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Objections to Bernstein's Middleism

Introduction

What does it mean for something to be fundamental? Within metaphysics, fundamentality aims to determine what is basic or ungrounded. In other words, something that is considered fundamental is irreducible and cannot be further grounded by anything else. Grounding refers to the relationship between entities where one is dependent on the other, providing a foundation for their existence or nature. Fundamentality and grounding are closely linked since for something to be fundamental it must be ungrounded and as Jonathan Schaffer puts it: "grounding connects the more fundamental to the less fundamental" (Schaffer, 122). However, there is disagreement over what is fundamental; the two leading views are monism and pluralism. A monist "views the cosmos as fundamental, with metaphysical explanation dangling downward from the One" (Schaffer, 31) such that the whole is prior to its parts. Whereas a pluralist would consider "particles fundamental, with metaphysical explanation snaking upward from the many" (Schaffer, 31-2) meaning that the parts are prior and therefore make up the whole. Both monists and pluralists agree that there is a priority ordering of things, but disagree on direction. In her paper, Sara Bernstein puts forward an argument that a middle level, which can ground both upward and downward, could be the most fundamental and that "the explanatory power of middleism is on par with that of top-ism and bottom-ism" (Bernstein, 1). In this paper, I will reconstruct Bernstein's argument and pose some objections to her argument as well as respond to possible defenses.

Bernstein's Argument

In her paper, Bernstein uses top-ism to refer to monism (that the whole grounds the parts and reality terminates upwards) and bottom-ism to refer to pluralism (that the parts ground the whole and reality terminates downwards). Both bottom-ists and top-ists have major proponents and have been at the center of metaphysical inquiry and debate as they both have different strengths and weaknesses. The gist of middle-ism is that the middle level can both ground facts metaphysically upwards and downwards meaning that "all God has to do is create the fundamental middle level of reality, and the existence of the bottom-most levels and the upper-most levels comes for free" (Bernstein, 5-6). I challenge this claim in the inference objection below. Subsequently, she uses the example of medium-sized dry goods to motivate her argument that if God chose to create a couch, the bottom-most least fundamental and top-most least fundamental things can be metaphysically conceived from the couch. Since upward and downward grounding proponents have defended their respective grounding mechanism (upward for a bottom-ist and downward for a top-ist), a middleist is "no more counterintuitive" (Bernstein, 8). Furthermore, middle grounding, the mechanism of grounding that all facts are in virtue of middle-level facts, satisfies logical desiderata for a theory of ground (Bernstein, 9). She argues that middle grounding would allow for strict order grounding that is transitive (if fact x grounds fact y and fact y grounds fact z, fact x grounds fact z), irreflexive (no fact grounds itself), and asymmetric (a fact that grounds another cannot be grounded by the fact it grounds). Bernstein addresses initial objections to such a strong claim since there seems to be logical conflict if middle grounding is asymmetric and middleism allows for bidirectionality. If we start at the middle level and ground downward until we are at the bottom-most level, can we ground back upward as middleism allows for bidirectionality and wouldn't this nullify the

asymmetry condition? Bernstein responds by stating that the middle level grounds downward and that same middle level grounds upward but "not vice-versa" (Bernstein, 9). Therefore, the asymmetry condition is not violated because levels other than the middle level do not have bidirectionality.

Structuring Objection

After introducing her theory, Bernstein states that middleism is best understood through defenses against objections. The first objection she poses is that the middle level is not suited to make arguments about fundamentality as it cannot structure reality unidirectionally in a way that allows one to *understand* (understanding is used in the manner that one could understand something by knowing all of its previous grounding relations) an ordered dependence relation downward to the bottom-most particles and upwards to the top-most universe. Her response to this is that this objection does not take away from middleism because fundamentality describes the metaphysical structure of reality, but does not have the duty to construct it. She argues that "it is not as if Reality is literally built layer upon layer, like a very tall and wide skyscraper, with the dependence facts arising from these layers" meaning that reality is not built sequentially through grounding relations (Bernstein, 11). I find this to be a weak defense because the purpose of fundamentality is to separate what is fundamental and what is non-fundamental; this inherently forces us to understand why something is non-fundamental (what is it grounded in that makes it non-fundamental)? For example, if the middle level is circuits and I want to understand why iPhones are not fundamental, what would the ontological structure look like? According to Bernstein, all we need to know is that since iPhones are grounded in circuits, iPhones are not fundamental. But, does that mean that there is no grounding relation between an object below the middle level of circuits (such as copper) and iPhones? Bernstein recognizes this problem and states that "transitivity does not require that the arrows of ground homogenously face the same direction" (Bernstein, 9). On Bernstein's account, then, copper and iPhones are each grounded in circuits, but the copper does not ground the iPhone, since grounding runs outward from the middle level and never between levels on opposite sides of it. Monists and pluralists avoid this result because their grounding runs in a single direction, so a whole and its parts are always connected by grounding, one way or the other. I find this result unconvincing because it is much more intuitive to argue that there is a grounding relation between iPhones and copper as copper is necessary to make iPhones which is the pluralist account or that the copper exists in virtue of the iPhone it is part of, which is the monist position. Both of these grounding relations are existence relations, but other grounding relations would satisfy as an example.

A possible defense against this objection Bernstein might argue is that iPhones being grounded in circuits and copper being grounded in circuits is enough to determine fundamentality. She argues a similar point about transitivity where "the fact that the house exists grounds the fact that the particles exist, and the fact that the house exists (partially) grounds the fact that the Cosmos exists, but the fact that the particles exist does not (partially) ground the fact that the Cosmos exists" (Bernstein, 9). My response to this defense would be that my objection has no qualms with the argument that the middle level can ground in both directions, rather the problem arises in that one is *required* to use the middle level to ground all else. A monist and pluralist do not require one to know the top-most and bottom-most levels to make grounding relations, respectively. When there is a grounding relation between two objects above and below the middle level, one must use the middle level to ground them (as a middleist only knows the direction of grounding after choosing a middle), ultimately weakening the middleist's theory.

Inference Objection

Bernstein presents inference and prediction as a feature of fundamentality and grounding such that we should be able to imagine what exists from fundamentalia. She further states that middleism has the same inferential power as a top-ist or bottom-ist as "there is no explanatory inference strategy available to the top-ist and bottom-ist that is not available to the middleist" (Bernstein, 14). First, I find that Bernstein has come to a hasty conclusion here without evaluating what a mechanism for inference would look like. This point can be best explained by thinking about how inference works for a bottom-ist using quarks as being fundamental: we can construct everything else by merely using the quark as fundamental since all other grounding relations branch out from the quark. This objection arises because the same cannot be said for *any* middle level. A similar inference would work with the largest universe and many proponents of monism have argued that one could ground everything that makes up the universe on the basis that the universe (by itself) is enough to metaphysically explain its parts (Schaffer, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). Bernstein's argument for middleism rests on the assumption that within the web of ontological structure, any middle level will be able to ground everything else as she intends her arguments "to apply to any non-top-most or non-bottom-most level" (Bernstein, 5). Say that the middle level is the level of medium-sized objects such as bananas; how can it have the same inferential power as the level of quarks? I find this implausible and would argue that there are ontological structures that do not involve any medium-sized object whereas all ontological structures would contain an elementary particle somewhere in their grounding relation. For example, it is hard to understand how a stray particle could be grounded by medium-sized objects, since it is neither part of one nor built from one, whereas a bottom-ist can simply count it among the elementary particles. The same argument could be made using a top-ist view that the universe has more inferential power than the middle level.

Second and relatedly, Bernstein is operating on the assumption that all middle levels have the same inferential power. How can we choose any middle level to be fundamental and argue that it has the same inferential power as any other middle level? Using Bernstein's own examples of the level of medium-sized objects and the biological level, the level of living things such as cells and organisms (Bernstein, 5), I would argue that the biological level has a *different* amount of inferential power than the level of medium-sized objects. As an aside, I would argue that the level of medium-sized objects has more inferential power than the biological level and that some levels have more inferential power than others. If that's true, then should a middleist choose a middle level that has more inferential power and wouldn't that conflict with the argument that any middle level may be chosen? If we hold that the level of medium-sized objects is fundamental, a granite boulder is simply part of that level; but if we hold that the biological level is fundamental, the boulder is neither a living thing, nor part of one, nor built from living things. It is much more compelling to argue that the biological level does not have the inferential power to infer the existence of the boulder rather than the much stronger claim that it does. Bernstein's use of middle-sized goods as an example obscures both objections about inferential power, but they remain salient in arguing that middleism has less explanatory power in fundamentalia compared to bottom-ism or top-ism.

Arbitrariness Objection

A conventional objection to middleism is about its arbitrary nature which Bernstein addresses directly (Bernstein, 12). Bernstein presents two objections on middleism's arbitrariness: that there is no plausible metaphysical underpinning for the fundamentality of the middle level and there is no justification for believing that a particular middle level is the fundamental one (Bernstein, 12). She argues that neither one of the two arguments disqualifies middleism on the basis that "what makes a middle level

a most fundamental one is just that it builds the other levels" and that top-ism or bottom-ism face similar objections (Bernstein, 12). This is a weak argument as a metaphysical fundamental level cannot be arbitrary due to the inherent nature of metaphysical grounding. Metaphysical grounding establishes the fundamental relationship between entities or properties, and it serves as the foundation upon which the rest of reality is built. Arbitrariness suggests a lack of reasoning or purpose, but the existence of a coherent and orderly universe demands that the metaphysical fundamentals are not randomly selected. Furthermore, the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR) states "for every fact F, there must be a sufficient reason why F is the case" (Melamed and Lin, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). Bernstein states that "anti-foundationalists and foundationalists alike run into trouble with the Principle of Sufficient Reason" arguing that monist and pluralist positions are no less arbitrary (Bernstein, 15). However, both top-ist and bottom-ist can refer to mereology to justify their position, whereas the middleist cannot. Mereological arguments concern part-whole relations briefly mentioned in the introduction where a pluralist would argue that the whole is grounded in the parts and a monist would argue that the parts are grounded in the whole. A middleist doesn't have access to similar arguments because they would have to argue that smaller parts are grounded in large parts and the whole is grounded in large parts. This line of mereological reasoning is less intuitive and not as developed in the philosophical community because a middleist would have to be committed to both directions of mereological arguments. Therefore, I'd argue that middleism has a lesser claim to the PSR.

Furthermore, Bernstein argues that "middle-level objects are perceptually and intuitively given" making them more epistemically available and less mysterious such that it "accords an extra advantage to middleism with respect to the Principle of Sufficient Reason" (Bernstein, 17). However, this argument is cherry-picking middle-sized dry goods as the middle, but there is no limitation on what the middle could be. Since what particular middle level is the middle is arbitrary, it could be just above the bottom-most level or below the top-most level meaning that in actuality, it would not be any more epistemically available than the bottom-most or top-most level. Additionally, it would mean that it would function very similarly to a bottom-ist or top-ist theory in that everything except the bottom-most or top-most level are grounded unidirectionally while being mechanically and logically more complicated.

Conclusion

The concept of fundamentality within metaphysics revolves around identifying what is basic, ungrounded, and irreducible. While there is disagreement between monists and pluralists, the two most common views on ground, regarding what constitutes the fundamental, they both acknowledge the existence of a priority ordering. Sara Bernstein's theory of middle-level fundamentality is exciting and creative in how it approaches fundamentality, but ultimately faces many objections about its inferential power, arbitrariness and the way it structures reality. Hopefully, Bernstein's article can motivate similarly unique approaches to fundamentality and provide a baseline for further inquiry.

Sources

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