CHAPTER 4

The Undifferentiated Limit of Ground

Why is the sky blue? Because air scatters short wavelengths. Why does air do that? Every parent knows where this goes. At some point the answers stop.

Philosophers have argued for decades about that stopping. One camp says the chain must end somewhere, in a fact that simply holds. The other says it never ends. The relation at issue is called grounding: A grounds B when B holds in virtue of A. The quarrel over whether such chains must end is the well-foundedness debate, and neither side has won it.

This chapter finds a third possibility both camps have missed. At an ordinary stopping point you can still ask what grounds the fact. You get no answer, and the question stays a good one. The chapter calls that explanation declined. At one stopping point, and only one, the question has nothing left to be about. Explanation there is foreclosed. The one point is equality, the book's name for being with no internal distinction. Its partner term is diversity, being with at least one distinction. Chapter 3 argued that every state of reality falls under one of the two.

Ask what a stone rests on, and perhaps nobody can tell you. Ask what the number seven rests on, and no answer is missing. Resting is not something numbers do. Grounding works on distinctions, so in equality it "runs out of material".

Five premises and a chessboard

The argument starts from five claims.

The first is that at least one difference exists. Chapter 1 argued that anyone denying this makes it true in the denying, so the book treats it as *self-vindicating*, its top mark. The second is Chapter 3's partition: any state of reality is either diverse or equal, the only two conditions within existence.

The third concerns non-existence. Think of a chessboard. The difference between black squares and white squares lives on the board. Take the board away and you have not found a third colour of square. Non-existence is like that missing board, so it is never there to ground anything. Chapter 3 added a sharper point: a non-existence that obtained would, in that obtaining, be equality.

The fourth and fifth claims are the standard rules of grounding. If A grounds B, then B does not ground A, and nothing grounds itself.

One further distinction is needed, and a lamp shows it. A lit lamp is one way and not another. The lamp also, more basically, obtains at all. That is bare obtaining, the standing of a whole state against its own absence. Diversity has both. Equality has only the second: "it is, with no further way that it is". The

distinction rests on one commitment. Bare obtaining has to say something real about the state. A reader who treats existence as no feature of anything may deny that. Such a reader, the chapter replies, must concede the point or hold that whatever exists is some way. The partition rejects that view.

Eliminating the candidates

The derivation runs in three steps. The first refuses a shortcut. You might ask what grounds diversity as such. The chapter declines that move, since the word names one of the partition’s two classes. So the argument runs on particular facts.

The second step clears away the candidates. Non-existence is out, since it is never available. Equality grounding itself breaks the rule that nothing grounds itself. Diversity is out twice over, for separate reasons. A diverse ground would sit below equality, so the chain would end at that diverse fact instead. And Chapter 3’s corollary about relations holds that no relation doing structural work can take equality as a term, since equality offers no feature by which anything could pick it out.

The third step draws the conclusion: every permitted candidate has gone, so equality is ungrounded, and the kind of ungroundedness is the finding.

A ground in the ordinary sense stands inside the relation and has features that do the work. Equality is instead a limit, the point where the relation’s requirements fail, so it neither is grounded nor grounds anything.

A boundary with one side

Boundaries usually have structure on both sides. The boundary between diversity and equality works differently. Diversity has structure, and that structure reaches its limit. The chapter calls this a unilateral boundary, one to which a single side contributes.

A three-part test says when a stopping point counts as one. It must be the limit of the relation’s reach. The relation’s requirements must hold above it and fail at it. And the failure must follow from what the stopping point is like. Equality meets the test, while a brute bottom level meets its first condition alone.

The appendix supplies the order behind the word limit. Rank states by the distinctions they carry: one state lies below another when the other carries all of its distinctions and at least one more. Equality is the bound such a descent approaches and never includes. The chapter grants that this is weaker than well-foundedness as the grounding literature defines it. The order rests on one assumption, which the appendix names. A single distinction can be carried by more than one state. Where that comparison fails, the order is silent. The argument needs only chains, each state below the last, where the comparison holds.

One reading has to be refused. It treats equality as a state that produced diversity, and asks how. The chapter replies that no reality lies outside the partition, and that the limit has no hidden productive powers. Equality is what diversity implies at its own edge, so no mechanism is wanted. This chapter keeps the relationship structural.

The result is then a choice. Either the hierarchy ends or it does not. If it does not, diversity is endless and no question about an end arises. If it does, equality is the only ending of the foreclosing kind. That branch carries one commitment. No diverse fact is the lowest one, so the steps below any fact never run out. Both branches hold infinitely many diverse facts. They differ only over whether the descent has a bound. On neither branch did diversity come out of non-existence. Something has always existed.

The objections the chapter answers

The first objection says the position is ordinary foundationalism in tidier words. Any foundationalist could call her bottom level the place where explanation runs out of material. The chapter replies that the test decides it. A bottom level with distinctions gives the relation material on both sides, so it could extend and does not. The chapter grants a sharper form of the objection. Equality sits at the bottom of the containment order by definition, so that placement is a matter of meaning. Three further claims do not follow from any definition. Grounding cannot reach the bottom in either direction. The bound is a mode of being. And every other ending leaves features unexplained, while the bound leaves none.

A famous question belongs here too. Why does equality obtain at all, instead of nothing? The chapter answers that the sentence has the grammar of a contrast and the content of none, since its alternative is its own subject under another name.

The strongest rival objects next. Jonathan Schaffer argues that the fundamental thing is the whole cosmos, one entity with enormous internal structure. The chapter makes no claim that he has erred. His ending is a brute one, it says, since the question why the cosmos has these distinctions and no others stays a good question. The chapter then costs its own preference in three lines, and loses one. Equality leaves no features unexplained, which counts only for someone who already treats unexplained features as a cost. One thing does stay unexplained even there: that the bounded hierarchy obtains at all. Chapter 5 records it as one featureless fact. A brute rival leaves a question open for every feature, so this second line also favours equality. Against that, equality must be possible for the hierarchy to end there, while Chapter 3’s appendix showed only that the description is consistent. Schaffer’s cosmos is actual, so its possibility comes free. The preference claimed here is worth that much and no more.

The chapter also concedes that a brute, differentiated bottom level is a coherent position, which its supporting argument does not refute.

What the chapter claims

Every result here is graded *established*, the rung below the book's top mark. Established means the result follows validly from premises the book defends, so a challenger has to reject one of them. It does not mean the premises are beyond dispute.

Two results carry a condition. That equality is the only foreclosing ending holds if the hierarchy ends. So does grounding limitarianism, the position that declined and foreclosed endings differ in a way a formal test can state. Both leave open whether equality is possible at all, which Chapter 11 takes up. The chapter never argues that the hierarchy does end.

The other results hold without that condition: the two-branch choice, the two senses of determination, the difference between a ground inside the relation and a limit where it fails, and the containment order of the appendix.

The strongest form of the argument needs those two rules of grounding, and the chapter admits that a philosopher who treats grounding as many relations with mixed properties can resist it. What survives is weaker: any relation that works on distinctions reaches a limit where there are none. That weaker claim delivers the limit without the uniqueness.

Grounding takes no time. Time is a hierarchy too, with its own argument about whether it ends. Chapter 5 asks whether the two end at the same point.