**It’s a Jumble out There:**

**How talk of levels leads us astray**

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One often hears talk about some entities being ‘higher-level’ than others: social and cultural objects, for example, are often said to be ‘higher-level’ entities than organisms; mental properties are often said to be ‘higher-level’ than physical or neurological properties, and so on. Sometimes this is expressed as the idea that reality comes in ontological levels, strata of being (Morgan 1923, Post 1991, Poland 1994, Baker 2007).[[1]](#endnote-1)

I will argue, however, that metaphysics is better without making use of the idea of ‘levels’. The levels metaphor is misleading and can generate pseudo-questions and pseudo-problems.

Nonetheless, there was something right behind the talk of levels—something that made that view preferable to its historical rivals of elimination and reduction. I will try to say both what was right and what’s wrong about the levels picture, how it leads us astray, and how to get a better picture—one that enables us to preserve many of the virtues the friends of levels sought, while avoiding the awkward questions and pseudo-problems that talk of levels invites.

1. **Why levels talk was wanted.**

Once upon a time, it was common to hear things like this:

“I need not tell you that modern physics has by delicate test and remorseless logic assured me that my second scientific table [not the ‘first’ table: the table of common sense] is the only one which is really there” (Eddington 1928, p. xiv)

“… *speaking as a philosopher,* I am quite prepared to say that the commonsense world of physical objects in Space and Time is unreal—that is, that there are no such things. Or, to put it less paradoxically, that in the dimension of describing and explaining the world, science is the measure of all things, of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not” (Sellars 1956/1997, pp. 82-3)

While it would require a lot of discussion to determine whether either of those quoted ultimately supported this view, they certainly give voice to the common eliminativist idea that all that *really* exists is whatever the most basic entities posited by the most basic science turn out to be.

Others try to accommodate the feeling that, in some sense, the basic entities of science are all there is, while retaining the common sense idea that of course there are tables, chairs, dogs and cats, and even beliefs and hopes. Some do so by arguing that the latter are *nothing but, nothing over and above,* the more basic particles that compose them. Such philosophers hold that the common sense objects are to really *identical with* or *reducible to* these basic entities (properly arranged and contextualized).(Of course the standards for saying that such a reduction has been performed vary.) But even in the relatively easy cases (e.g., concerning statues and chairs rather than thoughts and economies), barriers arose to these identity claims: most notably that statues and chairs seem to have very different identity and persistence conditions from those aggregates of particles that make them up.

In comes the non-reductionist’s talk of levels. On this picture, reality is made up of levels. At the bottom level are those most basic entities of physics. On higher levels we get composite objects, living beings, and ultimately mental states and cultural and social objects. The lowest-level objects are given proper respect, since they are the most basic objects (in some sense to be made clear).[[2]](#endnote-2) The higher-level objects, however, are also given their due: acknowledged as irreducible parts of the world, figuring in their own irreducible explanations. As Lynne Baker puts it “Only non-reductive materialism offers a metaphysics that takes ordinary things and their interactions with them at face value and makes them intelligible” (2007, p. 120).

Thus talk of levels, in short, was brought in as an alternative to eliminativist and reductionist views of all but the most basic physical entities. It was designed to enable us to say that these putatively higher-level objects really exist and can figure in explanations, preserving the autonomy of the special sciences. (I will say no more about the difficult issue of explanation here, leaving that to the side to focus on the ontological issues.)

As an alternative to eliminativist and reductionist views, the talk of levels had a lot going for it. It preserved the idea that we should say that there are electrons, pebbles, lizards, chairs, universities, recessions, corporations, and marriages. It also properly acknowledged we shouldn’t say that these are identical to the most fundamental entities posited by physics—or to mereological sums or arrangements of those.

Nonetheless, I will argue that we should not say that reality comes in levels. Nor should we say that everything that exists is ‘on the same level’. We should avoid talk of levels altogether.

Why should we? And what should we say instead? Those are the issues I will address here. I will begin by discussing serious realist proposals of ontological levels and why they lead us into a range of difficulties: questions we don’t want to have to answer (because we have no idea how to answer them) and problems that are hard to solve.

A popular alternative to the ‘levels of reality’ approach is to push the layering into language: to say: there are no levels of *reality* (or alternatively: there is only one), just levels of *description.* But while this move is again onto something, and solves some of our problems, it leaves us with other difficulties, for we retain the kind of artificial picture of orderliness that the layers of reality view also suffered from, while also severing the ordinary trivial connections between talk about truth, existence, and ontological commitment. In the end, I will argue, the right approach is to thread the needle between the robust ontological and linguistic approaches to social and cultural objects, while giving up talk of ‘levels’ all together.

1. **Levels of Reality**

Lynne Baker articulates the idea that reality comes in levels as follows:

On my view…reality is characterized by distinct ontological levels. Different kinds of material objects are on different ontological levels. For example, mountains are on a lower level than ID [intention-dependent] objects like credit cards or passports, and atoms are on a lower level still (2007, p. 112)

Baker is robustly realist about levels, insisting that: “Levels so defined are ontological: they are levels of reality, not levels of explanation or description.” (Baker 2007, p. 236).

These points are characteristic of a levels of reality view: different objects are on different ontological ‘levels’, with the cultural and social (intentionality dependent) objects on higher level or levels, the basic physical entities (whatever those are) on the lower levels. By presenting the view as robustly ontological, we get the picture that the leveled structure of reality is a discoverable feature of the world, much as we may discover that the rocks in a mine are stratified.

But despite its popularity in some quarters, and despite its virtues of enabling us to say there really are social and cultural entities and the rest (while also recognizing the priority, in some sense, of the physical), the idea that reality comes ordered hierarchically into levels leaves us with a lot of difficulties. Saying that reality has many levels, or that there are layers of reality, promotes a picture something like this: Reality is like a big layer cake, or a big cliff with different geological strata. We ontologists (or geologists, or pastriologists) have to discover how many layers there are and how they are related. For cliffs and cakes, these questions make sense: we can count the layers. We can say how the layers are related (they are physically on top of each other, with the lower supporting the higher). We can say of any two parts (the granite and the limestone/the blueberry crème and the raspberries) whether they are in the same layer or different layers. We can say what holds the layers together (layers of silt or icing). As soon as we buy into the levels of reality picture, there is a strong temptation to treat questions like these as appropriate, and to try to answer them.

So we may begin by asking: how are the layers related? Here we have little unanimity: clearly they are not spatially stacked as the layers of cliffs and cakes are. One natural answer is to say they are related by dependence: the higher-level entities depend on the lower. John Heil describes the levels view (which he goes on to criticize) as (among other things) holding that “Higher levels depend on, but are not reducible to, lower levels” (2003, p. 7). Even Baker marks the differences in layers initially by saying that the intention-dependent objects are on higher levels.

Once we have a picture on the table of how the layers are distinguished and of what ‘holds them together’, we might expect to be able to get answers to the questions that naturally suggest themselves if we think of reality as having a discoverable range of ontological levels. Those who defend levels of reality generally say things like: we have a physical layer at the bottom, a biological layer towards the middle, a psychological layer higher up, and perhaps a social or cultural layer on top.

But how many layers, precisely, are there? Does the chemical form a different layer from the physical? Are single-celled organisms in a different layer from mammals? Are higher-order thoughts in a different layer from mere feelings or sensations? Are symphonies or novels (as abstract cultural creations) in a different layer from concrete cultural artifacts like forks or events like marriages or 10K races? The robust realist layered conception makes it seem like we should be able to discover answers to these questions by examining the world.

These are questions that I, for one, do not want to have to answer—any more than I want to answer the question of exactly how many layers of reality there are.

But if we treat the relation between layers as involving dependence, that still leaves an endless number of questions like these unanswered, since things don’t order themselves in neat little layers of dependence. As I have elucidated elsewhere (1999, Chapter 2), there are a great many different relations of dependence. Consider intention-dependence, which typically plays a large role in informally distinguishing levels. (Regardless of whether you conceive of intention-dependence in terms of dependence on thought, consciousness, practices…). Dependence (as I have argued elsewhere) may take many different forms: an entity may depend on individual intentionality (e.g. an imaginary object) or collective intentionality (e.g. a dollar bill); it may depend directly on intentions about it (e.g. a corporation) or only indirectly on intentions that may be about other things (e.g. a recession); it may depend rigidly on particular intentional states (e.g. a hallucination) or generically on there being intentional states of a certain kind (e.g. response-dependent properties). Moreover, the modality of the dependence may vary: is the dependence conceptual or logical, or merely physical/nomological dependence? Do entities dependent in all of these different ways on human intentionality belong on the same level, or (e.g.) do entities only *generically* dependent on intentionality belong on a higher (or lower?) level than those *rigidly* dependent?

Which is on a higher level: a recession or a performance of the Moonlight Sonata? Neither depends on the other; both depend on collective intentionality, in different ways: the recession doesn’t depend on any individual thoughts or intentions about it, but only on collective acceptance of certain things as money and of various individual financial transactions. The performance of the sonata requires individual intentions to perform that very sonata (as part of a historical musical practice), and certain sound waves (created in certain way). So which is higher level? Is a zoo higher level than a shop in virtue of depending directly on biological entities as well as on collective acceptance of laws that charter it as a zoo? Are novels on a higher level than statues in virtue of the fact that they are abstract—depending only *generically* on some copy or other (rather than rigidly depending on this very lump of marble)?

Suppose we say that when A depends on B, then A is on a higher level than B. This will still leave a huge range of cases in which we cannot say whether A is on a higher level than B or not (when neither depends on the other). But if in a great many cases we can’t say whether A is on a higher or lower level than B (are colors on a higher or lower level than corporations? are corporations on a higher or lower level than foot races?), then the picture that reality has a certain number of levels misleads us.[[3]](#endnote-3)

The truth of the matter seems to be that things may depend on one another, or on things of certain kinds, in many different ways, with many different relations among them. Given the complexities involved, it seems highly unlikely that things will fall into neat and denumerable layers, enabling us to answer the kinds of questions that the layering picture suggests. Far better to try to elucidate detailed issues about the relationship between, for example, the performance of a musical work, copies of a score, intentions of composer and performer, sound waves of the right sort, and so on, than to try to answer questions about exactly what ‘layer’ it is in, or whether it is in a higher or lower layer than zoos, recessions, or corporations.

Suppose we try to draw our layers more coarsely, and just say, for example, whatever is dependent on intentionality is on a higher level than the mental and the physical. Then we put symphonies, musical performances, and copies of the score, for example, all on the same level (along with hallucinations, corporations, forks…). But then the same problem arises again that motivated the original levels picture: for in some sense, copies of a score and/or performances seem more basic than symphonies, though symphonies (one may argue through familiar appeal to differences in identity and persistence conditions) cannot be reduced to these. So the original problem just pops back up among these entities supposedly on the same level. While the talk of dependence—made suitably precise—may be of some use in making explicit how different entities are related, the talk of ‘levels of reality’ seems to do nothing but add a misleading metaphor on top of it.

Another standard answer to the question “How are the layers related?” is to say that the higher-level entities *supervene* on the lower. But here again there are many different sorts of supervenience relation (strong, weak, global…), with corresponding questions arising about how to order into layers entities that bear different supervenience relations on the same base. Moreover, if we divide our layers coarsely, we once again reach the problem that similar supervenience relations recur within the layers as, e.g., works of music may supervene on copies of the score (and surrounding cultural conditions). In any case, however, supervenience has fallen out of favor as failing to describe any sort of genuine ontological relation at all.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Lynne Baker gives a different answer to the question of how the layers are related. Following through on the layering metaphor and directly answering the question of what holds the levels together, Baker gives the following answer: Constitution “is the metaphysical glue, so to speak, of the material world” (2007, pp. 177-8). Constitution, she writes, “Is a single comprehensive metaphysical relation that unites items at different levels of reality into the objects that we experience in everyday life” (2007, p. 32). She understands constitution, roughly, as a relation holding between entities of distinct primary kinds (e.g. statue and lump of metal) where, for an F to constitute a G, the F and the G must be spatially coincident, made of the same kind of stuff, and such that it’s necessary that an F in the right circumstances will constitute a G, though it is also possible for an F to exist at some time without a G. (2007, p. 161)

Does the constitution view do any better than the dependence view at giving us an answer to questions about how many levels there are, or which of two entities is on a higher level? To address that question, we must first see how Baker distinguishes levels.

On Baker’s view, an object’s level is determined by what primary kind it is.

G is a higher-level primary-kind property than F if: there are some x, y, t such that:

1. x’s primary-kind property is F and y’s primary-kind property is G, and
2. x constitutes y at t (2007, p. 236)

A sufficient condition for different levels is given as follows: If G is a higher-level primary-kind property than F, then there are levels, such that F is on one level and G is on a higher level (2007, p. 236).

If we make use of the constitution criterion, we can answer some of the above questions invited by the levels picture, but many others remain obscure. Baker simply accepts that her constitution criterion does not give us a full ordering of layers or enable us to answer all of these sorts of questions. She writes: “The existence of levels, so defined, does not imply that all of material reality is well-ordered by level… There is no single hierarchy of levels. There is no answer to the question, Are robots on a higher level than sea slugs? And… there may be branching. So, the ordering of levels is only partial.” (2007, p. 236).

Moreover, many of the entities typically classified as ‘higher level’ can find no place in Baker’s layered scheme at all. For her way of drawing out levels enables us to speak of levels only for spatial, material entities (for only they can stand in constitution relations). Thus it already leaves us unable to describe works of literature or music, laws of state or corporations or recessions as ‘higher level’ entities.

One begins to wonder how much use the ‘layers’ metaphor is, if it cannot accommodate a range of putatively ‘higher level’ entities, nor answer the questions that it so naturally invites about how many layers there are or how things are related by layer. As Kim concludes: “I hope it has become clear that these questions [about the relative levels of many different things] don’t have clear answers, and there is no reason why we should seek them, to begin with. I think that attempts to construct an overarching levels ontology for the whole of the natural world in which every object has its “appropriate” place are rather pointless if not hopeless” (2002, p. 16).

1. **The linguistic move**

In the face of problems like these, it can seem attractive to deny that there are levels of reality by packing the leveling structure into language rather than thinking of the world as containing levels of reality. “Levels of description, not levels of reality” might be the slogan for this view. John Heil argues for a view along these lines, writing:

Everyday talk of levels—levels of description, levels of explanation—is unobjectionable…Trouble arises when philosophers introduce levels of reality corresponding to levels thought of in this way. (2003, p. 73)

And elsewhere:

My recommendation is that we abandon the notion that reality is hierarchical. We can accept levels of organization, levels of complexity, levels of description, and levels of explanation, without commitment to levels of reality in the sense embraced by many self-proclaimed anti-reductionist philosophers today. The upshot is a conception of the world and our representations of it that is ontologically, but not analytically, reductive (2003, p. 10).

Heil diagnoses the mistake behind the hyper-realist ‘levels of reality’ picture as coming from accepting the ‘picture’ theory of meaning: thinking that if we have a true higher-level description (e.g. there is a statue in the entryway), there must be higher-level objects to make it true (a statue, an entryway).[[5]](#endnote-5) Once we reject the picture theory of meaning, Heil suggests, we can see that we can accept the literal truth of ‘there are statues’, but allow that the truthmaker for this may be “staggeringly complex” and “hideously unruly” (2003, p. 189)—it need not be best accounted for on a simple correspondence model of a ‘distinct’ statue-object making the claim true (2003, p. 55).

Nonetheless, he suggests, we can still accept that there are those entities that the fan of ‘levels of reality’ aimed to accept: “An ontology that dispenses with levels of being—a ‘no-level’ ontology—need not be an ontology that dispenses with tables, trees, galaxies, or electrons” (2003, p. 73); “hierarchical conceptions of reality mis-construe the demands of realism” (2003, p. 38). For it’s literally true that there is a statue, though we should not think of the statue as a higher-level object on one of the upper echelons of reality.

So in what sense, one might wonder, is Heil’s resulting view different from the levels of reality view? While he accepts the literal truth of claims like “there are statues”, he nonetheless claims that there is a sort of ‘ontological reduction’ of the putatively higher-level entities, once we see that truthmakers for these claims need not involve the entities themselves. How can we articulate this sense of ontological reduction, and distinguish the view from the levels of reality view? Here are some ways Heil draws the distinction: he denies that “realism about an object answering to a sortal obliges us to suppose that the sortal designates an object… *in a metaphysically robust sense of object*” (2003, p. 185). We can, he insists, accept that it is true that there is a statue but deny that there are statues *‘in addition to’* the particles, or *‘distinct from’* the particles (2003, pp. 53 and 51, italics mine).

Ross Cameron develops the idea in a similar way. Like Heil, he accepts that although there are many different sorts of description, a claim need not have as its truthmakers those entities it describes: “…an existential claim can be made true by something other than what it says exists: in that case, the entities quantified over are not ontological commitments of the claim in question” (2012, p. 182). Instead, claims at what we might call various levels of description may all ultimately be made true by the same (one) most basic layer of basic entities or stuff. “It’s the things (and the properties of these things) at this level that we must be robustly realist about” (2012, p. 185).

In distinguishing his view from others, Cameron appeals to the notion of ontological commitments, insisting (against Quine) that “the ontological commitments of a claim/theory are those entities that must be invoked as *truthmakers* for the claim/theory if it is to be held true” (2012, p. 181). As a result, Cameron says, we can allow that “it is, even speaking strictly and literally, true to say such things [as tables and chairs] exist” (2010, p. 249) and yet deny that we are *ontologically committed to* tables and chairs—thus distinguishing our view from that of people like Baker. Indeed, Cameron argues, we can and should hold that “Many of the entities we quantify over in everyday speech do not… really exist” (2010, p. 249). Thus on his view, ordinary objects exist, but do not *really* exist, and we are not ontologically committed to them.

Moving from talk of levels of reality to talk of levels of description has some significant advantages: most notably, it seems to enables us to avoid the causal exclusion problem and the problem of metaphysical vagueness. Heil argues that we rid ourselves of the causal exclusion problem that arises so readily with the levels picture, for we are no longer stuck with the picture of higher-level entities and lower-level entities, and needing some causal work for the higher ones to do (2003, 20).[[6]](#endnote-6) Shifting to talk of levels of description rather than levels of reality also changes the problem of vagueness: if what we have are levels of description, not levels of reality, then it seems that vagueness may be attributed to our language—our ways of describing things—not to the world itself.[[7]](#endnote-7)

There is a lot that I think is right about the move to speak of levels of description rather than levels of reality. It does not promote the picture of reality as containing discernable, discoverable levels—instead, the layering relations we speak of as holding among objects show up on this view as more like reflections of relations in the rules of use for the terms we use to pick them out. Talk about dependence relations among objects, which is sometimes thought to license us to say that one object is on a ‘higher level’ than another, for example, is the object-language reflection of these relations in application conditions for the key terms used in making the claims. Similarly (as I have argued elsewhere), we can see talk of ‘constitution’ as a way of giving a relational label to things that is just the object-language reflection of a network of relationships among rules of use for the two terms (2013). Thus we can see two of the relations commonly used to distinguish ‘levels of reality’ as object-language correlates of relations in the rules of use for our terms--a move towards serious demystification and clarification of the methods by which we can hope to discover what these ‘levels’ are.

But while the ‘levels of description, not levels of reality’ move relieves us of some problems, it doesn’t relieve us of all of them. If we take seriously the idea that there are *levels of* description (I should note that it’s not clear that either Heil or Cameron does take the idea that description comes in levels seriously—instead Heil seems more directed at rejecting the levels of reality idea (and Cameron doesn’t speak much in these terms at all)), we still are stuck with some of the same problems that plague the levels of reality view: it promotes an artificially organized image that invites unwanted and inappropriate questions about exactly how many levels of description there are, and which level various descriptions belong to. Yet it seems we have no better prospects for answering questions about what layer a given *term* is on than we did for answering the corresponding, world-oriented questions about what layer a given *entity* is on. Language is messy; we have many different relations among the rules of use of our terms. Indeed on my view it is the tangles in the relations of rules of use that are reflected in the tangles in the dependence and other relations among the entities referred to. But if that’s so, we have no better prospects of getting a cleanly layered picture of language than of the world.

Moreover, while I think it is helpful to note that those relations that hold among entities often said to be on different ‘ontological levels’ may be seen as reflections of rules of use for our terms, I think there are also problems for saying that we are on this view somehow less than fully committed to putatively ‘higher level’ objects such as tables and statues. I agree completely that we need not ‘posit’ tables and statues to serve as truthmakers for claims that there are tables and statues (see my forthcoming, Chapter 2). But I don’t think that we are thereby licensed to deny that there are such objects ‘in a metaphysically robust sense of object’ or to deny that we are ontologically committed to them. Given core rules of use for each of the terms centrally involved (‘true’, ‘exists’, ‘committed’) we can move trivially from ‘It is true that there are tables’ to ‘there are tables’ to ‘tables exist’, and from someone S asserting ‘tables exist’ to ‘S is ontologically committed to tables’. So, contrary to Cameron, once someone accepts that ‘there are tables’ (or ‘there is a table in my office’) is true, I think she has no place denying that tables ‘really’ exist or rejecting the notion that she has an ontological commitment to tables.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Similarly, unlike Heil, I don’t think we should say that there are tables but not in a ‘metaphysically robust’ sense of ‘object’, or not as ‘distinct’ objects ‘over and above’ the fundamental particles (e.g. Heil pp. 49, 185).[[9]](#endnote-9) I think that once we accept that there are tables, we should acknowledge that we are accepting that there are tables in the only sense it makes to raise and answer the question at all: I don’t know what a more ‘metaphysically robust’ sense of object would be. And once we have accepted that there are tables we should acknowledge that they are distinct from—in the down home sense of not identical to—collections of particles and the like, since they have different identity and persistence conditions. We should (as I have argued elsewhere, 2007, 75-8) reject the serious metaphysician’s misleading use of phrases like ‘distinct from’ and ‘in addition to’, not just shift from a positive to negative use of the phrases. At the end of the day, the only difference between Heil and I is not that I think that there is a statues are objects in some ‘metaphysically robust’ sense of ‘object’ while he does not, but rather that I don’t think there is such a sense—at least not any that’s been made sense of. In the perfectly ordinary sense of ‘object’ as a dummy- or covering-sortal, we are entitled to infer from ‘there is a statue’ to ‘there is an object’ (see my 2009, 459-60); in that sense I think (and I suspect Heil agrees) that statues are objects. So I agree that it’s not proper (and certainly not informative) to say that if a claim like “there is a statue” is to be true we must posit a statue to serve as an explanatory truthmaker. Nonetheless, I think that the presence of the clay, shaped in the right way in the right context, by the right maker, *entitles* us to say ‘there is a statue’, in the only sense that the relevant terms have, and *commits* us to saying there is a statue. (Those who accept that there is clay that has been successfully shaped by an artist intending to make a statue in the right artistic context, and yet deny that there is (or ‘really’ is) a statue make a mistake. Those who accept that there is a statue and yet deny that there is an object also make a mistake—if only in taking on board the serious metaphysician’s rather obscure use of a ‘metaphysically robust sense of object’. Finally, those who accept the above and accept that statues exist, but (with Cameron) deny that they are ontologically committed to statues say something at least badly misleading, given current usage.

So in sum, I think the ‘levels of description, not reality’ view has some things right: we should see talk of the relations that hold among putatively ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ level entities as a reflection of relations in the rules of use for our terms. We should accept that the truthmakers for our putatively high-level claims may be staggeringly complex, and needn’t be put just in terms of “Px” is true if there is an x that is P. But we should not take that to entail anything less than straightforward realism about even the putatively higher level entities: we should not deny that such things are ‘really’ parts of our ‘ontology’, or to sever the connection between saying, e.g., “There are tables” is true, and saying that tables (really) exist, that tables are objects or that there are tables in our ontology: connections that seem natural and even trivial.

Finally, we should reject the idea that descriptions come in discrete and denumerable levels just as much as we rejected the corresponding idea for reality, for the same messy reasons.

1. **It’s a jumble out there**

I have argued that the defender of the levels of reality picture had it right that there really are the so-called ‘higher level’ entities such as animals, persons, artifacts, laws, and works of art, and that they are (typically) not identifiable with any (putatively) lower-level entities. But talk of ‘levels of reality’ gave us a misleading picture that invited unwanted questions (such as: how many levels are there? Are A and B on the same level?...) because it promotes thinking of layers as discrete and denumberable, and so suggests far more order than there is. I have also argued that the defender of levels of description had it right that these supposed differences in level among objects are reflections of relations in the rules of use for our terms. Moreover, making the shift to talk of levels of description is helpful as it may enable us to avoid the problems of higher-level causation and vagueness. But it still promotes an artificially ordered picture in which we can ask and answer questions about what ‘layer’ different descriptions are on—where these questions often seem as unanswerable as their ontologically oriented counterparts. Moreover, it goes awry if it leads us to denying that we are ontologically committed to such things, or that there ‘really’ are such objects in some ‘robust’ sense, or to severing the connection between saying, e.g., “There are tables” is true, and saying that tables really exist, or that there are tables in our ontology: connections that seem natural and even trivial.

In the space that remains I’ll attempt to thread the needle between some of the intuitions behind the levels of reality versus levels of description views, while dropping the talk of ‘levels’ altogether.

What should we say instead? What can replace talk of ‘levels’ in a way that preserves realism about medium-sized, biological, social, and cultural objects—without reductively identifying them with the objects of physics (or sums or aggregates of those)—and without invoking a misguided picture of a neatly stacked world?

I have already alluded to the alternative. The alternative begins by recognizing that language is a motley: the rules of our terms are interrelated in all sorts of different ways. These are reflected in a variety of interrelations among the individuals or kinds referred to by our terms.

It is no doubt true that the rules of use for certain of our terms are interrelated in such a way that the application of one term guarantees, or presupposes, the application of another: If ‘red’ applies to something, ‘colored’ is guaranteed to apply to the same thing; if ‘musical performance’ applies, that presupposes that ‘intentional state’ applies (but not that it applies to the same thing!); if ‘statue’ applies in a situation, that guarantees that ‘physical object’ applies in that situation, and so on. But the different ways we have of describing reality don’t seem to be well ordered: there are all sorts of relations among the rules of use for our terms. In some cases the application of one term seems to require that of another, in other cases the application of one term seems to entail that one among some other range of terms applies, in other cases the application of one term may preclude that of another (either at a time or over time), in some cases application of one term to some stuff entails that another applies to the same stuff, in others it only entails that there is some, perhaps abstract entity…

We can acknowledge that there are many—indeed many different—cases in which one entity depends on another (in many different ways) and in which one entity is constituted by another, and in which entities are dependent on others without being constituted by anything, and so on, while rejecting the picture that reality comes in levels. Once we reject that picture and respect the multitude of interrelations among our concepts, we can avoid all of the unwanted and apparently unanswerable questions about exactly how many levels there are, or whether this is on a higher level than that. Talk of levels of reality is just a coarse-grained, misleading, reified way of talking about relations among the rules of use for our terms.

This alternative not only rejects talk of levels (whether of reality or description) in favor of acknowledging the multitude of different sorts of interrelations among our terms and (correlatively) among the things they describe. It also threads the needle between the realist and the defender of the linguistic alternative by accepting that we do really have objects of different sorts, some of which depend on, and/or are constituted by others; yet insisting that talk of such relations among objects reflects relations in rules of use for the corresponding terms. It is because language is such a motley that there are corresponding complications in the relations among the entities (if any) they refer to.

Once we acknowledge the great variety of relations among the rules of use for our terms, and see the relations among objects as reflections of these, we can see that the ‘levels’ talk, whether done in the ‘material’ or linguistic mode, was misleading. Once we drop it we can avoid the whole range of unwanted and often apparently unanswerable questions about which level (of reality or of description) various entities or terms are on.

While avoiding some of the problems of the levels of reality view, [[10]](#endnote-10) we clearly retain many of its virtues: we plainly accept that there are social, cultural, and other allegedly ‘higher-level’ entities—that they are as ‘real’ as anything else (which is not of course to say that they are equally basic). We not only avoid eliminativism, we also avoid reduction. For we can accept straightforwardly that statues and tables and the like should not be identified with sums or arrangements of particles. For the two terms come with different co-application conditions, leading to differences in the persistence conditions for the entities (if any) they name. That’s what’s at stake in saying that they are not to be identified (leading some to say—a bit misleadingly perhaps—that they are not ‘distinct’ entities).

To summarize where we have come: I have argued that we should reject talk of levels. Differences in the dependence and constitution relations among entities are reflections of relations in the rules of use by which we refer to such entities, but the rules of use are interrelated in all sorts of ways that do not put them—or the objects they refer to—into neatly stacked ‘levels’. The talk of ‘levels’ is a misleading picture that invites pseudo-questions and pseudo problems. Even if we drop talk of levels altogether, however, questions remain about how to understand cultural and social entities and their relationship to biological entities, physical entities, and the like. On this score, the ‘levels of reality’ person had it right that we should accept that there are such things, and that they are not identical to or reducible to microphysical entities or sums of these. But the levels of description person had it right that we shouldn’t think we need to ‘posit’ those entities as *truthmakers* for the relevant claims. We can do better if we can see the relations among objects as reflections of relations in rules of use for our terms, but nonetheless accept that on this view there are social and cultural and other putatively ‘higher-level’ objects in the only sense the relevant terms have.

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1. I leave Putnam and Oppenheim’s (1958) off the list here, since they are explicitly reductionist about levels, and I am here interested in examining the prospects for a non-reductive ontological levels view, as an alternative to eliminativism and reductionism. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Different clarifications have been suggested: perhaps they are that on which everything else depends, supervenes, or is grounded. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Jaegwon Kim reaches a similar conclusion for the supervenience conception of levels—that the defender of that view may simply “have to accept the fact that properties and kinds are not always comparable to each other in terms of higher and lower. And if individual objects are ranked in terms of the properties they have, as I have suggested, the same outcome has to be expected for them as well,” (2002, p. 10). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Heil (2003, pp. 36-39) and Kim (2002) raise a similar range of difficulties for the levels view. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. For further demolition of the ‘picture’ theory, see Dyke (2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Heil proposes avoiding the causal relevance problem by accepting there may be true causal claims involving ‘higher-level’ predicates, while the truthmakers for these causal claims are all ultimately low-level physical properties (2003, p. 45). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Nonetheless, a shadow of the problem might still be thought to arise to the extent that the levels of description view does want to acknowledge that there are statues, dogs, and other putatively ‘higher-level’ entities: do we not still have to say that they are vague? I discuss how to deal with the problem of ontological vagueness in my (2007, Chapter 5). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. One can perhaps see Cameron as implicitly *recommending* that we change the way we use our technical term ‘ontological commitment’. One could do that, but it would surely introduce confusion. Far better to say (as Cameron sometimes comes close to suggesting (e.g. 2008, p. 6)) that tables are *not fundamental*, while (as Cameron doesn’t) allowing both that they exist and that we are ontologically committed to them. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. In fact, I find use of these phrases (by either side) inappropriate and misleading, for reasons detailed in my (2007, 75-78). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. To see how one may, with the levels-of-description theorist, retain a way of avoiding the chief problems that plagued the levels of reality view, such as the causal exclusion problem and the vagueness problem, see my (2007, Chapters 1 and 5). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)