Are There Ungrounded Truths?

I. Introduction

Two issues we'll be discussing today:

- Can there be *brute facts*—i.e. facts that are not grounded in other facts?

- Can there be groundings "all the way down"—i.e. an infinite sequence of distinct facts F_1, F_2, F_3, . . . such that (*i*) all of these facts obtain, and (*ii*) F_1 is partially grounded in F_2, F_2 is partially grounded in F_3, and so on?

These issues are connected. If we assume the partial grounding relation to be transitive and irreflexive, then a "no" answer to the first question entails a "yes" answer to the second.

It is also possible to give a "yes" answer to both questions.

But usually people who answer "yes" to the first question answer "no" to the second question.

II. Della Rocca's Argument against Brute Facts

Della Rocca interprets the Principle of Sufficient Reason (a.k.a. the PSR) as being a claim about grounding. (He uses explanation and grounding talk interchangeably.) He formulates the PSR two different ways:

". . . for each thing (object, state of affairs, or whatever) that exists or obtains, there is an explanation of its existence, there is a reason that it exists" (p. 1).

". . . for each truth, there is an explanation of its truth" (p. 1, n. 2).

The second of these is, on the face of it, stronger than the first. If we stick to Rosen's conventions, we can formulate these two versions of the PSR as follows:

Existential PSR: For any fact of the form [x exists] or [x obtains], there is some set of facts Γ which fully grounds that fact.

Factual PSR: For any fact, there is some set of facts Γ which fully grounds that fact.

Factual PSR entails that there are no brute facts of any sort, whereas Existential PSR on its own only entails that there are no brute facts about what exists or about what obtains.

However, if we assume either of the following:

first style of deflationism about facts: [p] is identical to [[p] obtains].

second style of deflationism about facts: [p] and [[p] obtains] are distinct facts, but they necessarily co-obtain and have the exact same grounds.

then Existential PSR entails Factual PSR, and vice versa.

an explicability argument = an argument in which "a certain state of affairs is said not to obtain simply because its obtaining would be inexplicable, a so-called brute fact" (p. 2).

Some very plausible explicability arguments:

1. *Archimedes' scale*: Imagine a balance in which everything is alike on both sides, and with equal weights hung on the two ends of the balance.

    (EA$_{1a}$) <The balance is not at rest> would be inexplicable, if true.

    (EA$_{1b}$) Facts about whether or not the balance is at rest are not inexplicable.

    (EA$_{1c}$) So, the balance is at rest.

2. *brute dispositions*: Suppose two objects, X and Y, in the same world are categorically exactly alike.

   (EA$_{2a}$)   <X dissolves in water but Y doesn't> would be inexplicable, if true.

   (EA$_{2b}$)   Facts about objects' dispositional properties are not inexplicable.

   (EA$_{2c}$)   So, <X dissolves in water but Y doesn't> is false.

3. *Parfit's case*: Suppose there is a person, A, whose brain is cut in half. Each half is placed in a different and new body. Each of the two people, B and C, thus produced is equally (and significantly) psychologically continuous with the original person.

   (EA$_{3a}$)   <A=B and A≠C> would be inexplicable, if true.

   (EA$_{3b}$)   Facts about personal identity are not inexplicable.

   (EA$_{3c}$)   So, <A=B and A≠C> is false.

Some more controversial explicability arguments:

4. *explicability argument for consciousness*:

   (EA$_{4a}$)   If facts about consciousness were not dependent on more fundamental facts, then facts about consciousness would be inexplicable.

   (EA$_{4b}$)   Facts about consciousness are not inexplicable.

   (EA$_{4c}$)   So, facts about consciousness are dependent on more fundamental facts.

5. *explicability argument for modality*:

   (EA$_{5a}$)   If facts about modality were not dependent on more fundamental facts, then facts about modality would be inexplicable.

   (EA$_{5b}$)   Facts about modality are not inexplicable.

   (EA$_{5c}$)   So, facts about modality are dependent on more fundamental facts.

Della Rocca's most controversial explicability argument:

6. *explicability argument for existence*:

   (EA$_{6a}$)   If facts about existence (i.e. facts of the form [*x* exists]) were ungrounded, then facts about existence would be inexplicable.

   (EA$_{6b}$)   Facts about existence are not inexplicable.

   (EA$_{6c}$)   So, facts about existence are grounded in other facts.

(EA$_{6c}$) entails Existential PSR. (But it does not entail Factual PSR unless we make additional assumptions.)

   Della Rocca's central argument:

   P1. Explicability arguments #1-3 are clearly acceptable. [*premise*]

   P2. Explicability argument #6 entails the PSR. [*premise*]

   C1. So, non-rationalists must draw a line between the acceptable and unacceptable explicability arguments. [*follows from P1, P2*]

   P3. This line must be either explainable or unexplainable. [*premise*]

   P4. To posit an unexplainable line is to beg the question against the rationalist. [*premise*]

   P5. There is no good explanation of where the line between acceptable and unacceptable explicability arguments falls. [*premise*]

   C2. So, explicability argument #6 is acceptable and the PSR is true. [*follows from C1, P3, P4, P5*]

Unfortunately this argument is not valid as it stands. We need to add a premise to the effect that a position can only be true if it is possible to offer a non-question-begging defense of it.

- *objection #1*: We can draw a principled line by appealing to intuition: intuitively, explanation is needed in some of these cases but not in others.

  Della Rocca's reply: ". . . this appeal to intuition is simply question-begging. And this is because the apparent intuition that [at least in some cases] existence is not in need of explanation has been challenged" (p. 8).

  > *worry #1*: If that's all it takes for an appeal to intuition to beg the question, then intuitions become dialectically impotent. No one could ever deny a position for which a philosopher provides an argument by pointing out that it has a counterintuitive consequence.

  > *worry #2*: One philosopher's *modus ponens* is another philosopher's *modus tollens*. So the non-rationalist could run Della Rocca's argument in reverse and argue that the intuitions to which he appeals also beg the question.

- *objection #2*: Van Inwagen and Bennett have successfully argued that the PSR entails *necessitarianism*, the view that all truths are necessary truths. But necessitarianism is implausible. So the explicability argument for existence must be illegitimate.

  Della Rocca's reply: This once again begs the question.

  a better reply: Van Inwagen and Bennett's argument is unconvincing.

  > *the van Inwagen/Bennett argument*: Suppose for reductio that Factual PSR is true and that there are contingent facts. Let P be the conjunction of all contingent facts. Given Factual PSR, P must be grounded in some other fact R. R is either necessary or contingent. If R is necessary, then P is necessary as well, so all of P's conjuncts are necessary, which is a contradiction. If R is contingent, then it is a conjunct of P. Since P grounds each of its conjuncts, it follows by transitivity that R grounds itself. But no contingent fact can ground itself, so we have a contradiction again.

  There are two major problems with this argument (and some minor ones as well):

  > i. It makes the implausible assumption that [*p* & *q*] always grounds [*p*].

  > ii. It neglects the possibility that a fact might be grounded in a plurality of facts. If P is grounded in some set of contingent facts that does not include P or anything which P grounds, no contradiction arises.

- *objection #3*: Explicability arguments #1-3 are very different from explicability arguments #4-6. In #4-6, the first premise is trivial, given that we are taking "inexplicable" and "ungrounded" to be synonymous. But in #1-3, there is an argument that can be offered for the first premise.

  > For example, here is an argument for (EA$_{3a}$):

  > > [A=B and A≠C] must be grounded in [A=B], [A≠C].

  > > But given the symmetry of the situation, any plausible candidate for something that grounds [A=B] would also ground [A=C].

  reply: Even if this is so, the crucial issue in each of these explicability arguments is whether the second premise is true. And so we still need to say something about where to draw the line between the second premises which are true and those which are false.

III. Cameron on Groundings "All the Way Down"

Cameron notes three interesting implications of there being no groundings "all the way down": (*i*) it serves as a crucial premise in one plausible way of interpreting Bradley's regress; (*ii*) it forces us to reject either the existence of gunk (an object each of whose proper parts has a proper part) or the claim that a complex object is dependent on its part; and (*iii*) it forces us to reject non-eliminative anti-realism about the mental.

Some arguments against there being groundings "all the way down" that Cameron does not find convincing:

- *argument #1*: If we have an infinite sequence of distinct entities such that the existence of each depends on the existence of the entities at the next level, then—as Schaffer puts it—"[b]eing would be infinitely deferred, never achieved."

  Cameron's reply: Why is this so? Metaphysical priority is not temporal priority. It's not as if God has to *first* make an entity exist in order to *then* (sometime later) make the entities on which it depends exist; he can make them all together.

- *argument #2a*: Dependent things are less real than the things on which they depend. So if there were infinitely descending chains of dependence, nothing in those chains would be real.

  Cameron's reply: "Why could not everything get a bit more real as we progress down the chain, without anything being wholly real?" (p. 10). Moreover, to insist that this is not possible is just to appeal to the very intuition we are trying to support.

- *argument #2b*: Dependent things are unreal and fundamental (i.e. independent) things are real. So if there were infinitely descending chains of dependence, nothing in those chains would be real.

  Cameron's reply: What does "real" mean here? If "real" means "fundamental," then this argument begs the question. If "is real" means "exists," then it is false that dependent things are unreal. If "real" means "mind-independent," then we are just assuming that it is false that everything is mind-dependent, but it is not clear how to establish this without relying on the very intuition we are trying to support. And if "real" does not mean any of these, then it is not clear what it means in this argument.

- *argument #3*: If there were infinitely descending chains of dependence, then while every entity in the chain would be grounded, there would be nothing to ground the chain itself.

  Cameron's reply: Why must there be nothing to ground the chain? Maybe the chain of entities is grounded in some new entity, which itself is grounded via a new infinite chain of entities. And maybe that new infinite chain of entities is grounded in another entity, which itself is grounded via yet another infinite chain of entities. And so on.

Cameron's preferred way of arguing that there are no infinitely descending chains of dependence does not attempt to derive this conclusion from more basic metaphysic principles, but rather appeals to the *theoretical utility* of postulating there to be no chains of this sort:

> "If we seek to explain some phenomena, then, other things being equal, it is better to give the same explanation of each phenomenon than to give separate explanations of each phenomenon. A unified explanation of the phenomena is a theoretical benefit. This seems to provide some evidence for the intuition under discussion. For if there is an infinitely descending chain of ontological dependence, then while everything that needs a metaphysical explanation . . . has one, there is no explanation of everything that needs explaining. That is, it is true for every dependent x that the existence of x is explained by the existence of some prior object (or set of prior objects), but there is no *collection of objects* that explains the existence of every dependent x. This is a theoretical cost; it would be better to be able to give a common metaphysical explanation for every dependent entity. We can do that only if every dependent entity has its ultimate ontological basis in some *collection of independent entities*; so this provides reason to believe the intuition against infinite descent in metaphysical explanation" (p. 12, emphasis mine).

I find this passage very puzzling. At most it seems to establish that, when other theoretical considerations do not outweigh considerations of unity, we should not postulate there to be groundings "all the way down."

Also, the italicized portions hide a problem: if all we want is a single (possibly infinite) *collection of entities* that explains everything, then we can get that if there are infinitely descending chains of dependence; but if what we want is a single *collection of independent entities* that explains everything, then it is not clear how to justify this criterion without begging the question at issue.