

Fine on Grounding (Pt. 1)

I. The Dialectic of “The Question of Realism”

Fine’s task in “The Question of Realism”: to figure out how to formulate and assess the debate between *realists* and “*non-skeptical antirealists*” about various domains (his main two examples are *mathematics* and *morality*).

A non-skeptical antirealist (henceforth: antirealist) accepts <There are prime numbers between 2 and 6> and <Killing babies for fun is wrong>, yet denies <There are numbers> and <There are moral truths>.

According to Fine, this requires the antirealist to countenance a *metaphysical conception of reality*.

Two main ways of understanding that conception (and two corresponding varieties of antirealism):

1. metaphysical reality = “objective” or “factual” reality
antirealism = antifactualism (a denial that the propositions in a given domain are “in the business” of stating facts “out there” in the real world)
2. metaphysical reality = what is “irreducible” or “fundamental”
antirealism = reductionism (every fact in a given domain is reducible to facts of some other sort)

[Two warnings: (i) unlike some authors we have read, Fine does *not* take “fundamental” and “ungrounded” to be synonyms; (ii) Fine assumes that reduction has antirealist import.]

According to Fine, “the prospects for defining the notions of factuality and reducibility in fundamentally different terms ... do not look good” (p. 11).

Fine’s objections to various attempts to define factuality and reducibility in other terms (see pp. 4-11) are extremely interesting and strike me as mostly correct. However, the disparate nature of these objections leaves one wondering why there is an in-principle problem here.

The unintelligibility of factuality and reducibility in other terms leads to a challenge from so-called *quietists*:

- The *extreme* (or *conceptual*) *quietist* insists that the metaphysical notions of factuality and reducibility do not make sense.

reply #1: The usual basis for rejecting the intelligibility of a whole sphere of concepts is by appeal to the very distinctions that the quietist is here rejecting.

reply #2: Factuality and reducibility appear to make sense, and “the fact that a notion appears to make sense is strong *prima facie* evidence that it does make sense” (p. 13).

reply #3: These notions are indispensable when formulating certain metaphysical issues, such as the debate between A-theorists and B-theorists over the reality of time. (To which the extreme quietist will reply: so much the worse for that debate, and others like it.)

- The *moderate* (or *methodological*) *quietist* holds that there is no way of ascertaining what is or is not factual or what does or does not reduce to what.

Fine takes the moderate quietist’s challenge very seriously, and the second half of his paper constitutes a reply to that challenge.

Fine will make unrepentant use of metaphysical notions of factuality and reducibility: “...for the purposes of dispelling methodological doubts, it is better to throw conceptual caution to the winds and adopt whatever models or metaphors might help us understand how the concepts are to be employed” (p. 14).

II. Fine on the Metaphysics and Epistemology of Ground

metaphysical assumption #1 (p. 15): A statement of ground can be cast in the following canonical form:

Its being the case that p consists in nothing more than its being the case that q, r, \dots ,
where “ p ,” “ q ,” “ r ,” ... are particular sentences.

Thus, for Fine, the word “grounds” is a sentential operator, like “if... then...” or “unless” (p. 16).

quibble: “ p grounds q ” is not grammatical when “ p ” and “ q ” are sentences; however, “ p because q ” is.

Fine prefers the sentential-operator view because “it shows that there is no need to suppose that a ground is some fact or entity in the world or that the notion of ground is inextricably connected with the concept of truth” (p. 16).

However, Fine often slides into treating grounding as a *relation* between *true propositions*, and it is unclear whether he could make every claim he makes without resorting to proposition talk.

(In general, I find that the most serious impediment to fully understanding this article is coming to grips with what Fine means by “proposition”: Finean propositions are always candidates for being true or false, but sometimes they are—somehow—true without being factual.)

metaphysical assumption #2 (pp. 15-16): Ground is the tightest explanatory relation that exists between truths.

Thus Fine rejects that idea that invocations of a “*normative*” *in-virtue-of* relation are instances of grounding:

“...the fact that someone broke a promise may ‘normatively’ account for his having done something wrong, but that is still compatible his wrongdoing’s consisting in something more than his having broken the promise” (pp. 15-16; compare “Guide to Ground,” pp. 1-3).

epistemological assumption (pp. 21-22): There are two main sources of evidence for making judgments of ground:

(i) intuitions (both positive and negative), and (ii) appeal to explanatory considerations such as “simplicity, breadth, coherence, or non-circularity.”

III. Fine on How to Settle Questions of Factuality

Let P = the true proposition upon whose factuality the factualist and antifactualist disagree.

Fine wishes to show that, given certain plausible assumptions, their disagreement over the factuality of P leads to a disagreement over what grounds what.

slight worry: Showing that the factualist and the antifactualist inevitably disagree on questions of grounds is not the same as showing that their disagreement is *nothing more than this*.

Stage 1: If P is basic (i.e. ungrounded), then proceed to the next step.

If P is grounded, then let Q, R, S, \dots be the basic propositions in which P is grounded.

There must be at least one of these, say Q , which the factualist takes to be factual and which the antifactualist takes to be nonfactual.

Substitute the present Q for the previous P , and proceed to the next stage.

Assumptions on which Stage 1 depends:

- (a) Any true nonbasic factual proposition is grounded in basic propositions.
- (b) No nonfactual proposition has a ground consisting entirely of factual propositions.
- (c) No factual proposition is partly grounded in a nonfactual proposition.

Potential worries:

- As we shall see during our seventh meeting, (a) is controversial. Fine claims that this assumption is “dispensable” because it remains true if we replace “basic” with “fundamental” (and, presumably, because (g) below also remains true when we make a similar change).
- Assumption (b) is only plausible given Fine’s stipulation that his notion of grounding does not cover normative in-virtue-of claims.

Stage 2: The antifactualist must acknowledge that at least one of P’s constituents is nonfactual.

Let C, D, ... be the constituents of P which our antifactualist takes to be nonfactual.

Our factualist must take at least one of these constituents, say C, to be factual (since presumably the factualist agrees with the antifactualist that if C, D, ... were all nonfactual, P would be nonfactual).

Assumption on which Stage 2 depends:

- (d) Any nonfactual proposition contains a nonfactual constituent.

Stage 3: Though our factualist and antifactualist disagree over whether C is factual, it is plausible to hold that they can find a true proposition P⁺ which essentially contains C and which they agree to be factual.

for example: P⁺ = <S said P> or <S believes P> or <Word w refers to C>

(A proposition *essentially* contains a constituent iff that constituent’s replacement by some other constituent induces a shift in truth-value.)

Let us suppose that the factualist and antifactualist agree that all of the constituents in P⁺ other than C are factual.

Assumption on which Stage 3 depends:

- (e) Any nonfactual constituent is essentially contained in some true factual proposition.

Potential worry:

- Our antifactualist might take all propositions concerning meaning, reference, belief, and justification to be nonfactual.

reply #1 (p. 20): Global antifactualism must be established in a piecemeal fashion.

reply #2 (p. 23): The antifactualist must concede [why?] there to be a factual standard of correctness for beliefs, and a factual sense in which someone is responsive to the facts.

Stage 4: The antifactualist holds that P⁺ is *imperfectly factual*: it is factual but contains a nonfactual constituent.

Thus the antifactualist must hold that P⁺ has a ground which is *perfectly factual*: it is factual and contains only factual constituents. Let R, S, T, ... be this putative ground.

C does not occur in R, S, T, ... (since the antifactualist deems R, S, T, ... to be perfectly factual).

The factualist must hold that, since C occurs in a true basic factual proposition, and since C occurs essentially in P⁺, every ground of P⁺ includes at least one proposition which contains C as a constituent.

Thus the factualist will deny that R, S, T, ... grounds P⁺. A disagreement on a question of ground is thereby secured.

Assumption on which Stage 4 depends:

- (f) Any true imperfectly factual proposition has a perfectly factual ground.
- (g) Whenever a constituent occurs in a true basic factual proposition and also occurs essentially in some true factual proposition, then any ground for the latter proposition must contain the constituent.

Potential worry:

- As formulated, (g) seems to be false. For example, even if *wrongness* occurs in a true basic proposition, <S believes that abortion is wrong> might be true without being grounded in a proposition that contains *wrongness* (if, for example, S believes that abortion is wrong for completely stupid reasons).

V. Fine on How to Settle Questions of Fundamentality

Rather than define the concept of *fundamental reality* in terms of the relative concept of one thing being *less fundamental than* (or *reducible to*) another, Fine thinks we should take the absolute concept to be primitive and define the relational concept in terms of it (p. 25).

[Thus, from this point on, Fine stops using “fundamental” and “irreducible” as synonyms, and he starts using “fundamental” and “real” as synonyms.]

This absolute conception of fundamental reality is “the conception of Reality as it is in itself” (ibid.)

What does that come to? Fine tells us: “One might think of the world and of the propositions by which the world is described as each having its own intrinsic structure; and a proposition will then describe how things are in themselves when its structure corresponds to the structure of the world” (ibid.). But then he takes this back: “[This picture] need not commit one to the view that there are facts in the world whose structure might correspond to the structure of the propositions or sentences by which they might be described” (pp. 25-26, n. 35). Huh?

Fine’s proposal for how to define the relational concept in terms of the absolute concept:

True proposition P *reduces to* propositions Q, R, ... iff (i) P is not real; (ii) P is grounded in Q, R, ... ; and (iii) each of Q, R, ... is either real or grounded in what is real.

How do we determine what is real/fundamental?

Fine proposes the following:

the metaphysical nexus: A true proposition is factual iff it is real or it is grounded in what is real.

(In fact, Fine already appealed to this nexus earlier, on p. 20, during his defense of (g).)

It follows that if a true proposition is basic (i.e. ungrounded) and factual, then it is real.

How, though, do we determine whether a grounded proposition is real?

Here, it seems, we must consult the same sort of evidence we use to make judgments about ground: (i) our intuitions about what is real, and (ii) explanatory considerations.

In some cases, we have an intuition that a true proposition is real, despite being grounded.

Fine’s example (p. 27): If water is indefinitely divisible and water through-and-through, then any true proposition about the location of a given body of water is entirely grounded in true propositions about the location of smaller bodies of water, but intuitively all of these are real.

Fine argues that, except in cases like this in which we have a special reason for thinking that a grounded proposition is real, grounded propositions should be taken to be unreal (pp. 27-28), but his argument here is not terribly convincing, since it is unclear what counts as a “case like this.”