are not assigned in virtue of, or as a consequence of, the truth values of any other sentences. [...] The truth values of the boundary points of the graph are determined not by the truth values of other bits of language but by *the world*.

Now denying the base principle means that there are no such boundary points, no place where the representational appearance finds its final basis in some non-representational reality.

The necessity to apply the denial of the base principle to the representation – representatum relation is obvious. For if the ontological nihilist holds that it is appearances all the way down, and that appearances do not exist, a standard correspondence-theoretic reading of the claim ‘ontological nihilism obtains’ (carrying with it the existence of a fact, state of affairs, or somehow alternatively characterized ‘way the world is’) that makes this claim true will immediately render the claim false, since there is now at least one thing in existence, and that is the correspondence-theoretic truthmaker for the statement of ontological nihilism. We can only hold on to this correspondence-theoretic reading if we agree that the truthmaker too is only an appearance.

Ontological nihilism is therefore not compatible with realism about truth, where this is construed as the claim that ‘(ultimate) reality is in a certain way absolutely, and the way it is is largely independent of human conceptual activity’ (O’Leary Hawthorn and Cortens 1995, 161). This is not because any kind of relativist perspectivalism is implied here but because the idea of an ultimate, absolute reality is incompatible with the denial of the base principle. For if there is a way things are ultimately this will constitute precisely the kind of basis which is not itself an appearance, a basis which the denial of the base principle rejects.

The lack of foundation of mental or linguistic representations in any non-appearing reality has important consequences for our assessment of ontological nihilism as a philosophical theory, since it too, *qua* theory, is a representation. Most importantly, it means we can no longer consider such metaphysical statements as statements of how the world is at the most fundamental level,⁷³ and, in particular, we

⁷³As for example Turner (2011, 5) notes in a discussion of ontological nihilism: ‘Metaphysics asks what the fundamental structure of the world is and how this structure accounts for the richness and variety

cannot understand nihilism itself as such a statement. The denial of the base principle essentially claims that the descending chain of appearances based on appearances is unfounded. On pain of inconsistency, ontological nihilism cannot endorse this principle as a premiss *and* regard itself as a theory that describes how the world is at the most basic level. The denial of the base principle also implies that we cannot construe ontological nihilism as a generalization of the paraphrasing strategy that is often employed to explain local eliminativist theories.⁷⁴ We cannot give a faithful representation of what the ontological nihilist is trying to do by proposing to translate ordinary 'guilty' ontological talk that makes all sorts of existence assumptions into philosophically more sophisticated 'innocent' talk bereft of all ontological commitment. For even if this succeeded, and we managed to construct an account of language that did more or less everything we expect from a language, but did not carry any ontological commitments, our account would still be committed to the existence of language at the most fundamental level,⁷⁵ a commitment incompatible with ontological nihilism.

Does this mean that ontological nihilism is therefore self-refuting after all? Does it imply that it is false, if true? Only if we hold on to the presupposition that a metaphysical theory has to tell us what the basis, the view of the world *sub specie aeternitatis*, is; in this case we obviously cannot have a theory that is both metaphysical and tells us that there is no such thing. Yet it does not appear that this picture of metaphysics is self-evident, and it might even be more advantageous to do without it.

6. Seven objections and replies

- (1) In order to even express ontological nihilism, we need the notion (or concept, or predicate, or property) of existence. So there has to be at least this notion (concept, predicate, property), so it is false that nothing exists.

of experience. [...] A complete metaphysical picture will tell us what the world is like [...].’ O’Leary Hawthorne and Cortens (1995, 161) consider their interpretation of ontological nihilism as ‘very much wedded to the claim that reality is in a certain way absolutely’.

⁷⁴For different attempts to construe ontological nihilism in this way see O’Leary Hawthorne and Cortens (1995); Turner (2011, 2016, 322–327).

⁷⁵Rather curiously, Turner, who gives a detailed exposition of various such paraphrasing strategies seems to accept this point: ‘Of course, as a Nihilist, she doesn’t believe there are any of these [bits of language], either. She will ultimately have to tell her story without appeal to them, and I confess to not knowing what she will say.’ (2016, 326). Unger (2006b, 26, note 14, 30.) notes that his sorites-based rejection of ‘ordinary things’ such as tables and chairs also applies to natural language, and that his arguments consequently only qualify as indirect proofs. Unfortunately he does not expand on this point.

We discussed above that the appearance of an object (such as a notion, concept, predicate, or property) need not be considered itself to be an object. Another way of making the same point is by reference to Carnap's distinction between internal and external questions. If we talk about anything at all we need some kind of theory to do so, and all the resources within this theory (such as concepts etc) exist internally, that is, as far as they are part of the theory. However, we cannot say that they exist outside of the theory, since we lack the resources to say anything intelligible about existence outside of the theory at all. Of course, we could introduce a higher-order theory such that the first theory (and possibly others) are part of it, and in this case, all these theories, and all their contents, exist according to the higher-order theory. But in this case, we have not answered any external question, we have simply replaced one internal question by a different, more comprehensive one.

So the claim that 'the appearance of an object is not itself an object' can be spelt out as saying that in using some theory to speak about some objects x we are neither committed to the existence of x in any substantial sense (they are useful fictions, and have no more ontological weight than characters in a novel), nor to the existence of the *theory* of x , since this is not anything the theory itself speaks about. So we can understand the ontological nihilist's claim as saying that there are no existence-claims that are not framework-bound, but only as long as we are clear that this does not license commitment to the framework-independent existence of any framework.

- (2) When a thought appears to me, am I not committed to the existence of both that thought and its thinker?

The nihilist's account of thoughts does not have to differ from his account of tables and chairs. Even though there are no items of furniture there still appear to be some. Similarly, thoughts appear, even though there are no thoughts.

But what about the existence of the thinker? It seems that we cannot make the same move here, since even if the thinker only appears, he would have to appear to someone. So relegating him to the realm of appearance would immediately necessitate another existent object (someone to whom the thinker appears), and so there would always be at least one existent object.

In response, grant that each appearance-object (each appearance) entails an appearance-subject (someone who has the appearance). There is no necessity to assume that the appearance-subject has any

greater existential status, is more fundamental than, or prior to the appearance-object – briefly put, it can be appearances all the way down. If we consider the contemporary discussion in the philosophy of mind we find at least two accounts of the self that deny the fundamentality of the self or appearance-subject. These are the narrative account of the self due to Dan Dennett (1992), and the phenomenal self model theory developed by Thomas Metzinger (2003, 2009).⁷⁶ Both give accounts of the self and the appearances it has without assuming that the self is in any way prior or more fundamental than these appearances. Rather, on both of these accounts the self arises on the basis of these appearances, instead of acting as their foundation.

- (3) The nihilist does not seem to be able to account for the manifest image of the world, as the eliminativist could (in terms of the ineliminable basis) and as the non-foundationalist could (in terms of the next level further down). Nor could the nihilist integrate his account into a naturalist view of the world, as he denies the existence of any of the objects science recognizes.

Note that the nihilist is still able to speak about appearances. He is, therefore, able to say that the chair appearance, say, when analyzed in certain ways, dissolves into an appearance of atoms arranged chair-wise.⁷⁷ This seems very much in accordance with the manifest image. Can we take the atoms ontologically seriously? No, because they will in turn be shown to be an appearance based on something else, and appearances do not exist. But as the Berkeleyan idealist can mirror what the materialist is saying, so the nihilist can mirror most of what the physicalist reist says, namely everything that does not postulate the irreducible existence of certain objects.⁷⁸ Much of science is concerned with explaining how stuff works, or with finding out which things can be reduced to other things, but not necessarily with determining what stands at the end of the explanatory chain. To give illuminating

⁷⁶See also Hofstadter (2007, xii) on the self as a ‘strange loop’ and Nozick (1997, 313).

⁷⁷See French (2017, 171): ‘Likewise, one could insist that ordinary objects do not exist, that all our statements about them are strictly false, but that nevertheless beliefs about such objects serve a pragmatic purpose and the relevant statements can be regarded as “true-within-the-narrative-we-construct-for-our-everyday-lives”.

⁷⁸The nihilist would have no problem accounting for the appearance of some entities (K2, say), as opposed to the non-appearance of others (the Golden Mountain). Whatever story about the existence and non-existence of entities his reist opponent might provide to explain the existence of K2 as opposed to the non-existence of the Golden Mountain could be mirrored by the nihilist in terms of a story about appearances and absences of appearances.

answers to how life can arise out of inanimate matter, how minds can be produced from brains, or classical systems from quantum systems no reference to the ultimate constituents of reality is necessary. The area where the question of the foundational reality of certain entities arises most clearly is in specific parts of physics, and even in physics, the question of whether there *is* in fact a fundamental level of reality is an open question (see Schaffer 2003, 504–506). The limitation that the nihilist could not endorse the postulation of certain objects as ultimately real, though he would still be able to take on board the explanatory relations science puts forward does not seem to be too severe. Certainly, an adoption of nihilism does not entail that we could no longer pursue most of the science as we know it.

- (4) If the nihilist can speak about appearances where the reist speaks about existence we should be able to translate reistic ‘existence’ talk into nihilistic ‘appearance’ talk in a systematic manner. When the reist says something like ‘there exists at least one mountain higher than K2’ the nihilist will say something like ‘at least one mountain higher than K2 appears’. Yet if we can systematically translate any ‘exists’-sentence the reist takes to be true (or false) into an ‘appears’-sentence the nihilist takes to be true (or false), nihilism turns out to be a mere notational variant of reism.⁷⁹ If usage fixes meaning, and if the reist uses ‘exists’ just as the nihilist uses ‘appears’, the nihilist’s talk means just the same as the reist’s.

Simply switching ‘appears’ for ‘exists’ does not preserve truth. The nihilist holds, for example, that ‘the mountain higher than K2 appears, yet does not exist’, and the reist obviously does not accept that ‘the mountain higher than K2 exists, yet does not exist’. However, we could refine this criticism somewhat by considering a reist who is also a non-foundationalist (i.e. someone who accepts non-foundationalism but rejects eliminativism). We might then try to turn any of the nihilist’s assertions into assertions of the non-foundationalist reist by means of the following translation manual: wherever the nihilist has ‘appears’ we will replace this by ‘exists’ (which for the sake of clarity we will write as ‘exists_{NF}’), and wherever the nihilist has ‘exists’ (which we write as exists_N) we will replace this by ‘is well-grounded’. Everything else remains the same. This seems to work in many instances: ‘the mountain higher than K2 appears, yet does

⁷⁹See Turner (2011), section 4.1 for more discussion of this point.

not exist_N', becomes 'the mountain higher than K2 exists_{NF}, yet is not well-grounded', 'appearances appear but don't exist_N' becomes '(instances of) existence_{NF} exist_{NF}, but are not well-grounded', 'nothing exists_N' becomes 'nothing is well grounded', and so on.

There are cases where this translation-by-replacement breaks down, however. For the nihilist, 'if x exists_N, then x is not well-grounded' is always true (having a false antecedent), though its non-foundationalist reist translation 'if x is well grounded, then x is not well-grounded' is a contradiction. This shows that nihilism is not a mere notational variant of non-foundationalist reism. The question of whether everything the nihilist accepts can be by mere translational changes be transformed into something some other reist theory accepts (and vice versa) remains an open question.

- (5) Consider an arbitrary argument for realism about x -type entities (electrons, ethical properties, numbers etc.) doesn't the ontological nihilist have to show that all of these arguments fail?

Basically, yes. This, however, is hardly a unique property of ontological nihilism. The soundness of an argument for a philosophical theory T entails that all theories conflicting with T are false, and that the arguments put forward to establish them go wrong somewhere. The argument for T will not automatically show where the difficulties with the conflicting theories lie, though to understand T better it will often be helpful to point this out in detail. To do so for ontological nihilism is obviously not a task I have undertaken here, and is in any case not something that one could hope to carry off in a single paper, or even a single book. However, some indication of the general strategy the ontological nihilist is likely to pursue to criticize realist arguments might be helpful here. This strategy will focus on the foundationalist assumptions the realist argument is going to make. For realist arguments about x that also entail that the x s can be reduced to some other entities are obviously unproblematic for the ontological nihilist. If we argued for the reality of numbers, and also believed that numbers really boil down to nothing more than sets, the numbers could then be treated as mere appearances. It is the realism about some entity *in conjunction with the claim that these entities are ontologically fundamental* that is going to cause the problem. And it is this second conjunct that the ontological nihilist will try to undermine. In the case of sets, this might take the form of arguing for some kind of formalist or conceptualist understanding

of sets, according to which sets are in turn manifestations of a particular kind of game with squiggles on paper, or creations from human concepts, rather than platonic entities. This strategy is hardly surprising. If we want to have a comprehensive defence of the non-foundationalist premiss of the ontological nihilist's argument we need to have something to say in response to various proposals that specific entities (be they structures, or phenomenological qualities, or moral properties) do *not* form part of an infinitely descending ladder of appearances, but indicate the place where such a ladder stops.

- (6) The nihilist position seems to be self-immunizing. If we come up with a counterargument (such as 'I see a cup, so there are cup-appearances, so there is something') or with a charge of inconsistency ('Don't you have to accept the existence of the nihilist position?') he can simply deny that there are any such things as counterarguments or contradictions. So nihilism does not seem to be a position that can play a role in an argumentative exchange (including the possibility of being shown to be false), and we can simply disregard it as a serious philosophical option.

It is true that if nihilism is defended in this way it cannot really be involved a philosophical discussion.⁸⁰ (Some nihilists may think this is a good thing. I disagree.) But nihilism does not have to be defended in this way, and there is, as I have been trying to argue here, a way of defending it that takes appearances seriously. Taking them seriously does of course not entail accepting their existence, but it means, first, that our theory sets out to account for objects appearing to people, and, second, that it accepts that logical problems at the level of appearance (such as contradictions) need to be avoided. As for the first, the nihilist has to stress that the appearing of objects needs to entail neither the existence of the object, nor that of the appearance of the object. In the case of the neon colour illusion the circle appearing pink does not involve the existence of anything pink (neither 'out there' nor 'in here'), and replacing talk of the reality of objects by talk about the reality of appearances gets us into precisely the conceptual mess eloquently described by Dennett (1991, 362–368).

⁸⁰In the same way as we could not do business with somebody who declines to accept the currency we use as real money. If every time we try to pay he rejects our payment, saying that it is just Monopoly money, we are never going to enter into an economic exchange.

As for the second, taking appearances seriously means that participating in a debate based on logical rules only happens if we accept the rules, independent of whether we consider them just as a kind of fiction or appearance-only or play-acting. If we believe that it is important that nihilism presents itself as a serious contender at the level of appearance, it cannot be presented in a way that leads to a contradiction, since according to the rules we are playing by, contradiction-entailing accounts are not serious contenders for argumentative success.⁸¹ As such, rather than embracing the contradiction of the existence of the nihilistic position, the nihilist needs to explain how he can consistently deny ascribing any existential status to the nihilist position itself.

(7) If the role of ontology is not to give a true account of the world at the ultimate level, what is it?

What could the attraction of metaphysics be once its ultimate truths claims⁸² are removed? We do not seem to be able to give a pragmatic account of metaphysics. In the case of physics we can be instrumentalist, saying that although some theory is not literally true, it is still useful in predicting consequences, designing mechanisms and so on. But in the case of metaphysics there does not seem to be much we can do with the theory if it is not regarded as ultimately true.

The arguments for ontological nihilism, if successful, prove something about ontological nihilism itself (that it cannot be ultimately true). Does that undermine the steps we took to reach that conclusion? In a way it does, though this is not necessarily problematic. We relied on specific assumptions and inferential patterns that we accepted for the sake of argument. Some of these presupposed commitment to ultimately true theories. It is hard, for example, to argue for the principle of parsimony on the grounds suggested above, without assuming that there are any (ultimate) truths about what the fissures in nature are that our hypostatizations may or may not correspond to. Yet we end up with a conclusion that rejects these very ultimate truths. What has happened? The dialectical situation might be described (to use Robert Nozick's metaphor) as one

⁸¹These considerations even have some relevance for a position like dialetheism that accommodates some contradictions. For in this case the dialetheist also wants to show that the nihilist's contradiction belongs to the set of rationally acceptable contradictions. (see Priest (2006, 102–104, 115–117.)

⁸²'Metaphysics is the study of ultimate reality. This still seems to me to be the best definition of metaphysics I have seen' (van Inwagen 2002, 1).

involving ‘intellectual judo or aikido.’⁸³ Presupposing ultimately true theories the argument, if successful, shows that presupposing ultimately true theories is inherently problematic, and concludes that we should not commit to the existence of ultimately true theories. Rather than fearing that we have just sawn off the philosophical branch we have been sitting on it would be more suitable to interpret what we have done as a demonstration that the branch was never fit to be sat on in the first place.

Does this mean that metaphysical investigation has to be abandoned altogether? No. While arriving at ultimate truths is commonly seen as the aim of metaphysical inquiry, it is not the only possible one. Another is a sufficiently deep analysis of the intersubjectively held set of beliefs by which we lead our lives. Such analysis, it appears, is particularly interesting if the seeming implications of these beliefs differ from what they, in fact, entail. If the argument for ontological nihilism is successful, this is a case in point: it seems to us as if there are things, though if we properly examine our beliefs it turns out that (based on assumptions and inferential patterns that we intersubjectively accept) there are not in fact any things. Has the analysis of our set of beliefs now arrived at an ultimate truth about this set? Of course not. Our new theory consists just of *more beliefs* which we now add to the extant set of beliefs,⁸⁴ which thereby becomes another, larger set, which can, in turn, be the subject of analysis and so on. Even though this process of metaphysical analysis can be extended indefinitely, this does not imply that the results we may reach at some particular stage are without interest.

7. Conclusion

Given how unintuitive the position of ontological nihilism is, I would be surprised if the preceding remarks had convinced many readers to embrace it. I do not regard this as a significant problem for the argument in support of ontological nihilism I presented here; I am in any case sceptical of philosophy’s ability to convert by force of knock-down arguments.⁸⁵ If the history of philosophy has shown us anything, it is that ‘arguing for the truth of *x*’ simply is ‘measuring the price of the theory

⁸³ ‘Alternatively, arguments might be used solely to disarm an attacker. Deftly, the force of the assault could be diverted or even turned against the attacker’ (Nozick 1981, 5).

⁸⁴ There are interesting connections between this position and Putnam’s ‘just more theory’ move in his defence of antirealism. See Button (2013, 27–31).

⁸⁵ Even if our conception of ‘knock-down’ does not go as far as Nozick’s (1981, 4): ‘Perhaps philosophers need arguments so powerful they set up reverberations in the brain: if the person refuses to accept the conclusion, he dies. How’s that for a powerful argument?’

claiming that x holds'.⁸⁶ That disagreeing views are knocked down by the brute force of the refuting arguments is a cherished, but nevertheless deceptive illusion. Any proposition can be clung to in the face of contrary arguments if its defender is simply prepared to make adjustments elsewhere in his web of belief, and it appears that the proposition that there is something is one many may want to cling to. What we can do, however, is determine whether the adjustments we need to make to accept or reject some view are, all things considered, worth making.

Why should we then try to measure the price of a philosophical theory in comparison to which many eccentric sets of beliefs philosophers have endorsed (such as those listed by David Lewis)⁸⁷ look positively pedestrian? I believe that the 'appearances all the way down' version of ontological nihilism described above has its uses in explicating some positions in the history of philosophy, but this is not the place to go into this matter.⁸⁸

Independent of all historical considerations, for the price to be worth paying there needs to be a reasonable vantage point from which the nihilist conclusions looks right, plausible, or at the very least, tempting. One such perspective is one that harbours doubts about the feasibility of the very project of constructing a fundamental metaphysical theory. Criticisms of the idea of a fundamentalist metaphysics can be brought to philosophy from the outside (e.g. by arguing that the impossibility of absolutely general quantification undermines the possibility of ontological theorizing) (Westerhoff 2013, 2020, 277–295), or they can arise from the inside, arguing that on the basis of plausible metaphysical claims the entire enterprise of making fundamentalist metaphysical claims self-destructs. Some examples of the first type may be regarded as problematic to the extent that they attempt to draw a limit to the philosophical enterprise from a perspective that can somehow survey both what is within the limit, as well as

⁸⁶Lewis (1983, x)

The reader in search of knock-down arguments in favor of my theories will go away disappointed. Whether or not it would be nice to knock disagreeing philosophers down by sheer force of argument, it cannot be done. Philosophical theories are never refuted conclusively. (Or hardly ever. Gödel and Gettier may have done it.) The theory survives its refutation – at a price. [...] But when all is said and done, and all the tricky arguments and distinctions and counterexamples have been discovered, presumably we will still face the question which prices are worth paying, which theories are on balance credible, [...] there will be no hope of discovering still further arguments to settle our differences.

⁸⁷That motion is impossible, that a Being than which no greater can be conceived cannot be conceived not to exist, that it is unthinkable that anything exists outside the mind, that time is unreal, that no theory has ever been made at all probable by evidence, (but on the other hand that an empirically ideal theory cannot possibly be false), that it is a wide-open scientific question whether anyone has ever believed anything' (1991: 59) and, we may add, that every way the world could be is a way some world is.

⁸⁸For some discussion see Westerhoff (2016).

what is outside of it.⁸⁹ We might then wonder whether this is not simply replacing one limited fundamentalist metaphysics by another, unlimited one. The present considerations belong to the second type. For if ontological nihilism holds, there are no metaphysical foundations. Thus a theory postulating such foundations could not occupy the status of an ultimately true theory, and, what is more, ontological nihilism itself cannot occupy this status either. As such the search for a fundamental metaphysical theory turns out to be futile, not just because we cannot find any such foundations, but because our best assumptions of what is ultimately true about the world (assuming, for the sake of argument, that eliminativism and non-foundationalism *are* the best such assumptions) imply that there cannot be ultimately true theories about the world.

The nihilist conclusion therefore could be attractive from a perspective of scepticism towards the project of constructing a fundamental metaphysical theory. And, more generally speaking, an approach like the one described above is interesting because it shows us something about the very limits of philosophical theorizing. The kind of nihilism discussed here, which follows from the two principles of non-foundationalism and eliminativism, each of which is individually defensible (and has been so defended by a variety of philosophers), appears to be an example of a metaphysical theory that rejects some of the most fundamental features we expect a metaphysical theory to have. Insofar as it gives us an opportunity to refine our conceptions of the presuppositions of our metaphysical discourse ontological nihilism deserves a more sophisticated response than a mere incredulous stare.

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⁸⁹Stone (2000, 93):

[T]here is something confused about the idea of criticizing metaphysics by drawing a limit to thought; for in order to think of a limit, it seems we need to station ourselves along both sides—the cognitively legitimate and the metaphysically illegitimate side—of it.”

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