

Monism: Priority of a Structure over the Concrete Objects

Student: Ali Sanaeikia

1- Abstract

Priority monism states that there is only one concrete whole which is prior to every other entity, namely its parts. On the other hand, there are priority pluralists who claim that we have more than one object which is prior to every other entity. There are two problems with the extant priority views. Firstly, the adherents of both of these priority views never consider an abstract entity to be the most prior object. Secondly, they assume the structure of reality to be a tree-like structure, like something which has a root that grows linearly; however, we can have a structure, which is an abstract entity, as the prior object over other entities. In this research, I want to investigate the plausibility of this structure as a priority view. For doing this task, I want to examine the structure of reality to see whether it is more plausible than the extant priority views for answering the existing arguments that are rejecting one of the current priority views.

2- Literature review

Monism has been defended through the history of philosophy by many philosophers, such as Spinoza, pre-Socratic philosophers and Neo-platonic philosophers. Schaffer (Schaffer, 2010) introduced a new version of monism, namely priority monism, by using the notion of grounding. Grounding is a non-causal priority relation which can have different kinds of the entities as

its relata¹. By grounding relation, we can show how the layers of reality are structured. Most of the philosophers assume grounding is transitive, irreflexive and asymmetrical.² These properties of grounding can represent the layers of reality as a structure which is like a tree with its root and branches. The root of this tree is the ground of all of its branches. We call this view Metaphysical Foundationalism (MF). Accordingly, priority monism states there is only one ungrounded concrete object, namely cosmos, which is the ground of everything else.

On the other hand, there is the view of priority pluralism which states that there are at least two concrete objects which are the grounds of everything else. By using the example of a tree-like structure, we can show that the debate is about the numbers of existing objects in the root of the tree. Schaffer (Schaffer, Monism: The Priority of the Whole, 2010) (Schaffer, 2008) (Schaffer, 2013) (Schaffer, The Internal Relatedness of All Things, 2010) gives some arguments for justifying his claim. The arguments of the debate between priority monism and priority pluralism, which Schaffer rejects or defend, are Common sense, Quantum emergence, gunky world, Heterogeneity, Intrinsicness, free modal recombination, Nomic integrity and Modal cut and paste.³

Schaffer has two assumptions for his claim that I think it should be reconsidered. First, he assumes MF to be correct. Recently this view has been under attack by a new position, which is called metaphysical coherentism (MC). MC claims that the properties of the "grounding relation", which represents the structure of reality, are being non-symmetric, non-transitive and non-irreflexive.⁴

¹ There is a debate about what kinds of entities does grounding relate. In this research, I assume that grounding relates various kinds of entities.

² You can see the debates about the properties of grounding in (Trogdon, 2013)

³ You can read a thorough survey of these accounts in (Schaffer J. , 2008)

⁴ Rabin (Rabin, 2018) defends MC by referring to Barnes (Barnes, 2018) (Rabin, 2018, p. 43) arguing for the possibility of symmetric relations and Jenkins (Jenkins, 2011) (Rabin, 2018, p. 44) for her arguing that identity relations can be reflexive. Furthermore, he refers to Schaffer (Schaffer J. , 2012) (Rabin, 2018, p. 46) for his counterexample that shows grounding can be non-transitive.

Schaffer second unjustified assumption is overlooking the abstract entities as the grounds of everything⁵ else although he introduces grounding as a relation which flanks different kinds of entities.⁶

One question will arise here. If priority monism is working about concrete objects, what is the reason for us to bring abstract entities to the picture? Firstly, I should answer because grounding is neutral about the kinds of entities which it relates, we should consider abstract entities in our priority views. Secondly, I should bring an old debate between nominalists and realists about the properties. Nominalism is the view that says the only real thing is the concrete particular objects.

On the other hand, realists defend the priority of universals over the particulars. Now considering the existing priority views, we can see that they prefer nominalism due to choosing only the concrete objects; however, if we defend realism, then abstract entities would be one of the most important objects of the reality. Accordingly, we should use these abstract entities when we talk about the structure of reality, and one of these abstract entities is the structure itself.

Consequently, if we accept the plausibility of MC and relate both abstract and concrete entities as the relata of the grounding relation, we will fill a gap that currently exists in the literature of priority views. We can introduce the structure which MC talks about as the monistic ground of everything else.

⁵ Although nobody has never examined the part-whole relation between abstract and concrete entities, Trogdone & Cowling (Trogdon, Kelly & Cowling, Sam, 2019) argue for an abstract priority atomism.

⁶ (Schaffer J. , 2009)

3- Research Questions

By considering MC, I will argue for a structure to be the ground of everything else, and I will proceed to justify this new claim by investigating these two questions which will arise:

- 1- Is MC in consistence with priority views?
- 2- There are various arguments for priority monism which rejects priority pluralism and vice versa; can the view of the priority of the structure meet the problems which extant priority views are facing?

Regarding the first question, I will show that because grounding is non-transitive, then a single concrete object cannot be the ground of everything else. For example, imagine a world in which there is only three objects, namely a, b and c. due to the property of non-transitivity, in this world, we can have a cohere structure like this: a grounds b, b grounds c, c grounds a. in this world, whatever we choose for our prior ground would be arbitrary, and nothing is the ground of everything. Nevertheless, the structure that is relating these nodes can be the ground of the nodes. The structure can even necessitate its nodes and their relation. The same argument can be used for priority pluralism.

Accordingly, by the examination of these kinds of arguments, which are about the properties of the structure of reality, I want to argue against the consistency of MC and the extant priority views. By doing this, my position, which is arguing for the priority of a structure, will be justified.

After showing the inconsistencies between priority views and MC, I will search for a new solution which is the priority of a structure over all of the entities. Although philosophers have already examined the part-whole debates in abstract entities and concrete ones⁷ separately, no one has ever tried to suggest a unified solution by combining them. By some

⁷ See (Trogon, Kelly & Cowling, Sam, 2019) for abstract entities and (Schaffer J. , 2010) for concrete objects.

philosophers, like Schaffer⁸, grounding is assumed to be a relation which flanks different entities. So, examining this option would be beneficial for the literature of grounding and part-whole debate.

By introducing the whole structure as the ground of everything else, I will investigate whether this new solution is consistent with other existing priority views. For this purpose, I will isolate two notions of grounding, namely grounding_c, which is only about the concrete objects and grounding_a, which is about the abstract entities. Respectively, we would have priority monism_{a or c} and priority pluralism_{a or c}. Then, I want to show that the structure itself is the foundation which is determining the grounds of priority monism_c and priority monism_a. This solution would bring metaphysics and sciences closer together because the structure which scientists introduce, as the fundamental structure, would determine whether we should be priority monists_{a or c} or priority pluralists_{a or c}.

Besides the question of whether the account of the priority of the structure is neutral to priority views_{a and c}, I want to research the consistency of this new position with some other arguments which is defended by one of the existing priority views, namely Common sense, Quantum emergence, gunky world, Heterogeneity, Intrinsicness, free modal recombination, Nomic integrity and Modal cut and paste.

4- Methodology

Philosophy mostly is an armchair task. So, I will primarily be reading, writing and discussing with my supervisors and the other academics in my field. Also, I aim to go to workshops and conferences and present my work before the end of my PhD, and also attend seminars and present work in

⁸ (Schaffer J. , 2009)

progress internally. These activities will help me to revise and improve my research outcome.

5- Research significance

Stating the plausibility of a structure being a monistic ground of everything and the coherence of this view to MC, would make MC more plausible. Also, it would help the debates over the properties of grounding. Besides, if we accept a structure to be the monistic ground, I think we will bring metaphysics and fundamental sciences closer together. The fundamental sciences can answer which structure grounds everything. That structure is the united structure that they are modelling.

6- My relevant background

My master's thesis is on the metaphysics of grounding and its logic, namely the meta-ground question⁹. This thesis helped me to investigate the properties of grounding, and now I am ready to apply my knowledge of grounding in the areas that are using grounding to solve their debates.

7- References

- Barnes, E. (2018). Symmetric Dependence. In R. Bliss , & G. Priest, *Reality and Its Structure* (pp. 50-69). UK: Oxford.
- Baron, S. a. (2016). Monism: The Islands of Plurality. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 583–606.
- Bennett, K. (2017). *Making Things Up*. Oxford : Oxford University Press.

⁹ It asks what, if anything, grounds the grounding relations.

- Bernstein, S. (forthcoming). Could a Middle Level be the Most Fundamental? *Philosophical Studies*.
- Bliss, R. &. (2018). *Reality and its Structure: Essays in Fundamentality*. Oxford University Press.
- Bliss, R. (2014). VICIOUSNESS AND CIRCLES OF GROUND. *Metaphilosophy*, 245-256.
- Bohn, E. D. (2009). Must There Be a Top Level? *Philosophical Quarterly*, 193-201.
- Calosi, C. (2014). Quantum Mechanics and Priority Monism. *Synthese*, 1-14.
- Cameron, R. P. (2008). Turtles all the way down: Regress, priority and fundamentality. *Philosophical Quarterly*, 1-14.
- Correia, F., & Schnieder, B. (2012). Grounding: An Opinionated Introduction. In F. Correia , & B. Schnieder, *Metaphysical Grounding: Understanding the Structure of Reality* (pp. 1-36). UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Fine, K. (2001). The Question of Realism. *Philosophers' Imprint*, 1-30.
- Fine, K. (2012). Guide to Ground. In F. Correia, & B. Schneider, *Metaphysical Grounding: Understanding the Structure of Reality* (pp. 37-80). Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.
- Jenkins, C. S. (2011). Is Metaphysical Dependence Irreflexive. *The Monist* , 267-276.
- Ladyman, J. (1998). What is structural realism? *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science*, 409-424.
- Ladyman, J. (2014). Structural Realism. *he Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.
- Maudlin, T. (1998). Part and Whole in Quantum Mechanics. In E. Castellani, *Interpreting Bodies: Classical and Quantum Objects in Modern Physics* (pp. 46-60). Princeton University Press.
- Rabin, G. O. (2018). Grounding Orthodoxy and the Layered Conception. In R. Bliss, & G. Priest, *Reality and its Structure* (pp. 37-49). Oxford University Press.
- Raven, M. (2015). Ground. *Philosophy Compass*, 322-333.
- Raven, M. J. (2016). Fundamentality without Foundations. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 607-626.

- Rosen, G. (2010). Metaphysical Dependence: Grounding and Reduction. In B. Hale, & A. Hoffmann, *In Modality: Metaphysics, Logic, and Epistemology* (pp. 109-136). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Schaffer, J. (2003). Is there a fundamental level? *Noûs*, 498-517.
- Schaffer, J. (2008). Monism. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.
- Schaffer, J. (2009). On What Grounds What. In D. Manley, Chalmers, & R. Wasseman, *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology* (pp. 347-383). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Schaffer, J. (2010). Monism: The Priority of the Whole. *Philosophical Review*, 31–76.
- Schaffer, J. (2010). The Internal Relatedness of All Things. *Mind*, 341-376.
- Schaffer, J. (2012). Grounding, Transitivity, and Contrastivity. In F. a. Correia, *Metaphysical Grounding: Understanding the Structure* (pp. 122-38). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schaffer, J. (2013). The Action of the Whole. *Aristotelian Society Supplementary*, 67-87.
- Sider, T. (2007). Against Monism. *Analysis*, 1-7.
- Tahko, T. E. (2012). On the Common Sense Argument for Monism. In P. G. (ed.), *Spinoza On Monism* (pp. 149-166). Palgrave-Macmillan.
- Thompson, N. (2016). Metaphysical Interdependence. In M. Jago, *Reality Making* (pp. 38-56). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Toraldo di Francia, G. (1998). A World of Individual Objects? In E. Castellani, *Interpreting Bodies: Classical and Quantum Objects in Modern Physics* (pp. 21-29). Princeton University Press.
- Trogon, K. (2013). An introduction to grounding. In M. Hoeltje, B. Schnieder, & A. Steinber, *Varieties of Dependence* (pp. 97-122). Munich: Philosophia Verlag.
- Trogon, Kelly & Cowling, Sam. (2019). Prioritizing platonism. *Philosophical Studies*, 2029-2042.