Phil. 164: Metaphysics
Oct. 4, 2023

Lecture 10 – An Application in the Philosophy of Religion: Is Omniscience Impossible?

I. Fine’s Paradoxes of Ground (Cont’d)

We can break up the reasoning behind Fine’s paradoxes for grounding into four stages, each of which relies on its own distinctive variety of assumptions:

Stage 1 assumptions:

(Existential Truth)	Something is true.
(Universal Middle)	Every proposition is either true or not true.

Stage 2 assumptions:

(Propositional Existence)	The proposition $<p>$ exists.
(Propositional Grounding)	If p, and $<p>$ exists, then $[<p> \text{ is true}] \leftarrow [p]$.

Stage 3 assumptions (principles from the impure logic of grounding):

(Existential Grounding)	If $\varphi(a)$ and a exists, then $[(\exists x)\varphi(x)] \leftarrow [\varphi(a)], [a \text{ exists}]$.
(Disjunctive Grounding)	If p, then $[p \vee q] \leftarrow [p]$.
(Universal Grounding)	If $(\forall x)\varphi(x)$ and a exists, then $[(\forall x)\varphi(x)] \mapsfrom [\varphi(a)]$.

Stage 4 assumptions (principles from the pure logic of grounding):

(Strong Asymmetry)	If $[p] \mapsfrom [q]$, then not: $[q] \mapsfrom [p]$.
(Strong Transitivity)	If $[p] \mapsfrom [q]$, and $[q] \mapsfrom [r]$, then $[p] \mapsfrom [r]$.

Can we respond to the paradoxes by denying Propositional Existence?

Maybe there is no proposition <Every proposition is either true or not true> where the quantifier ‘every proposition’ ranges over that very proposition.

Or, in a variant, maybe there is no true proposition <Every proposition is either true or not true> where the type of truth we are attributing to the proposition is the same type of truth being appealed to within the proposition (perhaps because there are levels of truth, and truth at a given level cannot be applied to propositions employing equal or higher levels of truth).

These “predicative approaches” (as they are known) have counterintuitive consequences.

If I say, “Every proposition you have, are, and will express today is true”; and you first say to me, “Some proposition you have, are, or will express today is false,” and then also say, “4 is prime”; then it seems that what I said is false and the first thing you said is true, and we have both managed to generalize over all the propositions the other person has expressed today.

Can we respond to the paradoxes by denying Propositional Grounding?

Maybe Propositional Grounding is false, and one of the following is true instead:

(Propositional Identity)	If p, and $<p>$ exists, then $[<p> \text{ is true}] = [p]$.
(Prop. Common Ground)	If p, and $<p>$ exists, then $[<p> \text{ is true}] \leftarrow \Gamma$ iff $[p] \leftarrow \Gamma$.

However, a similar paradox can be generated using these principles at Stage 2. (How?)

Also, if we are willing to allow quantification not just over objects but also into sentence position, then Krämer points out we can run a version of Fine’s existential grounding paradox by relying on the following principle at Stage 3 and skipping Stage 2 altogether:

(Sentential Existential Grounding) If q, then $[(\exists p)\, p] \leftarrow [q]$.

Can we respond to the paradoxes by denying the relevant principles from the impure logic of grounding?

> Maybe Existential Grounding and Disjunctive are false, and instead the following are true:
>
> (Weak Existential Grounding) If $(\exists x)\varphi(x)$, then, for some y, $[(\exists x)\varphi(x)] \leftarrow [\varphi(y)]$, [$y$ exists].
>
> (Weak Disjunctive Grounding) If $p \vee q$, then *either* $[p \vee q] \leftarrow [p]$, *or* $[p \vee q] \leftarrow [q]$.
>
> However, replacing Disjunctive Grounding with Weak Disjunctive Grounding is not enough to block the universal versions of the paradox, since it's not very plausible that [$<p_0>$ is either true or not true] is grounded [$<p_0>$ is not true].
>
> So we must reject Universal Grounding as well, and there is no weaker principle to replace it with.

Can we respond to the paradoxes by denying the relevant principles from the pure logic of grounding?

> Denying Strong Transitivity is not enough, since the existential versions of the paradox do not need to appeal to Strong Transivity, so if one goes this route one is better off denying Strong Asymmetry.

II. Whitcomb on the Impossibility of Omniscience

Whitcomb argues that we can take the reasoning behind Fine's paradoxes of ground and use it (together with a few other natural assumptions) to establish that omniscience is impossible, and hence God does not exist.

The central core of Whitcomb's argument can be taken as relying on six assumptions:

(God Is Omniscient)	If God exists, then God is omniscient.
(Omniscience Is All-Knowingness)	If x is omniscient, then x knows every fact.
(Factual Existence)	If p, then $[p]$ exists.
(Truth Grounds Knowledge)	If x knows $[p]$, then $[x \text{ knows } [p]] \mapsfrom [p]$.
(Universal Grounding)	If $(\forall x)\varphi(x)$ and a exists, then $[(\forall x)\varphi(x)] \mapsfrom [\varphi(a)]$.
(Strong Asymmetry)	If $[p] \mapsfrom [q]$, then not: $[q] \mapsfrom [p]$.

Here is how we argue that God does not exist on the basis of these assumptions:

1.	God exists.	(*supposition for reductio*)
2.	God is omniscient.	(*by 1, God Is Omniscient*)
3.	God knows every fact.	(*by 2, Omniscience Is All-Knowingness*)
4.	[God knows every fact] exists.	(*by 3, Factual Existence*)
5.	God knows [God knows every fact].	(*by 3, 4*)
6.	[God knows [God knows every fact]] $\mapsfrom$ [God knows every fact].	(*by 5, Truth Grounds Knowledge*)
7.	[God knows every fact] $\mapsfrom$ [God knows [God knows every fact]].	(*by 3, 4, Universal Grounding*)
8.	$\perp$	(*by 6, 7, Strong Asymmetry)*
9.	God does not exist.	(*by 1, 8*)

(*Note #1*: Whitcomb formulates his argument in terms of God knowing [Someone knows every fact], but doing so requires several extra steps and a more complicated premise instead of Universal Grounding.)

(*Note #2*: Whitcomb appeals to Strong Transitivity and Strong Irreflexivity in his argument, but I have formulated things in terms of a single weaker assumption, namely Strong Asymmetry, which is entailed by his two assumptions but does not entail both of them.)

Can we respond to Whitcomb's argument by denying God Is Omniscient?

Maybe. But it would be a very significant achievement if (a variant of) his argument were able to show that God is not omniscient.

Can we respond to Whitcomb's argument by denying Omniscience Is All-Knowingness?

Whitcomb considers and rejects several alternative conceptions of what omniscience involves:

- *alternative #1*: If *x* is omniscient, then *x* knows every knowable fact.

  objection #1: This proposal renders the existence of omniscient beings compatible with the skeptical view that no being whatsoever can know anything. That's very implausible.

  objection #2: In order for this proposal to block Whitcomb's argument, [God knows every knowable fact] must be unknowable. However, to claim, "God knows every knowable fact, but I do not know that God knows every knowable fact," is to advocate a Moorean absurdity.

  (A similar response works against the proposal that if *x* is omniscient, then *x* knows every fact *that is knowable by x*. It'd be really weird if God is omniscient and although God cannot know this, we can.)

- *alternative #2*: If *x* is omniscient, then *x* believes every true proposition and no false proposition.

  objection: This proposal (implausibly) allows omniscient beings to believe things for bad reasons.

- *alternative #3*: If *x* is omniscient, then *x* believes *with maximal justification* every true proposition and no false proposition.

  objection #1: It's not clear that *there is* a maximal degree of justification.

  objection #2: This proposal doesn't capture the motivating thought behind taking God to be omniscient, which is that if God exists, then God is epistemically perfect. And surely a being with maximally justified beliefs that don't constitute knowledge is not epistemically perfect.

Can we respond to Whitcomb's argument by denying Truth Grounds Knowledge?

In epistemology, it is standard to take *the conditions for knowledge* that one is searching for when one is attempting to analyze propositional knowledge to each be *partial grounds of knowing that p*.

Then, insofar as almost everyone holds that *truth* is one of those conditions, it would follow that Truth Grounds Knowledge holds. (Some authors formulate the truth condition as [<*p*> is true], but it is probably better to formulate it as [*p*], if these are different facts.)

Can we respond to Whitcomb's argument by arguing that Fine's paradoxes of ground already give us good reason to conclude that either Universal Grounding or Strong Asymmetry is false?

Note that this response is not available to people who would prefer to block Fine's paradoxes of ground by denying some of the assumptions at Stages 1 or 2.

(Whitcomb is one of those people: he thinks we can resist Fine's paradoxes by replacing Propositional Grounding with Propositional Common Ground, without realizing that the latter can equally well be used to generate a version of Fine's paradoxes.)

Finally, there is a worry that Whitcomb's reasoning shows too much.

By a similar line of reasoning, we can show that (i) Truth Grounds Knowledge, (ii) Strong Asymmetry, and (iii) *either* Existential Grounding *or* a variant of Universal Grounding for 'many' rather than 'all' are enough on their own to demonstrate that the following are both false: I know [I know something], and I know [I know many things]. But surely I know these two facts!