Berker's "The Unity of Grounding"
Metaphysics Seminar, March 30th, 2016

Preview: Selim Berker maintains that "a metaphysical grounding relation is indispensable to normative reasoning". He argues against two kinds of pluralism: 1. Moderate grounding pluralism, and 2. Extreme grounding pluralism. We haven't read too much about moderate grounding pluralism yet. Moderate grounding pluralism (Fine 2012) claims that there are multiple "Big-G" grounding relations, metaphysical, normative, and natural. Extreme grounding pluralism is more familiar to us: Wilson's maintaining that there is no Big-G grounding relation, only a bunch of "small-g" grounding relations, falls under this heading. Berker believes there is a Big-G grounding relation, and moreover, there is no difference between Big-G metaphysical grounding and Big-G normative grounding.

1 Preliminaries

Berker remarks on the historical roots of grounding (which he thinks go back much further than Fine/Schaffer). He discusses grounding relations (instead of grounding as sentential operators). Berker distinguishes between grounding and supervenience in the typical ways we've seen so far, but he makes sure to highlight that "in virtue of", "because", "priority", and "making the case" talk has been intertwined with grounding talk in the past.

2 Appeals to Grounding in Normative Inquiry

2.1 The Right and The Good

Let's consider disputes between consequentialists and non-consequentialists. Berker considers the question, "Is the right prior to the good, or the good prior to the right?" (10) Berker thinks that the kind of priority here should be characterized in terms of grounding. But he needs to argue for this. First, he tries to show that we can't appeal to other kinds of priority to cash out this question. Here are the candidates he considers:

- Semantic: While Moore thought "maximizing act consequentialism" is an analytic truth, contemporary philosophers don't really think this. Erica: I found this discussion confusing.

- Conceptual: Likewise, it doesn't seem like a conceptual truth that act-consequentialism is true.

- Epistemic: Epistemic priority can cut in a different direction. For instance, perhaps the non-consequentialist will claim that the right is prior to the good, but we come to know about the right on the basis of coming to know about the good. Weird but not impossible.

- Causal: The causal powers of the good and the right (if they have causal powers) do not establish priority.

- Counterfactual: We may have a problematic symmetry.

- Logical: If logical entailment is just necessitation, then we have the symmetry problem. If it's not then we have no reason to think either entails the other.

- Identity: The priority is lost.

Berker: "All I am suggesting is that we take this 'making'-talk at face value and see it as picking out the grounding/in virtue of relation." (13) He thinks we should replace claims like Op with Op*, Bi with Bi*, and Ver with Ver*:

(Op) Necessarily, an action is morally right if and only if it is optimific.

(Op*) Necessarily, an action is morally right if and only if, and because, it is optimific.

(Bi) Necessarily, an action is morally right if and only if.

(Bi*) Necessarily, an action is morally right if and only if, and because.

(Ver) Action A is morally right in circumstances C.

(Ver*) Action A is morally right in circumstances C because.

2.2   Reasons First!

We should also appeal to grounding when characterizing what's going on in "reasons-first" debates. There are two ways of characterizing the reasons-first debate in terms of grounding. Here is Berker's suggestion for how to do so:

- **Reasons are first, full stop:** All basic facts about reasons are ungrounded. (Parfit, Scanlon)

- **Reasons are normatively first:** All basic facts about reasons are not grounded (even in part) in any other normative facts (though they may well be grounded in certain non-normative facts). (Street, Schroeder)

Issue: Reasons firsters sometimes characterize their position using talk of "reduction" not grounding. Berker asks: how different are reduction and grounding? Reduction claims may entail grounding claims but not vice versa. Berker maintains, " in such cases, I think reasons-firsters are more likely to take the presence of grounding, rather than a lack of reduction, to be the issue which is more relevant to their position."

Examples from Berker:

"(†) [Agent A has a reason to ϕ in circumstances C] obtains entirely in virtue of, but is not reducible to, [A ought to ϕ in circumstances D],

I think reasons-firsters would view this claim as being in tension with their first thesis. Isn't (†), on its own, enough to block the claim that reasons are first, in the relevant sense? Similarly, if a different philosopher were to claim:

(† †) [Agent A ought to ϕ in circumstances C] obtains entirely in virtue of, but is not reducible to, [A has a reason to ϕ in C, has no reasons against ϕ -ing in C, and has no reasons for or against any alternative to ϕ-ing in C],

I think reasons-firsters are likely to see this claim as offering partial confirmation of their second thesis. Isnt (††), on its own, enough to support the claim that reasons come before oughts, in the relevant sense? In short: if we mark a distinction between reduction and grounding, it is better to formulate the reasons-first program in terms of grounding, and if we dont mark a distinction between those two notions, it is harmless to phrase things in terms of grounding." (17)

Erica: Okay, but you may think the lack of a reduction leaves some explanatory gaps for the Reasons people.

3   Grounding Pluralism vs. Grounding Monism

Berker is now going to argue against Grounding Pluralism. Grounding pluralists maintain that there are multiple kinds of grounding relations that, in some sense, cannot be defined in terms of one another. Fine maintains that there are three such varieties: metaphysical grounding, normative grounding, and natural grounding. Berker disagrees: the kind of grounding and "in virtue of" claims that philosophers appeal to in

normative theorizing is the same as that appealed to in metaphysical theorizing. Before arguing for "grounding monism", Berker first wants a more rigorous formulation of Grounding Monism and Grounding Pluralism.

First, a few preliminary definitions:

Grounding relation R1 is *fundamentally distinct* from grounding relation R2 if and only if a. R1 and R2 are distinct relations, b. R1 cannot be defined in terms of R2, c. R2 cannot be defined in terms of R1, and d. there is no other grounding relation in terms of which both R1 and R2 can be defined.

Grounding relation R is *fundamentally unique* if and only if all other grounding relations can be defined in terms of it.

- **Grounding Monism:** There is one fundamentally unique grounding relation.
- **Grounding Pluralism:** There are at least two fundamentally distinct grounding relations.

Are we happy with this characterization? I am not.

4   Against (Moderate) Grounding Pluralism

In this section, Berker argues against moderate grounding pluralism (the kind of grounding pluralism here is moderate because Fine only takes there to be three different kinds of grounding relations instead of a vast array of dependence relations like Wilson claims).

Berker's Argumentative Strategy:
(1) Find a logical principle relating grounding claims to one another "and which holds when it is applied exclusively to metaphysical grounding, or exclusively to natural grounding or exclusively to normative grounding." (2) Argue that the principle also holds in mixed cases. And (3) Infer (via IBE) that there is a single generic grounding relation underlying these more specific grounding relations.

4.1   Implementing the Strategy with Transitivity.

4.1.1   The Pure Logical Principles (stage 1):

- (Tran-met) If [p] is partially metaphysically grounded in [q], and [q] is partially metaphysically grounded in [r], then [p] is partially metaphysically grounded in [r].

- (Tran-nor) If [p] is partially normatively grounded in [q], and [q] is partially normatively grounded in [r], then [p] is partially normatively grounded in [r].

4.1.2   The Mixed Principles (stage 2):

- (Tranmet/nor) If [p] is metaphysically grounded in [q], and [q] is normatively grounded in [r], then [p] is grounded (in some non-rigged-up sense) in [r].

- (Trannor/met) If [p] is normatively grounded in [q], and [q] is metaphysically grounded in [r], then [p] is grounded (in some non-rigged-up sense) in [r].

What does "non-rigged up sense" mean? That's not totally clear. Why do we need the "non-rigged up" qualifier? Berker: "It is necessary to include the phrase 'in some non-rigged up sense' in theses principles because we can always fabricate a variety of grounding that would make Tran met/nor and Tran nor/met true if that phrased were dropped".

Question: Is that stuff about the "non-rigged up sense" true? (consider examples on page 24)

Question: Why think these mixed principles hold? Examples.

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4.1.3 Stage 3: Inferring that there is a single grounding relation

Why should this lead us to conclude that there is a single grounding relation underlying metaphysical grounding and normative grounding? Mixed Transitivity Principles don't usually hold when the relations involved are distinct. Consider the examples on page 24 with the *larger than* relation.

4.1.4 How do we flesh out the idea that there is a single grounding relation in play here?

1. Identity Proposal: Metaphysical Grounding = Normative Grounding = Grounding. We're done! 2. Suppression Proposal. "The so-called "metaphysical" grounding is just the generic grounding relation, and normative grounding can be defined in terms of that relation as follows:

(NOR) [p] is (fully) normatively grounded in Δ =df there exists a non-empty set, Γ, of fundamental normative truths such that [p] is (fully) generically grounded in Δ, Γ.

Berker is not a big fan of The Suppression Proposal.
Suppose: [p]: action ϕ is right. Δ: action ϕ is optimific. Γ: action phi is right iff and because phi is optimific.
Berker thinks that there is a big question of how to understand the "because" occurring in Γ.
Question: Do we need to formulate (NOR) in this way?

4.2 Issues with the Argument for Grounding Monism

Issue 1: What if the transitivity and the asymmetry of ground fail?

Schaffer's potential counterexample to transitivity, page 31. Berker's response: Although the potential counterexamples "may well show that transitivity does not hold in *every possible case*, they do nothing to undermine the many particular cases in which it is plausible that an instance of trnasitivity holds. Moreover, that is all we need in order to run the Argument from Transitive links." (32) Berker has similar remarks for the potential counterexamples to asymmetry.

Issue 2: There is a positive argument for Grounding Pluralism.

4.2.1 Fine's Positive Argument.

Fine thinks that there are three fundamentally distinct kinds of necessity: normative, natural, and metaphysical. Fine also thinks that grounding necessitation principles hold. In particular, he'll accept the following:

- (Nec-met) If [p] is fully metaphysically grounded in Γ, then $\square$ met ($\wedge \Gamma \supset$ p).

- (Nec-nor) If [p] is fully normatively grounded in Γ, then $\square$ nor ($\wedge \Gamma \supset$ p).

- (Nec-nat) If [p] is fully naturally grounded in Γ, then $\square$ nat ($\wedge \Gamma \supset$ p).

Fine thinks if you're a grounding monist, you should plausibly be committed to the following:

- Met: ([p] is fully met grounded in Γ =def [p] is fully grounded in the generic sense in Γ and the conjunction of Γ members metaphysically necessitates p.

- Nor*: [p] is fully norm grounded in Γ =def [p] is fully grounded in the generic sense in Γ and the conjunction of Γ's members norm necessitates p.

Problem (Version that Berker Raises):

"let n be a true normative proposition that holds as a matter of normative necessity, and let m be an arbitrary proposition (maybe true, maybe false) that has absolutely nothing to do with n (for example: *The moon is made of cheese*). Since n is true, the fact [n] obtains, and it is very plausible that this fact fully metaphysically makes it the case that the disjunctive fact [n ∨ m] obtains. It follows from (Met) that [n] fully grounds (in the generic sense) [n ∨ m]. Moreover, since n is normatively necessary, it is also the case that $n \vee m$ is normatively necessary (since it has a normatively necessary disjunct) and that $n \supset (n \vee m)$ is normatively necessary (since it has a normatively necessary consequent). Thus, via an appeal to (Nor*), we may conclude that [n] fully normatively grounds [n ∨ m] (in addition to fully metaphysically grounding it). However, this is implausible." (34)

Berker's response: Berker agrees that Met and Nor are bad ways of understanding both metaphysical and normative grounding as related to a generic notion of grounding. But there are other ways to link normative and metaphysical grounding (recall the identity thesis and the suppression proposal).

5 Against Extreme Grounding Pluralism

Wilson maintains (i) that the Big-G grounding can't do any work without the small-g relations. And (ii), once we have the small-g relations there's nothing left for the Big-G to do.

5.1 Wilson's case for (i)

Berker thinks that Wilson makes too quick an inference.

She moves from,

(*) The Big-G Grounding relation can't do any theoretical work addressing whether the mental is real, whether the mental is ontological distinct, and whether the mental is distinctively causally efficacious without supplementation.

to

(**) The Big-G Grounding relation cant do any theoretical work in any area of philosophy without supplementation.

Berker thinks this is too quick. Moreover, Berker isn't sure how Wilson is supposed to get from (**) to 1. He suggests that perhaps Wilson should be making the following inference from:

(***) The Big-G Grounding relation cant do any theoretical work addressing whether the mental is real, whether the mental is ontological distinct, and whether the mental is distinctively causally efficacious without supplementation by the small-g grounding relations,

to

(i) The Big-G Grounding relation cant do any theoretical work in any area of philosophy without supplementation by the small-g grounding relations.

Berker: Are we sure that (***) is correct? Maybe we'd need other notions than the small-g grounding relations (at least the ones Wilson's pointed out) to make headway on this point (Rosen thinks we'll need to appeal to notions like "essence" for example).

5.2 Wilson's case for (ii)

(ii) maintains that Big-G grounding has no work to do once we accept that the small-g grounding relations are around. In making this point, if you remember, Wilson is mainly fending off objections from people who think that Big-G grounding can still do some work. Berker focuses on two of her replies to objections and maintains that they are in tension.

5.2.1 Sider's Objection and Wilson's Response

Sider asks why all the small-g grounding relations count as grounding relations. Isn't the best explanation that they have something in common, that they are unified under the Big-G grounding relation somehow? Wilson says no, references to 'a grounding relation' really are just relations to small-g grounding relations.

5.2.2 Fine's Objection and Wilson's Response

Fine maintains that the mere holding of small-g grounding relations is not enough to establish a direction of priority among the relata. Willson maintains that to bring in the right direction of priority, we have to bring in auxiliary assumptions, assumptions about fundamentality.

Now Berker states,

> "Now even if we grant to Wilson the cogency of her replies to Sider and Fine, when viewed separately, they are not replies that she can offer at the same time. In her reply to Fine, Wilson makes an important concession: she is now no longer claiming that relations (a) through (h) are in themselves small-g grounding relations. Rather, these eight relations sometimes "turn on" and become small-g grounding relations when certain other conditions are present. (Worse still, some of these specific relations can "turn on" in two different directions of priority.) But if that's so, then we need to revise her reply to Sider. We can no longer say that talk of 'small-g grounding relations' is just a schematic way of referring to relations (a) through (h), since those relations are not always small-g grounding relations. Rather, we have to say that talk of 'small-g grounding relations' is a schematic way of referring to relations (a) through (h) when they are "turned on" as small-g grounding relations. But now either circularity or an infinite regress threatens. It is one thing to say that the sentence "Many contemporary metaphysicians have spent their careers studying the small-g grounding relations" is just a way of saying, "Many contemporary metaphysicians have spent their careers studying either relation (a), or relation (b), . . . , or relation (h)." But to gloss that sentence as "Many contemporary metaphysicians have spent their careers studying either relation (a) when it is 'turned on' as a small-g grounding relation, or relation (b) when it is 'turned on' as a small-g grounding relation, . . . , or relation (h) when it is 'turned on' as a small-g grounding relation" is to border on the incoherent." (42)

Question: I found this confusing: are we really led to incoherence or circularity? Aren't the extra assumptions just ones about fundamentality (at least theoretically?)

Berker raises another issue: If there are just the small-g grounding relations, which one is supposed to handle claims like the right is prior to the good? Berker thinks that none of them look great.

6 Berker's Surprising Consequence

"It follows from he unity of grounding that normative ethics is a branch of metaethics" (47)

I'm not even going to touch this one!