

Bennett on Grounding Grounding

Metaphysics Seminar, March 2nd, 2016

Preview: Bennett asks, “Is *grounding* itself fundamental?” First, Bennett disambiguates the question into two questions. Then she tries to answer those two questions.

1 Bennett on Grounding

Is grounding fundamental or non-fundamental? Bennett thinks that either way of answering this question leads to problems:

One reason to think grounding facts are non-fundamental comes from Sider’s considerations of Purity: since fundamental facts only involve fundamental notions, grounding facts cannot be fundamental. Another reason not to treat grounding as fundamental (here, the grounding *relation*), Bennett thinks, is that the fundamental should be freely recombinable. In other words, “whatever the fundamental elements of the world are, they are open to free modal recombination.” (1) (We can find this idea in Schaffer’s Monism as well). But if grounding facts are fundamental, and the grounding relation is freely recombinable, then there are possible worlds where nothing grounds anything. Bennett thinks this is implausible for two reasons: 1. It would allow for zombie worlds, and 2. It’s plausible to think that each entity has its fundamentality status essentially (and hence, necessarily).

However, “there are also seemingly compelling reasons to say that grounding must be fundamental. If it is not, it is itself grounded—the grounding relation obtains between the grounding relation and something more fundamental. And surely this involves some kind of circularity or regress. It means that building “must somehow bootstrap itself into being (Schaffer, personal communication).” (2)

So now we have three options:

1. Treat grounding as fundamental.
2. Treat grounding as non-fundamental.
3. Claim that grounding has some status other than fundamental/non-fundamental.

What does it mean when we say a relation is “fundamental”? That its existence doesn’t obtain in virtue of anything or that its instantiation doesn’t obtain in virtue of anything? These questions come apart. For grounding, the question “Is grounding fundamental?” can be disambiguated as follows:

- Is there something in virtue of which the grounding relation exists?
- Is there something in virtue of which particular grounding facts obtain—for each A that grounds some B, there is something in virtue of which A grounds B?

2 Treating Grounding as non-fundamental can lead to regresses

Bennett thinks that if we answer yes to either question, we’ll encounter a regress.

Regress 1: The Fact Regress

A grounds B
X grounds (A grounds B)
Z grounds (X grounds (A grounds B))
...

Regress 2: The Relation Regress

Suppose that something, X, grounds Ground (which means, “X grounds the existence of the grounding relation”).

Is this the same sense of “ground” occurring twice in this sentence? Bennett thinks no, but she’s not sure why not. She conjectures:

“We are trying to tell a story about how the grounding relation comes to be, what brings it into the world, what makes it the case that it exists in the first place. That story cannot invoke grounding anywhere—neither in the ground itself, nor in the relation by means of which the ground counts as a ground.” (7)

If this is on the right track, we should write: X grounds* Ground. But what is “grounds*”? And also, what grounds Ground*? Here the regress takes shape:

X grounds* Ground
Y grounds** Ground*
Z grounds*** Ground**
...

3 Halting the Regresses

Internal Relations: R is an internal relation iff it supervenes on the intrinsic monadic properties of its relata. Grounding, Bennett conjectures is not only internal but SUPERINTERNAL. It supervenes on the intrinsic nature of one of the relata, the grounder. Let’s look at how this is supposed to solve the regresses: (hopefully I’m writing this on the board...)

3.1 Is grounding really superinternal? Three objections.

1. It yields too deflated a sense of ground.
2. The existence of an internal relation is a priori deducible if one knows the intrinsic natures of the relata. But is that the case with grounding? When you know the nature of A can you *a priori* deduce that A grounds B?
3. The tortoise.