Phil. 256: Becausal Relations
Oct. 6, 2021

Meeting 5: Pluralism about Grounding

I. Fine's Moderate Grounding Pluralism

Let us distinguish:

> *grounding pluralism*: There are at least two fundamentally distinct grounding relations.
>
> *grounding monism*: There is a fundamentally unique grounding relation.
>
> > Grounding relation R_1 is *fundamentally distinct* from grounding relation $R_2 =_{df}$ R_1 and R_2 are distinct relations, neither of which can be defined in terms of the other, and there is no grounding relation R_3 such that R_1 and R_2 can both be defined in terms of R_3.
> >
> > Grounding relation R is *fundamentally unique* $=_{df}$ all other grounding relations can be defined in terms of R.

Why do we need the 'fundamentally distinct'-qualifier? Because otherwise anyone who draws a distinction between *partial* and *full grounding* (and defines partial grounding in terms of full grounding in the standard way) would count as a grounding pluralist.

Fine is a grounding pluralist; he holds that there are three fundamentally distinct grounding relations:

- *metaphysical grounding* (his example: "The fact that the ball is red and round obtains in virtue of the fact that it is red and the fact that it is round");
- *natural grounding* (his example: "The fact that the particle is accelerating obtains in virtue of the fact that it is being acted upon by some net positive force");
- *normative grounding* (his example: "The fact that his action is wrong obtains in virtue of the fact that it was done with the sole intention of causing harm").

In "The Unity of Grounding," I argue that a number of central debates in normative areas of philosophy are best formulated in terms of the very grounding relation that metaphysicians have been studying, including:

- in normative ethics, the debate between consequentialists and their opponents;
- in metaethics, the debate over the "reasons first" approach to normativity;
- in epistemology, the debate between foundationalists, coherentists, and infinitists over whether a belief's "justifiers" always include at least one other belief inferentially related to that belief.

So Fine's pluralism represents a challenge to these claims, insofar as he will insist that these debates concern *normative grounding*, whereas metaphysicians have been studying a distinct relation of *metaphysical grounding*.

I argue against Fine-style pluralism by deploying the following basic strategy:

i. Find a logical principle that relates several grounding claims to one another and that holds when it is applied exclusively to metaphysical grounding, or exclusively to natural grounding, or exclusively to normative grounding.

ii. Argue that the logical principle also holds in mixed cases.

iii. Infer that the best explanation of (i) and (ii) is that there is a single generic grounding relation underlying these more specific grounding relations.

I implement the strategy by focusing on Transitivity and Asymmetry as my logical principles, but I could have used others, such as:

> (*) If *f* is distinct from *g*, *g* immediately fully grounds *h*, *h* is not metaphysically overdetermined, and *f* partially grounds *h*, then *f* partially grounds *g*.

II. The Argument from Transitive Links

It is extremely plausible that *metaphysical grounding* and *normative grounding* are both transitive relations (where, unless otherwise specified, all grounding relations are partial):

(Tran$_{met}$) If *f* metaphysically grounds *g*, and *g* metaphysically grounds *h*, then *f* metaphysically grounds *h*.

(Tran$_{nor}$) If *f* normatively grounds *g*, and *g* normatively grounds *h*, then *f* normatively grounds *h*.

It is also extremely plausible that mixed versions of these principles hold:

(Tran$_{met/nor}$) If *f* metaphysically grounds *g*, and *g* normatively grounds *h*, then *f* (in some non-rigged-up sense) grounds *h*.

(Tran$_{nor/met}$) If *f* normatively grounds *g*, and *g* metaphysically grounds *h*, then *f* (in some non-rigged-up sense) grounds *h*.

(Why the 'in some non-rigged-up sense'-qualifier? Because otherwise we could trivially make these two principles true by defining a notion of grounding that is the transitive closure of the disjunction of metaphysical and normative grounding.)

(These days I would prefer to drop that qualifier and simply insist that if metaphysical and normative grounding really are fundamentally distinct, then the transitive closure of their disjunction is no type of grounding relation at all, even a rigged-up one.)

To see why the mixed transitivity principles are plausible, consider the following facts:

o = [Either she acted wrongly in telling him, or she acted in a way she believed to be wrong];

w = [She acted wrongly in telling him];

s = [She could have done something else instead of telling him that would have brought more overall happiness];

l = [She could have lied instead of telling him, her lying would have brought about 100 overall units of happiness, and her telling him brought about 20 overall units of happiness].

If *l* metaphysically grounds *s*, and *s* normatively grounds *w*, then surely *l* also—in some sense—grounds *w*.

If *s* normatively grounds *w*, and *w* normatively grounds *o*, then surely *s* also—in some sense—grounds *o*.

But why on earth would metaphysical and normative grounding be logically related to each other in this way if they were fundamentally distinct, as Fine holds them to be?

- *analogy #1 (typical case involving fundamentally distinct relations)*:

  Sometimes when we say that one city is larger than another, we mean that the first city is *larger in area* than the second, and sometimes we mean that the first city is *larger in population* than the second. Each of these relations is transitive:

  (Tran$_{area}$) If *a* is larger$_{area}$ than *b*, and *b* is larger$_{area}$ than *c*, then *a* is larger$_{area}$ than *c*.

  (Tran$_{pop}$) If *a* is larger$_{pop}$ than *b*, and *b* is larger$_{pop}$ than *c*, then *a* is larger$_{pop}$ than *c*.

  But the following mixed transitivity principles are obviously false:

  (Tran$_{area/pop}$) If *a* is larger$_{area}$ than *b*, and *b* is larger$_{pop}$ than *c*, then *a* is larger (in some sense) than *c*.

  (Tran$_{pop/area}$) If *a* is larger$_{pop}$ than *b*, and *b* is larger$_{area}$ than *c*, then *a* is larger (in some sense) than *c*.

  Why is this so? Because these two larger-than relations are fundamentally distinct from each other.

- *analogy #2 (typical case involving fundamentally related relations)*:

  The relations *being a matrilineal descendant of* and *being a patrilineal descendant of* are both transitive:

  (Tran$_{mat}$) If x is a matrilineal descendant of y, and y is a matrilineal descendant of z, then x is a matrilineal descendant of z.

  (Tran$_{pat}$) If x is a patrilineal descendant of y, and y is a patrilineal descendant of z, then x is a patrilineal descendant of z.

  In this case, the following mixed transitivity principles also hold:

  (Tran$_{mat/pat}$) If x is a matrilineal descendant of y, and y is a patrilineal descendant of z, then x is a descendant (in some sense) of z.

  (Tran$_{pat/mat}$) If x is a patrilineal descendant of y, and y is a matrilineal descendant of z, then x is a descendant (in some sense) of z.

  Why is this so? Because these two relations can both be defined in terms of the relation *being a child of*, and the relation *being a descendant (simpliciter) of* can also be defined in terms of that relation.

If metaphysical and normative grounding are fundamentally related to one another, what is their connection? Two options:

the identity proposal: There is just a single generic grounding relation, and the so-called "metaphysical" and "normative" grounding relations are identical to that relation.

the suppression proposal: The so-called "metaphysical" grounding relation is just the generic grounding relation, and normative grounding can be defined in terms of that relation as follows:

(Nor) *ff* fully normatively ground $g =_{df}$ there exists a non-empty plurality, *hh*, of fundamental normative facts such that *ff*, *hh* fully ground *g*.

(See the Appendix below for a discussion of how these two proposals can fend off Fine's argument for grounding pluralism.)

What if metaphysical and/or normative grounding are not transitive? Well, even if these two relations do not *always* obey transitivity, they *often* do, and that's all we need to run a version of my argument.

III. The Argument from Asymmetric Dovetailing

It is quite plausible that *metaphysical grounding* and *normative grounding* are both asymmetric relations:

(Asym$_{met}$) If *f* metaphysically grounds *g*, then it's not the case that *g* metaphysically grounds *f*.

(Asym$_{nor}$) If *f* normatively grounds *g*, then it's not the case that *g* normatively grounds *f*.

It is also quite plausible that a mixed version of these principles holds:

(Asym$_{met/nor}$) If *f* metaphysically grounds *g*, then it's not the case that *g* normatively grounds *f*.

But if metaphysical and normative grounding really were fundamentally distinct relations, it would be utterly mysterious why these two relations would "get out of each other's way" in this manner.

analogy #1 (typical case involving fundamentally distinct relations): The relations *being larger in area than* and *being larger in population than* are both asymmetric, but a mixed asymmetry principle is clearly false.

analogy #2 (typical case involving fundamentally related relations): If we assume that time travel is impossible, then the relations *being a matrilineal descendant of* and *being a patrilineal descendant of* are both asymmetric, and a mixed asymmetry principle also holds.

As before, even if metaphysical and normative grounding do not *always* obey a principle of asymmetry, we can still run a version of this argument within those domains in which asymmetry holds.

objection: Suppose the metaphysical and normative grounding relations both stand in the determinate–determinable relation to a generic grounding relation. Then, assuming that determinates cannot be defined in terms of their determinables, such a view could count as a form of grounding pluralism. But this view can also explain (Asym$_{met/nor}$), if we assume that the generic grounding relation is asymmetric.

> (Actually, it is not in general true that determinable two-place relations inherit the formal properties of their determinates. For example, presumably *being an uncle of* and *being a grandchild of* are determinates of the determinable *being cross-generationally related to*. Yet the two determinates are asymmetric and the determinable symmetric.)

reply: While this view might help with the Argument from Asymmetric Dovetailing, it has trouble with the Argument from Transitive Links. If *f* metaphysically grounds *g*, and *g* normatively grounds *h*, then—if metaphysical and normative grounding really are co-determinates of a generic grounding relation—it should follow that *f* stands in a type of grounding relation to *h* that is at the same "level of determination" as metaphysical and normative grounding. But there is no such relation in the offing.

IV. Wilson's Extreme Grounding Pluralism

According to Wilson, we need to distinguish the specific (small g) grounding relations in whose terms metaphysicians have been theorizing for decades from this new-fangled general (big g) Grounding relation advocated by Fine, Rosen, Schaffer, and others.

> (By 'metaphysicians', Wilson really means 'philosophers of mind who were big in the '90s'.)

Wilson's canonical list of small-g grounding relations:

a. type identity;
b. token identity;
c. functional realization;
d. the classical mereological part–whole relation;
e. the causal-composition relation;
f. the set-membership relation;
g. the proper-subset relation;
h. the determinate–determinable relation.

Fine's objection: For many of these relations, the mere holding of that specific relation is not enough to establish a relation of ground, and—when there is a relation of ground—also not enough to establish the direction of priority among the relata.

> For example, sometimes parts depend on their wholes, sometimes wholes depend on their parts, and sometimes parts and wholes do not stand in a dependency relation with each other.

Wilson's reply: Relations (a)–(h) "are all capable of serving as 'small-g' grounding relations, but . . . their serving in this capacity will typically depend on certain other facts or assumptions" (p. 569).

> For example, Wilson posits a primitive notion of fundamentality (big-F Fundamentality, as it were) such that the following holds:
>
> (Wil) If *x* bears one or relations (a)–(h) to *y*, and *x* is fundamental while *y* is not, then that specific relation serves as a small-g grounding relation in which *x* is the grounds and *y* is the grounded (and not also vice versa).
>
> *objection*: But big-F Fundamentality is just big-G Grounding in disguise.
>
> *Wilson's reply*: It would be, if "*x* is Fundamental $=_{df}$ *x* is unGrounded" were true. But we should reject that conception of fundamentality, for two reasons:

- *first reason*: "The fundamental should not be metaphysically characterized in negative terms—or indeed, in any other terms" because "the fundamental is, well, *fundamental*" (p. 560).

  problem: This argument commits a metaphysical level confusion: it conflates a metaphysical characterization of *those things which are fundamental* with a metaphysical characterization of *the fact that those things are fundamental*. Even if [*x* is fundamental] holds in virtue of [Nothing grounds *x*], it doesn't follow that *x* itself holds in virtue of something.

- *second reason*: We should allow for the possibility of metaphysical views on which the fundamental entities mutually ground each other, or even ground themselves (as we find on some conceptions of God).

  problem: But there are characterizations of Fundamentality in terms of Grounding that allow for these possibilities, such as:

  x is Fundamental $=_{df}$ either *x* is unGrounded, or everything that Grounds *x* is itself Grounded in *x*.

Wilson argues that (i) the big-g Grounding relation can't do any theoretical work on its own, without supplementation by the small-g grounding relations, and (ii) once the small-g grounding relations are on the scene, there is no additional work for the big-g Grounding relation to do.

Some standard replies to these arguments:

- Just because Grounding claims don't, on their own, answer *all* questions we want to ask, it doesn't follow that they don't answer *some* we want to ask. (Wilson is particularly fixated on three questions that seem most relevant in the philosophy of mind but not elsewhere.)
- Analogues of arguments (i) and (ii) would appear to threaten big-f Fundamentality, causation, and each of her relations (a)–(h) as much as they threaten big-g Grounding.

Is it really true that we can conduct our theorizing in the way we want if we restrict ourselves to "turned on" versions of relations (a)–(h) instead of a generic big-g Grounding relation?

Wilson's small-g grounding relations are particularly ill-suited for theorizing about normative matters. When a maximizing act-consequentialist claims

(Op*) Necessarily, an action is right if and only if, and because, it is optimific (i.e. it produces at least as much overall good as any alternative),

which of Wilson's small-g grounding relations is playing the role of the 'because' in (Op*)?

- Not *the determinate–determinable relation*, because optimificity does not seem to be a determinable of rightness.
- Not *the proper-subset relation* or *the set-membership relation*, because the facts about an action's rightness and its optimificity are not sets.
- Not *the causal-composition relation*, because consequentialists need not think that deontic and evaluative properties have causal powers.
- Not *the classical mereological part–whole relation*, because consequentialists need not embrace a conception of facts on which they have literal parts.
- Not *functional realization*, because consequentialists need not be moral functionalists.
- Not *type* or *token identity*, because (i) such consequentialists want rightness to depend on optimificity but not vice versa, and (ii) they also want optimificity to depend on the specific level of goodness of each possible outcome, but one fact can't be identical to a plurality of facts.

We can also run a version of my Arguments from Transitive Links and from Asymmetric Dovetailing against Wilson's form of grounding pluralism:

> The following principles are both extremely plausible:
>
> (Tran$_{small\text{-}g}$) If *x* bears a "turned on" version of one of (a)–(h) to *y* (in the from-grounds-to-grounded direction), and *y* bears a "turned on" version of one of (a)–(h) to *z* (in the from-grounds-to-grounded direction), then there is a non-rigged-up notion of grounding such that *x* grounds *z*.
>
> (Asym$_{small\text{-}g}$) If either *x* or *y* is not Fundamental, and *x* bears a "turned on" version of one of (a)–(h) to *y* (in the from-grounds-to-grounded direction), then *y* does not bear a "turned on" version of one of (a)–(h) to *x* (in the from-grounds-to-grounded direction).
>
> Wilson cannot account for (Tran$_{small\text{-}g}$) without supplementing her list of relations (a)–(h). And she simply assumes (Asym$_{small\text{-}g}$) in her discussion without argument.
>
> But if (Tran$_{small\text{-}g}$) and (Asym$_{small\text{-}g}$) are true, why on earth do these ostensibly unrelated small-g grounding relations mesh with each other in such a conveniently well-behaved manner?

V. A Surprising Consequence?

At the end of my article, I argue that the unity of grounding has a surprising consequence.

> *the consequence, put most provocatively*: Normative ethics is a branch of metaethics.
>
> *the consequence, put less provocatively but more accurately*: Many of the central claims of normative ethics are at once claims in normative ethics and claims in metaethics.

The argument for this is simple, given what we've already established:

P1. A central portion of normative ethics is concerned with establishing claims of the form:

> Necessarily, an action is right if and only if, *and because*, _____.
>
> Action A is right in circumstances C *because* _____.

P2. The 'because' in these claims picks out a generic relation of metaphysical grounding (and not a special first-order 'because' of normative ethics that contrasts with a second-order 'because' of metaethics).

C1. So, a central portion of normative ethics is concerned with establishing certain metaphysical claims.

C2. So, when we are doing a core part of normative ethics, we are thereby doing moral metaphysics.

P3. Metaethics is (or at least includes) the metaphysics, epistemology, semantics, philosophy of mind, etc. of morality.

C3. So, when we are doing a core part of normative ethics, we are thereby making a contribution to one branch of metaethics.

In short: a significant portion of normative ethics is also, at the same time, a subfield of metaethics.

> I am not claiming here, as Dworkin and some other "quietists" do, that many claims put forward as metaethical claims are *instead* first-order claims within normative ethics.
>
> Rather, my proposal is that many claims put forward as first-order claims within normative ethics are *in addition* metaethical claims.
>
> There is just one field here: ethics.

VI. Appendix: Fine's Argument against Grounding Pluralism

Fine argues for his grounding pluralism by way of the following two assumptions:

> *modal pluralism*: Metaphysical necessity, normative necessity, and natural necessity are fundamentally distinct varieties of necessity, none of which can be defined in terms of any of the others.
>
> *pluralist grounding necessitarianism*: If *ff* fully metaphysically (*or*: normatively; *or*: naturally) ground *g*, then it is metaphysically (*or*: normatively; *or*: naturally) necessary that if *ff* obtain, then *g* obtains.

His argument for grounding pluralism is not really an argument for grounding pluralism *per se* as much as it is an argument against one way of being a grounding monist.

Suppose a grounding monist tries to account for pluralist grounding necessitarianism by taking both metaphysical and normative grounding to be definable in terms of a generic relation of grounding, like so:

> (Met) *ff* fully metaphysically ground $g =_{df}$ *ff* fully ground *g*, and $\Box_{met}$ (if *ff* obtain, then *g* obtains).
>
> (Nor*) *ff* fully normatively ground $g =_{df}$ *ff* fully ground *g*, and $\Box_{nor}$ (if *ff* obtain, then *g* obtains).

Fine then argues that these definitions are extensionally inadequate as follows:

> Suppose [A maximizes happiness] fully normative grounds [A is right], which in turn fully metaphysically grounds [A is right or not right].
>
> By (Met), (Nor), and the transitivity of generic grounding, it follows that [A maximizes happiness] generically grounds [A is right or not right].
>
> But it is metaphysically necessary that [A is right or not right] obtains, so *a fortiori* it is metaphysically necessary that if [A maximizes happiness] obtains, then [A is right or not right] obtains.
>
> So, by (Met), it follows that [A maximizes happiness] metaphysically grounds [A is right or not right], which supposedly is counterintuitive.

Note that Fine is *not* here assuming a mixed transitivity principle; instead, all he is assuming is that generic grounding is transitive. If we didn't want to rely on that assumption, we could instead argue as follows:

> Let [*n*] be an arbitrary normatively necessary fact and <*c*> an unrelated contingent proposition.
>
> Then [*n*] metaphysically grounds [$n \vee c$] and hence by (Met) generically grounds it.
>
> But it is normatively necessary that if [*n*] obtains, then [$n \vee c$] obtains.
>
> So, by (Nor*), it follows that [*n*] normatively grounds [$n \vee c$], which is counterintuitive.

So Fine is right that (Met) and (Nor*) are extensionally inadequate. But grounding monists need not endorse those definitions. Instead, they could hold either *the identity proposal* or *the suppression proposal* (see §II, above).

Advocates of either proposal then have two options for handling Fine's argument for grounding pluralism:

- Deny modal pluralism. (Tellingly, when arguing for modal pluralism in "The Varieties of Necessity," Fine never directly argues against the proposal that normative necessity is identical to metaphysical necessity.)
- Deny pluralist grounding necessitarianism.

Advocates of the suppression proposal also have a third option:

- Accept both modal pluralism and pluralist grounding necessitarianism, by holding that metaphysical and normative grounding satisfy the following biconditional (which is *not* a definition):

  > (Bicon) $\Box_{nor}$ *p* iff there exists a non-empty plurality of fundamental normative facts, *hh*, such that $\Box_{met}$ ((*hh* obtain) $\supset$ *p*).