Grounding identity in existence facts: A reply to Wilhelm

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1. Introduction

There is currently an orange mug on my table. It is self-identical. So is everything else: Barack Obama, the colour green, the number 4. What grounds identity facts such as these?

Isaac Wilhelm (2020) compares two answers to this question:

(i) the fact that the mug is self-identical (for example) is grounded in *the fact that the mug exists*;

(ii) the fact that the mug is self-identical is grounded in *the mug itself*.

Wilhelm argues that (i) results in a troubling disunity in our account of what grounds identity facts, and concludes that (ii) is the better answer (§2-§3). He takes this conclusion to have a broader significance. For (ii) is not available to *fact-grounders*, who hold that grounding obtains only between facts; (ii) is only available to *entity-grounders*, who think that grounding can also obtain between entities of various other kinds: objects, properties, events, and so on. Wilhelm concludes that this gives us a reason to be entity-grounders.[1]

Here I rebut Wilhelm's argument. I show that (i) is not the only answer that commits us to a disunity; (ii) brings with it a disunity of the very same kind. The advocate of (ii) has a natural way of restoring unity – but this maneuver is equally available to the advocate of (i), leaving neither theorist with any particular advantage (§4).

2. Two views about what grounds identity facts

Let us get a better grip on the debate. Letting angle brackets denote facts, our focal question is: what grounds facts of the form $<e = e>$?

For x to *ground* y is for y to obtain in virtue of x's obtaining. (Throughout, I use *ground* to refer to full, rather than merely partial, grounds.) For simplicity, I will assume that grounding is a relation. However, my arguments would be unaffected if we posited only a grounding operator. It is just that entity-grounders

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[1] Fact-grounders include Rosen (2010); Fine (2012). Entity-grounders include Schaffer (2009); deRosset (2013).

would need to treat this operator as connecting, not only sentences, but also words and phrases of other grammatical categories.[2]

It will be useful to introduce two notions. Roughly speaking, an *immediate ground* is the very next link down the chain of grounding. More precisely, for x to *immediately ground* y is for x to ground y, and for there to be no further z such that x grounds z and z grounds y. Meanwhile, an *ultimate ground* is, to a first approximation, what is at the bottom of the grounding chain. More precisely, for x to *ultimately ground* y is for x to ground y, and for there to be no further z that grounds x. Note that the immediate and ultimate grounds of something can in principle be the same: this will happen when something is just one link from the bottom of the grounding chain.

Now our focal question splits into two: what immediately grounds identity facts? And what ultimately grounds them?

For fact-grounders, Wilhelm suggests, a natural answer to the first question is:

> *Existence Facts Ground Identity*: For any entity e, $<e = e>$ is immediately grounded in $<e$ exists$>$.

Philosophers have identified several motivations for Existence Facts Ground Identity. It has been said that this thesis is a natural expression of the thought that identity facts are nothing 'over and above' existence facts; that this thesis lets us characterize, in a precise way, the idea that identity facts are lightweight; and that the thesis is simply intuitive in and of itself.[3]

Next, Wilhelm observes that entity-grounders might instead be drawn to:

> *Entities Ground Identity*: For any entity e, $<e = e>$ is immediately grounded in e.

Wilhelm suggests that this view would be motivated by the same sorts of considerations that motivate Existence Facts Ground Identity, and I will grant this point for the sake of discussion. Obviously, however, fact-grounders cannot accept Entities Ground Identity. This view is only available to entity-grounders.[4]

Which view is superior?

3. Wilhelm's argument

Wilhelm thinks that the second view is the better one: he argues that Existence Facts Ground Identity commits us to a troubling disunity, while Entities Ground Identity does not. Let us examine Wilhelm's argument carefully.


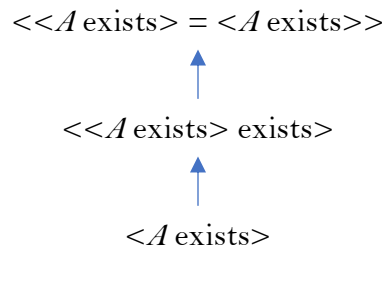[2] Schaffer (2009) and Rosen (2010) treat grounding as a relation. Fine (2012) treats it as an operator.
[3] The first motivation is expressed in Burgess (2012: 90). The second and third appear in Wilhelm (2020: 501). Existence Facts Ground Identity is also discussed in Shumener (2017).
[4] See Wilhelm (ibid).

Consider some fundamental object – say, a fundamental particle, *A*. Existence Facts Ground Identity entails that $<A = A>$ is immediately grounded in $<A$ exists$>$. If we continue to follow the chain of grounding down, we will discover the *ultimate* ground of $<A = A>$, as well. In this case, because *A* is fundamental, it is plausible that $<A$ exists$>$ is a fundamental fact, which would make this very same fact the ultimate ground of $<A = A>$. If we draw lines underneath ultimate grounds, then we arrive at this depiction:

$$<A = A>$$

$$\uparrow$$

$$<A \text{ exists}>$$
$$\underline{\hspace{3cm}}$$
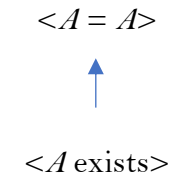
Now consider the fundamental fact $<A$ exists$>$. This fact, too, is self-identical: $<<A$ exists$> = <A$ exists$>>$. What are the immediate grounds, and the ultimate ones, of *this* identity fact? According to Existence Facts Ground Identity, the immediate ground is $<<A$ exists$>$ exists$>$. In addition, Wilhelm suggests, it is natural to assume that for any fact *F*, $<F$ exists$>$ is grounded in *F*. Thus, the *ultimate* ground is $<A$ exists$>$:

$$<<A \text{ exists}> = <A \text{ exists}>>$$

$$\uparrow$$

$$<<A \text{ exists}> \text{ exists}>$$

$$\uparrow$$

$$<A \text{ exists}>$$
$$\underline{\hspace{3cm}}$$

Wilhelm submits that this account is troublingly disunified. The disunity does not show up at the level of *immediate* grounds: in both of these diagrams, what *immediately* grounds the fact that a particular fundamental entity is self-identical is the fact that that entity exists. Where the disunity shows up is at the level of *ultimate* grounds. $<A$ exists$>$ is a fundamental fact, and what ultimately grounds its self-identity is itself. By contrast, *A* is a fundamental particle, but what ultimately grounds *its* self-identity is *not* itself. It is the fact that *A* exists. Wilhelm worries that it is *ad hoc* to say that different fundamental entities get their self-identities ultimately grounded in such different ways.[5]

The entity grounder is supposed to do better. Recall that she thinks that for any entity *e*, what immediately grounds $<e = e>$ is *e*. So return to our

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[5] Ibid: 501–503.

fundamental particle A. What grounds $<A = A>$? According to Entities Ground Identity, the answer is just A. But A is, we have assumed, fundamental, so the *ultimate* ground of $<A = A>$ is precisely the same – just A:

$$<A = A>$$

$$\uparrow$$

$$A$$
_____
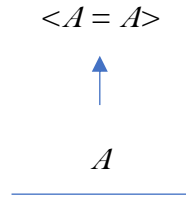
Now consider any fundamental fact F. What grounds $<F = F>$? Entities Ground Identity tells us that its immediate ground is F. But, again, we have assumed that F is fundamental. Thus the *ultimate* ground will also be F:

$$<F = F>$$

$$\uparrow$$

$$F$$
_____
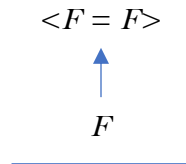
In sum, if we accept Entities Ground Identity, then we can say that for *any* fundamental entity e, $<e = e>$ has the same ultimate ground, namely e itself. If we accept Existence Facts Ground Identity, we get an account that is disunified by comparison. That, according to Wilhelm, is a reason to prefer Entities Ground Identity, which in turn requires us to be entity-grounders rather than fact-grounders.[6]

This is an ingenious argument. Is it sound?

4. The argument assessed

I think not. Observe: for any existing entity e, there is a corresponding fact $<e$ exists$>$. The observation iterates: there are also the facts $<<e$ exists$>$ exists$>$, $<<<e$ exists$>$ exists$>$ exists$>$, and so on, *ad infinitum*. What is the relationship among all of these entities? For an entity-grounder like Wilhelm, the simplest and most natural view is:

> *Entities Ground Existence Facts*: Any fact of the form $<e$ exists$>$ is grounded in e.[7]

Or perhaps the entity-grounder will be tempted by this alternative view:

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[6] Ibid: 503.

[7] Recall that Wilhelm himself argues that, for any fact F, F grounds $<F$ exists$>$ (ibid: 502). Perfectly parallel considerations would support Entities Ground Existence.

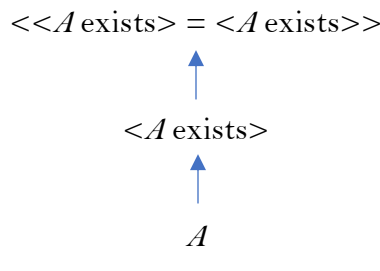*Entities and Existence Ground Existence Facts*: Any fact of the form <*e* exists> is grounded in *e*, existence.[8]

I think that either of these views will generate a problem for the advocate of Entities Ground Identity. This is easy to miss, as our earlier discussion of Entities Ground Identity was purely schematic when it came to fundamental facts. We considered a representative fundamental fact *F*, but we did not think about what *F* might be, exactly. Let us be more concrete.

Go back to our example of a fundamental particle, *A*, and a corresponding fundamental fact, <*A* exists>. Since <*A* exists> is fundamental, Wilhelm wants to say that its self-identity has the same immediate and ultimate ground, namely itself:

$$<<A \text{ exists}> = <A \text{ exists}>>$$

$\uparrow$

$$<A \text{ exists}>$$
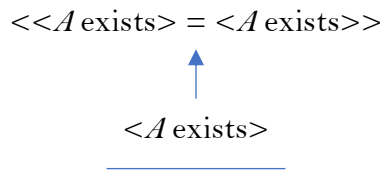
This picture says that <*A* exists> is ungrounded. But this is inconsistent with either of our two proposals about what grounds existence facts: both proposals identify particular grounds for <*A* exists>. In particular, if Wilhelm accepts Entities Ground Existence Facts, then he must change his picture to this:

$$<<A \text{ exists}> = <A \text{ exists}>>$$

$\uparrow$

$$<A \text{ exists}>$$

$\uparrow$

$$A$$

Or if Wilhelm prefers Entities and Existence Ground Existence Facts, then he must endorse this picture:

$$<<A \text{ exists}> = <A \text{ exists}>>$$

$\uparrow$

$$<A \text{ exists}>$$

$$A \qquad\qquad Existence$$
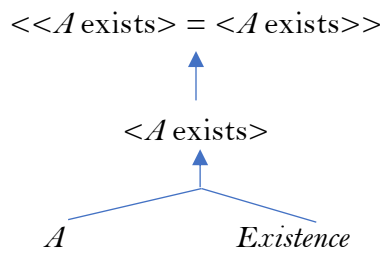
Either way, Wilhelm is committed to a disunity of the very same kind as his opponent. He says that *some* fundamentalia, such as particle A, have their self-identities immediately *and* ultimately grounded in themselves. *Other* fundamentalia, such as $<A \text{ exists}>$, have their self-identities immediately grounded in themselves, but ultimately grounded in something else. That is, apparently, a strange rupture in Wilhelm's account of the grounds of identity facts about fundamentalia.

To be fair, I think that Wilhelm has an effective reply to this concern: he can say that facts are never fundamental; only certain *constituents* of facts are fundamental. For example, the fact $<A \text{ exists}>$ is not fundamental, because it is grounded in A, perhaps together with existence. With this reply in hand, Wilhelm can keep his grip on the claim that for *any* fundamental entity e, $<e = e>$ has the same ultimate ground, namely e itself. The unity of Wilhelm's theory is thereby restored.

However, turnabout is fair play! The advocate of Existence Facts Ground Identity, in response to the charge of disunification, can say that particles like A are never fundamental. What are fundamental are only certain facts about them, such as $<A \text{ exists}>$.

This move, too, restores unity. For consider any fact of the form $<e = e>$, where e is fundamental. By Existence Facts Ground Identity, $<e = e>$ will be immediately grounded in $<e \text{ exists}>$. Now, since e is fundamental, and the present view is that only facts are fundamental, e must be a fact. But we assumed earlier that for any fact F, $<F \text{ exists}>$ is grounded in F. Thus $<e \text{ exists}>$ must be grounded in e. Since e is fundamental, it has no further ground; we have arrived at the ultimate ground. Thus, for *any* fundamental entity e (which will always be a fact), $<e = e>$ will have the same ultimate ground, namely e itself:

$$<e = e>$$
$$\uparrow$$
$$<e \text{ exists}>$$
$$\uparrow$$
$$e$$
$$\overline{\qquad\qquad}$$
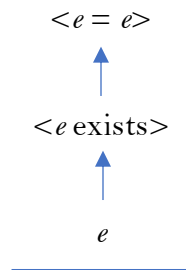
In short, when it comes to the ultimate grounds of identity facts about fundamentalia, both parties to the dispute can provide a unified theory.

I conclude that Wilhelm's objection is unsound: whether we accept Existence Facts Ground Identity or Entities Ground Identity, there is no particular advantage in unity. We must settle the debate between these two proposals, and between fact-grounders and entity-grounders more broadly, in some other way.[9]

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