

Foster on sustainment
David Balcarras, March 2017

0 Introduction

John Foster (1982) introduces the notion of *logical sustainment*, a relation of metaphysical dependence between facts, that bears a striking resemblance to the contemporary concept of *metaphysical grounding*.

Sustainment, like grounding, is a transitive, asymmetric, irreflexive, necessitating, and hyperintensional relation between facts—one-one or many-one—which Foster uses to characterize fundamentality, nothing-over-and-aboveness, and metaphysical dependence between both entities and states of affairs.

Plausibly, sustainment just is grounding. If so, Foster’s invocation of the notion, decades before its popularization, and his subsequent *use* of the notion in first-order metaphysical applications across his oeuvre, should be acknowledged and more widely appreciated. I hope this brief note will contribute towards that end.

1 Logical sustainment

At the start of *The Case for Idealism* (1982), Foster offers a first-pass characterization of the relation of ‘logical sustainment’:

I will say that a fact or set of facts F is *logically sustained by* a fact or set of facts F' iff F obtains wholly in virtue of F' in the following sense:

- (a) F is a logical consequence of F' , i.e. it is logically necessary¹ that if F' , then F obtains.
- (b) F is mediated by F' , i.e. the obtaining of F is achieved through and by means of the obtaining of F' .
- (c) F is exhausted by F' , i.e. the obtaining of F is wholly constituted by and is nothing over and above the obtaining of F' . (p. 5)

He then explains some of its formal properties (underlining mine). Like grounding, sustainment is a ‘strict partial order’:

¹Crucially, Foster makes it clear that by ‘logically necessary’ in (a) he means *holds with metaphysical necessity*: “Where a necessity is stronger than natural necessity, I shall, to mark the distinction, call it a *logical* necessity. This is obviously a rather broad use of the term ‘logical’, since there are many cases where something which is, in that sense, logically necessary cannot be established from (what we ordinarily take to be) the laws of logic alone. Indeed, there are cases where something which is, in that sense, logically necessary cannot be established *a priori* (e. g. it is logically necessary that Hesperus and Phosphorus are numerically identical, though, given the difference in the concepts *Hesperus* and *Phosphorus*, this is not something we can know *a priori*). But this broad use of the term ‘logical’ seems to me appropriate, because any stronger-than-natural necessity is a necessity of the strongest kind – the kind for which the necessity of logical truth, in the narrow sense, provides the clearest measure.” (p. 5)

And so, like grounding, the entailment of ‘the sustained’ (the grounded) by ‘the sustaining’ (the ground) is taken to be *a posteriori*.

Since a fact does not mediate itself, the relation of logical sustainment is irreflexive. It is also, for obvious reasons, transitive (if F sustains F' and F' sustains F'' , then F sustains F'') and asymmetric (if F sustains F' , then F' does not sustain F). (p. 6)

Next, Foster distinguishes a fact's *sustaining* another from a fact's *contributing to the sustainment* of another, defining the latter in terms of the former. The similarity to Fine's (2012) implementation of the full/partial grounding distinction is immediately apparent:

[Sustainment] is also asymmetric in a special and stronger sense. Thus let us say that a fact F *contributes* to the sustainment of a fact F' iff there is a set of facts F'' such that F' is sustained by F and F'' together, but is not sustained by either F or F'' on its own. Then the special asymmetry consists in this: that for any facts F and F' , if F sustains or contributes to the sustainment of F' , F' does not sustain or contribute to the sustainment of F . (p. 6)

Foster then introduces the idea of one *entity* 'logically creating' another, a relation he defines in terms of sustainment:

I shall say that an entity x is *the logical creation of* (or is *logically created by*) the fact or set of facts F iff the existence of x (i.e. the fact that x exists) is logically sustained by F . (p. 6)

He points to the relation between a set and its members as a paradigm case of logical creation:

For example, and quite trivially, the set {John, Mary} (likewise, the aggregate John + Mary) is the logical creation of, in combination, the existence of John and the existence of Mary. Thus logical creation is a special case of logical sustainment, namely the sustainment of an entity's existence. (p. 6)

This brings to mind how today grounding is often introduced with the example of Socrates grounding the existence of 'singleton Socrates', {Socrates}. Moreover, this passage shows that Foster takes sustainment to be *hyperintensional*: the fact that {John, Mary} exists is intensionally equivalent with the fact that John exists and Mary exists, but the sustainment of former on the latter is asymmetric.

Now, with sustainment in hand, Foster gives a sustainment-theoretic definition of the notion of fact's being 'logically basic' (better: metaphysically basic):

Where a fact is not logically sustained by any fact or set of facts I shall call it *logically basic* (or just *basic*) and where an entity is not the logical creation of any fact or set of facts I shall call it *ontologically primitive* (or just *primitive*). I shall also use the term 'ultimate' to apply generically both to logically basic facts and to ontologically primitive entities. (p. 7)

Here we see Foster pretty clearly defining *fundamentality* in terms of sustainment, in more or less the same way that it is today defined in terms of grounding.

This is brought out by Foster's taking it for granted, as many do today, that every (contingent) fact is either basic or sustained (fundamental/ungrounded or nonfundamental/grounded):

in what follows, I shall make the additional assumption that every fact is either basic or sustained by some set of basic facts. In particular, I shall assume that the totality of basic contingent facts, which forms the factual component of ultimate reality, is, in a certain sense, exhaustive: that it encompasses, explicitly or implicitly, all that contingently obtains – that every contingent fact (every state of affairs) is either an element of this totality or sustained by it.

Foster invokes sustainment in order to put it to good metaphysical use across the rest of his book, developing a rigorous, extended argument for a version of Berkeleyan phenomenistic idealism, which he continued to defend for the next 25 years.

Sustainment is crucial for the statement of his view, namely, that the fundamental facts are wholly mental and non-physical. And Foster's assumption that fundamental reality 'exhausts' contingent reality is crucial for his view to have its desired consequences:

I want claim (1) that ultimate reality is wholly mental, to imply that every contingent fact is either a mental fact or logically sustained by mental facts, and I want claim (2), that ultimate reality is wholly non-physical, to imply that every contingent fact is either a non-physical fact or logically sustained by a non-physical facts. (p. 7)

Exhaustion is required for these implications to hold, as he explains (p. 7–8).

Of course, there is by now much disagreement about the nature of metaphysical grounding. Perhaps no presicification of 'grounding' defended today corresponds exactly to sustainment. Nevertheless, I hope it is clear that Foster glommed onto roughly the same notion that was advocated for in the 'first-wave' of work on grounding: what is sometimes called the 'orthodox conception' of grounding.² He deserves acknowledgment.

2 Foster's use of sustainment

The sustainment-grounding connection shines new light on Foster's unjustly neglected body of work. It also perhaps calls for reexamination of his arguments and metaphysical maneuvers from our contemporary perspective. Much that was obscure may now be crystal clear.

There is a lot of work that deserves a second (or first!) look. Beyond the liberal use of sustainment in Foster (1982), the notion is used throughout his later papers and monographs. Sustainment is relied on over and over in later developments and rereadings of his arguments in *The Case For Idealism*: see Foster (1985b, 1992, 1993, 2008). It is relied on extensively in Foster's publications arguing for mind-body dualism over and against materialism: see Foster (1991, 1994a,b, 2001). It occurs throughout his exegesis and defense of Ayer's philosophy in Foster (1985a). And it is also employed throughout his work on perception in arguing for an idealistic version of direct realism,

²See Fine (2001, 2012), Rosen (2010), and Schaffer (2009). And see Wilson (2014) for a critical assessment.

in Foster (2000), as well as in his work defending a theistic approach to the laws of nature, in Foster (2004).

Sustainment underwent some evolution across Foster's career. In Foster (1991), sustainment is unhelpfully renamed 'constitution'.³ Here is how sustainment/constitution is defined there:

a fact F is wholly constituted by a fact or set of facts F' if and only if two conditions hold:

- (1) F obtains in virtue of F'
- (2) The obtaining of F is nothing over and above the obtaining of F' .

[...] One thing which is implied by both conditions is that the obtaining of F' logically necessitates the obtaining of F .

He then argues, as is widely accepted, that necessitation *on its own* is insufficient for sustainment/constitution(/grounding):

There are two reasons why such necessitation is not, on its own, sufficient for constitution, and it is these reasons which bring to light the further implications of, and consequential differences between, the two conditions.

In the first place, logical necessitation is not, as such, asymmetric. [...] Now we want the constitution-relation to be asymmetric [...] For we want constitution to be such that, where F is constituted by F' , F *derives* its obtaining *from* (*owes* its obtaining *to*) the obtaining of F' , in a way which precludes the same relationship holding in reverse. It is this element of asymmetric dependence which, in addition to mere logical necessitation, is expressed by saying (in condition (1)) that F obtains *in virtue of* F' .(p. 140)

Note Foster's prescient emphasis on what is connoted by the 'in virtue of' locution. He also puts heavy emphasis again on the connection between sustainment/constitution and what is connoted by the 'nothing over and above' locution:

we want the constitution-relation to exclude [a] kind of separateness, so that where F is constituted by F' , the obtaining of F is wholly absorbed by, and included in, the obtaining of F' . It is this absorption, or inclusion, which is expressed by saying (in condition (2)) that the obtaining of F is *nothing over and above* the obtaining of F' .
(p. 141)

³As he explicitly announces in fn. 7, p. 285. This relabeling might explain why Foster is not known for his liberal use of a well-defined notion of metaphysical grounding, if Foster-constitution was confused with or read as something more like *material constitution*.

Here, the sustainment-grounding connection is obvious.

Much else is said about sustainment/constitution in Foster (1991); many examples of sustainment/constitution relations are discussed, as is the relation, if any, between sustainment/constitution, on the one hand, and reduction and conceptual analysis, on the other (p. 140–149). Throughout these passages and beyond them, Foster is ahead of his time. I recommend that the text be consulted directly.

In Foster (2000), sustainment/constitution is defined much in the same way it is defined in Foster (1991) (p. 2–6).

But a new connection between sustainment/constitution and *determination*, and the determinable/determinate relation, is explored:

It is easy to find examples of both forms of constitution. A range of clear-cut cases of single-fact constitution is provided by the relationship between the instantiation of a generic (determinable) property and the instantiation of some specific (determinate) form of it. Thus if an object is scarlet, then the fact of its being (generically) red is clearly constituted, in the relevant sense, by the fact of its being (specifically) scarlet: the generic colour-fact obtains in virtue of, and its obtaining is nothing over and above, the obtaining of the more specific.

The grounding-determination connection has been drawn by many.⁴ This reinforces the idea that sustainment just is grounding. The connection is overdetermined.

Finally, in Foster (2008), the definition of sustainment/constitution is presented, in full, again (p. 2–6). The proximity of this work’s publication to the initial explosion of work on grounding is curious.

In any event, I take it as reasonably clear that Foster’s work has been unjustly ignored and neglected. Perhaps better research and citation practices could have prevented this gross oversight. I hope that future work on grounding will draw the sustainment-grounding connection.

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⁴See Rosen (2010), p. 126–130.

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