SOUTHWEST PHILOSOPHY REVIEW

On Maxwell Suffis's "From the Ground Up: Explaining Category Differences in Ontological Pluralism"

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1. Introduction

In his (2014) paper Maxwell Suffis discusses what he calls *the problem of fundamental difference*: How can categorical differences between things be explained? Or, why do things belong to different ontological categories? Suffis focuses on two attempts to answer the question: 1. Jonathan Schaffer's *conception of grounding*, according to which things belong to different ontological categories *because* they are grounded by different levels of things, and 2. Kris McDaniel's *ontological pluralism*, "the doctrine that there are ways of being" (McDaniel, 2010a, p. 698)—a doctrine which entails that things belong to different ontological categories *because* some things having one mode of being *depend* for their being on other things having a different mode of being.

Suffis argues that Schaffer's conception of grounding better explains categorical difference than McDaniel's ontological pluralism. In the present essay I'll examine whether this is so.

2. McDaniel on Almost-Nothings

According to McDaniel, almost-nothings (holes, cracks, shadows) are *dependent* beings—they depend on their being on something else which has a different mode of being and is *more real*.

Take, for instance, holes and their hosts. Right now, we are sitting in a hole—in this room—which is an absence, a lack, or a privation of the building that hosts it.[1] Thus, this room and this building have different modes of being, the latter being more real than the former. Under what general conditions, then, is one thing more real than the other?

McDaniel formulates two conditions (or three, depending on how you specify them) that, when, taken together, are jointly sufficient for x's being more real than y. Let me call the resulting conditional:

(R) If   (1) (a) x's mode of being has arity n (i.e. has an n-placed
logical form), and

        (b) y's mode of being has arity n+m (i.e. has an n+m-placed logical form), and

    (2) all entities that have y's mode of being *depend* for their existence on some entity that has x's mode of being,

then x is *more real* than y. (Cf. McDaniel, 2010b, p. 633)

In his paper Suffis then states a principle which he calls *McDaniel's Dependency Pluralism*; let me label it:

(MDP) The most perspicuous way to *represent* that x is *more real* than y
is to have distinct *existential quantifiers* ranging over x
and y. (Cf. Suffis, 2014, p. 118 [emphasis added])[2]

Subsequently, Suffis launches, in essence, two criticisms against McDaniel: Schaffer's conception of grounding can *equally well* "capture the virtues of McDaniel's almost-nothings case and can do so with *greater parsimony*" (Suffis, 2014, p. 118 [emphasis added]; cf. p. 121). Let me defer my comments on Suffis's objections for now, as "my previous objection returns " (Suffis, 2014, p. 123), and next explain what, in a nutshell, Schaffer's conception of grounding is.

3. Schaffer on Grounding and Idioms of Existential Quantification
According to Schaffer, ontological

> ... categories are indeed determined by the grounding relations.
> That is, categories just are *ways things depend on substances*. ...
> Thus the categories themselves, the different ways of being, are
> best understood as different ways of depending on the primary
> beings. (Schaffer, 2012, p. 78)

So Schaffer, just like McDaniel, acknowledges that there are different ways of being. Moreover, Schaffer aligns grounding with ontological dependence, perhaps even more perspicuously so when he says:

> ... the key notions of a *fundamental entity* (a prior, primary,
> independent, ground entity) and *derivative entity* (a posterior,
> secondary, dependent, grounded entity) can both be defined
> in terms of *grounding* (ontological dependence, priority in
> nature).... (Schaffer, 2012, p. 87)

According to Schaffer, we thus have the following two definitions:

- *x is fundamental* $=_{Df}$ nothing grounds x.[3]
- *x is derivative* $=_{Df}$ something grounds x.[4]

And we also obtain the following "informative equivalence" about existence:

- x is an existent $\leftrightarrow$ x is fundamental, or x is derivative.[5]

Now, Schaffer does not intend this equivalence to be a definition. In his view, "existence" is *too fundamental* to be definable; and as he points out, he has already appealed to this very expression in the definitions of x's being fundamental and derivative.

Moreover, Schaffer claims that there is "no linguistic evidence of any ambiguity in our idioms of existential quantification" (Schaffer, 2012, p. 79).[6] So the ontological *permissivism* he is suggesting is not Meinongian—i.e. Schaffer draws no distinction between what exists, subsists, and what there is—nor does he introduce new quantifiers. "Rather," as he says, "I am invoking *the one and only one sense of existence*, and merely holding that very much exists" (Schaffer, 2012, p. 80).

Having recorded that Schaffer thinks that idioms of existential quantification (such as "there is an x," "x exists," or "x has being") are *not ambiguous* and thus *univocal*, i.e. these idioms have *the same* meaning when applied to members of different ontological categories, I return to Schaffer's conception of *grounding*.

Schaffer's grounding relation is (in Suffis's words) "topic neutral" (2014, p.122), i.e. (in Schaffer's words) "terms for entities of arbitrary ontological category may flank the grounding sign" (Schaffer, 2012, p. 88). In addition, the conception of grounding is that of *partial* and *relative* grounding; that is, entities may have a plurality of grounds and may be grounded in entities that have still deeper grounds (see diagram 1).

Diagram 1
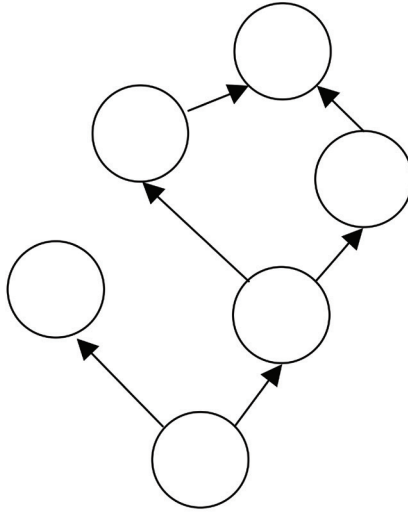
The grounding relation is thus irreflexive, asymmetric, and *transitive*; hence, it induces a partial ordering with a least point over entities.[7]

So, if there is a difference in grounding levels, then there is a difference in categories. But the converse does not hold, since it is possible that there be a difference in categories without a difference in grounding levels. In other words, grounding level difference is merely sufficient, but not necessary for category difference. Finally, Schaffer states that "grounding passes every test for being a metaphysical primitive worth positing. It is unanalyzable. It is useful. And it is clear what we mean" (Schaffer, 2012, p.89).

4. McDaniel on the Analogy of Being, Idioms of Existential Quantification, and Ontological Pluralism

Suffis says that the "two most plausible cases" that McDaniel makes for his version of ontological pluralism are his "almost-nothing case" and his "systematically variably axiomatic thesis" (Suffis, 2014, pp. 188, 122). Let us now examine the latter.

According to McDaniel, the property (or feature) of being F is *topic-neutral* if and only if for every ontological category C there is a member of C such that it exemplifies being F (e.g. being self-identical). The property

of being F is *topic-specific* if and only if it is not topic-neutral, i.e. there is an ontological category C such that no member of C exemplifies being F. The fewer categories there are in which no member exemplifies being F, the more *topic-neutral* is the property of being F; in other words:

- *The property of being G is more topic-neutral than the property of being F* ↔
  there are more ontological categories whose members exemplify being G than there are ontological categories whose members exemplify being F. (Cf. McDaniel, 2010a, p. 695)

McDaniel then states the following principle that incorporates a series of necessary conditions for a property's being analogous:

- *The property of being F is analogous* →
  (1) being F is not a perfectly natural property, and
  (2) there are properties of being G_1, ..., G_n such that
  (i) every property of being G_1, ..., G_n is more natural than being F, and
  (ii) necessarily, everything that exemplifies being G_1, ..., G_n also exemplifies being F, and
  (iii) there are fewer ontological categories whose members exemplify being G_1, ..., G_n than there are ontological categories whose members exemplify being F (i.e. the properties of being G_1, ..., G_n are less topic-neutral than being F). (Cf. McDaniel, 2010a, p. 697f.)

In addition, McDaniel says: "On most versions of ontological pluralism, *existence* or *being* [simpliciter] is taken to be an analogous feature" (McDaniel, 2010a, p. 698 [my insertion]). Thus, the predicate "is an existent" (or "has being") which, according to McDaniel, expresses this analogous property may be called *analogical*, i.e. a predicate that has *similar*, but *not the same* meaning when applied to members of different ontological categories.[8] Since McDaniel also does "not distinguish between what *there is* and what has being" (McDaniel, 2010a, p. 688, n. 2 [emphasis added]) he introduces *semantically primitive restricted quantifiers*—each of which is one that:

> ... in virtue of its meaning, ranges over only some of what there is. A semantically primitive quantifier is *not* a quantifier defined by way of the unrestricted quantifier and a restricting predicate. (McDaniel, 2010a, p. 692)

Subsequently, McDaniel launches the following argument for his version of ontological pluralism:

(1) *The property of being F (e.g. being an existent, or having being) is systematically variably axiomatic (i.e. is an SVA feature)* if and only if the "logic" (incorporating the axioms or principles governing being F) differs systematically when applied to members of different ontological categories (Cf. McDaniel, 2010a, p. 699).

(2) The "logic" of being an existent is the logic of quantification.[9]

(3) The logic of quantification differs systematically when applied to members of different   ontological categories (Cf. McDaniel, 2010a, pp. 708-713).

(4) The "logic" of being an existent differs systematically when applied to members of different ontological categories. (from 2, 3)

(5) The property of being an existent is systematically variably axiomatic. (from 1, 4)

(6) If the property of being an existent is systematically variably axiomatic, then it is analogous (Cf. McDaniel, 2010a, p. 714.).

(7) The property of being an existent is analogous. (from 5, 6)

(8) The property of being an existent is not a (perfectly) natural property. (from 7, plus the general principle about a property's being analogous)

(9) "One way to believe in ways of being [i.e. in ontological pluralism] is to hold that existence is *not* a natural property" (McDaniel, 2010a, p. 690 [my insertion]).

(10) So, there is some, albeit no conclusive reason, to believe that ontological pluralism is true (Cf. McDaniel, 2010a, pp. 708; 714).

5. Conclusion

As I see it, one major difference between Schaffer's conception of grounding and McDaniel's ontological pluralism regards the question of whether idioms of existential quantification (such as "there is") are *univocal* or *analogical*, i.e. whether they have the same meaning, or merely have similar meanings (that relate to one focal or fundamental meaning) when applied to members of different ontological categories. By suggesting to use *different types* of semantically primitive restricted quantifiers, McDaniel's view might actually be *more* "parsimonious," when it comes to questions regarding the *vocabulary* of a theory (or what Quine calls its *ideology*). After all, Schaffer's use of the unrestricted, univocal existential quantifier (in accord with Quine) necessitates the use of several restricting predicates.

Now, Suffis is right to say that "it is not at all obvious that existence, taken as an existential quantifier, can be SVA" (2014, p. 123). But I do not see any argument in his essay that establishes the point that idioms of existential quantification are actually not *systematically ambiguous*, as I would prefer to say. Aristotle thought they were, Aquinas did, McDaniel et alii do—Suffis does not. Why not?

Moreover, when it comes to *ontology* itself, Schaffer's Neo-Aristotelian view entails (in particular because of the transitivity of the grounding relation, I think) that it is, in the end, *the whole universe* (consisting primarily of substances) that grounds everything else there is. There is certainly a sense, *then*, in which no other ontological view can be *more* "parsimonious" than Schaffer's view; after all, there is only *one kind of thing* that grounds everything else. But then there is also another sense in which no other ontological view can be *less* "parsimonious"; after all, it is the *entire cosmos* that grounds everything else there is. It would be helpful, I think, if Suffis could say more in response to these questions.

Notes

[1]   I'm not saying that this isn't a very nice host.

[2]   Notice that (MDP) is a principle about representing.

[3]   *x is fundamental* $=_{Df} \neg(\exists y)$ (x is grounded by y).

[4]   *x is derivative* $=_{Df} (\exists y)$ (x is grounded by y).

[5]   Schaffer recognizes a *complication* here—and one that is pretty serious to my mind. For what should we say about the grounding relations themselves? According to Schaffer, surely they exist; now, if they are fundamental, they are conflated with substances; but if they are derivative, the grounding relations themselves need grounding, and a vicious infinite regress threatens. In this context, see also Schaffer (2012, p. 80f.), my insertions, where he says:

> Occam's Razor should only be understood to concern substances: *do not multiply basic entities without necessity*. There is no problem with the multiplication of derivative entities—they are an "ontological free lunch".... Indeed a better methodology would be the "[ontological] bang for the [substantial] buck" principle. What one ought to have is the strongest theory (generating the most derivative entities) on the simplest basis (from the fewest substances).

[6]   Cf. also Schaffer (2012, p. 91, n.9), where he says:

> Indeed, there is plenty of evidence against ambiguity. For instance, (i) other languages do not use distinct terms for these allegedly distinct existence claims, and (ii) our language has systematically related expressions ("there are numbers," "numbers exist," etc.) for the same claims.

7   Cf. Schaffer (2012, p. 88), where he says that the ordering of grounding is "provably... well-founded (in fact it provably has a unique foundation, the *whole universe*)."

8   In this respect the predicate is on a par with "is healthy," but unlike "is a bank" which is merely a disjunctive predicate.

9   Cf. McDaniel (2010a, p. 708), where he says: "One plausible answer is that the 'logic' of being is the logic of quantification."

Works Cited

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