

Original Article

Is backing grounding?

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Abstract

Separatists are grounding theorists who hold that grounding relations and metaphysical explanations are distinct, yet intimately connected in the sense that grounding relations *back* metaphysical explanations, just as causal relations back causal explanations. But Separatists have not elaborated on the nature of the ‘backing’ relation. In this paper, I argue that backing is a form of (partial) grounding. In particular, backing has many of the properties commonly attributed to grounding, and taking backing to be partial grounding allows Separatists to make the most of their position vis-à-vis their Unionist opponents.

Key words: causation; explanation; explanatory realism; grounding; metaphysical explanation

1. INTRODUCTION

Grounding theorists all agree that there is an intimate connection between grounding and metaphysical explanation. But they disagree on the nature of this connection. In the terminology introduced by Raven (2015), *Unionists* hold that grounding relations just are metaphysical explanations, or differently put, grounding relations are themselves explanatory by nature (see e.g. Bohn, 2018; Dasgupta, 2014; Guigon, 2015; Litland, 2013; Raven, 2012). *Separatists*, on the other hand, hold that grounding relations and metaphysical explanations are distinct, but linked in the sense that grounding relations *back* metaphysical explanations (see e.g. Audi, 2012a; Audi, 2012b; Koslicki, 2012; Schaffer, 2016a, 2016b; Trogdon, 2013b).

Curiously, Separatists have not addressed the question of what *backing* is supposed to involve. In this paper, I argue that there are good reasons for Separatists to think that the backing relation is itself a grounding relation.¹ I will not argue for Separatism over Unionism (or, for that matter, alternative views of metaphysical explanation, e.g. Kovacs’ (2019) unificationist account), but merely put on the table an attractive answer, by the Separatists’ own lights, to a question where they owe an account.

2. SEPARATISM AND ITS MOTIVATION

¹ The question of how metaphysical explanations are related to grounding relations (and, in particular, whether they are grounded in grounding relations) is *not* the same question as that of what grounds a grounding fact (discussed by e.g. Bennett (2011) and deRosset (2013)). The latter is the question what grounds a grounding fact like [A grounds B], whereas the topic of the current paper concerns whether grounding facts like [A grounds B] ground certain facts involving metaphysical explanations.

Separatists, like Unionists, think that there is something objective, or ‘worldly’, about explanation. If it is true that Q explains P, there must be something in the world – a relation between whatever entities Q and P refer to – that makes it so. Explanation, we might say, is a factive concept. On the other hand, Separatists, unlike Unionists, stress that explanation also has an epistemic or pragmatic dimension, and is importantly connected to understanding. If it is true that Q explains P, this cannot *just* be a matter of a worldly relation holding between whatever Q and P refers to.

Separatism belongs to a line of thought known as *explanatory realism*, of which Jaegwon Kim (1974, 1988, 1994) and David-Hillel Ruben (1990) are the primary figureheads. The two-level picture at work in explanatory realism, and thereby in Separatism, can be summarised as follows. Assume that Q explains P. What is going on? There is some piece of information (that can be conveyed to someone asking a question like ‘Why P?’), a representational entity² <P because Q>. This representational entity is an explanation (as opposed to a quasi-explanation) in virtue of there being some obtaining fact [P] that needs to be explained, some obtaining fact [Q], and there is an appropriate determination relation that holds objectively between [P] and [Q]. The worldly relation that obtains between [P] and [Q] *backs* the explanation of P in terms of Q. The Separatist may hold that *more* conditions need to be in place in order for <P because Q> to be an explanation (more on this below), but either way the worldly relation is a *necessary* condition. Ruben (1990, 2) calls explanation an epistemic concept which requires ‘metaphysical backing’. Such backing is provided by *dependence* or *determination* relations, ‘roughly relations of *bringing about* or *being responsible for*’ (Audi, 2015, p. 211).

Explanatory realism typically starts with the familiar case of causal explanation – with causation as the relevant determination relation – but can readily be extended in an analogous manner to non-causal explanation (including metaphysical explanation), as noted by both Kim and Ruben. This is what Separatists about grounding have latched on to. As Schaffer (2016b, 58) puts it, ‘causation and grounding are among the elite handful of relations able to back explanations’.

The close analogy between causal explanation and metaphysical explanation is very central to some Separatist accounts (see especially Schaffer, 2016b; A. Wilson, 2018), but the two-level picture of explanation that divorces the determination relation from the representational level at which explanation can be given, is arguably driven by the recognition – crucial for explanatory realism – that giving up on the epistemic and pragmatic dimension of explanation is simply not an option. Kim writes:

If we think in terms of the traditional divide between knowledge and reality known, explanations lie on the side of knowledge – on the side of the ‘subjective’ rather than that of the ‘objective’, on the side of ‘representation’ rather than that of reality represented. Our explanations are part of what we know about the world (1988, p. 225).

The idea of explaining something is inseparable from the idea of making it intelligible; to seek an explanation of something is to seek to understand it, to render it intelligible. These are simple conceptual points, and I take them to be untendentious and uncontroversial (1994, p. 54).

This recognition is also what primarily distinguishes the Separatist from the Unionist about grounding. As has been convincingly argued by e.g. Thompson (2016) and Maurin (2019),

² To clarify, I take the piece of information here to be distinct from the *act* of giving an explanation. The piece of information, or representational entity, is rather that which is expressed during such an act of e.g. writing or uttering sentences in order to enhance someone’s knowledge or understanding. This item, and not the act, is what I intend with ‘explanation’ (including ‘metaphysical explanation’) in this text.

Unionists face the following problem. The grounding relation is typically supposed to be a mind-independent relation that holds objectively (I take it that most Separatists and Unionists alike agree with this), whereas explanations are at least partly dependent on context, and pragmatic and epistemic factors like the interests or epistemic situations of agents. In short, explanations and grounding relations do not have the same properties. But, by the indiscernibility of identicals, this means that grounding relations cannot themselves be explanations, contrary to what unionists claim. In order to hold on to their central claim, Unionists appear forced to reject the idea that whether something is an explanation is sensitive to interests, knowledge, and context.³ Explanatory realism recognises this tension and tries to avoid it by rejecting identity between explanation and underlying relation, thus introducing the two-level picture sketched above.⁴ I will assume that being able to avoid the tension-problem is a desideratum for Separatists.

3. THE BACKING RELATION

Why should we care about the more precise nature of the backing relation? First, the notion of ‘backing’ and the slogan ‘grounding backs metaphysical explanation’ is clearly very central to Separatism, so it would seem that Separatists owe us an account of what this means, and what relation ‘backing’ is supposed to pick out. Second, the debate between Separatism and Unionism appears to demand it. If we are to make a fair evaluation of the Separatist option, we should have a clear view of what backing is. There are different ways to cash out the backing relation, that have different implications for what the Separatist can and cannot say with respect to various substantial issues.⁵ I am going to argue that on an attractive understanding of the backing relation, backing is grounding.

3.1. Is Backing Grounding? Some Preliminary Reasons

There are quite a few reasons to think that backing is a form of grounding, since the two seems to have a lot in common. To begin with, Separatism in particular, and explanatory realism more generally, is readily stated using locutions like ‘in virtue of’, ‘because’, ‘depends on’: certain claims of the form $\langle P \text{ because } Q \rangle$ are explanations *in virtue of* the obtaining of worldly determination relations; $\langle P \text{ because } Q \rangle$ ’s status as an explanation *depends on* the obtaining of a relation between P and Q. Of course, talk in these terms is ubiquitous in characterising and capturing the concept of grounding, especially among grounding theorists who take grounding to be a primitive notion, the existence of which is betrayed by our use of locutions like ‘in virtue of’. So this fact is potentially important.

Next, the explanatory realist’s two-level picture of explanation suggests that backing is a non-causal dependence relation, as grounding is also normally thought to be. According to explanatory realism, explanation requires – *depends on* – the existence of a worldly relation. But the relation does not *cause* there to be an explanation. Rather, the existence of the relation is a necessary precondition – a ground, it seems natural to say – for the existence of the explanation. Relatedly, it is plausible that grounding relations are more fundamental than metaphysical explanations, and that the backing relation thus holds between two entities where one is more fundamental than the other – again, much like the standard picture of grounding.

Moreover, much like the grounding relation, the backing relation appears to be *explanatory*. Why do some pieces of information explain? Partly because they correspond to obtaining determination relations. In this way, the obtaining of the backing relation between

³ Unless they give up on the general mind-independence of grounding. This is the option favoured by Thompson (2016), but I take it to be something many grounding theorists would want to avoid.

⁴ Although this leads to problems of its own for Separatism, see Maurin (2019) for discussion.

⁵ This is illustrated below, especially in section 3.2, but see also Kovacs (forthcoming) for relevant discussion.

grounding relation and representational entity (at least partially) *explains why* the representational entity in question is, or qualifies as, a metaphysical explanation.⁶ That is, [A grounds B] and [C causes E], help explain the facts that [<B because A> is a metaphysical explanation] and [<E because C> is a causal explanation] respectively, just as e.g. the fact that there are natural properties helps explain the fact that there are moral properties (if it is true that moral properties are grounded in natural properties).

The grounding relation also has certain formal properties. Although philosophers disagree on virtually all of these, it will be useful to see that the backing relation is compatible with two of the properties that have standardly been attributed to the grounding relation: asymmetry and necessity – or so I will argue.

3.2. Necessitarianism and the Modal Profile of Backing

Many grounding theorists have assumed that grounding is necessary, i.e. that if the ground obtains then, necessarily, the grounded obtains (see e.g. Trogon 2013a for a case in favour of grounding necessitarianism, and Skiles 2015 for a case against it). Assuming that Separatists want to adhere to grounding necessitarianism, it seems backing can only be grounding if the obtaining of a grounding relation necessitates the existence of a metaphysical explanation. Thus, whenever we have a grounding relation, we also have a metaphysical explanation. Is that right? It is certainly part of explanatory realism, and hence of Separatism, that whenever we have a metaphysical explanation, there is a grounding relation that backs it, but it is not clear that there is modal co-variation also in the other direction.

Strictly speaking, it is open to the Separatist both to forbid and to allow for there to be grounding without metaphysical explanation (and more generally, to explanatory realists to forbid and allow for there to be e.g. causation without causal explanation). Both of these options are also compatible with the view that backing is grounding. This is so due to the distinction between *full* and *partial* grounding, which is standardly accepted by grounding theorists. Grounding necessitarianism is a claim about *full* ground only. The distinction between full and partial ground reflects the (possible) one-many nature of the grounding relation; a plurality of facts can ground one single fact. Taken individually, they only *partially* ground the grounded, and the relation of partial ground is not necessitating. The Separatist may thus choose between the claim that backing is a case of *full* grounding (for Separatists attracted to the view that the obtaining of a determination relation is enough for there to be explanation) and the claim that backing is a case of *partial* grounding (for Separatists attracted to the view that the obtaining of a determination relation is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for there to be explanation).

In my view, Separatists are best off going for the latter option. That is, the best version of Separatism allows for there to be certain obtaining grounding relations without there being metaphysical explanation. Let me elaborate on what this involves. Recall the two-level explanatory realist account of explanation that divorces the worldly relation between P and Q from the epistemic level where we find the would-be explanation, i.e. the representational entity <P because Q> that can be communicated. I have tried to be relatively non-committal regarding the ontology of the representational entities here, but an obvious candidate view is that they are propositions. The current suggestion is *not* that Separatists should allow for there to be an obtaining grounding fact [Q grounds P] without there being a true proposition that

⁶ Schnieder (2010, 326-327) briefly reasons along these lines in a slightly different context. He suggests that some piece of information e.g. <The Titanic sank because it collided with an iceberg> is a causal explanation because it is *grounded* in a causal fact e.g. [The collision of the Titanic with an iceberg caused it to sink], and he also indicates that this relation between fact and piece of information is *explanatory*.

represents this as being the case. The suggestion is that they should allow for cases where the proposition in question does not express a metaphysical explanation.⁷

Why go for this? I noted above that an important difference between Separatism and Unionism is that the former has a seemingly better chance to accommodate the epistemic and/or pragmatic features of explanation than the latter, and that doing so is a desideratum for Separatists. Making room for the above possibility presents a natural way of making room for these features of explanation too. The Separatist may say that the backing relation is one of *partial* grounding, and that only *together with* some other obtaining (epistemic and/or pragmatic) facts does it fully ground, and *then* necessitate, a metaphysical explanation. More generally, if <A because B> is an explanation, this is partially grounded by the fact that a determination relation obtains between A and B, and partially grounded by the fact(s) that certain epistemic and/or pragmatic conditions obtain. The obtaining of these worldly and epistemic/pragmatic conditions *together* necessitate the fact that <A because B> is an explanation, but the obtaining of e.g. [B grounds A], or [B causes A] alone, does not.

On the alternative version of Separatism with backing as *full* grounding – so that whenever the determination relation between some P and Q obtains, the corresponding representation entity <P because Q> is an explanation – it is hard to see how to make room for auxiliary conditions of any kind. While there is nothing formally wrong with this option, the difference here illustrates how a better understanding of the backing relation matters to the evaluation of Separatism. If it is a desideratum on any version of Separatism that it can make room for the epistemic and/or pragmatic dimension of explanation, the modal profile of the backing relation – and generally, its more precise nature – is highly relevant to whether and how this can be achieved.

3.3. Asymmetry

Asymmetry is also a property traditionally attributed to grounding (although see Rodriguez-Pereyra (2015) for an argument against it). That is, if [A] grounds [B], then [B] does not ground [A]. Is backing asymmetrical? On an intuitive level, I think the answer is clearly ‘yes’. At the heart of explanatory realism is a certain directionality: the fact that something is an explanation is (partly) due to a corresponding determination relation in the world. Explanation depends on the obtaining of determination relations, but not the other way around.

But it might be objected here, that Separatists are committed to a symmetrical dependence between metaphysical explanations and grounding relations. Here is how such reasoning might go. Grounding theorists, including Separatists, like to say that grounding is explanatory. Indeed, this is a defining feature of grounding relations, central to the motivation for postulating them at all. What does it mean to say that grounding is an explanatory relation? For a Unionist, the answer is seemingly obvious: to say that grounding is explanatory is just a shorthand way to say that grounding *is* (metaphysical) explanation. The Separatist, who divorces grounding relations from metaphysical explanation, must give a different answer. For instance, she might say that ‘explanatoriness’ is *conferred* onto the relation in virtue of the metaphysical explanations that it backs (and similarly, causal explanations make the causal relations that back them explanatory). But this, the objection would go, looks suspiciously like a symmetrical dependence: not only are metaphysical explanations dependent on grounding relations for their being what they are (i.e. explanations), but grounding relations are dependent on metaphysical explanations for being what they are (i.e. explanatory).

⁷ This would generalise to other kinds of explanation, so that there would also be room for obtaining causal relations, where the true proposition representing the obtaining of this causal relation does not express a causal explanation.

In fact, Separatists should steer clear of the above story anyway. Because if, as I suggested above, Separatists should allow for grounding relations that do not in fact back any metaphysical explanation (because the other would-be partial grounds do not obtain), a picture on which explanatoriness is conferred on the relations by the explanations they actually back, would appear to imply that certain grounding relations are not explanatory. That does not seem to be an attractive consequence – especially since they presumably *could* very well back an explanation, had only the relevant epistemic/pragmatic conditions obtained. But thankfully there are other ways to account for the ‘explanatoriness’ of the grounding relation, so Separatists do not need to say this. For instance, they can say that what it means for a relation to be explanatory is that it belongs to a type of relation which is, as Schaffer (2016b, 58) puts it, ‘among the elite handful of relations *able to* back explanations’ (my emphasis). That is, these relations are *apt* or *disposed* to back explanations, even if this disposition is not (currently, or ever) realised by a given token relation. I conclude that there is no genuine threat here to the claim that backing is, just like grounding, an asymmetric relation.

4. REASONS AGAINST?

Above I argued that grounding and backing have several important properties in common. I also demonstrated that this gives the Separatists room for an attractive way of accommodating the epistemic/pragmatic dimension of explanation. But are there any obvious reasons *against* seeing backing as grounding?

First, one may object that grounding only relates facts, whereas backing is supposed to be cross-categorical. But on the one hand, as Raven (2015, 326) points out, the Separatist/Unionist debate bears on what the relata of a grounding relation can be. The motivation for taking facts to be the only proper relata comes at least partially from the Unionists’ wish to say that the grounds themselves explain the grounded, since grounding *is* explanation. So it is not clear that a Separatist should accept this objection. On the other hand, even granting that grounding only relates facts, I do not see why we should be so sure that backing must be cross-categorical. While we may lazily say that facts about determination relations back explanations, which are representational entities, it makes just as much sense to say that properly speaking, it is the fact that [A grounds B] which backs the fact that [<B because A> is a metaphysical explanation] (or, if one prefers, the more colloquial sounding fact that [A metaphysically explains B]). Indeed, that is how I have phrased things throughout this paper. And if, as I argued in 3.2, what [A grounds B] (partially) grounds is not the *existence* of a true proposition which represents this relation as obtaining, but *the fact that it is, or can be used to express, a metaphysical explanation*, the proper way to construe the relata of the grounding relation is along precisely these lines.

Second, one may worry about circularity. Backing plays a crucial role in elucidating what it means to say that grounding is explanatory (i.e. aptness to *back* metaphysical explanations). And I assume that being explanatory is an essential part of what it is to be grounding. So if backing is grounding, Separatists are invoking grounding in order to elucidate what grounding is.

There are a few different things one could say here, depending on what kind of grounding theorist one is. Many think that ‘grounding’ is a primitive notion, and therefore we mainly grasp what grounding is by way of examples. So why not an example of how the obtaining of a determination relation grounds an explanation? It may sound awkward when we talk about grounding relations between grounding relations and explanations, but note that it does not seem at all strange to talk about a causal relation grounding a causal explanation.

Others, like e.g. Rettler (2017), think that ‘grounding’ may refer to either member of a set of different ‘small-g relations’ (cf. J. M. Wilson, 2014), such as the part-whole relation,

ontological dependence, or supervenience. But these small-g relations are importantly unified in the sense that they are all instances of ('big-G') Grounding. This can be understood in terms of Grounding as genus that admits of several species, or that Grounding is multiply realisable, so that there are many, to some extent different, ways to be grounded, but they are all instances of Grounding. This is compatible with the idea that backing is grounding. One would say that backing is a species of Grounding, or that being backed is one way of being (partially) grounded.⁸ Key to this kind of account is the question of what makes something a way of being grounded, of what it means to realise Grounding. One might worry that the notion of 'backing' explanation is central to elucidating that, and if so, that we have circularity on our hands, if backing is supposed to be a form of Grounding.

But first of all, there are other ways of elucidating what unifies instances of Grounding. Rettler mentions that being non-causal, being naturally captured by 'in virtue of'-locutions, and being such that talk about it is easily substituted by grounding-talk, are all possible candidate criteria for being an instance of Grounding. Second, even if one needs to invoke ability to back explanation in saying what makes something an instance of Grounding, I am not convinced this would be problematic or obstructive to our grasping the notion. Consider the following analogous example. The property of being a blood relative is multiply realisable, by e.g. parenthood, brotherhood, aunthood, grandmotherhood, and so on. Differently put, all these relations are species of the genus blood relatedness. In order to elucidate what it means for a relation to be one of blood relatedness, one presumably needs to, directly or indirectly, refer to the relation of parenthood. Of course, parenthood is itself a way of being related by blood. But whatever circularity this may involve, does not seem to obstruct understanding of what it means to be a blood relative of someone.

Third, it might be complained that my argument here does not support the claim that backing is grounding in a fine-grained enough way. For instance, Kovacs (forthcoming) suggests that backing can be reductively understood as either grounding (or, 'production', in his preferred terminology) or metaphysical explanation, and his own preferred reading of 'backs' appears to be 'metaphysically explains' (cf. Kovacs, 2017, p. 2934). It may be objected that several properties of backing (e.g. asymmetry, 'in virtue of'-talk, explanatoriness), that I have drawn attention to here as motivating seeing backing as grounding, would be just as nicely accommodated by the view that backing is metaphysical explanation.⁹

As I stated at the outset of this paper, I am merely concerned with presenting a position available to Separatists, in response to a question to which they owe an answer. And if one *is* a Separatist, the claim that grounding *metaphysically explains* metaphysical explanation, appears to require that grounding *grounds* metaphysical explanation. Separatists hold that metaphysical explanations must be backed by grounding relations. Hence, if the fact that [A grounds B] metaphysically explains the fact that [<B because A> is a metaphysical explanation] (or more colloquially, the fact that [A metaphysically explains B] – I'll write that for brevity in what follows), this 'meta-explanation' too must correspond to a grounding relation. That relation, presumably, is the backing relation. In fact, as I suggested in 3.1, the backing relation is explanatory in the sense that it appears to indicate a metaphysical explanation of the fact that some piece of information is an explanation. So given the Separatist picture, the suggestion that backing is metaphysical explanation is not really in conflict with my suggestion that backing is grounding – provided that we do not read the former 'is' in a literal (Unionist) way as indicating identity.

⁸ Whether or not backing could be identified with another small-g relation, and if so which one, remains an open question.

⁹ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this.

Fourth and finally, a regress worry rears its head in light of my reply to the third objection. Let us call [A grounds B] GF (for grounding fact), and [A metaphysically explains B] EF (explanation fact). Separatists say that GF backs EF. I have suggested that this should be understood as the claim that GF (partially) grounds EF. Now, that is a further grounding fact, let us call it GF₂, consisting of the backing relation and its relata. GF₂, I just suggested, also backs a metaphysical explanation – namely the meta-explanation, of why A grounds B metaphysically explains that A metaphysically explains B. Let us call the fact that this is an explanation EF₂. That is, GF₂ backs EF₂. This, in turn, is a further grounding fact, GF₃, if backing is indeed grounding. And doesn't GF₃ back a metaphysical explanation EF₃, which in turn... It seems we are off on a regress.¹⁰

But recall that if – as I have suggested – backing is only *partial* grounding; the obtaining of a grounding fact is itself not enough to guarantee metaphysical explanation. Some other partial grounds – epistemic and/or pragmatic conditions – must also obtain. And, crucially, there can therefore be grounding relations without corresponding metaphysical explanations. That means that the regress *can* be stopped at any point, if the right epistemic and/or pragmatic conditions do not obtain in addition to the grounding fact in question. I have suggested that backing is explanatory – indeed, that is a reason to think that backing is grounding – so we can perhaps expect that backing often *does* back metaphysical explanations, i.e. that grounding facts like GF₂ typically back explanation facts like EF₂. But it can do so even if there are many other backing-facts, perhaps like the more complex GF₄, that do not typically back metaphysical explanations. The ‘explanatoriness’ of any particular grounding (or backing) relation does not, as I suggested in 3.3 above, derive from *actually* backing an explanation, but from being an instance of a kind that is apt to back explanation. Given that last point, there is also good reason to think that whatever regress there is here is benign – nothing in the earlier steps of the chain depends on whether or not backing/grounding facts further down the line actually back any explanations.

5. CONCLUSION

Separatists claim that grounding relations back metaphysical explanations, but have not been clear about what kind of relation ‘backing’ refers to, despite the central part it plays on their account. I have argued that there are good reasons to think that backing is grounding, and that there are no obvious reasons to think that backing is *not* (a form of) grounding. In particular, I suggested that the view that backing is a relation of *partial* grounding is an attractive option because it allows Separatists a natural way to accommodate the epistemic and/or pragmatic dimension of explanation. The arguments presented here are not conclusive, and fully characterising the backing relation is beyond the scope of this text. But the paper puts an option worthy of serious consideration on the table.

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¹⁰ Many thanks to Anna-Sofia Maurin for pressing me on this point.

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