Implicit Prior Reference and the Necessity of an Ultimate Good

Constitutive Priority, Infinite Regress, and Aristotle's Hierarchy of Ends

Abstract

This paper develops a general metaphysical principle, Implicit Prior Reference, and applies it to Aristotle's argument for an ultimate good in Nicomachean Ethics I.1–2. The principle holds that every derivative structure necessarily presupposes what is primitive in the relevant order of constitution. Plurality presupposes unity; composition presupposes constituents; relations presuppose relata; and instrumental goodness presupposes the goodness of an end. These dependencies can be established universally, prior to examining any particular instance. Consequently, an infinite hierarchy of derivative structures cannot furnish an exception to the principle: every member remains subject to the same constitutive necessity.

The argument distinguishes universal presupposition from the further principle of non-derivative grounding. The former establishes that no derivative instance escapes its necessary conditions; the latter maintains that an operation cannot be the exhaustive constitutive source of what it necessarily presupposes. Together these principles explain why exclusively derivative constitution is insufficient without traversing an infinite regress.

Applied to practical philosophy, the argument shows that instrumental goodness is explanatorily subordinate to the goodness of an end. An exclusively instrumental hierarchy would consist entirely of derivative goodness. Under non-derivative grounding, genuine instrumental goodness must presuppose some goodness that is final: goodness for its own sake. Aristotle's further criteria of completeness and self-sufficiency concern the identification of the highest human good.

I. Introduction: The Derivative and the Primitive

Certain structures are intelligible only through reference to something prior to them. A plurality is a plurality of units. A composite is a composition of constituents. A relation is a relation between relata. An instrument is useful for the sake of an end.

In each case, the derivative structure presupposes something that is not supplied merely by asserting the derivative structure itself. Such presuppositions are constitutive: they concern the conditions under which the derivative structure is what it is.

> *Every derivative structure necessarily presupposes what is primitive in the relevant order of constitution.*

This principle of Implicit Prior Reference belongs to a longstanding investigation into the relation between what is prior and posterior, fundamental and derivative, and independently actual and dependent.[1] The argument proceeds from universal conceptual necessity, to actual constitutive conditions, to the insufficiency of an exclusively derivative order. It does not seek a primitive by traversing an infinite sequence.

II. Unity and Plurality

1. The conceptual priority of unity

A plurality is necessarily a plurality of units. Two is one and one; three is one, one, and one. To assert plurality is already to presuppose unity. The dependence is asymmetrical: a unit can be considered as one without first being considered as a plurality, whereas plurality cannot be considered as many without reference to units.

Every plurality necessarily presupposes units; therefore plurality presupposes unity, which is constitutively prior in this respect. The conclusion is universal: **every possible plurality necessarily presupposes unity**.[2]

2. Actual plurality and actual unity

Suppose an actual plurality exists. Because it necessarily consists of units, its constitutive units must actually exist in the relevant respect. The inference does not derive existence from a concept alone: conceptual analysis identifies the condition, and actuality supplies the existential premise.[3]

3. The universal scope of the demonstration

Suppose an opponent proposes a plurality composed entirely of further pluralities, each composed of still further pluralities, indefinitely. This does not eliminate the necessity of unity. The universal proposition applies to each member regardless of how many further pluralities it contains. There is no need to inspect every level or traverse the hierarchy to a final member.

An infinite plurality of pluralities cannot provide a plurality that escapes the priority of unity. This immediate conclusion concerns unity, not necessarily absolute mereological simplicity: one tree can have many parts. The further question of noncomposite grounding requires the parallel argument concerning composition.[4]

III. Complexity, Composition, and Simplicity

4. Composition presupposes constituents

A composite is constituted through the combination or organization of constituents. Composition therefore presupposes what is composed. The operation is constitutively posterior to its operands. The principle is analogous to unity and plurality, but is not derived from that argument: the modalities are parallel.[5]

5. Recursive complexity

If every constituent of a composite is itself composite, every member of the indefinitely descending hierarchy remains subject to the conditions of composition. The question is not whether a composite can contain further composites, but whether products of composition can exhaustively constitute the very constituents presupposed by composition.

> *An operation cannot be the exhaustive constitutive source of the operands whose actuality it presupposes.*

This is the substantive metaphysical thesis. It is stronger than the proposition that every composite has parts; it concerns the ontological sufficiency of exclusively derivative constitution.[6]

6. Simplicity and infinite divisibility

The argument does not require that material things be composed of smallest spatial particles. A continuous magnitude may be indefinitely divisible. Analysis investigates parts of an already constituted object; constitution concerns conditions of its actuality. Simplicity here signifies non-derivative constitution in the relevant order, not necessarily physical atomhood.[7]

IV. The General Principle

7. Parallel modalities

Plurality presupposes unity; composition presupposes constituents; division presupposes something divisible and determinate parts or possible divisions; relations presuppose relata; deficiency presupposes a positive condition or standard; instrumental goodness presupposes the goodness of an end. These are parallel applications, not successive steps, and need not identify the same primitive entity.

8. Reference and grounding

Universal Reference: Every possible instance of a derivative structure necessarily presupposes its corresponding constitutive condition.

Non-Derivative Grounding: Where a derivative operation presupposes something not constituted through that operation, an order consisting exclusively of its products cannot be ontologically exhaustive.

Universal dependence alone does not formally entail foundational termination: an infinite hierarchy may satisfy local dependence at every level without a least member. The paper therefore defends non-derivative grounding as an additional metaphysical principle, not a consequence of quantification alone.[8]

9. General demonstration

An actual derivative structure exists; its character presupposes constitutive conditions; those conditions must obtain wherever the actual derivative obtains; and the derivative operation cannot exhaustively constitute what it presupposes as prior. Therefore an order consisting exclusively of its products cannot be ontologically exhaustive. The fourth premise bears the substantive philosophical burden.

V. Infinite Regress and Constitutive Priority

10. The regress is already within the principle’s scope

Consider the assertion that every judgment is uncertain. If asserted with certainty, it already involves a commitment apparently excluded by its unrestricted formulation. The analogy illustrates how an assertion can disclose its presuppositions immediately; it is not an independent proof of metaphysical foundationalism.

To assert plurality presupposes unity; to assert composition presupposes constituents; to assert instrumental goodness presupposes the goodness of an end. The universal principle applies to any further instance, including every member of an infinite hierarchy.[9]

11. Ontological sufficiency

An opponent may propose an infinite hierarchy existing as a whole without successive construction or a first member. Infinity alone is not contradictory. Contemporary grounding theory distinguishes the prohibition of all descending chains from the weaker requirement that grounded things have some ungrounded grounds.[10] The present argument need only defend the latter.

Where a derivative operation presupposes non-derivative actuality, no exclusively derivative hierarchy, finite or infinite, can be an exhaustive account of that actuality.

12. The primitive

If an allegedly exhaustive order contains only products of an operation, while the operation necessarily presupposes something not produced by it, that order excludes a condition of its own constitution. The difficulty lies not in numerical infinity but in the conflict between exhaustive constitution and a necessary constitutive condition. The primitive is not discovered at the end of the regress: its necessity is implicit from the outset.

VI. Aristotle's Hierarchy of Practical Ends

13. Action and the good

Aristotle opens Nicomachean Ethics by observing that every art, inquiry, action, and choice appears to aim at some good (I.1, 1094a1–3). He distinguishes activities from products and describes subordinate pursuits serving governing arts: riding-equipment manufacture serves horsemanship, and horsemanship and related military pursuits serve strategy (1094a9–18). The end of the governing pursuit has explanatory priority over subordinate means.[11]

14. Eliminating unnecessary means

Suppose an agent pursues A solely for the sake of B. If B can be obtained directly without relevant loss or countervailing cost, A has no independent instrumental justification. This **principle of eliminating unnecessary means** reconstructs the explanatory structure of Aristotle's hierarchy rather than quoting an explicit Aristotelian formulation. It applies only to what is pursued solely as a means; an activity can also be valuable for itself.[12]

15. Instrumental and final goodness

Medicine is instrumentally good insofar as it contributes to health; tools insofar as they enable activities; money insofar as it enables other goods. In each case the means, considered precisely as an instrument, derives its value from the end.

The technically precise opposite of instrumental goodness is **final goodness**—goodness for its own sake. Intrinsic goodness is sometimes used similarly, but can instead refer to value grounded in nonrelational properties. The argument establishes final value, not necessarily value from intrinsic properties alone.[13]

VII. The Necessity of Final Goodness

16. Aristotle's regress

In Nicomachean Ethics I.2 (1094a18–22), Aristotle asks whether there is an end chosen for itself while other things are chosen for its sake. If everything were chosen for something further, desire would become empty and vain. The present argument reconstructs the difficulty through constitutive priority.

17. The universal structure

If every good were merely instrumental, every good would derive its value from a further end. If that end were instrumental, the dependence would recur. Yet every possible instrumental good remains subject to the same universal principle. An infinite hierarchy repeats the relation without removing the explanatory priority of the goodness of an end.

18. Formal demonstration

1. Genuine instrumental goodness exists.

2. Instrumental goodness is goodness for the sake of an end.

3. Therefore it necessarily presupposes the goodness of an end.

4. This necessity applies to every possible instrumental good.

5. An infinite hierarchy cannot remove the dependence because every member remains instrumental.

6. An exclusively derivative order cannot exhaustively constitute the non-derivative goodness presupposed by genuine instrumentality.

7. Therefore not all genuine goodness can be merely instrumental.

Conclusion: Some good must be final—good for its own sake.

19. Explanatory achievement

The difficulty is not that an agent could never complete an infinite sequence, nor that every infinite series is contradictory. It is that an exclusively instrumental hierarchy contains only derivative goodness. If genuine instrumental goodness exists, the order of goodness cannot be exhaustively instrumental.[14] Mere desire or apparent usefulness does not itself establish objective goodness.

VIII. Completeness, Self-Sufficiency, and Flourishing

20. From final goodness to the highest human good

The existence of final goodness does not establish exactly one final good. Aristotle's further investigation identifies and orders goods in a complete human life. In Nicomachean Ethics I.7 he introduces completeness and self-sufficiency.

21. Completeness

Aristotle distinguishes goods chosen for themselves and also for something further from what is always chosen for itself and never merely for another end (1097a25–1097b6). The most complete good is not subordinate to a further end.

22. Self-sufficiency

The self-sufficient good makes life choiceworthy and lacking in nothing essential (1097b6–20). This does not imply isolation: Aristotle includes human social relationships. Completeness concerns the absence of subordination; self-sufficiency concerns adequacy for flourishing.[15]

23. Human function

Aristotle identifies the highest human good as eudaimonia and develops the human-function argument, linking flourishing with excellent rational activity (1097b22–1098a20). That substantive ethical identification is distinct from the metaphysical proof that some final goodness must exist.[16]

IX. Conclusion

Implicit Prior Reference establishes that derivative structures necessarily presuppose what is prior in the relevant order of constitution. Plurality presupposes unity; composition presupposes constituents; relations presuppose relata; instrumental goodness presupposes the goodness of an end.

These dependencies are universal. No infinite hierarchy can provide an exception because every member remains subject to the original necessity. The further principle of non-derivative grounding holds that the derivative operation cannot exhaustively supply the actuality it presupposes.

An instrumental good is good for the sake of an end. An infinite hierarchy of such goods repeats that explanatory dependence. Thus, given genuine instrumental goodness and non-derivative grounding, **some good must be choiceworthy for its own sake**.

Aristotle’s criteria of completeness and self-sufficiency then address the positive identification of the highest human good. The many presupposes the one; the complex presupposes what is prior to composition; and the instrumental presupposes the finally good.

Scholarly Notes

1. Constitutive and explanatory priority

Aristotle distinguishes senses of priority in Metaphysics Δ.11 (1018b9–1019a14). See Kit Fine, “Guide to Ground,” in Metaphysical Grounding, ed. Correia and Schnieder (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 37–80; Jonathan Schaffer, “On What Grounds What,” ibid., 122–147. The proposed principle goes beyond the mere asymmetry of some explanations.

2. Unity and plurality

See Plato, Parmenides 137c–166c, and Aristotle, Metaphysics Δ.6 and I.1. These investigate distinct senses of unity and are precedents, not direct proofs of the present thesis.

3. Actuality

Aristotle, Metaphysics Θ, offers historical context for actuality and potentiality. The existential inference is valid only when the condition is constitutive of the actual structure, not merely a condition of describing it.

4. Unity is not simplicity

See Achille C. Varzi, “Mereology,” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, §3.4. Numerical unity does not entail mereological atomhood.

5. Leibniz

Leibniz, Monadology §§1–3 and Principles of Nature and Grace §1, argues from composites to simples. See Robert Merrihew Adams, Leibniz: Determinist, Theist, Idealist (Oxford University Press, 1994) for qualifications about aggregates and substances.

6. Foundational premise

Jonathan Schaffer, “Monism: The Priority of the Whole,” Philosophical Review 119, no. 1 (2010): 31–76. Priority monism shows that metaphysical fundamentality need not belong to smallest parts.

7. Gunk

David Lewis, Parts of Classes (Blackwell, 1991); Theodore Sider, “Van Inwagen and the Possibility of Gunk,” Analysis 53, no. 4 (1993): 285–289. Quantitative divisibility is distinct from ontological grounding.

8. Grounding

See “Metaphysical Grounding,” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, §2.4; Ricki Leigh Bliss, “Viciousness and the Structure of Reality,” Philosophical Studies 166 (2013): 399–418; Bliss and Graham Priest, eds., Reality and Its Structure (Oxford University Press, 2018).

9. Transcendental analogy

Compare Aristotle’s dialectical defense of noncontradiction, Metaphysics Γ.4 (1006a11–1007b18). An immediate conceptual presupposition is not by itself proof of an ontological fundamental.

10. Non-well-founded grounding

Ricki Leigh Bliss, “Viciousness and Circles of Ground,” Metaphilosophy 45, no. 2 (2014): 245–256, challenges the assumption that all grounding circles and regresses are vicious.

11. Aristotle’s hierarchy

Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics I.1, 1094a1–18; Sarah Broadie, Ethics with Aristotle (Oxford University Press, 1991).

12. Means and ends

The shortcut principle is the author’s reconstruction. Compare Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics III.3 (1112b11–1113a14), on deliberation concerning means.

13. Final and intrinsic value

Christine M. Korsgaard, “Two Distinctions in Goodness,” Philosophical Review 92, no. 2 (1983): 169–195. Final value need not be value grounded exclusively in nonrelational properties.

14. Moral foundationalism

See “Infinite Regress Arguments,” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, discussing Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics 1094a. The present paper offers a constitutive-priority reconstruction.

15. Completeness

Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics I.7, 1097a25–1097b20. Aristotle allows goods chosen both for themselves and for happiness.

16. Flourishing

Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics I.7, 1097b22–1098a20; Richard Kraut, Aristotle on the Human Good (Princeton University Press, 1989); Kraut, “Two Conceptions of Happiness,” Philosophical Review 88, no. 2 (1979): 167–197; C. D. C. Reeve, Practices of Reason (Oxford University Press, 1992).

Addendum: Scholastic Objections and Replies

Article I. Whether conceptual necessity entails actual existence

Objection. Conceptual dependence does not establish actual existence.

Reply. The argument begins with an actual derivative and identifies necessary constitutive conditions; it does not derive existence from concepts alone.

Article II. Whether infinite plurality dispenses with unity

Objection. Every unit might itself be a plurality.

Reply. Every member of the hierarchy remains a plurality and thus presupposes unity. Noncomposite grounding is a further claim.

Article III. Whether infinite complexity dispenses with simplicity

Objection. Every constituent might itself be composite.

Reply. Indefinite decomposition differs from exclusively derivative constitution. The additional non-derivative grounding principle must be defended against this objection.

Article IV. Whether infinite divisibility contradicts simplicity

Objection. A continuum may contain no indivisible spatial atoms.

Reply. The argument concerns non-derivative actuality, not smallest physical particles.

Article V. Whether the whole can be prior to its parts

Objection. Priority monism makes the whole fundamental.

Reply. A fundamental whole may satisfy the requirement of non-derivative actuality; the general argument does not demand smallest parts.

Article VI. Whether infinite grounding can be sufficient

Objection. An infinite hierarchy may exist without a first member.

Reply. No temporal first member is required. The dispute is whether an exclusively derivative order is ontologically sufficient.

Article VII. Whether goodness can be exclusively instrumental

Objection. Every means may serve another means indefinitely.

Reply. The universal reference persists at every level; non-derivative grounding rules out an exhaustively instrumental order.

Article VIII. Whether final goodness is necessarily intrinsic

Objection. Final value may depend on relational properties.

Reply. The conclusion concerns final goodness, not value grounded exclusively in intrinsic properties.

Article IX. Whether apparent goods establish objective goodness

Objection. Agents can desire what is not actually good.

Reply. The existential premise is genuine instrumental goodness, not merely apparent usefulness.

Article X. Whether final goodness entails one highest good

Objection. Several goods may be finally valuable.

Reply. The theorem establishes at least one final good; Aristotle’s additional criteria concern a comprehensive highest human good.

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