

# The Unity of Grounding

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## 1. Introduction

Is the right prior to the good, or the good prior to the right? This is not a question about supervenience, or counterfactual dependence, or conceptual priority. Rather, it is a question about that distinctive variety of non-causal dependence which metaphysicians now call ‘grounding’. In what follows, I offer a defense of the claims I have just made.

A prominent threat to my thesis that the metaphysicians’ notion of grounding is the very same one being employed in normative ethics comes from within that group of metaphysicians who have been touting the philosophical significance of grounding. Kit Fine, to whom we owe the expression ‘ground’, and whose work has played a crucial role in the resurgence of interest in the notion, holds that there are three varieties of grounding: metaphysical, natural, and normative. So for Fine, the sort of grounding at issue in metaphysical debates is distinct from the sort of grounding at issue in ethical debates. In what follows, I argue that Fine is mistaken in thinking that grounding is disunified in this way.

Fine is what we might call a ‘moderate grounding pluralist’: he holds that there exist a small number of fundamentally distinct types of grounding. Grounding pluralism, when pushed to the extreme, becomes a source of skepticism about the importance and interest of grounding. One representative ‘extreme grounding pluralist’, as we might call them, is Jessica Wilson, who argues that although there are a large number of specific dependency relations such as the set membership relation or the determinate–determinable relation, these specific relations do not form a unified kind and nothing is gained by theorizing in terms of a general grounding relation. In what follows, I defend the theoretical usefulness of unqualified ‘grounding’-talk against the challenge posed by extreme grounding pluralists such as Wilson.

Thus I have three main goals in this paper. The first is to argue that a metaphysical grounding relation is indispensable for normative theorizing. (For the most part I will focus on the case of ethics, but I intend my thesis to extend to other normative disciplines, such as aesthetics, epistemology, political philosophy, and the philosophy of law.) The second is to argue against Fine’s form of moderate grounding pluralism. And the third is to argue against the sort of extreme grounding pluralism that gives rise to skepticism about the very topic of grounding. These three goals are interrelated in various ways. As already mentioned, achieving my first goal requires achieving the second, since Fine’s pluralism represents a notable challenge to my claim that metaphysical grounding is indispensable for normative inquiry. Moreover, success with my first goal helps with the third, since it is precisely in normative contexts where the claims of extreme grounding pluralists such as Wilson are at their weakest. And my second and third

goals are likewise interrelated, since my arguments against Fine also have traction against Wilson. It is because of these interrelations that I take on all three tasks in the same essay.

First, though, I should provide some background on the notion of grounding and its history.

## 2. Grounding: The Very Idea

What is grounding? The name might sound imposing, but the notion of grounding is no more and no less obscure than the word ‘because’.

As is so often the case, it helps here to begin with Plato. At one point during the Platonic dialogue that bears his name, Euthyphro proposes the following definition of piety:

(Eu) An act is pious if and only if all the gods love it,

to which Socrates famously responds, “Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?” (*Euthyphro* 10a). On one common interpretation, this question gives rise to the following fatal dilemma for Euthyphro’s proposal. If, on the first horn, we endorse

(1) An act is loved by all the gods *because* it is pious,

then the gods are just *detectors* of piety, and we haven’t yet found what ultimately makes that act pious. But if, on the other horn, we endorse

(2) An act is pious *because* it is loved by all the gods,

then either (a) the gods love that act *because* it possesses certain characteristics which are the true ultimate grounds of its piety, or else (b) the gods’ love is *arbitrary* and not the proper thing to ground piety. A similar objection is thought by many secular philosophers to constitute a decisive refutation of all attempts to base morality on the commands (or will, or wishes) of a divine being.

Let us put to one side the issue of whether the argument I have just sketched is successful. Let us also put to one side the issue of whether that argument is a faithful interpretation of Socrates’ reasoning in the *Euthyphro*.<sup>1</sup> Let us even put to one side the first horn of this dilemma.<sup>2</sup> Instead, I want to focus on the second horn, and in particular on claim (2).

There are two things to notice about (2). First, although I formulated that claim using the word ‘because’, I could have just as easily used the phrases ‘in virtue of’, ‘grounds’, or ‘makes the case’. In other words, the following are all equivalent ways of saying (2):

(3) An act is pious *in virtue of* its being loved by all the gods.

(4) The fact that an act is pious *is grounded in* the fact that it is loved by all the gods.

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, I think it pretty clearly is not a faithful interpretation: Socrates’ actual argument is weirder than many people remember, involving some tricky maneuvers that rest on the distinction between carrying something and being a carried thing.

<sup>2</sup> I am setting aside the first horn because, although it is commonly supposed that both halves of Socrates’ leading question concern grounding, it is not clear to me that answer (1) to that question is a claim about grounding. (I think it is more plausible to hold that (1) features what Matt Evans (2012, 17) calls the ‘because’ of rational basis than to hold that it features the ‘because’ of grounding.) But even if (1) is not a grounding claim, (2) most certainly is, so focusing on that claim suffices for my purposes.

(5) An act's being loved by all the gods *makes it the case that* the act is pious.<sup>3</sup>

Second, in order for the argument on this horn of the dilemma to have any chance of succeeding, the relation being picked out by these various locutions must not be any of the following:

- the causal 'because' relation (since an act's piety doesn't have causal powers, and even if it does, those aren't what's at issue here);
- the necessitation relation (since Euthyphro intends (Eu) to be a necessary truth):
- a counterfactual/subjunctive conditional (for the same reason); or
- a supervenience relation (more on why later).

Rather, these uses of 'because', 'in virtue of', 'grounds', and 'makes the case' all seem to be picking out a distinctively metaphysical relation of dependence (or its converse). Following Kit Fine (2001), it has become customary to refer to this relation as 'the grounding relation'.<sup>4</sup>

A digression here is in order. I just made reference to the grounding *relation*. But, in fact, there is disagreement over whether grounding is fundamentally a relation (as it appears to be in sentences such as (4), where 'grounds' is most naturally interpreted as a relational predicate flanked by referring expressions on either side), or whether grounding is fundamentally an operator (as it appears to be in sentences such as (2), where 'because' is most naturally interpreted as a sentential operator flanked by sentential

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<sup>3</sup> Some authors in the grounding literature take the following sentences to be synonymous with (2)-(5):

- (6) An act's being pious *is nothing over and above* the fact that it is loved by all the gods.  
 (7) An act's being pious *consists in nothing more than* the fact that it is loved by all the gods.

However, I think this is a mistake. Among other problems, the logic for nothing-over-and-above claims is not the same as the logic for grounding/in-virtue-of claims. For example, it is extremely plausible that nothing-over-and-above claims are governed by the following principle:

- (Noth) If  $F_1$  is nothing over and above  $G$ , and  $F_2$  is also nothing over and above  $G$ , then it is not the case that  $F_1$  is something over and above  $F_2$ .

But there is no analogous principle for grounding/in-virtue-of claims. (What would the consequent of such a principle even be? If  $F_1$  obtains entirely in virtue of  $G$ , and  $F_2$  also obtains entirely in virtue of  $G$ , then . . . what?)

<sup>4</sup> Personally I prefer the expressions 'in virtue of' and 'because' over the now ubiquitous expression 'grounds' (and its cognates), for two reasons. First, 'grounds'-talk lends itself to the surprisingly common misconception that 'grounds' is a technical term referring to a wholly new relation that was invented by Fine in 2001. But nothing could be further from the truth, and the intended equivalence of 'grounds'-talk to 'in virtue of'- and 'because'-talk helps us see that. Although the use of the word 'grounds' in roughly Fine's sense is a relatively recent phenomenon, 'in virtue of'- and (non-causal) 'because'-talk have been with us from the very beginning, as my Platonic example shows.

My second reason for preferring the locutions 'in virtue of' and 'because' over 'grounds' is that, to my ears at least, 'grounds'-talk is not yet a dead metaphor—it calls to mind both the base of a building and electrical connections to the earth. As such, the expression 'grounds' tempts us into assuming that everything which is grounded can eventually be traced back to a set of ungrounded grounders that serve as the foundation for the whole metaphysical edifice. Perhaps such a form of metaphysical foundationalism is correct; however, I don't think that view is inevitable, and it would be unfortunate if lingering metaphors attached to our philosophical terminology were to unduly sway our thinking here. Less of a danger arises when we theorize using the terms 'in virtue of' and 'because', since any metaphorical content they might have once had is long since dead. (It takes real work to remind ourselves that 'virtue' is part of 'in virtue of' and that 'cause' is part of 'because'.)

However, despite these misgivings, I will be making free use of 'grounds'-talk in this essay, partially as a way of paying due homage to Fine's monumental contributions to the topic, and partially because 'grounds'-talk allows us to easily state dependency claims in both directions (since we can say both "F grounds G" and "G is grounded in F," but with the expressions 'in virtue of' and 'because' it is more difficult to formulate things in the former, from-grounds-to-grounded direction). I urge my readers to ignore any metaphorical content that might be attached to such phraseology, and I urge them to remember that all 'grounds'-talk can be translated into language using ordinary terms such as 'because'.

expressions on either side). Nothing I say in this essay turns on the relation vs. operator issue, but for ease of exposition it will help to choose a side in this debate. So I will simply assume that grounding is a relation.<sup>5</sup> I will also assume that the relata of the grounding relation are facts, and that the grounding relation is singular on the side of what is grounded and plural on the side of what does the grounding, so that in some cases one fact is grounded in several facts taken together. All of these assumptions will be harmless for our purposes.

Although the *Euthyphro* dilemma is perhaps the most famous example of a philosophical argument that involves a grounding claim, the interest and appeal of grounding claims is hardly limited to discussions of theistic foundations for morality. There are numerous other areas of philosophy where grounding claims are both natural and attractive. Here are some candidates (culled from Correia and Schnieder 2012a, 1):

- (8) Mental facts obtain because of neurophysiological facts.
- (9) Normative facts are grounded in natural facts.
- (10) Dispositional properties are possessed in virtue of categorical properties.
- (11) The existence of a set is grounded in the existence of its members.
- (12) <Snow is white> is true because snow is white.<sup>6</sup>

Over the past decade an explosion of research on the grounding relation has resulted, in large part due to the pioneering work of three figures: Kit Fine (2001, 2010, 2012a, 2012b), Gideon Rosen (2010, MS), and Jonathan Schaffer (2009, 2012). Fine, Rosen, and Schaffer have been instrumental in (a) demonstrating the usefulness of a grounding relation for formulating certain debates in metaphysics, (b) defending the idea that we have as much of a handle on the notion of grounding as we do on any fundamental notion in philosophy, and (c) showing how we can theorize about the nature, logic, and semantics of the grounding relation in a rigorous manner. Although skeptics remain—some of whom we will hear from momentarily—in just a short time the grounding/in-virtue-of relation has gone from being widely vilified as obscure and incomprehensible to being seen, at least in some quarters, as a fully respectable item in our analytical toolkit.

However, given the plausibility and seeming importance of various grounding claims in philosophy, a puzzle arises: why has the grounding relation itself become a serious object of inquiry

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<sup>5</sup> On the difference between relational and operational views, see Fine 2001, 16; Fine 2012a, 43, 46; and Correia and Schnieder 2012a, 10-12. (Correia and Schnieder use the label ‘predicational’ for the former sort of view, but I think the term ‘relational’ is more apt since the fundamental distinction here is metaphysical, not semantic: it concerns the nature of grounding itself, rather than the nature of the terms we use to talk about grounding.) In the recent grounding literature, relationalists include Audi (2012a, 2012b), Chudnoff (2011), Della Rocca (2012), Evans (2012), Leuenberger (2014a, 2014b), Raven (2012, 2013), Rosen (2010, MS), Schaffer (2009, 2012), Trogon (2013), and Whitcomb (2012); operationalists include Correia (2010), Fine (2001, 2010, 2012a, 2012b), and Schnieder (2011).

<sup>6</sup> Here and elsewhere, I follow the by-now standard convention (originally due, I believe, to Ernest Sosa) of using ‘<*p*>’ as a name for the proposition that *p*.

among analytic philosophers only in the past decade or so? No doubt there are many factors at work.<sup>7</sup> One very tempting hypothesis, though, is the following: for many years, philosophers mistakenly identified the grounding relation with the supervenience relation, and as a result they tried to put the supervenience relation to work in areas in which the grounding relation is better suited to get at what they wanted. I believe this hypothesis is essentially correct. But the actual relationship between supervenience and grounding is a bit more complicated than it suggests.

### 3. The Entangled History of Grounding and Supervenience

‘Supervenience’ has become a philosopher’s term of art for a relation of necessary covariation between two sets of properties (or facts). The core idea behind supervenience, as the term is used now, is

- (Su) Set of properties A supervenes upon set of properties B just in case no two things can differ with respect to their A-properties without also differing with respect to their B-properties.

There are countless ways of making this rough idea more precise, leading to a dizzying array of different supervenience relations: weak supervenience, strong supervenience, global supervenience, and the like. Since the details here are so familiar, I won’t review them.<sup>8</sup>

One important theme in the seminal papers on grounding by Fine, Rosen, and Schaffer has been the following: the supervenience relation is distinct from the grounding relation, and the supervenience relation on its own is ill-suited to capture the sorts of grounding claims we want to make in our philosophical theorizing. In a moment I will turn to the arguments offered for these claims, but before I do I want to make two historical points: (i) in fact, the word ‘supervenience’ was first introduced in its distinctively philosophical sense to pick out *both* the idea of one set of properties necessarily covarying with another *and* the idea of one set of properties being grounded in (or depending on) another, and (ii) the claim that these two ideas need to be distinguished from one another had already been argued in the 1980s by Jonathan Dancy, Michael DePaul, and a number of other authors.

R. M. Hare’s *The Language of Morals* (1952) is usually credited with being the first appearance in print of the distinctively philosophical use of the term ‘supervene’.<sup>9</sup> However, when we turn to Hare’s text,

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<sup>7</sup> Correia and Schnieder (2012a, 9-10) speculate that grounding’s neglect was due to a combination of (a) the anti-metaphysical influence of the Vienna Circle, (b) Quine’s skepticism about non-extensional notions, and (c) the practice of relegating discussions of explanation to the philosophy of science.

<sup>8</sup> For an excellent overview, see McLaughlin and Bennett 2011.

<sup>9</sup> I say “first appearance in print” because Hare (1984, 1) claims that the term was already in use that way in Oxford during the 1940s, and because the same idea appears without the label ‘supervenience’ in earlier works by Henry Sidgwick (1907, 209, 379), G. E. Moore (1922, 261), and W. D. Ross (1930, 109, 120, 122-23), among others.

Jake Nebel has brought to my attention the fact that Ross uses the word ‘supervenes’ a number of times in his 1939 book, *Foundations of Ethics* (see Ross 1939, 184, 198, 232, 296, 298). However, as I read those passages, all of them use ‘supervenes’ in its non-technical sense, namely to mean ‘to follow or result as an additional, adventitious, or unlooked-for development’ (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary). In particular, all of these passages advert to an activity or state (whether mental or physical) that *after a lapse of time* “supervenes on” another activity or state (whether mental or physical).

we find something quite surprising. Here are the first two passages in which Hare explains what he means by ‘supervenient’:

Let me illustrate one of the most characteristic features of value-words in terms of a particular example. It is a feature sometimes described by saying that ‘good’ and other such words are the names of ‘supervenient’ or ‘consequential’ properties. Suppose that a picture is hanging upon the wall and we are discussing whether it is a good picture; that is to say, we are debating whether to assent to, or dissent from, the judgment ‘P is a good picture’. . . . Suppose that there is another picture next to P in the gallery (I will call it Q). Suppose that either P is a replica of Q or Q of P, and we do not know which, but do know that both were painted by the same artist at about the same time. Now there is one thing that we cannot say; we cannot say ‘P is exactly like Q in all respects save this one, that P is a good picture and Q not’. If we were to say this, we should invite the comment, ‘But how can one be good and the other not, if they are exactly alike? There must be some *further* difference between them to **make** one good and other not’. Unless we at least admit the relevance of the question ‘What **makes** one good and the other not?’ we are bound to puzzle our hearers; they will think that something has gone wrong with our use of the word ‘good.’ Sometimes we cannot specify just what it is that **makes** one good and the other not; but there always must be something. (Hare 1952, 80-81, bold emphasis mine)

Since, as we have already remarked, ‘good’ is a ‘supervenient’ or ‘consequential’ epithet, one may always legitimately be asked when one has called something a good something, ‘What is good about it?’ Now to answer this question is to give the properties **in virtue of which** we call it good. Thus, if I have said, ‘That is a good motor-car’ and someone asks ‘Why? What is good about it?’ and I reply ‘Its high speed combined with its stability on the road’, I indicate that I call it good **in virtue of** its having these properties or virtues. Now to do this is *eo ipso* to say something about other motor-cars which have these properties. If any motor-car whatever had these properties, I should have, if I were not to be inconsistent, to agree that it was, *pro tanto*, a good motor-car. (Hare 1952, 131, bold emphasis mine)

In both of these passages we find the idea that supervenient properties necessarily covary with certain other properties: no difference in the first set of properties without a difference in the second set of properties. However, that familiar way of understanding supervenience is combined in these passages with another idea, namely that the supervenient properties *hold in virtue of* certain other properties. Indeed, in these two passages it is difficult to tell which of these two ideas—(a) that supervenient properties necessarily covary with other properties, and (b) that supervenient properties are always grounded in other properties—is primary, or whether Hare in fact intends both ideas to be definitive of supervenient properties (so that supervenient properties are always grounded in certain other properties with which they necessarily covary).<sup>10</sup> Overall the textual evidence suggests that Hare was not clear in his mind whether he meant supervenient properties to be defined as properties that necessarily covary with other properties, or as properties that hold in virtue of other properties, or both.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> It is true that elsewhere in the book Hare appears to use ‘supervenient’ only to pick out idea (a), as in the following oft-quoted passage:

First, let us take the characteristic of [the moral use of] ‘good’ which has been called its supervenience. Suppose that we say ‘St. Francis was a good man’. It is logically impossible to say this and to maintain at the same time that there might have been another man placed in precisely the same circumstances as St. Francis, and who behaved in them in exactly the same way, but who differed from St. Francis in this respect only, that he was not a good man. (Hare 1952, 145)

But a few sentences later Hare summarizes the phenomenon he has just described as amounting to the idea that “the judgement that a man is morally good is not logically independent of the judgement that he has certain other characteristics which we may call virtues or good-**making** characteristics,” suggesting that even here he is mixing together ideas (a) and (b).

<sup>11</sup> We find a similar commingling of claims about dependence with claims about necessary covariation in Sidgwick, Moore, and Ross. In *The Methods of Ethics*, Sidgwick writes:

Hare’s use of the term ‘supervenience’ did not catch on until Donald Davidson put it to use in the philosophy of mind in this famous passage from his 1970 article “Mental Events”:

Although the position I describe [i.e. anomalous monism] denies there are psychophysical laws, it is consistent with the view that mental characteristics are in some sense *dependent, or supervenient*, on physical characteristics. Such *supervenience* might be taken to mean that there cannot be two events alike in all physical respects but differing in some mental respect, or that an object cannot alter in some mental respect without altering in some physical respect. (Davidson 1970, 214, italics mine)

This passage led to two trends. First, it became standard to *define* supervenience as a relation of necessary covariation. Second, often it was thought that this covariation relation *just is* the grounding/dependence relation. (Note Davidson’s use of the ‘or’ of identity in the first italicized portion of the quoted passage.)

Now, as I said, an important theme in recent work on grounding has been to insist that this second trend is a mistake—to insist that the supervenience relation (which I will understand, from this point on, purely as a relation of necessary covariation) and the grounding relation are distinct from one another, and more generally to insist that grounding cannot be defined in terms of supervenience. We can extract from the recent grounding literature two main forms of argument for these claims. The first—call it *the argument from formal structure*—is not terribly convincing.<sup>12</sup> It goes as follows: “We know the grounding relation is not the supervenience relation because they have different formal properties. Grounding is irreflexive and asymmetric, whereas supervenience is reflexive and non-asymmetric.”<sup>13</sup> This argument is too quick. At most it is a way of blocking the proposal *that grounding is supervenience*, so that X is grounded in Y iff X supervenes on Y.<sup>14</sup> However, the argument is powerless against the proposal *that grounding is one-way*

Within the range of our cognitions of right and wrong, it will generally be agreed that we cannot admit [an] *unexplained* variation. We cannot judge an action to be right for A and wrong for B, unless we can find in the natures or circumstances of the two some difference which we can regard as a reasonable *ground* for difference in their duties. (Sidgwick 1907, 209, italics mine; see also 379)

So, for Sidgwick, the properties that necessarily covary with rightness are also properties that *explain* or *ground* it. In “The Conception of Intrinsic Value,” Moore writes:

If a given thing possesses any kind of intrinsic value in a certain degree, then . . . anything *exactly like* it must, under all circumstances, possess it in exactly the same degree. (Moore 1922, 261)

This might appear to be a thesis purely concerning necessary covariation. However, Moore takes this thesis to be *equivalent* to a thesis about dependence. Two sentences later he writes:

I think this second proposition [i.e. the one just quoted] also is naturally conveyed by saying that the kind of value in question *depends* solely on the intrinsic nature of what possesses it. (Moore 1922, 261-62, italics mine)

Finally, in *The Right and the Good*, Ross repeatedly stresses that being right and being good are “resultant” or “consequential” properties, in that a thing only possesses them in virtue of other properties which it possesses (Ross 1930, 28, 33, 79, 88, 121-22). There is one place where Ross can be read as taking this fact about goodness to *entail* a certain necessary covariation thesis (see Ross 1930, 122). However, there are three other places in that book where Ross appears to *equate* the claim that resultant/consequential properties depend on other properties with the claim that they necessarily covary with those other properties (see Ross 1930, 109, 120, 123).

<sup>12</sup> Versions of this argument are offered by Schaffer (2009, 364), McLaughlin and Bennett (2011, §3.5), Raven (2012, 690; 2013, 194), and Leuenberger (2014a, 228). None of them rest much on it.

<sup>13</sup> A two-place relation, R, is *irreflexive* iff  $(\forall x)(\neg xRx)$ , is *asymmetric* iff  $(\forall x)(\forall y)(xRy \supset \neg yRx)$ , is *reflexive* iff  $(\forall x)(xRx)$ , and is *non-asymmetric* iff  $\neg(\forall x)(\forall y)(xRy \supset \neg yRx)$ .

<sup>14</sup> I am being intentionally loose here about the relata of the grounding and supervenience relations. If we take the relata of the former to be facts and the relata of the latter to be sets of properties, then a more precise formulation of this proposal would

*supervenience*, so that X is grounded in Y iff (X supervenes on Y, and Y does not supervene on X), since one-way supervenience is both asymmetric and irreflexive.

The second form of argument in the recent grounding literature—call it *the argument from fineness of grain*—is more compelling. The central idea is this: the grounding relation can draw distinctions between necessarily co-obtaining facts and between necessarily co-extensive properties, but the supervenience relation cannot. This disparity leads to a variety of counterexamples to the proposal that grounding is identical to supervenience (as well as to the proposal that grounding is identical to one-way supervenience). Some of these counterexamples involve two necessarily co-obtaining facts,  $F_1$  and  $F_2$ , which are plausibly held to bear a grounding relation in one direction but not the other; this is problematic, because if  $F_1$  supervenes on  $F_2$ , then  $F_2$  also supervenes on  $F_1$ . For example, as Fine has famously emphasized,<sup>15</sup> the fact that the set {Socrates} exists is presumably grounded in the fact that the individual Socrates exists, and not vice versa. However, the fact that {Socrates} exists and the fact that Socrates exists supervene on one another: no difference with respect to either fact without a difference with respect to the other. A second sort of counterexample involves a fact,  $F$ , and two necessarily co-obtaining sets of facts,  $\Gamma_1$  and  $\Gamma_2$ ,<sup>16</sup> such that it is plausible that  $F$  obtains in virtue of  $\Gamma_1$  but not plausible that  $F$  obtains in virtue of  $\Gamma_2$ ; this is problematic, because if  $F$  supervenes on  $\Gamma_1$ , then  $F$  also supervenes on  $\Gamma_2$ . For example, as Mark Greenberg (2004, 159) and Rosen (2010, 113-14) have emphasized, the debate over legal positivism can be interpreted as a debate over whether the legal facts are wholly grounded in the social facts, or whether they are grounded in the social facts plus the moral facts. But if the basic moral facts are necessary, then a given legal fact will supervene on the social facts if and only if that legal fact supervenes on the social facts plus the basic moral facts. So although we can understand this debate in terms of grounding, we cannot understand it in terms of supervenience.<sup>17, 18</sup>

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be: the fact that  $a$  is  $F$  is grounded in the fact that  $a$  is  $G$  if and only if the set {being  $F$ } supervenes on the set {being  $G$ }. Similar comments apply to the next sentence, and to the next paragraph.

<sup>15</sup> Actually, Fine (1994, 4-5) first used this example to make a point about essence, but since that time the example has frequently been adapted to make an analogous point about grounding.

<sup>16</sup> To say that two sets of facts are necessarily co-obtaining is to say that, necessarily, if all of the facts in one obtain, then all of the facts in the other obtain, and vice versa.

<sup>17</sup> A third sort of counterexample, less often discussed in the literature, is the reverse of the second sort of counterexample: it involves two necessarily co-obtaining facts,  $F_1$  and  $F_2$ , and a set of facts,  $\Gamma$ , such that it is plausible that  $F_1$  obtains in virtue of  $\Gamma$  but not plausible that  $F_2$  obtains in virtue of  $\Gamma$ ; this is problematic, because if  $F_1$  supervenes on  $\Gamma$ , then  $F_2$  also supervenes on  $\Gamma$ .

<sup>18</sup> Sometimes it is suggested that the problems mentioned in this paragraph for the identification of grounding and supervenience are due to the fact that grounding is a hyperintensional relation, whereas supervenience is not (see, for example, Schaffer 2009, 364; Leuenberger 2014a, 228; Wilson 2014, 538; Barnes MS, §1.2). Following a suggestion made by C. S. Jenkins (2011, 270-71), I think it is a mistake to put the point this way. Only *expressions* can be hyperintensional, not *relations*. So, if we want, we can say that sentences of the form “The fact that . . . grounds the fact that \_\_\_” are hyperintensional because substituting an expression for ‘. . .’ (or for ‘\_\_\_’) which is necessarily equivalent in truth value sometimes leads to a change in truth value of the overall sentence. However, this doesn’t show that grounding itself, construed as a relation between facts, possesses the special property of being hyperintensional. Rather, the hyperintensionality of the sentences in question appears to be purely a function of the hyperintensionality of the expression ‘the fact that . . .’ (in the sense that substituting an expression for ‘. . .’ in ‘the fact that . . .’ which is necessarily equivalent in truth value sometimes leads to a change in referent of the overall expression).



In the grounding literature it has become almost a commonplace to suggest that it was only with Fine's {Socrates} vs. Socrates example that we learned that supervenience is distinct from grounding. I agree that Fine's example is a particular clear and powerful way of making the point. However, the point is not original to Fine. For example, in his 1987 article "Supervenience and Moral Dependence," Michael DePaul asks us to consider the relation between the following two properties of actions: *being morally right* and *being felicitic*, where by definition an action is felicitic if and only if it produces at least as much overall balance of pleasure over pain as any alternative.<sup>19</sup> DePaul points out that if maximizing hedonistic act-utilitarianism is the correct moral theory, then

(Fe) Necessarily, an action is morally right if and only if it is felicitic.

It follows from this that being morally right supervenes on being felicitic, and vice versa. However, many utilitarians will want to say that the fact that an action is morally right is grounded in the fact that it is felicitic, but not vice versa. So supervenience cannot be grounding (DePaul 1987, 433-34).

Similar objections were offered by a number of authors in the 1980s and 1990s (Lombard 1986, §8.3; Grimes 1988; Kim 1990, §4). These sorts of problems eventually led Jaegwon Kim—probably the most prominent advocate of the philosophical importance of supervenience—to write the following:

Supervenience itself is not an explanatory relation. It is not a "deep" metaphysical relation; rather, it is a "surface" relation that reports a pattern of property covariation, suggesting the presence of an interesting dependency relation that might explain it. (Kim 1990, 167)

Or, in other words, Kim is saying that it is usually in virtue of the truth of a certain in-virtue-of claim that a given supervenience claim is true. This sentiment was not original to Kim. Almost a decade earlier, we find Jonathan Dancy making much the same claim in his 1981 article "On Moral Properties," an article which—to the best of my knowledge—is the earliest appearance in print of an explicit argument that the supervenience relation is not the same as the grounding relation.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, on my telling, the history of the relationship between supervenience and grounding is more complicated than how it is often portrayed by advocates of grounding. In the early 1950s, the term 'supervenient property' was introduced in its distinctively philosophical sense in a way that made it ambiguous between 'property that necessarily covaries with some other set of properties' and 'property

Once the individuation of the relevant facts has been fixed, the grounding relation itself is purely extensional.

<sup>19</sup> Derek Parfit has pointed out to me that since, in ordinary usage, 'felicitic' means 'tending to promote happiness', it would be more accurate to say 'maximally felicitic' where DePaul says 'felicitic'; however, to save words I will follow DePaul (and Ross before him; see Ross 1930, 36) in dropping the 'maximally'-qualifier. Also, we can distinguish *being weakly felicitic* (producing *at least as much* overall balance of pleasure over pain as any alternative) from *being strongly felicitic* (producing a *greater* overall balance of pleasure over pain as any alternative); throughout I mean the former and leave the 'weakly'-qualifier implicit.

<sup>20</sup> See Dancy 1981, 382, for Dancy's claim that supervenience is a consequence of grounding rather than vice versa, and see Dancy 1981, 380-82 (as well as Dancy 1993, 73-79, and Dancy 2004, 85-93) for Dancy's arguments that supervenience and grounding are distinct relations. (Note that, picking up on Ross' talk of 'resultant properties', Dancy's name for the grounding relation is 'the resultance relation'.) Dancy's reasons for distinguishing supervenience from grounding are importantly different from the ones considered in the text, but it would take us too far afield to consider them here. (Some of those arguments are tied to Dancy's controversial claim that a set of grounds does not necessitate that which it grounds, but others of them are not.)

that is always possessed in virtue of some other property or properties'. Eventually, in the 1970s, philosophers' practices shifted in a way that made the first of these meanings become primary. By the early 1990s, it was generally agreed by those who study the matter that supervenience is not a form of dependence. However, it was not until the first decade of the 21st century that this lesson became widely appreciated and the grounding/dependence relation itself became an object of sustained philosophical inquiry.

Still, the account I have just offered of grounding's place in contemporary analytic philosophy might seem to share this feature with the narrative that we can extract from the metaphysicians who have been stressing the importance of grounding of late: it might seem to situate the recent wave of enthusiasm for grounding *as a return*, albeit a return to the early 20th century, instead of a return all the way back to Aristotle. But talk of 'a return' suggests that grounding had temporarily disappeared from the scene. Perhaps it had in metaphysics. However, there is one branch of philosophy where the grounding/in-virtue-of/non-causal-because relation most certainly never disappeared: namely, moral philosophy.

#### **4. Appeals to Grounding in Normative Inquiry**

I now want to argue that there are a number of central debates in moral philosophy—and in normative inquiry more generally—which it is both natural and proper to formulate in terms of a metaphysical grounding relation.

Let us start with so-called "first-order" or "normative" ethics, and with the debate that has dominated that field for the past century or so: the dispute between consequentialists and their opponents. The old way of formulating this debate was to ask: "Is the right prior to the good, or the good prior to the right?" More recently, that snappy formulation has given way to a more nuanced one, now that it is generally recognized that even non-consequentialists can hold the good to be prior to the right, as long as they endorse a distinctively non-consequentialist account of the nature of value and how we should respond to it. So now the central question has become: "Is it the case that (a) the good is prior to the right, and (b) all good is to-be-promoted?" with non-consequentialists being free to deny (a), (b), or both.<sup>21</sup> Note, though, that even this more complicated way of characterizing the debate appeals to a notion of priority.

But what exactly is the variety of priority at issue here? When a consequentialist philosopher asserts, "The good is prior to the right," and when some (but not all) of her opponents deny this, what exactly is being asserted and denied?

There are a number of proposals we can set aside rather quickly. The consequentialism debate, at least as it exists today, is clearly not a debate over *semantic* or *conceptual priority*. Although G. E. Moore insisted in *Principia Ethica* (1903) that maximizing act-consequentialism is an analytic truth, few

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<sup>21</sup> See Berker 2013a, §2, for a defense of this way of understanding the central issue dividing consequentialists and their opponents. (And see pp. 382-83 of that article if you are wondering why I do not refer to consequentialists' opponents as 'deontologists'.)

philosophers since then have thought we can determine the truth of consequentialism merely by considering the meanings of our moral terms, and even Moore himself changed his mind by the time he wrote *Ethics* (1912). The idea that maximizing act-consequentialism might be a conceptual truth is equally implausible.<sup>22</sup> Can we really believe that non-consequentialists—and, for that matter, consequentialists of a non-maximizing or non-act persuasion—are conceptually confused when they insist that maximizing act-consequentialism is false? Surely consequentialists disagree with their opponents—and with each other—over *substantive* matters, not over *linguistic* or *conceptual* matters.

It is also clear that ‘prior’ in “Is the good prior to the right?” does not refer to a form of *epistemic priority*. Normative ethics is not moral epistemology, and consequentialists are free to accept an account of the order in which we come to know moral truths on which it is sometimes the case that our knowledge of the good is parasitic on our knowledge of the right. Nor does ‘prior’ in this debate refer to a form of *causal dependence*. It is widely believed that evaluative properties (such as *being good*) and deontic properties (such as *being right*) do not have causal powers. And even if such properties *do* have causal powers, it would be extremely odd if making sense of the consequentialism debate required us to take such a controversial stand on that particular issue.

A more plausible suggestion is that the sort of priority at issue in debates over consequentialism can be understood in terms of *supervenience*. However, a version of DePaul’s argument shows that this suggestion cannot be correct. Consider the following biconditional:

- (Op) Necessarily, an action is right if and only if it is optimific (i.e. it produces at least as much overall good as any alternative).

Maximizing act-consequentialists will presumably want to hold both that (Op) is true and that the good is prior to the right. However, they cannot do this if we understand “The good is prior to the right, but not vice versa” to mean “Deontic properties supervene on evaluative properties, but not vice versa.” After all, (Op) entails both that being right supervenes on being optimific and that being optimific supervenes on being right.

Similar reasoning shows that the consequentialism debate is not about *counterfactual dependence* or about *logical entailment*. We cannot construe the maximizing act-consequentialist’s claim that being optimific is prior to being right, but not vice versa, as the claim that if an action were optimific, then it would be right, but not vice versa. According to standard accounts of the truth-conditions for subjunctive/counterfactual conditionals, (Op) entails both <If an action were optimific, then it would be

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<sup>22</sup> Although many philosophers treat ‘analytic truth’ and ‘conceptual truth’ as synonyms, I take it they have different meanings: ‘analytic truth’ refers to a truth that holds in virtue of the meaning of words, whereas ‘conceptual truth’ refers to a truth that holds in virtue of the nature and composition of concepts. Depending on the relationship between words and concepts, it might turn out that something is always an analytic truth in virtue of being a conceptual truth, or vice versa; it might turn out that these two notions sometimes pull apart, or that they never do; it might turn out that one notion is useful for philosophical purposes whereas the other is not; and so on. I take no stand on any of these issues here. (So when I say, “Maximizing act-consequentialism is not an analytic truth,” what I really mean is, “If there is a philosophically useful analytic–synthetic distinction, then maximizing act-consequentialism is not on the analytic side of that divide.”)

right> and <If an action were right, then it would be optimific>. Of course non-standard accounts are available, but, as with the causal-dependence proposal, it would be very surprising if making sense of the debate between consequentialists and their opponents *required* us to adopt non-standard truth conditions for subjunctive conditionals. Similarly, we cannot construe the maximizing act-consequentialist's priority thesis as the claim that <Action A is optimific> entails <A is right>, but not vice versa. On some accounts of logical entailment, if < $p$ > necessitates < $q$ >, then < $p$ > entails < $q$ >. <sup>23</sup> It follows from such accounts that if (Op) is true, then <A is optimific> both entails and is entailed by <A is right>. Other accounts of logical entailment deny that necessitation is sufficient for entailment, perhaps on the grounds that <There's water in that cup> does not entail <There's H<sub>2</sub>O in that cup>, and <Carol is Henry's mother> does not entail <Carol is female>. <sup>24</sup> But on almost all accounts of this latter sort, it will neither be the case, given (Op), that <A is optimific> entails <A is right> nor be the case that <A is right> entails <A is optimific>. So either way, we fail to have an entailment in one direction but not the other.

Perhaps, then, we should interpret consequentialists as putting forward a claim about *identity*; perhaps, for example, we should understand maximizing act-consequentialists as positing that the property *being right* is identical to the property *being optimific*, and hence the fact [Action A is right] is identical to the fact [A is optimific]. <sup>25</sup> But this is not a way of *interpreting* our consequentialist's claim that the latter of these two facts is prior to the former; rather, it involves *denying* that priority claim, since no fact can be prior to itself. As such, this proposal does violence to our usual way of understanding consequentialism. Moreover, even if it were a charitable way of construing the relation being put forward by maximizing act-consequentialists between [A is right] and [A is optimific], this proposal would not allow us to sidestep the issue of how to understand the priority relation being invoked in debates over consequentialism. After all, presumably consequentialists of this sort hold that there are various specific facts about the goodness of various actual and possible outcomes that are prior to the general evaluative fact [A is optimific]. So even if [A is right] is identical to [A is optimific], we can still ask about the nature of the priority relation that holds between that general evaluative fact and the more specific evaluative facts about the goodness of each outcome. And at this point we cannot invoke the identity relation once again, since one fact cannot be identical to a plurality of facts.

Where does this leave us? What we are looking for is not a *semantic*, *conceptual*, or *epistemic* notion of priority, but rather a *metaphysical* notion, in the thin sense that it concerns how things are, not our knowledge of those things or our words or concepts for them. Causal dependence, supervenience, counterfactual dependence, identity, and (arguably) logical entailment all count as metaphysical relations, in this thin sense, but they are the wrong tools for the job. A far better proposal—and a much more

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<sup>23</sup> For example, Rosen (2010, 118) implicitly assumes such an account of entailment.

<sup>24</sup> These examples are based on similar ones in Beall and Restall 2013, §1.

<sup>25</sup> Here and elsewhere, I follow Rosen's (2010, 115) helpful convention of using '[ $p$ ]' as a name for the fact that  $p$ .

natural suggestion, I might add—is that the type of priority at issue here is *grounding*. On this proposal, consequentialists insist that facts about rightness *obtain in virtue of* certain facts about goodness, that the latter facts are what *make it the case* that the former facts obtain, that it is *because of* the relevant facts about goodness that the corresponding facts about rightness hold. These claims just roll off the tongue, and for good reason. Grounding is what we are after.

I do not intend my proposal here to be controversial; in fact, I think this is the default way of understanding the notion of priority at stake when we ask, “Is the good prior to the right?” It has been standard for a while now to insist that consequentialism provides an account of an action’s *right-making characteristics*.<sup>26</sup> All I am suggesting is that we take this ‘making’-talk at face value and see it as picking out the grounding/in-virtue-of relation. Similarly, if a maximizing act-consequentialist were to formulate her central thesis as

(Op\*) Necessarily, an action is morally right if and only if, and because, it is optimific,  
instead of

(Op) Necessarily, an action is morally right if and only if it is optimific,

I don’t think anyone would look askance at her for including the ‘and because’-qualifier. Indeed, when consequentialists drop that qualifier and write (Op) rather than (Op\*), I think it is customary to take the ‘and because’-qualifier as understood.

I have just been emphasizing the way in which consequentialism should be interpreted as a view that makes certain distinctive claims about the grounds of rightness (and, in turn, about the grounds of goodness). I believe the same is true of consequentialism’s traditional opponents: their positive positions are also best interpreted as consisting in various claims about the grounds of rightness, goodness, and whatever other normative notions are under their purvey. For example, one particularly clear alternative to consequentialism is W. D. Ross’ theory of *prima facie* duties. According to Ross, (i) there are a small number of distinctive sorts of properties (such as *being a breaking of a promise* or *contributing toward the improvement of one’s own character*) in virtue of which an act is either *prima facie* right or *prima facie* wrong, (ii) the degree of *prima facie* rightness or *prima facie* wrongness grounded in those properties depends on all of the facts of the case at hand in an uncodifiable manner, and (iii) an act is either right (*sans phrase*) or wrong (*sans phrase*) in virtue of the overall balance of *prima facie* rightness and *prima facie* wrongness possessed by that act in comparison to its alternatives. My summary here of Ross’ view has made free use of the phrases ‘in virtue of’ and ‘grounded’, but this is no anachronistic re-reading on my part. Ross first presents his theory in a chapter titled “What *Makes* Right Acts Right?” (Ross 1930, ch. 2, italics mine), and his discussion is shot through with many of the traditional ways of picking out the grounding relation, including the expressions ‘makes’ (16, 24, 33), ‘because’ (18, 44, 46, 47), ‘in [*or*: by] virtue of’ (19, 28, 29,

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<sup>26</sup> The locus classicus for this view is Bales 1971.

30, 32, 33, 43), ‘depends’ (33, 43, 47), ‘ground’ (37, 46, 47), and ‘due to’ (46). It would be a gross misreading of Ross to take him to be formulating his theory using a notion other than grounding.<sup>27</sup>

I believe something similar is true of most other non-consequentialist moral theories. When such theories are in the business of seeking exceptionless principles, they should be understood not merely as proposing biconditionals of the form

(Bi) Necessarily, an action is morally right if and only if \_\_\_\_\_,

but rather as offering accounts of the *grounds* of moral notions, like so:

(Bi\*) Necessarily, an action is morally right if and only if, and because, \_\_\_\_\_.

Similarly, when non-consequentialist moral philosophers focus on particular verdicts about particular scenarios, they should be understood not merely as seeking to establish a bald claim of the form

(Ver) Action A is morally right in circumstances C,

but rather as seeking to understand *why* that verdict holds, so that we have a claim of the form

(Ver\*) Action A is morally right in circumstances C because \_\_\_\_\_.

Again, I don’t think I am saying anything controversial here. It is almost a truism that we want our moral theories not merely to be extensionally adequate, but moreover to be properly explanatory.<sup>28</sup>

Thus I see first-order moral philosophy as fundamentally in the business of proposing (and assessing, and establishing) various grounding claims. Moreover, I think the same is true of most other first-order investigations of normative notions. For example, consider the widely popular “reasons first” approach to normativity, according to which reasons are the fundamental particles of the normative realm, and all other normative facts, properties, and relations can be analyzed or accounted for in terms of the reason relation. Two theses are being put forward here: first, that reasons are not analyzable or accountable in other terms (as a catchphrase: “Reasons are first”), and, second, that every other normative notion can be analyzed or accounted for in terms of reasons (as a slightly-less-catchy phrase: “Reasons are not tied for first”). When interpreting either of these theses, I think we do best to understand the relevant notion of analysis or accounting-for in terms of the grounding relation, for reasons very similar to the ones we considered in the case of consequentialism.

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<sup>27</sup> Incidentally, the title of Ross’ chapter constitutes a concise refutation of one influential way of criticizing the legitimacy of appeals to grounding that appears in the literature. Thomas Hofweber (2009) has argued that metaphysicians who theorize in terms of a notion of grounding are engaging in a problematic form of “esoteric metaphysics” because the questions they are trying to answer involve distinctly metaphysical terminology that one has to be an insider to understand, in contrast to a more appropriate form of “egalitarian metaphysics” in which the questions being addressed can be phrased using ordinary notions intelligible to the general public. However, the question “What makes right acts right?” is phrased in ordinary English and understandable by all. So we have at least one field of philosophy where appeals to grounding avoid Hofweber’s charge.

<sup>28</sup> For example, Judith Jarvis Thomson (1990, 30) writes, “A moral theory contains more than object-level moral judgments [such as ‘Capital punishment is wrong’]. At the heart of every moral theory there lie what we might call explanatory moral judgments, which explicitly say that such and such is good or bad, right or wrong, other things being equal good or bad, other things begin equal right or wrong, and so on, *because* it has feature F—for example, ‘Capital punishment is wrong *because* it is intentional killing of those who constitute no threat to others’.”

Consider the second thesis first. When reasons-firsters say that all evaluative and deontic facts can be analyzed or accounted for in terms of facts about reasons, they are not making a semantic or conceptual claim, or a claim about epistemic or causal dependence, or a claim about supervenience, counterfactual dependence, or logical entailment. Rather, they are claiming that all evaluative and deontic facts are *grounded in* facts about reasons, that it is *in virtue of* the facts about reasons that these other normative facts obtain. What makes it the case that I ought to perform such-and-such action in such-and-such circumstances? A reasons-firster will say: the various reasons for and against that action and its alternatives. What makes it the case that she ought to believe such-and-such proposition in such-and-such situation? A reasons-firster will reply: the various reasons for and against her holding a belief in that proposition. In other words, the reasons-firsters' second thesis, as captured in the slogan "Reasons are not tied for first," is most naturally expressed in terms of grounding. Similarly, I think we also do best to interpret the reason-firsters' first thesis, as captured in the slogan "Reasons are first," in terms of the grounding relation. The sense in which reasons are being proposed not to come before anything else is an *explanatory* sense: the claim is that it is not *because of* any facts about other normative notions that facts about reasons obtain, that facts about other normative notions do not *ground* facts about reasons, that when it comes to normative matters, facts about reasons are bedrock.

This way of characterizing the reasons-first program allows us to easily explain an aspect of that program which might otherwise be puzzling. There is in fact a divide among the reasons-firsters: although some of them think that (at least some) facts about reasons are ungrounded, other self-professed reason-firsters think that certain natural facts always serve to explain why a given consideration counts as a reason in a given context. But if natural facts can come before facts about reasons, in what sense are reasons first? The answer is that, when it comes to the reason-firsters' first thesis, we need to distinguish between a stronger and weaker way of reading of that thesis, corresponding to a strong and weaker way of reading the slogan "Reasons are first," as follows:

"Reasons are first, full stop": All basic facts about reasons are ungrounded.<sup>29</sup>

"Reasons are normatively first": All basic facts about reasons are not grounded (even in part) in any other normative facts (although they may well be grounded in certain non-normative facts).

Reasons-firsters who are non-naturalists tend to embrace the first way of interpreting the slogan "Reasons are first," whereas those who are naturalists tend to embrace the second. Two prominent examples of the former are Derek Parfit and T. M. Scanlon; two prominent examples of the latter are Mark Schroeder and Sharon Street.

It must be conceded that here I am going against how reason-firsters sometimes characterize their

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<sup>29</sup> By 'basic fact about reasons' I mean a fact about reasons that is not itself grounded in any facts about reasons. The 'basic'-qualifier is needed here because almost all reasons-firsters will want to allow that some facts about reasons obtain in virtue of other facts about reasons. For example, it might be in virtue of my having a reason to pursue some end that I have a reason to pursue the indispensable means to that end.

own program. I have been suggesting that we do best to understand that program in terms of the grounding/in-virtue-of/non-causal-because relation. Although reasons-firsters occasionally frame their program using the idiom of grounding and talk of explanation, much more frequently reasons-firsters characterize their view in terms of *reduction*. For example, Parfit rarely formulates his non-naturalist view about the nature of reasons in terms of grounding, but he repeatedly says that, on his view, facts about reasons are irreducibly normative truths.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, here is Scanlon describing the reasons-first view he dubs ‘reasons fundamentalism’:

Truths about reasons are fundamental in the sense that truths about reasons are not **reducible** to or **identifiable** with non-normative truths, such as truths about the natural world of physical objects, causes and effects, nor can they be **explained** in terms of notions of rationality or rational agency that are not themselves claims about reasons. Reasons might be fundamental in the further sense of being the only fundamental elements of the normative domain, other normative notions such as *good* and *ought* being **analyzable** in terms of reasons. (Scanlon 2014, 2, bold emphasis mine)

A number of potentially distinct notions are mentioned here, including reduction, identity, explanation, and analysis. But most often when Scanlon goes on to discuss the commitments of reasons fundamentalism, he appeals to the idea that truths about reasons are irreducible (or irreducibly normative).

Now the exact relation between grounding and reduction is controversial. On some views, reduction just is grounding,<sup>31</sup> and if that is so, then my characterization of the reasons-first program in terms of grounding is equivalent to the characterization its practitioners provide in terms of reduction. However, on other views, reduction is distinct from grounding, and if that is so, then I think it is more in the spirit of the reasons-first program to formulate it in terms of grounding rather than in terms of reduction. The argument for this claim is simple. First, as Rosen (2010, §10) has argued, it is extremely plausible that reduction entails grounding, in the following sense:

(Re) Necessarily, if fact F reduces to set of facts  $\Gamma$ , then F is entirely grounded in  $\Gamma$ .<sup>32</sup>

So the only way in which reduction can pull apart from grounding is in a case in which we have grounding without reduction. But in such cases, I think reasons-firsters are more likely to take the presence of grounding, rather than a lack of reduction, to be the issue which is more relevant to their position. For example, if a philosopher were to claim:

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<sup>30</sup> See Parfit 2011. Although Parfit does not formulate his version of non-naturalism in terms of grounding, the grounding relation does feature prominently in those two books, albeit not under that name (Parfit prefers the label ‘non-causal making’; see 2011:1, 368, and 2011:2, 299). For example, the main task of Part 1 of those books is to argue against subjectivism about reasons, which Parfit explicitly formulates as a thesis about *the grounds* of what we have most reason to do (2011:1, chs. 2-4), and many of Parfit’s arguments against normative naturalism in Part 6 turn on the issue of whether naturalists can make sense of the utilitarian claim that an act’s maximizing happiness *makes* that act right (2011:2, chs. 24-27).

<sup>31</sup> For instance, Jonathan Ichikawa (2014, 185) assumes this view.

<sup>32</sup> Here I assume that facts are the relata of the reduction relation, to fit with reasons-firsters’ talk of one fact or truth being reducible to another. If one prefers to understand reduction as a relation that holds among propositions, as Rosen (2010, 122) does, it is easy enough to reformulate (Re) and my ensuing discussion accordingly.



- (†) [Agent A has a reason to  $\phi$  in circumstances C] obtains entirely in virtue of, but is not reducible to, [A ought to  $\psi$  in circumstances D],

I think reasons-firsters would view this claim as being in tension with their first thesis. Isn't (†), on its own, enough to block the claim that reasons are first, in the relevant sense? Similarly, if a different philosopher were to claim:

- (††) [Agent A ought to  $\phi$  in circumstances C] obtains entirely in virtue of, but is not reducible to, [A has a reason to  $\phi$  in C, has no reasons against  $\phi$ -ing in C, and has no reasons for or against any alternative to  $\phi$ -ing in C],

I think reasons-firsters are likely to see this claim as offering partial confirmation of their second thesis. Isn't (††), on its own, enough to support the claim that reasons come before oughts, in the relevant sense? In short: if we mark a distinction between reduction and grounding, it is better to formulate the reasons-first program in terms of grounding, and if we don't mark a distinction between those two notions, it is harmless to phrase things in terms of grounding.

I have just argued that the very grounding relation being touted by metaphysicians plays a central role in one important debate in moral philosophy—namely, the debate over consequentialism—and also plays a central role in an equally important debate concerning normativity in general—namely, the debate over whether reasons are first. I believe the same is true of most other areas of normative inquiry: each features a number of key debates that turn on the truth of certain grounding claims. Moreover, in many of these cases, framing the relevant debate in terms of grounding is not some new innovation we have only recently come to appreciate; rather, most of these debates have been formulated using language such as 'in virtue of', 'because', 'makes the case', and 'depends' from their inception.

To reinforce this final point, let us briefly turn to one last case study, this time from the field of epistemology. One enduring debate in that area of philosophy is the dispute between foundationalists, coherentists, and infinitists. If we restrict ourselves to the debate as it arises with regard to epistemic justification, then one very standard way of characterizing that debate is as follows: what makes it the case that a given belief is justified? Do a belief's "justification-makers" or "justifiers"—that is, the factors in virtue of which it counts as justified—always include at least one other belief inferentially related to the belief in question, as coherentists and infinitists usually hold? Or can a belief sometimes be justified without its justifiers including any other beliefs inferentially related to the first one, as foundationalists insist? Note the invocation here of the phrases 'makes the case' and 'in virtue of'. These expressions, as well as many of the other standard ways of talking about grounding such as 'because' and 'depends', are extremely common in the literature on foundationalism, coherentism, and infinitism.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, it is fairly

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<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Alston 1976, 24; Oakley 1976, 221; Kornblith 1980, 603; Sosa 1980a, 151; Sosa 1980b, 179; Williams 1981, 87; Harker 1984, 262; Kvanvig and Riggs 1992, 200; Sayre-McCord 1996, 167; BonJour 1999, 123; DePaul 2001, viii; Fantl 2003, 541; Gillett 2003, 712; Huemer 2003, 141; Klein 2003, 723; Klein 2005, 277; Pryor 2005, 182; Van Cleve 2005, 256; Sinnott-Armstrong 2006, 222; DePaul 2011, 236; Klein 2011, 250; Olsson 2011, 258; Pryor 2012, 274; Roche 2012, 269; Elgin

difficult to find a single contribution to that vast literature which does not, at some point, make crucial use of an expression such as ‘in virtue of’, ‘makes the case’, ‘because’, and the like. This, too, is another area of normative inquiry where the grounding relation is front and center, and has been for many decades.

## 5. The Threat of Grounding Pluralism

I have just argued that appeals to a metaphysical notion of grounding are a crucial component of normative theorizing. If I am right, then philosophers investigating normative matters should welcome the recent upsurge of interest in the grounding relation among metaphysicians. Moreover, they should view grounding not as some new-fangled invention that can help them with their theory building (or theory destroying), but rather as a tool they have been using all along, albeit not always with full self-consciousness.

In making these claims, I have spoken indiscriminately of “the” grounding relation and acted as if the sort of dependence relation being studied by metaphysicians is the same one being employed in normative contexts. It turns out, though, that these assumptions of mine are controversial. Most notably, Kit Fine—probably the philosopher whose work has had the single largest influence on the burgeoning field of grounding studies—disagrees with these assumptions. According to Fine, there are three distinct grounding relations: *metaphysical grounding*, *normative grounding*, and *natural grounding*.<sup>34</sup> Fine (2012a, 37) provides the following examples of each type of grounding:

- [The ball is red and round] is metaphysically grounded in [The ball is red], [The ball is round].<sup>35</sup>
- [His action was wrong] is normatively grounded in [His action was performed with the sole intention of causing harm].
- [The particle is accelerating] is naturally grounded in [The particle is being acted upon by a positive net force].

Moreover, Fine (2012a, 39) denies that “each of these explanatory relations [can] be defined in terms of a

2014, 270; Rescorla 2014, 179. (In each of these cases I restrict myself to citing one page that is particularly clear in its invocation of the idiom of grounding; in most cases many more pages could be cited.)

<sup>34</sup> Actually, Fine wouldn’t put the matter this way, for three reasons. First, as already mentioned, Fine believes that grounding is fundamentally an operator, not a relation: see Fine 2001, 16; Fine 2010, 99; Fine 2012a, 43, 46; and Fine 2012b, 3. (However, he often slips into ‘relation’-talk, for ease of exposition: see, among other places, Fine 2001, 15; Fine 2010, 100, 112; Fine 2012a, 39-40, 71, 77; and Fine 2012b, 1.) Second, for reasons that are somewhat opaque to me, Fine’s preferred way of referring to the notion in question—whether it be construed as a relation or an operator—is with the mass noun ‘ground’ rather than the (more common) mass noun ‘grounding’. (Thus he would prefer that this essay be titled “The Unity of Ground” instead of “The Unity of Grounding.”) Third, there are places where, although Fine distinguishes between metaphysical, normative, and natural ‘in virtue of’-claims, he reserves the term ‘ground’ and its cognates for the first of these: see Fine 2012a, 38-40. (However, there are other places where Fine deviates from this convention and applies ‘ground’ to all three: see Fine 2012a, 44, 48, 77.) None of these three issues are important for our purposes, so I will continue to ignore them in the main text.

<sup>35</sup> Here and elsewhere, I follow the convention, standard in the grounding literature, of using commas on the right side of the is-grounded-in relation in such a way that (where  $\Gamma$  and  $\Delta$  are sets of facts):

- i. ‘ $[p], [q]$ ’ is shorthand for ‘ $\{[p], [q]\}$ ’,
- ii. ‘ $[p], \Gamma$ ’ is shorthand for ‘ $\{[p]\} \cup \Gamma$ ’,
- iii. ‘ $\Gamma, \Delta$ ’ is shorthand for ‘ $\Gamma \cup \Delta$ ’.

single generic relation.” He insists that “rather than understanding the special explanatory relations in terms of the generic relation, we should understand the generic relation as some kind of ‘disjunction’ of the special relations” (2012a, 40), presumably defined as follows:

- (Dis) Fact  $[p]$  is grounded<sub>disjunctive</sub> in set of facts  $\Gamma =_{df}$   $[p]$  is metaphysically grounded in  $\Gamma$ , or  $[p]$  is normatively grounded in  $\Gamma$ , or  $[p]$  is naturally grounded in  $\Gamma$ .

But if this is so, then it is not true that the relation being studied by metaphysicians is the same as the one I have been urging the importance of in normative debates. Moreover, it is also not true that we can argue against the idea that metaphysical grounding is something new by appealing to its ubiquity in normative disciplines over the past few decades.

Thus Fine’s brand of grounding pluralism constitutes an objection to my earlier claims. In what follows, I shall argue that Fine is mistaken in thinking that grounding is disunified in the way he proposes. In other words, I shall argue for grounding monism: the view, roughly, that there is only one grounding relation. But first, I would like to be a bit clearer about what these two positions—grounding monism and grounding pluralism—come to.

So far I have characterized grounding monism and pluralism in terms of the number of grounding relations they countenance: either one (grounding monism) or more than one (grounding pluralism). However, some qualifications are needed here, or else it will turn out that grounding monism is patently false. For instance, it is widely agreed that we need to distinguish between *partial grounding* and *full grounding*. Not only do we want to say that [The ball is red and round] is fully grounded (whether metaphysically or in a single, unified sense) in [The ball is red] and [The ball is round], taken together, but moreover we also want to say that [The ball is red and round] is partially grounded in [The ball is red] by itself. Does this mean that there are at least two grounding relations, and that grounding monism is a non-starter?

No, it does not. All it means is that we need to be more careful when formulating our respective forms of monism and pluralism. Here we can take a hint from Fine. Recall that he denied that there is a generic grounding relation in terms of which metaphysical, normative, and natural grounding *can be defined*. Thus the crucial issue is not the mere number of distinct grounding relations that we can list, but rather the number of grounding relations in terms of which all other grounding relations can be defined.

Let us say that grounding relation  $R_1$  is *fundamentally distinct* from grounding relation  $R_2$  if and only if (a)  $R_1$  and  $R_2$  are distinct relations, (b)  $R_1$  cannot be defined in terms of  $R_2$ , (c)  $R_2$  cannot be defined in terms of  $R_1$ , and (d) there is no other grounding relation in terms of which both  $R_1$  and  $R_2$  can be defined. And let us say that grounding relation  $R$  is *fundamentally unique* if and only if all other grounding relations can be defined in terms of it. We may then formulate grounding monism and pluralism as follows:

*grounding monism:* There is one fundamentally unique grounding relation.

*grounding pluralism:* There are at least two fundamentally distinct grounding relations.

These formulations avoid the worry that distinguishing between partial and full grounding renders grounding monism obviously false. It is standard to hold that partial grounding can be defined in terms of full grounding (Schaffer 2009, 376n34; Rosen 2010, 115; Fine 2012a, 50; Fine 2012b, 3). Here is Rosen's way of doing so:

- (Par) Fact  $[p]$  is partially grounded in set of facts  $\Delta =_{df}$  for some set of facts  $\Gamma$ ,  $[p]$  is fully grounded in  $\Gamma$ , and  $\Delta$  is a subset of  $\Gamma$ .<sup>36</sup>

Since partial grounding can be defined in terms of full grounding, the two grounding relations are not fundamentally distinct from one another, and thus countenancing both relations does not jeopardize any commitment one might have to grounding monism.<sup>37</sup>

This way of characterizing grounding monism and pluralism invites the following question: what sense of 'define' do I have in mind? My answer: in whatever sense partial grounding can be defined in terms of full grounding, that is the sense we should use when formulating grounding monism and pluralism. Whether this be a semantic or conceptual variety of definition, or whether it be a distinctively metaphysical type of definition (corresponding roughly to Aristotle's notion of a 'real definition'), is something I take no stand on in this essay. Moreover, if we are using a metaphysical notion of definition, I take no stand on how best to understand that notion: perhaps we can understand it purely in terms of the grounding relation plus modal and logical notions, perhaps we need to appeal to something like essence as well, or perhaps metaphysical definition is a (metaphysically) primitive notion that cannot be (metaphysically) defined in terms of other notions. In what follows I shall simply treat 'definition' as a black box into which one can insert one's favorite definition of definition, as it were.

## 6. Against Moderate Grounding Pluralism

Fine is a grounding pluralist, but his form of grounding pluralism is relatively *moderate*: he only countenances three fundamentally distinct varieties of grounding, and he does not see his pluralism as licensing skepticism about the significance of grounding as a tool for philosophical theorizing or as a topic for philosophical research. Eventually we shall encounter a more *extreme* form of grounding pluralism,

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<sup>36</sup> Two comments. First, since in this definition I have written 'subset' and not 'proper subset', partial grounding is compatible with full grounding, and really by 'partial grounding' I mean 'at least partial grounding'. (Phrasing things this way is standard in the grounding literature.) Second, I have followed Rosen's way of defining partial grounding in terms of full grounding rather than Schaffer's and Fine's. Schaffer (2009, 376n34) and Fine (2012a, 50; 2012b, 3) propose the following slightly different definition:

- (Par\*) Fact  $[p]$  is partially grounded in fact  $[q] =_{df}$  for some set of facts  $\Gamma$ ,  $[p]$  is fully grounded in  $\Gamma$ , and  $[q]$  is a member of  $\Gamma$ .

The problem with this definition is that it makes the partial grounding relation singular on the side of what does the grounding, whereas presumably we want it to be plural on that side of the relation. For example, presumably we want to be able to say that [The ball is red, round, and rubber] is partially grounded in [The ball is red] and [The ball is round], taken together.

<sup>37</sup> For similar reasons, even though Fine distinguishes between *factive* and *non-factive* grounding (Fine 2012a, 49-50), between *mediate* and *immediate* grounding (Fine 2012a, 50-51), and between *weak* and *strict* grounding (Fine 2012a, 51-53; Fine 2012b, 3-4), none of these distinctions thereby makes him a grounding pluralist, since in each case he holds that one half of the distinction can be defined in terms of the other.

according to which there is no generic grounding relation underlying all others, but rather only a large number of already familiar dependence relations such as the set membership relation and the determinate–determinable relation, with the result being that we should be skeptical that there is an exciting new topic here. I intend to argue against both sorts of pluralism, but it will help to start by explaining my argument as it applies to moderate pluralists such as Fine.

The basic idea behind my argument is simple. It is standard to assume that there are various logical principles governing the grounding relation, such as a principle of transitivity or the principle that a disjunction is always grounded in its disjuncts. Some of these principles, when formulated in a pure way so that the same grounding relation appears throughout the principle, hold for each of the grounding relations posited by the pluralist. But what about mixed versions of those principles, in which we formulate them using several different grounding relations in the same principle? If the mixed versions of the logical principles are just as plausible as the pure ones, this gives us excellent reason to think that there is in fact a unity here, not several distinct relations that cannot be defined in terms of each other. Otherwise why would these various distinct relations be logically related to one another in this way?

More specifically, here is how my argumentative strategy works, when applied to Fine’s brand of pluralism. Each iteration of the argument involves three steps:

- i. Find a logical principle which relates several grounding claims to one another and which holds when it is applied exclusively to metaphysical grounding, or exclusively to natural grounding, or exclusively to normative grounding.
- ii. Argue that the logical principle also holds in mixed cases.
- iii. Infer that the best explanation of (i) and (ii) is that there is a single generic grounding relation underlying these more specific grounding relations.

There are any number of logical principles for which, I believe, (i) and (ii) are true. However, I shall restrict myself to showing how the argument works when applied to two of the most widely accepted logical principles governing grounding, namely a principle of transitivity (§6.1) and a principle of asymmetry (§6.2). I focus on these two principles because they are so widely accepted, and because they demonstrate importantly different ways in which my argumentative strategy can work. However, philosophers are a contentious lot, and it turns out that there are some who dispute even these two logical principles.<sup>38</sup> But as I shall explain (§6.3), even if transitivity and asymmetry do not hold with full generality, I can still offer a version of my argument in terms of them. Finally, after taking myself to have provided strong evidence against Fine’s form of grounding pluralism, I end this section (§6.4) by considering Fine’s positive argument for his view.

In what follows I only demonstrate how my argumentative strategy can be used to unify Fine’s notions of metaphysical and normative grounding, since that is the case that most concerns me. It is easy

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<sup>38</sup> In fact, I myself am open to the possibility that asymmetry might fail in certain rare cases, although I am much more reluctant to give up on the transitivity of grounding. More on this below.

enough to use similar arguments to establish the unity of natural and metaphysical grounding and the unity of natural and normative grounding.

### 6.1. *The Argument from Transitive Links*

Let us begin, then, with the argument as applied to transitivity. I call this way of implementing my strategy the Argument from Transitive Links. Let us grant to Fine, for the sake of argument, that there is both a metaphysical grounding relation and a normative grounding relation. It is extremely plausible that each of these relations is transitive, so that the following principles hold:

- (Tran<sub>met</sub>)      If  $[p]$  is partially metaphysically grounded in  $[q]$ , and  $[q]$  is partially metaphysically grounded in  $[r]$ , then  $[p]$  is partially metaphysically grounded in  $[r]$ .
- (Tran<sub>nor</sub>)      If  $[p]$  is partially normatively grounded in  $[q]$ , and  $[q]$  is partially normatively grounded in  $[r]$ , then  $[p]$  is partially normatively grounded in  $[r]$ .<sup>39</sup>

For example, if [The ball is red and round, or the ball is orange and oval] is fully (hence partially) metaphysically grounded in [The ball is red and round], and if [The ball is red and round] is partially metaphysically grounded in [The ball is red], then surely [The ball is red and round, or the ball is orange and oval] is partially metaphysically grounded in [The ball is red]. Similarly, if [Her action is right] is fully (hence partially) normatively grounded in [Her action is optimific], and if [Her action is optimific] is fully (hence partially) normatively grounded in [Her action is felicitic], then surely [Her action is right] is normatively grounded (both partially and fully) in [Her action is felicitic].<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Two comments about these principles. First, Fine (2010, 100; 2012a, 56; 2012b, 5) and Schaffer (2012, 124) prefer to formulate transitivity as a rule of inference rather than an axiom in the form of a conditional. However, the difference between these two will be inconsequential for our purposes, so I follow Rosen (2010, 116) in using the more succinct conditional formulation.

Second, I have formulated transitivity in terms of a partial grounding relation between individual facts because that is the least controversial version of transitivity, and because that version will suffice for my purposes. Rosen (ibid.) advocates the following version of a transitivity principle for full grounding:

- (Tran\*)      If  $[p]$  is fully grounded in  $[q]$ ,  $\Gamma$ , and  $[q]$  is fully grounded in  $\Delta$ , then  $[p]$  is fully grounded in  $\Gamma, \Delta$ ,

and Fine (2012a, 56; 2012b, 5) endorses several principles that together entail this principle of Rosen's. However, I believe it is better to formulate the transitivity principle for full grounding as

- (Tran\*\*)      If  $[p]$  is fully grounded in  $[q]$ ,  $\Gamma$ ;  $[q]$  is fully grounded in  $\Delta$ ; and  $[q] \notin \Gamma$ , then  $[p]$  is fully grounded in  $\Gamma, \Delta$ .

The problem, as I see it, with (Tran\*) is that it entails

- (Tran\*\*\*)      If  $[p]$  is fully grounded in  $[q]$ ,  $\Gamma$ , and  $[q]$  is fully grounded in  $\Delta$ , then it is both the case that  $[p]$  is fully grounded in  $\Gamma, \Delta$  and that  $[p]$  is fully grounded in  $[q], \Gamma, \Delta$ .

(To see why, note that if  $[p]$  is fully grounded in  $[q]$ ,  $\Gamma$ , then it is also the case that  $[p]$  is fully grounded in  $[q], [q], \Gamma$ .) But (Tran\*\*\*) strikes me as implausible. (Suppose  $[(\exists x)(Fx) \wedge Gb]$  is fully grounded in  $[(\exists x)Fx], [Gb]$ , and suppose  $[(\exists x)Fx]$  is fully grounded in  $[Fa]$ . Does it follow that  $[(\exists x)(Fx) \wedge Gb]$  is fully grounded in  $[Fa], [Gb]$  and also fully grounded in  $[(\exists x)Fx], [Fa], [Gb]$ ? To insist upon that seems to go against the main intuition motivating the thought that grounding is non-monotonic.) It is in order to sidestep these issues that I restrict myself to transitivity principles for partial grounding.

<sup>40</sup> Recall that an action is optimific iff it produces at least as much overall good as any alternative, and an action is felicitic iff it produces at least as much overall balance of pleasure over pain as any alternative. As it turns out, I think that even if hedonism is the correct theory of the good, an action is not optimific in virtue of being felicitic (rather, I think we have a common-ground structure: that which makes the action felicitic also makes it optimific). But that doesn't undermine the conditional claim I make here.

It is also extremely plausible that the following mixed versions of these principles hold:

- (Tran<sub>met/nor</sub>) If  $[p]$  is metaphysically grounded in  $[q]$ , and  $[q]$  is normatively grounded in  $[r]$ , then  $[p]$  is grounded (in some non-rigged-up sense) in  $[r]$ .
- (Tran<sub>nor/met</sub>) If  $[p]$  is normatively grounded in  $[q]$ , and  $[q]$  is metaphysically grounded in  $[r]$ , then  $[p]$  is grounded (in some non-rigged-up sense) in  $[r]$ .

(Here I have dropped the ‘partially’-qualifiers to reduce clutter; from this point on those qualifiers should be taken as understood, unless I write ‘fully’ instead.) It is necessary to include the phrase ‘in some non-rigged-up sense’ in these principles because we can always fabricate a variety of grounding that would make (Tran<sub>met/nor</sub>) and (Tran<sub>nor/met</sub>) true if that phrase were dropped. For example, we could define a notion of grounding that is the transitive closure of the disjunction of metaphysical and normative grounding, like so:

- (Rig)  $[p]$  is grounded<sub>rigged-up</sub> in  $[q] =_{df}$  there exist a series of facts  $[p], [r_1], \dots, [r_n], [q]$  such that:
- $[p]$  is either metaphysically or normatively grounded in  $[r_1]$ ,
  - $[r_1]$  is either metaphysically or normatively grounded in  $[r_2]$ ,
  - $\dots$ ,
  - $[r_n]$  is either metaphysically or normatively grounded in  $[q]$ .<sup>41</sup>

But I think we have a strong intuition that there is a much more natural type of grounding which makes (Tran<sub>met/nor</sub>) and (Tran<sub>nor/met</sub>) true.

Examples which support these two mixed principles are plentiful. Suppose the moral fact

W = [She acted wrongly in telling him]

obtains normatively in virtue of the natural fact

S = [She could have done something else instead of telling him that would have brought about a greater overall balance of pleasure over pain].

And suppose the disjunctive fact

O = [Either she acted wrongly in telling him, or she acted in a way she believed to be wrong]

obtains metaphysically in virtue of W. Then it is very natural to hold that O also obtains in virtue of S, in some non-rigged-up sense of ‘in virtue of’. This offers partial confirmation of (Tran<sub>met/nor</sub>).

Similarly, suppose that W still normatively obtains in virtue of S, and suppose that, in addition, S obtains metaphysically in virtue of

L = [She could have lied instead of telling him, her lying would have brought about an overall balance of 100 units of pleasure over pain, and her telling him brought about an overall balance of 20 units of pleasure over pain].

Then it is very natural to hold that W also obtains in virtue of L, in some non-rigged-up sense of ‘in virtue of’. This offers partial confirmation of (Tran<sub>nor/met</sub>).

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<sup>41</sup> My notation here should be interpreted in such a way that the series  $[p], [q]$  counts a limiting case of the series  $[p], [r_1], \dots, [r_n], [q]$ .

However, if metaphysical and normative grounding were fundamentally distinct grounding relations, as Fine holds, then it would be very puzzling why  $(\text{Tran}_{\text{met}/\text{nor}})$  and  $(\text{Tran}_{\text{nor}/\text{met}})$  are true. Why on earth are metaphysical and normative grounding logically related to each other in this way, given Fine's conception of their relation (or lack thereof)? Why on earth is it possible to link these two relations together via applications of transitivity and derive additional grounding claims, if the two grounding relations have, at a fundamental level, nothing to do with each other?

An analogy here will help.<sup>42</sup> Sometimes when we say that one city is larger than another, we mean that the first city is *larger in area* than the second, and sometimes we mean that the first city is *larger in population* than the second. Let us use 'larger<sub>area</sub>' to refer the first of these relations and 'larger<sub>pop</sub>' to refer to the second. It is extremely plausible that each of these relations is transitive, so that we have the following (where  $a$ ,  $b$ , and  $c$  are variables ranging over cities):

$(\text{Tran}_{\text{area}})$       If  $a$  is larger<sub>area</sub> than  $b$ , and  $b$  is larger<sub>area</sub> than  $c$ , then  $a$  is larger<sub>area</sub> than  $c$ .

$(\text{Tran}_{\text{pop}})$       If  $a$  is larger<sub>pop</sub> than  $b$ , and  $b$  is larger<sub>pop</sub> than  $c$ , then  $a$  is larger<sub>pop</sub> than  $c$ .

However, we have absolutely no inclination to think that the following mixed versions of these principles are also true:

$(\text{Tran}_{\text{area}/\text{pop}})$     If  $a$  is larger<sub>area</sub> than  $b$ , and  $b$  is larger<sub>pop</sub> than  $c$ , then  $a$  is larger (in some sense) than  $c$ .

$(\text{Tran}_{\text{pop}/\text{area}})$     If  $a$  is larger<sub>pop</sub> than  $b$ , and  $b$  is larger<sub>area</sub> than  $c$ , then  $a$  is larger (in some sense) than  $c$ .

Dallas is larger in area than New York City, and New York City is larger in population than Houston, but it does not follow that Dallas is larger, in some sense, than Houston. (In fact, Houston has both a greater population and a larger landmass than Dallas.)<sup>43</sup> Of course, we could always rig up a so-called "larger" relation that makes  $(\text{Tran}_{\text{area}/\text{pop}})$  and  $(\text{Tran}_{\text{pop}/\text{area}})$  come out true, by insisting that the transitive closure of the disjunction of the is-larger-in-area-than and is-larger-in-population-than relations itself counts as a kind of is-larger-than relation. However, I think the Dallas/NYC/Houston example shows that this rigged-up relation does not deserve to be called an is-larger-than relation.  $(\text{Tran}_{\text{area}/\text{pop}})$  and  $(\text{Tran}_{\text{pop}/\text{area}})$  are flat-out false.

Now contrast that case with another. The relations *being a matrilineal descendant of* and *being a patrilineal descendant of* are both transitive, so that the following principles hold (where  $x$ ,  $y$ , and  $z$  are variables ranging over human beings):

$(\text{Tran}_{\text{mat}})$       If  $x$  is a matrilineal descendant of  $y$ , and  $y$  is a matrilineal descendant of  $z$ , then  $x$  is a matrilineal descendant of  $z$ .

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<sup>42</sup> The example to follow is inspired by Elgin 1996, 218.

<sup>43</sup> Dallas may well be larger in some other sense than Houston; perhaps, for example, it is has a larger political clout. However, that Dallas is larger in this sense doesn't follow as a matter of logic from  $\langle \text{Dallas is larger}_{\text{area}} \text{ than New York City} \rangle$  and  $\langle \text{New York City is larger}_{\text{pop}} \text{ than Houston} \rangle$ .



(Tran<sub>pat</sub>) If  $x$  is a patrilineal descendant of  $y$ , and  $y$  is a patrilineal descendant of  $z$ , then  $x$  is a patrilineal descendant of  $z$ .

However, in this case it is undeniable that the following mixed versions of these principles also hold:

(Tran<sub>mat/pat</sub>) If  $x$  is a matrilineal descendant of  $y$ , and  $y$  is a patrilineal descendant of  $z$ , then  $x$  is a descendant (in some sense) of  $z$ .

(Tran<sub>pat/mat</sub>) If  $x$  is a patrilineal descendant of  $y$ , and  $y$  is a matrilineal descendant of  $z$ , then  $x$  is a descendant (in some sense) of  $z$ .

Indeed, the sense of descentance in the consequent of both principles is simply the relation *being a descendant (full stop) of*. Why are the mixed versions of transitivity so plausible in this case? It is because the relations *being a matrilineal descendant of* and *being a patrilineal descendant of* are not fundamentally distinct kinship relations: the former can be defined in terms of the kinship relation *being a child of* together with the property *being female*, and the latter can be defined in terms of the kinship relation *being a child of* together with the property *being male*. Moreover, *being a descendant (full stop) of* can be defined in terms of *being a child of* on its own. All together, we have:

(Mat)  $x$  is a matrilineal descendant of  $y =_{df}$  there exists a series of human beings  $x, z_1, \dots, z_n, y$  such that:

$x$  is a child of  $z_1$ , and  $z_1$  is female;<sup>44</sup>  
 $z_1$  is a child of  $z_2$ , and  $z_2$  is female;  
 $\dots$ ;  
 $z_n$  is a child of  $y$ , and  $y$  is female.

(Pat)  $x$  is a patrilineal descendant of  $y =_{df}$  there exists a series of human beings  $x, z_1, \dots, z_n, y$  such that:

$x$  is a child of  $z_1$ , and  $z_1$  is male;  
 $z_1$  is a child of  $z_2$ , and  $z_2$  is male;  
 $\dots$ ;  
 $z_n$  is a child of  $y$ , and  $y$  is male.

(Des)  $x$  is a descendant of  $y =_{df}$  there exists a series of human beings  $x, z_1, \dots, z_n, y$  such that:

$x$  is a child of  $z_1$ ,  
 $z_1$  is a child of  $z_2$ ,  
 $\dots$ ,  
 $z_n$  is a child of  $y$ .

These three definitions together entail (Tran<sub>mat</sub>), (Tran<sub>pat</sub>), (Tran<sub>mat/pat</sub>), and (Tran<sub>pat/mat</sub>).

The case of larger<sub>area</sub> vs. larger<sub>pop</sub> is a typical example of what happens when we consider mixed transitivity principles for two fundamentally distinct transitive relations of a given sort. Similarly, the case of matrilineal descentance vs. patrilineal descentance is a typical example of what happens when we

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<sup>44</sup> I assume here, for the sake of simplicity, that (i) humans are only able to reproduce through sexual reproduction between a male and a female, (ii) a human cannot be both male and female at a given time, and (iii) humans do not change in sex over time. A more precise formulation which does not rely on those assumptions would replace “ $x$  is a child of  $z_1$ , and  $z_1$  is female” with “ $(\exists w_1)(x$  was the result of male-female sexual reproduction between  $z_1$  and  $w_1$  in which  $z_1$  played the female role),” or something to that effect.

consider mixed transitivity principles for two fundamentally related transitive relations of a given sort. If metaphysical and normative grounding really were fundamentally distinct grounding relations, as Fine suggests, then we would expect mixed transitivity principles involving metaphysical and normative grounding to be as implausible as the analogous mixed transitivity principles involving the larger<sub>area</sub> and larger<sub>pop</sub> relations. But what we find is the opposite: the mixed transitivity principles for metaphysical and normative grounding are as plausible as they are in the case of the matrilineal descent and patrilineal descent relations. All of which gives us excellent—though, of course, defeasible—evidence that metaphysical and normative grounding are fundamentally linked to one another in some way

What, then, is the connection between metaphysical and normative grounding? One possibility—call it *the identity proposal*—is that there is just a single generic grounding relation, and the so-called “metaphysical” and “normative” grounding relations are identical to this relation.<sup>45</sup> Another possibility—call it *the suppression proposal*—is that so-called “metaphysical” grounding is just the generic grounding relation, and normative grounding can be defined in terms of that relation as follows:

(Nor)  $[p]$  is (fully) normatively grounded in  $\Delta =_{df}$  there exists a non-empty set,  $\Gamma$ , of fundamental normative truths such that  $[p]$  is (fully) generically grounded in  $\Delta, \Gamma$ .

In short: normative grounding is metaphysical grounding in which the appeal to fundamental normative truths has been suppressed. Now personally I prefer the first of these proposals, for the following reason. As already mentioned, I think a typical fundamental normative truth is of the form

(Op\*) Necessarily, an action is morally right if and only if, and (fully) because, it is optimific, rather than of the form

(Op) Necessarily, an action is morally right if and only if it is optimific.<sup>46</sup>

However, if we want to say that [His action is morally right] is fully normatively grounded in [His action is optimific] due to the fact that [His action is morally right] is fully generically grounded in (Op\*) and [His action is optimific], taken together, we face a dilemma. What variety of grounding does the ‘because’ in (Op\*) pick out? If it picks out grounding in the generic sense, then (Op\*) is not needed in order to fully generically ground [His action is morally right]; [His action is optimific] on its own is enough to do this. But if the ‘because’ in (Op\*)—and in the other fundamental normative truths—picks out normative grounding, then our definition of normative grounding becomes objectionably circular, since the normative grounding relation has been defined in terms of something that itself involves a normative

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<sup>45</sup> Note that an advocate of this proposal might be skeptical that there is any consistent pattern to our use of the labels ‘metaphysical grounding’ and ‘normative grounding’ beyond certain paradigm cases; as such, an advocate of the identity proposal does not owe us an account of when generic grounding is labeled ‘metaphysical grounding’ and when it is labeled ‘normative grounding’ by Fine-style pluralists.

<sup>46</sup> Or, at least, if the fundamental normative truths are exceptionless general principles, then that is their form. A similar result follows if the fundamental normative truths take the form of *ceteris paribus* laws or of particular normative verdicts, and also follows if there are no normative truths that qualify as fundamental (since in that case (Nor) is a non-starter).

grounding relation.<sup>47</sup>

Regardless, though, of whether we prefer the first way I have mentioned of linking metaphysical and normative grounding, or the second way, or some other way all together, I think the plausibility of mixed transitivity principles gives us good reason to think that some linkage of this sort is needed. Additional evidence is provided by consideration of mixed versions of an asymmetry requirement for grounding.

### 6.2. *The Argument from Asymmetric Dovetailing*

Grounding seems to be an asymmetric relation of dependence. So if we distinguish between metaphysical and normative grounding, as Fine does, then presumably each of these relations will be governed by a pure asymmetry principle of the following form:

- (Asym<sub>met</sub>)      If  $[p]$  is metaphysically grounded in  $[q]$ , then it is not the case that  $[q]$  is metaphysically grounded in  $[p]$ .
- (Asym<sub>nor</sub>)      If  $[p]$  is normatively grounded in  $[q]$ , then it is not the case that  $[q]$  is normatively grounded in  $[p]$ .

However, as with transitivity, mixed versions of these principles are just as plausible as the pure versions. In particular, we are very strongly inclined to hold that the following is the case:

- (Asym<sub>met/nor</sub>)      If  $[p]$  is metaphysically grounded in  $[q]$ , then it is not the case that  $[q]$  is normatively grounded in  $[p]$ .<sup>48</sup>

But if metaphysical and normative grounding really were fundamentally distinct relations, it would be utterly mysterious why these two relations would “get out of each other’s way” in this manner.

Our two analogies from before help here as well. The relations *being larger in area than* and *being larger in population than* are both asymmetric, so that we have:

- (Asym<sub>area</sub>)      If  $a$  is larger<sub>area</sub> than  $b$ , then it is not the case that  $b$  is larger<sub>area</sub> than  $a$ .
- (Asym<sub>pop</sub>)      If  $a$  is larger<sub>pop</sub> than  $b$ , then it is not the case that  $b$  is larger<sub>pop</sub> than  $a$ .

However, the following mixed version of these principles is undeniably false:

- (Asym<sub>area/pop</sub>)      If  $a$  is larger<sub>area</sub> than  $b$ , then it is not the case that  $b$  is larger<sub>pop</sub> than  $a$ .

(For example, Houston is larger in area than New York City, but New York City is larger in population

<sup>47</sup> Although when it comes to the relation between metaphysical and normative grounding, I prefer the identity proposal, when it comes to the relation between metaphysical and natural grounding, I can see the attraction of (an analogue of) the suppression proposal. On such a view, metaphysical grounding just is generic grounding, and natural grounding can be defined in terms of that relation as follows:

- (Nat)       $[p]$  is (fully) naturally grounded in  $\Delta \equiv_{df}$  there exists a non-empty set,  $\Gamma$ , of fundamental laws of nature such that  $[p]$  is (fully) metaphysically grounded in  $\Delta, \Gamma$ .

Whether this proposal is tenable depends on the proper account of laws of nature and of scientific explanation more generally, two issues I do not wish to take a stand on in this essay.

<sup>48</sup> In this case there is no need to consider two mixed principles, since by contraposition they are equivalent to one other.

than Houston.) Thus in a typical case in which we have two fundamentally distinct relations of the same broad type, the asymmetry of each relation fails to manifest in a true mixed principle of asymmetry.

The opposite happens, however, in the other analogous case that we considered. If we assume (as I am comfortable doing) that time travel is not possible, then the relations *being a matrilineal descendant of* and *being a patrilineal descendant of* are both asymmetric. Thus we have:

(Asym<sub>mat</sub>)      If *a* is a matrilineal descendant of *b*, then it is not the case that *b* is a matrilineal descendant of *a*.

(Asym<sub>pat</sub>)      If *a* is a patrilineal descendant of *b*, then it is not the case that *b* is a patrilineal descendant of *a*.

However, the following mixed version of these principles is also extremely plausible:

(Asym<sub>mat/pat</sub>)      If *a* is a matrilineal descendant of *b*, then it is not the case that *b* is a patrilineal descendant of *a*.

Why is this so? It is because if *a* is a matrilineal descendant of *b* while *b* is a patrilineal descendant of *a*, then it follows—given our definitions of matrilineal descentance, patrilineal descentance, and descentance *sans phrase*—that *a* (who, by the way, must be male) is his own descendant. However, it is not possible to be one's own descendant (again, assuming that time travel is impossible). In short, it is because the matrilineal descentance and patrilineal descentance relations are not fundamentally distinct kinship relations that (Asym<sub>mat/pat</sub>) is true. Mixed asymmetry is strong evidence that two relations of a given type can be definitionally linked.

I call this application of my argumentative strategy the Argument from Asymmetric Dovetailing because the overall picture we get is one in which the pattern of metaphysical grounding relations between facts neatly dovetails with the pattern of normative grounding relations between facts: overlaying the two patterns on one another does not result in any cases in which [*p*] grounds [*q*] in one of these two senses and [*q*] grounds [*p*] in the other. In the case of the Argument from Transitive Links, we saw a somewhat different phenomenon: instead of the metaphysical and normative grounding relations meshing with one another in an all-too-convenient manner, instead we saw that a given instance of a metaphysical grounding relation and a given instance of a normative grounding relation can entail the existence of an additional instance of a grounding relation of some sort. So (to engage in some harmless anthropomorphization) in the case of transitivity, it is as if the two ostensibly unrelated grounding relations interact with one another so as to produce yet more grounding relations, whereas in the case of asymmetry, it is as if the two ostensibly unrelated grounding relations manage to steer clear of each other as they go about their business. What miraculous behavior! Rather than holding that a pre-established harmony, twice over, has led metaphysical and normative grounding to function in this way, I think we do better to reject Fine's pluralism about these two relations.

It is worth pausing here to clarify the nature of my argument. I am offering an *abductive argument*

from the existence of mixed asymmetry and mixed transitivity principles to the unity of metaphysical and normative grounding. I am *not* claiming that if two principles are governed by mixed asymmetry and transitivity principles, then this *deductively entails* that the two relations are fundamentally connected (either by being the same relation, or by being definitionally linked to one another in some way). There exist cases in which either a mixed asymmetry principle or a mixed transitivity principle hold between two relations, but the best explanation of why this is so appeals to something other than a fundamental connection between the two relations. Consider, for instance, the relations *being the son of* and *being the nose of*.<sup>49</sup> These two asymmetric relations obey the following mixed asymmetry principle:

(Asym<sub>nose/son</sub>)     If  $x$  is the nose of  $y$ , then it is not the case that  $y$  is the son of  $x$ .

However, in this particular case we can explain why such a mixed asymmetry principle holds merely by appealing to facts about the relata of our two relations: the left-hand side of the is-a-nose-of relation must be a body part, whereas the right-hand side of the is-a-son-of relation cannot be a body part, so if  $x$  bears the first of these relations to  $y$ , it follows that  $y$  does not bear the second to  $x$ . But no such explanation can be offered in the case of (Asym<sub>met/nor</sub>), our mixed asymmetry principle for metaphysical and normative grounding. Perhaps it is true that only normative facts can stand in the is-normatively-grounded-in relation to some other fact or facts. However, since it is undoubtedly the case that normative facts can stand in metaphysical grounding relations to other normative facts,<sup>50</sup> we cannot derive (Asym<sub>met/nor</sub>) from this restriction on the relata of the normative grounding relation, in the way in which we can derive (Asym<sub>nose/son</sub>) from restrictions on the relata of its constituent relations. And, I claim, no other explanation of (Asym<sub>met/nor</sub>) is in the offing, short of positing a fundamental link between metaphysical and normative grounding. Of course, in claiming this I have not run through every other candidate explanation and explicitly argued against them. But we rarely do so when offering abductive arguments.

Finally, although I have presented the Argument from Transitive Links and the Argument from Asymmetric Dovetailing as if they constitute separate arguments that serve as independent sources of abductive evidence for grounding monism, these two arguments are at their strongest when they are combined into a single abductive argument that is stronger than the sum of its parts. Combining the arguments increases their strength because some explanations of mixed transitivity commit us to denying mixed asymmetry, and some explanations of mixed asymmetry commit us to denying mixed transitivity. So finding a plausible explanation of all three of the following:

(Tran<sub>met/nor</sub>)     If  $[p]$  is metaphysically grounded in  $[q]$ , and  $[q]$  is normatively grounded in  $[r]$ , then  $[p]$  is grounded (in some non-rigged-up sense) in  $[r]$ ,

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<sup>49</sup> I owe this example to John Mackay.

<sup>50</sup> For instance, [Action A was not optimific] might be metaphysically grounded in [A brought about 20 total units of good in the world, action A\* was an alternative to A, and A\* would have brought about 100 total units of good in the world], and [Subject S knows something about platypuses] might be metaphysically grounded in [S knows that platypuses are mammals].

- (Tran<sub>nor/met</sub>) If  $[p]$  is normatively grounded in  $[q]$ , and  $[q]$  is metaphysically grounded in  $[r]$ , then  $[p]$  is grounded (in some non-rigged-up sense) in  $[r]$ ,
- (Asym<sub>met/nor</sub>) If  $[p]$  is metaphysically grounded in  $[q]$ , then it is not the case that  $[q]$  is normatively grounded in  $[p]$

is more difficult than finding an explanation of the first two on their own and a separate explanation of the third on its own. In particular, most attempts to explain (Asym<sub>met/nor</sub>) by appealing to restrictions on the relation of the metaphysical and normative grounding relations are incompatible with taking (Tran<sub>met/nor</sub>) and (Tran<sub>nor/met</sub>) to be non-vacuously true (i.e. to be true, but not true because their antecedents are never satisfied). Presumably such attempts would involve arguing either that (i) the same type of fact cannot be both on the left-hand side of the is-metaphysically-grounded-in relation and the right-hand side of the is-normatively-grounded-in relation or that (ii) the same type of fact cannot be both on the right-hand side of the is-metaphysically-grounded-in relation and the left-hand side of the is-normatively-grounded-in relation. But notice that the non-vacuous truth of (Tran<sub>met/nor</sub>) entails the falsity of (ii), and the non-vacuous truth of (Tran<sub>nor/met</sub>) entails the falsity of (i). I see little hope of explaining the combination of (Tran<sub>met/nor</sub>), (Tran<sub>nor/met</sub>), and (Asym<sub>met/nor</sub>) unless we posit a fundamental connection between metaphysical and normative grounding.<sup>51</sup>

### 6.3. What If Grounding Is Non-transitive or Non-asymmetric?

I conclude that we should have grave doubts that there are two fundamentally distinct grounding relations here, one of a metaphysical variety, the other of a normative variety. It might appear, though, that in offering my arguments I have relied on two assumptions that at least some authors in the grounding literature dispute, namely that grounding is transitive and that grounding is asymmetric. Does my argument lose its force if we deny either of these assumptions?

No, it does not. For what matters to the argument are the overall patterns evinced by the metaphysical and normative grounding relations and the way those two patterns interact with one other—whether they suggest additional grounding links (as in the case of the Argument from Transitive Links), or

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<sup>51</sup> Combining my two arguments also helps address the following reply to the Argument from Asymmetric Dovetailing, which was suggested to me by Nathaniel Baron-Schmitt and Tom Donaldson. Suppose the metaphysical and normative grounding relations both stand in the determinate–determinable relation to a generic grounding relation. Then, assuming that determinates cannot be defined in terms of their determinables, such a view could count as a form of grounding pluralism. But this view can also explain mixed asymmetry in the following way. Suppose, for reductio, that  $[p]$  metaphysically grounds  $[q]$ , and  $[q]$  normatively grounds  $[p]$ . Then, because these relations are determinates of our generic grounding relation, it follows that  $[p]$  generically grounds  $[q]$ , and  $[q]$  generically grounds  $[p]$ . However, this violates the asymmetry of the generic grounding relation.

One problem with this argument is that it assumes that because the two determinate relations are asymmetric, the generic determinable relation must be asymmetric as well. It is not in general true, though, that determinable two-place relations inherit the formal properties of their determinates. For example, presumably *being 5 miles north of* and *being 5 miles above* are determinates of the determinable *being 5 miles away from*. Yet the two determinates are asymmetric and the determinable symmetric.

But another, deeper problem with the determinate–determinable response is that, while such a view might help with the Argument from Asymmetric Dovetailing, it does not fare particularly well when we consider the Argument from Transitive Links. If  $[p]$  metaphysically grounds  $[q]$ , and  $[q]$  normatively grounds  $[r]$ , then—if metaphysical and normative grounding really were co-determinates of a generic grounding relation—it should follow that  $[p]$  stands in a type of grounding relation to  $[r]$  that is at the same “level of determination” as metaphysical and normative grounding. However, there is no such relation in the offing. So either we must deny mixed transitivity, or we must give up on the determinate–determinable form of grounding pluralism.

whether they mesh with one another in a remarkable fashion (as in the case of the Argument from Asymmetric Dovetailing). These forms of interaction can still occur even if transitivity and asymmetry do not hold in general, for usually those who deny transitivity and asymmetry still admit that *for the most part* grounding is transitive and asymmetric.

Consider the case of transitivity. Schaffer (2012) has argued that the following is a counterexample to the transitivity of grounding. Imagine a metal ball that is almost a perfect sphere, except for one minor dent in it. Let ‘B’ refer to the ball, and let ‘S’ refer to the ball’s maximally determinate shape. Then Schaffer thinks the following three claims are each highly plausible:

- (B<sub>1</sub>) [Ball B has the particular dent it does] partially grounds [B has shape S].<sup>52</sup>
- (B<sub>2</sub>) [Ball B has shape S] partially grounds [B is more-or-less spherical].
- (B<sub>3</sub>) [Ball B has the particular dent it does] does *not* partially ground [B is more-or-less spherical].

Together, (B<sub>1</sub>), (B<sub>2</sub>), and (B<sub>3</sub>) constitute a counterexample to (Tran<sub>meta</sub>), if we interpret the relevant type of grounding in each to be metaphysical grounding (as presumably a Fine-style pluralist would recommend that we do).<sup>53</sup>

Now, as it turns out, I don’t think Schaffer’s example here is particularly convincing.<sup>54</sup> But even if

<sup>52</sup> Here I follow Jon Litland (2013, 21n11) in cleaning up Schaffer’s example by writing ‘has the particular dent it does’ instead of ‘has a dent’. Raven (2013, 198) and Wilson (2014, 570n85) also silently tidy up Schaffer’s example in a similar way.

<sup>53</sup> Similar would-be counterexamples to the (pure) transitivity of normative grounding are easy to come by. For example, a hedonist act-utilitarian might insist on the following ground claims, in some particular case:

- (A<sub>1</sub>) [Action A would bring about 1 unit of pain] partially normatively grounds [A would bring about an overall balance of 999 units of goodness].
- (A<sub>2</sub>) [Action A would bring about an overall balance of 999 units of goodness] partially normatively grounds [A is morally required].
- (A<sub>3</sub>) [Action A would bring about 1 unit of pain] does *not* partially normatively ground [A is morally required].

Why hold (A<sub>3</sub>)? Well, our hedonist might hold that the 1 unit of pain brought about by A does not *help* make it the case that A is required; if anything, our hedonist might say, it is *despite* its bringing about that 1 unit of pain that A is required.

<sup>54</sup> Schaffer (2012, 127) motivates (B<sub>3</sub>) with the following thought: “The presence of the dent in no way helps to support the more-or-less sphericity of the thing [i.e. the ball], but is if anything a *threat* to the more-or-less sphericity of the thing. The thing is more-or-less spherical *despite* the minor dent, not because of it.” However, I believe Schaffer is being misled here by the phrase ‘helps to ground’, which he takes to be synonymous with the phrase ‘partially grounds’. We should not think of partial grounds as each making a *pro tanto* contribution toward whatever it is that is grounded—as each constituting a metaphysical force vector in a given direction that, together with the other partial grounds, sums up to a given metaphysical effect. Rather, we should think of an individual partial grounds as something that is *part of* a complete grounds for the thing being grounded. And when we conceive of a partial grounds in this way, (B<sub>3</sub>)’s plausibility evaporates. The following claims about full grounds are all extremely plausible:

- (B<sub>1</sub><sup>\*</sup>) [Ball B has the particular dent it does] and [B has the particular shape it does other than the dent] together fully ground [B has shape S].
- (B<sub>2</sub><sup>\*</sup>) [Ball B has shape S] fully grounds [B is more-or-less spherical].
- (B<sub>3</sub><sup>\*</sup>) [Ball B has the particular dent it does] and [B has the particular shape it does other than the dent] together fully ground [B is more-or-less spherical].

It follows from (B<sub>3</sub><sup>\*</sup>), given our definition of partial grounding in terms of full grounding, that (B<sub>3</sub>) is false. For a similar reply to Schaffer’s dented sphere example (although without the diagnosis that Schaffer has been misled by the phrase ‘helps to ground’), see Litland 2013.

we concede to Schaffer his counterexample, the Argument from Transitive Links for grounding monism is not thereby imperiled. For although (B<sub>1</sub>)-(B<sub>3</sub>) may well show that transitivity does not hold *in every possible case*, they do nothing to undermine the many particular cases in which it is plausible that an instance of transitivity holds. Moreover, that is all we need in order to run the Argument from Transitive Links. In particular, Schaffer's example does not weaken our conviction that if [She could have done something else instead of telling him that would have brought about a greater overall balance of pleasure over pain] normatively grounds [She acted wrongly in telling him], which in turn metaphysically grounds [Either she acted wrongly in telling him, or she acted in a way she believed to be wrong], then there *must* be some non-rigged sense in which the first of these facts grounds the third. Moreover, it would be utterly mysterious why this would be so if normative and metaphysical grounding were fundamentally distinct grounding relations. In short, all we need to run the Argument from Transitive Links are the particular instances which make our mixed transitivity principles true, not the principles in their full generality.

A similar result holds if we deny that grounding is asymmetric. For example, Elizabeth Barnes (MS) provides examples of a number of metaphysical systems—such as versions of mathematical structuralism that construe structure in terms of dependence, or views that combine trope theory with a bundle theory of objects—which she argues are plausibly interpreted as featuring pairs of entities that metaphysically depend on each other.<sup>55</sup> However, for all of these systems, even though asymmetry fails in general, it holds within certain domains. More specifically, although, in all of these systems, there are certain privileged entities that can stand in symmetric grounding relations with each other, the grounding relations between privileged and non-privileged entities, as well as the ground relations among the non-privileged entities themselves, are always asymmetric. (The limiting case of such a system is one in which there is just one privileged entity—God—that grounds itself, and that is the only violation of asymmetry and irreflexivity.) Within such a system, we can run the Argument from Asymmetric Dovetailing by restricting our scope to the non-privileged entities for which asymmetry holds in general. When it comes to those entities, a pure version of asymmetry holds for both metaphysical and normative grounding, and presumably a mixed version of asymmetry holds as well. But why would this be so, if metaphysical and normative grounding were unrelated to each other? Why would metaphysical and normative grounding “get out of each other's way” within this restricted region, if Fine-style grounding pluralism were true?

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<sup>55</sup> Three comments. First, Barnes only officially argues that her examples feature cases of symmetric *ontological dependence*, not that they feature cases of symmetric *grounding* (she takes these notions to be distinct), but many of her examples can also be interpreted as featuring instances of symmetric grounding. Second, because most of the metaphysical systems Barnes mentions are incompatible with one another, her examples do not constitute a cumulative case for the view *that grounding is not asymmetric*; at most they constitute a cumulative case for the view *that it is not a conceptual truth that grounding is asymmetric*. Third, it is interesting to note that although most of Barnes' systems can be interpreted as allowing it to be possible for X to *partially* ground Y while Y *partially* grounds X, few (if any) of her systems allow it to be possible for X to *fully* ground Y while Y *fully* grounds X. So perhaps although a circle of partial ground is a coherent notion, a circle of full ground is not. (This thought that circles built up out of partial grounding relations might be less problematic than circles built up out of full grounding relations is the metaphysical analogue of a point I make with regard to circles of epistemic dependence in Berker forthcoming.)



Even if grounding is not always asymmetric, we can still run a version of the Argument from Asymmetric Dovetailing.

#### 6.4. Fine's Argument for Grounding Pluralism

I have just argued that we should reject Fine's claim that there are fundamentally distinct metaphysical and normative grounding relations. However, Fine does not just pull his view out of thin air; he has a positive argument for it. So let us end this section by considering Fine's way of arguing for grounding pluralism.

Fine's (2012a, 39-40) argument relies on two central sets of assumptions. First, Fine has argued elsewhere (Fine 2002) that there are three fundamentally distinct varieties of necessity, none of which can be defined in terms of the others: *metaphysical necessity*, *normative necessity*, and *natural necessity*. Second, Fine holds that a set of full grounds necessitate that which they ground, where the relevant variety of necessity corresponds to the relevant variety of grounding. Thus we have:

(Nec<sub>met</sub>) If  $[p]$  is fully metaphysically grounded in  $\Gamma$ , then  $\Box_{met}(\wedge\Gamma \supset p)$ .<sup>56</sup>

(Nec<sub>nor</sub>) If  $[p]$  is fully normatively grounded in  $\Gamma$ , then  $\Box_{nor}(\wedge\Gamma \supset p)$ .

(Nec<sub>nat</sub>) If  $[p]$  is fully naturally grounded in  $\Gamma$ , then  $\Box_{nat}(\wedge\Gamma \supset p)$ .

Fine's argument on the basis of these two assumptions is not really an argument for grounding pluralism *per se* as much as it is an argument against one particular way of being a grounding monist. Suppose, using (Nec<sub>met</sub>) and (Nec<sub>nor</sub>) as one's inspiration, one held that metaphysical and normative grounding are both definable in terms of a generic notion of grounding in the following manner:

(Met)  $[p]$  is fully metaphysically grounded in  $\Gamma =_{df}$   $[p]$  is fully grounded (in the generic sense) in  $\Gamma$ , and  $\Box_{met}(\wedge\Gamma \supset p)$ .

(Nor\*)  $[p]$  is fully normatively grounded in  $\Gamma =_{df}$   $[p]$  is fully grounded (in the generic sense) in  $\Gamma$ , and  $\Box_{nor}(\wedge\Gamma \supset p)$ .

Fine then argues against these definitions as follows. Suppose we have a case in which, for some action A,  $[A$  is either right or not right] is fully metaphysically grounded in  $[A$  is right], and  $[A$  is right] is fully normatively grounded in  $[A$  maximizes happiness]. It follows, claims Fine, that  $[A$  is either right or not right] is fully grounded, in the generic sense, in  $[A$  maximizes happiness]. Moreover, it is metaphysically necessary that  $\langle$ If A maximizes happiness, then A is either right nor not right $\rangle$  is true, since the truth of the antecedent entails the existence of action A, and it is metaphysically necessary that the consequent is true when A exists. Thus it follows from (Met) that  $[A$  maximizes happiness] fully metaphysically grounds  $[A$  is either right or not right]. But Fine insists that the former fact does *not* metaphysically ground the latter fact. So we have a counterexample to (Met). "Nor is it altogether clear," Fine (2012a, 40) tells us,

<sup>56</sup> If  $\Gamma$  is set of facts  $\{[q_1], [q_2], \dots\}$ , then ' $\wedge\Gamma$ ' is shorthand for ' $q_1 \wedge q_2 \wedge \dots$ ' (i.e. a conjunction of the sentences expressing the contents of those facts). I take this notation from Rosen 2010, 118.

“how the definition might be modified so as to avoid counterexamples of this sort.”

Now at first it might seem that Fine is relying, in his argument here, on a mixed transitivity principle in order to move from  $\langle [A \text{ is either right or not right}] \text{ is metaphysically grounded in } [A \text{ is right}] \rangle$  and  $\langle [A \text{ is right}] \text{ is normatively grounded in } [A \text{ maximizes happiness}] \rangle$  to  $\langle [A \text{ is either right or not right}] \text{ is grounded (in the generic sense) in } [A \text{ maximizes happiness}] \rangle$ . And this would raise the interesting issue of why Fine is entitled to assume this mixed transitivity principle, given his claims about the fundamental disunity of metaphysical and normative grounding. However, I think Fine is best read here as assuming that *his opponent* is committed to the relevant mixed transitivity principle, in virtue of her commitment to (Met), (Nor\*), and the assumption that generic grounding obeys a pure transitivity principle.<sup>57</sup> What Fine is doing here is offering an attempted *reductio* of his opponent’s position, and it is fine (no pun intended) if in the course of this *reductio* he assumes a logical principle which he believes to be false (as I think he must, lest he open himself to my Argument from Transitive Links).

Indeed, there are counterexamples of this same sort that do not rely on any applications of a principle of transitivity. For example, let  $\langle n \rangle$  be a true normative proposition that holds as a matter of normative necessity, and let  $\langle m \rangle$  be an arbitrary proposition (maybe true, maybe false) that has absolutely nothing to do with  $\langle n \rangle$  (for example:  $\langle \text{The moon is made of cheese} \rangle$ ). Since  $\langle n \rangle$  is true, the fact  $[n]$  obtains, and it is very plausible that this fact fully metaphysically makes it the case that the disjunctive fact  $[n \vee m]$  obtains.<sup>58</sup> It follows from (Met) that  $[n]$  fully grounds (in the generic sense)  $[n \vee m]$ . Moreover, since  $\langle n \rangle$  is normatively necessary, it is also the case that  $\langle n \vee m \rangle$  is normatively necessary (since it has a normatively necessary disjunct) and that  $\langle n \supset (n \vee m) \rangle$  is normatively necessary (since it has a normatively necessary consequent). Thus, via an appeal to (Nor\*), we may conclude that  $[n]$  fully normatively grounds  $[n \vee m]$  (in addition to fully metaphysically grounding it). However, this is implausible. Insofar as we have a grip on what distinguishes normative grounding from metaphysical grounding, the relation between  $[n]$  and  $[n \vee m]$  does not seem to be an instance of the former. So we have a counterexample to the combination of (Met) and (Nor\*).

Thus the real lesson of Fine’s style of counterexample here is not that (Met) and (Nor\*) run into trouble with applications of transitivity. Rather, the lesson is that, just as necessitation is too coarse-grained a tool to distinguish cases of grounding from cases of non-grounding when we are only dealing with a single notion of grounding, so too are metaphysical necessitation and normative necessitation too coarse-grained to distinguish cases of metaphysical grounding from cases of normative grounding when

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<sup>57</sup> So on this way of reading Fine’s argument, his counterexample is really a counterexample to the combination of (Met) and (Nor\*), not a counterexample to (Met) on its own.

<sup>58</sup> The following principle is widely endorsed in the grounding literature (Fine 2010, 100; Fine 2012a, 58; Rosen 2010, 117):

(v) If  $p$ , then  $[p]$  fully metaphysically grounds  $[p \vee q]$ .

I have my doubts about the general truth of (v). However, I do think it holds with respect to  $[n]$  and  $[n \vee m]$  in the case at hand.

we are dealing with multiple types of grounding. Moreover, this lesson is, I believe, a good one. (Met) and (Nor\*) are bad ways of defining metaphysical and normative grounding in terms of a generic notion of grounding.

But that is compatible with there being other ways of fundamentally linking these two varieties of grounding. Indeed, I have already mentioned two possibilities. According to what I called *the identity proposal*, we hold that talk of so-called “metaphysical grounding” and “normative grounding” really are just two different ways of referring to the same generic grounding relation. According to what I called *the suppression proposal*, we hold that metaphysical grounding is identical to generic grounding, and then we define normative grounding to be metaphysical grounding in which the appeal to fundamental normative truths has been suppressed, like so:

(Nor)  $[p]$  is (fully) normatively grounded in  $\Delta =_{df}$  there exists a non-empty set,  $\Gamma$ , of fundamental normative truths such that  $[p]$  is (fully) metaphysically grounded in  $\Delta, \Gamma$ .

The challenge Fine presents is how to endorse either of these ways of unifying metaphysical and normative grounding while following Fine in accepting (Nec<sub>met</sub>) and (Nec<sub>nor</sub>) as well as his modal pluralism.

There are at least three ways of meeting this challenge. The first two are obvious. First, one might simply deny (Nec<sub>met</sub>) and (Nec<sub>nor</sub>). It is notable that Fine himself does not offer a positive argument for either claim. And in the grounding literature, the issue of whether a complete set of grounds necessitates that which it grounds is a hotly contested issue. The most prominent denier of “grounding necessitarianism,” as it is sometimes called, is Jonathan Dancy, who for many decades has argued that a given non-normative fact (for example: [I would enjoy  $\phi$ -ing]) can fully ground a given normative fact (for example: [I have a reason to  $\phi$ ]), even though there are possible situations in which the first fact obtains without the second also obtaining, because certain “disabling conditions” are present.<sup>59</sup> Entering into this debate would take us too far afield. But I simply note that if one goes a certain way in that debate, then a ready response to Fine’s argument against grounding monism is available.

Second, one might reject Fine’s modal pluralism. This would require engaging with Fine’s (2002) powerful arguments for that view. Fully assessing those arguments is another topic outside the scope of this essay.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> See, among other places, Dancy 1981, 1993, 1999, 2000, 2004. In the recent grounding literature, grounding necessitarianism is assumed without argument by Audi (2012b), Dasgupta (2014), Fine (2012a), and Rosen (2010); criticized by Chudnoff (2011; 2013, §6.2), Leuenberger (2014a), and Skiles (forthcoming); and defended by Trogdon (2013).

<sup>60</sup> However, I should note that although Fine’s individual arguments in his 2002 are probing and insightful, the overall case he makes for modal pluralism is inconclusive. In particular, Fine attempts to establish modal pluralism through an argument by elimination: he considers various ways of defining metaphysical, normative, and natural necessity in terms of each other, and then argues against each possibility. But there are a number of serious candidates that Fine does not consider. In particular, although Fine (2002, §6) offers a powerful argument against attempts to identify metaphysical and normative necessity by wedding that metaphysical position with an *a posteriori* epistemology of the normative, so far as I can tell he provides no explicit argument against views that take normative necessity to be identical to metaphysical necessity while endorsing a fundamentally *a priori* epistemology of the normative. As such, almost all non-naturalists—as well as many naturalists—will find their preferred view not addressed by Fine’s arguments.

Finally, there is a third way of meeting Fine's challenge that is less obvious than the other two. Fine's modal pluralism is a thesis about whether one type of modality can be defined in terms of another; it is not in itself a thesis about whether there are entailment relations between these different types of modality. But all we need in order to secure  $(Nec_{met})$  and  $(Nec_{nor})$  is an entailment of the right sort between metaphysical and normative necessity. So a final option would be to *agree* with Fine that normative necessity cannot be defined in terms of metaphysical necessity, and vice versa, but nevertheless hold that because these two notions are linked in another way,  $(Nec_{met})$  and  $(Nec_{nor})$  follow.

For example, consider the following proposal for how to define normative necessity in terms of metaphysical necessity:

(Def)  $\Box_{nor} p =_{df}$  there exists a set,  $\Phi$ , of fundamental normative truths/laws such that  $\Box_{met}(\wedge \Phi \supset p)$ .

Fine (2002, 278) has two very interesting objections to this proposal.<sup>61</sup> However, both of his objections are non-extensional worries: they only call into question the claim that (Def) constitutes an adequate definition of normative necessity, not the claim that it gets the extension of normative necessity correct. So it is compatible with Fine's arguments for modal pluralism that, although (Def) is false, the following related principle connecting metaphysical and normative necessity holds:

(Con)  $\Box_{nor} p$  iff there exists a set,  $\Phi$ , of fundamental normative truths/laws such that  $\Box_{met}(\wedge \Phi \supset p)$ .

Moreover,  $(Nec_{met})$ ,  $(Nor)$ ,  $(Con)$ , and the claim that metaphysical grounding just is generic grounding together entail  $(Nec_{nor})$ . For suppose  $[p]$  is fully normatively grounded in  $\Gamma$ . From  $(Nor)$ , it follows that there exists a set,  $\Phi$ , of fundamental normative truths such that  $[p]$  is fully grounded (in the generic sense) in  $\Phi \cup \Gamma$ . From  $(Nec_{met})$  and the identity of metaphysical and generic grounding, it follows that  $\Box_{met}(\wedge(\Phi \cup \Gamma) \supset p)$ . By standard modal logic, it follows that  $\Box_{met}(\wedge \Phi \supset (\wedge \Gamma \supset p))$ . From  $(Con)$ , it follows that  $\Box_{nor}(\wedge \Gamma \supset p)$ . Thus it is possible to pursue our second possible way of defining metaphysical and normative grounding in terms of each other while also accepting (or at least not taking a stand on) Fine's arguments for modal pluralism, provided one endorses  $(Con)$ .

I conclude that there a number of ways to resist Fine's positive argument for grounding pluralism: one can reject his assumption of grounding necessitarianism, one can reject his assumption of modal pluralism, and one can accept Fine's modal pluralism but hold that his three types of modality are extensionally linked to one another. I leave it to the reader which of these options he or she prefers.

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<sup>61</sup> His first objection (Fine 2002, 278, building on a point first made on 255) is that we cannot specify the basic moral laws (and other fundamental normative truths) without invoking the notion of normative necessity. His second objection (Fine 2002, 278, building on a point first made on 265-66) is that this proposal makes the sense in which the basic moral laws (and other fundamental normative truths) are necessary a trivial matter.

## 7. Against Extreme Grounding Pluralism

I have just argued that the sort of grounding pluralism embraced by Fine is untenable: when we look at the logical behavior of each of the types of grounding positing by Fine and, in particular, look at how those types of grounding interact (or fail to interact) with one another, the striking patterns in this behavior and in these interactions give us excellent reason to conclude that there is a single generic notion of grounding underlying these putatively distinct grounding relations. I now want to consider how my argumentative strategy applies to an importantly different type of grounding pluralist. This sort of grounding pluralist uses his or her pluralism as a way of casting doubt on the importance and significance of the recent wave of research on grounding. He or she does this by insisting that “the” grounding relation really bifurcates into a large number of distinct dependence relations, and moreover that these distinct relations are ones that have been familiar to analytic philosophers for decades, not some important new innovation that has only recently been brought into respectability. I call such a grounding pluralist an *extreme grounding pluralist*, and I shall use Jessica Wilson as my representative example of such a pluralist.

According to Wilson (2014), we need to distinguish the *specific grounding relations (with a small g)* that metaphysicians have been theorizing in terms of for years from this new-fangled *general Grounding relation (with a big g)* being pushed by Fine, Rosen, and Schaffer. Wilson’s (2014, 539) canonical list of small-g grounding/dependence relations is as follows:

- (a) type identity,
- (b) token-but-not-type identity,
- (c) functional realization,
- (d) the classical mereological part–whole relation,
- (e) the causal composition relation,
- (f) the set membership relation,
- (g) the proper subset relation,
- (h) the determinate–determinable relation.

Wilson argues for two theses:

- (i) The big-g Grounding relation can’t do any theoretical work without supplementation by the small-g grounding relations.
- (ii) Once the small-g grounding relations are on the scene, there is no additional work for the big-g Grounding relation to do.

Thus we can see Wilson as advocating a form of extreme grounding pluralism, one which licenses skepticism about the theoretical usefulness of unqualified ‘grounding’-talk. From Wilson’s perspective, when we consider the explosion of work on the big-g Grounding relation over the past few years, it is as if a group of scientists suddenly started publishing papers about the physical properties of jade without realizing that there are two different minerals which go under that name. Worse, it is as if these scientists started doing all of this when there already existed well-established results about the physical properties of

jadeite and well-established results about the physical properties of nephrite.<sup>62</sup>

These are bold claims; should we believe them? I want first (§7.1) to consider Wilson’s case for thesis (i), second (§7.2) to consider her case for thesis (ii), and finally (§7.3) to consider the plausibility of Wilson’s overall position, independently of her arguments for it. But before I do, I should mention a complicating factor. So far I have been assuming that grounding is a relation between facts. However, many of Wilson’s relations (a)-(h) do not take facts as relata on both sides of the relation; for example, facts do not have members (in the set-theoretic sense), and facts are not themselves determinates or determinables (only properties and relations are). So to give Wilson a proper hearing, I will temporarily relax my assumption that facts are the relata of the grounding relation(s) and allow entities of arbitrary ontological category to stand in grounding relations with one another. Thus instead of saying things like “[Socrates exists] grounds [Socrates exists],” we will allow ourselves to say, “Socrates grounds Socrates,” and not take the latter merely to be shorthand for the former.<sup>63</sup>

### 7.1. No Work for Big-G Grounding on Its Own?

Wilson calls her central argument for thesis (i) ‘the argument from metaphysical underdetermination’. In distilled form, it proceeds as follows (Wilson 2014, 542-54):

Suppose we say, “The mental is fully grounded in the physical.” This doesn’t yet settle whether *reductive physicalism* or *non-reductive physicalism* is true, and hence doesn’t yet settle the most important questions we want to ask about the mental, namely: “Is the mental real?” “Is the mental ontologically distinct from the physical?” and “Is the mental distinctively causally efficacious?” Similarly, suppose we say, “The mental is not fully grounded in the physical.” This doesn’t yet settle whether *robust emergentism* or *eliminativism* is true, and hence doesn’t yet settle our three

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<sup>62</sup> Thomas Hofweber (2009, §2) defends a position that is similar to Wilson’s in certain respects. According to Hofweber, there are a number of ordinary notions of priority, including the following:

- (a\*) causal dependence,
- (b\*) counterfactual dependence,
- (c\*) conceptual priority,
- (d\*) one-way logical entailment.

Like Wilson, Hofweber holds that metaphysicians have been theorizing in terms of these specific relations for decades. Like Wilson, Hofweber holds that nothing is gained and much is lost by introducing a more general notion of priority (which he calls ‘metaphysical priority’) over and above these more specific relations. And like Wilson, Hofweber thinks that all of the examples used by advocates of grounding to motivate the more general relation can be accounted for in terms of the specific relations. The major difference between Wilson and Hofweber—other than their different choices for the list of specific relations—is that Hofweber does not wish to refer to his specific relations as varieties of metaphysical dependence or as types of grounding (even small-g grounding). For this reason, it would be inaccurate to label Hofweber an ‘extreme grounding pluralist’, in my terms. But he is an extreme grounding pluralist in all but name. (Since he allows that his specific relations are types of priority relations, perhaps we could refer to him as an ‘extreme priority pluralist’.) In what follows I briefly mention in the footnotes the ways in which my arguments against Wilson also apply to Hofweber.

<sup>63</sup> If we wanted, we could try to stick to a facts-as-the-only-relata framework by constructing “factualized” versions of each of Wilson’s relations (a)-(h). For example, instead of having one of our specific relations be the relation picked out by the two-place predicate ‘\_\_\_ is a member of \_\_\_’, we could take the relevant specific relation to be the relation picked out by the two-place predicate ‘\_\_\_ is a fact of the form [x exists] and \_\_\_ is a fact of the form [y exists], where x is a member of y’. But then Wilson’s claim that metaphysicians have been theorizing in terms of this relation for decades becomes more difficult to motivate. (Incidentally, I think this shows that although Wilson (2014, 536) acts as if she need not take a stand on the relata of the grounding relation(s), her argument does in fact depend on that issue. If Grounding is a relation exclusively between facts, then the set membership relation cannot be a specific version of that relation.)

important questions. In either case, to settle those questions we need to appeal to one of the small-g relations (a)-(h).

Wilson takes thesis (i)—that big-g Grounding can't do any theoretical work without supplementation by the small-g grounding relations—to follow from this line of reasoning.

But no such thing follows. There are two problems here. The first is that, in taking this debate in the philosophy of mind to be sufficiently representative of philosophy as a whole, Wilson is implicitly making an inference from

- (\*) The big-g Grounding relation can't do any theoretical work *addressing whether the mental is real, whether the mental is ontological distinct, and whether the mental is distinctively causally efficacious* without supplementation,

to

- (\*\*) The big-g Grounding relation can't do any theoretical work *in any area of philosophy* without supplementation.

But that is a gigantic leap. Why think that big-g Grounding's ability to answer these three questions is a good test case for its ability to answer any question at all? Wilson's (2014, 544) reply is that her three questions—whether the mental is real, whether the mental is ontologically distinct, and whether the mental is distinctively causally efficacious—are “questions that are the usual target of investigations of metaphysical dependence” when it comes to the mental, but I don't see why that is so. Whether the mental is real is not *in itself* a question about dependence, even if it turns out that one's answer to the dependence question has a bearing on one's answer to the reality question, and similarly for Wilson's other two questions. Wilson (2014, 545) also claims that her three questions “*must be answered* to gain even basic illumination about . . . claims of metaphysical dependence,” but again I don't see why that is so. Perhaps it is true that, when it comes to the mental, the three questions Wilson is asking are more interesting than the question of what, if anything, the mental depends on. But that doesn't show that one hasn't answered the question of dependence until one has answered these other questions, and it also doesn't show that in all areas of philosophy questions of dependence are uninteresting.

Moreover, even if we grant to Wilson her inference from (\*) to (\*\*), there is a second problem. Thesis (i)—the thesis she wants to argue for—is stronger than (\*\*): thesis (i) holds not just that big-g Grounding requires supplementation in order to do any theoretical work at all, but moreover that it requires supplementation *specifically by relations (a)-(h)*. So really Wilson is making an inference from

- (\*\*\*) The big-g Grounding relation can't do any theoretical work *addressing whether the mental is real, whether the mental is ontological distinct, and whether the mental is distinctively causally efficacious* without supplementation *by the small-g grounding relations*,

to

- (i) The big-g Grounding relation can't do any theoretical work *in any area of philosophy* without supplementation *by the small-g grounding relations*.

The second problem is that even if we grant Wilson the cogency of this inference, she has done little to motivate the final clause in (\*\*\*)).

It helps here to consider the views of Rosen and Fine. Although Wilson makes it seem as if Rosen and Fine hold that big-g Grounding is the only tool available to us when addressing fundamental questions in metaphysics, their actual positions are more subtle than that. The whole point of Rosen's 2010 article is to distinguish between two forms of metaphysical dependence: *grounding* and *reduction*. (Hence its title: "Metaphysical Dependence: Grounding and Reduction.") In what is in effect a sequel to that article, Rosen (MS) proposes a definition of *reduction* in terms of *grounding* and *essence* (together with standard modal and logical notions).<sup>64</sup> Meanwhile, Fine opens his 2001 article by stating that one of his main conclusions will be that "questions of what is real are to be settled upon the basis of considerations of *ground*" (Fine 2001, 1). He goes on to postulate that *the factual*, *the real*, and *grounding* are three metaphysically intertwined notions, and moreover he insists that *reduction* can be defined in terms of two of these, namely the real and grounding.<sup>65</sup> So for Fine, the question of whether the mental is grounded in something else has a direct bearing on the question of whether the mental is real. And for both Rosen and Fine, the question of whether the mental is grounded in the physical partly (but not entirely) determines whether the mental is reducible to the physical, an issue which—according to Wilson (2014, 549)—has direct implications for whether the mental is ontologically distinct and distinctively causally efficacious. Moreover—and this is the crucial point—for both Rosen and Fine, what are needed in addition to facts about big-g Grounding in order to settle these questions about reality, reduction, and the like are not facts about Wilson's relations (a)-(h), but rather facts about more abstract notions such as essence. It might be that sometimes it is in virtue of the obtaining of one of Wilson's relations (a)-(h) that the needed additional facts obtain. But Wilson has given us no reason to think that facts about her specific relations are *always* what are needed in addition to facts about big-g Grounding to settle these issues. And even if they are, she has given us no reason to think that the facts about her specific relations do their work in such a way that they occlude any contribution by the big-g Grounding facts, rather than by making something the case which works together with the big-g Grounding facts in order to yield the result that the mental is reducible, or real, or whatever.

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<sup>64</sup> Rosen's (MS, 22) proposal is that being F reduces to being G if and only if (a) it is part of the constitutive essence of F-ness that, for all *x*, if *x* is either F or G, then *x* is F entirely in virtue of being G, and (b) nothing else is part of the constitutive essence of F-ness.

<sup>65</sup> Fine's (2001, 28) proposed link between *the factual*, *the real*, and *grounding* is: "a proposition is factual iff it is real or is grounded in what is real." It is unclear to me what Fine's view about the status of this biconditional is; on the one hand, when offering it he says that it is a "definition" (28), but on the other hand, that is in tension with his earlier claim that "the prospects for defining . . . factuality . . . in fundamentally different terms . . . do not look good" (11). (Maybe the answer is that although this is a definition of factuality, it is not a definition in fundamentally different terms, because reality and grounding can also be defined in terms of factuality. That makes sense of what Fine says here, but it goes against his embargo on circular chains of definitions elsewhere in his work.)

Fine's (2001, 26) definition of *reduction* in terms of *the real* and *grounding* is: "the true proposition P reduces to the propositions Q, R, . . . iff (i) P is not real; (ii) P is grounded in Q, R, . . . ; and (iii) each of Q, R, . . . is either real or grounded in what is real."



I conclude that Wilson’s argument from metaphysical underdetermination is unconvincing. It is not true that big-g Grounding must, on its own, settle the questions “Is the mental real?” “Is the mental ontologically distinct?” and “Is the mental distinctively causally efficacious?” if it is to settle any questions at all. And just because Wilson’s small-g relations have bearing on her three questions, it does not follow that big-g Grounding must be supplemented by those relations, rather than by something else, in order to address her three questions.

### 7.2. *No Work for Big-G Grounding in Addition?*

I now turn to the case that Wilson makes for her second thesis, namely:

- (ii) Once the small-g grounding relations are on the scene, there is no additional work for the big-g Grounding relation to do.

Wilson defends this thesis by responding to a litany of possible objections to her claim that there is nothing to be theoretically gained by appealing to the big-g Grounding relation once the small-g grounding relations have already been invoked. I focus here on two of these objections, one provided by Ted Sider and the other provided by Kit Fine, because I think Wilson’s replies to these two objections are especially revealing. In particular, I think there is a serious tension between her reply to Sider and her reply to Fine.

Sider’s objection is as follows (Wilson 2014, 556): why, asks Sider, are relations (a)-(h) all classified as ‘grounding relations’, unless there is a general notion of Grounding, not reducible to any one of these specific relations? Wilson replies that “references to . . . ‘a grounding relation’ . . . are schematically and neutrally ranging over specific small-g grounding relations” (Wilson 2014, 557; see also 539, 558n61, 568, 576). So, for her, the sentence “Many contemporary metaphysicians have spent their careers studying *the small-g grounding relations*” is really shorthand for “Many contemporary metaphysicians have spent their careers studying *either relation (a), or relation (b), . . . , or relation (h).*”

Fine’s objection is as follows (Wilson 2014, 558): for many of the specific relations in list (a)-(h), Fine points out, the mere holding of that specific relation is not enough to establish a relation of ground, and—when there is a relation of ground—also not enough to establish the direction of priority among the relata. For example,  $\langle X \text{ is a proper part of } Y \rangle$  is compatible with all of the following:  $\langle X \text{ and } Y \text{ do not bear a grounding relation to each other} \rangle$ ,  $\langle X \text{ grounds } Y \rangle$ , and  $\langle Y \text{ grounds } X \rangle$ . So, Fine insists, in order for one of Wilson’s specific relations to serve as a grounding relation in a given direction, additional facts or assumptions are needed, and these further facts or assumptions crucially involve an appeal to Grounding. Wilson replies that relations (a)-(h) “are all capable of serving as ‘small-g’ grounding relations, but . . . their serving in this capacity will typically depend on certain other facts or assumptions,” facts or assumptions which do *not* crucially involve an appeal to big-g Grounding (Wilson 2014, 569). For example, to handle cases in which one relatum is fundamental and the other relatum is non-fundamental, Wilson endorses the following principle:

- (Wil) If X bears one of the relations (a)-(h) to Y, and X is fundamental while Y is not, then that specific relation serves as a small-g grounding relation between X and Y, with Y being small-g grounded in X, and not vice versa.<sup>66</sup>

Wilson is here appealing to a primitive notion of fundamentality—big-f Fundamentality, as it were— which she argues is not just an appeal to big-g Grounding in disguise.<sup>67</sup>

Now even if we grant to Wilson the cogency of her replies to Sider and Fine, when viewed separately, they are not replies that she can offer at the same time. In her reply to Fine, Wilson makes an important concession: she is now no longer claiming that relations (a) through (h) are *in themselves* small-g grounding relations. Rather, these eight relations sometimes “turn on” and become small-g grounding relations when certain other conditions are present. (Worse still, some of these specific relations can “turn on” in two different directions of priority.) But if that’s so, then we need to revise her reply to Sider. We can no longer say that talk of ‘small-g grounding relations’ is just a schematic way of referring to relations (a) through (h), since those relations are not always small-g grounding relations. Rather, we have to say that talk of ‘small-g grounding relations’ is a schematic way of referring to relations (a) through (h) *when they are “turned on” as small-g grounding relations*. But now either circularity or an infinite regress threatens. It is one thing to say that the sentence “Many contemporary metaphysicians have spent their careers studying *the small-g grounding relations*” is just a way of saying, “Many contemporary metaphysicians have spent their careers studying *either relation (a), or relation (b), . . . , or relation (h)*.” But to gloss that sentence as “Many contemporary metaphysicians have spent their careers studying *either relation (a) when it is ‘turned on’ as a small-g grounding relation, or relation (b) when it is ‘turned on’ as a small-g grounding relation, . . . , or relation (h) when it is ‘turned on’ as a small-g grounding relation*” is to border on the incoherent.

Thus Wilson’s reply to Fine undermines her reply to Sider. More generally, we should be suspicious of Wilson’s claim that her relations (a) through (h) deserve to be called ‘grounding relations’ at all. Rather, they appear to be relations that sometimes underwrite—either in the weak sense of ‘being present when’, or in the strong sense of ‘helping ground’—a grounding relation between their relata (or

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<sup>66</sup> Here I generalize from Wilson 2014, 559. Wilson omits my ‘while Y is not’-qualifier, but it is clear from context that she meant to include it.

<sup>67</sup> Her arguments here are not entirely convincing. She addresses the worry that her notion of big-f Fundamentality smuggles in an appeal to big-g Grounding by explicitly arguing against the proposal that for an entity or fact to be Fundamental just is for it to be unGrounded. She has two objections to this proposal. Her first is clearly mistaken. She writes that “the fundamental should not be metaphysically characterized in negative terms—or indeed, in *any* other terms” because “the fundamental is, well, *fundamental*” (2014, 560). But this reply conflates a metaphysical characterization of *those things which are fundamental* with a metaphysical characterization of *the fact that those things are fundamental*: even if [X is fundamental] holds in virtue of [Nothing grounds X], it does not follow that X itself holds in virtue of something. To think otherwise is to make a metaphysical level confusion (to borrow a term from epistemology). Wilson’s second objection is better. She argues that we should allow for the possibility of metaphysical views on which the fundamental facts/entities mutually ground each other, or even ground themselves (as we find on some conceptions of God) (2014, 560-61). I agree with her here. But I don’t think this response completely insulates her from the worry that her notion of the big-f Fundamental implicitly appeals to a notion of big-g Grounding. For even if it does not follow on her conception of Fundamentality that <X is Fundamental> entails <X is unGrounded> (and vice versa), it still might be argued that (i) she holds that <X is Fundamental> and <Y is not Fundamental> together entail <X is not Grounded in Y>, and (ii) this is enough of a link between Fundamentality and Grounding for us to think that they are not independent notions.

between facts intimately related to their relata).<sup>68</sup>

### 7.3. *The Plausibility of Wilson’s Overall Position*

Let us turn, then, to assessing Wilson’s positive proposal, independently of the arguments she marshals in its favor. Can we really make due in our theorizing if we restrict ourselves to “turned on” versions of relations (a)-(h) instead of a generic big-g Grounding relation? And do we really have good reason to suppose that the versions of relations (a)-(h) that have been “turned on” as small-g grounding relations are not unified in any way?

Here we can return to themes we encountered earlier in this essay. It is when we theorize about normative matters that Wilson’s claim that we can make due with relations (a)-(h) in lieu of a generic grounding relation is at its weakest. When consequentialists and their opponents ask, “Is the good prior to the right, or the right prior to the good?” none of Wilson’s relations (a) through (h) adequately capture the notion of priority at issue. Recall Wilson’s list of those relations:

- (a) type identity,
- (b) token-but-not-type identity,
- (c) functional realization,
- (d) the classical mereological part–whole relation,
- (e) the causal composition relation,
- (f) the set membership relation,
- (g) the proper subset relation,
- (h) the determinate–determinable relation.

Taking these in reverse order: the idea that the good might bear *the determinate–determinable relation* to the right is an intriguing proposal, but it most certainly is not the sort of claim that consequentialists typically make when they insist that the good is prior to the right.<sup>69</sup> We can immediately set aside the proposal that we can understand the notion of priority in this debate as *the proper subset relation* or *the set membership relation*. Since it should be possible for consequentialists and non-consequentialists to have their dispute even if they agree that evaluative and deontic properties do not have causal powers, we can also set aside the proposal that we understand the sort of priority at issue in terms of *the causal composition relation*. Perhaps if we embrace a heavy-duty conception of facts according to which they can literally stand in *the part–whole relation* with one another, then maybe we can make sense of the idea that, for consequentialists, a given

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<sup>68</sup> Or at least that is true of some of them. I am suspicious that token identity, type identity, and the proper subset relation ever underwrite a grounding relation between their relata, but I won’t take up that issue here.

<sup>69</sup> Moreover, there are various technical obstacles that must be overcome if we are to construe a consequentialist’s commitment to the good being prior to the right as being a commitment to *being good* being a determinate of *being right*. To start with, a determinate property is attributed to the same object as its determinable, but the primary bearers of goodness in a consequentialist theory are often not the same as the primary bearers of rightness. And even if we circumvent this problem by taking actions to be derivatively good to the degree to which they promote good states of affairs, there is the additional problem that—except in rare cases, such as absolute-threshold forms of satisficing consequentialism—it is not just the goodness (in our derivative sense) of an action that, according to consequentialists, determines its rightness, but moreover the goodness of that action in comparison to the goodness of its alternatives. So the properties that a typical consequentialist must propose as being determinates to the determinable *being right* are properties such as *being 10 utiles better than one alternative and 50 utiles better than every other alternative*—a much less attractive idea than the simple thought that *being good* is a determinate of *being right*.

fact about the goodness of some outcome is a proper part of a given fact about the rightness about some action. However, surely it is possible for consequentialists and their opponents to have their dispute without endorsing such a controversial view about the nature of facts. When it comes to *functional realization*, while it is true that there are some philosophers who call themselves ‘moral functionalists’ (Jackson & Pettit 1995, Jackson & Pettit 1996, Jackson 1998), and while it is true that these philosophers are usually consequentialists, their commitment to moral functionalism is independent of their commitment to consequentialism. Moreover, it is possible to be a consequentialist without being a moral functionalist. Finally, I have already dealt, earlier in this essay, with the suggestion that we understand the consequentialism debate in terms of *identity* (whether token or type): not only does such a suggestion do violence to our usual way of understanding consequentialists as positing an asymmetric relation of priority between facts about overall goodness and facts about rightness, but moreover such a suggestion leaves unexplained the relation between facts about the comparative overall goodness of all outcomes and facts about the *pro tanto* goodness of specific outcomes, since that relation cannot be identity.<sup>70</sup>

In short, none of Wilson’s relations (a)-(h) is a natural way of construing the priority relation at issue in the debate over consequentialism. The same is true, I believe, of my other examples of normative views that I argued are best understood in terms of a grounding/in-virtue-of/non-casual-because relation. When Ross insists that I have a *prima facie* duty to pick you up at the train station in virtue of my promise to do so, he is not making a claim about the determinate–determinable relation or the set membership relation. When advocates of the reasons-first program insist that facts about what one ought to do can be analyzed in terms of facts about reasons, they are not making a claim about causal composition or the part–whole relation. When foundationalists and coherentists disagree over whether a given belief’s justification-making factors always include a fact about some other belief inferentially supporting that one, they are not arguing about functional realization or type identity. If all we are left with are Wilson’s specific relations (a)-(h), it becomes difficult to make sense of much of normative inquiry.

Of course, we could always try to supplement Wilson’s list with an additional specific dependence relation to handle the normative cases, but what would that relation be? Why not just add to that list the relation that philosophers in normative disciplines have been theorizing in terms of for over a century, the relation that arguably the expression ‘supervenience’ was meant to pick out before it became co-opted as a way of referring to relations of necessary covariation, namely the relation we pick out with expressions such as ‘because’, ‘in virtue of’, ‘makes the case’, and ‘grounds’? There is no need to demean or belittle these expressions by using them with capital letters. When a consequentialist proposes

(Op\*) Necessarily, an action is morally right if and only if, and because, it is optimific,

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<sup>70</sup> Nor is it plausible to take this relation to be any of Wilson’s other small-g relations: the *pro tanto* goodness of an individual outcome does not stand in the determinate–determinable relation to the comparative overall goodness of all outcomes, nor is the former a subset, member, or part of the latter, nor does the former functionally realize or causally compose the latter.

we do not need to stop her and ask, “Wait, do you mean big-b ‘Because’, or are you schematically referring to some small-b ‘because’-relation?” Our consequentialist is using ‘because’ in a perfectly natural and sensible way. Of course, there are difficult questions about the logic, metaphysics, and epistemology of the notion being picked out by that expression, as well as difficult questions about the semantics and pragmatics of the expression itself, and these difficult questions deserve to be their own area of philosophical investigation. But the same is true of most of the other words in (Op\*), including ‘necessarily’, ‘action’, ‘morally’, and ‘if’.

Thus Wilson’s form of grounding pluralism leaves out the very relations we most want when theorizing about normative notions such as moral rightness, or reasons for action, or epistemic justification.<sup>71</sup> Wilson’s extreme grounding pluralism is also susceptible to the form of argument I used against Fine’s more moderate grounding pluralism.<sup>72</sup> First of all, we can run a version of the Argument from Transitive Links. The following principle is extremely plausible:

(Tran<sub>small-g</sub>) If X bears a “turned on” version of one of Wilson’s small-g grounding relations to Y (in the from-grounds-to-grounded direction), and Y bears a “turned on” version of one of Wilson’s small-g grounding relations to Z (in the from-grounds-to-grounded direction), then there is a non-rigged up notion of grounding such that X grounds Z.

For example, if Socrates’ body parts small-g ground Socrates, because they stand in a “turned on” version of the part–whole relation to him, and if Socrates small-g grounds {Socrates}, because he stands in a “turned on” version of the membership relation to that set, then we are very strongly inclined to hold that Socrates’ body parts also ground the set {Socrates}, in some non-rigged-up sense. Similarly, if Socrates small-g grounds {Socrates}, and if {Socrates} small-g grounds {{Socrates}}, then we are very strongly inclined to hold that Socrates also grounds {{Socrates}}, in some non-rigged up sense. Finally, if certain physical states of Socrates’ brain small-g ground certain neural states of Socrates’ brain, because they stand in a “turned on” version of the causal composition relation to those latter states, and if those neural states of Socrates’ brain small-g ground Socrates’ desire to seek the truth, because they stand in a determinate–determinable relation to Socrates’ desire to seek the truth (in a Yablo-style way), then we are very strongly inclined to hold that the physical states of Socrates’ brain also ground Socrates’ desire to seek the truth, in some non-rigged-up sense. But in all of these cases, none of Wilson’s relations (a)-(h) can serve as the needed non-rigged-up type of grounding relation. Socrates’ body parts are neither a part of nor a member of {Socrates}, Socrates is not a member of {{Socrates}}, and something which causally composes a determinate of some determinable is not itself a determinate of that determinable. Nor do any

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<sup>71</sup> An analogous objection can be leveled against Hofweber. We cannot theorize about most normative categories in the way we want to if we restrict ourselves to Hofweber’s “ordinary” types of priority such as causal dependence, counterfactual dependence, conceptual priority, and one-way logical entailment, for the sorts of reasons mentioned in §4 above. Raven (2012, 692-93) makes a similar point against Hofweber for the specific case of the Euthyphro dilemma.

<sup>72</sup> Hofweber’s position is susceptible to this form of argument as well.

of Wilson’s other specific relations seem up to the task in each of these cases. This leaves us searching for more dependence relations than the eight relations which Wilson extracts from the recent philosophy-of-mind literature. And it leaves us wondering why, when Wilson’s eight relations are “turned on” as small-g grounding relations, they can be linked together via applications of a mixed transitivity principle, despite Wilson’s claim that there is no generic Grounding relation underlying the “turned on” versions of those eight relations.<sup>73</sup>

We can also run a version of the Argument from Asymmetric Dovetailing against Wilson’s brand of grounding pluralism. Wilson allows for the possibility that the asymmetry of grounding (whether big or small) might fail when we are considering fundamental entities: she thinks it is a live possibility that there might be fundamental entities X and Y such that X grounds Y and Y grounds X. (I am with her on this, provided that we are speaking of partial grounding; I am less comfortable with the possibility of symmetric full grounding.) But when it come to cases in which at least one of X and Y is non-fundamental, Wilson adheres to the following (very plausible) asymmetry principle:

(*Asym<sub>small-g</sub>*) If either X or Y is not fundamental, and if X bears a “turned on” version of one of Wilson’s small-g grounding relations to Y in the from-grounds-to-grounded direction, then it is not the case that Y bears a “turned on” version of one of Wilson’s small-g grounding relations to X in the from-grounds-to-grounded direction.

For example, in cases in which either X or Y is fundamental and the other is not, (*Asym<sub>small-g</sub>*) directly follows from (Wil), the principle that Wilson uses to say what extra conditions are needed in such cases to “turn on” one of her specific relations in a particular direction.<sup>74</sup> But now we can ask: why on earth do the “turned on” versions of Wilson’s small-g relations get out of each other other’s way in the manner predicted by (*Asym<sub>small-g</sub>*), if those relations are fundamentally distinct from one other? Why do these supposedly disparate relations exhibit patterns of instantiation that so neatly dovetail with one another? If, as I have been proposing, what it means for there to be a “turned on” version of one of Wilson’s specific relations between two entities, X and Y, is for it to be the case that, in addition to—and possibly in virtue of—that specific relation between X and Y, there is a (generic, unqualified) grounding relation between X and Y (or between two facts intimately relation to X and Y, such as [X exists] and [Y exists]), then we have a ready explanation of why the “turned on” versions of these relations mesh with each other in this way. But Wilson’s pluralism leaves this meshing utterly mysterious. Once again we are led to the conclusion that grounding is unified.

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<sup>73</sup> As before, a version of this argument can be offered even if (*Tran<sub>small-g</sub>*) does not hold with full generality, since there are many specific cases—including the ones I have just mentioned—in which it is plausible that an instance of that schema holds.

<sup>74</sup> In cases in which neither X nor Y are fundamental, Wilson also abides by (*Asym<sub>small-g</sub>*). For example, when considering whether her (non-fundamental) hand depends on her (non-fundamental) body, or vice versa, or neither, Wilson (2014, 564-65) sets aside the possibility that her hand might depend on her body due to one of the relations (a)-(h) while, at the same time, her body depends on her hand due to another of those relations (or due to the same relation being “turned on” in the opposite direction).

### 8. A Surprising Consequence

I have argued that we have good reason to reject Fine’s brand of moderate grounding pluralism, according to which a metaphysical variety of grounding must be distinguished from normative and natural varieties of grounding. And I have also argued that we have good reason to reject Wilson’s brand of extreme grounding pluralism, according to which there are a large number of specific grounding relations such as the functional realization relation and the proper parthood relation, but no generic grounding relation underlying these specific relations. On my view, such a generic relation does exist, and it is precisely this relation which is being invoked when philosophers use locutions such as ‘in virtue of’, ‘makes the case’, and ‘grounds’ (as almost all of them do, at some point), and when they use ‘because’ in the way characteristic of grounding claims. Grounding is a unity, not a heap of disconnected relations.

I have chosen Fine and Wilson as my foils because they develop the pluralist view in two importantly different ways—Fine’s being the sort of pluralism typically favored by grounding’s proponents, Wilson’s the sort typically favored by grounding’s critics. One important issue I do not address here is whether there are other forms of grounding pluralism that can escape my general form of argument. I suspect that there are not, but it is difficult to say without seeing what these other pluralist positions come to.

Another important issue I do not address here is the degree to which my arguments generalize. Do the Argument from Transitive Links, the Argument from Asymmetric Dovetailing, and other arguments of that general form show not just that various candidates for different types of grounding form a unity, but moreover that grounding and other notions usually thought distinct from it also form a unity? For example, it is standard to distinguish between at least three uses of the word ‘because’: the ‘because’ of causation (as in: “The table broke *because* he put too much weight on it”), the ‘because’ of rational basis (as in: “He put too much weight on the table *because* he wanted to see how many chairs he could stack on it at one time”), and the ‘because’ of grounding (as in: “It was wrong of him to stack that many chairs on the table *because* the table wasn’t his and he should have known that much weight would break it”).<sup>75</sup> Do arguments similar to the ones I have provided here show that the relations picked out by these three uses of the word ‘because’ are not fundamentally distinct from one another? I will not take up that issue here, although I hope to do so on a future occasion.

Instead, I want to end by noting a surprising consequence of the arguments I have offered in this essay. When I first realized this consequence, I found it quite disturbing, but now I have learned to live with it—indeed, to embrace it. Put most provocatively, the consequence is this: *it follows from the unity of grounding that normative ethics is a branch of metaethics*. Put less provocatively but more accurately, the

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<sup>75</sup> Some authors refer to this second ‘because’ as ‘the “because” of action explanation’, but I prefer Evans’ term ‘the “because” of rational basis’ (see n. 2, above), since that same ‘because’ can be used in contexts in which rationally-assessable items other than actions—such as beliefs or feelings—are being explained. (That said, one downside of Evans’ terminology is that it suggests that when such a ‘because’-claim is true, then we have a case of rational action/belief/feeling/whatever. However, I think such ‘because’-claims are compatible with irrationality. So maybe a better term yet is ‘the “because” of rationalizing basis’?)

consequence is this: *it follows from the unity of grounding that many of the central claims of normative ethics are at once claims in normative ethics and claims in metaethics.*

The argument for this consequence is straightforward, given what we have already established. As argued in §4 above, when in normative ethics we are concerned with general theories, we are not just searching for extensionally adequate biconditionals of the form

(Bi) Necessarily, an action is morally right if and only if \_\_\_\_\_,

but rather we are searching for biconditionals that are *explanatory*, like so:

(Bi\*) Necessarily, an action is morally right if and only if, *and because*, \_\_\_\_\_.

Similarly, when in normative ethics we are focusing on a particular verdict about a particular scenario, we usually are not merely interested in establishing a claim of the form

(Ver) Action A is morally right in circumstances C,

but rather are interested in establishing an *explanation* of why that verdict holds, like so:

(Ver\*) Action A is morally right in circumstances C *because* \_\_\_\_\_.

It follows from my arguments against grounding pluralism in §§6-7 that the ‘because’ in both (Bi\*) and (Ver\*) is picking out a generic relation of metaphysical grounding, not some special type of normative grounding (as Fine would have it) or a specific small-g grounding relation such as the determinate–determinable relation (as Wilson would have it). Thus a central portion of normative ethics is concerned with establishing certain metaphysical claims: when we are doing this sort of normative ethics, we are thereby doing moral metaphysics. But metaethics is, by definition, the metaphysics, epistemology, semantics, etc. of morality. So when we are doing a central portion of normative ethics, we are thereby making a contribution to one branch of metaethics—the branch devoted to the metaphysics of morality. In short, one core part of normative ethics is also, at the same time, a subfield of metaethics.<sup>76</sup>

An obvious reply suggests itself. Perhaps we need to distinguish between two distinct ‘because’-relations that are employed in the study of moral notions: the first-order ‘because’ of normative ethics and the second-order ‘because’ of metaethics. But it is precisely here that my arguments for the unity of grounding kick in. How do these putatively distinct ‘because’-relations interact? Can we string them together using applications of transitivity? I am inclined to say that we can. Do these two putatively different relations conform to a mixed asymmetry principle? I am inclined to say that they do. And so on. The pattern of interaction and avoidance between the ‘because<sub>metaethics</sub>’-relation and the ‘because<sub>normative-ethics</sub>’-relation is precisely the sort of pattern we would expect from two relations that are not fundamentally distinct from one another. Therefore we cannot avoid the implication that normative ethics traffics in

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<sup>76</sup> I believe a stronger claim is true: that in normative ethics we are almost never concerned with merely extensional matters, and hence almost all of normative ethics is, at the same time, a subfield of metaethics. However, I won’t argue for that stronger claim here.



metaphysical claims by attempting to cordon off the ‘because’ of first-order investigations of morality from the ‘because’ of second-order investigations of morality. Instead, since some of our canonical examples of first-order moral theories are also, at the same time, second-order moral theories, we should be suspicious of this very distinction between “first-order” and “second-order” ways of investigating moral matters.

It might seem that what I am proposing here is the reverse of a move made famous by Ronald Dworkin (1996, 2011). According to Dworkin, many claims that philosophers have put forward as second-order/metaethical claims external to normative ethics, such as the claim that morality is mind-dependent, are in fact first-order claims within normative ethics. So it might seem that what I have just argued for is the opposite: that many claims put forward as first-order claims within normative ethics are in fact metaethical claims, insofar as they concern the metaphysical dependence of moral matters. But this characterization of my position as simply a “reverse Dworkin” is inaccurate in an important respect. Dworkin’s claim is that certain views often taken to be purely metaethical views are in fact not metaethical views at all, but instead are views in normative ethics. My own position is that certain views often taken to be purely normative ethical views are in fact views *both* in normative ethics *and* in metaethics, as those two fields are standardly conceived.

Both Dworkin and I offer our arguments as a way of destabilizing the traditional metaethics versus normative ethics divide. However, Dworkin wants to destabilize that divide in order to get us to stop asking certain questions traditionally taken to fall on the metaethical side of the divide. I, on the other hand, want us to continue to ask all of the questions that have traditionally fallen on both sides of the divide. I want self-styled “metaethicists” to go on asking all of the questions they have been asking, and I want self-styled “normative ethicists” to go on addressing all of the issues they have been addressing. I simply want us to stop seeing these questions as sorting into two natural piles of non-overlapping issues, the “metaethical” ones and the “normative ethical” ones. There is just one field here: ethics.

The term ‘metaethics’ first gained its currency during the era of linguistic philosophy. In those days, it was easy to say what distinguished metaethics from ethics proper: metaethics was the study of moral language, and ethics proper wasn’t even a part of philosophy. As linguistic approaches to philosophy receded, our conception of the field of metaethics changed: metaethics shifted from being devoted exclusively to the meanings of moral terms to also being concerned with the metaphysics, epistemology, and so on of first-order moral claims. Hence our current grab-bag conception of metaethics: it is the metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, etc. (note that crucial ‘etc.’) of moral matters. However, this common conception of how to draw the divide between metaethics and normative ethics rests, I believe, on an overly naive view of normative ethics. Many of the so-called “first-order” moral claims at issue in normative ethics are also at the same time “second-order” claims concerning the metaphysics of morality, insofar as they concern what makes right acts right, what makes good people good, and so on—that is, insofar as they concern claims about metaphysical

grounding.

My use of the term ‘metaphysical’ here will no doubt scare some people off. I have been using it in a thin sense whereby it serves mainly as a contrast term for ‘epistemic’, ‘conceptual’, ‘semantic’, and the like: as I understand them, metaphysical claims are those that concern how things are, epistemic claims are those that concern our knowledge (broadly conceived) of things, conceptual claims are those that concern our concepts, and so on. I think the use of these labels in this broad way is both natural and useful; think, for example, of the post-Kripkean charge that a given philosopher has conflated a metaphysical thesis with an epistemological one. And when these terms are used in this way, I think saying that grounding is a relation of metaphysical dependence, rather than a relation of epistemic, conceptual, or semantic dependence, is the easiest way of conveying in a succinct manner the sort of relation one has in mind. However, for some philosophers, the expression ‘metaphysical’ is a bogeyman to be avoided at all costs. For these philosophers, to countenance metaphysical relations is thereby to commit us to a spooky epistemology involving magic antennae in the brain that put us in touch with a Platonic third realm. Now personally I think this epistemological objection to metaphysical relations rests on overly demanding assumptions about what is required for knowledge of metaphysical matters, together with overly lax assumptions about what is required for knowledge of empirical matters. We don’t have special organs that directly detect the truth of causal ‘because’-claims, so why on earth do we need special organs that directly detect the truth of metaphysical ‘because’-claims? But no matter: if the word ‘metaphysical’ frightens you, then let us avoid it all together. Let us use a more colorless expression, such as ‘ontic dependence’, to characterize the grounding relation. That doesn’t undermine the crucial premise in the argument I have just given: the question “On what, if anything, does the moral ontically depend?” is just as much a part of metaethics as the question “Are there any moral facts?”

Anyway, I think a destabilization of the divide between metaethics and normative ethics has been happening for a while now. In one way, my talk of ‘metaethics’ here is a little quaint. Over the past two decades, the field formerly known as ‘metaethics’ has become broadened to include within its scope—here I revert to the standard language—second-order questions directed at first-order normative claims of any type, not just second-order questions directed at first-order claims about narrowly moral or ethical notions such as what one is morally required to do or how it would be best to live. Metaethics has, in effect, been superseded by “metanormative studies.” The standard way of effecting this widening of scope is to discuss reasons in general, not just moral reasons for action, or to discuss rational requirements in general, not just moral requirements on action. But during this transition, something odd happened. Investigations of what, on the surface, appear to be purely first-order issues about reasons or rational requirements in general became perfectly acceptable at a conference or in an anthology ostensibly devoted to ‘metaethics’ (understood now to have been broadened to ‘metanormative studies’). This has led to a bizarre taxonomic situation whereby a paper on desire-based theories of well-being is forbidden at a metaethics conference,

but a paper on desire-based theories of reasons for action is perfectly fine for such a conference, even though the positions discussed in each paper might be identical in structure, equivalent in terms of their explanatory ambitions, and subject to the same objections and counter-replies. As long as your seemingly first-order investigation is devoted to a sufficiently general normative category such as *rational requirement* or *reason*, you still count as doing metaethics, in the broad sense.

In effect, I have provided an argument that legitimizes this taxonomic promiscuity within metanormative studies. Moreover, my argument suggests that such taxonomic promiscuity should also be embraced within metaethics, narrowly conceived. If grounding is unified, then a properly explanatory moral theory is *both* a position in normative ethics *and* a position in metaethics. It does not answer all questions in the two fields, but it answers some in each. And, when we broaden our historical focus, isn't that the right way to view things? Consider Kant and Aristotle. Is Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* a book in metaethics or in normative ethics? The correct answer is: both. Is Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* devoted to "first-order" or "second-order" questions? Again, the answer is: both. And in each case, it is not as if these authors include separate discussions of each type of issue, or use their conclusions in one field as premises to help them establish claims in the other. Rather, in both cases their discussions of questions that we might sort as either "metaethical" or "normative ethical" are intertwined with one other. This is why, I believe, it is so difficult to say where contemporary neo-Kantian and neo-Aristotelian views fall in the traditional metaethics vs. normative ethics divide. They are positions in both fields at once. And, if my arguments here are correct, the same is true even of utilitarianism and Ross-style pluralism. The unity of grounding grounds the unity of ethics.

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