Reply to Kit Fine

Theodore Sider

July 19, 2013

Kit Fine’s paper raises important and difficult issues about my approach to the metaphysics of fundamentality. In chapters 7 and 8 I examined certain subtle differences between my approach and his. Our approaches are kindred because they share the assumption that fundamentality-theoretic concepts are not to be defined modally, and that some such concepts are themselves to be adopted as conceptually primitive. But they differ over which concepts are to be adopted, and over how those concepts behave.

On Fine’s (2001; 2012) approach, the primitive concepts are those of ground and reality. One proposition grounds another if and only if the first accounts for the second in a certain metaphysically distinctive way; one proposition holds in reality if and only if it is part of reality’s intrinsic structure. One difference between my approach and Fine’s is over whether the notion of a “fundamental truth” obeys the following principle of Combination:

Combination If sentences $S_1, S_2, \ldots$ are fundamental truths then any true sentence $S$ stated in the vocabulary of $S_1, S_2, \ldots$ is also a fundamental truth.

It is natural for me, I said, to define a fundamental truth as a truth that involves only joint-carving expressions—“fundamental terms” as Fine calls them; and it is natural for Fine to understand a fundamental truth as one that holds in reality. Thus my approach implies Combination whereas Fine’s allows him to deny it. Fine’s approach therefore can accommodate certain views that mine cannot. Fine gives two examples. First, certain logical atomists thought that $\neg P$ is a fundamental truth, but that $\neg \neg \neg P$ is not. Second, certain philosophers think that although persons possess mental attributes fundamentally, they possess physical attributes only derivatively, in virtue of the fundamental possession of those physical attributes by their bodies. Thus “Ted weighs 165 pounds” is a nonfundamental truth whereas “$B$ weighs 165 pounds” (where $B$ is my body) and “Ted has such-and-such mental features” are fundamental truths.

Fine’s complaints (and perplexity) about what I say about this issue in my book are fair; and to be honest, some of them reveal parts of the book that were hazy and underdeveloped. Rather than retracing my steps, I’d like to move forward and reassess the situation.

1This is not to say that all the approaches regard the concepts as metaphysically primitive.
In chapter 7 I distinguished between two notions of a fundamental truth. One was that characterized above (a truth cast in fundamental terms); the other was a truth that does not hold in virtue of any other. Let’s call the latter “basic truths”, and let’s continue to call the former “fundamental truths”. As Fine points out, my approach to fundamentality commits me to Combination only about fundamental truths, not to Combination about basic truths.²

Regardless of whether Combination about basic truths is true, however, my overall view is still not flexible enough to accommodate positions 1 and 2. Suppose for the sake of argument that Combination about basic truths is not true, and in particular that \( \neg \neg \neg P \) holds in virtue of \( \neg P \), which itself does not hold in virtue of anything. So far so good for the logical atomist. However, I accept the following principle:

**Completeness** Every nonfundamental truth holds in virtue of fundamental truths

That is, every truth that contains at least one nonfundamental term holds in virtue of truths that contain only fundamental terms. This is then incompatible with the logical atomist position, unless negation is admitted to be a fundamental term. (Moreover, once negation is admitted to be a fundamental term, the motivation for saying that \( \neg \neg \neg P \) holds in virtue of \( \neg P \) is undercut, since Completeness no longer demands that \( \neg \neg \neg P \) holds in virtue of anything.) So regardless of whether Combination about basicness is true, my view still limits the options for the logical atomist.

Fine accepts a principle analogous to completeness, which says roughly³ this:

**Fine-completeness** Every truth that does not hold in reality is grounded in truths that do hold in reality

---

² Kit wonders why I did not consider Combination about basicness in my book, and guesses that it stems from my opposition to ground (since “in virtue of” is in the vicinity of ground). This is partly responsible, though I must confess that I wrote chapter 8 before I wrote the bits of chapter 7 in which I distinguish two senses of ‘fundamental truth’, and did not properly reconsider chapter 8. Furthermore, insofar as opposition to ground was my main reason to set the issue aside, it’s not a good reason. First, I’m not so much opposed to ground as convinced that metaphysical semantics is a more useful notion, and so must still face the issue. Second, nothing I say about metaphysical semantics rules out the possibility that, e.g., \( \neg \neg \neg P \) has \( \neg P \) as its metaphysical truth condition, which again requires me to face the issue.

³ This is a simplified version of the principle that Fine (2001) actually accepts: “every factual truth that does not hold in reality is grounded by truths that hold in reality”. 

---

2 Kit wonders why I did not consider Combination about basicness in my book, and guesses that it stems from my opposition to ground (since “in virtue of” is in the vicinity of ground). This is partly responsible, though I must confess that I wrote chapter 8 before I wrote the bits of chapter 7 in which I distinguish two senses of ‘fundamental truth’, and did not properly reconsider chapter 8. Furthermore, insofar as opposition to ground was my main reason to set the issue aside, it’s not a good reason. First, I’m not so much opposed to ground as convinced that metaphysical semantics is a more useful notion, and so must still face the issue. Second, nothing I say about metaphysical semantics rules out the possibility that, e.g., \( \neg \neg \neg P \) has \( \neg P \) as its metaphysical truth condition, which again requires me to face the issue.

3 This is a simplified version of the principle that Fine (2001) actually accepts: “every factual truth that does not hold in reality is grounded by truths that hold in reality”.

2
Thus we each accept that a certain status halts the demand for grounding/in-virtue-of propositions. For me that status is being a fundamental truth; for Fine that status is holding in reality. Thus the “halter” obeys Combination for me but need not for Fine.

And it is being a halter for which the question of Combination is most important. This is because inability to provide grounds (or see how they could be provided) is one of our main guides to fundamentality. Consider the case of logical atomism. It is much harder to see how to provide grounds for all negative truths than it is to provide grounds for some negative truths in terms of negations of fundamental truths; and so it matters a great deal whether an available position is that singly negated fundamental truths are halters but triply negated ones are not.

This to some extent just pushes the question back: why do I insist on Completeness? The answer is that my espousal of Completeness reflects my “atomism” about fundamentality—i.e. my view that the most fundamental sort of fundamentality is term-fundamentality. (Atomism is at the very core of my position.) Rejecting Completeness would mean saying that some statements containing nonfundamental terms nevertheless don’t need to hold in virtue of any other statements. For instance, in the case of logical atomism, it would mean saying that even though ¬ is not a fundamental term, ¬P holds in virtue of nothing. Even though ¬P is not made out of reality’s basic building blocks—and even though the concept of reality’s basic building blocks is the most basic sort of fundamentality—the fact that ¬P is metaphysically bedrock. What teeth would then be left to the notion of a fundamental term?

So in the end my original assessment is vindicated: my account is committed to Combination in an important way. There of course remains the question of whether we should reject my account on that basis. Fine suggests that an appropriate dedication to the “data” of metaphysics will lead in his direction, and is mystified by my tendency to let theory drive the data rather than the other way around. Although my treatment of the dialectic was less clear than it might have been, I did not intend to let my theory dictate the data, but rather to argue for my theory on the basis of all the data. Although some of the data admittedly appears to go against my theory, this is inevitable in metaphysics; and part of the data speaks directly in favor of my theory: my arguments for preferring my theory over Fine’s (see especially section 8.3.1), and the considerable intuitive support that I think my atomistic approach enjoys. A wise choice on the basis of all the data requires examining whether the recalcitrant bits can be explained away. Still, there may be underlying methodological differences
between Fine and me. Fine seems to assume that a metaphysics of fundamentality ought to be “neutral” in the sense of accommodating all positions that are “coherent” and have “some plausibility”; that is why it is so important that an account of fundamentality not rule out the form of logical atomism under discussion. I on the other hand think that the nature of fundamentality is itself a metaphysical question like any other, without any privileged methodological place. Theory of fundamentality is not a sort of “first metaphysics”, which lays out a playing field into which all metaphysical theories can be fit in order to subsequently do battle. So consistency with all forms of logical atomism is not a piece of data that simply must be accommodated. (Of course, if there is reason to think that it is true, that is another matter.)

Let me turn next to Fine’s distinction between the E- and the D-projects:

The E-project is concerned with saying what can be said in the most fundamental terms, while the D-project is concerned with describing what can be described in the most fundamental terms. We can easily bring out the difference between the two projects with the case of disjunction. I can say ‘p or q’ and it is not clear that this can be said except by using disjunction or the like. But suppose now that I correctly describe the world by means of the sentence ‘p or q’. Then the use of ‘or’ is dispensable, since I can alternatively describe the world by means of p or q, depending upon which is true. Thus even though ‘or’, or the like, may be indispensable for saying what we can say, it would not appear to be indispensable for describing what we can describe.

Fine says that sometimes I seem focused on the D-project and sometimes on the E-project.

This distinction strikes me as illuminating, important to understanding different approaches to fundamentality, and worthy of future study. Whether one accepts it is, I suspect, crucial on a range of questions, such as whether in-virtue-of should be understood “conditionally” or “biconditionally”, whether fundamentality is atomistic or holistic, and whether the fundamental facts involve logical notions.

My approach to fundamentality is at its core based on rejecting the distinction (or at least, denying that it has the significance Fine thinks it has). Or

---

4Perhaps there is a further methodological difference: over whether judgments about particular cases are invariably more secure than judgments about more general theoretical claims.

perhaps I can put this by saying that I’m focused on the D-project, but that I think this should be done by following the rules that Fine thinks govern the E-project. My goal is to describe the world (and not just talk about what we can say); but I think that doing so requires saying what the distinguished structure of the world is, which requires more than giving grounds.

For example, Fine says that disjunction is dispensible in a description of the world (the D-project) since a complete description of the world can simply mention whichever disjuncts are true. My view, on the other hand, is that if ‘or’ is a fundamental term (as it may well be), then a complete description of the world (and not just of what we can say) must include the true disjunctions. The world has fundamental disjunctive structure, and so no complete description can leave out the disjunctions.

Might one accept my theory of fundamentality but deny that ‘or’ and related terms are fundamental? Nothing in my general metaphysics of structure rules this position out, but my epistemology says to accept indispensable ideology as joint-carving (section 2.3), and logical ideology such as ‘or’ is indispensable. Thus it would appear that my metaphysics conflicts with Fine’s distinction only in conjunction with this quasi-Quinean epistemology. Appropriately enough, what I say about scientific theories is another case where Fine thinks I am neglecting the distinction. He notes that I say on p. 23 that “good scientific theories… must be cast in [fundamental] terms”, and then says:

This may be fine under the E-project but not under the D-project, since even the logical constants may not be D-fundamental. Indeed, reference to theories is largely irrelevant to the D-project since theories are concerned to describe the world at a certain level of generality and so require notions which may not be required when the world is described in full specificity.

Whereas my view is that an important constraint on reasonable belief concerning the description of fundamental reality (and not just what we can say) is that we have reason to prefer hypotheses about fundamental reality that include simple strong generalizations, and reason to regard terms as fundamental when they are indispensable for formulating such generalizations. Thus my epistemology of structure involves a sort of identification of the D- and E-projects.

So far I have been pointing out the depth of the opposition between my approach to fundamentality and Fine’s distinction between the D- and E-projects. The distinction is fruitful in part for this reason. Also it is, I grant, a
prima facie natural distinction to make. Nevertheless I think that it—or, Fine’s use of it—is ultimately problematic.

Let’s consider some examples, beginning with ones that put no pressure on Fine but ending with ones that I believe do. First example: surely Fine will want to hold that it’s a fact about reality that a certain electron \( e \) is negatively charged. But imagine someone who says: no, the fact that \( e \) is negatively charged is grounded in the fact that \( e \) has a certain spatiotemporal trajectory. To be sure, to say that \( e \) is positively charged isn’t something that we can say in spatiotemporal terms, but that’s just about what we can express (the E-project). When it comes to description (the D-project), we’re done when we describe \( e \)’s spatiotemporal trajectory. What is wrong with such a claim?

Here Fine has an easy answer. He can say that ground implies necessitation—if \( p \) grounds \( q \), then necessarily, if \( p \) is true then \( q \) is true—and propositions about spatiotemporal trajectory don’t necessitate propositions about charge. (I do worry that our modal belief here is justified by our belief in ground, and not the other way around; but set this aside.)

Next move to examples involving necessary truth. Suppose someone says that what can be expressed using the idea of God, or of numbers, can’t be expressed in other terms, but that the world can be completely described using ‘God’-less, or nonnumeric, vocabulary. What will Fine say is wrong with these claims?

Here he cannot use the fact that ground implies necessitation, since true propositions about God and numbers are necessarily true and hence are necessitated by propositions stateable using ‘God’-less and nonnumeric vocabulary. So he will need to fall back on the intuitive judgment that propositions about God and numbers are not grounded—are not “metaphysically explained” by, are something “over and above”—propositions expressible using ‘God’-less and nonnumeric vocabulary. And note that this negative intuitive judgment about metaphysical explanation must be accompanied by various positive judgments about metaphysical explanation, such as that ‘\( p \)’ is a full metaphysical explanation of ‘\( p \) or \( q \)’ even though the explanandum involves ‘or’ and the alleged explanans does not.

On Fine’s view, a claim involving a term \( T \) can sometimes be grounded by a claim that doesn’t involve \( T \) or a metaphysical definition of \( T \), as in the case of disjunction, but not always, as in the case of God and numbers; and the distinction between these cases seems to rest on intuitive judgments. I think the distinction between these cases is problematic. It can seem unproblematic if we deal only with a few cases, since we grow accustomed to thinking of
certain cases—such as the case of disjunction—as paradigms of the sense of “metaphysical explanation” that Fine has in mind, and also because a certain kind of picture-thinking about logic (as being “non-metaphysical”, against which see section 6.5 of my book) has a powerful grip on us.⁶ But consider some further cases.

When \( p \) is true, will Fine say that the fact that \( \Diamond p \) is grounded in the fact that \( p \)? On the one hand this claim would be somewhat parallel to the claim that disjunctions are grounded in their disjuncts. But it is hard to accept that the fact that \( \Diamond p \) is “nothing over and above” the fact that \( p \)—that the latter is a complete metaphysical explanation of the former.

Will Fine say that plural existential claims are grounded in their instances? That, for example, some critics admire only one another is grounded in the fact that \( A \) is a critic and \( B \) is a critic and \( A \) admires only \( B \) and \( B \) admires only \( A \)? If Fine treated the plural existential quantifier the way he treats the singular existential quantifier—which would seem natural for him to do—the answer would be yes. And in that case, I venture to guess, he would also say that each fact that is expressible in the language of plural quantification is grounded in some subclass of the following: i) the true atomic sentences, ii) the true negations of atomic sentences, and iii) a “totality fact” saying that there exist no objects other than \( a, b, \ldots \) [a list of all objects]. But the latter claim is hard to accept, given the way in which adding the plural existential quantifier increases expressive power.

[I plan to (attempt to) say more here.]

What I think is that the last two examples should shake our confidence in Fine’s distinction between cases in which sentences that involve neither \( T \) nor a metaphysical definition of \( T \) can explain \( T \)-involving sentences and cases in which they cannot. In my view, even in the paradigms of the former, such as the grounding of existentials by their instances and disjunctions by their disjuncts, the alleged explanation is unsuccessful. Just as modal and plural facts are “over and above” nonmodal and singular facts, so even existentials and disjunctions are “over and above” their instances and disjuncts.

References


⁶I don’t mean to suggest that Fine himself is motivated by anything like logical convention-alism.