

Metaphysical Explanation

Lately, it has been suggested that metaphysics should not be confined to the ontological inquiry about what exists, but it should aim at telling a story about the fundamental features of reality and how they relate to each other and to what is derivative¹. There are of course many differences between those projects, but roughly the underlying idea is that the philosophical inquiry should focus on relations of *metaphysical priority*, such as *being grounded in*, *being existentially dependent on*, *being composed of*, *being constituted by*, etc. All such relations are not *meant* to spell out form of ontological reductionism or eliminativism. In particular, there is a clear difference between metaphysical priority projects and reduction projects that rely on the idea of supervenience. Metaphysical priority claims are stronger than mere supervenience claims, since it is possible for something to supervene on a base even if the base is not more fundamental than the supervened feature or entity². Hence, metaphysical priority relations are anti-symmetric relations that imply that the “prior” side is more fundamental than the other.

One of the idea in the literature on the topic is that the “closeness” required by metaphysical priority relations is provided by the fact that they (or at least some of them) are constrained by an *explanatory link* between the relata. For instance, the fact that certain fundamental particles are arranged in a certain way explains the fact that a certain table exist. Such a correlation between explanations and structural relations of metaphysical priority is to be found in many places and it is not confined to existential claims. In the paper I will concentrate on the relation of *grounding*. Although often in the literature grounding is connected with the idea of explanation, the nature of such a connection is left vague³. That is not by chance, since it is not clear whether there is a unique notion of explanation that plays the alleged role in every case of grounding. My main aim will be to spell out a notion of *fundamental metaphysical explanation* which tracks *certain* instances of grounding relations, namely those that bottom down in what is most fundamental.

Grounding claims can be regimented in claims of the form⁴:

(B) p because q

Claims p and q can concern various kinds of entities. Consider, for instance, the claim that a object O exist, that property P is exemplified, that event e occurs. Let us stipulate that for any entity x , $F(x)$ is the claim that x is part of reality—where “being part of reality” means different things depending on the entity at issue (existing, being exemplified, occurring, etc)⁵. If $F(x)$ is true, x is part of reality. My working hypothesis will be the following:

(WH) x is the most fundamental ground of y if and only if it is a metaphysical explanation that $F(y)$ because $F(x)$

¹ See for instance Melia 2005, Cameron 2008, Rayo 2009, Schaffer 2008, McGrath 2008, Fine 2001. (Correia 2005).

² Irrelevant cases of correlations allowed by supervenience are typically those concerning necessary existents, which can be ruled out only by resorting to a antisymmetric (not just asymmetric) link. See McLaughlin and Bennett 2005, Shaffer 2009: 364.

³ Jenkins ms. argues that the notion of fundamentality can be analysed in terms of what explains “the rest”.

⁴ Correia 2005, Correia, ms., Schnieder 2006

⁵ Trodgon (ms.) defines a “fact function” in a similar way.

Since what counts as an explanation is a highly context-sensitive matter, we have to look for a way to characterize metaphysical contexts, such that metaphysical explanations are guaranteed to track grounding relations between the most fundamental and the derivative and not simply to reflect pragmatic tendencies. I will resort to the “It is fundamentally the case that ...” or “In reality, ...” operator “R”⁶, and impose the following condition on metaphysical explanations:

(MP) If it is a metaphysical explanation that p because q , then Rq

The idea behind such a constraint is that the explanans of a metaphysical explanation *correctly represent* the *relevant* aspects of fundamental reality. In other terms, metaphysical explanations have explanatory power in virtue of their being correct representations of the relevant fundamental aspects of reality. In the paper I will provide the outline of a formal theory for the “because” of metaphysical explanations and its connection with the operator R. One interesting feature of the formal theory is that, although the underlying relation of grounding is anti-symmetric, fundamental metaphysical explanation allows for reflexive explanations of the fundamental facts.

I will conclude with the consequences of my approach to the notion of genuine metaphysical debate. If what I claim is on the right track, then genuine metaphysical debates boil down to disagreement over competing metaphysical explanations. Consider, for instance, two opposing theories of persistence—threedimensionalism (a.k.a. endurantism) and fourdimensionalism (a.k.a. perdurantism)—and the explanations of identity through time of ordinary objects that they respectively provide:

(3dimE) Ordinary objects persist identical through time because they are wholly present (or entirely located) at each moment of their existence

(4dimE) Ordinary objects persist identical through time because they have temporal parts at each moment of their existence

As a general label, I will say that the explanandum p in a metaphysical explanation of the form p because q express the *phenomenon* that the explanation aims at explaining. Many metaphysical debates are characterized by antagonistic explanations of the same phenomenon. That is, a metaphysical debate can be identified with a set of claims of the form:

(ex₁) p because q_1

(ex₂) p because q_2

...

If a metaphysical debate is genuine, namely concerns matters of fact, any party to the debate understands the claim of the others. More precisely, each party to the debate: (a) considers the (ex_n) that she endorses as true, (b) considers the others to provide false *hypothetical explanation* of the phenomenon p . A hypothetical explanation is defined as follows:

⁶ See Fine 2005, and Williams 2010

(HE) A claim of the form “ p because q ” is an hypothetical explanation if and only if p is true, Rq is false (hence the whole claim is false too), but were Rq true “ p because q ” would⁷ be true

What it takes for there to be a genuine metaphysical disagreement is that each party takes her explanation as the only metaphysical explanation and the other as false hypothetical explanation of the same phenomenon.

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⁷ Given that many metaphysical debates concern necessary theses this “would” has to be understood as a counterpossible rather than as an ordinary counterfactual. There’s a lot more to say about that, but here I just wanted to hint at the problem.

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