

Introduction

I. Grounding: A Historical Example

At one point during the Platonic dialogue which bears his name, Euthyphro proposes the following definition of piety:

- (*) An act is pious iff all the gods love it,

to which Socrates famously responds,

“Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?”
(*Euthyphro* 10a)

On one common interpretation, this question poses the following fatal dilemma for Euthyphro’s proposal:

- *horn #1*: A given act is loved by all the gods *because* it is pious.
problem: Then the gods are just *detectors* of piety, and we haven’t really found what ultimately makes that act pious.
- *horn #2*: A given act is pious *because* it is loved by all the gods.
problem: Then either (a) the gods love that act *because* it possesses certain characteristics which are the true ultimate grounds of its piety, or else (b) the gods’ love is *arbitrary* and not the proper thing to ground piety.

A similar objection is thought by many secular philosophers to constitute a knockdown objection to all attempts to ground morality in the commands (or will, or wishes) of a divine being.

Let’s put to one side the issue of whether this argument is successful, and put to one side the issue of whether this is a faithful interpretation of the actual argument that Socrates gives in the *Euthyphro*. (We’ll discuss these matters later in the semester.) Note two things about the argument as I have presented it:

1. I formulated the horns of the dilemma using the word “because,” but I just as easily could have used the phrases “in virtue of,” “grounds,” and “makes the case”:
“Is an act pious in virtue of its being loved by the gods, or is it loved by the gods in virtue of its being pious?”
“Is an act’s piety grounded in the fact that it is loved by the gods, or is an act’s being loved by the gods grounded in the fact that it is pious?”
“Does an act’s being loved by the gods make it the case that it is pious, or does its piety make it the case that it is loved by the gods?”
2. In order for this argument to have any chance of working, the relation being picked out by these various locutions must not be any of the following:
 - the causal “because” relation (since an act’s piety does not have causal powers);
 - the necessitation relation (since Euthyphro intends (*) to be a necessary truth);
 - a counterfactual/subjunctive conditional (for the same reason);
 - a supervenience relation (more on why later).

Rather, these uses of “because,” “in virtue of,” “grounds,” and “makes the case” all seem to be picking out a distinctively metaphysical relation of dependence (or its converse). Following Kit Fine, it has become customary to refer to this relation as *the grounding relation*. It will be the central focus of this seminar.

II. Grounding: Some Contemporary Examples

It's not just in discussions of the *Euthyphro* dilemma that grounding claims arise. Some other candidates for grounding claims (culled from Correia & Schnieder, "Grounding: An Opinionated Introduction," p. 1):

- Mental facts obtain because of neurophysiological facts.
- Legal facts are grounded in non-legal, e.g. social, facts.
- Normative facts are based on natural facts.
- Meaning is due to non-semantic facts.
- Dispositional properties are possessed in virtue of categorical properties.
- What accounts for the existence of a whole is the existence and arrangement of its parts.
- A set of things is less fundamental than its members.
- What makes something beautiful are certain facts about the reception of its beholders.
- A substance is prior to its tropes or modes.
- That snow is white is true because snow is white.

III. The Entangled History of Grounding and Supervenience

a puzzle: Given the plausibility and seeming importance of various grounding claims in philosophy, why has the grounding relation itself only become a serious object of inquiry in the past decade or so?

my hypothesis: For many years, people mistakenly identified *the grounding relation* and *the supervenience relation*, and as a result they tried to put the supervenience relation to work in areas in which the grounding relation is better suited to get at what they wanted to get at.

"Supervenience" has become a philosopher's term of art for a relation of necessary covariation between two sets of properties (or facts). The core idea behind supervenience (as the term is now used):

Set of properties A supervenes upon set of properties B just in case no two things can differ with respect to their A-properties without also differing with respect to their B-properties.

There are approximately a gazillion different ways of making this rough idea more precise. For example, Jaegwon Kim famously distinguished between the following three varieties of supervenience in his 1984 article "Concepts of Supervenience":

weak supervenience: Set of properties A *weakly supervenes* upon set of properties B =_{df} for any possible world w and any objects x and x' in w , if x in w is B-indiscernible from x' in w (i.e. x has in w precisely those B-properties that x' has in w), then x in w is A-indiscernible from x' in w .

strong supervenience: Set of properties A *strongly supervenes* upon set of properties B =_{df} for any possible worlds w and w' and any objects x in w and x' in w' , if x in w is B-indiscernible from x' in w' , then x in w is A-indiscernible from x' in w' .

global supervenience: Set of properties A *globally supervenes* upon set of properties B =_{df} for any possible worlds w and w' , if w and w' are B-indiscernible (i.e. w and w' have exactly the same world-wide pattern of distribution of B-properties), then w and w' are A-indiscernible.

This led to an active debate over the logical relations between these covariation theses (and others like them).

But, in fact, the word "supervenience" was first introduced in its distinctively philosophical sense to pick out *both* the idea of one set of properties necessarily covarying with another *and* the idea of one set of properties being grounded in (or depending on) another.

R. M. Hare's *The Language of Morals* (1952) is usually credited with being the first appearance in print of the distinctively philosophical use of the term "supervene" (although Hare himself claims that the term was already in use that way in Oxford in the 1940's, and the same idea appears without the label "supervenience" in earlier works by Sidgwick, Moore, and Ross, among others). Here is what Hare says:

"Let me illustrate one of the most characteristic features of value-words in terms of a particular example. It is a feature sometimes described by saying that 'good' and other such words are the names of 'supervenient' or 'consequential' properties. Suppose that a picture is hanging upon the wall and we are discussing whether it is a good picture; that is to say, we are debating whether to assent to, or dissent from, the judgment 'P is a good picture.' ... First let us notice a very important peculiarity of the word 'good' as used in this sentence. Suppose that there is another picture next to P in the gallery (I will call it Q). Suppose that either P is a replica of Q or Q of P, and we do not know which, but do know that both were painted by the same artist at about the same time. Now there is one thing that we cannot say; we cannot say 'P is exactly like Q in all respects save this one, that P is a good picture and Q not.' If we were to say this, we should invite the comment, 'But how can one be good and the other not, if they are exactly alike? There must be some *further* difference between them to make one good and other not.' Unless we at least admit the relevance of the question 'What makes one good and the other not?' we are bound to puzzle our hearers; they will think that something has gone wrong with our use of the word 'good.' Sometimes we cannot specify just what it is that makes one good and the other not; but there always must be something" (pp. 80-81, underlining mine).

"...since, as we have already remarked, 'good' is a 'supervenient' or 'consequential' epithet, one may always legitimately be asked when one has called something a good something, 'What is good about it?' Now to answer this question is to give the properties in virtue of which we call it good. Thus, if I have said, 'That is a good motor-car' and someone asks 'Why? What is good about it?' and I reply 'Its high speed combined with its stability on the road,' I indicate that I call it good in virtue of its having these properties or virtues. Now to do this is *eo ipso* to say something about other motor-cars which have these properties. If any motor-car whatever had these properties, I should have, if I were not to be inconsistent, to agree that it was, *pro tanto*, a good motor-car..." (p. 131, underlining mine).

"First, let us take the characteristic of 'good' which has been called its supervenience. Suppose that we say 'St. Francis was a good man.' It is logically impossible to say this and to maintain at the same time that there might have been another man placed in precisely the same circumstances as St. Francis, and who behaved in them in exactly the same way, but who differed from St. Francis in this respect only, that he was not a good man" (p. 145).

In the third of these passages, we find only the idea that supervenient properties necessarily covary with their subvening properties. However, in the first and second passages, we find a combination of that idea with the idea that the supervening properties obtain in virtue of the subvening properties.

Hare's use of the term "supervenience" did not catch on until Donald Davidson put it to use in the philosophy of mind in this famous passage from his 1970 article "Mental Events":

"Although the position I describe [i.e. anomalous monism] denies there are psychophysical laws, it is consistent with the view that mental characteristics are in some sense dependent, or supervenient, on physical characteristics. Such supervenience might be taken to mean that there cannot be two events alike in all physical respects but differing in some mental respect, or that an object cannot alter in some mental respect without altering in some physical respect" (p. 214, underlining mine).

This passage led to two trends:

1. It became standard to *define* supervenience as a relation of necessary covariation.
2. Often it was thought that this covariation relation *just is* the grounding/dependence relation. [Note Davidson's use of the "or" of identity.]

IV. Why Grounding Is Not Supervenience

Numerous authors have argued that the grounding relation is not the same as one or another supervenience relation (understood as a relation of necessary covariation), including Jonathan Dancy, Lawrence Lombard, Michael R. DePaul, Thomas R. Grimes, Jaegwon Kim, Kit Fine, Brian McLaughlin, Karen Bennett, Jonathan Schaffer, Gideon Rosen, and many others.

A sampling of the arguments they have offered:

- i. *Grounding can be a relation between particular facts or particular property instances, whereas supervenience is a relation between sets of properties or facts in general.*

For example, I might possess one property in virtue of possessing another, or it might be the case that one fact obtains because another fact obtains.

Supervenience, on the other hand, is a relation between sets of properties in general (regardless of whether they are instantiated), or between sets of facts in general (regardless of whether they obtain).

- ii. *Grounding and supervenience have different formal properties.*

It is usually held that the grounding relation is *irreflexive* and *asymmetric*, whereas the supervenience relation is *reflexive* and neither *symmetric* nor *asymmetric*.

This leads to counterexamples to the identity of grounding and supervenience of the following sort:

- a. Any set of properties A supervenes on itself, but no property instance grounds itself.
- b. The surface area of a perfect sphere supervenes on its volume and vice versa, but it is not true that a given perfect sphere both has the surface area it does in virtue of its having the volume it does and vice versa.

[Note that we can block this objection if we propose something like the following: A depends on B iff A supervenes on B and B does not supervene on A.]

- iii. *The grounding relation can draw distinctions between necessarily co-obtaining facts and between necessarily co-extensive properties, but the supervenience relation cannot.*

This leads to counterexamples of the following sort:

- c. Plausibly, the fact that {Socrates} exists is grounded in the fact that Socrates exists, and not vice versa. But the facts about which individuals exist and the facts about which singleton sets containing an individual exist supervene on one another.
- d. The debate over legal positivism can be interpreted as a debate over whether the legal facts are wholly grounded in the social facts, or whether they are grounded in the social facts plus the moral facts. But if the basic moral facts are necessary, then the legal facts supervene on the social facts iff the legal facts supervene on the social facts plus the basic moral facts.

Problems such as these eventually led Kim, probably the most prominent advocate of the philosophical importance of supervenience, to write the following:

“...supervenience itself is not an explanatory relation. It is not a ‘deep’ metaphysical relation; rather, it is a ‘surface’ relation that reports a pattern of property covariation, suggesting the presence of an interesting dependency relation that might explain it. But we don’t have a mind–body theory until we have something to say about the *ground* of mental–physical property covariation” (“Postscripts on Supervenience,” p. 167).

Or, in other words, Kim is saying that it is usually in virtue of the truth of a certain in-virtue-of claim that a given supervenience claim is true.