

## Meeting 8: An Application in Metaethics

### I. Moral Principles and Explanation

When philosophers say, “Moral principles are explanatory,” they might mean two things (where for now let us restrict our attention to principles concerning the moral properties of actions):

- “Moral principles are explanation involving”: i.e. moral principles contain as part of their content explanatory relations between the features they specify and the moral properties under their purview.
- “Moral principles are explanation serving”: i.e. moral principles themselves are some of the items that stand in an explanatory relation to an action’s moral properties.

What do I mean by ‘moral principle’?

It is standard to distinguish between two types of (or uses for) moral principles: *first-person guides* and *third-person standards*. I am focusing here on the latter.

Two paradigm instances of moral principles: the Principle of Utility and the seven (or maybe six) principles summarizing Ross’s seven (or maybe six) *prima facie* duties.

What does it mean for moral principles to be *explanation involving*?

Moral principles are *not* explanation involving when they are formulated *intensionally*, like so:

PU<sub>i</sub>. Necessarily, an action is required if and only if it maximizes happiness.

PF<sub>i</sub>. Necessarily, if an action breaks a promise, then it is *prima facie* wrong.

Moral principles are explanation involving when they are formulated *hyperintensionally*, like so:

PU<sub>h</sub>. Necessarily, an action is required if and only if, and because, it maximizes happiness.

PF<sub>h</sub>. Necessarily, if an action breaks a promise, then that makes it the case that the action is *prima facie* wrong.

What does it mean for moral principles to be *explanation serving*?

Here is one widely endorsed proposal on which they are:

*Principles as Partial Grounds*: Whenever a particular moral fact of the form [Action A has moral property M] obtains, it is fully grounded in the combination of (i) a general moral principle specifying a connection between M and some set of non-moral properties or relations and (ii) various particular facts about the instantiation of those properties or relations.

For example, maybe whenever [Action A is required] obtains, it is fully grounded in [A maximizes happiness] together with the Principle of Utility.

Why does it matter whether Principles as Partial Grounds is true?

If we formulate the distinction between (*metanormative*) *naturalism* and *non-naturalism* in ground-theoretic terms, and if we assume there are no loops or infinite chains of ground, then non-naturalism entails that there are some ungrounded normative facts that, together with the non-normative facts, ground all other facts.

Moreover, it is very plausible that moral properties are “resultant” or “consequential” properties (Ross 1930): every fact about the instantiation of such a property is fully grounded in other facts.

So it might seem that non-naturalists must hold that moral (and other normative) principles are the ungrounded grounders of the normative realm.

## II. Against Principle as Partial Grounds

I propose the following dilemma for Principles as Partial Grounds:

- *first horn (the Problem of Redundant Grounding):*

Suppose we understand the content of moral principles hyperintensionally, as in  $[PU_h]$  or  $[PF_h]$ .

And—focusing on  $[PU_h]$ —suppose  $[PU_h]$  and  $[A \text{ maximizes}]$  together fully ground  $[A \text{ is required}]$ .

Presumably the grounding relation in  $[PU_h]$  is full, not partial (after all, the principle doesn't just specify one partial ground among others).

So if  $[PU_h]$  obtains, it follows that whenever  $[A \text{ maximizes happiness}]$  obtains, that fact by itself fully grounds  $[A \text{ is required}]$ .

Thus  $[PU_h]$  is, at best, a redundant partial ground of  $[A \text{ is required}]$ : the fact that together with  $[PU_h]$  fully grounds  $[A \text{ is required}]$  suffices on its own to fully ground  $[A \text{ is required}]$ .

But it is implausible that moral principles play their distinctive explanatory role in a redundant way.

The objection here is not to the existence of redundant partial grounds as such. For example, I have no problem with the claim that  $[\text{The ball is red}]$  is a redundant partial ground of  $[\text{Either the ball is red and round, or something is round}]$ .

- *second horn (the Problem of Implausible Grounding):*

Suppose we understand the content of moral principles intensionally, as in  $[PU_i]$  or  $[PF_i]$ .

Then Principles as Partial Grounds relies on grounding claims such as the following:

- G<sub>1</sub>.  $[\text{Action A breaks a promise}]$  and  $[\text{Necessarily, if an action breaks a promise, then it is } \textit{prima facie} \text{ wrong}]$  together fully ground  $[A \text{ is } \textit{prima facie} \text{ wrong}]$ .
- G<sub>2</sub>.  $[\text{Action A maximizes happiness}]$  and  $[\text{Necessarily, an action is required if and only if it maximizes happiness}]$  together fully ground  $[A \text{ is required}]$ .

But these grounding claims are extremely implausible. For example, we don't think the following grounding claims are true:

- G<sub>3</sub>.  $[\text{Action A breaks a promise}]$ ,  $[A \text{ is done on a Tuesday}]$ , and  $[\text{Necessarily, if an action breaks a promise and is done on a Tuesday, then it is } \textit{prima facie} \text{ wrong}]$  together fully ground  $[A \text{ is } \textit{prima facie} \text{ wrong}]$ .
- G<sub>4</sub>.  $[A \text{ is required}]$  and  $[\text{Necessarily, an action is required if and only if it maximizes happiness}]$  together fully ground  $[A \text{ maximizes happiness}]$ .

So why think that (G<sub>1</sub>) and (G<sub>2</sub>) are true?

The basic idea here is that the sort of grounding claim being posited by an advocate of Principles as Partial Grounds only seems plausible if we are implicitly treating the content of moral principles as not really being purely intensional. But then we are thrust back on the other horn of our dilemma.

## III. Two Unsuccessful Responses

*response #1 (the circularity gambit):* We should include an additional partial ground in our hyperintensional formulation of a given moral principle, namely that principle itself, like so:

- PF<sub>c</sub>. Necessarily, if an action, X, breaks a promise, then  $[X \text{ breaks a promise}]$  and  $[PF_c]$  together fully ground  $[X \text{ is } \textit{prima facie} \text{ wrong}]$ .

This avoids the Problem of Redundant Grounding.

*my reply:* I have serious reservations about the sort of metaphysical circularity evinced by (PF<sub>c</sub>).

Consider the following alleged fact (where  $g$  is some independently specifiable fact):

$$f = [f \text{ grounds } g].$$

We can rewrite this as:

$$f = [[f \text{ grounds } g] \text{ grounds } g] = [[[ \dots \text{ grounds } g] \text{ grounds } g] \text{ grounds } g].$$

But how can such an endless quicksand of iterated grounding relations, never leading back to an independent grounder for the entire sequence, be the case?

Moreover, if  $f$  cannot obtain, then [PF<sub>c</sub>] also cannot obtain. (It's not like sharing the grounding-load with another fact and then quantifying over the result helps.)

*response #2 (the grounding-pluralism gambit):* Let us follow Fine in distinguishing between two fundamentally distinct types of grounding, *metaphysical grounding* and *normative grounding*. Then we can interpret the claim made by Principles as Partial Grounds in terms of metaphysical grounding but formulate our moral principles hyperintensionally in terms of normative grounding, like so:

PF<sub>n</sub>. Necessarily, if an action breaks a promise, then that fully *normatively* makes it the case that the action is *prima facie* wrong.

This avoids the Problem of Redundant Grounding.

*my reply:* Now the relevant grounding claim being made is:

G<sub>5</sub>. [A breaks a promise] and [Necessarily, if an action breaks a promise, then that fully normatively makes it the case that the action is *prima facie* wrong] together fully metaphysically ground [A is *prima facie* wrong].

But if metaphysical and normative grounding really are fundamentally distinct grounding relations that have as little to do with each other as, say, the relations *being a blood descendant of* and *being a doctoral descendant of* do, then it is completely obscure why (G<sub>5</sub>) should be true.

*counter-reply:* Okay, then let's give up on Fine's claim that metaphysical and normative grounding are fundamentally distinct, but still appeal to a distinction between metaphysical and normative grounding in order to avoid the dilemma for Principles as Partial Grounds.

*my counter-counter-reply:* If metaphysical and normative grounding are not fundamentally distinct, while still being distinct, what is their relation to one another?

Metaphysical grounding cannot be defined in terms of normative grounding, since many claims of metaphysical grounding have nothing to do with anything normative.

So maybe we should define normative grounding in terms of metaphysical grounding. Here is one natural way of doing so:

*the suppression proposal:*  $ff$  fully normatively ground  $g =_{df}$  there exists a normative principle,  $h$ , linking (some of) the constituents of the facts among  $ff$  to (some of) the constituents of  $g$  such that  $ff$  and  $h$  together fully metaphysically ground  $g$ .

But if moral and other normative principles are being formulated hyperintensionally in terms of a normative grounding relation, as our objector is suggesting that we do in order to escape my dilemma, then the suppression proposal becomes objectionably circular, since its definiens appeals to something that in part contains the definiendum.

In effect, the grounding-pluralism gambit has become the circularity gambit!

#### IV. Enoch's Reply

Enoch embraces a version of the grounding-pluralism gambit (except with 'moral' replacing 'normative'), but rather than defining moral grounding in terms of metaphysical grounding via the suppression proposal, instead he posits the following non-definitional link between the two:

"... it lies in the nature of the moral grounding relation that when a moral fact is metaphysically grounded in the conjunction of a moral principle and a set of morally relevant natural facts, it is fully morally grounded in the relevant set of natural facts alone" (pp. 14-15).

In other words, if we switch his 'moral grounding' to our 'normative grounding', he is claiming:

- E<sub>1</sub>. It lies in the nature of normative grounding that: if [A breaks a promise] and [Necessarily, if an action breaks a promise, then that fully normatively makes it the case that the action is *prima facie* wrong] together fully metaphysically ground [A is *prima facie* wrong], then [A breaks a promise] fully normatively grounds [A is *prima facie* wrong].

He also explicitly denies that the following is true (to avoid being committed to a real definition of normative grounding in terms of metaphysical grounding):

- E<sub>2</sub>. It lies in the nature of normative grounding that: if [A breaks a promise] and [Necessarily, if an action breaks a promise, then that fully normatively makes it the case that the action is *prima facie* wrong] together fully metaphysically ground [A is *prima facie* wrong], then: [A breaks a promise] fully normatively grounds [A is *prima facie* wrong] metaphysically because [A breaks a promise] and [Necessarily, if an action breaks a promise, then that fully normatively makes it the case that the action is *prima facie* wrong] together fully metaphysically ground [A is *prima facie* wrong].

There are two major problems with this reply to my argument:

- *first problem*: Positing a pre-established harmony between the extension of the normative and the metaphysical grounding relations that is not underwritten by an explanatory or definitional relation of some sort between the two strikes me as unacceptable mystery mongering, and slapping an essence operator in front of that extensional pre-established harmony does not make the mystery go away.
- *second problem*: What we wanted was an explanation of why G<sub>5</sub> is true, and E<sub>1</sub> doesn't provide that! After all, we can deduce the following merely from the factivity of the metaphysical grounding relation, without any need to appeal to essences:

E<sub>1</sub>\*. If [A breaks a promise] and [Necessarily, if an action breaks a promise, then that fully normatively makes it the case that the action is *prima facie* wrong] together fully metaphysically ground [A is *prima facie* wrong], then [A breaks a promise] fully normatively grounds [A is *prima facie* wrong].

The real mystery is how the antecedent of this principle could be true despite normative and metaphysical grounding being fundamentally distinct, and E<sub>1</sub>\* doesn't help us with that problem.

Enoch also thinks that accepting grounding pluralism allows him to distinguish between, for instance, the first-order/ethical debate over whether reasons are normatively grounded in our desires (and other responses) and the second-order/metaethical debate over whether reasons are metaphysically grounded in our desires.

But given his commitment to necessary extensional links between normative and metaphysical grounding of the sort posited by E<sub>1</sub>, this is at most a Pyrrhic victory for attempts to keep ethics and metaethics segregated from each other.

For every debate in normative ethics about the extension of the normative grounding relation, there will be a shadow debate in metaethics about the extension of the metaphysical grounding relation, and going one way in the former debate will commit one to going a parallel way in the latter debate.

It still looks like, in doing normative ethics, one is thereby, at the same time, making a contribution to (some but not all of) moral metaphysics.

## V. Rosen's Two Replies

Rosen offers two ways of attempting to grasp the second horn of my dilemma. Each involves switching the modality in moral principles/laws to normative (rather than metaphysical) necessity and then claiming:

- R. Some but not all facts of the form  $[\Box \forall x (\phi(x) \supset Fx)]$  are moral laws, and it is only these facts that together with  $[\phi(a)]$  fully ground  $[Fa]$ ,

where ' $\Box p$ ' is shorthand for 'It is normatively necessary that  $p$ ' and where all quantifiers range over actions.

But which facts of the form  $[\Box \forall x (\phi(x) \supset Fx)]$  are moral laws?

*Rosen's Proposal 1 (the Essential List Proposal):*  $[\Box \forall x (\phi(x) \supset Fx)]$  is a moral law iff:

- (a)  $\Box \forall x (\phi(x) \supset Fx)$ , and
- (b) It lies in the nature of F-ness that if  $\Box \forall x (\phi(x) \supset Fx)$ , then: for all  $y$ , if  $y$  is  $\phi$ , then  $[\phi(y)]$  and  $[\Box \forall x (\phi(x) \supset Fx)]$  fully metaphysically ground  $[Fy]$ .

On this account, F-ness's essence determines a list of *potential* F-making features.

*question:* Why is this superior to an account that takes F-ness's essence to determine a list of *actual* F-making features, be swapping in the following for (b)?

- (b\*) It lies in the nature of F-ness that for all  $y$ , if  $y$  is  $\phi$ , then  $[\phi(y)]$  and  $[\Box \forall x (\phi(x) \supset Fx)]$  fully metaphysically ground  $[Fy]$ .

*Rosen's answer* (p. 144): During substantive disagreements about normative matters, it doesn't seem that one side is right and the other side is wrong about the *natures* of the properties involved.

Rosen writes that "Proposal 1 is extensionally correct, though less illuminating than one might wish" (p. 153).

*my reply:* Proposal 1 is not, in fact, extensionally correct.

The problem is that we can still generate counterexamples by considering entailment relations *among* the potential wrong-making features.

For example, it's plausible that both *being a killing* (= *being K<sub>1</sub>*) and *being a killing that isn't necessary to save one's own life* (= *being K<sub>2</sub>*) are on our list of potential wrong-making features.

Let's suppose that, in the dispute between the normative theorist who thinks killing is always wrong (call her T<sub>1</sub>) and the normative theorist who thinks killing is always wrong unless doing so is necessary to save one's own life (call her T<sub>2</sub>), the former is correct.

Then  $[\Box \forall x (K_{1x} \supset Wx)]$  obtains, where *being W* = *being wrong*. And, since normative necessity is closed under logical entailment,  $[\Box \forall x (K_{2x} \supset Wx)]$  also obtains.

Now suppose Gertrude kills Hugo on a Tuesday, and doing so wasn't necessary to save her life.

Then we get the problematic result that Gertrude's killing of Hugo was wrong in virtue of being K<sub>1</sub>, and also wrong in virtue of being K<sub>2</sub>. But didn't we want theorist T<sub>1</sub> to be right about the grounds of wrongness in this case, not both T<sub>1</sub> and T<sub>2</sub> to be right?

Lest you think we can live with this result, let's consider a third property that is also entailed by being K<sub>1</sub> but which is not plausibly on our list of potential wrong-making features, such as *being a killing that happens on a Tuesday* (= *being K<sub>3</sub>*).

Gertrude's killing of Hugo possesses the property of being K<sub>3</sub>, but according to Proposal 1 her action is not wrong in virtue being K<sub>3</sub>. That's really bizarre! Whence this invidious distinction between being K<sub>2</sub> and being K<sub>3</sub>? After all, it was theorist T<sub>1</sub> who was correct.

*Rosen's Proposal 2 (the Basic Necessity Proposal):*  $[\Box \forall x (\phi(x) \supset Fx)]$  is a moral law iff:

- (a)  $[\Box \forall x (\phi(x) \supset Fx)]$  is a basic normative necessity (i.e. it is not partially grounded in any facts of the form  $[\Box \forall x (\psi(x) \supset Fx)]$ ), or
- (b) There is some basic normative necessity of the form  $[\Box \forall x (\psi(x) \supset Fx)]$  such that necessarily, for all  $y$ , if  $y$  is  $\phi$ , then  $[\phi(y)]$  grounds  $[\psi(y)]$ .

*Rosen's objection to Proposal 2:* Consider a possible world in which both  $[\Box \forall x (x \text{ causes pain} \supset x \text{ is wrong})]$  and  $[\Box \forall x (x \text{ is wrong} \supset x \text{ causes pain})]$  are basic normative necessities. It follows from Proposal 2 that, if A is some action in that world that is wrong, then [A is wrong] partially grounds [A causes pain].

*my objection to Proposal 2:* Clause (a) lets in too much. In fact, depending on our account of what grounds normative necessities, clause (a) may well let in all of the counterexamples we were seeking to avoid.

It's not plausible that the following facts are partially grounded in facts of the form  $[\Box \forall x (\psi(x) \supset x \text{ is wrong})]$ :

- $[\Box \forall x (x \text{ is wrong} \supset x \text{ is wrong})]$ ,
- $[\Box \forall x (x \text{ is wrong and blameworthy} \supset x \text{ is wrong})]$ .

So we still face a version of our original challenge.

Does Proposal 2 at least block some of the original counterexamples? Rosen writes, "When Q is a bona fide wrong-making feature and R is irrelevant, it's perfectly true that  $\Box \forall x ((Qx \wedge Rx) \supset Wx)$ . But this fact is obviously . . . grounded in the prior fact that  $\Box \forall x (Qx \supset Wx)$ " (p. 150).

But it is not obvious at all that  $[\Box \forall x ((Qx \wedge Rx) \supset Wx)]$  is grounded in  $[\Box \forall x (Qx \supset Wx)]$ . Indeed, given Rosen's real definition of natural necessity on p. 144, this would seem not to be the case.

Compare: is [Everyone in this room who was born after 1990 is under 7 feet tall] grounded in [Everyone in this room is under 7 feet tall]? I say: no. After all, the facts about my height partially ground the latter but not the former fact.

## VI. Whither Non-Naturalism?

If we reject Principles as Partial Grounds, must we also reject non-naturalism? No.

Two ways to be a non-naturalist while not holding that normative principles are the ungrounded grounders of the normative realm:

1. *Hold that some particular normative facts are ungrounded.*

Although it is crazy to hold that [Action A was morally required] is ungrounded, it is not at all crazy to hold that [What it's like to be in agony is a reason for me to avoid future agony] is ungrounded.

So even if all moral properties of actions are resultant, it is not clear that every normative property and relation is resultant. (This, I hypothesize, is why so many non-naturalists are also reason-firsters: it's because the reason relation is an excellent candidate for a non-resultant normative relation.)

2. *Hold that facts of the form [Normative fact N obtains because facts  $O_1, \dots, O_n$  obtain] are themselves normative facts, and that some of them are ungrounded (or, at least, not fully grounded in natural facts).*

More generally, facts about the tethering of normative facts to natural facts (whether we understand that tethering relation in terms of grounding, or reduction, or identity, or . . . ) might not themselves be tethered to the natural facts. So if such facts-about-the-tethering-of-the-normative-to-the-natural are normative, this is another way of not being a naturalist about all of normativity.

(And even if these tethering facts are not themselves normative facts, they seem to raise all of the metaphysical and epistemological problems that tend to motivate naturalists about a given domain.)