

Ground and explanation

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Metaphysical ground, like other topics in philosophy, is the subject of intense disagreement. What is it? How does it work? How can we know anything about it? Controversy surrounds these and other questions about ground. But if there is one *uncontroversial* claim in this area, it is that ground is deeply linked with a certain form of explanation, what we will call *grounding explanation*. This link, and this form of explanation, are the subject of this chapter.

To its enthusiasts, grounding explanation is both ubiquitous in ordinary life and central to many of philosophy's biggest questions. In ordinary life, we offer grounding explanations of why this chess player is victorious (because her opponent's king is in checkmate), of why this coffee is hot (because it has a high mean kinetic energy), or of why these two nations are at war (because they are bombing each other). And in philosophy, grounding explanation has been thought to be what is at issue when we ask whether this or that phenomenon 'reduces' to something else. Kit Fine, for instance, writes:

What is it to explain the appearance of a world with minds in terms of a mindless world or the appearance of a world with value in terms of a purely naturalistic world? My own view is that what is required is that we somehow *ground* all of the facts which appear to presuppose the reality of the mental

or of value in terms of facts which do not presuppose their reality.¹

This chapter surveys the philosophical literature on grounding explanation and its connection to metaphysical ground. I begin by discussing explanation in general (§1) before turning to grounding explanation in particular (§2). I then take up the question of whether and how this form of explanation relates to reality (§3). I turn finally to ground (§4).

1 Explanation

In daily life, as well as in more theoretical pursuits, we seek and offer explanations of facts. Here are some examples, or potential examples, of explanation.

- (1) The window shattered because Suzy threw a rock at it.
- (2) Jones went to the post office in order to mail a package.
- (3) Since Meghan Markle is married to Prince Harry and Harry is the queen's grandson, Markle is a member of the royal family.
- (4) Billy's taunt hurt Jimmy's feelings for no reason and that's why it was wrong.
- (5) What explains why nothing has ever traveled faster than light is that the laws of nature prohibit that.
- (6) The reason why Anaxagoras failed in his attempt to square the circle is that it is impossible to do that.
- (7) Arthritis is a disease of the joints and so no one can have arthritis in the thigh.

We should distinguish two senses of explanation and with them two senses in which these examples may be taken.² In one sense, an explanation is a communicative act. If I say, "The window shattered because Suzy

¹Fine (2012, 41).

²This distinction is familiar from the literature on explanation in the philosophy of science, e.g. Strevens (2008, 6–7). Although that literature has focused largely on causal explanation, many of the considerations raised there apply equally to grounding explanation. This literature, I believe, constitutes an invaluable resource for philosophers of ground that has only just begun to be exploited.

threw a rock at it', then my utterance is an explanation in this sense. But there is also another sense of explanation. In *this* sense, an explanation is what is communicated or conveyed by an act of this kind—namely, that a certain fact is accounted for by various other facts. I will call this the *ontic* sense of explanation, and it is this ontic sense that will be my main concern.

Despite my use of the term 'ontic', I do not mean to imply that an explanation in this sense must be objective. I do not mean to imply, that is, that such an explanation must be independent of what anyone believes or knows or understands or finds intelligible. An explanation in the ontic sense is simply what is conveyed by an explanation in the communicative sense. This might turn out to be an objective matter, but it also might not.

Why might someone take explanation *not* to be objective?³ One reason is that the appropriate answer to a why-question can depend on who is asking. Suppose, for example, that I am asked why I was late to the NYU colloquium. With some questioners, it might be enough to answer that I took the express train. But if my questioner is unfamiliar with the New York subway system, I will need to say more: I was late because I took the express train and that train does not stop near the NYU philosophy department. One might take this to show that what counts as an explanation depends on what one's interlocutor knows.

But even if this is right, it shows at most that explanation in the *communicative* sense is not objective. It shows at most, that is, that what counts as an *act* of explanation depends on what one's interlocutor knows. That is consistent with taking what is communicated—what accounts for my tardiness—to be independent of what anyone knows. It is consistent, that is, with taking explanation in the *ontic* sense to be objective.

This example should caution us against too quickly rejecting the objectivity of ontic explanation. Even if certain things about our practice of giving explanations depend on what people know or believe or understand or find intelligible, that does not show that explanation in the ontic sense depends on these things. (Of course, it also does not show that ontic explanation does *not* depend on these things.)

We began this section with a list of examples. These examples show

³Thompson (2016) is a recent doubter of the objectivity of explanation.

that the category of explanation is quite diverse. Some explanations, for instance, concern what causes what, while others do not.⁴ But there are still features that are common to all explanations. Every explanation, for instance, has both a fact that is explained, called the explanandum, as well as one or more facts that do the explaining, called the explanans. Thus in the first example on the list, the explanandum is the fact that the window shattered, and the explanans is the fact that Suzy threw a rock at it.⁵ (The plural of ‘explanans’ is ‘explanantia’, but I will not use it, and at any rate I will mostly confine myself to cases in which the explanans consists of only one fact.)

Our concern in this section has been the explanation of one fact in terms of some other facts. There may be other, nonfactual forms of explanation. One such form might be thought to arise in connection with real definition. Consider, for instance, Socrates’ singleton set. There is a sense in which we may explain what this set is by saying that it is the set whose one and only member is Socrates. One might view this as an explanation, not of a fact, but of an object.⁶ In this chapter, however, we will set aside nonfactual forms of explanation.

2 Grounding explanation

The focus of this chapter is a particular form of explanation which we will call *grounding explanation*. Some examples of grounding explanation were given in the chapter’s introduction; here are a few more.

- (1) What makes it the case that the Golden Gate Bridge is red is that it is this particular vermilion shade.
- (2) Bowser is big and Bowser is bad, and that’s why Bowser is big-and-bad.

⁴Some philosophers, such as Lewis (1986), have held that the explanation of *events* is always causal. But this thesis is not so popular today, and even Lewis did not extend the thesis to explanation in general.

⁵The explanans on its own is sometimes referred to as an explanation. Thus one might say that the explanation of the window’s shattering is that Suzy threw a rock at it. I will not use ‘explanation’ in this way.

⁶Compare Fine (2015, 297).

- (3) Since Socrates is a philosopher, there is someone who is a philosopher.
- (4) Because snow is white, it is true that snow is white.
- (5) The reason why this figure is a regular pentagon is that it has five sides of equal length.
- (6) There is a table here in virtue of there being wood arranged here in a certain 'tablewise' way.
- (7) There is a hole in this piece of paper because it is perforated.

Like the category of explanation in general, the category of grounding explanation displays considerable diversity. There are explanations which are logical in character, explanations concerning the relationship between determinates and determinables, explanations involving parts and wholes, explanations involving the dependence of what is true on what the world is like, and still others besides.

Despite this diversity, however, philosophers have tended to think there are certain claims that hold of grounding explanation in general. Some of these follow simply from the fact that grounding explanation is a form of explanation. For example, explanation of *any* form is irreflexive, antisymmetric, and transitive, and so grounding explanation must be irreflexive, antisymmetric, and transitive as well.⁷ And in a grounding explanation, as in any explanation, the explanans must be relevant to the explanandum. This entails, among other things, that if *A* has a grounding explanation in terms of *B*, then *A* will not in general have a grounding explanation in terms of *B* together with some arbitrary additional fact.

If these claims hold of grounding explanation in general, then this category has at least a certain 'formal' kind of unity. But philosophers have taken the category of grounding explanation to be unified in other

⁷These properties are defined as follows. Irreflexivity: nothing has a grounding explanation in terms of itself. Antisymmetry: if *A* has a grounding explanation in terms of *B*, then *B* has no grounding explanation in terms of *A*. Transitivity: if *A* has a grounding explanation in terms of *B*, and *B* has a grounding explanation in terms of *C*, then *A* has a grounding explanation in terms of *C*. Irreflexivity has been challenged by Jenkins (2011) and transitivity by Schaffer (2012). I discuss Schaffer's challenge further below.

ways as well.⁸ For example, many have thought that grounding explanation can be characterized in general as that form of explanation in which we explain some fact by citing other facts that ‘constitute’ it.⁹ The fact that the Golden Gate Bridge is red, for instance, is constituted by the fact that it is vermilion. Or again, the existence of this table is constituted by the tablewise arrangement of certain pieces of wood.

But even if this constitutive characterization is correct, is it illuminating? Do we have a good grasp of the notion of constitution? It is at least clear that constitution is different from causation. The constitutive relationship between the Golden Gate Bridge’s being vermilion and its being red is different from the causal relationship between Suzy’s throw and the window’s shattering. But beyond this contrast with causation, how is the notion of constitution to be understood?

Philosophers have not said a great deal in answer to this question. And what they have said raises the possibility that there is more than one way of spelling out the constitutive characterization of grounding explanation. Fine, for instance, glosses it this way:

[I]t is natural in such cases to say that the explanans or explanantia are constitutive of the explanandum, or that the explanandum’s holding consists in nothing more than the obtaining of the explanans or explanantia.¹⁰

In a similar vein, Rosen writes:

Metaphysical grounding is often distinguished from other explanatory relations by the metaphorical thought that the grounded fact is ‘nothing over and above’ the facts that ground it; that it is not really a ‘further fact’ or an ‘addition to reality’.¹¹

Fine’s and Rosen’s glosses suggest a broadly ‘lightweight’ conception of constitution. But other philosophers have glossed the notion differently.

⁸Skeptics of unity include Wilson (2014, 2016) and Koslicki (2015). See the chapters on skeptical doubts and rejoinders for further discussion of this issue.

⁹Dasgupta (2017), for instance, offers such a characterization. I hasten to add that not all philosophers agree with the constitutive characterization. Audi (2012, 709), for instance, holds that the explanandum in a grounding explanation ‘is in no way constituted by’ the explanans.

¹⁰Fine (2012, 39).

¹¹Rosen (2017, 280).

According to Schaffer, for instance, claims of grounding explanation ‘have the feel of concerning the constitutive generation of a dependent outcome’.¹² Does Schaffer’s talk of ‘generation’ mean he rejects the idea that the explanandum of a grounding explanation is no addition to reality? Is his conception of constitution more ‘heavyweight’ than that of Fine and Rosen? It is not clear. Whether these different glosses reflect genuinely different conceptions of grounding explanation, and if so, whether this difference can be stated precisely, remains a matter for further research.

Philosophers have offered other characterizations of grounding explanation, not given in terms of constitution, but these are more controversial. For example, it is sometimes suggested that a grounding explanation is one in which the explanans and explanandum are connected as a matter of metaphysical necessity: necessarily, if the explanans obtains, so does the explanandum. But this is not universally accepted.¹³ And there may be other forms of explanation, such as mathematical explanation, that also obey this condition.¹⁴ Or again, it is sometimes suggested that a grounding explanation is one that is synchronic—one whose explanans and explanandum obtain at the same time. But even if grounding explanation is always synchronic, perhaps other forms of explanation, such as causal explanation, can be synchronic as well.¹⁵

One also sees grounding explanation characterized simply as ‘metaphysical’ explanation. Sometimes this is simply a matter of terminology: some authors use the phrase ‘metaphysical explanation’ to mean grounding explanation.¹⁶ But in some cases it may be more than merely terminological, since it may stem from an assumption that grounding explanation is the only distinctively metaphysical form of explanation. This assumption is controversial. One might think, for instance, that if something is a certain way by its very nature, then this explains why it is that way,¹⁷ and this might be thought to be a metaphysical explanation that

¹²Schaffer (2017, 303).

¹³Leuenberger (2014) and Skiles (2015) are notable opponents of this thesis. For further discussion see the chapter on necessity.

¹⁴Steiner (1978) is a classic discussion of mathematical explanation.

¹⁵Bernstein (2016, 24) discusses some potential cases of synchronic causation and so of synchronic causal explanation. For further discussion see the chapter on causation.

¹⁶I myself did this in Glazier (2016).

¹⁷Kment (2014, 163).

is not a grounding explanation.¹⁸ Or one might think that if something *must* be true, then this explains why it *is* true,¹⁹ and perhaps this too is a metaphysical explanation that is not a grounding explanation.

3 The question of realism

Given any form of explanation, whether it is grounding explanation or some other form, we may ask how it relates to reality. To see what I mean by this, let us look at a passage from Carl Hempel, one of the most important theorists of *scientific* explanation. Describing his influential deductive–nomological account of such explanation, Hempel wrote:

[A] D-N explanation answers the question ‘*Why* did the explanandum-phenomenon occur?’ by showing that the phenomenon resulted from certain particular circumstances, specified in C_1, C_2, \dots, C_k , in accordance with the laws L_1, L_2, \dots, L_r . By pointing this out, the argument shows that, given the particular circumstances and the laws in question, the occurrence of the phenomenon *was to be expected* . . .²⁰

There are in fact two opposing views of explanation suggested by this rich passage.

The first is realism.²¹ On this view, explanation is ‘backed’ by real or worldly determination. Something in the world makes something else exist or happen (or one thing ‘results’ from another, as Hempel puts it) and this determination or making underwrites an explanation of whatever it is that is determined or made. Suppose, for example, that the shattering of this window is causally explained by the fact that Suzy threw a rock at it. A realist about causal explanation could take this explanation to be backed by the fact that Suzy’s throw made the window shatter.

On the antirealist view, by contrast, explanation is not backed by determination. It is not possible to say much more than this about antire-

¹⁸Glazier (2017).

¹⁹Thus van Inwagen (1996, 95) writes, ‘If showing that it is impossible for a certain state of affairs to obtain doesn’t count as answering the question why that state of affairs does not obtain, I don’t know what would count.’

²⁰Hempel (1965, 337).

²¹This explanatory notion of realism is discussed by Kim (1988, 1994), Ruben (1990, ch. 7), and Taylor (2017), among others.

alism in general, for there are many different versions of the view with little to unite them apart from their rejection of realism. On one version of antirealism, suggested by Hempel's passage, explanation is simply a matter of expectability. One fact explains another just in case, given the first, the second is to be expected. Another version of antirealism is 'unificationist': *A* explains *B* just in case there is a deductive argument from *A* to *B* that fits into a pattern of arguments that best unifies or systematizes the facts.²² A third version is 'pragmatic', rendering explanation a contextually sensitive matter.²³ The commitment common to these and other antirealist views is simply that explanation is not backed by real determination relations. (The antirealist may allow, of course, that the explanans and explanandum of an explanation are perfectly real.)

Just as there are realist and antirealist views of scientific explanation, so there are realist and antirealist views of grounding explanation. But in the case of grounding explanation, antirealist views have so far seen little discussion. On one such view, grounding explanations hold in virtue of psychological dispositions.²⁴ (In calling this view antirealist, I do not mean to suggest that psychological facts are unreal. The view is antirealist because psychological facts, even if they are real, are not standardly taken to constitute a form of determination.) Another version of antirealism is unificationist.²⁵ And it is perhaps also possible to develop a pragmatic view of grounding explanation. What other antirealist views there might be is a matter for further research.

In light of the relatively undeveloped state of antirealism, let us turn now to realism. On one popular realist view, grounding explanations are backed by determination relations of a certain sort, what might be termed relations of constitutive generation or production.²⁶

These relationalist realists differ over what the relata of these generation relations are. Some, for instance, take generation relations to hold

²²Kitcher (1981) gives an influential unificationist account of scientific explanation.

²³Van Fraassen (1980) and Achinstein (1984) develop pragmatist views of scientific explanation.

²⁴Miller and Norton (2017, n. 8).

²⁵Dasgupta (2017, 80–1); Kovacs (2017, 2942).

²⁶Versions of this view are discussed in Audi (2012), deRosset (2013), Schaffer (2016), Dasgupta (2017, 80–1) and Kovacs (2017, 2935–46). Such determination relations are often called relations of ground, but I wish to leave discussion of ground, and of the term 'ground', until the final section.

between properties. Thus the property of vermilionness will be taken to generate the property of redness. Others take the relations to hold between facts. Thus the fact that snow is white will be taken to generate the fact that it is *true* that snow is white. Still others think that generation relations can hold between entities of any category—between one object and another object, or between a fact and a property, and so on. Socrates, for instance, might be taken to generate his singleton set.²⁷

Generation relations, according to the relationalist realist, back grounding explanations. But this view raises two questions. First, what exactly is ‘backing’? Second, which generation relations back which grounding explanations? (Analogous questions apply to the other forms of realism we will discuss, though we will not consider them.)

Let us take the first question first. One possibility is to understand backing itself in terms of explanation. For a grounding explanation to be backed by generation relations, on this view, is simply for it to be explained in some way by those relations.²⁸ Another possibility is to take backing to be a matter of information content. On this view, a grounding explanation is backed by generation relations in the sense that it contains information about generation relations.²⁹ Yet a third possibility is to understand backing in terms of mereological or part-whole relations. Suppose one takes an explanation to be a complex whose parts are an explanans, an explanandum, and some generation relations that serve to connect the two. Given this view of explanation, one might then say that an explanation is backed by those generation relations that are parts of it.

What about the second question? Which generation relations back which grounding explanations? The answer to this question depends in part on what the relata of these relations are. Are they facts? Properties? Entities of arbitrary category? If they are facts, then a simple answer

²⁷On a related realist view, the facts that back grounding explanations are properly stated by means of a sentential operator rather than (as we have done) by means of a predicate. The distinction between these two forms of realism is related to the distinction between the operational and predicational views of ground. See the introduction to this handbook for further discussion.

²⁸Cf. Kovacs (2017, 2934).

²⁹This view requires an explanation to be something that can contain information—i.e., something like a proposition. Lewis (1986) defends a similar view of causal explanation.

to our second question is available: the grounding explanation of *A* in terms of *B* is always backed by *A*'s being generated by *B*, and conversely, *A*'s being generated by *B* always backs a grounding explanation of *A* in terms of *B*. (Matters are less clear if one takes the relata to be something other than facts. If Socrates is taken to generate singleton Socrates, for example, exactly which grounding explanations does this back?)

The simple answer has come under pressure from a case due to Jonathan Schaffer. To understand the problem Schaffer's case poses, notice that the generation relation, whatever it is, is naturally taken to be transitive. If the fact that *A* generates the fact that *B*, and the fact that *B* in turn generates the fact that *C*, then presumably the fact that *A* will generate the fact that *C*. And grounding explanation, according to the simple answer, corresponds one-to-one with generation. So since the latter is transitive, the former must be too.

Yet Schaffer presents a case in which grounding explanation might be thought *not* to be transitive. The case concerns a sphere with a small dent. That the sphere has this particular dent, he suggests, in part explains why it has the exact overall shape that it does—namely, dented here and spherical everywhere else. And that it has that exact overall shape in turn explains why it is more-or-less spherical. Yet it may seem that the sphere's having this particular dent does not explain, even in part, why it is more-or-less spherical. For as Schaffer observes, 'the presence of the dent makes no difference to the more-or-less sphericity of the thing.'³⁰

One response on behalf of the simple answer is this. Distinguish an immediate or direct form of generation, which is not transitive, from a mediate or indirect form, which is. Just as one gets a relation of ancestorship by chaining together parent-child relations, so one gets a relation of mediate generation by chaining together relations of immediate generation. Now say that what backs grounding explanation is *immediate* generation. This would accommodate Schaffer's case, for now neither grounding explanation nor generation are transitive. But this response goes too far. Even if grounding explanation is not transitive in general,

³⁰Schaffer (2012, 127). Schaffer's response to the problem is to take both generation and grounding explanation to be contrastive. So understood, he argues, both can be seen to be transitive after all. I will not discuss this response here.

there are surely many cases in which it chains. For example, because the Golden Gate Bridge's being vermilion explains its being red, and because its being red in turn explains its being colored, it follows that its being vermilion explains its being colored. But relations of immediate generation by definition never chain, and so there is no reason to think they correspond one-to-one with the grounding explanations that do. This response on behalf of the simple answer cannot accommodate such cases.

Should this answer therefore be abandoned? Krämer and Roski have recently argued that it should.³¹ On their view, although grounding explanation is backed by generation relations, the matter of which relations back which explanations is somewhat complex. In order for *A* to explain *B*, not only must the fact that *A* generate the fact that *B*, the former must also *make a difference* to whether the latter obtains. There is no explanation in Schaffer's case, according to Krämer and Roski, because this difference-making requirement is not met. The sphere's having this particular dent generates, but does not make a difference to, its being more-or-less spherical. The difference-making requirement means that grounding explanation need not correspond one-to-one with generation, and so even if the latter is transitive, the former need not be.

There may, of course, be competitors to the simple answer other than this difference-making answer. In fact, these answers may not even be in competition. One might wish to recognize multiple notions of grounding explanation, each of which obeys a different answer to the question of which generation relations back which explanations. Perhaps one notion of explanation obeys the simple answer, while another obeys the difference-making answer, so that there is no need to choose between them.

Let us now turn to a second form of grounding-explanatory realism, which we will call 'nomicist'. For the nomicist realist, grounding explanations are backed by laws of metaphysics.³² Laws of *nature* are familiar: it is a law of nature, for example, that like charges repel. In a similar way, one might recognize laws of *metaphysics*. For instance, one might take

³¹Krämer and Roski (2017). Their view builds on Strevens's (2008) account of scientific explanation.

³²Laws of metaphysics have been discussed by Sider (2011, 274–80), Wilsch (2015a, 2015b), Glazier (2016), and Schaffer (2017), among others. See the chapter on law for further discussion.

it to be a law of metaphysics that everything vermilion is red. Suppose now that one explains why the Golden Gate Bridge is red by saying that it is vermilion. This explanation can then be taken to be backed by the law that everything vermilion is red.

Views of laws of *nature* are standardly classed as Humean or anti-Humean. For the Humean, the laws are mere summaries of independently existing regularities in nature. For the anti-Humean, by contrast, the laws play an active role in determining the course of events or in making events happen. Maudlin describes this sort of nomic determination thus: ‘The universe started out in some particular initial state. The laws of temporal evolution operate, whether deterministically or stochastically, from that initial state to generate or produce later states.’³³

The distinction between Humeanism and anti-Humeanism about laws of nature is familiar. Far less familiar is an analogous distinction between Humeanism and anti-Humeanism about laws of *metaphysics*.³⁴ For the Humean, laws of metaphysics are mere summaries of independently existing regularities in the facts, such as the correlation between vermilionness and redness. For the anti-Humean, by contrast, the laws play an active role in determining the facts or in making the facts obtain.

The anti-Humean view appears inevitable once one adopts the nominalist form of realism. The realist, after all, takes grounding explanations to be backed by real determination. But Humean laws do not determine the facts; they merely summarize them. It is only anti-Humean laws that provide the kind of determination or ‘making’ that realist explanation requires.

On a third realist view, grounding explanation is backed by the essences or natures of things. Suppose, for example, that one explains why singleton Socrates exists by pointing to the existence of Socrates himself. One might then take this explanation to be backed by the fact that it is essential to the singleton that Socrates is its sole member.

But will this kind of essentialist backing be available in every case? A number of philosophers have thought so. They have held that whenever there is a grounding explanation of *A* in terms of *B*, there will be some items involved in *A* or in *B* or in both whose essences require some kind

³³Maudlin (2007, 174).

³⁴It is briefly discussed in Wilsch (2015b, 3306–7).

of link between *A* and *B*.³⁵ A defender of the essentialist form of realism might take grounding explanations to be backed by these links.

The most developed version of essentialist realism, due to Kelly Trogdon, is inspired by the mechanistic view of causal explanation.³⁶ Such explanation, on this view, is backed by causal mechanisms, which are understood as complex systems or as physical processes. In analogous fashion, Trogdon takes grounding explanation to be backed by what he calls *grounding mechanisms*: relations that essentially require certain determination relations to obtain. For instance, set formation—the relation holding between a set and its members—is a grounding mechanism on his view. For he takes it to be essential to this relation that, if some objects exist, then their existence determines or makes it the case that the set of those objects exists too. This grounding mechanism will then back various grounding explanations, such as the explanation of the existence of singleton Socrates in terms of that of Socrates himself.

We have now considered three broad kinds of grounding-explanatory realism: relationalism, nomicism and essentialism. We should keep in mind that these may not be exclusive, for some may turn out to reduce to or be otherwise compatible with others. Nor need they be exhaustive, for there are further possible realist views that we have not yet considered.

One such view is primitivist. The realist views considered above all presuppose that what backs a given explanation must be something other than that very explanation. But this might be false. Perhaps grounding explanation need not be backed by some distinct, underlying form of determination. Perhaps grounding explanation is itself a form of determination. To be sure, the realist by definition holds that grounding explanations must be backed by real determination. But if grounding explanation is itself a form of determination, then perhaps a grounding explanation can be backed by itself.³⁷

It may even be possible to hold a ‘semiprimitivist’ form of realism along the following lines. Some, even most, grounding explanations are backed by a distinct form of determination: generation relations, laws of metaphysics, or whatever you like. But certain grounding explanations

³⁵Rosen (2010) and Fine (2012) hold views of this kind, and Dasgupta (2014b) is sympathetic.

³⁶Trogdon (2018).

³⁷Schaffer (2016, 84) offers a brief argument against primitivist realism.

are, in primitivist realist fashion, backed only by themselves.

One motivation for semiprimitivist realism might be thought to arise from ‘logical’ grounding explanations. One can give a grounding explanation of why Bowser is big and bad, for instance, by saying that he is big and he is bad. But some philosophers have thought it impossible to extend the nonprimitivist forms of realism to cover these logical cases. Even if we are willing to say that many grounding explanations are backed by a distinct, underlying form of determination, how could this be true of logical grounding explanations? What could possibly underlie them? Such logical cases have seemed to some to be direct, unmediated explanatory relationships. These considerations might move one to adopt a version of semiprimitivist realism. Thus one might hold that while nonlogical grounding explanations are backed by a distinct form of determination, logical grounding explanations are backed only by themselves.³⁸

4 Grounding explanation and ground

Grounding explanation, at least by that name, has seen far less discussion than something called ‘ground’. But what is ground, and what does it have to do with grounding explanation?

These questions are ambiguous, because philosophers have used the term ‘ground’ in two different ways. Some have used it simply to mean grounding explanation.³⁹ On this usage, to say that *A* grounds *B* is simply to say that *A* provides a grounding explanation of *B*. But other philosophers have used ‘ground’ in a different way, to mean a relation of constitutive determination, or generation, or production.⁴⁰

In the first, explanatory sense of ground, the relationship between ground and grounding explanation is simply identity. But matters are less simple if ground is understood in the second, determinative sense. What one says about the relationship between ground in this sense and grounding explanation will depend in part on one’s views on grounding-explanatory realism.

³⁸Cf. Kovacs (2017, 2942).

³⁹Examples include Litland (2013), Dasgupta (2014a) and Wilsch (2015a).

⁴⁰One might also use ‘ground’ to mean a determinative *operation*. However, I am not aware of any philosopher who has used the term this way.

Consider first the relationalist realist. Ground as a determination relation finds a natural place in her view of grounding explanation. For since the relationalist realist takes grounding explanation to be backed by determination relations, it will be natural for her to take these backing relations to be nothing other than relations of ground. Schaffer expresses this kind of view thus:

One should distinguish the worldly relation of grounding from the metaphysical explanations between facts that it backs, just as one should distinguish the worldly relation of causation from the causal explanations between facts that it backs.⁴¹

For the relationalist realist, then, it is natural to take the relationship between ground (in the determinative sense) and grounding explanation to be one of backing: the former backs the latter.

Consider next the primitivist realist. Ground as a determination relation also fits naturally with her view, though in a different way than with that of the relationalist realist. For the primitivist realist, grounding explanation itself is a form of determination. And so for her (and her alone) it will be natural to take the two uses of ‘ground’ to have one and the same referent. There is the explanatory use, which refers to grounding explanation. And there is the determinative use, which, for the primitivist realist, will also refer to grounding explanation. For the her, then, the relationship between grounding explanation and ground, whether in the explanatory or determinative sense, is one of identity.

Ground in the determinative sense perhaps fits less straightforwardly with other forms of realism, though the combination can usually be made to work. Consider Trogdon’s mechanistic version of essentialist realism, for instance. For him, grounding explanations ‘are representations of grounding relations [relations of ground in the determinative sense] as being instances of grounding mechanisms’.⁴² His view of grounding explanation therefore preserves a place for ground as a determination relation.

Finally, what about the antirealist? For her, grounding explanation requires no real form of determination to back it. And so it will be natural

⁴¹Schaffer (2012, 124); see also Audi (2012), deRosset (2013) and Trogdon (2013).

⁴²Trogdon (2018, 1290).

for her to deny that there is any such thing as ground in the determinative sense. For her, ground in this sense simply does not exist, and so there is no relationship at all between it and grounding explanation.^{43,44}

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⁴³The philosophical terrain charted in this section has been partitioned differently by some other authors. Raven (2015) distinguishes ‘unionist’ views, on which ground and grounding explanation are identical, from ‘separatist’ views, on which they are distinct. But from the present perspective this distinction is ambiguous owing to the ambiguity of the term ‘ground’. The relationalist realist, for instance, will be a unionist if ground is understood in the explanatory sense but a separatist if it is understood in the determinative sense. However, we should not go as far as Dasgupta (2017, n. 8) in characterizing Raven’s distinction as largely verbal. For if ground is understood in the determinative sense, then the debate between unionists and separatists will turn largely on the *substantive* question whether grounding explanation itself is a form of determination.

⁴⁴I am indebted to Mike Raven, Kevin Richardson, Erica Shumener, and the participants at a workshop on metaphysical grounding at the University of Hamburg.

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