

No Work for a Theory of Grounding

Metaphysics Seminar, February 24th, 2016

Preview: Wilson is not a big fan of grounding. First she distinguishes between “big G” and “little g” grounding relations. Big G grounding relations are those Schaffer, Fine, Rosen, etc. appeal to in providing theories of Ground. Little g relations are those like realization, reduction, determination relations, set-membership, parthood, and so on. Wilson thinks the little gs are legitimate metaphysical dependence relations we should be studying. Big G does no work over and above the work the little gs can do, and, moreover, she thinks (of course) that big G grounding can do no work at all. In the first part of the paper, Wilson argues that Grounding, like supervenience, is too coarse-grained to capture a notion of metaphysical dependence adequately. Then, in the last few sections, Wilson examines whether Grounding, while coarse-grained, could play a role in addition to the little gs. Nope.

1 The uselessness of Grounding on its own

1.1 Does Grounding fare better than supervenience?

First, why can't we use supervenience to characterize metaphysical dependence?¹

Wilson thinks that metaphysical dependence is supposed to capture this “nothing over and above” talk. When X metaphysically depends on Y, X is nothing over and above Y. Supervenience cannot capture this “nothing over and above” intuition. Why not? Well, Wilson has us consider a Malebranchian God: Malebranchian God could “bring about, with metaphysical necessity, certain mental states upon the occurrence of certain physical states; here the mental states metaphysically supervene on but are clearly over and above the physical states.”

At first, it may seem like Grounding does a better job at capturing the “nothing over and above” intuition. Neither is the mental grounded in the physical nor is the physical grounded in the mental in the Malbranchian picture. However, Wilson claims that Grounding is still in trouble: we could claim that under certain varieties of emergentism, the mental is grounded in the physical (as in the mental is at least partially dependent on the physical), but the mental is still something “over and above” the physical.

Questions for Wilson:

1. How much should we care about “nothing over and above” stuff?
2. In the case of emergentism, can we just claim that the mental is *partially Grounded* in the physical? Perhaps only full Grounding can accommodate the “nothing over and above” intuition? Wilson considers this in a footnote:

“Per usual, Fine’s work anticipates this concern, in explicitly allowing for partial Grounding. I cannot enter into the more subtle details of Fine’s investigations here; suffice to say that a relation of partial Grounding is not up to the task of making sense of the usual (in virtue of; nothing over and above) idioms of metaphysical dependence that proponents of Grounding take as implicitly defining their posit. It is especially unclear how a relation of partial Grounding is supposed to comport with Schaffer’s and Rosen’s supposition that Grounding is primitive. Is the basic primitive Partial Grounding, and if so, how does this comport with Complete Grounding? Note that one cannot define Complete Grounding in terms of Partial Grounding, along lines of defining parthood in terms of primitive proper parthood and identity. Rather, to handle the case of robust emergentism, primitivists about Grounding will require, it seems, at least two primitively related primitive relations.” (ft. 27)

¹One reason I’d say is that supervenience isn’t asymmetric, but this isn’t a major concern for Wilson.

(Clarification) Question 2*: What's wrong with taking complete/full ground as primitive and defining partial ground from that?

Fine: "Another familiar distinction is between full and partial ground. Ground in the previous sense is full ground. A is a partial (or what we shall later call a partial strict) ground for C if A, on its own or with some other truths, is a ground of C."

1.2 Grounding and Underdetermination

Another big issue is that of underdetermination. Wilson thinks that "Grounding (/failure of Grounding) claims leave open important ontological, metaphysical and causal questions about Grounded (/non-Grounded) goings-on—questions that are the usual target of investigations into metaphysical dependence, and which the small-g grounding relations successfully answer." (544)

What specifically does Wilson have in mind? Consider the claim that normative facts (like x is good) are grounded in naturalistic facts (like, x has physical properties P) as Rosen hypothesizes. "Rosen's Grounding-based formulation of naturalism tells us almost nothing about how, exactly, normative and intentional goings-on stand to naturalistic goings-on. It does not tell us, for example, whether the former are reducible to the latter (as per reductive varieties of naturalism), or whether the former are rather irreducible to, though still nothing over and above, the latter (as per non-reductive varieties of naturalism).

Someone who accepts normative-naturalist grounding could accept any of the following kinds of views:

1. Type-identity theory (?)
2. Token identity theory (?)
3. Role Functionalism ("normative state types are characterized by functional or causal roles played by naturalistic state types.")
4. Determination Relation-Based Naturalism

Grounding underdetermines which one of these is the type of metaphysical dependence we should have in mind.

1.3 To clarify the uselessness of Grounding on its own, let's compare it with Causation

"Suppose someone were inclined to posit a general (perhaps even primitive) relation of Causation, as at issue in contexts in which various idioms of causal dependence were operative. (I am not suggesting that we should posit such a general relation; the example is for illustrative purposes.) Such a general posit would not, it seems, be subject to the complaint I am now leveling against Grounding, for a bare claim of Causation tells one quite a lot about the ontological, metaphysical and causal status of the related goings-on. If someone tells me that the baseball Caused the breaking of the window, for example, then, even if I do not know which specific sort of causal relation (e.g. nomological, counterfactual, transference-based) is supposed to be at issue, I am nonetheless in position to know quite a lot about what the claim metaphysically entails or presupposes about the related goings-on. I know, for example, that (on the supposition etc.) the baseball and the window-shattering each exist; that the baseball and the window-shattering are distinct; that the baseball is efficacious." (553)

2 The uselessness of Grounding in conjunction with the little gs

2.1 Useful to have a coarse-grained G-notion in addition to the finer-grained g-notions?

Wilson considers some suggestions:

- **Suggestion:** We can use Grounding to characterize the physicalism/non-physicalism debate.
- **Suggestion:** Our use of “in virtue of”/“Grounding” in various discussions provides evidence that there’s a single notion of Grounding. Response: It is not parsimonious to posit Grounding. Additionally, this doesn’t provide a reason to take Grounding as *metaphysically* primitive.)
- **Suggestion:** We are epistemically motivated by these “nothing over and above” intuitions. Response: Again, this doesn’t provide a reason to take grounding to be *metaphysically* primitive.
- **Suggestion:** Do we need Grounding to fix the direction of priority? Little-gs “may not in general be sufficient to establish a relationship of ground. So, for example, given that every X is a proper part of some Y, nothing follows about whether it is the parts or the wholes that are metaphysically dependent (558)

Response: We don’t need Grounding to fix the direction of priority, we can appeal to fundamentality without appealing to Grounding. This is pretty easy in cases where X depends on Y and Y is fundamental while X is not.

But how do we characterize the fundamental on this approach? Not as the ungrounded! But that’s okay, Wilson thinks. We shouldn’t be characterizing the fundamental as the ungrounded anyway.

Wilson says:

We...have two reasons to resist a characterization of the fundamental as the un-Grounded: first, such a characterization inappropriately characterizes basic entities in negative and, more importantly, in non-basic terms; second, such a characterization is inappropriately theoretically loaded. In place of a negative non-basic, theoretically loaded characterization, we should rather characterize the fundamental in positive basic, metaphysically neutral terms. Here I am inclined to follow Fine and ‘reject the idea that the absolute notion of fundamental reality is in need of a relational underpinning’, rather taking reality and its intrinsic structure to be primitive: ‘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.’ Though I endorse Fine’s view that the fundamental is primitive, I think we can say more about this notion; namely, that it follows from some goings-on’s being fundamental at a world that these goings-on, individually or together, provide a ground—*nota bene*: in one or other specific ‘small-g’ fashion, not by reference to a distinctive relation of Grounding—for all the other goings-on at the world. Which entities are in the fundamental base is primitive; this primitive specification then fixes the direction of priority.” (561)

Question: Are we happy with this? What about redundant fundamental entities?

- **Suggestion:** Do we need Grounding in cases where nothing is perfectly fundamental, but there are still priority relations? Response: No, we’ll still be working with an idea of the fundamental in the background...
- **Suggestion:** Do we need Grounding as a “general unifier” of the little gs? Wilson thinks we do not. First, why think that just because the little gs have certain features in common, it follows that there is a primitive Grounding relation? Second, what exactly are the features uniting the little gs as varieties of Grounding? Are they structural features, like irreflexivity, asymmetry and transitivity? If so, then so what, lots of relations that share these features! Moreover, are we so certain that all the little gs share these features (consider the set-membership relation...)

2.2 Identity as a grounding relation

Here things get intense. Furthering the last point, Wilson thinks that not all grounding relations (little gs) are irreflexive, asymmetric, and transitive. Not all little gs are irreflexive (nor asymmetric)! I had a difficult time following all of this discussion on pages 572-3, but hopefully we can talk about it!