

Schaffer on Grounding

I. From Last Time: Rosen on Grounding and Reduction

Rosen proposes the following connection between (metaphysical) *reduction/analysis* and grounding:

Grounding-Reduction Link: If $\langle p \rangle$ is true and $\langle p \rangle$ reduces to $\langle q \rangle$, then $[p] \leftarrow [q]$.

Some examples of this link at work:

- If ABCD is a square, and if for it to be the case that ABCD is a square just is for it to be the case that ABCD is an equilateral rectangle, then [ABCD is a square] is grounded in [ABCD is an equilateral rectangle].
- If Fred is a bachelor, and if for it to be the case that Fred is a bachelor just is for it to be the case that Fred is an unmarried male, then [Fred is a bachelor] is grounded in [Fred is an unmarried male].

This requires Rosen to adopt a fine-grained conception of facts according to which [Fred is a bachelor] and [Fred is an unmarried male] are distinct facts.

(Somehow he thinks he can do this while still holding that *the property of being a bachelor* is identical to *the property of being an unmarried male*. I found this bit rather murky.)

What I don't understand: once we've gone this far, and once we've stressed that the sense of reduction at issue is a metaphysical (rather than semantic or conceptual) one, why don't we just *identify* (rather than link) this sort of reduction with grounding? Are there any cases in which $[p]$ is entirely grounded in $[q]$, but $\langle p \rangle$ does not (metaphysically) reduce to $\langle q \rangle$?

II. Schaffer on the Quinean and Aristotelian Conceptions of Metaphysics

Contemporary metaphysics textbooks often start with the Quine-Carnap debate. But according to Schaffer, this is a bad place to start, since that debate is an internecine dispute between anti-metaphysical pragmatists.

On Schaffer's view, we need to get back to a more Aristotelian conception of metaphysics.

Here he leans heavily on an interpretation of Aristotle according to which (i) metaphysics is "the discipline that studies substances and their modes and kinds" (p. 351), and (ii) substances are by definition fundamental (i.e. ungrounded) entities.

(I would like to bracket the issue of whether this is a good interpretation of Aristotle.)

The Quinean conception of metaphysics which Schaffer aims to overthrow:

the Quinean task for metaphysics: To say what exists.

the Quinean method of doing metaphysics: Extract existence commitments from our best theory.

The Aristotelian conception of metaphysics which Schaffer wants to put in its place:

the Aristotelian task for metaphysics: To say what grounds what.

the Aristotelian method of doing metaphysics: Deploy diagnostics for what is fundamental, together with diagnostics for grounding.

According to Quineans, the target of metaphysical inquiry is *flat*: it consists in a set E of entities, with no internal structure.

According to neo-Aristotelians, the target of metaphysical inquiry is *ordered*: it consists in an ordered pair $\langle F, G \rangle$ of fundamental entities and grounding relations, which generate the hierarchy of being.

Schaffer waffles between two different conceptions of neo-Aristotelianism:

permissive neo-Aristotelianism: Most existence questions (including all of the ones that animated Quine) are trivial, so metaphysics is almost entirely devoted to the Aristotelian task.

impermissive neo-Aristotelianism: A decent number of existence questions are non-trivial, so metaphysics consists in *both* the Quinean task *and* the Aristotelian task.

Sometimes it seems that neo-Aristotelianism as such involves a commitment to permissivism (see pp. 347, 348, 352), and other times it seems that it doesn't (see pp. 353, 354n6, 363).

III. Schaffer's Ontological Assumptions

assumption #1 (pp. 375-376): Grounding is a *relation* between *entities of arbitrary ontological category*.

Schaffer think he needs this because he wants grounding to specify the relation between a substance and its modes.

Actually, it's possible to subsume Schaffer's way of understanding the grounding relation within Rosen's way of understanding it, by taking "x grounds y" to be shorthand for either "[x exists] grounds [y exists]" or "[x has property P] grounds [y exists]" whenever x and y are not facts.

Schaffer's brief defense of assumption #1: we think the same is true of identity, so why is this so crazy? (Note: this rationale doesn't give us cross-categorical grounding truths.)

assumption #2 (pp. 364, 376): Grounding is *primitive* and *unanalyzable*.

It is very unclear to me what Schaffer means by this. Is he talking about *semantic* (or *conceptual*) primitiveness/unanalyzability, or about *metaphysical* primitiveness/unanalyzability? If the latter, then what is the relation between metaphysical primitiveness/unanalyzability and grounding?

Moreover, Schaffer comes perilously close to taking back assumption #2 in the article's final pages, when he seems to offer an *analysis* of grounding in terms of *abstraction* (pp. 377, 378).

IV. Schaffer on the Triviality of the Quinean Task

In the first stage of Schaffer's defense of the neo-Aristotelian approach to metaphysics, he argues that Quinean existence questions are trivial.

Schaffer takes the existence of *numbers*, *properties*, *mereological composites*, and *fictional characters* to be settled by the following four Moorean arguments:

proof of the existence of numbers:

1. There are prime numbers.
2. Therefore there are numbers.

proof of the existence of properties:

3. There are properties that you and I share.
4. Therefore there are properties.

proof of the existence of mereological composites:

5. My body has proper parts (e.g. my hands).
6. Therefore there are things with proper parts.

proof of the existence of fictional characters:

7. Arthur Conan Doyle created Sherlock Holmes.
8. Therefore Sherlock Holmes exists.

Schaffer insists that (1), (3), (5), and (7) are all truisms which command *Moorean certainty*: each is more credible than any philosopher's argument to the contrary.

He also insists that the inferences to (2), (4), (6), and (8) are all obviously valid.

Schaffer replies to three likely objections:

- *objection #1*: (1) is only true if we paraphrase it as meaning "According to the fiction of numbers, there are prime numbers" [and similarly for (3), (5), and (7)].
reply: These paraphrases are irrelevant: (1), (3), (5), and (7) are obviously true as stated.
- *objection #2*: The meaning of "are" has shifted from (1) to (2), and from (3) to (4).
reply: "...there is no shift in meaning. There is no linguistic evidence of any ambiguity in our idioms of existential quantification" (pp. 357-358).
- *objection #3 (Azzouni)*: Quantification is ontologically neutral: <'There are x 's> does not entail < x 's exist>.
reply: <'There are x 's> does indeed entail < x 's exist>, and to deny this is to accept unfathomable conjunctions such as "Number don't exist, but there are numbers."

Three other worries that one might have about Schaffer's arguments:

- *worry #1*: Nihilists about numbers, properties, and composite objects are likely to find Schaffer's claim that (1), (3), and (5) command Moorean certainty to be question-begging.
- *worry #2*: The argument for the existence of fictional characters is particularly shaky. Schaffer defends the validity of the inference from (7) to (8) by insisting that "to create something is to make it exist" (p. 359). But one might doubt that this true for the creation of fictional characters.

Some linguistic evidence in favor of this last claim: the badness (to my ear) of the following sentence is defeasible evidence that "create" is ambiguous in this way:

"Arthur Conan Doyle created Sherlock Holmes and thousands of new jobs in the publishing industry."

- *worry #3*: Even if one follows Schaffer in holding that the existence of *numbers*, *properties*, *mereological composites*, and *fictional characters* is trivial, it doesn't follow that most existence questions are trivial.

For example, consider the question of whether *free will*, or *moral requirements*, or *human rights*, or *knowledge of the external world*, exists. These are extremely important existence questions that cannot, in my opinion, be settled through mere Moorean table-thumping.

The one example of this sort that Schaffer does consider is the question of whether God exists. According to Schaffer, even this question has a trivial answer: yes, God exists, though for atheists God exists as a fictional character.

Three observations: (i) I'm not sure how seriously Schaffer expects us to take him here; (ii) this requires us to agree with Schaffer that fictional characters exist; (iii) it is very unclear what truism about God could serve as the premise in a Moorean argument whose conclusion is "Therefore God exists."

V. Schaffer on the Importance of the Aristotelian Task

In the second stage of Schaffer's defense of the neo-Aristotelian approach to metaphysics, he argues that Aristotelian fundamentality questions are interesting.

Examples of interesting philosophical debates which, according to Schaffer, are best thought of as turning on issues of metaphysical dependence/grounding:

- *metaphysical realism vs. idealism*: Are entities like rocks grounded in ideas, or independent of them?
- *realism vs. nominalism about universals*: Are properties fundamental, or are they derivative, being mere “shadows cast by predicates”?
- *substratum vs. bundle theories of objects*: Are objects prior to properties, or are properties prior to objects?
- *dualist vs. materialist theories of mind*: Is mind based on matter, or is mind independent of matter?

Schaffer insists that in all of these debates, the existence of the entities in question is not what is at issue; rather, the debate is over what grounds what.

objection: Grounding questions can be rephrased as existence questions, by packing grounding information into the description of a candidate entity.

Schaffer’s reply: (i) These aren’t the sorts of existence questions Quine considered. (ii) Even then, metaphysics is not about existence questions *per se*, but about existence questions of a certain sort (namely those that pack grounding information into the description of the entity in question). (iii) By this same trick, virtually any question can be rephrased as an existence question.

VI. Schaffer on Why the Quinean Method Presupposes Grounding

In the third stage of Schaffer’s defense of the neo-Aristotelian approach to metaphysics, he argues that the Quinean method of doing metaphysics presupposes an Aristotelian ordering structure to reality.

Schaffer’s interpretation of the Quinean method (p. 366):

stage 1: Identify the best theory.

stage 2: Identify the canonical logic.

stage 3: Translate the best theory into the canonical logic.

stage 4: Determine the domain of quantification required to render this translation true.

stage 5: Read the entity commitments off the elements of the required domain.

According to Schaffer, every single stage of this process requires presuppositions about ordering structure:

Aristotelian presupposition at stage 1: The best theory is a theory of the fundamental.

Why think this? It’s needed to deem *Bohmian mechanics plus geology* to be a worse theory than *Bohmian mechanics* on its own, and it’s needed to determine whether *Bohmian mechanics* is better than *the many-minds interpretation of quantum mechanics* (since they’re empirically equivalent).

Aristotelian presupposition at stage 2: The canonical logic turns (in part) on what is fundamental.

Why think this? Because the choice between *classical logic* and *intuitionist logic* turns (in part) on whether numbers are mind-dependent, and because the choice between *classical logic* and *dialetheist logic* turns (in part) on whether there are impossible worlds, which turns on whether worlds are basic entities or set-theoretic constructions.

Aristotelian presupposition at stage 3: The apt translations are into talk of the fundamental.

Why think this? Otherwise we couldn’t rule out *inverted translations*.

At the 4th and 5th stages, Schaffer doesn’t in fact identify an Aristotelian *presupposition* of Quine’s method; rather, he proposes some Aristotelian machinery that allows one to avoid being saddled with certain Quinean theses he doesn’t like (namely, *ontological relativity* and *eliminativism*) when one employs the Quinean method.