

Dispensing with Ontological Levels: An Illustration (P. van Inwagen)

**The Bad Way:** Begin by giving examples of pairs of things that supposedly occupy different ontological levels (or one of which is ontologically more fundamental than the other or one of which is ontologically grounded in the other or one of which enjoys a special ontological status denied to the other). Proceed to use these examples as intuition pumps in the service of an affirmative answer to our question. Alternatively, play the other side of the game: insist that the default answer to our question is No, and dispute the examples that your opponents say support an affirmative answer—deny the existence of some of the entities that figure in the examples, or deny that there is any reason to suppose that the members of any of the pairs do occupy different ontological levels. (And similarly for the other formulations of the question.)

**The Good Way:** Let metaphysicians who accept the idea of ontological levels construct theories that incorporate that idea. Let metaphysicians who reject the idea of ontological levels construct theories that do not incorporate that idea. Once these things have been done—of course they will be done only if they are possible, only if it is possible to construct theories of both sorts—compare all the theories that our metaphysicians have constructed and determine which is the best. (I say ‘is’ for the sake of simplicity; in this paper, I’ll use ‘metaphysical theory’ to mean something fairly comprehensive—sufficiently comprehensive that any two “metaphysical theories” will be incompatible with each other. (What I am calling a metaphysical theory is what once would have been called a metaphysical system.) Thus, platonic realism and presentism are not metaphysical theories in the present comprehensive sense; but any metaphysical theory must in some way incorporate a theory of universals and a theory of time.) And—again, for no better reason than my desire to keep the sentences I have to write as simple as possible—I’ll ignore the possibility of two metaphysical theories tying for first place in the goodness sweepstakes.) And, finally, affirm the reality of ontological levels only if ontological levels figure in the best metaphysical theory. (And similarly for the other formulations of the question.)

- immanent universals
- kinds (natural or otherwise): species, genera, taxa
- tropes or individual accidents or property instances
- bare particulars or substrates
- mathematical entities: sets, numbers, vectors, functions, operators . . .
- events (or changes) and processes
- moments and intervals of time
- spatial points and lines and regions
- points in and regions of space-time
- stuffs and quantities of stuff: water; the water in this glass
- “derivative entities” or “ontological parasites” or “modes of substance”: holes, cavities or hollows, surfaces, waves, shadows, reflections . . .
- mental/perceptual/intentional entities (other than immaterial mental substances like Cartesian egos): pains, qualia, sensations, sense data, thoughts, episodes of reasoning, the witch that Hob thought had blighted his crop . . .
- linguistic entities: word-tokens, sentence-types, questions, tenses, languages . . .
- social entities: married couples, universities, football teams, political parties, religions, nations . . .