Ways of Grounding: Enabling and Generation
Modos de Fundamentar: Habilitación y Generación

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Abstract. Some facts ground by generating: they ground by bringing about other facts or grounding connections among them. Intuitively, other facts play a similar role to background conditions in the causal case: they ground by enabling the obtaining of grounded facts or generative connections among them. As we may ask whether causal background conditions are irreducible to causes, we may wonder whether enablers are irreducible to generators. Some metaphysicians defend a genuine metaphysical distinction between generators and enablers. Yet considerations from ideological parsimony and unity should prompt us to defend a unified account of ground. Here, I identify and discuss some characteristics extracted from the literature that are said to be possessed by enablers only. Contrary to this claim, I argue that generators can possess the same features. I conclude that such features should not be regarded as a guide to the irreducibility of enabling to generation.

Resumen. Algunos hechos fundamentan generando: fundamentan provocando otros hechos o fundamentando conexiones entre ellos. Intuitivamente, otros hechos desempeñan un papel similar a las condiciones de fondo en el caso causal: fundamentan al permitir la obtención de hechos fundamentados o conexiones generativas entre ellos. Así como podemos preguntarnos si las condiciones causales de fondo son irreductibles a las causas, podemos preguntarnos si los habilitadores son irreductibles a los generadores. Algunos metafísicos defienden una distinción metafísica genuina entre generadores y habilitadores. Sin embargo, consideraciones de parsimonia y unidad ideológicas deberían impulsarnos a defender una explicación unificada del terreno. Aquí identifico y analizo algunas características extraídas de la literatura que se dice que poseen únicamente los facilitadores. Contrariamente a esta afirmación, sostengo que los generadores pueden poseer las mismas características. Concluyo que tales características no deben considerarse como una guía para la irreductibilidad de la habilitación a la generación.

Keywords: Grounding, Enabling, Background Conditions, Metaphysical Explanation, Metaphysical Laws

Palabras clave: fundamentación, habilitación, condiciones de fondo, explicación metafísica, leyes metafísicas

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1. *Introduction: Why Should You Care?*

Ground is a non-causal yet determinative explanatory relation among facts. It captures the idea that some facts obtain in virtue of others and underlies many important 'what-makes-it-the-case-that' philosophical questions (for an up-to-date overview of this concept and its applications, see Raven 2020). A few stock examples of ground include the relationships between physical and mental facts, facts about the existence of specific individuals and their singleton sets, facts about parts and the wholes they compose, and facts about determinates and the corresponding determinables.

To introduce our topic, I offer an unsophisticated case. Consider an ordinary scarlet ball and these three facts about it: the fact that the ball has a certain volume, the fact that it is scarlet, and the fact that it is red. Most theorists of ground would agree that the fact that the ball is scarlet at least partially grounds the fact that it is red. But is the fact that the ball has a certain volume a partial ground of the fact that it is red? Or, alternatively, does the fact that the ball has a certain volume ground the grounding connection between the fact that it is scarlet and the fact that it is red? These two questions are substantially different. The first

concerns the grounds of a first-order *grounded* fact. The second is about the grounds of a higher-order *grounding* fact; namely a fact about what grounds what. The distinction plays a stronger dialectical role later. I will make it precise in due course. For now, let us return to the questions using this example as an intuition pump.

On the one hand, we may be inclined to answer the previous questions positively. We might think, for example, that the fact that the ball has a certain volume contributes, to some extent, to the obtaining of the fact that it is red. Alternatively, it could contribute to the obtaining of the connection between the fact that the ball is scarlet and the fact that it is red. On the other hand, some readers could have a different intuition. The way the fact that the ball has a certain volume contributes to the obtaining of the fact that it is red is not the same sort of determination displayed by this fact and the fact that it is scarlet.

An analogy with causation offers a perspicuous way to reframe this tension. The grounding relationship between the fact that the ball is scarlet and the fact that it is red resembles an event's causing a certain effect, such as the striking of a match's causing its catching light. By contrast, the relationship between the fact that the ball has a certain volume and the fact that it is red is akin to a background condition's enabling the causal relationship between some events, like the presence of oxygen in the room enables that the striking of the match causes its catching light.

Suppose you concede that there is an intuitive difference in the grounding roles that facts can play analogous to the difference between causes and background conditions. Now call *generative ground* or *generator* a fact that plays a grounding role similar to a cause, and call *generation* this way of grounding. Call *enabling ground* or *enabler* a fact that plays a role akin to that of a background condition, and call *enabling* this other way of grounding.

This paper explores the question of whether enabling is irreducible to generation. Considerations from ideological parsimony and theoretical unity, which I outline below, give us *prima facie* reasons to push back the irreducibility of enabling. I set out to identify and discuss certain allegedly unique features and roles of enabling, extractable from the work of Chilovi (2020), Wygoda Cohen (2020), and Baron-Schmitt (2021), that could be taken as markers of its irreducibility to generation. I will argue that the identified characteristics can be possessed by generation. Therefore, they should not be taken as indicators of the irreducibility of enabling. Though the discussion leaves open the possibility that other criteria of irreducibility may be successful, the conclusion of this work weakens the case for the irreducibility of enabling.

As I understand it, this investigation is not about the meaning of 'enabling' and that of 'generation'. Nor does it regard the concepts one employs to grasp enabling and generation. Instead, it is a metaphysical question concerning whether enabling *consists in* or *just is* generation. We could say that if enabling reduces to generation, then, whenever enabling holds, it does so just in case generation holds and in virtue of it. To say that enabling is irreducible to generation is, accordingly, to say that these relations have different natures.[1] As I will explain in the next section, the generative conception is the received view of ground. Therefore, the alleged irreducibility of enabling matters for the theory of ground at large and its applications. As I see it, three main issues are at stake.

First, *Simplicity*. The irreducibility of enabling to generation amounts to an expansion of our primitive concepts, which abates the overall simplicity of the resulting theory. This view would be less ideologically parsimonious than one attributing both the generative and enabling roles to the same kind of ground. By contrast, if enabling just is a form of generation, we can dispense with a separate theory of enabling. Our best theory of generation will do. All else being equal, we ought to prefer the simpler theory.

Second, *Unity*. At stake with the irreducibility of enabling, there is a picture of the very nature of ground. The irreducibility of enabling to generation disunifies ground in the sense that it undermines the project of analyzing these relations in terms of a single primitive notion of ground. The latter would, at best, be analyzable as a disjunction of generation or enabling. However, this result is not particularly insightful since it leaves important questions unaddressed. For example, it does not tell us how these grounding varieties are related. Nor does it account for the apparent natural kinship of enabling and generation. We could devise clever ways to glue enabling and generation together. For example, we may argue that generation and enabling are different species belonging to the same genus (cf. Schaffer 2020 for a similar point regarding ground and causation) or distinct members of the same family (cf. Bennett 2017 and her discussion of the building relation). But these approaches require us to invoke extra resources, which we

[1] This gloss on reduction can be made more precise if needed. For example, see Rosen (2010, pp. 122–126) and Rosen (2015).

could dispense with if enabling is reducible to generation. If enabling just is a form of generation, unity would be ensured by design. The previous challenges would be circumvented.[2]

Lastly, *Applicability*. A widespread methodological principle is that metaphysical posits earn their keep by virtue of their theoretical benefits. Philosophers who recognized the enabling relation appealed to the useful work it performs for us (e.g., Chilovi 2020, Wygoda Cohen 2020, Baron-Schmitt 2021; discussions of the distinction or something in the vicinity can also be found in Chudnoff manuscript; 2013, chapter 6; Trogdon 2013; Skiles 2015; Bader 2016). However, such advantages can be claimed only if there is a robust metaphysical distinction between enabling and generation. Thus the applicability of enabling is at stake with the question of whether this relation is irreducible to generation.

The paper's structure unfolds like this. In the remainder of this section, I make three clarificatory remarks. In section 2, I explain what generation is. In section 3, I do the same but for enabling, connecting my own characterization to extant accounts. I turn to the negative part in section 4. There, I cast doubts on some criteria one could invoke to defend the irreducibility of enabling. These can be located in Chilovi (2020), Wygoda Cohen (2020) and Baron-Schmitt (2021)—though none of these philosophers explicitly advocate them. I draw some concluding remarks in section 5.

Three clarifications are in place before we move on to a more detailed discussion of generation. First, the orthodox view is that ground induces strict partial ordering among facts (e.g., Schaffer 2009; Rosen 2010; Fine 2012). Like other metaphysicians, I am inclined to favour a heretic position that does not take ground to be irreflexive, asymmetric, and transitive (e.g., Jenkins 2011; Schaffer 2012; J. M. Wilson 2014, 2016; Tahko 2018; Giannotti 2021*;* Cameron 2022). For the purposes of this paper, we do not need to choose sides. However, I shall return to the structural features of grounding relationships in section 4.

Second, though I praise the virtue of expressive rigour, I want to maintain minimal distracting and unnecessary technicalities. Sometimes I employ schematic formulations to facilitate the discussion. When necessary, I use *f*, *g*, ... as variables for particular facts and upper-case Greek letters, such as Γ and Δ, for pluralities thereof. And I will unconventionally use [...] to denote facts about facts. I shall take facts to be worldly and thusly constituted by items such as individuals, properties, and relations—under the assumption that we can safely ignore foundational issues with a structured conception of facts for the argumentative purposes of this work. However, my hope is that the discussion concerning the distinction between enabling and generation can be suitably amended for other conceptions.

Lastly, I leave open whether there are other varieties of ground. My claim is not that generation and enabling exhaust the ways some facts can ground others. Others could be legitimately recognized if they turn out to be irreducible to either generation or enabling. For instance, Litland (2013) and Richardson (2020) discuss the notion of *how-grounding*. Epstein (2015, 2019) discusses a metaphysical determination of *anchoring* (involving 'rules' and 'moves' that makes something count as a social fact), which Schaffer (2019, pp. 755–757) regards as a species of grounding. I shall discuss these relations on another occasion.

2. *Generation*

Now I turn to illustrate the generative conception of ground, or generation. The label is unusual. But generation, I believe, is the default among those who theorize about ground. A generative ground or generator is a fact that, on its own or together with other facts, brings about or produce another fact.

Generation could be regarded as a form of metaphysical causation (cf. A. Wilson 2018a). We could say that a generator is a fact whose obtaining brings about or helps to bring about the obtaining of some other fact. Arguably, generation is what metaphysicians have in mind when they offer paradigm cases of grounding relationships: facts about determinates generatively ground facts about determinables, facts about the existence of individuals are generators of facts about the existence of their singleton sets, and so on. Let us say that a collection of facts Γ^G is a full generative ground of *f* just in case the obtaining of the facts in Γ^G suffices to metaphysically bring about *f*. And let us say that *g* is a partial generator (or partial generative ground) of *f* just in case there is a full generative ground Γ^G of *f*, and *g* is a member of Γ^G.[3] Someone might demur this formulation of partial generative grounding in terms of completability. Fine with me. Even if some grounds are incompletable (e.g., Leuenberger 2020), the generative conception

[2] There are independent reasons for arguing against the unity of grounding, which have been discussed already in the literature. See, for example, J. M. Wilson (2014) and (2016).

[3] Following the orthodoxy (e.g., Schaffer 2009, Rosen 2010), I consider generative grounding non-monotonic. If *f* is a ground of *g*, it does not follow that *f* and any other fact is a ground of *g*. The non-monotonicity of grounding encodes the idea that each ground must be relevant in a sense that can be sharpened in various ways to account for the grounded fact. I will assume a non-monotonic conception of both generation and enabling.

remains available. Quite plausibly, the fact that my shirt is navy blue is a partial generator of the fact that my shirt is blue. That is, the obtaining of the fact that my shirt has a determinate shade of blue contributes to generate the obtaining of the fact that it is blue.

Generation is the bread and butter of the theory of ground. As Wygoda Cohen puts it, generation underlies talk of 'facts that make so-and-so the case—facts that play a distinctive grounding role' (2020, p. 723). Plausibly, generation is what Fine has in mind saying that:

> […] there may be a distinctive kind of metaphysical explanation in which explanans and explanandum are connected, not through some sort of causal mechanism, but through some constitutive form of determination. (2012, p. 37)

At least initially, we may believe that a generative interpretation is a natural reading of Schaffer's claim that 'grounding is something like metaphysical causation' (2012, p. 122). The same goes for A. Wilson's slogan that 'grounding just is a type of causation' (2018a, p. 723).[4] And Schnieder (2020, p. 107) nicely expresses the idea of generativity in claiming that (the emphasis is mine; let us postpone the discussion of the link between generators and priority to section 4):

> *A ground is a fact that brings about a grounded fact* (*that is to say that the relation is productive*), where the grounded fact is less fundamental than the ground (that is to say: grounding is a priority relation).

It would be comforting to have a reductive analysis of generation. But I am sceptical that we can concoct anything insightful. Typically, grounding theorists take this concept to be primitive. Thus, I concede that the above remarks are somewhat vague. However, this vagueness is not utterly confusing. If we have a pre-theoretical or intuitive understanding of what it is for something to bring about or produce something else, the core idea of generation is within our grasp.

Now, let us say something more about enabling.

3. *Enabling*

It is unsurprisingly difficult to introduce the enabling conception without risking sneaking in some cumbersome theoretical commitment. Perhaps, an effective way of thinking about enabling is by analogy with the causal case (another instructive comparison might be with the moral case. See Chilovi 2020 and Wygoda Cohen 2020; cf. Dancy 2004). We could say that generators stand to causes as enablers stand to background conditions. The latter contribute, in a sense to be unpacked in accordance with one's favourite conception of background conditions, to the causal link between an event and a certain effect. For example, the presence of oxygen in the room contributes, again in a sense that can be precisified, to the causal connection between the striking of the match and its catching light.

At least superficially, we can think of enablers as playing the analogue ground-theoretic role that background conditions play for causal relationships. We should not overcommit to the analogy between enablers and background causes, though. My suggestion is that the comparison just is a useful way to get an initial hang of what an enabler might be. We should avoid projecting a specific view of background conditions into our initial characterization of enablers. Our question is whether we should believe in a genuine metaphysical distinction between generators and enablers. This question is orthogonal to what the best account of the distinction between causes and background condition is—even if one believes in deep structural similarities between ground and causation (e.g., Schaffer 2016, A. Wilson 2018a). An uncritical transposition of views from the causal case risks presupposing an answer in the grounding case. For example, someone endorsing a non-objective theory of background conditions, such as Mackie (1974), Hart and Honoré (1959), and Hitchcock and Knobe (2009), might be inclined to think that whether something counts as an enabler is subject to the epistemic interests of an inquirer, contextual circumstances, and

[4] Ned Hall (2004) has distinguished two notions of causation: *production* and *dependence*. Productive causation involves, for example, exchanges of conserved quantity—such as energy. Causal dependence need not involve exchanges of conserved quantities. A generative conception of grounding is closer, at least intuitively, to the productive sense of causation in the sense that it involves bringing about new facts. We should handle the analogy with care. It is not part of the generative conception of grounding that this notion involves exchanges of conserved quantities. It is also worth noting that the structural equation models for causation, which Wilson and Schaffer adapt for the grounding case, are typically offered as accounts of causal dependence.

variable judgements about normality. By contrast, someone favouring an objective theory of background conditions—such as Yablo (2004), Bigaj (2005), Hauska (2008), Klein (2018), Skow (2016, 2018), and Paolini Paoletti (2023)—might be disposed to believe that enablers must be robustly distinct in kind as compared to generators. Like background conditions, an objectivist might hold that enablers possess unique structural features or exclusive explanatory roles. It is, for example, a somewhat popular objectivist view that background conditions explain or contribute to why something is a cause of a certain effect rather than to the production of the effect itself (e.g., Yablo 2004; Skow 2016, 2018). As I will discuss in more detail in section 4, however, one should not presuppose that only enablers have an analogous explanatory feature in the grounding case. Here we can set aside the details of specific objective and non-objective accounts of background conditions. The remark is general. One could believe that there is a superficial similarity between casual background conditions and enablers. However, in the absence of an argument linking one's view about causal background conditions to enabling, there is no reason to suppose that there must be harmony. Namely, we should not assume that they share the same features or play the same theoretical roles. It does not follow from endorsing a non-objective account of background conditions that there is no objective distinction between enabling and generators. Nor does it follow from accepting an objective theory of background conditions that there is a genuine metaphysical distinction between enablers and generators.

Enabling or something near enough has been discussed by several philosophers (e.g., Chudnoff manuscript 2013, chapter 6; Trogdon 2013, Skiles 2015; Bader 2016; Chilovi 2020, Wygoda Cohen 2020, Baron-Schmitt 2021). And perhaps, something like enabling is permitted by Schaffer's (2016) and A. Wilson's (2018a) interventionist accounts.[5] All these authors except the interventionists tinker with the idea that facts can ground others by enabling them in addition to generating them, though they disagree on the fine details. Here, since I aim to offer a general characterization, we should avoid getting lost in unnecessary minutiae.

My preferred way of thinking about enabling traces to Leuenberger's (2014) idea of a blocker. I suggest that we regard enablers as the imperfectly similar converse of what Leuenberger calls 'blockers'. These are 'extra fundamental facts whose obtaining ensures the non-obtaining of certain facts that, in the actual world, are grounded in other facts' (Leuenberger 2014, p. 165). Accordingly, I propose a functional characterization of enablers in terms of what they do. Enablers are facts that ensure or help ensure the obtaining of generative facts—namely, facts about what is generatively grounded. Thus, an enabler is something like a necessary condition whose obtaining necessitates or contributes to the necessitation of the obtaining of generative facts.[6] Since we should not preclude the possibility of nonfundamental enablers, I propose avoiding any fundamentality requirement. We can say that Γ^E is a full enabling ground of the generative fact *g* just in case the obtaining of every fact in Γ^E ensures the obtaining of *g*. And we can say that *e* is a partial enabling ground (or partial enabler) of *g* just in case some Γ^E containing *e* is a full enabling ground of *g*. Perhaps, there are incompletable partial enablers. But if we have a grip on the notion of a causal background condition, the enabling role remains graspable.

There is significant variation between accounts of enabling. Some details, particularly regarding the views of Chilovi (2020), Wygoda Cohen (2020), and Baron-Schmitt (2021), will be relevant to the discussion of the irreducibility of enabling to generation. To prepare for the terrain, I need to complicate things a little.

Grounding theorists not only discuss the question of what grounds first-order facts (such as the fact that the ball is scarlet), but they also debate about the grounds of higher-order grounding facts, such as [the fact that the ball is scarlet grounds the fact that the ball is red]. A similar distinction applies to enabling. A fact might enable a first-order generated fact, such as *g* in [*f* is a generative ground of *g*]. Call this *first-order enabling*. And a fact might enable a higher-order generative fact, such as [*f* is a generative ground of *g*]. Call this *higher-order enabling*. Now we can refine our inquiry with two related questions:

(a) Is first-order enabling irreducible to generation?
(b) Is higher-order enabling irreducible to generation?

[5] However, the interventionist framework also allows for a treatment of enabling conditions as first-order causes. As it will become clear in a moment, I do not conceive of enabling grounds in an analogous fashion.
[6] It is not part of the advertised view, however, that every form of necessitation is a form of enabling. On a plausible principle of modal-set theory, the fact that {Norma} exists necessitates the fact that Norma exists. But I find it hard to believe that the existence of the singleton set is a background condition of Norma's existence.

Extrapolating some criteria from the literature, I will argue for a negative answer to both (a) and (b). Before turning to these questions, however, I should clarify a few aspects of enabling.

The characterization I offered has relevant similarities as well as non-negligible differences with Chilovi (2020), Wyogda Cohen (2020), and Baron-Schmitt (2021). The focus on these philosophers will become more evident in section 4, where I evaluate some attempts to establish the irreducibility of enabling.

In discussing the applicability of enablers to grounding-based formulations of legal positivism, Chilovi says that (2020, p. 3299):

> On the conception of enabling that we should adopt, it ought not be enough for something to count as an enabler that it be such that without it, the fact enabled by it would not obtain. Rather, it should be built into the enabling role that whatever plays this role is not only needed for the fact it enables to hold, but also explains its obtaining.

Chilovi is right in stressing that a counterfactual or modal understanding does not suffice to individuate enablers.[7] However, we are not forced to place explanatoriness upon enablers. As it happens, I will challenge the idea that this particular explanatory character is an exclusive trait of enablers in the next section.

Wyogda Cohen describes (what I call) enablers as follows:

> Facts whose presence or absence is required for the first kind of facts [the generators] to play their distinctive [generative] role; necessary conditions to do the grounding work. (2021, p. 78)

The operative characterization of enabling has a significant difference from Wyogda Cohen's. I prefer thinking of facts as having the power to generatively ground (and sometimes to be grounded in) other facts built-in. Though here we can remain uncommitted to what metaphysics of facts best accommodates this idea. It is the manifestation of this power—namely, the obtaining of generative facts—that requires the presence of enablers. Compare: the presence of oxygen does not confer upon the striking of the match the power to cause the match's catching light; the striking can produce that effect on its own. The presence of oxygen, however, does make a difference in whether the striking actually causes the match's catching light.

Lastly, the characterization of enabling employed is different from Baron-Schmitt's in two respects. First, Baron-Schmitt (2021, pp. 18–19) takes 'ennoblers' to be facts that explain grounding facts (i.e., facts such as [*f* is a ground of *g*]) rather than the grounded fact (that is, *g* in [*f* is a ground of *g*]). By contrast, the proposed view of enabling allows for both higher-order and first-order enabling. Second, unlike Baron-Schmitt and as per the difference with Chilovi's characterization, what distinguishes an enabler from a generator is not its explanatory role. Rather it is the grounding role it plays—namely, its ways of grounding. We should leave open the possibility that a fact enables without explaining a generative grounding fact. Likewise, we should countenance the possibility that even if an enabler explains [*f* is a ground of *g*], this view does not preclude that *f* is also part of a complete explanation of why [*f* is a ground of *g*] obtains. I shall expand on this topic in the next section.[8]

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[7] For a more technical discussion of partial grounds and explanatory relevance, see Krämer and Roski (2017). Those who worries about difficulties related to enabling counterfactuals can apply the strategies that Krämer and Roski design. In my understanding, their notion of a difference-making ground is applicable to both generation and enabling.

[8] Two extra remarks. First, it is extremely plausible that some enablers are generatively grounded. The fact that the ball has a certain volume, for example, is very plausibly generated by facts about the volume of its parts. But it is not part of the proposed characterization that every enabler is generatively grounded. There may be ungenerated enablers, and we should not rule this possibility out by default. Second, it should be permitted that the same fact is part of a generative full ground and part of an enabling full ground of a generative fact. Plausibly, the fact that the ball has a certain volume is a first-order enabler of the fact that it is red and, perhaps, a higher-order enabler of [the fact that the ball is scarlet is a generative ground of the fact that it is red]. But the fact that the ball has a certain volume is also a plausible generator of the fact that something has a certain volume. I agree with Wygoda Cohen (2020, p. 83) that the grounding role facts play is a contextual affair. It depends on the obtaining of other facts. Someone might regard this consequence as surprising. But it should not be once we accept that whether some facts play a generative grounding role depends on the presence of enablers.

4. Is enabling irreducible to generation?

The chief motivation for recognizing the enabling relation as metaphysically distinct from generation is that it proves serviceable in our philosophical theorizing. Here are some examples.

Chilovi (2020) argues that enabling paves the way toward an insightful account of legal positivism and its specifications.

Baron-Schmitt (2021) discusses how enabling gives us a better understanding of putative failures of the so-called internality of ground. It is not sufficient that every member of Γ obtains and *g* obtains to ensure a grounding connection between them. As the purported counterexamples suggest, we need to consider the obtaining of relevant enablers to ensure the grounding link between Γ and *g*.

Wyogda Cohen (2020) defends a related advantage. The appreciation of enabling allows us to reframe and repeal the debate between contingentism and necessitarianism. The latter is the view that if Γ is a full ground of *f*, then necessarily if Γ obtains, so does *f*. Contingentism is the denial of necessitarianism. According to Wyogda Cohen, if we accept that there is 'a genuine distinction, and not a merely pragmatic one' (2020, pp. 82–83) between generators and enablers, the choice between necessitarianism and contingentism ceases being exclusive. Presumably, the truth of necessitarianism requires one to have in mind an inclusive conception comprising both generators and enablers among the full grounds. By contrast, contingentism opposes versions of necessitarianism that excludes enablers from Γ.

In the same work, Wyogda Cohen argues that enabling improves our understanding of putative failures of the transitivity of ground (e.g., Schaffer 2012 and Loss 2015). According to the proposed diagnosis, counterexamples to transitivity involve a suspicious shifting between generation and enabling, which can be fixed by eliciting the distinction (see Wygoda Cohen 2020, pp. 84–90 for a more detailed discussion).

Seizing the previous advantages requires ensuring that enabling is metaphysically distinct from generation. As I argued in section 1, considerations from ideological parsimony and the unity of ground should prompt us to explore whether enabling could be analysed in terms of the more familiar generative conception. If it turns out that enabling just is a special case of generation, then the previous advantages should be disclaimed.

In what follows, I identify some features or roles ascribed to enabling that can be regarded as indicators of this relation's irreducibility to generation. The characteristics I will discuss can be found in the work of Chilovi (2020), Wygoda Cohen (2020), and Baron-Schmitt (2021). However, these philosophers do not explicitly invoke them to defend the irreducibility claim. Therefore, my goal is not to show that these authors are wrong. The argumentative goal is another. Since it is claimed that enabling, not generation, has such features or plays such roles, we could reasonably take them as markers of irreducibility. It is plausible to think that differences concerning these characteristics are owed to the different natures of enabling and generation, respectively. Thus if, on the contrary, it turns out they share these features or roles, the case for the irreducibility of enabling is weakened. Sharing a single characteristic, on its own, won't be sufficient to rule out the irreducibility of enabling to generation. It would be a mistake to claim that enabling is not irreducible because the identified features and roles are shared with generation since other traits may fail to be shared. Instead, my claim is that since a representative sample of characteristics fails to be uniquely possessed by enabling, we should take it as evidence against the case for its irreducibility to generation. In this sense, the discussion is brought forward in the spirit of metaphysical conservatism. Before purchasing a new relation—that is, enabling—we should assess whether it is metaphysically distinct from another already in our possession, namely generation.

There is a different objection against the robustness of the distinctness between enabling and generation I won't discuss. Someone could argue that the distinction between these two relations is a pragmatic, non-metaphysically substantive affair (cf., Trogdon 2013, p. 478). Once again, the analogy with causation may help illustrate the thought.

Against the robustness of the distinction between background conditions and causes, someone could argue that both are required for the occurrence of a certain effect. This shared contribution is a symptom of the shallowness of the metaphysical separation between them. Mackie expresses this idea by grouping both causes and background conditions under the idea of 'factors':

> There may be a set of factors which where, in the circumstances, jointly sufficient and severally necessary for a certain result, and which all occurred, as, consequently, did the result. Then we can say that each of these facts that if in the circumstances it had not occurred the result would not; but we may not be so willing to say of each of them that it caused the result. Perhaps we ought to say this, since they are all logically related to the result in the same way: the situation as described is symmetrical with respect to all facts. (1980, 34)

Now suppose that 'factors' refer to generators and enablers, and we get an objection against the robustness of their distinction. From here, one could articulate a positive argument for a pragmatic approach to the generation-enabling distinction. I will not discuss this objection because it shows—if sound—that there are no metaphysically substantive reasons to privilege generation over enabling, or the other way round. But this result is not what we are attempting to achieve. Our question is different. We are investigating whether certain features or roles that could indicate the irreducibility of enabling are, contrary to what the literature suggests, shared with generation. But we need not deny that future investigations may reveal more successful candidates.

Let us start with Chilovi (2020). His view suggests three aspects that could be linked to the irreducibility of higher-order enabling: *meta-grounding*, *mere partial grounds*, and *explanatory role*. Since the third can be identified in Baron-Schmitt (2021) too, I will merge its discussion at the end of the section. To reinforce my case, I will also discuss two irreducibility strategies concerning first-order enabling, which can be extrapolated from Wygoda Cohen (2020). Overall, my conclusive assessment will be that each of the discussed features or roles can be possessed by both enabling and generation.

4.1 *The meta-grounding strategy*

Chilovi's characterization of enabling (as well as Baron-Schmitt's) concerns what I called 'higher-order enabling'. Not only do enablers account for first-order generatively ground facts, but they also account grounding facts, namely, facts of the form [*f* is a ground of *g*]. The first irreducibility marker one could identify is the claimed unique grounding role of enabling: only enablers can ground grounding facts. This difference could be traced to the different natures of enabling and generation, respectively. One could claim that it is this special explanatory role that ensures, on its own or with other factors, the irreducibility of enabling to generation.

Unfortunately, this approach won't get the advocate the irreducibility of enabling very far. For example, Bennett (2017; see also deRossett 2013 and Litland 2017) defends the view that grounding facts such as [*f* grounds *g*] are fully grounded by *f*. Crucially, Bennett emphasizes that the grounds of grounding facts are generative: 'everything is settled by the base, by the first relatum(a). That is what makes it *generative*' (2017, p. 194; original emphasis). This view, which Bennett dubs 'upward anti-primitivism', is a limpid case of higher-order generation.

In the absence of an argument against the suitability of generators for higher-order grounding, it is unclear why we should believe that only enablers can be higher-order grounds. One way to supplement this strategy is to argue that enabling avoids some significant charges that the generative version of upward anti-primitivism faces.

Two interesting objections against generative anti-primitivism originate from Dasgupta (2014). The first is that Bennett's view implies that facts which should get different explanations, get the same one (Dasgupta 2014, p. 573). To illustrate the complaint, Dasgupta employs a familiar example. If *p* obtains, then *p* grounds *p* or *q*. Suppose that *p* grounds ~~*p*. On upward anti-primitivism, *p* is a generator of both grounding facts. According to Dasgupta, however, 'this is wrong' (*ibid.*): one grounding fact should be explained by facts involving the nature of the disjunction and the other by facts involving the nature of the negation. Here I am not interested in evaluating the strength of Dasgupta's objection. Nor am I concerned with an assessment of Bennett's response. Rather, we should focus on whether an enabling version of upward anti-primitivism escapes Dasgupta's objection. As it happens, it should be relatively uncontroversial that an enabling upward anti-primitivism would suffer the same issue. Dasgupta's objection would equally hit if *p* were a higher-order enabler of the grounding facts under discussion.

Dasgupta's second objection is that (generative) upward anti-primitivism fails to account for patterns of grounding facts. On Dasgupta's view, we should invoke some general principles, or grounding laws, about what grounds what to solve this issue (2014, p. 574). Again, let us set aside the question of whether Dasgupta's objection and Bennett's reply are convincing (but see Bennett 2017, pp. 203–205 for more). Instead, let us ask whether an enabling variant of upward anti-primitivism is immune to this problem. It is hard to see how that could be. Regarding the higher-order grounds of grounding facts as enablers does not remove the concern. If Dasgupta is right, we would still be missing some general linking principles connecting enablers and grounding facts.

The above considerations suggest that enabling is not uniquely well-suited to serving as higher-order or meta-grounding. Therefore, we should not take this feature as supportive of its irreducibility to enabling.[9]

4.2 *The mere partial grounds strategy*

We can identify another irreducibility marker from Chilovi (2020). Articulating a version of grounding-based legal positivism, Chilovi argues that enabling social facts are only 'mere partial grounds' of grounding facts about the connection between some target legal facts and others (2020, p. 3299). According to Chilovi, enablers are mere partial grounds in the sense that they never suffice, on their own, to fully account for the grounding fact. If we adopt this characterization, a partial ground could never be sufficient, on its own, to account for a grounding fact. To defend the irreducibility claim, one could argue that enablers (but not generators) are mere partial grounds, and this feature is unique arising from the nature of enabling.

The attempt is initially promising. Think again of Bennett's upward anti-primitivism. This view holds that for any *f* and any *g*, *f* is the full generator of [*f* grounds *g*]. Bennett's view should not be confined to singular facts, though. For example, Bennett places the generative role 'on one side of the relation' (2017, p. 194). On a plausible interpretation, this claim suggests that a plurality of facts can fully generatively ground the relevant grounding facts. However, this very possibility gives us reasons to doubt that only enablers can be mere partial grounds as I will illustrate in a moment. Some generators can be mere partial grounds in Chilovi's sense: they do not suffice on their own to fully ground the grounding fact.[10]

Consider a plurality of facts, Δ, that fully generatively grounds a grounding fact. According to a canonical definition, *f* is a partial ground of some fact *g* if and only if *f* on its own or together with other facts Δ is such that Δ, *f* fully ground *g* (Fine 2012, p. 50). Therefore, every member of Δ is a partial ground. Since we are discussing a collection with generators only, each member of Δ is a partial generator of the grounding fact. Some partial grounds fully ground without the help of other facts. But others do not. In the latter case, each member of Δ contributes to the full grounding of the relevant grounding fact but fails to do so individually. For example, think of the plurality *f*, *g*. Suppose, under upward anti-primitivism, that *f*, *g* is the full generative ground of [*f*, *g* is a full generative ground of *f* & *g*]. On a standard view, neither *f* nor *g* individually suffices to fully ground *f* & *g*. Similar considerations should lead us to believe that neither suffices to fully generatively ground [*f*, *g* is a full generative ground of *f* & *g*]. Presumably, we need the obtaining of both *f* and *g* to ground a grounding fact about their conjunction. Each of *f* and *g* is, therefore, a mere partial generator: neither is, on its own, sufficient to fully generate the grounding fact [*f*, *g* is a full generative ground of *f* & *g*]. If these considerations are correct, generators and enablers alike can be mere partial ground. This result casts doubts on taking mere partial grounding as an exclusive trait of enabling.

4.3 The structural properties strategy

We can identify another candidate marker of irreducibility focusing on the distinctive structural features that first-order enabling is claimed to enjoy. Wygoda Cohen (2020, p. 79) argues that first-order enablers, but not generators, can be symmetric. Namely, it is possible, for some facts *e* and *w*, that *e* is an enabling ground of *w*, and *vice versa*. Perhaps, the fact that students are motivated to participate is an enabling ground of the fact that the class is enjoyable, and *vice versa*. By contrast, at least according to the orthodox view, generative ground is asymmetric. It is at least initially plausible to regard such a structural difference as arising from the different respective natures of generation and enabling. Someone could argue such a structural difference reveals the irreducibility of enabling to generation.

I register two issues against taking asymmetry as one of the possible distinguishing markers of the irreducibility of enabling to generation. First, although the orthodox view holds that generation is asymmetric, the acceptance of symmetric generative grounds has been taken seriously in the literature. It has been argued that we should not rule out a priori the possibility, for instance, of self-grounding or mutually grounded entities (for more on non-asymmetric ground, see J.M. Wilson 2014, 2016; Thompson 2016, 2018; Giannotti 2021*;* Cameron 2022). Certain metaphysical structures, such as the interdependence

[9] Here I do not wish to settle the question of what grounds the grounding facts. This topic would require us a different investigation. However, I note two things. First, Bennett (2017) offers various replies to Dasgupta's objections. Second, the enabling version of upward anti-primitivism may reveal unique strategies to resist such objections. But whether the latter are preferable to Bennett's remain to be seen.

[10] Note that here I am not referring to Leuenberger's (2020) notion of an incompletable ground. Rather I am using Chilovi's terminology for the sake for consistency. As I remarked in section 3, I leave the possibility that there are incompletable enablers.

of elements in Huayan metaphysics and specific interpretations of scientific cases, such as the interdependence of mass, volume, and density of a homogenous fluid, have been offered as plausible cases of mutual grounding. These examples are bound, of course, to remain controversial. The point, however, is more general. If these non-standard approaches are correct, the nature of both generation and enabling is such that their instances can be symmetric. A similar reasoning could be extended to other structural features of enabling and generation. This structural approach to irreducibility should be supported further. Focusing on the case of asymmetry, one should provide some arguments for believing that symmetric instances are possible for enabling but not for generators. My claim is not that such arguments cannot be offered. Instead, it is that a thorough assessment of this approach requires further details.

Perhaps, someone could attempt to defend the asymmetry of generation by arguing that it is needed to retain the explanatoriness of grounding (see Maurin 2019 for a more precise discussion of using explanation as a guide to ground). However, it is unclear how defensible this strategy is since enabling, like generation, is an explanatory notion (I will say more about this topic in 4.5). By parity of reasoning, one should deny the possibility of symmetric enablers, thereby erasing such a structural difference between enabling and generation. Thompson (2018) and Cameron (2022) have suggested that we should look at holistic explanations to make sense of the explanatory character of symmetric grounding cases. However, it should be granted that more work in this area must be done. Note, however, that my claim is different—namely, that we lack a compelling justification for outlawing symmetric generation but tolerating symmetric enabling.

Second, this irreducibility strategy is problematic for an independent reason. As I noted previously, similarity and dissimilitude between enabling and generation may involve other factors other than their structural features. Therefore, the proponents of irreducibility incur no charge of conceptual incoherence in claiming that enabling is metaphysically distinct from generation even if they have the same structural features. This upshot strongly suggests that we should not regard the structural features of enabling as a guide to its irreducibility.

4.4 The priority strategy

The penultimate criterion stems from the previous one. Wygoda Cohen (2020, p. 79) suggests that first-order enablers, unlike generators, do not always link derivative facts to more fundamental ones. It is at least initially plausible that such a difference tracks a difference in the respective nature of enabling and generation. Once again, we should not assume that such a difference exhausts the nature of these relations. However, supporters of the irreducibility of enabling could still argue that divergence in this link with priority is a sign of the irreducibility of enabling to generation. This approach is intriguing because many believe that ground is connected to priority by design. Typically, if *f* is a generative ground of *g*, then *f* is more fundamental than *g* (e.g., Schaffer 2009, p. 373). Such a principle is implausible if first-order enablers can be symmetric—as, for example, Wygoda Cohen maintains. An enabler *e* would be more fundamental than an enabler *w*, and *w* would be more fundamental than *e* when *e* and *w* are each other's enabling ground.

We could raise two concerns with this strategy, which resemble the issues with the appeal to differences in structural properties. First, if we countenance the possibility of symmetric generation, it would not be the case that generators always link derivative facts with more fundamental facts. The priority principle is equally implausible for symmetric generators.

Second, we could challenge the initial idea of taking a difference concerning the link with priority to indicate a corresponding metaphysical distinctness between enabling and generation. Suppose for a moment that *both* generation and enabling do not always lead us from the derivative to the more fundamental. This scenario does not undermine the initial characterisation of the distinction between varieties of grounding. Nor does it collapse generation into enabling. If both generation and enabling could fail to possess a special link with priority, we should not take it as constitutive of their nature. This observation casts doubt on taking the link with priority as a potential marker of the irreducibility of enabling to generation.

4.5 The explanatory role strategy

The last irreducibility criterion I consider arises from the claimed unique explanatory role of higher-order enabling. Baron-Schmitt (2021, pp. 17-18) argues that a significant difference between generation and enabling lies in their target *explananda*. Chilovi (2020, p. 3298) makes a similar claim: 'it should be built into the enabling role that whatever plays this role is not only needed for the fact it enables to hold, but also explains its obtaining'. Building from these considerations, the proponent of the irreducibility view could argue that the unique explanatory role of enabling is an indicating feature of the

irreducibility to generation. It is not built into the nature of generation, one might say, that it explains the obtaining of higher-order grounding facts.

I doubt this criterion is successful. According to Baron-Schmitt and Chilovi, generators explain the obtaining of *grounded* facts like *g* in [*f* is a ground of *g*]. On their view, enabling is a higher-order affair: enablers explain (or additionally explain, in Chilovi's view) the obtaining of *grounding* facts, such as [*f* is a ground of *g*]. For this irreducibility strategy to succeed, one should establish that higher-order generation is not explanatory or that all higher-order grounding is enabling.

As it happens, the presence of coherent views of higher-order grounding represents a counterexample to both disjuncts. For example, deRossett (2013) and Litland (2017) can be legitimately interpreted as defending the view that generative grounds explain grounding facts. A related approach could be Bennett's upward anti-primitivism, which I discussed earlier. On such a view, it seems perfectly fine to maintain that a grounding fact is explained by the fact generating the grounded fact in question. It appears consistent with upward anti-primitivism that *f* explains both the obtaining of *g* and the obtaining of [*f* grounds *g*] (e.g., Bennett 2017, pp. 204–205). What supports this view is the idea grounding facts are not brute. Instead, they are accounted for by the same grounds that generate the grounded fact under study. The very motivation for endorsing upward anti-primitivism promotes the view that higher-order generators are explanatory. Crucially, some of these views are explicitly committed to a generative conception (e.g., Bennett 2017, pp. 57–59; deRossett 2013, p. 24). Unless the proponent of the irreducibility view shows that such views are incorrect or, contrary to the explicit commitment of their advocates, involve enabling, it seems that both generation and enabling have explanatory import regarding grounding facts. Therefore, it appears that the appeal to a special explanatory role of enabling is not supportive of the irreducibility of this notion.

5. *Conclusion*

The discussion carried out so far suggests that we should not evaluate a target distinguishing feature in isolation. Without reasons to think that the features under scrutiny exhaust the nature of either generation or enabling, there may be other relevant characteristics or roles that these relations fail to share. However, I argued that a representative sample of features or theoretical roles which can be regarded as indicating the irreducibility of enabling is possessed or played by generation, too. Such an outcome not only elicits the limit of strategies appealing to these features but also puts pressure on the advocates of enabling. They should identify alternative and promising criteria for supporting an irreducible distinction between enabling and generation. This conclusion is good news if we believe that ideological parsimony and considerations from the unity of ground should prompt us to defend that enabling just is or consists in generation. Drawing from the arguments discussed in this paper, one might be tempted to hold that the enabling role just is a special case of higher-order generative ground. But here I do not adventure further in defending this view since auxiliary considerations are needed to establish it. For now, I rest content with this ending—namely, that the discussed characteristics should not be regarded as indicators of the irreducibility of enabling to generation.[11]

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