

Fine's "Question of Realism"

Metaphysics Seminar, March 23rd, 2016

Preview: Fine is interested in the realism/anti-realism distinction. For instance, how should we characterize the disagreement between moral realists and anti-realists? To answer this question, Fine thinks we need to understand what metaphysical picture of *reality* lurks in the background. In the first half of the paper, Fine considers two ways of characterizing "metaphysical reality", one (1) in terms of factuality, and the other (2) in terms of irreducibility. But he finds that factuality and irreducibility "resist formulation in other terms". This leads to what Fine calls, "the quietist challenge". In the second part of the paper, Fine tries to respond to the quietist challenge and show how we can understand realist debates by appealing to the notion of ground: disagreements between realists and anti-realists can be understood largely as disagreements in ground. In the last section, Fine attempts to show these discussions are unified.

1 To begin with, why do we need a metaphysical picture of reality?

Fine thinks that we are interested in varieties of anti-realism that are "non-skeptical" in nature; non-skeptical anti-realists will want to capture many of our ordinary assessments. Such an anti-realist about X will want to say that X is the case, but X is not *really* the case. So, killing babies for fun is wrong but it is not *really* the case that killing babies for fun is wrong. But once we start using this "really the case" locution, we need to figure out what metaphysical picture of reality is in play. How do we do that? Fine says we should look at two leading ways of characterizing the realism/anti-realism debate (non-skeptically): in terms of factuality and irreducibility.

(Different kinds of antirealists will appeal to factuality and irreducibility, Fine thinks. Nonfactualists are supposed to be folks like non-cognitivists. Reductionists are supposed to be people like ethical naturalists)

2 Factualism and Realism

Metaphysical Reality: what is real is what is factual.

How should we characterize factuality?

2.1 First Proposal

First attempt:

"On the traditional account of this sort, a 'noncognitive' or 'non-factual' proposition is taken to be one that is not a candidate for being true or false, and the antirealist is taken to deny that the propositions from a given disputed class are candidates for being true or false." (4)

Problem: Given that killing babies for fun is wrong, it's true that killing babies for fun is wrong! Either the non-factualist is using some special, inflated notion of truth/falsity to block this inference, or she is a skeptical anti-realist! Neither option is great.

2.2 Second Proposal

Second attempt (Dummettian):

"Realism (factualism) for a given area of discourse is primarily a matter of its conforming to the Principle of Bivalence, the principle that every statement of the discourse should be true or false. (5)"

Problem(s):

1. It leads to a skeptical version of anti-realism. That's because we ordinarily take the statements of the discourses in question (killing babies for fun is wrong, etc.) to obey bivalence.
2. To which area of discourse do the statements belong? Sometimes there are multiple potential discourses, and we may think that Bivalence holds for some and not others.
3. What about the person who goes around considering the statements of the discourse one by one, and forms an opinion on the truth/falsity of each one. Does she only become a realist once she considers the "final" statement of the discourse?

2.2.1 Supplementing the Principle of Bivalence

2.2.2 Epistemic Proposal

"According to the epistemic proposal, the notion of truth that figures in Bivalence must be such that it is possible for a statement from the given discourse to be true and yet unknowable—or even lacking in any possible evidence in favor of its truth." (6)

Problem: Consider a semantics in which the meaning of a sentence is given by the evidential situations in which the assertion is warranted.

Question: what's going on in the top of page 7, the stuff on objective warrant?

2.2.3 Semantic Proposal

Maybe realism shouldn't just be characterized by the statements of a discourse conforming to Bivalence; realism requires the acceptance of all of the features of classical logic (for that discourse).

Problem: If this antirealist could accept Bivalence, why couldn't she embrace all of classical logic? (8)

3 Irreducibility and Realism

Metaphysical Reality: What is fundamental or irreducible.

Here, anti-realists about X would claim that sentences about X are reducible to sentences that are not about X.

What is it for a sentence/statement/proposition to be reducible to another?

3.1 First Proposal: Logical Analysis

"To say that one sentence reduces to, or is analyzable in terms of, another is to say that they express the same proposition but that the grammatical form of the second is closer to the logical form of the proposition than the grammatical form of the first. Thus reduction reveals a discrepancy between the "apparent" grammatical form of the sentence and the "genuine" logical form of the proposition and serves to bring the two in closer alignment. To take a paradigm example, the sentence 'The average American is 5 feet tall' will reduce to 'The sum of heights of all Americans divided by the number of Americans is 5 feet', since the latter brings us closer to the logical form of the proposition that is expressed." (8)

Problems:

1. Conjunctive cases (and one-many cases in general) and disjunctive cases.
2. *De Re* reductions.
3. What is the "logical form" of a proposition?

3.2 Second Proposal: Semantic Analysis

“Reduction is a semantical matter. It is taken to be a relation that holds in virtue of the meaning of the sentences to which it applies; and what is most distinctive about this relation is that, given that one sentence reduces to others, it should be possible to acquire an understanding of the reduced sentence on the basis of an understanding of the sentences to which it reduces.” (9)

This proposal can avoid problem (1) above, but it cannot accommodate (2) *De Re* reductions, very well. Fine also brings up a bachelor example (top of page 10), but I had trouble seeing the exact problem there. Maybe we can chat about it.

3.3 Third Proposal: Supervenience

Perhaps one sentence reduces to others when the former supervenes on the latter.

You know how this is going to go!

4 The Quietist Challenge

It seems we cannot analyze factuality and irreducibility in other terms. This is problematic if we want to keep these notions around. Consider non-factuality. This means that non-factual propositions lurk among the factual propositions. They are zombies! imposters!

But what exactly is the problem?

1. Should we conclude that “factuality” and “irreducibility” are unintelligible notions? No, thinks Fine.
2. Is the problem rather that there is no way of ascertaining “what is or is not factual or what does or does not reduce to what”? Yes, thinks Fine. This is the challenge he wants to meet.

5 Ground and Realism

Fine wants to respond to the Quietist’s challenge in 2. He claims that understanding grounding will help us clarify the notions of factuality and irreducibility. Thus, Fine will argue, we can understand questions of realism as (largely) questions concerning ground.

6 Reality, Factuality, and Grounding

(See supplementary handout)

7 Reality, Irreducibility and Grounding

You may think that what is real is what is ungrounded, but that’s not quite right for Fine. He claims,

“It is natural to understand the concept of fundamental reality in terms of the relative concept of one thing being less fundamental than, or reducible to, another—the fundamental being whatever does not reduce to anything else (but to which other things will reduce). But we appear thereby to play into the quietist’s hands. For how can an explanatory connection be determinative of what is and is not real? We may grant that some things are explanatorily more basic than others. But why should that make them more real? What I would like to suggest, in the face of this difficulty, is that we reject the idea that the absolute notion of fundamental reality is in need of a relational underpinning. The conception of reality that we are after is simply the conception of Reality as it is in itself...One might think of the world and of the propositions by which the

world is described as each having its own intrinsic structure; and a proposition will then describe how things are in themselves when its structure corresponds to the structure of the world. Thus it is this positive idea of the intrinsic structure of reality, rather than the comparative idea of reduction, that should be taken to inform the relevant conception of what is fundamental or real.” (25)

Now we can get at this idea of ir/reducibility. One proposition will reduce to others if the latter “bring us closer to what is real.”

Reducibility: The true proposition P reduces to the propositions Q, R, ... iff (i) P is not real; (ii) P is grounded in Q, R, ...; and (iii) each of Q, R, ... is either real or grounded in what is real.

- Are all ungrounded propositions real? No
- Are all grounded propositions unreal? No (consider the water case)

“So given that one proposition is grounded in others, how are we to ascertain whether or not it is real? What I would like to suggest is that there is a general presumption in favor of the grounded not being real. In the absence of any reason to the contrary, such as those illustrated by the cases above, we should assume that any given grounded proposition is unreal.”

8 The Unity of Realist Metaphysics

We can now have a more unified conception of factuality and fundamentality.

Factuality: A proposition is factual iff it is real or it is grounded in what is real.