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## Essentialism and grounding

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**Resumen:** *Se ha afirmado que las nociones de esencia y de fundamentación, en sus respectivos debates, son primitivas, no reducibles a una noción más básica, ni analizables en esta. Empero, parece haber interesantes conexiones entre ellas. Y estas conexiones son las que deseo explicitar en este artículo. Más específicamente, deseo discutir lo que Gideon Rosen denomina el principio de mediación: si el hecho A se cimienta sobre el hecho B entonces reside en la naturaleza de las cosas A y B, que A así se cimiente. Una dificultad para este principio es considerada en el texto: la posibilidad de conexiones mooreanas, esto es, la posibilidad de algunos principios generales que afirman que ciertos hechos se fundamentan sobre otros hechos, pero no pueden ser explicados mediante la apelación a la esencia de las cosas que aparecen en esos hechos. A la luz de estas conexiones mooreanas, intento elucidar el papel que la noción de esencia tiene en la explicación de qué fundamenta las relaciones de fundamentación.*

**Palabras clave:** *Propiedad esencial. Necesidad. Fundamentación. Principio de mediación. Conexiones mooreanas.*

**Abstract:** *It has been claimed that the notions of essence and grounding, in their respective debates, are primitive, neither reducible to nor analysable into any other more basic notion. However, there seems to be interesting connections between them. And these connections are the ones I want to make explicit in this paper. And more specifically, I want to discuss what Gideon Rosen calls the principle of Mediation: if the fact A is grounded in the*

*fact B, then it lies in the nature of the things A and B, that A is so grounded. A difficulty for this principle is considered: the possibility of Moorean connections, that is, the possibility of some general principles that say that certain facts are grounded in some other facts, but cannot be explained by appeal to the essence of the things occurring in those facts. In light of these Moorean connections, I try to clarify the role the notion of essence has in an account of what grounds grounding relations.*

**Key words:** *Essential property. Necessity. Grounding. Principle of mediation. Moorean connections.*

### 0. Introduction

Three central notions in contemporary analytic metaphysics are metaphysical necessity, essence and ontological dependence or grounding. Some attempts to connect some of these to the others have been given. Kit Fine has argued that the notion of metaphysical necessity can be reduced to essences and rejects the view that essential and grounding relations can be captured in terms of metaphysical necessity. This strongly suggest that that the notions of essence and grounding are at least more basic than the notion of metaphysical necessity. In fact, it has been claimed that the notions of essence and grounding, in their respective debates, are primitive, not reducible to or analysable into any other more basic notion. However, there seems to be interesting connections between them. And these connections are the ones I want to make explicit

in this paper. And more specifically, I want to discuss a principle advanced by Gideon Rosen that connects essence and grounding:

**Principle of Mediation (PM):** if the fact A is grounded in the fact B, then it lies in the nature of the things in A and in B, that A is so grounded.

This principle grounds grounding relations between two facts A and B in the nature of the objects involved in A and in B. Take an example. It is not hard to see that the fact that I smile is somehow grounded in at least some facts about the form and constitution of my mouth. What grounds this grounding relation between these facts? According to PM, it lies in the nature of smiling that it is grounded in facts about the form and constitution of human mouths. Later on we will have the chance to be more specific about PM.

PM is, however, not free of trouble. I want to consider a difficulty, put forward by Rosen: the possibility of Moorean connections, that is, the possibility of some general principles that say that certain facts are grounded in some other facts, but cannot be explained by appeal to the essence of the things occurring in those facts. In light of these kind of connections, I try to clarify the role the notion of essence has in an account of what grounds grounding relations and offer some strategies to explain away the supposed examples of Moorean connections.

The plan of the paper is this. In the first part, I focus on essence and grounding. I give a preliminary understanding of each notion. Finally, I explain in what sense these notions, in their respective domains, have been claimed to be primitive. In the second part, I present Rosen's proposal of connection between essence and grounding via the principle of mediation. In the third part, I consider three examples of Moorean connections that call into question the principle of mediation. Finally, in the fourth part, I consider a couple of strategies to explain away the purported examples.

## 1. Essence and grounding

### 1.1. What is essence?

Let us start with an intuitive characterisation of the notion of essence:

- Intuitive characterisation: the object *o* has the property *p* essentially if and only if *o* must have *p* in order to be the object it is.

From this characterisation we can see that an essential property is a property that determines the identity of an object. And even if it contains a modal element, we should rule out a modal understanding of what an essential property is (more on this later). An alternative account is in terms of real definition: a real definition of an object is the set of all propositions true of *o* and that say what *o* is. The canonical form of a real definition is this:  $X = \text{df. } \dots$  Real definitions are usually expressed like this:

- To be *F* just is to be  $\phi$ .

In other words, for all *x*, for it to be the case that  $Fx$  just is for it to be the case that  $\phi x$ . This points to the fact that the notion of essence is an explanatory one, and it is one that is sensible to source—unlike necessity.

### 1.2. What is grounding?

As in the previous case, the notion of grounding is meant to be reducible to modal notions. (More on this later.) The notion of ground presupposes a distinction between things or facts that are more basic or fundamental than others and things that are merely derivative from the fundamental ones. We have the following definitions:

- Fundamental: *x* is fundamental =df. nothing grounds *x*.
- Derivative: *x* is derivative =df. something grounds *x*.

Although there is some debate about the proper *relata* of the relation of grounding, in what

follows I will assume that it is a relation between facts. Facts are understood as Russellian propositions.<sup>1</sup> They are individuated by (i) their constituents and (ii) the way they are arranged. We use the following notation:

$$-[p] \leftarrow \Gamma$$

where  $\Gamma$  is a plurality of facts that conjunctly ground the fact that  $p$ , that is,  $[p]$ .  $[p]$  expresses ‘the fact that  $p$ ’; and  $[Fa]$  expresses ‘the fact that  $a$  is  $F$ ’.

$$-[p] \leftarrow [q]$$

expresses: ‘the fact that  $p$  is grounded in the fact that  $q$ ’. We will assume that the grounding relation is plural on the right —there could be more than one fact on the right. The general form of the grounding relation is:

$$-[p] \leftarrow \Gamma.$$

Partial grounding can be defined as this:

$$-[p] \leftarrow \Delta =_{df} \text{for some } \Gamma, [p] \leftarrow [\Gamma] \text{ and } \Delta \subseteq \Gamma.$$

The fact that  $p$  is partially grounded in the set of facts  $\Delta$  if and only if there is some set of facts  $\Gamma$ , such that the fact that  $p$  is grounded in  $\Gamma$ , and  $\Delta$  is a subset of  $\Gamma$ . This relation has some formal properties: it is irreflexive, anti-symmetric, transitive, non-monotonic, hyper-intensional. And usually is taken to be not connected and not well-founded.<sup>2</sup>

### 1.3. Claims of primitiveness

#### 1.3.1. Why the notion of essence is primitive?

To see this let us consider the modal account of essential property:

- the modal account of essential property(MD):  $p$  is an essential property of an object  $o$  if and only if  $o$  has necessarily  $p$ .

There are various problems with this, but the most important now is that it fails as an analysis

of essential property. We have some counterexamples. Take Socrates and its singleton, the set whose only member is Socrates. We can say the following:

- i) Socrates is necessarily member of his singleton.
- ii) Socrates’s singleton has necessarily Socrates as a member.
- i) and (ii) are true and, by the definition MD above, it follows:
  - i)’ Socrates is essentially a member of his singleton.
  - ii)’ Socrates’s singleton has essentially Socrates as a member.
- ii)’ is true, but (i)’ is false: there is nothing in the nature of Socrates that forces him to belong to his singleton. The modal account cannot explain the asymmetry here. We can conclude that (i) the notion of essence cannot be reducible to the notion of de re necessity; (ii) rather, necessity is reducible to essence; (iii) essence is a primitive term (not explainable in other simpler terms, even if it can be clarified by the notion of real definitions).

#### 1.3.2. Why the notion of grounding is primitive?

As in the previous case, it is not reducible to modal notions in the vicinity: de re necessity, supervenience, etc. We have a case much similar to that of essence: we can rephrase Socrates and his singleton case in terms of grounding. Let us adopt a variant version of MD, call it MD\*:

MD\*: For every  $[p]$ ,  $[q]$ ,  $[p] \leftarrow [q]$  if and only if necessarily whenever  $[p]$  holds,  $[q]$  holds].

Once again, there are plenty of problems with MD\*, but one that is especially important in the present context is that it fails as a satisfactory analysis of the grounding relation. Given our understanding of necessity and grounding we have the following claims:

- i) Necessarily, if Socrates exists, then his singleton exists.
- ii) Necessarily, if Socrates's singleton exists, then Socrates exists.
- i) and (ii) are true and, by the definition MD\* above, it follows:
- i)' [Socrates exists]  $\leftarrow$  [Socrates's singleton exists].
- ii)' [Socrates's singleton exists]  $\leftarrow$  [Socrates exists].
- ii)' is true, but (i)' is false: Socrates's existence does not depend on the existence of his singleton. The modal account cannot explain the explanatory asymmetry here. In an analogous way, we can conclude that the notion of grounding is a primitive notion worth positing: (i) it is unanalyzable, (ii) it is useful and (iii) it is reasonably clear what we mean by it (Schaffer, 2009, 375) So, the notion of grounding cannot be reduced to necessity and it is a primitive notion.

The result so far is that both the notion of essence and the notion of grounding are primitive. In spite of this fact, we can still say that there are some connections between these notions. And more importantly, we can ask whether one of them is more basic than the other. Does this make sense?

## 2. The mediation conjecture

Is there any connection between the notions in question? In principle we have two general strategies to deal with the result of the previous part, namely, the primitiveness of essence and grounding:

- a) We can reject the claims of primitiveness and argue that one of them is not only more primitive than the other but that it can be used to explain the other. Maybe we can say that the notion of essence is more basic, and it can be deployed to explain or even ground grounding relations. (In fact, this is the final goal the present paper wants to reach.)
- b) We keep their primitiveness untouched but we try to draw connections between them—without reducing one to the other? For the

moment, let's follow the second strategy. So, which possible connections can be traced between essence and grounding?

First, one way to interpret the cases in favour of the primitiveness of each notion seems to suggest that, essence and grounding, both more primitive than the notion of necessity, are just the same notion. My view is that this is not so because if it they were identical, then the principle of mediation we have mentioned and we will see later on would have little or no use to clarify both notions. In the last section of the paper we will the opportunity to discuss with more detail why I think the notions are not identical.

We have then to accept that they are different but connected notions. How exactly? A few options are open to us:

1. We can look at the recent history of grounding and we can find that all the contemporary debate around it was triggered by Fine's discussion of essence and its connection with modality. What motivated the need of a more fine-grained tool to do metaphysics was precisely the insight that modal notions are incapable to do a lot of work in metaphysics, and in particular, in an explanation of essential truth.
2. Is there a more philosophical reason to think that the notion of essence is a more primitive notion than that of grounding—and the latter actually depends on the former? Yes, I think it is. And the basic claim is that for a grounding connection between two (or more) facts to be possible, there must be essential connections between the objects involved in those facts. (More on this later.)
3. Another reason to think that essence is more primitive than grounding is that very often, some philosophers think that the notion of grounding, if it is to be brought in metaphysical debates, must be an explanatory notion—there are plenty of objections to these. But if this is true, one may claim that the notion inherits this explanatory character from the essence.

Let us see more precisely the connection between essence and ground by invoking Rosen's mediation conjecture.

### 2.1. The mediation conjecture

The question now is how all the grounding facts we have been talking about are to be explained. One way to do it is by pointing to some of their constituents whose natures/essences mediate the relation.<sup>3</sup>

The explanation could have the following structure:

Particular grounding facts, like [this ball is blue] ← [this ball is cerulean] are explained like this:

1. Appeal to ordinary facts:  
–[the ball is cerulean].
2. Appeal to broadly formal principles of grounding:  
–For all x if x is cerulean then [x is blue] ← [x is cerulean].
3. These formal principles are themselves explained like this:  
– Other facts: [cerulean is a shade of blue].
4. And essential truths about at least one of the things in question, in this case, the nature of the colour blue —it lies in the nature of the colour blue that whenever a thing is a shade of blue, its being blue is grounded in its being that shade.

Take another example:

Why [p ∨ q] ← [p]? Because

1. p is true.
2. [p ∨ q] is a disjunctive fact with p as one if its disjuncts.
3. In general, (for all p) if p is true, then [p ∨ q] ← [p].

Why d is true? Because  $\Box \forall$  For all p, q: (if p is true, then [p ∨ q] ← [p]).

Where ‘ $\Box \forall$ ’ is an essentialist operator: ‘ $\Box \forall A$ ’ means that A is true in virtue of the nature of the objects  $\forall$  that occur in A. Now, in all these cases we have general principles of grounding:

- For all x if x is cerulean then [x is blue] ← [x is cerulean].
- For every proposition p, if p is true, [p ∨ q] ← [p]

And the basic idea is that these principles are explained by the essence of certain items: the

nature of the colour blue and the nature of the disjunction. We can express the crucial idea more precisely as follows: (Rosen, 2010, 1131):

1. All these examples lead to the following two-part conjecture (about what explain facts about grounding, that is, how facts about grounding are themselves grounded):
2. Formality: whenever [A]← [B], there exist propositional forms  $\varphi$  and  $\psi$  such that:
  - a. (i) A is of the form  $\varphi$ ; B is of the form  $\psi$ ; and
  - b. (ii) for all propositions p, q: if p is of the form  $\varphi$  and q is of the form  $\psi$  and q is true, then [p] ← [q].
3. Mediation: every general grounding principle of the form (ii) is itself grounded in, and hence explained by, an essential fact of the form (iii):
  - a. (iii)  $\Box X$  (For all propositions p, q: if p is of the form  $\phi$  and q is of the form  $\psi$  and q is true, then [p] ← [q]), where X’s are the constituents of the propositional forms in question.

Before we go any further, some remarks are in order:

1. The basic idea of the principle of Formality is that particular grounding facts must be subsumable under general laws. If this particular ball is blue in virtue of its being cerulean, then any other object with the same shade of blue will be blue.
2. In the case of Mediation, what explains the ground connection is the nature of the things involved in the fact that is grounded, and not the nature of the things involved in the fact that grounds. In this regard Fine says: “it is the fact to be grounded that “points” to its grounds and not the grounds that point to what they may ground.” (Fine, 2012, 76)

### 3. A problem for mediation

A problem for the link between essence and ground we have identified is constituted by what we can call Moorean connections: general

principles that say that certain facts are grounded in some other facts, but cannot be explained by the nature of the things involved. Consider the following two cases:

### 3.1. The case of non-reductivist materialism

According to a non-reductivist form of materialism, phenomenal facts are supposed to be grounded in neurophysiological facts. However, no phenomenal property is reducible to any neurophysiological property. In other words, I am in pain in virtue of the firing of my c-fibres, but my being in pain does not consist in c-fibre firing —nor in any disjunctive state of which c-fibre firing is a disjunct nor in any existential state of which c-fibre firing is an instance. In still some other words, even if facts about phenomenal consciousness are grounded in facts about brain states, this further grounding fact is not itself explained in terms of the nature of pain. There is nothing in the nature/essence of pain that could ground that further fact. So, Mediation fails.

### 3.2. Moorean position in metaethics

According to certain views in metaethics, we can say that at least some moral facts are grounded in natural facts. However, as in the previous case, no moral property is reducible to any natural property —say producing more happiness than any other available action. In other words, the fact that a certain action *x* is good can be grounded in the fact that such an action has that natural property, even if the property of being morally true does not consist in having that natural property —nor in any disjunctive property of which that natural property is a disjunct, nor in any existential state of which that natural property is an instance. In still some other words, even if moral facts are grounded in natural facts, this further grounding fact is not itself explained in terms of the nature of morality. There is nothing in the nature of morality that could ground that further fact. So, Mediation fails once again.

In order to run these examples we need the following principles:

- For all *x*, if *x*'s c-fibres are firing then [*x* is in pain] ← [*x*'s c-fibres are firing].
- For all agents *x* and action *A*, if *x*'s doing *A* would maximise happiness then [*A* is right] ← [*X*'s doing *A* would maximise happiness].

But it is difficult to find an item whose nature explains these general laws. Why? The answer seems to be that the higher-level properties of pain and rightness do not seem to touch the lower-level properties of pain and c-fibre firing. Are we then to abandon the Mediation principle, and with it, out bet shot to connect essence and ground? In the final section I explore some ways to explain away.

## 4. A way out

Are the counter-examples good? It is easy to see that these examples go against Fine's: account of necessity that every necessary truth derives its truth from the nature/essence of its constituents. All the principles above are meant to be necessary if true at all. But, according to the present proposal, even if these principles are necessary, its true does not derive from the natures/essences of their constituents. So, if we are to accept Fine's views on necessity, we must find something faulty in the examples above. Of course, this strategy may not be as convincing as it may seem, for it requires to accept Fine's view, and perhaps we have good reason to not accept his reduction of necessity to essences.

Another strategy is given by Rosen: we may allow for Moorean connections, and appeal to an alternative account of necessity: necessary truths are logical consequences of essential truths together with basic grounding laws. I think this is a path worth exploring, but if we can find a more direct way to deal with the examples and show that the purported Moorean connections those examples supposedly show are wrong, it is a more preferable option.

And fortunately we may have a way to resist the examples put forward by Fine. In other context, Fine has argued for the claim that there are three modal notions, which are basic and non-reducible to the other: the metaphysical, the normative and the physical necessity. The first step is

Fine's strategy to deal with the examples consists of an analogous distinction between three different notions of ground: metaphysical, normative and physical ground. The examples are plausible only if we deal with normative and physical ground. But, given that the relevant notion is not metaphysical ground, we do not require that the principles above be explained in terms of the essentialist nature of the objects involved.

Let us finish the paper with some remark on the general question whether the notion of grounding can be defined in terms of—and thereby reduced to—the notion of essence. Is grounding definable in terms of essence? Mediation does not amount to a definition or reduction of the grounding to essence. But one may try to do so. Consider  $[C] \rightarrow [B1, B2, \dots]$ . We can obtain a generalisation of this, via Formality perhaps, of this particular fact of grounding that will hold in virtue of the nature of the objects involved in  $C$ . Corresponding to that generalisation, we can have a generalisation that is free of the grounding idiom. Instead of  $[C] \leftarrow [B1, B2, \dots]$ , we can say that 'C if B1, B2, ...'. And we can define 'B1, B2, ... grounds C' just in case some ground-free generalisation of the statement of ground is true in virtue of the nature of the things involved in  $C$ .

Does this work? There are statements of essence that seem to be symmetric between ground and what is grounded—but of course we do not want to say that grounding is symmetric. Take the following cases:

- There is a distinction between existing at a time and existing simpliciter.
- It is essential to any object that exists in time that it exists simpliciter iff it exist at a time.

We can say now:

- [the object exists simpliciter]  $\rightarrow$  [the object exists at a time].
- [the object exists at a time]  $\rightarrow$  [the object exists simpliciter].

However, only the first one deserves to be a legitimate claim of grounding. The definition above does not work. So, we cannot expect to have a definition of ground in terms of essences.

## 5. Conclusion

In this paper I have discussed Rosen's attempt to connect the notion of ground with the notion of essence. The basic idea is that essences mediate grounding relations: if the fact that  $p$  is grounded in the fact that  $q$ , this is so because of the nature or essence involved in the grounded fact that  $p$ . I have tried to show that the relevant objects, whose essence ground the grounding relation, are the things involved the grounded facts. In this sense, there is an asymmetry to be found in the mediation relation between essence and ground. It is this asymmetry what explains, in part, that we cannot get a full definition of ground in terms of essences. I discuss a possible difficulty to the mediation principle, namely, the existence of Moorean connections. We have grounding connections between facts about mental and physical states, and between moral and natural facts, but in which there is no thing whose nature makes those grounding relations to obtain. I explore a strategy to respond to this difficulty, which consists of distinguishing between three basic notions of ground: the metaphysical, the normative and the physical. Although I think that this is a promising strategy, there is still plenty to say to make the case stronger. Other strategies, mentioned in the paper, are still open to be explored and strengthened.

## Notes

1. This poses no difference between a proposition  $p$  and the fact that  $p$ . This further assumes that every true proposition has a truth maker. The relation of truth-making presupposes the notion of grounding. An alternative account of the relation of truth-making is given in modal terms, but it has the unfortunate consequence that everything is a truth-maker for every necessary truth.
2. This implies that there is no fundamental level from which anything else comes from. I will assume rather that there is infinite of levels down the grounding ladder. Nothing of what I will say later on in the paper will depend on this assumption.
3. Here the suggestion seems to be that entanglement with essence appears only when we try to

explain why particular grounding facts hold: what grounds the fact *p* is grounded in the fact *q*? But we can press a bit further and say that the notion of essence is required much earlier, namely, when we ask what grounds the fact *p*. My suspicion is that in order to answer this question, the notion of essence should already be operating in the background of the grounding relation. But this is something that I need to explain better.

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