Dasgupta on grounding ground

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Ground seminar

1. The puzzle

Ampliativity An adequate theory of ground must leave open the possibility that ampliative theses like physicalism are true: "all facts are purely physical or are grounded in purely physical facts"

Ampliativity (like purity) rules out many claims about the status of ground:

1. Grounding facts are groundless
2. Grounding facts are grounded in groundless facts (such as laws of metaphysics, necessities, or facts about essences) that involve the grounded facts or their constituents

E.g. if (a) is grounded in a groundless law of metaphysics that every action that maximizes utility is wrong, then this law violates physicalism.

(a) The fact that Oswald's action failed to maximize utility grounds the fact that it was wrong

Ampliativity leaves open views that accept:

3. Grounding facts are grounded in facts that don't mention the grounded facts or their constituents at all.

Against such views Dasgupta says:

> [Such views] must then explain (a) in purely physical terms, without mentioning anything about wrongness. And this seems to be impossible.
>
> To see this, it is important that we hear candidate explanations in the flesh rather than considering them in the abstract. Our question is what explains (a): Why is it that the action's failing to maximize utility was responsible for its being wrong? One thing that an answer to this question must explain is why its failing to maximize utility made it *wrong*, rather than (say) right. Why, that is, was this naturalistic fact about the action responsible for its having this moral property as opposed to another? It is

almost irresistible to think that the answer must have something to do with *wrongness*…

Let us now hear my opponent's explanation. We just saw that a candidate explanation must say why the action's failing to maximize utility is responsible for its being *wrong*, rather than (say) right. My opponent answers that it is because various quantities are distributed throughout space-time, but it is difficult to take the proposed answer seriously: if someone sincerely offered me that answer I would be inclined to think that she had misunderstood the question! I was asking why the action's having a certain naturalistic property was responsible for its having *this* moral property rather than another; the fact that various physical quantities are distributed thus and so simply fails to address the question. (Dasgupta, 2011, p. 12)

2. Dasgupta against Bennett and deRosset

To use an example that deRosset discusses, suppose (as is customary) that a fact P grounds $P \vee Q$. Then their view is that P also grounds the fact that P grounds $P \vee Q$. Now on the face of it this is vulnerable to the same objection I have been developing, and in a particularly striking manner. For supposing (as is also customary) that P grounds $\sim\sim P$, it follows on their view that the explanation of why P grounds $P \vee Q$ is exactly the same as the explanation of why P grounds $\sim\sim P$, i.e. P! And this is implausible: the correct explanations are intuitively different and will involve something about disjunction in the first case and negation in the second. It is because of the way disjunction works that P is a sufficient explanation of why $P \vee Q$; while it is because of how negation works that P grounds $\sim\sim P$. The point is emphasized by noting that even if Q obtains, P does not ground $P \& Q$. In virtue of what then is P a sufficient explanation for $P \vee Q$ but not $P \& Q$? Surely the explanation has something to do with how disjunction works. (Dasgupta, 2011, p. 15)

3. Reply to Dasgupta

Dasgupta's challenge: find an account of what grounds the fact that A grounds B, which i) satisfies ampliativity/purity, but ii) explains why the grounding fact connects A to B rather than other Cs.

Strategy for the reply: the ground of $B \leftarrow A$ is a fact that involves B, but this fact in turn is grounded in purity/ampliativity-friendly facts.

Let's consider various types of facts that might be part of the ground of (1), and show that they have purity/ampliativity-friendly grounds:

(1) $\text{table}(a) \vee \text{chair}(a) \leftarrow \text{table}(a)$

3.1 First-order elements

(2) $\forall x(\text{table}(x) \rightarrow (\text{table}(x) \vee \text{chair}(x)))$

Perhaps (2) is grounded in (3):

(3) $Ta_1{\rightarrow}(Ta_1{\vee}Ca_1), Ta_2{\rightarrow}(Ta_2{\vee}Ca_2), \ldots, [a_1, a_2 \ldots \text{ are all the objects}]$

The conditionals here are equivalent to:

(4) ${\sim}Ta_i \vee (Ta_i{\vee}Ca_i)$

When the first disjunct of (4) is true, the issue becomes what grounds negations. We'll discuss this later. When the second disjunct is true, (4) is grounded by:

(5) $Ta_i{\vee}Ca_i$

And the grounding of (5) is unproblematic. (Note the case of $a_i = a$: $Ta{\vee}Ca$ is a partial ground of (1). But not of itself.)

3.2 Modal elements

(6) $\Box\forall x(\text{table}(x) \rightarrow (\text{table}(x) \vee \text{chair}(x)))$

If modality is grounded in first-order claims, (6) reduces to the case already considered. But even if modality is primitive, (6) might be grounded in ampliativity/purity-friendly modal claims.

First, though, what grounds a negative claim like ${\sim}\text{table}(a)$? Perhaps a proposition of the form ${\sim}\tau(a)$, where τ is a "metaphysical definition" of 'table'. E.g. ${\sim}(T_1a \vee {\sim}T_2a \vee \cdots)$. But then, perhaps the ground of (6) is one of the following (which are unproblematic):

(7a) $\Box\forall x((T_1 x \vee T_2 x \vee \cdots) \to ((T_1 x \vee T_2(x) \vee \cdots) \vee (C_1 x \vee C_2 x \vee \cdots)))$

(7b) $\Box\forall x((T_1 x \to (T_1 x \vee (C_1 x \vee C_2 x \vee \cdots) \wedge (T_2 x \to (T_2 x \vee (C_1 x \vee C_2 x \vee \cdots) \wedge \cdots)$

(7b) $\Box\forall x((T_1 x \to (T_1 x \vee C_1 x) \wedge (T_1 x \to (T_1 x \vee C_2 x) \wedge \cdots \wedge (T_2 x \to (T_2 x \vee C_1 x)) \wedge (T_2 x \to (T_2 x \vee C_2 x)) \wedge \cdots$

- Objection 1: (7a) can't be a full ground of (6) because it doesn't include anything about the connection between the disjunction of the T_is and being a *table*. Reply: why isn't that also an objection to viewing $T_1 a$ as a ground of table(a)?
- Objection 2: this approach implies that T2 grounds T1, even though T2 is a logical truth and T1 concerns the "substantive" matter of what the modally necessary necessary and sufficient conditions for being a table are:

  T1 $\Box\forall x(\text{table}(x) \to (T_1 x \vee T_2 x \vee \cdots))$

  T2 $\Box\forall x((T_1 x \vee T_2 x \vee \cdots) \to (T_1 x \vee T_2 x \vee \cdots)$

3.3 Structured propositions

(8) The grounder of [table(a) ∨ chair(a) ← table(a)] is a disjunct of its groundee

Perhaps (8) is grounded in (9), which is grounded in (10):

(9) [table(a) ∨ chair(a) ← table(a)] exists

(10) tablehood, chairhood, disjunction, and grounding all exist

What then grounds (10)? Perhaps the existence of tablehood is grounded in the fact that there are tables, or in the fact that the property of *being a* T_1 *or a* T_2 *or a* T_3 *or …* exists.

References

Dasgupta, Shamik (2011). "The Status of Ground." MS. Available at `http://www.shamik.net/Research_files/dasgupta%20the%20status%20of%20ground.pdf`.