The Asymmetry of Ontological Commitment: Why Indeterminacy Needs No Ground

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Abstract

Western metaphysics has overwhelmingly treated determinacy as the default ontological condition: forms, essences, necessary beings, and brute facts are offered as starting points from which philosophical inquiry proceeds, while indeterminacy is treated as a derivative state requiring explanation. This paper argues that this default rests on an undefended assumption — the *symmetry assumption* — according to which determinate and indeterminate ontological commitments bear equal justificatory burdens. Against this assumption, the paper establishes an *asymmetry principle*: any determinate ontological commitment (the claim that some entity exists with determinate properties) requires justification, while the refusal to make such commitments does not. Three arguments — from information theory, from the logic of determination, and from the regress structure of metaphysical explanation — converge on this conclusion. The asymmetry principle yields two meta-ontological consequences. First, maximum indeterminacy (the state carrying zero determinate commitments) uniquely satisfies the terminus condition that the concept of grounding requires: carrying no determinate commitments, it generates no further demand for justification, and is therefore the only legitimate starting point for ontological inquiry. This is a conclusion about what the grounding relation requires of its terminus, not a first-order claim about the ultimate furniture of reality. Second, the concept of maximum indeterminacy is logically incompatible with stasis: a state possessing no determinate properties cannot possess the property of stability. A consistency argument then shows that this conceptual result aligns with well-understood physical dynamics of fluctuation, symmetry-breaking, and

self-organisation. The paper thereby dissolves rather than answers Leibniz's question ("Why is there something rather than nothing?"): both "something" and "nothing" are determinate commitments that require justification; maximum indeterminacy precedes both.

Keywords: ontological commitment; indeterminacy; justificatory burden; emergence; self-organisation

1 Introduction: The Default of Determinacy

From its earliest formulations, Western metaphysics has treated determinacy as the default condition of reality. Plato's Forms are the paradigm: stable, necessary, mind-independent structures that ground the flux of appearances. Aristotle naturalised the Forms as essential properties inherent in substances. Leibniz's Principle of Sufficient Reason demands that every fact have a determinate explanation, presupposing that the basic furniture of explanation consists of determinate states of affairs (Leibniz, 1965). In contemporary analytic metaphysics, the same default persists: Fine's (1994) essentialist programme treats essences as the fundamental explanatory ground of metaphysical modality; Lowe's (2006) four-category ontology posits determinate substances, kinds, attributes, and modes as the irreducible categories of being; Lewis's (1986) modal realism populates reality with maximally determinate possible worlds.

What unites these positions is a shared presupposition: that the starting point of metaphysical inquiry is some determinate structure, and that indeterminacy, if acknowledged at all, is a derivative condition requiring explanation. This presupposition is so deeply embedded that it is rarely made explicit and almost never defended. It functions less as an argued thesis than as a methodological habit: a default orientation that shapes what questions are asked and what counts as an adequate answer. The analogy with pre-Copernican astronomy is instructive: for centuries, geocentrism functioned not as a hypothesis to be tested but as a framework assumption that structured all astronomical inquiry. The question was never "Is the Earth at the centre?" but "How do the heavenly bodies move around the Earth?" The present paper suggests that the default of determinacy

occupies a similar structural position in metaphysics. The question is almost never "Why should we start from determinacy rather than indeterminacy?" but "Given that reality is fundamentally determinate, what is its structure?" This default is not universal: Daoist *wu*, Madhyamaka *śūnyatā*, and Whiteheadian process philosophy all grant priority to the indeterminate — a convergence that suggests the determinacy default may be a feature of the Western tradition specifically rather than of metaphysical inquiry as such.

This paper argues that the default of determinacy rests on an unexamined assumption — what I call the *symmetry assumption* — and that once this assumption is made explicit, it cannot be sustained. The symmetry assumption holds that determinate and indeterminate ontological commitments bear equal justificatory burdens. Against this, I establish an *asymmetry principle*: determinate ontological commitments require justification; the refusal to make such commitments does not. This principle is not a form of scepticism but a thesis about the direction of justificatory burden, structurally analogous to the presumption of innocence in criminal law or the null hypothesis in statistical reasoning. The paper thus belongs to the metametaphysical literature concerned with the methodology and presuppositions of metaphysical inquiry (Chalmers et al., 2009). Its closest point of contact is the debate about grounding (Schaffer, 2009; Rosen, 2010; Fine, 2012; Correia and Schnieder, 2012): what grounds what, and what can serve as the terminus of the grounding chain? This raises the prior question of what conditions a state must satisfy in order to count as a genuine terminus — specifically, whether it generates no further demand for justification — and what ontological standing any state satisfying that condition would have. The well-foundedness of grounding — whether every grounding chain must terminate in something ungrounded — is directly contested: Bliss (2013) argues that infinite chains need not be vicious; Dixon (2016) defends well-foundedness as a conceptual requirement; Bennett (2017) canvasses the options from the perspective of "building" relations. For a comprehensive survey see Bliss and Trogdon (2024). Section 4 returns to these questions.

The asymmetry principle has two consequences. First, maximum indeterminacy — the state that carries zero determinate commitments — uniquely satisfies the terminus condition that the concept

of grounding requires: it is the only candidate that generates no further demand for justification, and therefore the only legitimate starting point for ontological inquiry. This is not a first-order assertion about the ultimate furniture of reality; it is a meta-ontological conclusion about where the grounding relation permits inquiry to begin. Second, maximum indeterminacy is not a static void but an inherently unstable state — indeterminate with respect to *all* properties, including stability itself — which therefore cannot persist; a consistency argument then shows that this conceptual instability aligns with well-understood physical dynamics of fluctuation, symmetry-breaking, and self-organisation, making the emergence of determinate structure consistent with well-characterised physical processes. The argument proceeds as follows. Section 2 diagnoses the symmetry assumption. Section 3 establishes the asymmetry principle. Section 4 draws the meta-ontological consequence. Section 5 shows the consistency of emergence with known dynamics. Section 6 considers objections and concludes.

2 The Hidden Symmetry Assumption

2.1 The Symmetry Assumption in Contemporary Metaphysics

Consider Leibniz's foundational question: "Why is there something rather than nothing?" (Leibniz, 1965). The question appears innocent, but it carries a hidden presupposition: that "nothing" and "something" are symmetrically positioned alternatives, and that the existence of something — rather than nothing — is the state that requires explanation. The question treats the transition from nothing to something as the fundamental explanandum and demands a sufficient reason for it.

But notice what this framing assumes: it assumes that "nothing" (the absence of all determinate existence) is the default state, and that the existence of determinate entities is a deviation from this default that requires justificatory work. This is already a form of the symmetry assumption, because it treats both the claim "there is something" and the claim "there is nothing" as substantive ontological commitments that require grounding — the only question being which one actually obtains and why.

The Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR) makes the symmetry assumption explicit. The PSR holds that every fact has a sufficient reason: for every true proposition, there is a complete explanation of why it is true rather than false (Leibniz, 1965). Applied to the fundamental question, the PSR demands a sufficient reason for the existence of something rather than nothing. But the PSR itself presupposes that the demand for reasons applies symmetrically to all propositions. It does not distinguish between propositions that carry positive ontological commitments ("entity X exists with property P") and propositions that decline such commitments ("there is no sufficient reason to believe that X exists with property P"). It treats both as equally in need of explanation. This is the symmetry assumption in its purest form.

Contemporary essentialist metaphysics inherits this symmetry. Fine's (1994) programme begins from determinate essences and explains modality in terms of them; and the broader grounding programme — from Rosen's (2010) foundational account to Fine's (2012) guide to ground and the collected treatment in Correia and Schnieder (2012) — takes determinate facts as the relata of grounding rather than questioning whether determinacy itself requires justification. The possibility that there might be no essences — that apparent necessity is a feature of cognitive architecture rather than of mind-independent reality — is not treated as a competing hypothesis with a lighter justificatory burden, but as a sceptical challenge bearing an equal or greater burden of proof. The asymmetry of burden is, from the start, misallocated. Lowe's (2006) four-category ontology is similarly structured: it posits four fundamental categories — substances, kinds, attributes, and modes — and treats the existence of determinate categorical structure as the starting point of inquiry, not as a commitment that itself requires justification.

2.2 The Asymmetry Already Acknowledged in Epistemology

The remarkable feature of the symmetry assumption is that it is already rejected in every other domain where justificatory burden has been carefully examined. In criminal law, the presumption of innocence assigns the burden asymmetrically: the prosecution must establish guilt; the defence need not establish innocence. (The presumption of innocence is referenced here as a structural analogy

for asymmetric burden-allocation, not as a legal argument.) In scientific methodology, the null hypothesis is the default that stands unless sufficient evidence compels its rejection (Fisher, 1925). One might object that the null hypothesis is merely a convention of frequentist statistics, but the Bayesian framework's own default — the prior adopted in the absence of any specific information — is the *maximum-entropy prior* (Jaynes, 1957): the distribution that makes the fewest assumptions. Even within Bayesian statistics, the asymmetry reappears: departures from the maximum-entropy prior require justification; the prior itself does not. In the logic of ontological commitment, Ockham's Razor expresses the same asymmetry: entities should not be multiplied beyond necessity (Sober, 2015).

A clarification about the relationship between the asymmetry principle and Ockham's Razor is required here, lest the former appear to be a mere restatement of the latter. Ockham's Razor is a *selection rule*: given two competing theories that both account for the evidence, prefer the one that posits fewer entities. It operates within the space of competing determinate commitments and presupposes that both candidates already carry some positive content. The asymmetry principle is a *default rule*: it governs the inquirer's starting point *before* any competing theories have been assembled, specifying that the position of zero commitment is the default from which inquiry should proceed. These operate at different logical levels. Ockham's Razor requires an *instrumental* justification — it promotes theoretical virtues such as simplicity and predictive power, and its authority is therefore domain-sensitive and revisable, as Sober (2015) argues. The asymmetry principle requires a *logical* justification — it follows from the structure of information and determination: any departure from the zero-commitment baseline introduces a constraint that must itself be grounded. Because the two principles occupy different logical positions, the widely noted limitations of Ockham's Razor as a merely conventional or instrumental preference do not extend to the asymmetry principle.

These are convergent recognitions of a single structural fact: *positive commitments carry justificatory burdens; the absence of commitment does not*. What is puzzling is that this asymmetry is routinely violated in metaphysics, where the most far-reaching positive commitments — necessary

beings, essential natures, fundamental substances — are treated as defaults rather than as claims requiring the heaviest justificatory burdens.

Why has the asymmetry been overlooked? Two factors are likely responsible. First, the tradition of metaphysics as "first philosophy" — as the discipline that establishes the most fundamental truths about reality — has historically encouraged the assumption that inquiry must begin from some positive starting point. If metaphysics is the science of being *qua* being (Aristotle) or the inquiry into the most general structures of reality (Lowe), then it seems to require, as its very starting material, some determinate being or structure to investigate. The possibility that the most fundamental "structure" might be the absence of structure is, within this framing, a non-starter. But this is a feature of the framing, not of reality. Second, the phenomenology of everyday experience strongly reinforces the determinacy default. Our perceptual world presents itself as a world of determinate objects with determinate properties. The sense that reality is fundamentally determinate is not a theoretical inference but an experiential given. This raises a question to which Section 5.3 will return: why is the determinacy default so phenomenologically compelling, if it is unjustified as a starting point?

3 The Asymmetry of Ontological Commitment

3.1 Statement of the Principle

I propose the following principle:

> **The Asymmetry Principle.** Any determinate ontological commitment — any claim of the form "there exists an entity X that possesses determinate property P" — requires justification. The refusal to make such a commitment — the position "there is no sufficient reason to believe that X possesses P" — does not require justification.

Three clarifications: the asymmetry principle is not global scepticism (it makes no claim about the limits of knowledge, only about the direction of justificatory burden); it is not a substantive

ontological thesis but a *methodological* principle about who bears the burden of proof, structurally identical to the presumption of innocence; and it is not verificationism (it does not require empirical verifiability, only justification — the standard of "sufficient reason" is left open; the principle concerns the direction of burden, not the standard of proof).

3.2 Three Arguments for the Asymmetry Principle

Three lines of reasoning support the asymmetry principle. The first two — from information theory and from the logic of determination — are not fully independent of one another: they represent two expressions of a single structural insight articulated in different theoretical vocabularies (the mathematics of information constraint and the metaphysics of predication). Their convergence is significant precisely because the vocabularies are so different: it shows that the asymmetry is structural rather than an artifact of either framework. The third argument — from the regress of metaphysical explanation — is genuinely independent of both: it arrives at the asymmetry principle by an entirely different route, examining the failure modes of the alternatives rather than the internal logic of commitment itself.

3.2.1 The Information-Theoretic Argument

A determinate ontological commitment carries information in the precise sense established by Jaynes (1957): it constrains the space of possibilities by excluding some states of affairs and including others. The present argument depends not on Shannon's communication-theoretic framework but on Jaynes's reasoning in the logic of inference: the maximum-entropy distribution is the only assignment that introduces no constraint beyond those explicitly given, because any other distribution smuggles in a constraint that must be justified. Whether maximum entropy is the *uniquely correct* assignment in all contexts is contested — see van Fraassen's critique of the "straight rule" and Seidenfeld's objections — but the present argument requires only the weaker claim that *any departure from maximum entropy introduces an unjustified narrowing of the possibility space*, which is what the smuggling-in argument establishes. This is a result in the logic of inference, not in communication

engineering, and it transfers to ontology without equivocation. The claim "X exists and possesses property P" excludes all states in which X does not exist or does not possess P. Information, in this technical sense, is a measure of constraint: it quantifies how much the space of possibilities has been narrowed. Any departure from maximum entropy — any narrowing of the possibility space — requires a mechanism or condition that produces that narrowing.

Applied to ontology: a determinate ontological commitment is an informational constraint that narrows the space of ontological possibilities. Such narrowing requires justification (a reason why *this* constraint rather than some other, or none at all). The refusal to make such a commitment is the state of maximum ontological entropy: no possibilities excluded, no constraints imposed, no information asserted. This state requires no justification because there is nothing in it that could be justified or unjustified — it makes no claims. The asymmetry is structural: selecting a subset of the possibility space requires a selection principle; retaining the whole space requires nothing.

A potential objection should be noted here: the inference from "carries information" (a descriptive claim) to "requires justification" (a normative claim) risks committing an is-ought fallacy. The response is that the normative force does not derive from a contingent background epistemic norm added from outside; it derives from a constitutive condition of rational inference itself. Any inference is a transition from a narrowed possibility space (premises) to a conclusion: inference presupposes that the narrowing of the possibility space is *traceable* — that there is a ground for each exclusion effected. Without this traceability condition, rational inference cannot get off the ground, because the constraints that generate the inferential move are arbitrary, and an inference whose premises are arbitrary does not warrant its conclusion. This is not a norm adopted within some inquiry tradition or culture; it is a condition of the possibility of inference *as such*, and as such it is logically prior to the asymmetry principle that is here being argued for. The information-theoretic argument is therefore best read as: (i) a determinate commitment carries information (a conceptual claim about constraint); (ii) traceable compression of the possibility space is a constitutive condition of rational inference itself; therefore (iii) a determinate commitment requires a ground for the exclusion it effects. The normative force comes from (ii), which the information-theoretic framework helps to

articulate but does not itself supply.

3.2.2 The Argument from the Logic of Determination

Every determinate attribution involves a distinction: to say that X is A is to distinguish A from not-A and to place X on one side of the distinction. As Spinoza held, and as Hegel later crystallised in the formula *omnis determinatio est negatio* — every determination is a negation — to determine X as A is simultaneously to negate that X is not-A, that X is B, and so on. (The Latin formula is Hegel's, from the *Science of Logic* of 1812, though the underlying idea derives from Spinoza's Letter 50 to Jarig Jelles of 1674 and the ontology of the *Ethics* (Spinoza, 1996). The precise attribution is contested; what matters for the present argument is the philosophical point, not its provenance.)

But distinction requires a ground: there must be something in virtue of which X is A rather than not-A. This is not a demand in the style of the Principle of Sufficient Reason, which would be a substantive claim about the causal-explanatory structure of reality. It is an analytic constraint on the concept of distinction itself: if there is no condition in virtue of which X falls on the A-side rather than the not-A-side, then there is no fact of the matter about which side X falls on, and the distinction has not been drawn. This is a semantic point — about what "making a distinction" means — not a claim about the cosmic constitution. The ground of a distinction is the condition that makes the distinction hold; without such a ground, the distinction is arbitrary — there is no fact of the matter about which side X falls on. Indeterminacy makes no distinctions. The indeterminate state is the state in which no property has been attributed, no distinction has been drawn. Since it draws no distinctions, it requires no ground for any distinction. The asymmetry follows directly: determination requires a ground; indeterminacy does not. The more determinate a state of affairs, the more distinctions it embodies, and the more grounds it requires. In the limit — maximum indeterminacy — no distinctions are drawn, no grounds are needed, and no justification is required.

3.2.3 The Regress Argument

To explain why X has property P, we appeal to some more fundamental fact Q. But Q is itself a determinate fact, and the question arises: why Q? This generates a familiar explanatory regress. The regress admits of five standard responses: (i) a *necessary being* whose existence requires no further explanation; (ii) a *brute fact* that simply obtains without explanation (Parfit, 1998); (iii) *infinitism*, which denies that the chain must terminate; (iv) *coherentism*, which substitutes mutual support for linear foundations; or (v) a state that *genuinely requires no explanation because it makes no determinate commitments*.

Option (i) suffers from its own internal regress: a necessary being is a determinate entity with specific properties, and the question "Why does *this* entity exist necessarily?" simply reopens the regress at a higher level. Option (ii) concedes that the regress is irresolvable within the framework of determinate commitments. Option (iii) defers the burden indefinitely without ever discharging it. Option (iv) distributes it circularly: coherence among unsupported claims does not generate support from nothing. (The point is not that infinitism and coherentism are indefensible as general epistemological positions, but that neither resolves the specific problem at hand: how to terminate the explanatory regress of determinate facts without either leaving the burden unmet or introducing a new unjustified determinate commitment.)

What is common to (i)–(iv) is that they all attempt to halt the regress *within the space of determinate commitments*. Option (i) halts it at a special determinate entity; (ii) halts it at an unexplained determinate fact; (iii) refuses to halt it at all; (iv) replaces linearity with circularity. Each fails for a distinct reason, but the underlying pattern is the same: so long as the terminus of explanation is itself a determinate state, it generates or perpetuates the very demand for justification it was meant to satisfy.

Option (v) escapes by stepping outside this space: the regress terminates in maximum indeterminacy — a state that carries no determinate commitments and therefore generates no further demand for justification. Maximum indeterminacy halts the regress because there is nothing to justify: no entity has been posited, no property has been attributed, no distinction has been drawn.

It is worth noting that this solution preserves a significant insight from each of the rejected options. The appeal to necessary being correctly recognises that the regress must terminate in something requiring no further explanation; the error is in thinking this something must be a determinate entity. The appeal to brute fact correctly recognises that the regress must simply stop; the error is in stopping at a determinate state and declaring it unexplainable. Maximum indeterminacy combines the virtues of both: it stops the regress at something that genuinely requires no explanation, without the disadvantages of either. The asymmetry principle can now be read as the generalisation of this observation: determinate commitments require justification because they carry information, draw distinctions, and exclude possibilities; the absence of commitment generates no such demands. This solution to the regress is closely connected to the debate on well-foundedness of grounding. Bliss (2013) argues that infinitely descending grounding chains need not be vicious, and Dixon (2016) responds that well-foundedness is a genuine conceptual requirement. The asymmetry principle provides an independent motivation for well-foundedness: a grounding chain that does not terminate in maximum indeterminacy will terminate in some determinate state, which by the asymmetry principle generates a further demand for justification — so the chain has not genuinely terminated. The only terminus that discharges the demand is maximum indeterminacy. This is not merely the assertion that grounding must be well-founded (a claim Bliss disputes) but a diagnosis of *why* it must be well-founded and what the terminus must be like.

3.3 The Retorsion Objection

The most natural objection takes the form of a retorsion argument: "The asymmetry principle is itself a determinate claim — the claim that justificatory burden is asymmetric. By its own standard, it requires justification. But if it requires justification, then it cannot serve as the foundational principle you claim it is, for its justification would presuppose the very framework it is meant to ground."

This rests on a category confusion. The asymmetry principle is not a determinate ontological commitment of the form "entity X exists with property P." It is a *meta-ontological principle about*

the structure of the grounding relation — a principle about what conditions any state must satisfy in order to serve as an ontological ground, not a first-order claim about which entities exist. The presumption of innocence is not a claim about the defendant's actual guilt or innocence; it is a procedural principle about who bears the burden of proof. One cannot coherently object that "the presumption of innocence is itself a claim that must be presumed innocent" — this is a category error that confuses a first-order claim (about guilt) with a second-order structural principle (about burden-allocation). The same category error underlies the retorsion objection to the asymmetry principle.

To make the distinction precise: two types of justificatory demand differ in kind, not merely in degree. Type (A) is *ontological grounding*: claims of the form "X exists with property P" must specify the source or basis that accounts for X's having P — this is the burden of determinate ontological commitment. Type (B) is *argumentative justification*: claims that a meta-ontological principle R is well-founded must be supported by argument — this is the burden that any claim about the structure of the grounding relation carries. The asymmetry principle carries a Type (B) burden, not a Type (A) burden, and that burden has been discharged by the three arguments above. The retorsion objection misapplies a Type (A) demand to a Type (B) claim: it requires the asymmetry principle not merely to be argued for, but to be *ontologically grounded* — to specify some metaphysical source from which its authority derives. But this demand is appropriate only to first-order ontological claims about what entities exist; applied to a meta-ontological principle about what the grounding relation requires, it commits precisely the category confusion identified above. The presumption of innocence need not be grounded in facts about human nature or criminal behaviour; it needs to be justified by argument (concerning fair procedure, power asymmetries, and the costs of error). That justification has been provided. The same structure applies here.

Moreover, the asymmetry principle is *recursively consistent* with its own application. If we ask "Does the asymmetry principle itself carry a justificatory burden?" the answer is: it carries whatever burden is appropriate to a meta-ontological principle about the structure of the grounding relation, and that burden has been discharged by the three arguments above. Crucially, the principle does

not claim to be beyond justification — it claims only that the direction of justificatory burden in ontology is asymmetric. This claim is itself justified by argument, not exempted from justification. There is no self-referential collapse. The retorsion objection derives its apparent force from tacitly reinstating the symmetry assumption: it assumes that the asymmetry principle must bear the same kind of burden as first-order ontological claims. But this is precisely what those arguments give independent reason to deny.

4 Meta-Ontological Consequence: Indeterminacy as the Required Starting Point

4.1 The Grounding Relation's Terminus Condition

The asymmetry principle is a claim about what the grounding relation requires of its terminus: any state serving as an ontological ground must generate no further demand for justification. To generate no further demand for justification, a state must carry no determinate commitments — for any determinate commitment, by the asymmetry principle, requires a ground. Maximum indeterminacy is precisely the state that carries no determinate commitments. It follows that maximum indeterminacy uniquely satisfies the terminus condition that the concept of grounding imposes. This is a meta-ontological conclusion — reached by conceptual analysis of what "ground" requires — not an additional first-order assertion that "maximum indeterminacy exists with property *P*." The analysis of the grounding relation employed here is conceptual rather than metaphysically realist: it asks what the *concept* of grounding requires of its terminus, not what the grounding relation's intrinsic metaphysical nature is. The claim is not that reality is "really" indeterminate at bottom, but that any inquiry into what is fundamental must begin from maximum indeterminacy, because every other candidate — necessary being, fundamental substance, essential nature, brute fact — is a determinate commitment that carries a justificatory burden it has not discharged, and therefore cannot satisfy the terminus condition. The grounding literature does engage the question of

what the terminus must be like, but its answers are uniformly *relational*: the terminus is whatever is ungrounded — what nothing further grounds (Rosen, 2010; Fine, 2012). Bennett (2017) frames it as what "builds" without itself being built; Dasgupta (2016) argues that certain absolute necessities are "autonomous" and so require no explanation. The present argument does not dispute the relational condition but argues that it is *necessary but not sufficient*. A state that happens to be ungrounded is not thereby qualified to terminate the grounding chain, if it carries determinate commitments that themselves generate a demand for justification. The gap in the existing literature is the absence of a *substantive* terminus condition — an account of what the terminus must be like intrinsically, not merely relationally. The asymmetry principle supplies this: the terminus must carry no determinate commitments. This is what distinguishes the present argument from the observation, already available in the literature, that grounding chains must terminate somewhere.

Two senses of "ground" must be carefully distinguished at this point. The claim established above is that maximum indeterminacy satisfies the terminus condition in the sense of *meta-ontological priority*: it is what the concept of grounding requires its terminus to be like, because it is the only state that halts the demand for justification by carrying no determinate commitments that could generate such a demand. This is a claim about the conceptual requirements of the grounding relation, not a first-order claim about the causal or constitutive structure of reality. In particular, it is not a claim that maximum indeterminacy possesses *positive explanatory power* in the sense of actively accounting for why the specific determinate structures that emerge take the form they do. Satisfying the terminus condition removes the demand for further grounding — it does not thereby acquire the power to derive what follows from the terminus. The positive explanatory work — the question of how determinate structure can arise from a starting point of maximum indeterminacy — belongs to Section 5's consistency argument, not to the terminus condition established here. Conflating the two would impose on this section a task it is not designed to discharge: Section 4 argues only that maximum indeterminacy is the unique legitimate starting point that the grounding relation permits; Section 5 argues that beginning from this starting point is not in conflict with what we know about the emergence of structure. The two sections are complementary and sequential; neither is reducible

to the other.

A clarification about referential language is required. To speak of maximum indeterminacy as "the state that carries no determinate commitments" is, unavoidably, to use referential language, and referential language appears to introduce the very conceptual structure being denied. But this appearance is misleading. "Maximum indeterminacy" is defined entirely negatively: it is the asymptotic limit of the removal of all determinate specifications. Its logical structure parallels the empty set: the empty set is not a peculiar kind of full set; it is defined purely by the absence of members, and this negative definition is not itself a positive content. Similarly, maximum indeterminacy is not a peculiar kind of determinate entity; it is defined purely by the absence of all determinate commitments. Using the phrase "maximum indeterminacy" to mark this negatively-defined terminus does not introduce a determinate ontological commitment; it marks the *absence* of any such commitment. The terminology is a placeholder for the limit of a regress, not a positive description of a hidden reality.

Maximum indeterminacy is not "nothing" in the traditional sense. "Nothing" — the absolute absence of anything whatsoever — is itself a determinate commitment: it asserts that the number of existing entities is exactly zero, a quantificational first-order count claim that excludes all non-empty possibilities. The distinction between maximum indeterminacy and nothingness is not merely a matter of content; it runs deeper, to a difference in logical level. "Nothingness" is a first-order ontological claim: it says something *about the content of the world* (that the world contains no entities) and answers the question "What is there?" "Maximum indeterminacy" is a meta-ontological terminus condition: it says something about the structure of the grounding relation (that this is the state from which no further demand for justification can arise) and answers the question "What state can terminate the grounding chain?" These are different questions at different logical levels. The two claims cannot be interderived: establishing that maximum indeterminacy satisfies the terminus condition does not entail that the world contains no entities; equally, asserting absolute nothingness would not satisfy the terminus condition, since it is itself a substantive first-order commitment that requires justification. An inquirer who begins from maximum indeterminacy does not thereby claim

that the world is empty; the inquirer begins from the only starting point that carries no unjustified determinate commitments. The world might contain any configuration of entities — but until a justificatory case has been made for some particular description, any other starting point would be assuming more than the grounding relation licenses. In information-theoretic terms, maximum indeterminacy is the maximum-entropy state: all possibilities remain open and none has been selected (Jaynes, 1957).

4.2 The Dissolution of Leibniz's Question

Leibniz's question — "Why is there something rather than nothing?" — presupposes that "something" and "nothing" are the two fundamental alternatives. But the asymmetry principle reveals that both are determinate commitments requiring justification. The genuine default is maximum indeterminacy, which is prior to both. Leibniz's question is therefore not answered but *dissolved*: the fundamental contrast is not between something and nothing but between determinacy and indeterminacy.

This dissolution is distinct from previous responses. Van Inwagen (1996) argues probabilistically but within the framework of determinate possibilities and does not question whether "nothing" is the appropriate contrast class. Parfit (1998) accepts the existence of something as a brute fact — still a determinate state, only one for which no justification is available. Heidegger (1959) reframes the question in terms of the ontological difference between beings (*Seiende*) and Being (*Sein*) but does not question whether its presupposition — that "nothing" and "something" exhaust the field — is correct. Nozick (1981) considers self-subsumption and the principle of fecundity but again within determinate explanatory principles.

The asymmetry principle offers a different kind of response: not a new answer to the old question, but a demonstration that the question's presupposition is false. The fundamental contrast is not between something and nothing but between determinacy and indeterminacy. Once this is recognised, the "mystery" of why there is something rather than nothing disappears — not because it has been solved, but because it has been shown to rest on a question-begging framework that treats determinacy as the default and therefore cannot even formulate the relevant alternative.

A more charitable reading might ask simply: "Why is there maximum indeterminacy rather than nothing at all?" But this reformulation presupposes that maximum indeterminacy is a positive state requiring explanation. The asymmetry principle denies precisely this: to demand a reason for the absence of all determinate properties is to apply the PSR to the very condition that lies beyond the scope of the PSR.

4.3 Maximum Indeterminacy as the Required Starting Point

The argument of Section 4.1 establishes the positive claim. The remaining task is defensive: to show that the two most powerful objections to that claim — the PSR reductio and the demand for temporal or causal origination — can be met.

Maximum indeterminacy satisfies the terminus condition in a precise sense: it is the only state from which metaphysical inquiry can begin without presupposing what it claims to explain. Every other starting point — necessary being, brute fact, fundamental substance, essential nature — is a determinate commitment that bears a justificatory burden it has not discharged. The claim is meta-ontological: it concerns where inquiry must begin, not what reality is "made of."

This result also clarifies the status of the PSR itself. Della Rocca (2010) has argued forcefully that rejecting the PSR is incoherent: any principled restriction on the PSR's scope would itself require a sufficient reason, generating a pragmatic self-defeat. But this argument presupposes precisely the symmetry assumption that the present paper challenges. Della Rocca's reductio works only if the demand for reasons applies symmetrically to all propositions, including the proposition "the PSR does not apply here." The asymmetry principle denies this: the refusal to make a determinate commitment (including a commitment to the universal scope of the PSR) does not bear the same justificatory burden as the commitment itself. The PSR presupposes that *all* states of affairs, whether determinate or indeterminate, are equally in need of explanation. When applied to the question "Why is there indeterminacy rather than determinacy?" the PSR demands a sufficient reason for indeterminacy — thereby treating indeterminacy as a positive state requiring justification, which is precisely what the asymmetry principle denies. The PSR is not a pre-theoretical principle that

precedes the symmetry assumption; it is an *expression* of it, dressed in the language of explanatory completeness. Accepting the PSR without qualification is equivalent to accepting the symmetry assumption; questioning the symmetry assumption is equivalent to restricting the scope of the PSR to determinate commitments only. A careful Leibnizian might accept this restriction and reformulate the PSR as applying only to determinate facts: why does *this* determinate structure obtain rather than some other? Such a restricted PSR converges with the asymmetry principle rather than conflicting with it. The asymmetry principle's contribution is to make this restriction *explicit and principled* rather than ad hoc: it provides a positive justification for why the demand for reasons should apply to determinate commitments specifically, rather than simply carving out an exception for indeterminacy as a special case. Moreover, the asymmetry principle extends the analysis to the methodological question of ontological starting points that the restricted PSR leaves unaddressed: it explains not only that we need not demand a reason for indeterminacy, but why — indeterminacy is not the kind of thing the demand for reasons is designed to address.

A more sophisticated version of the PSR challenge appears in Dasgupta's (2016) *metaphysical rationalism*. Dasgupta argues that the PSR holds for *substantive* facts while "autonomous" necessities — those that hold independently of any further fact, including the essences or natures of things — are exempt from its demand. This is the most refined defence of PSR-style rationalism in the contemporary literature, and it has already moved in the direction of restriction. But Dasgupta's exempted class is defined by *modal status*: autonomous necessities are exempt because they could not have been otherwise. The asymmetry principle defines its exempted class differently: not by modal status but by the absence of any positive ontological content. A state that carries no determinate commitments is exempt not because it is necessary but because there is nothing in it to ground — no property attributed, no distinction drawn, no possibility excluded. Autonomous necessities, however necessary, are still determinate: they specify some state of affairs as holding. They therefore still carry the burden of specifying *which* state of affairs holds necessarily, and why that one rather than another. The asymmetry principle's restriction is thus more fundamental than Dasgupta's: it does not merely carve out exceptions to the PSR on modal grounds, but identifies the

structural reason why the demand for reasons has a direction at all.

Two qualifications are essential. First, the claim that maximum indeterminacy satisfies the terminus condition is not a claim about temporal priority or causal origination; it is a meta-ontological claim about where the grounding relation permits inquiry to begin: maximum indeterminacy is what we are entitled to assume without justification because it alone satisfies the terminus condition. Second, whether reality is "really" indeterminate at bottom is a further empirical and scientific question that the meta-ontological argument does not settle — and does not need to settle. The asymmetry principle establishes that maximum indeterminacy is the unique candidate that meets the grounding relation's terminus condition; what the fundamental level of reality is actually like is a separate, subsequent inquiry. The present argument constrains the *starting point* of that inquiry, not its *outcome*.

5 Dynamic Consequence: The Consistency of Emergence

The previous sections established a meta-ontological conclusion: maximum indeterminacy uniquely satisfies the terminus condition that the concept of grounding requires, and is therefore the only legitimate starting point for ontological inquiry. That conclusion constrains where inquiry may begin; it does not, by itself, tell us what happens next. A natural further question arises: if we take the additional step of treating maximum indeterminacy not merely as the required starting point for inquiry but as a *candidate description of the ground-level state* — a hypothesis about what the world is like prior to the emergence of determinate structure — is this hypothesis consistent with what we know about the physical world? This section addresses that conditional question. It does not claim that the meta-ontological argument of Section 4 entails a first-order cosmology; it claims that the most natural first-order reading of the meta-ontological conclusion — the reading on which maximum indeterminacy characterises the ground-level state — is not in conflict with the best available science, and indeed finds natural expression in it. The section thus changes register: from meta-ontological analysis (what the grounding relation requires) to conditional consistency

testing (what would follow if the meta-ontological terminus also described the world).

The argument proceeds on two levels that must be kept distinct. The first is conceptual: if maximum indeterminacy is the state possessing no determinate properties whatsoever, then it cannot possess the property of stability, and therefore cannot persist. This is an analytic consequence of the concept. The second is empirical: in all known physical systems, uninhibited fluctuation is amplified into stable ordered structures through symmetry-breaking and self-organisation — a trajectory well-documented in the physical sciences. The conceptual argument establishes that stasis is precluded; the empirical argument shows that the form of emergence is not exotic but well-characterised. The aim of this section is therefore *not* to provide a constitutive explanation of the origin of the universe, as if this paper were a work of speculative cosmology. The aim is to show that the emergence of determinate structure from maximum indeterminacy is (i) a logical consequence of the concept of maximum indeterminacy itself, and (ii) consistent with well-understood physical and dynamical processes. The asymmetry principle does the philosophical work; this section shows that the first-order hypothesis most naturally suggested by that work does not conflict with the scientific picture.

5.1 The Instability of Maximum Indeterminacy

The key move is conceptual. Maximum indeterminacy means the absence of *all* determinate properties — including stability. A state that possesses no determinate properties cannot possess the property of remaining unchanged. This is not an external force acting on an inert void. It is the internal logic of indeterminacy itself: to be maximally indeterminate is to be indeterminate with respect to the distinction between change and changelessness, between fluctuation and stasis, between structure and formlessness. A state that is genuinely indeterminate with respect to all such distinctions cannot be stably "nothing" — for stable nothingness would itself be a determinate condition (the determinate absence of all change). Maximum indeterminacy is not quiescent; it is, of logical necessity, dynamically unstable.

The point can be stated more carefully. "Persistence" here must be understood in a purely

conceptual sense — not as cross-temporal identity, which would presuppose time as a determinate ordering of states, but as possessing the property of maintaining oneself under some specification. Time, as a determinate ordering of states, is itself a form of determinate structure; it cannot be presupposed prior to any conceptual analysis of maximum indeterminacy, and may itself be among the emergent products of the instability that the present argument describes. In this purely conceptual sense: if maximum indeterminacy possessed persistence, it would possess at least one determinate property — the property of maintaining itself under some specification — which contradicts the assumption that it is maximally indeterminate. Maximum indeterminacy is therefore logically incompatible with persistence. This is not a causal claim about what "makes" indeterminacy change; it is a conceptual claim about what maximum indeterminacy *is*: a state so lacking in determinate properties that it cannot even possess the property of remaining itself.

One might press further: if maximum indeterminacy lacks the property of stability, it equally lacks the property of *instability*; why should the absence of stability entail change rather than merely leaving the question of change undetermined? The objection is well-taken if the argument is read as "lack of stability *causes* change" — for that would attribute a positive power (the power to produce change) to a state defined by the absence of all positive attributes. But that is not the argument's logical form. The argument is strictly negative: the concept of maximum indeterminacy is *incompatible with the predication of stasis*, because stasis (remaining unchanged under some specification) is itself a determinate property, and maximum indeterminacy by definition possesses no determinate properties. This is a claim about what the concept *excludes*, not about what it *produces*. The concept excludes persistence; what positively replaces persistence — fluctuation, symmetry-breaking, structure — is not deduced from the concept alone but belongs to the empirical consistency argument of the following subsection. The conceptual argument's contribution is therefore precisely delimited: it establishes that the hypothesis of a persisting state of maximum indeterminacy is self-contradictory, because persistence would constitute a determinate property. What happens instead is a question for Section 5.2, not for conceptual analysis.

5.2 Consistency with Known Dynamics

The conceptual argument establishes that the concept of maximum indeterminacy is incompatible with persistence: a persisting state of maximum indeterminacy is self-contradictory. What replaces persistence? Here the argument shifts from the conceptual to the empirical.

Before proceeding, an important methodological clarification is required. The aim of this subsection is *not* to provide a constitutive explanation of how the universe originated, nor to derive physical conclusions from philosophical premises. Its aim is the modest one of showing *consistency*: that the hypothesis of maximum indeterminacy as a ground-level state does not conflict with the best available science, and indeed finds natural parallels in it. The philosophical work is done by the asymmetry principle and the terminus argument of Section 4; what follows is simply a consistency check. (The quantum vacuum is invoked throughout this section as an illustrative parallel, not as a constitutive argument; the philosophical argument stands independently of any particular physical interpretation.)

The dynamical instability of indeterminacy manifests as fluctuation. In physical terms, the quantum vacuum is not empty space but a field of continuous fluctuation (Penrose, 2004). Prigogine's (1984) theory of dissipative structures shows that in far-from-equilibrium systems, fluctuations can be amplified and locked into stable, self-maintaining ordered structures — structures that persist by continuously dissipating energy. Convection cells, chemical oscillations, and biological metabolic cycles are all examples: ordered structures that arise spontaneously, maintained not by external design but by the dynamics of the system itself. The philosophical significance is this: the emergence of order from less ordered conditions is not a speculative hypothesis but a well-characterised physical process. The asymmetry principle establishes that maximum indeterminacy is the legitimate starting point; dissipative structure theory shows that the transition from indeterminacy to structure has a known dynamical mechanism.

Kauffman's (1993; 1995) work extends this: when networks of interacting components exceed a complexity threshold, autocatalytic closure emerges with overwhelming probability — the network sustains and reproduces itself. The emergence of such self-sustaining networks is not a vanishingly

improbable event but a well-characterised dynamical outcome. This eliminates the explanatory gap between non-living ordered structures and living, self-reproducing systems without any appeal to a first cause or additional explanatory principle.

The pattern is general: *fluctuation* → *symmetry-breaking* → *dissipative structure* → *self-sustaining organisation*. At each stage, determinate structure arises from less determinate conditions, not by the imposition of external form but by the inherent dynamics of the system. No stage requires an appeal to a first cause, a designer, or a necessary being. Each stage is the dynamical consequence of the preceding stage's instability.

The pattern described above extends, in principle, to the emergence of cognitive systems capable of *generative modelling* (Clark, 2013; Friston, 2010; Hohwy, 2013). Such systems develop high-stability attractors whose functional profile — stability under perturbation, cross-contextual consistency, resistance to revision — is structurally indistinguishable from the phenomenology of perceiving mind-independent essences. This provides a *diagnostic* answer to the question raised in Section 2.2: the determinacy default is phenomenologically compelling because cognitive systems operating through generative modelling cannot, from within their own generative loop, distinguish their high-stability attractors from essences.

6 Objections and Conclusion

6.1 Objections

6.1.1 Is the Asymmetry Principle Disguised Scepticism?

Scepticism claims that knowledge is impossible or unreliable: we cannot know whether the world is as it appears. The asymmetry principle makes no such claim. It does not deny that we can have knowledge of determinate facts, nor does it assert that the world is indeterminate. It claims only that the *direction* of justificatory burden runs from determinacy to indeterminacy, not the reverse: those who posit determinate structure bear the burden of justification, and those who decline to posit it do

not.

The structural parallel with scientific methodology makes this clear. The null hypothesis in statistical testing does not express scepticism about the existence of real effects; it expresses a methodological commitment about where the burden of evidence falls. A researcher who fails to reject the null hypothesis is not claiming that no effect exists; the researcher is claiming that the evidence is insufficient to justify the determinate commitment that an effect exists. The asymmetry principle occupies the same position with respect to ontological commitments: it does not deny that determinate structure exists, but insists that the claim of its existence bears a burden that the absence of such a claim does not.

6.1.2 Does This Confuse Epistemology with Ontology?

One might object that the asymmetry principle is an epistemological thesis about our justificatory practices, not an ontological thesis about the structure of reality, and that deriving ontological conclusions from epistemological premises commits a category error. The objection misidentifies what the paper claims. The paper does not derive a first-order ontological conclusion ("reality is indeterminate at bottom") from epistemological premises. It derives a *meta-ontological* conclusion: that maximum indeterminacy is the only state satisfying the terminus condition that the concept of grounding requires, and is therefore the only legitimate starting point for ontological inquiry. The asymmetry principle concerns the structure of the grounding relation itself — specifically, what conditions a state must satisfy in order to serve as a terminus — not our psychological or social justificatory practices. The argument is: a genuine terminus must generate no further demand for justification (by the concept of grounding); generating no such demand requires carrying no determinate commitments (by the asymmetry principle); maximum indeterminacy uniquely satisfies this condition; therefore maximum indeterminacy is the required starting point. Each step is a conceptual claim about the grounding relation, not an epistemological claim about what inquirers are permitted to believe. The move from meta-ontological analysis to a constraint on ontological inquiry is not a conflation of levels; it is internal to a single level — the analysis of what "ground" requires.

Indeed, the history of philosophy provides ample evidence that the failure to clarify the terminus condition for grounding *before* doing ontology leads to precisely the kind of ungrounded determinacy that the symmetry assumption produces. Aristotle's substance ontology, Leibniz's monadology, and Fine's neo-essentialism all begin from determinate starting points whose status as grounds is never justified. The result is systems that are internally coherent but externally ungrounded — they explain the relationships *among* determinate structures without ever establishing that a determinate structure can meet the terminus condition at all.

6.1.3 Is the Instability Claim a Modal Overreach?

The argument that maximum indeterminacy is inherently unstable — and therefore "necessarily" gives rise to fluctuation and structure — might appear to be a strong modal claim that itself requires justification. Does the claim that indeterminacy *must* produce structure smuggle in a determinate modal commitment?

The claim is analytic, not metaphysically modal. It follows from the definition of maximum indeterminacy: if a state possesses *no* determinate properties, then it does not possess the property of stability (changelessness over time). This is not a claim about what is metaphysically necessary across all possible worlds; it is a claim about what the concept of maximum indeterminacy entails. The analytic character of the claim distinguishes it from empirical claims about particular physical systems and from metaphysical claims about modal structure. It is a conceptual truth about what "maximum indeterminacy" means, not a hypothesis about the universe. (The quantum vacuum's inability to remain in a state of zero fluctuation is an empirical correlate of the conceptual point, but the conceptual point does not depend on the empirical correlate.)

As for the *specific form* that emergent structure takes — why this universe rather than some other — the present account does not claim to explain this. Two distinct steps must be kept apart. The conceptual argument establishes, analytically, that stasis is precluded: a state possessing no determinate properties cannot possess the property of stability, so persistence is ruled out by the concept itself. But the further claim — that *some* determinate structure will emerge — is not

secured by the conceptual argument alone. It is supported by the physical dynamics documented in Section 5.2: in all known physical systems, fluctuation in the absence of structural inhibition is amplified into stable ordered structures (Prigogine's dissipative structures, Kauffman's autocatalytic closure). The two steps together make the emergence of *some* structure physically credible, without entailing that *this particular* structure must emerge. The specific configuration of the actual world may involve contingency. What the combined argument — conceptual and physical — supports is the consistency, not the necessitation, of structural emergence.

6.1.4 The Hard Problem of Consciousness

The framework does not address the hard problem, and does not claim to. Honesty about this limitation is itself an application of the asymmetry principle: in the absence of sufficient justification for a particular account of consciousness, the appropriate position is to decline the commitment.

6.2 Conclusion

This paper has argued for a reorientation of ontological inquiry around a simple but far-reaching principle: the justificatory burden of determinate ontological commitments is asymmetric. Positive commitments — claims that entities exist with determinate properties — require justification. The refusal to make such commitments does not. This asymmetry, already recognised in legal reasoning, scientific methodology, and the logic of parsimony, has not been adequately applied to metaphysics, where the most far-reaching determinate commitments — essences, necessary beings, brute facts — are routinely treated as defaults rather than as claims bearing the heaviest burdens.

From this principle, two consequences follow. First, the only starting point for ontological inquiry that satisfies the terminus condition imposed by the concept of grounding is maximum indeterminacy: the state that carries zero determinate commitments. This is a meta-ontological conclusion — a constraint on where inquiry may legitimately begin — not a first-order claim about the ultimate constitution of reality. It dissolves Leibniz's question by showing that both "something" and "nothing" are determinate commitments, neither of which is the genuine default. Second,

maximum indeterminacy is inherently unstable — indeterminate with respect to all properties including stability — and therefore conceptually precludes stasis; and a consistency argument shows that in all known dynamical contexts, such uninhibited fluctuation gives rise to symmetry-breaking and self-organisation.

This two-step movement constitutes what I call *generative ontology*: a framework in which determinacy is not presupposed but generated, and in which the appearance of essence is explained as a product of attractor dynamics in generative networks rather than as a disclosure of the intrinsic nature of reality. Applications to essentialist phenomenology, comparative philosophy, and other domains remain to be developed in subsequent work.

Four limitations should be noted. First, the framework does not address the hard problem of consciousness. Second, it does not claim to reveal the ultimate structure of reality; it identifies the starting point that carries the lightest justificatory burden, which is a revisable methodological commitment. Third, the physical illustrations are offered as illustrative parallels, not constitutive arguments. Fourth, the relationship to religious cosmologies requires separate treatment.

The deepest motivation of this paper can be stated simply. Western metaphysics has long asked: "Given that reality has a determinate structure, what is that structure?" The present paper asks a prior question: "What justifies the assumption that reality has a determinate structure at all?" The answer, I have argued, is: nothing justifies it. If the asymmetry principle is correct — if the burden of justification falls on determinate commitments and not on the refusal to make them — then any inquiry into what is fundamental must begin from the only starting point that carries no unjustified weight: maximum indeterminacy. The paper does not claim that reality *is* indeterminate at bottom; it claims that indeterminacy is where inquiry must begin, because every alternative starting point assumes more than the grounding relation licenses. What the world turns out to be like, once the inquiry is pursued, is a further question — but the starting point from which that question is asked is no longer optional. Whether to accept this conclusion depends on whether the asymmetry principle itself has been adequately established. That question the preceding arguments have addressed; this is where they arrive.

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