Emptying Fine's Paradox with Grounding Pluralism

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Introduction

"On what ground could one thing exist?" — It seems like an ultimate problem of philosophy. What if someone (say, Kit Fine) tells you a simple yet plausible answer is "on the existence of that very thing," how do you make of it? You'll probably regard him as a nut. But he says is no kidding: one line of reasoning *does* suggest so.

I'm trying to argue for a solution of the issue concerning global self-grounding, also known as Fine's Paradox (Fine 2010, 104-5), in what follows. And this paper will be divided into three parts. In Section 1, I shall briefly introduce Fine's Paradox, with emphasis on two hidden yet salient ideas; in Section 2, I'll go through some alternative fixes, focusing on either the paradox itself or the logical profile of grounding relation in general; and finally, Section 3 is devoted to another proposal motivated by Grounding Pluralism, which is, though imperfect, close enough to a cure.

1 Fine's Paradox

I will demonstrate, in this section, i) on what background Fine's Paradox is proposed, ii) an argument in support of Fine's claim and iii) how Fine's Paradox could threat the project of philosophical grounding.

As for i), the background of Fine's Paradox, the orthodox view suggests that grounding relation is irreflexive, asymmetric and transitive (i.e., a strict partial order). This logical profile is generally, though not non-controversially, accepted for various reasons, e.g., its application in philosophical explanations (cf. Rosen 2010, 115-117). I will grant it (at least in this section) for the sake of argument.

As for ii), Fine's argument in support of his claim, my formulation is built upon notations below. In this paper, I use 'x' or 'y' for a particular, 'A' for an arbitrary sentence and 'F' or 'f' for a fact. And there are: existential quantification 'Ǝ', identity '=',

absurdity '⊥', grounding relation '<' and existence predicate 'E'. And I define four common notions (pacing Fine 2010, 98, 101):

Particular Existence: ∃x E(x) (Something exists.)

Factual Existence: A / ∃f (f = [A]) (Given A, then there is the fact that A.)

Existential Grounding: A(y), E(y) / A(y) < ∃x A(x) (Given that A(y) and that y exists, then y's being an A helps ground that something is an A.)

Factual Grounding: E(f), f = [A] / A < E(f) (Given that F exists and is the fact that A, then A helps ground that F exists.)

Fine's Paradox (Fine 2010, 104-5) can be conducted from the following argument:

(1) ∃x E(x) (which we abbreviate to F)
    (Something exists)
<div align="right">Particular Existence</div>

(2) ∃f (f = [F])
    (There is the fact that something exists)
<div align="right">from (1) by Factual Existence</div>

(3) (a) E(f)
    (b) f = [F] (i.e. f = ∃x E(x))
    (Let f be the existing fact that something exists)
<div align="right">Assumptions (in preparation for ∃E)</div>

(4) E(f) < ∃x E(x)
    (The existence of f helps ground that something exists)
<div align="right">from (1) & (3)(a) by Existential Grounding</div>

(5) ∃x E(x) < E(f) (i.e. F < E(f))
    (Something existing helps ground that f exists)
<div align="right">from (3)(a)(b) by Factual Grounding</div>

(6) ∃x E(x) < ∃x E(x) (i.e. F < ∃x E(x))
    (Something existing helps ground that something exists)
<div align="right">from (4) and (5) by Transitivity</div>

(7) ⊥
<div align="right">from (6) by Irreflexivity</div>

It is, of course, unacceptable for friends of grounding.

As for iii), how Fine's Paradox threats the project of grounding, I appeal to two underlying ideas: the notion of self-grounding and its scope. **First**, the notion of self-grounding itself is controversial for two reasons. Reason one, it's inconsistent with *Irreflexivity* of grounding. Reason two, it's not explanatory, that is to say, it's du-

bious how the claim "x is self-grounded" could substantially differ from "x is not grounded". **Second**, even if self-grounding is taken for granted, its domain should also be localized. E.g., for a theist who accepts self-grounding (cf. Bliss 2014, 249), it is still only *the few* (i.e., the God) that is grounded in himself. Anyway, a picture of global self-grounding is, both ideologically and technically, problematic.

2 Three Potential Options

In Section 2, we'll examine three kinds of options rejecting Fine's Paradox. One of them is specified to Fine's argument (i.e., rejecting at least one premise from (1)-(5)), while the other two target on the logical profile of grounding relation in general (rejecting premise (6) or (7)).

Option One: A Fishy Argument

Maybe it is Fine who is to blame. There are two points one could complain about.

First, one can argue that Fine's argument is, even not a trap, misleading. Two notions, existential quantification and existence predicate, initially confuse with each other. Therefore, the conclusion is merely a false consequence drawn from a problematic line of reasoning. But this rejection seems *ad hoc* for two reasons. Reason one, our pre-theoretical conceptions of ground themselves are arguably gerrymandered (cf. Audi 2010; I suggest we should consider the pragmatics of ground, though I reject his pragmatical account itself). Unless further explained, the accusation of confusing notions seems unpersuasive. Reason two, from a logical point of view, given those postulations in general, Fine's argumentation is indeed permissible. In fact, the fragility and fallibility of our ideology of ground does somewhat motivate Fine for his diagnosis (Fine 2010, 97).

Second, one can criticize that Fine's system is incoherent. It's not hard to see circularity is potentially entailed by two notions, *Existential Grounding* and *Factual Grounding*. As Fine puts it, these two notions (along with others) are common assumptions made by friends of grounding (Fine 2010, 97). The foundation of these assumptions, arguably our intuitions and beliefs, is suspiciously inconsistent. Then, to

reject the paradox, one need only to reject one of these two notions. But which one is to be rejected? In other words, on which is the other grounded: something's existence *or* that fact it exists? And more importantly, why? We face an updated Euthyphro Dilemma. Whichever one chooses, it seems arbitrary and therefore implausible. A clean solution is, as I conclude, merely possible. It seems non-beneficial to empty one paradox by introducing a new dilemma.

Option Two: Rejecting Transitivity

Maybe it's the problem of *Transitivity*. There are two strategies in particular.

Strategy one, one can turn to Schaffer's Differential Structure Model of grounding, replacing *Transitivity* with *Differential Transitivity* (Schaffer 2012, 132-4). To employ this notion, we shall expand the domain from facts (in Schaffer's original proposal) to existence and facts (and grant its applicability). Then, given that F, G, H, f, g and h are facts, we can replace (4) with (4*) and replace (5) with (5*) as:

(4*) It is f's existence rather than g's existence that helps ground F rather than G (where f ≠ g and F ≠ G).
(5*) It's F rather than H that helps ground that f exists rather than that h exists (where F ≠ H and f ≠ h).

If H = G and h = g, then by the definition of *Differential Transitivity* (Schaffer 2012, 132) we have:

(6*) It is f's existence rather than g's existence (i.e., h's existence) that helps ground f exists rather than that g exists (i.e., h exists).

Hence contradiction is entailed. In fact, (6*) is even worse than (6) for its profitless complexity, if the equations (i.e., "H = G" and "h = g") hold. However, since coincidence like this is statistically rare, (6*) doesn't follow for most cases. Thus, we can say this strategy can solve the paradox for most of time. But its drawbacks are obvious, too. First, we may make categorical mistake for erroneously expanding the domain of Schaffer's model. Second, it's suspicious that whether relevant relata(s) (e.g., G and g in (4*)) can be non-arbitrarily identified and selected. Moreover, one could doubt "why *Differential Transitivity* is four-place rather six-place, eight-place, …?" A

satisfying reply to either concern is not easy to make. Third, Schaffer's account also flirts with the notion of causation. Given his structural equation model and casual analogy of grounding explanation (Schaffer 2015), it is dubious how could the notion of ground be essentially distinct from causation[I]. If this accusation holds (though I hope not), as is suggested by non-friends of grounding, the notion of ground will then be verbal and superfluous indeed (Wilson 2014). If so, the rationale, viz. a unified ideology in philosophy, is betrayed. It's apparently not a price we can afford.

Strategy two, one can argue that *Existential grounding* and *Factual Grounding* are two kinds of grounding relations, and there is no cross-kind *Transitivity*. I personally endorse this proposal, and I will argue for it at length and explicity in Section 3. Before that, let's continue our evaluation on other proposals.

Option Three: Rejecting Irreflexivity

Maybe we are wrong about *Irreflexivity*. More specifically, two modifications could be made: the moderate and the radical.

The moderate strategy, as Jenkins points out (Jenkins 2011, 269), for relatas like 'S's pain' and 'S's brain state B' (i.e., any two relatas that may arguably be identical), our persisting on *Irreflexivity* may could be abandoned. Or, as Raven suggests in a modified version, we could grant privilege to pairs like Thing/Matter, Mind/Body and Existence/Fact from being constrained by *Irreflexivity* (Raven 2013, 198). But proposal of this kind can hardly help us out. Granted *Reflexivity* in grounding relations between identical relatas, it's still too risky to say something's existence is the identical with the fact it's existing. E.g., in one theory of *state of affair*, the *state of affair* "x exists" is made true by its *truth-maker*, viz. x's existence in the (actual) world (cf. Armstrong 1997). Neglecting the fact/state of affair distinction (which is of minor importance here), we can see people do initially distinguish existence from facts. Therefore, if positing this strategy, we either argue for the identity between facts and existence, or prove how this proposal could not be *ad hoc*. Our burden is heavy, no matter what we choose.

The radical strategy, as Wood puts it, Fine's Paradox is a case of vacuous

grounding; while for most cases (i.e., cases in which *Irreflexivity* is supported by our intuitions), the grounding relation should be non-vacuously irreflexive (Wood 2018). That is to say, either we should never have accepted that grounding is irreflexive in the first place, or we should distinguish Fine's Paradox (along with the notion(s) of ground he employs) from normal cases. For the first option, since *Irreflexivity* is a logical virtue favored by us, we should not sacrifice it that easily (i.e., simply in virtue of rejecting a paradox). For the second option, this distinction holds in virtue of my proposal (Section 3), i.e., there are more than one kind of grounding relations (the vacuous one and the non-vacuous one). However, there are two concerns about this strategy. First, it seems that the situation where Fine's Paradox obtain is more accusable than features of ground relation *per se*. This tendency is arguably a suspect of misemphasis. Second, the vacuous/non-vacuous distinction seems to curve the nature in a bizarre way. That is, as for the question why we should make such a distinction, no stronger evidence other than appealing to intuition could be given (Wood 2018, 632). And I will later demonstrate why my proposal is more considerable.

At last, it's worth stating that *Asymmetry* is called into question, too (cf. Bliss 2014). However, since it's not directly involved in the paradox, we'll leave it aside [II]. One lesson is: challenges for the logical features of ground are, though brave and admirable, more of trouble than benefit.

3 Something Almost a Cure

This section is devoted to respond three questions, (i) why a fix citing Grounding Pluralism (henceforth GP), (ii) how is it formulated and (iii) its virtues and vices.

Motivation

For (i), the issue concerning why a fix citing GP, my motivations come from two aspects: workability and economy.

Considering workability, the most resistant factor against GP doesn't seem to be its theoretical weakness. First of all, I conceive GP as:

GP (genuine definition): There are more than one grounding relations (in

philosophical explanations).

For a period of time, GP is ignored by most friends of grounding, basically some Grounding Monists (e.g., Rosen 2010, Audi 2010，Raven 2013, etc.), partly because of its betrayal of the ideological unity, one of philosophers' main expectations for the introduction of grounding. However, recent discoveries, e.g., the distinction of small-g/Ground relation (Cameron 2016), how-/why-grounding distinction (Richardson 2018) or the claim that ground is irreducibly plural (Dasgupta 2014), indicate that maybe GP is more promising than we estimate. Since my purpose here is to provide one way of emptying Fine's Paradox, I only suggest a general notion of GP, without committing myself to any particular version of it.

Considering economy, I make two clarifications. First, GP is not necessarily harmful to the ideological unity, since I made no particular presupposition on the nature of ground. As I suggest, the distinction in GP is explanatory rather than ontic, thus, my proposal is open for various conceptions about the nature of ground. (N.b., if one posits the small-g/Ground distinction, the damage to the ideological unity is omissionable.) Second, GP is more fine-grained and informative in explanation. though I make no particular assertion on how many modes of grounding relations are there, my proposal is compatible with a variety of precisifications. Whatever the classification is, one thing is clear: *Existential Grounding* is different from *Factual Grounding*. Therefore, compared to the vacuousness/non-vacuousness distinction (Wood 2018), my proposal not only tells us that they are different, but also does it tell us why they are different (in an intuitive and apprehensible way). Considering literal elegance, I will abbreviate the grounding relation in *Existential Grounding* to grounding$_1$ and that in *Factual Grounding* to grounding$_2$.

Formulation

For (ii), the issue concerning the formulation of my proposal citing GP, my reply is as below.

First thing first, I introduce the *Quasi-Closure Principle* in philosophical explanation. Principle of this kind, continuously discussed in areas like epistemology and

philosophy of mind, is widely (though not non-controversially) defended[III]. Considering the dispute concerning the traditional (or austere) version of *Closure Principle*, I modify my reading for more flexibility as:

> **Quasi-Closure Principle** (of grounding explanation). There is no (direct) explanatory path from one explanation citing one particular mode of grounding relation to another explanation (as is illustrated by the diagram).
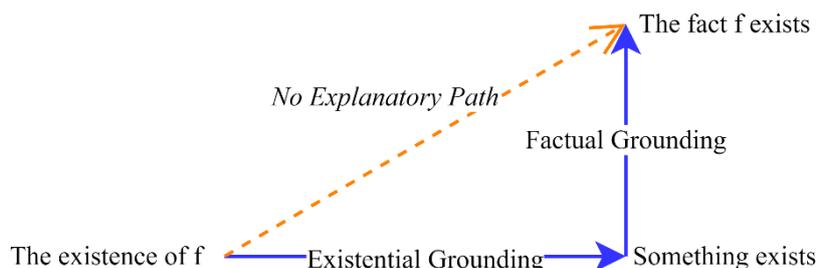
Diagram

Notice that: I do not reject the explanation chain as "the existence of f helps ground that something exists, *and* something existing helps ground the fact that f exists," but I clarify it is *de facto* a conjunction of two distinct explanation clauses citing two distinct modes of grounding relations. While explanation like "something existing helps ground that something exists" is forbidden, for violating *Quasi-Closure Principle* I define. Given this principle, a corollary initially follows:

> **Corollary**. There is no *Transitivity* between different modes of grounding relations.

Now, given grounding$_1$ and grounding$_2$ are different modes of grounding relation, we know there is no *Transitivity* from grounding$_1$ to grounding$_2$ and *vice versa*. And my refutation can be proposed as:

> **1.** If contradiction follows from Fine's argument, then premise (6) holds.
> **2.** If premise (6) holds, then there is *Transitivity* between grounding$_1$ and grounding$_2$.
> **3.** There is no *Transitivity* between grounding$_1$ and grounding$_2$. (Corollary)
> **4.** It's not the cased that premise (6) holds. (2, 3)
>
> ———————
>
> **5.** It's not the case that contradiction follows from Fine's argument. (1, 4)

So far, so good. It seems almost a cure.

Evaluation

As for (iii), the issue concerning evaluation, virtues and vices of my proposal can be listed as follows.

For its virtues, briefly speaking (since relevant content is covered earlier in this paper), I suggest three points. First, GP does solve Fine's Paradox, with *Irreflexivity*, *Asymmetry* and *Transitivity* preserved. Second, the notion itself is much less esoteric, compared to other three options. Third, GP also sharpens our metaphysical tool, i.e., makes our ground-talks more fine-grained.

Nonetheless, for its vices, I suggest two imperfections. First, it still demands explanation on why there are plural modes of grounding relations. Its theoretical benefits, though attractive, is not persuasive enough for our adaption. We, nevertheless, like our theoretical rivals (e.g., Grounding Monists, non-friends of grounding), eventually appeal to some intuitions of ours. In this sense, philosophers methodologically draw a tie. I therefore do not think it is a threat customed to my proposal only.

Second, the *(Quasi-)Closure Principle* itself is controversial; particularly in our discussion, one can reasonably doubt why there can't be *Transitivity* between grounding$_1$ and grounding$_2$. It's still intuitive to say 'x's existing helps ground the fact it exists". I reply, however, cases of this kind are always accompanied with controversy (recall the undated Euthyphro Dilemma). My proposal, maybe conservative, makes my theory of ground immune to those disputes (by excluding them). Moreover, those pre-theoretical intuitions are not erased, on the contrary, they could be accommodated in my theory of ground, as long as improvements are made debugging the controversy. (As for details like at that time on what classification does this kind of grounding relation fall, is it a new mode of grounding relation nor not, etc., it depends on what improvement we make: an accommodation of controversy or just having it explained away.) At this point, it's safe to say technical issues should not concern us that much. To conclude, insofar, none of those concerns is severe enough to cause any substantial threat.

Contrasting GP's benefits and its cost, I do believe we should remain optimistic about my proposal.

Conclusion

To summarize, I give a brief introduction of Fine's Paradox in Section 1; after that there is an overall examination of possible options in Section 2; later, citing the notion of Grounding Pluralism, a new fix, or something close enough to a cure, is proposed in Section 3. Admittedly, there is still a long way to go before the notion of ground actually becomes a metaphysical lifesaver. Nonetheless, as we can see, it is not defeated by Fine's Paradox, a respectable challenge, and still remain one of the most attractive games in the town.

Notes

I. Though Schaffer (2015) argues that there are three distinctions: (1) grounding implies an associated (metaphysical) supervenience, causation does not imply an associated (nomological) supervenience, (2) causation connects distinct events but grounding connects indistinct entities and (3) grounding needs to be well-founded, causation does not. However, we can notice that: (1) postulates a certain conception of causation, which is non-conclusive and also controversial; (2) obtains by stipulation, more specifically, by stipulation in Schaffer's own model of grounding; what's more, (3) is one expectation of the logical feature of ground, which is not necessarily essential to the notion of ground. Therefore, the suspicion mentioned in the main-text still remains. (Schaffer also acknowledged the fallibility, see Schaffer 2015, 50).

II. Very briefly, Bliss (2014) poses a much more radical strategy on this issue. She argues that philosopher reject *Symmetry* of grounding mainly because of the vicious regress/circularity it may lead to. However, she argues that potential is *merely* possible and should not be taken too seriously. For example, it may become compatible with a coherentist view about fundamentality. Like those proposals challenging *Transitivity* or *Irreflexivity*, without decisive (new) evidence, this proposal is far from convincing or even attractive.

III. It is note-worthy that nowadays most philosophers tend to be moderate realists about such closures (see Schaffer, J. (2007) "Closure, Contrast, and Answer" in *Philosophical Studies* 133(2): 233-255). However, steadfast rejections about (any) closure, though facing their own problems, are also defended by some philosophers, e.g., Dretske (1970), Nozick (1981), and Heller (1999). See Dretske, F. (1970) "Epistemic Operators" in *Journal of Philosophy* 67: 1007-1023, Nozick, R. (1981) *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) and Heller M. (1999) "Relevant Alternatives and Closure" in *Australian Journal of Philosophy* 77: 196-208.

More specifically, a general formulation about such a principle (a.k.a. 'EE') in explanation is made famous by a series of publication by Jaegwon Kim, e.g., Kim, J. (1989) "Mechanism, purpose and explanatory exclusion" in *Philosophical Perspectives 3*: 77-108, Kim, J. (1990) "Explanatory exclusion and the problem of mental causation" in Villanueva, E. (ed.) *Information, semantics, and epistemology* (Oxford: Blackwell) and Kim, J. (1993) "Explanatory realism, causal realism, and explanatory exclusion" in Ruben, D.H. (ed.) *Explanation.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press). EE is also vastly disputed.

I do not intend to engage myself in the debate, so, without paraphrasing EE, I pose a moderate version here, which is arguably less controversial and more acceptable.

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