

Schaffer's "On What Grounds What"

Handout, Metaphysics Seminar 2/10/15

Preview: Schaffer brings grounding-talk into the (metaphysics) mainstream with this paper. The first half of the paper criticizes conceptions of metaphysics which claim that metaphysics strives to answer "existence questions." Schaffer thinks that this is roughly Quine's project. Schaffer maintains that we should instead be asking questions about fundamentality and grounding. In particular, we should ask which entities are fundamental and which entities exist *in virtue of*, or are *grounded in*, other entities. After arguing for his negative proposal, Schaffer tries to clarify the nature and applications of grounding.

1 Preliminaries

Quinean Task: The task of metaphysics is to find what exists.

Quinean Method: We should extract our metaphysical commitments from our best theory.

First, we translate our best theories into canonical logic (classical first-order predicate logic for Quine). Next, we see which variables are bound by quantifiers. The bound variables represent our ontological commitments. That is, "the method is to solve for the domain of quantification required for the truth of an apt regimentation of our best theory. The elements of the domain are the posits of the best theory, and insofar as we accept the theory, these are the entities we get committed to (1963a: 123)." (348)

Aristotelian Task: The task of metaphysics is to find what grounds what.

Aristotelian Method: The method of metaphysics is to deploy diagnostics for what is fundamental, together with diagnostics for what grounds what.

Schaffer helps us distinguish between a few different options for metaphysical pictures: flat, sorted, ordered.

2 The Quinean Task and The Aristotelian Task

2.1 The Quinean Task: The Triviality of Existence Questions

Do numbers exist? Properties? Sherlock Holmes? They exist, Schaffer maintains. These existence questions are trivial. Here is a simple yet compelling argument that numbers exist:

- Premise: There are prime numbers
- Conclusion: There are numbers.

Does this argument punch you in the face with its soundness and cogency? If not, Schaffer anticipates three objections you may have:

1. There is a silent "according to the fiction" operator. Schaffer's response: Where is it? Not in the syntax!
2. The argument equivocates on "are". Schaffer's response: Where is the linguistic evidence? Nowhere!
3. Quantification is ontologically neutral. Schaffer's response: one ought to hold on to Quinean impulses here.

(Schaffer runs the same kinds of arguments for properties and Holmes.) Schaffer is a "permissivist" about existence¹; he thinks the interesting question concerns how such entities are grounded.

¹Although, he'll still claim that awful things, like square circles and non-self-identical creatures, don't exist.

“I thus submit that a meta-metaphysics that would make sense of these central questions must make sense of claims of grounding. These central metaphysical questions are not questions about whether entities exist, but only about how they do.” (363)

2.2 The Aristotelian Task: The Central Metaphysical Questions Concern Fundamentality and Grounding

Issues to address:

1. Perhaps some central metaphysical questions are still existence questions? Schaffer seems okay with this (are we?!).
2. “The second reply I anticipate is that grounding questions can be analyzed into existence questions, via supervenience claims.” Schaffer denies that supervenience is a suitable substitute for grounding.
3. Maybe we can rephrase questions about grounding into non-trivial existence questions? For instance, Do ungrounded-numbers exist? Does a concrete Sherlock Holmes exist? These would count as robust metaphysical questions for Schaffer. But Schaffer wants you to note what’s special about such existence questions: it’s the information about the grounding-status that’s the focus of our concern.

3 Unpacking the Quinean Method and Aristotelian Assumptions

Schaffer thinks that the Quinean Method will “deliver decent results” only if it involves “presuppositions about ordering structure at every single stage.” What are the stages of the Quinean method and how do they involve Aristotelian presuppositions?

Quinean method, stage 1: Identify the best theory (physics, for Quine).

(Aristotelian presuppositions at stage 1: The best theory is a theory of the fundamental.)

Quinean method, stage 2: Identify the canonical logic (first-order logic, for Quine).

(Aristotelian presuppositions at stage 2: The canonical logic turns (in part) on what is fundamental. Considerations about what is fundamental will help us choose between classical logic, intuitionist logic, etc.)

Quinean method, stage 3: Translate the best theory into the canonical logic (some paraphrasing allowed, for Quine).

Aristotelian presuppositions at stage 3: The apt translations are into talk of the fundamental. Our accounts of what’s fundamental should help us decide whether translating to FOPL from functorese is apt or *vice versa*.

Quinean method, stage 4: Determine the domain of quantification required to render this translation true (all equinumerous domains are equally good, for Quine).

Aristotelian presuppositions at stage 4: The right domain is the domain of the fundamental.

Quinean method, stage 5: Read the entity commitments off the elements of the required domain (with radically eliminativist consequences, for Quine).

Aristotelian presuppositions at stage 5: The ontic commitments are to the fundamental grounds plus grounding relations and what is grounded. The Quinean method tells us only what basic or fundamental entities exist.

4 Grounding

x is fundamental =df x is ungrounded.

x is derivative =df something grounds x.

“Grounding is...irreflexive, asymmetric, and transitive. It thus induces a partial ordering over the entities (the great chain of being), with foundations (the substances, the foundation post for the great chain of being).”

There are more controversial elements of Schaffer’s theory of grounding. Here are a few: He thinks that all chains of ground must bottom out in ungrounded entities. He thinks there is only one “variety” of grounding relation. He is also a priority monist (though he doesn’t argue for this view here).

5 Questions

- How does Schaffer’s conception of fundamentality differ from Sider’s notion of fundamentality?
- What are the appropriate relata for the grounding relation?
- What do we think about the fundamentality status of the grounding relation itself?