

Review of Karen Bennett's *Making Things Up*

Forthcoming in *the Journal of Philosophy*

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12-4-2018

Karen Bennett's *Making Things Up* is an important and metaphysically rich book focused on key issues in contemporary metaphysics including but not limited to the nature of fundamentality (both relative and absolute), causation, grounding, and, most centrally, the notion of *building*. *Making Things Up* is also straight up fun to read: it is imaginative, provocative, and written in Bennett's characteristically clear and charming style.

Here is an overview of *Making Things Up*. The first three chapters of are focused on clarifying the idea of a building relation, about which more will be said momentarily. In chapter four, Bennett argues for a position which I suspect contemporary metaphysicians will find especially contentious, specifically, that causation is a diachronic building relation. (I suspect though that a view like this would find sympathy from some early modern philosophers.) In chapters five and six, Bennett defends a reduction of absolute and relative fundamentality to building. In chapter seven, Bennett turns to the question of what builds building. And finally in chapter eight, Bennett defends the view that there are some non-fundamental objects, contrary to thesis that she calls "flatworldism".

Let me turn now to building. The intuitive idea is that a building relation is a relation via some things make up some other thing; hence the title of the book. Bennett (pp. 25-29) defends a kind of *building pluralism* according to which there are many building relations, each of which is of more metaphysical interest than a general building relation of which it might be a specification. More formally, according to Bennett (pp. 32, 60), relation *R* is a *building relation* if and only if (i) it is antisymmetric and irreflexive, (ii) it induces necessitation, i.e., if *x* bears *R* to *y*, then necessarily, if *x* exists, then *y* exists, and (iii) it is "generative", i.e., "Built entities exist or obtain because that which builds them does."

Bennett (pp. 40, 63) also endorses a principle about building called "B->MFT", which is stated as follows: for all *x* and *y*, and all building relations *B*, if *x* at least partially *Bs* *y*, then *x* is more fundamental than *y*. But she rejects the suggestion that B->MFT be taken as a fourth condition on what it is to be a building relation. Part of her motivation for rejecting this suggestion is that she wants to explain relative fundamentality in terms of patterns of building; this is the reductive project that she articulates and defends in chapter six. As Bennett (p. 64) earlier puts things, "...one thing's building another is what makes the former be more fundamental than the latter. That is, the correct picture is that building generates relative fundamentality, not that generating relative fundamentality makes a relation be a building relation."

Maybe it's worth exploring a middle position. Suppose we have a list of the building relations *R*₁...*R*_{*n*}. Perhaps this list includes relations such as set membership, the relation of part to whole, and the relation of realization. We could deny that it is constitutive of any of *R*₁...*R*_{*n*} that if *x* bears one of them to *y*, then *x* is more fundamental than *y*. That is, it is not part of what it is to be, e.g., *R*₁, that if *x* bears *R*₁ to *y*, then *x* is more fundamental than *y*. But we could still say that what part of what makes each of *R*₁...*R*_{*n*} a building relation is that they satisfy B->MFT. Given our supposition, if we found Bennett's reduction of relative fundamentality to patterns of building relations plausible, we should find a

reduction of relative fundamentality to patterns of $R_1...R_n$ just as plausible. And we would thereby have a non-circular, reductive account of both relative fundamentality and what it is to be a building relation.

The success of this middle project turns on the supposition that we can produce an exhaustive list of building relations, and Bennett might doubt either that we have such a list at hand or that we could even produce one. Bennett's (pp. 15-16) remarks suggest that it is open-ended question which building relations there are. And if there are building relations that are alien to actuality, i.e., merely possibly instantiated building relations, it is not obvious how we could produce an exhaustive list of building relations.

This open-endedness is potentially troublesome. Bennett (p. 20) suggests that the building relations form "a reasonably natural resemblance class". But what is it for a class to be reasonably natural? Perhaps a class is reasonably natural when its members share a reasonably fundamental feature; this is more or less the view that I would favor. But I'm not sure how well this view would fit with her attempt to reduce fundamentality to building.

Bennett (pp. 58-59, 184-185) also discusses two diametrically opposing ways to understand condition (iii), i.e., the generative condition, on what it is to be a building relation. The first way is appeals to an unreduced and metaphysically serious notion of in virtue of or grounding, and this appeal seems to settle worries about the open-endedness of which relations are building relations. Moreover, it seems that this relation would satisfy conditions (i)-(iii), and hence would itself be a building relation. But it is not clear to me why we wouldn't attempt to reduce fundamentality to it and it alone rather than conscript the other building relations into doing this job too. (We'll see when we discuss the building of building that there might be a second reason for Bennett to accept an unreduced relation of grounding.)

The second way Bennett discusses is to hold that it is merely conventional that some relations rather than others satisfy clause (iii). As Bennett (p. 59) puts it, "... there is nothing but the generative talk. Why do building relations license or make true that kind of talk? They just do, as a matter of convention. Perhaps it is arbitrary, perhaps it is more deeply embedded in our conceptual scheme, but either way there is nothing further to be said about the matter." One question is how we are able to arbitrarily associate in virtue of talk with a collection of relations when we do not know what these relations are. If we can appeal to the claim that the building relations form a reasonably fundamental class, we might conventionally associate in virtue of talk with some members of that class that we are aware of and then stipulate that such talk should also be associated with the other members of the resemblance class. But this is to presuppose both that in this context we can talk of reasonably fundamental classes (which was questioned earlier) and that there is exactly one reasonably fundamental class of which the building relations we are aware of are members. This second presupposition might be risky.

So I think there is some pressure for Bennett to fix on a determinate list of building relations. But if she does so, the middle position I mentioned earlier is available and perhaps even attractive.

One big picture question I had after reading *Making Things Up* is what (if any) work Bennett thinks that the notion of fundamentality does. Bennett's (pp. 161-163) preferred view of relative fundamentality is one in which there are several specific notions of relative fundamentality, each of which is defined in terms of the pattern of instantiation of some particular building relation. Moreover, these specific "indexed" notions of relative fundamentality are the terms in which a more general notion of relative fundamentality is in some way to be defined. What are the jobs that either the indexed kinds of relative

fundamentality or the more general notion supposed to do, and could relations defined in the way Bennett defines them do those jobs? (Perhaps it would be worth considering this question in conjunction with an assessment of Sider's (2011: 141) argument that fundamentality must itself be fundamental.) If there is no work for fundamentality (indexed or otherwise) to do, I wondered whether Bennett might consider scrapping rather than reducing it.

Let me turn now to the interesting question of what builds building. Bennett (pp. 192-198) argues that whenever x builds y , x also builds the building of y . Here, I will raise a worry about the thesis Bennett argues for rather than directly addressing the argument for the thesis. First, recall that Bennett (pp. 25-29) argues that it is the specific building relations, such as causation, mereological composition, and set formation, that do the metaphysical work rather than some highly nonspecific Building relation of which these building relations are something like specifications, disjuncts, or determinates. Given this, there are different ways to understand the claim that whenever x builds y , x also builds the building of y .

One way to understand it is this: whenever there is a building relation R such that x bears R to y , then it is also the case that x bears R to the fact that x bears R to y . But this is implausible. Suppose R is the relation that members bear to sets. Consider Socrates and his singleton. Socrates bears R to his singleton. But Socrates definitely does not bear R to the fact that he bears R to his singleton, since this fact is not itself a set. An consider ordinary mereological composition, which Bennett (pp. 8-9) also takes to be a building relation. Suppose that my atoms mereologically compose me. They do not mereologically compose the fact that my atoms mereologically compose me because fact composition is a different kind of composition than mereological composition.

Here is a second way to understand Bennett's claim: whenever there is a building relation R such that x R y , then there is a building relation R' such that x R' [the fact that x R y]. (Perhaps in some cases $R=R'$, but, as just noted, for many cases it will not be.) If an unreduced relation of grounding is among the building relations, Bennett's claim so understood is plausible, since grounding so understood is always available to serve as the value of R' . Sometimes Bennett (p. 193) talks as though she has this kind of grounding relation in mind, but it might be that this is only because she is giving an informal statement of her view.¹ However, if an unreduced building relation is not among the building relations, I think Bennett's claim is less plausible. Consider Socrates and his singleton once more. What building relation does Socrates bear to the fact that Socrates forms Socrates's singleton? Socrates does not stand in set formation to this fact; Socrates does not mereologically compose this fact; this fact is not an effect of which Socrates is the cause; and so forth. True, Socrates is a non-mereological constituent of this fact, but he does not by himself non-mereologically compose this fact. Rather, Socrates, set-formation, and Socrates's singleton collectively non-mereologically compose it. With regards to non-mereological composition, Socrates's role is no more significant than that played by his partners in building the fact. (For this reason, if an unreduced relation of grounding cannot be appealed to, there is a question of how to understand the claim that set-formation is a one-sided relation in Bennett's (pp. 194-195) sense.)

It is characteristic of reviews of philosophy books that they focus on points of disagreement rather than agreement, and this review does not buck the trend. But philosophers show their respect by way of

¹ In personal communication, Bennett has indicated that she prefers the second option, and intends to pursue it in forthcoming work.

critical engagement, and it would grossly understate things to say that I respect this book. Anyone working on fundamentality, grounding, or causation must carefully study *Making Things Up*.²

Other references

Sider, Theodore. 2011. *Writing the Book of the World*, Oxford University Press.

² I thank Karen Bennett and Ross Cameron for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this review.