

The concept of essence and the concept of (metaphysical) grounding.

Essence: a feature is essential to a thing if it pertains to *what* the thing is, in a specifically metaphysical sense.

Grounding: a fact is grounded in other facts if the former obtains *in virtue of* the latter, where ‘in virtue of’ is understood as having metaphysical force.

Examples (cf. e.g. Correia 2005, Rosen 2010):

- Mental facts obtain in virtue of neurophysiological facts
- Dispositional properties are grounded in categorical properties
- Determinables are exemplified in virtue of corresponding determinates being exemplified
- Universals exist in virtue of their having exemplifiers
- A whole exists in virtue of the fact that its parts exist and are arranged in such and such a way
- Given any truth, there is an entity x such that this truth is true in virtue of the existence of x .

Grounding used to define key metaphysical concepts, e.g. existential dependence (Correia 2005, also Schnieder 2006), and to articulate conception of reality as having a layered structure, with a level of basic, i.e. ungrounded, facts, and a (perhaps itself structured) level of facts grounded in the former facts (Fine 2001, Schaffer 2009).

How are these concepts to be understood? And how are they related to one another?

Against modal accounts (cf. e.g. Dunn 1990, Fine 1994, Correia 2005, Rosen 2010).

A radical move: ‘double primitivism’. Thus, Fine 2010:

I think it should be recognized that there are two fundamentally different types of explanation. One is of identity, or of what something is; and the other is of truth, or of how things are. It is natural to want to reduce them to a common denominator - to see explanations of identity as a special kind of explanation of truth or to see explanations of truth as a special kind of explanation of identity or to see them in some other way as instances of a single form of explanation. But this strikes me as a mistake.

And it seems to me that [it is an error to attempt] to assimilate or unify the concepts of essence and ground. The two concepts work together in holding up the edifice of metaphysics; and it is only by keeping them separate that we can properly appreciate what they are and what they are capable of doing together.

Yet, any “common denominator” view would be better. My aim: show that the prospects for an account of grounding in terms of essence are not as bad as one might have thought.

1. Grammatical and Semantical Points

(Cf. Correia 2010.) Grounding expressed by means of a predicate vs. by means of a sentential operator:

(pred) Fact f is grounded in fact f_1 , fact f_2 , ...

(op) p because p_1, p_2, \dots

Singular grounds versus plural grounds.

Variant of (pred) with propositions instead of facts; (op) involves uncommon, one-to-many operator ‘because’.

In this talk, focus is on the operational mode of expression.

2. The Simple Account

a = anything, b = a red ball, $a+b$ = the mereological fusion of a and b , $t = b$'s redness trope.

Putative cases of grounding:

- (1) $a+b$ exists because a exists, b exists
- (2) t exists because b is red
- (3) b is a red ball because b is red, b is a ball
- (4) The proposition that b is red is true because b is red.

Compare:

- It is part of what it is for it to be the case that $a+b$ exists that $a+b$ exists if both a exists and b exists
- It is part of what it is for it to be the case that t exists that t exists if b is red
- It is part of what it is for it to be the case that b is a red ball that b is a red ball if b is red and b is a ball
- It is part of what it is for it to be the case that the proposition that b is red is true that the proposition that b is red is true if b is red.

⇒ Idea:

- (S) p because p_1, p_2, \dots :≡
(i) p_1 & p_2 & \dots , and
(ii) It is part of what it is for it to be the case that p that if p_1 & p_2 & \dots , then p .

Compare the (flawed) modal account:

- (M) p because p_1, p_2, \dots :≡
(i) p_1 & p_2 & \dots , and
(ii) It is necessary that if p_1 & p_2 & \dots , then p .

For the record, the corresponding account of the predicational notion is:

- (S*) f is grounded in f_1, f_2, \dots :≡
(i) f_1 obtains & f_2 obtains & \dots , and
(ii) It is part of the nature of f that if f_1 obtains & f_2 obtains & \dots , then f obtains.

Notice the non-standard essentialist expression in (S). Understand 'what it is for it to be the case that p ' as 'what the proposition that p is'?

THE UNWANTED DEPENDENCIES OBJECTION (Fine 2010; cf. also Lowe 2009).

- *Against* (S*). Consider:

- (a*) [Someone is a philosopher] is grounded in [Socrates is a philosopher],

where '[p]' is used for 'the fact that p '. By (S*), (a*) entails:

[Someone is a philosopher] is essentially dependent upon [Socrates is a philosopher].

Since [Socrates is a philosopher] is in turn essentially dependent upon Socrates, we then have:

- (b*) [Someone is a philosopher] is essentially dependent upon Socrates.

But while (a*) is plausible, intuitively (b*) is not. As Fine puts it: the fact "knows nothing" of Socrates.

- *Against* (S). Consider:

(a) Someone is a philosopher because Socrates is a philosopher

By (S), (a) entails:

(b) It is part of what it is for it to be the case that someone is a philosopher that someone is a philosopher if Socrates is a philosopher.

But while (a) is plausible, intuitively (b) is not: what it is for it to be the case that someone is a philosopher does not involve particular philosophers.

3. Generalisation

Remark 1: The former objection does not arise if ' $p_1 \& p_2 \& \dots$ ' does not make reference to any particular object.

Remark 2: Granted that someone is a philosopher because Socrates is a philosopher, it is plausible to hold that for every philosopher x , someone is a philosopher because x is a philosopher.

Hence the idea (Fine 2010):

(G) Case 1: None of ' p_1 ', ' p_2 ', ... makes reference to any object. Then (G) runs like (S).
Case 2: Some of ' p_1 ', ' p_2 ', ... make reference to some object. Where a_1, a_2, \dots are the objects referred to, we make the reference explicit and write ' $p_1(a_1, a_2, \dots)$ ', ' $p_2(a_1, a_2, \dots)$ ', etc. The account then goes as follows:
 p because $p_1(a_1, a_2, \dots), p_2(a_1, a_2, \dots), \dots \equiv$
(i) $p_1(a_1, a_2, \dots) \& p_2(a_1, a_2, \dots) \& \dots$, and
(ii) There is a condition Φ such that $\Phi(a_1, a_2, \dots)$ and it is part of what it is for it to be the case that p that for all x_1, x_2, \dots , if $\Phi(x_1, x_2, \dots)$, then if $p_1(x_1, x_2, \dots) \& p_2(x_1, x_2, \dots) \& \dots$, then p .

In a nutshell, (G) escapes the previous objection because reference to a_1, a_2, \dots is absent in the scope of the essentialist operator in (ii) (unless condition Φ does make reference to them, of course).

Illustration. For (a), take the condition to be e.g. that of being a person.

THE INDISCRIMINATION OBJECTION (Fine 2010; also affects (S)).

The account does not do justice to the distinction between plural grounds and conjunctive grounds: on the account, ' p because p_1, p_2, \dots ' is always equivalent to ' p because $p_1 \& p_2 \& \dots$ '.

Problematic, since plausibly, if ' $p_1 \& p_2$ ' is true, then ' $p_1 \& p_2$ because p_1, p_2 ' is true as well, while ' $p_1 \& p_2$ because $p_1 \& p_2$ ' cannot be true (grounding is irreflexive).

THE REDUCTION OBJECTION (does not affect (S)). In a nutshell: by (G), partial grounds must be full grounds.

Consider:

(I) p because $F(a), G(a)$.

Then by (G), $F(a) \& G(a)$ and:

(II) There is a condition Φ such that $\Phi(a)$ and it is part of what it is for it to be the case that p that for all x , if $\Phi(x)$, then p if $F(x) \& G(x)$.

Define new condition $X(x)$ as $\Phi(x) \& F(x)$. Then $X(a)$, and by (II) it is part of what it is for it to be the case that p that for all x , if $X(x)$, then p if $G(x)$. So:

(III) There is a condition Ψ such that $\Psi(a)$ and it is part of what it is for it to be the case that p that for all x , if $\Psi(x)$, then p if $G(x)$.

Then by (G) again:

(IV) p because $G(a)$.

Problem: there are many statements of type (I) which we may take to be true while rejecting the corresponding statement of type (IV).

Not clear that the objection succeeds. It involves the transition from (t1) to (t2):

- (t1) It is part of what it is for it to be the case that p that for all x , if $\Phi(x)$, then p if $F(x) \& G(x)$
- (t2) It is part of what it is for it to be the case that p that for all x , if $\Phi(x) \& F(x)$, then p if $G(x)$.

The embedded forms are logically equivalent, but the presence of the essentialist operator may create a problem. More work on closure principles for essence needed.

4. Modification and Final Evaluation

The situation so far:

	(S)	(G)
Unwanted dependencies	√	×
Indiscrimination	√	√
Reduction	×	√?

Modifying (S) and (G) in order to escape the indiscrimination objection.

Replace in condition (ii) the standard dyadic ‘if ..., then ...’ by a new conditional, ‘IF ..., THEN ...’, whose first position can be filled in with a list of 1 or more sentential expressions.

How is ‘IF ..., THEN ...’ to be understood? One option: start with the predicate ‘imply’ endowed with an appropriate meaning, and say that ‘IF ..., THEN ...’ is just the operator corresponding to that predicate. Another option:

IF p_1, p_2, \dots , THEN p iff_{df} if it is the case that $p_1 \&$ it is the case that $p_2 \& \dots$, then it is the case that p .

‘IF p_1, p_2, \dots , THEN p ’ and ‘if $p_1 \& p_2, \dots$, then p ’ may be logically equivalent, but they relevantly differ. Consider:

- (α) IF p_1, p_2, \dots , THEN $p_1 \& p_2 \& \dots$
- (β) If $p_1 \& p_2 \& \dots$, then $p_1 \& p_2 \& \dots$

The unwanted dependencies objection is not convincing.

- *The objection to (S*).*

What Fine rejects as intuitively incorrect:

(b*) [Someone is a philosopher] is essentially dependent upon Socrates.

The relevant concept of dependence is this:

The notion of essential dependence which is at work here can be defined as follows:

(Dep) x essentially depends upon y iff_{df} for some condition Ψ , it is part of the nature of x that $\Psi(y)$.

My reply: I don’t see any problem with (b*) on that account of essential dependence!

- *The objection to (S).*

What Fine rejects as intuitively incorrect:

- (b) It is part of what it is for it to be the case that someone is a philosopher that someone is a philosopher if Socrates is a philosopher.

My reply: I don't see any problem with (b)!

5. Concluding Remarks

(S) and (G) are promising. Further work needed. (1) Assessing the viability of (G) requires further work on closure principles for essence. More generally, fully assessing the viability of (S) and (G) demands a proper understanding of the concept of essence involved. (2) Work on the logic of 'IF ..., THEN ...'. (3) Further investigations needed to determine which one of the two accounts, if any, is better.

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