

Metaphysical semantics versus ground on questions of realism

ROHAN SUD

1. Introduction

After isolating some facts as metaphysically distinguished, theories of fundamentality typically introduce a ‘linking’ notion that gives voice to how these distinguished facts are responsible for other non-distinguished facts. Fine (2001, 2012) and others regiment this link in terms of *grounding*. In contrast, Sider (2011) and others understand the link in terms of *metaphysical semantics*.¹

According to both Fine and Sider, a theory of fundamentality should give us the concepts to articulate and investigate what is at issue between the assortment of ‘realist’ and ‘anti-realist’ positions in a given domain. As Fine puts it, the apparatus we adopt should give us the tools to state and evaluate ‘questions of realism’. Indeed, Fine takes this to be ‘the principal importance’ of the notion of ground (2012: 40). Call this the *disagreement desideratum*. The disagreement desideratum is not trivial to meet. Consider debates in meta-ethics between non-naturalists, reductive naturalists and quasi-realist expressivists. Each will agree that there are moral facts, truths and properties. Nevertheless, the rival theorists seem to be having some disagreement about the metaphysical status of moral facts.² An adequate theory of fundamentality will give us the conceptual apparatus necessary to reconstruct their disagreement.

The primary motivation Sider (2011) gives for preferring metaphysical semantics to grounding is that the former does better with respect to the disagreement desideratum. (He gives additional arguments against grounding theorists who take grounding facts to be fundamental.) He argues that the grounding theorist fails to perspicuously differentiate the various ways the metaphysically distinguished facts give rise to the undistinguished facts, lumping such facts together. His discussion also contains the ingredients for a closely related second objection:³ the grounding theorist fails to vindicate

1 Other writers who see this link in terms of *grounding* include Rosen 2010 and Clark and Liggins 2012 (see also the references contained therein). Close cousins of Sider’s approach include Rayo 2008 and Williams 2010.

2 This generates what Dreier (2004) calls ‘the problem of creeping minimalism’ – the problem of stating what metaphysical thesis distinguishes the quasi-realist from the realist. See Dunaway 2016 for a nice overview of the problem.

3 Sider does not explicitly make this second objection – which I refer to as the *completeness objection*. Rather, it is implied by other claims he makes. Most importantly, it fails for the same reason as the objection he does make, and so it is instructive for our purposes.

the intuition that the metaphysically distinguished facts are responsible for all facts. In this note, I defend the grounding theorist. I will argue that, in so far as these complaints apply to the grounding theorist, they also apply to the metaphysical semanticist. So, any purported advantage is illusory.

2. *Questions of realism*

Fine's ground-theoretic treatment of fundamentality includes two primitives. First, some facts are said to *be real*; second, some facts are said to *ground* some other facts. Using these notions, Fine reconstructs meta-ethical disagreement as follows: while the non-naturalist, reductionist and quasi-realist all accept that there are moral facts, only the non-naturalist accepts that some moral facts are real – the latter two disagree. Moreover, the reductionist accepts that moral facts can be grounded in the real facts while the quasi-realist disagrees. Say that a $FACT_{GT}$ is a fact that is real or is grounded in facts that are real. The quasi-realist denies that moral facts are $FACTS_{GT}$.

On the Finean picture, the disagreement between the quasi-realist and the non-naturalist concerns, in the first place, whether moral facts are real. However, this disagreement over reality begets a disagreement over grounds. Here's how. Although the quasi-realist and the non-naturalist disagree over whether the moral facts themselves are $FACTS_{GT}$, they both agree that facts about our moral *talk* are $FACTS_{GT}$. In particular, the fact that so-and-so *said* that torture is wrong will, according to both parties, be grounded in real facts. The non-naturalist, on the one hand, takes these real grounds to include the moral facts that our moral talk is about. The quasi-realist, on the other hand, offers an alternative explanation, one that does not refer to the moral subject matter of our talk (cf. [Gibbard 2003](#): ch.9 and [Dreier 2004](#).) In this way, the quasi-realist and non-naturalist's disagreement over *reality* includes a disagreement over *grounds*.

Sider's rival theory has only one primitive: *structure*. The notion of structure is an extension of [Lewis's \(1983\)](#) notion of naturalness and applies to constituents of facts like properties. (For example, certain microphysical properties are plausibly structural.) Sider (115–16) uses this primitive to isolate some facts as metaphysically distinguished.⁴ The distinguished (or, in Sider's words, 'fundamental') facts are simply those that contain only structural constituents.

More relevant for our purposes is how these fundamental facts supposedly 'link' up with the rest of the facts. Sider glosses this linking relation in terms of *metaphysical semantics*. Whereas the grounding relation is a relation holding between facts and facts, metaphysical semantics is a linguistic notion applied to sentences. In common with the more familiar project of *linguistic semantics*, *metaphysical semantics* is a special science that seeks to explain linguistic behaviour in terms of meaning claims. And, as with linguistic semantics, the

4 Unless otherwise stated, all page references to Sider are to his 2011.

meaning claims come in different forms, depending on which best explains the subject's linguistic behaviour. But the meaning claim will often be an explication of truth conditions, taking the following form:

(1) 'Grass is green' is true iff ϕ

In contrast with the linguistic semanticist, however, the metaphysical semanticist seeks to explain linguistic behaviour in terms of *structural* constituents. Thus, ϕ in (1) above must be stated in structural terms (terms that pick out structural constituents).

Here, as I understand it, is how Sider (§7.4) applies his apparatus to meet the disagreement desideratum. A non-naturalist about the ethical domain accepts that some facts in that domain are fundamental because the factual constituents that distinguish the domain – moral properties – are structural. The reductionist and quasi-realist disagree, treating moral properties as non-structural.⁵ The reductionist and the quasi-realist in turn disagree about the shape of the link between the moral facts and the fundamental facts. The reductionist claims that the metaphysical semantic theorems for moral sentences will be truth conditional, of the form:

(2) 'Killing is wrong' is true iff ϕ

The quasi-realist, however, denies that there is any way to fill in ϕ such that (2) can satisfy the distinctive explanatory goals of metaphysical semantics. Instead, Sider says, the expressivist quasi-realist will opt for a non-truth-conditional metaphysical semantic theorem such as:

(3) 'Killing is wrong', as uttered by speaker x , is expressively appropriate for x iff $\psi(x)$

where $\psi(x)$ is a condition on speaker x 's attitudes stated in purely structural terms. Say that a $FACT_{MS}$ is a fact that is fundamental or is expressed by a sentence that has a truth-conditional metaphysical semantics. The metaphysical semanticist understands quasi-realists as denying that moral facts are $FACTS_{MS}$ – just as the grounding theorist took them to be denying that they are $FACTS_{GT}$.

3. Sider's critique of grounding

On the one hand, the grounding theorist distinguishes views based on whether or not *there is a link* between the distinguished facts and the other facts (see Table 1). On their picture, the reductionist about a fact posits a link between that fact and the real facts whereas the quasi-realist rejects any such link (moral facts are ungrounded unreal facts). The metaphysical semanticist, on the other hand, distinguishes views based on *the shape of that link* (see Table 2). On their picture, the

5 See Dunaway 2016 for an intricate argument – based on considerations of reference – that, for the expressivist, normative properties are not structural (or perfectly natural).

Table 1. The Grounding Approach

	Grounding Theorist	
	Is the ethical distinguished?	Is the ethical linked to the distinguished?
Non-naturalism	Yes	—
Reductionism	No	Yes
Quasi-realism	No	No

Table 2. The Metaphysical Semantic Approach

	Metaphysical Semanticist	
	Is the ethical distinguished?	Is the ethical linked to the distinguished?
Non-naturalism	Yes	—
Reductionism	No	Yes (truth-cond. m.s.)
Quasi-realism	No	Yes (<i>non-truth-cond. m.s.</i>)

reductionist about a non-fundamental fact posits a truth-conditional link between the ethical and the fundamental whereas the quasi-realist posits a non-truth-conditional link between the ethical and the fundamental. This generates a key difference: the grounding theorist ‘has nothing to say about *how* ungrounded non-factual facts are related to the fundamental [or the real⁶]’ (126). In so far as they want to make room for quasi-realists, the grounding theorist allows facts that float free from reality – quasi-realist ‘floaters’, we might say.

Sider (2011: §7.9) argues that this key difference gives us reason to prefer his metaphysical semantic conception of the linking notion to the grounding theoretic conception. Here are two such reasons. (Only the first is given explicitly by Sider; the second is based on the same line of thought as the first, together with other things Sider says.)

First: We have been focused on quasi-realist *expressivists* in the moral domain. But non-descriptive quasi-realist positions in other domains are not necessarily expressivist. For instance, quasi-realist *formalists* about mathematics might understand mathematical language in terms of the existence of a series of steps constituting a proof within a particular formal system.

6 There is a terminological mismatch here: Fine sometimes uses the terms ‘basic’ or ‘fundamental’ to simply mean ‘ungrounded’. But when Sider criticizes Fine’s approach on the basis of the link to (in Sider’s words) the ‘fundamental’ facts, he is talking about (in Fine’s words) the ‘real’ facts.

According to the grounding theorist, both the expressivist about morality and the formalist about mathematics posit ungrounded unreal facts, one floater in the domain of morality and another floater in the domain of mathematics. But that ignores a significant difference between the two views. Intuitively, the expressivist and the formalist are positing different links between the moral/mathematical and the metaphysically distinguished. This difference is not reflected by grounding claims relating the real to these floaters. At best, the grounding theorist reflects this difference *indirectly* in terms of divergent grounds for our talk of morality and mathematics: the grounds for our talk about the former might make reference to an attitude expressed while the grounds for our talk of the latter might make reference to some formal system. The metaphysical semanticist, on the other hand draws the distinctions directly in terms of the differing forms taken by the metaphysical semantics for the respective claims. As Sider puts it: ‘[the grounding theorist] lumps all ungrounded nonfactual facts – moral, mathematical, say – together’, and so ‘the grounding approach . . . does not draw [the distinctions] in the most perspicuous way’ (126). Call this *the lumping objection* to the grounding theorist.

A similar line of thought can be used to construct a second objection. According to Sider, the metaphysically distinguished facts are supposed to be a complete description of the world. In his words, ‘the fundamental must in some sense be responsible for everything’ (105). That is an intuition that arguably lies at the heart of theories of fundamentality:

(Completeness Intuition (Very Rough)) The fundamental (Sider) or real (Fine) facts are responsible for *all* facts.

For Sider, this amounts to the claim:

(MS-Completeness*) Every sentence that contains a non-structural term has a metaphysical semantics.

Say that a *fact* (as opposed to a sentence) has a metaphysical semantics just in case a sentence that reports (a proposition about) that fact has a metaphysical semantics. Then MS-Completeness* more-or-less implies:⁷

(MS-Completeness) Every non-fundamental fact has a metaphysical semantics.

By comparison, at least in so far as they want to make room for quasi-realists, the grounding theorist posits floaters and so does *not* accept:

(GT-Completeness) Every unreal fact is grounded by real facts.

So the grounding theorist cannot vindicate the Completeness Intuition. Call this the *completeness objection* to the grounding theorist.

7 Strictly speaking, MS-Completeness* implies that every *expressible* non-fundamental fact has a metaphysical semantics, but I will ignore this wrinkle.

4. *In defence of ground*

Although it may appear that the metaphysical semanticist has the upper hand with respect to drawing distinctions between non-descriptive positions and vindicating intuitions about completeness, this apparent advantage is illusory.

It will be instructive to begin with the completeness objection. Recall that when we give a metaphysical semantics for a sentence s that picks out a fact f , the fact we are trying to explain (at least in the first place) is not f itself. Rather we are trying to explain facts about *our use* of the sentence s . Compare: when a linguistic semanticist gives a truth-conditional theorem relating the sentence ‘grass is green’ with its truth conditions, they seek to explain, *inter alia*, how we use the sentence – they are not explaining why grass is green. With this observation in mind, we can see that the completeness objection holds the metaphysical semanticist and the grounding theorist to different standards based on different specifications of the Completeness Intuition. On one way of specifying that intuition, the distinguished facts must explain our *talk* about the other facts:

(Linguistic Completeness) For any fact f and sentence s that picks out f , the real/fundamental facts (perhaps together with some additional theorems) must explain our linguistic behaviour with respect to s .

The metaphysical semanticist can arguably satisfy Linguistic Completeness. Metaphysical semantic theorems, after all, are designed to give an explanation of our linguistic behaviour. But the grounding theorist can *also* satisfy Linguistic Completeness. According to the grounding theorist, even a quasi-realist will accept that facts about our linguistic behaviour – our *talk* of the moral – are grounded in the real, which is a type of explanation.⁸ Both theorists, then, succeed in explaining our talk of moral facts in terms of the metaphysically distinguished (i.e. real/fundamental) facts.

Suppose instead, then, that we specify the Completeness Intuition as a non-linguistic claim:

(Metaphysical Completeness) For any f that is not real/fundamental, there are some real/fundamental facts that are ‘responsible’ for f .

Presumably, a grounding theorist (at least one who wants to make room for quasi-realism) cannot accept Metaphysical Completeness. But neither can the metaphysical semanticist. Here’s why.

In order for the metaphysical semanticist to satisfy Metaphysical Completeness, the metaphysical semantic theorems for a sentence s that picks out a non-fundamental fact f must point us towards a fundamental fact f^* that is responsible for f . When it comes to *truth-conditional* semantic theorems, it is easy to read off such a fundamental fact. (1), for instance, relates a sentence

8 Of course, distinctions can still be drawn. The grounding theorist uses a ‘metaphysical’ mode of explanation while the explanation provided by the metaphysical semanticist is in the same mode as other special scientific explanations.

that picks out a non-fundamental fact about grass to (let us suppose) a micro-physical fundamental fact about the structural correlates of botanical reality. These two facts are intimately related – related in a way that can plausibly count as one’s being ‘responsible’ for the other.

But, whatever the relationship of ‘responsibility’ is, expressivist metaphysical semantic theorems do not associate the non-fundamental fact expressed by the theorem’s target sentence with a fundamental fact that bears this responsibility relationship to it. That is because, like expressivist *linguistic* semantics, expressivist *metaphysical* semantics is use-theoretic and non-descriptive: it aims to explain linguistic behaviour in terms of the mental states of those who use the language, while staying silent about the features of reality that the sentence is about. Truth-conditional metaphysical semantic theorems point us to the structural correlates of what the target sentence is about. But expressivist metaphysical semantic theorems are not similarly concerned with the structural correlates of what the target sentence is about. Expressivist metaphysical semantic theorems like (3), then, do not relate the moral sentence with the structural correlates of moral reality.

Of course, theorems like (3) do relate the target sentence with the structural correlate of a *psychological property* $\psi(x)$ of a speaker. But no quasi-realist thinks that fundamental facts about (the structural correlates of) speakers’ mental states and non-fundamental moral facts have the intimate ‘responsibility’ relationship had by the fact that grass is green and ϕ in (1). To suggest otherwise confuses expressivism with speaker subjectivism.

Here is one way to see this. Whatever the particular relationship of responsibility is that we can read off of truth-conditional theorems, the following principle holds of it: if a is responsible for b , then necessarily: if a is true then b is true.⁹ But, according to the quasi-realist, moral facts are, in general, modally independent of the facts about speakers’ psychology that are used to understand moral language. Consider a contingent moral truth (e.g. ‘John performed a wrong action’) and a psychological claim, in structural terms, about a speaker’s disapproval of John’s actions. According to the quasi-realist, there is a possible world in which the speaker continues to disapprove of John’s actions, but is mistaken.

In sum: if we interpret the Completeness Intuition as Linguistic Completeness, both theorists can accommodate the intuition. If we interpret the Completeness Intuition as Metaphysical Completeness, neither theorist can accommodate the intuition. So the theories are on par.

With this lesson in hand, we can now see that the lumping objection fails for the very same reason. Suppose that some non-representational quasi-realist positions

9 Sider (2013b: 767, 2013a: 745–46) apparently accepts an even stronger principle, according to which metaphysical semantics gives necessary and sufficient conditions for the non-fundamental in terms of the fundamental. My observation is that this is only the case for truth-conditional theorems.

are true about both mathematics and morality. The grounding theorist reflects this difference in terms of divergent grounds for our talk of morality and mathematics. The metaphysical semanticist complained that this was an *indirect* way to draw the distinction, in terms of divergent explanations of talk of moral and mathematical facts instead of the relationship between reality and those facts themselves. But this is the same position that the metaphysical semanticist is in. In addition to non-descriptive theorems for moral sentences, the metaphysical semanticist will posit some non-descriptive theorems linking, say, a mathematical sentence with the existence of a series of steps in a formal system. But, as we have just learned, these non-descriptive theorems do not show how the fundamental facts are responsible for the non-fundamental mathematical or moral facts. Rather, the theorems merely explain facts about our mathematical and moral linguistic behaviour. So, the different theorems merely reflect a difference in the explanations of that behaviour. Thus, any distinctions the metaphysical semanticist draws between mathematical and moral facts are also indirect, going via divergent explanations of our linguistic behaviour.

Contra Sider, then, the disagreement desideratum does not tell against the grounding theorist in favour of the metaphysical semanticist. The disagreement desideratum is not a point of divergence between the views. Rather it is a point of convergence: the two theories share a picture of disagreements in domains such as meta-ethics. On that shared picture, one party takes facts in that domain to be metaphysically distinguished; a second denies that distinction to facts in the domain, but takes the distinguished facts to be responsible for such facts; and a third party denies both that the domain's facts are distinguished and that the distinguished facts are responsible for them – even though they accept that the distinguished facts are responsible for our *talk* of such facts. When it comes to the disagreement desideratum, the grounding theorists and metaphysical semanticists are allies not antagonists.¹⁰

Ryerson University
Canada
rohan.sud@ryerson.ca

References

- Clark, M.J. and D. Liggins. 2012. Recent work on grounding. *Analysis Reviews* 72: 812–23.
- Dreier, J. 2004. Meta-ethics and the problem of creeping minimalism. *Philosophical Perspectives* 18: 23–44.

10 This paper was presented at the 2021 APA Central Division Meeting; thank you to those who attended and to my commenters, Kevin Richardson and Kenneth Boyce. Special thanks to Ted Sider, with whom I had helpful early conversations on related material. Thanks also to two anonymous referees from this journal.

- Dunaway, B. 2016. Expressivism and normative metaphysics. *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* 11: 241–64.
- Fine, K. 2001. The question of realism. *Philosophers' Imprint* 1: 1–30.
- Fine, K. 2012. Guide to ground. In *Metaphysical Grounding: Understanding the Structure of Reality*, eds. F. Correia and B. Schneider, 37–80. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gibbard, A. 2003. *Thinking How to Live*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Lewis, D. 1983. New work for a theory of universals. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 61: 343–77.
- Rayo, A. 2008. On specifying truth conditions. *Philosophical Review* 117: 385–443.
- Rosen, G. 2010. Metaphysical dependence: grounding and reduction. In *Modality: Metaphysics, Logic, and Epistemology*, eds. B. Hale and A. Hoffmann, 109–36. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sider, T. 2011. *Writing the Book of the World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sider, T. 2013a. Replies to Dorr, Fine, and Hirsch. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 87: 733–54.
- Sider, T. 2013b. Symposium on *Writing the Book of the World*. *Analysis* 73: 751–70.
- Williams, J. 2010. Fundamental and derivative truths. *Mind* 119: 103–41.

Abstract

One desideratum for a theory of fundamentality is to give us the conceptual tools to articulate fruitful metaphysical distinctions between the assortment of ‘realist’ and ‘anti-realist’ positions in a given domain such as meta-ethics. The ability to articulate such distinctions gives us a way to assess rival theories of fundamentality, such as Fine’s grounding theory and Sider’s metaphysical semantic theory. Indeed, Sider has argued that metaphysical semantic theories have an edge with respect to this desideratum and takes this as an important reason to prefer those theories over rival grounding theories. This paper takes a closer look at how the rival theories compare with respect to questions of realism and defends the grounding theorist’s ability to meet the desideratum.

Keywords: fundamentality, metaphysical semantics, grounding, quasi-realism