

Varieties of grounding skepticism

(forthcoming in *The Monist*. Please cite the final version!)

Abstract: Skepticism about grounding is the view that ground-theoretic concepts shouldn't be used in metaphysical theorizing. Possible reasons for adopting this attitude are numerous: perhaps grounding is unintelligible; or perhaps it's never instantiated; or perhaps it's just too heterogeneous to be theoretically useful. Unfortunately, as currently pursued the debate between grounding enthusiasts and skeptics is insufficiently structured. This paper's purpose is to impose a measure of conceptual rigor on the debate by offering an opinionated taxonomy of views with a reasonable claim to being "skeptical". I argue that carving up logical space into pro- and anti-grounding views isn't especially helpful; rather, we should recognize various degrees of ground-theoretic involvement depending on how inflationary our understanding of the theoretical term 'ground' is.

1. Introduction

In 2001, Kit Fine published a highly influential paper, "The question of realism", in which he introduced the notion of grounding: an unanalyzed level-connecting explanatory notion that is useful and even indispensable for a proper understanding of a number of important philosophical disputes and which is distinct from level-connecting notions that were still in wide use at the time (especially supervenience). Although Fine's paper is the first one to explicitly theorize about grounding, he wasn't the first contemporary author to use the word in roughly this sense.¹ Fine's paper was followed by a number of further, highly influential works over the next few years.²

It didn't take long for the pushback to come. 'Grounding skeptics', as I will refer to them following Chris Daly (2012), have taken upon themselves to argue that for a variety of reasons, grounding shouldn't be added to the metaphysician's toolkit. Their arguments vary: the most radical ones complain that grounding is esoteric (Hofweber 2009) or unintelligible (Daly 2012). Others argue that there is no such thing as grounding (Jansson 2017, Kovacs 2017, Miller and Norton 2017, Duncan, Miller and Norton 2021, and MacBride and Janssen-Lauret 2022) or that even if there is, it's too disunified and coarse-grained to be theoretically useful (J. Wilson 2014,

Koslicki 2015). Responses to these arguments began to appear very soon, against both the unintelligibility³ and the disunity⁴ claims (the second type of skepticism, that grounding is neither intelligible nor disunified but simply never occurs, has received far less attention).

I used to count myself among the skeptics, but I no longer do so – not because I have become a true believer, but because I have started to lose my grip on what is at stake in the debate between fans and foes of grounding. Over the past decade, the literature on grounding has become large, topically diverse and conceptually sophisticated in a way that it wasn't when the first criticisms appeared in print. Grounding enthusiasts have become more articulate about the sense in which grounding is explanatory⁵; they began to reflect on ontological issues, first and foremost whether grounding is a relation or best expressed by a sentential connective⁶; moreover, the literature on grounding is now much better informed than it used to be by the large body of work that has been produced on explanation.⁷ These changes necessitate a reassessment of grounding skepticism: what it is, what it targets, and why one might be attracted to it. Such a reassessment is the present paper's main purpose. Thus, most of this paper will be an opinionated taxonomy of views that have a reasonable claim to be a kind of skepticism about grounding. I don't profess complete neutrality; for example, in section 3 I will argue that the view that grounding is unintelligible is very difficult to motivate. However, issuing a definitive verdict on the debate isn't my goal. Rather, I will show that "skepticism" is best seen as an attitude that comes in degrees: there are several degrees of ground-theoretic involvement, and different kinds of skeptics will differ in what degree of involvement they deny.

Since I'm primarily interested in clarifying what is at stake in the debate rather than taking a side in it, the details of extant criticisms of grounding won't be my primary focus, and I will often take liberty to reformulate these criticisms in light of recent developments and conceptual

distinctions in the literature. In section 2, I will do some stage setting and introduce a few assumptions that will make it easier to adjudicate the debate. I will argue that the debate is best understood as one concerning grounding *qua* metaphysical explanation (rather than grounding *qua* the relation that backs metaphysical explanation), and that ‘grounding’ in this sense should be treated as a theoretical term (rather than as a piece of ordinary parlance). I will also restrict my discussion to realist views about ‘ground’-discourse that treat the notion as a primitive. In section 3 I will discuss the prospects of the arch-skeptical view that the notion of grounding is unintelligible (‘defectivism’) and will argue that defectivism isn’t a particularly promising version of grounding skepticism. In section 4, I will consider two further grounding-skeptical views: that although grounding isn’t unintelligible, its extension is empty (‘nihilism’) and that although the extension of grounding isn’t empty, it’s objectionably disunified (‘pluralism’). I will show that properly understood, the difference between nihilism and pluralism is semantic rather than metaphysical, and that given our starting assumptions, nihilism is the more plausible position to take for would-be grounding skeptics. Section 5 concludes.

2. Preliminaries

As we will shortly see, there are many ways of being a skeptic about grounding. But the common denominator of all these views is a normative claim: when engaging in metaphysical (or more broadly other theoretical) projects, one *shouldn’t* use ‘grounding’ and its cognates (‘in virtue of’, ‘because’, etc.), at least not with the same purported meaning that grounding theorists assign to it. This immediately raises the question of *how* grounding theorists use these words; as it will gradually emerge, they don’t all use them in the same way. However, already now we can make

four simplifying assumptions that will help streamline the discussion and allow us to interpret grounding skeptics in a maximally charitable way.

The first assumption concerns the presence or absence of grounding in ordinary discourse. Most grounding theorists adopt what Trogon (2013) calls the *quotidian* approach to grounding, according to which the concept of grounding figures in everyday thinking. In defense of this claim, they usually cite textbook examples of grounding that should also seem intuitive to non-philosophers (for example “This acquisition is wrong because it is theft”.) The opposing *non-quotidian* view maintains that grounding is a theoretical posit that doesn’t figure in everyday thinking. It might be expressed in some contexts with an everyday word (e.g. ‘because’), but mere linguistic competence with such words doesn’t imply that the folk have a pre-theoretical grasp of the notion of grounding.

The non-quotidian view is more amenable to grounding skepticism. One version of grounding skepticism, the view that grounding is unintelligible (section 3) is difficult to even state on the assumption that grounding already figures in everyday thinking. After all, if a concept already figures in our everyday thinking then we already have at least a vague understanding of it; philosophical investigation may uncover the need for clarification, but won’t show the concept to be unintelligible. Similar remarks apply to weaker forms of grounding skepticism, for example the view that grounding is never instantiated. We *seem to* understand sentences like ‘This acquisition was wrong because it was theft’. Grounding theorists tell us that the word ‘because’ in this sentence expresses grounding. But if they are right and we understand the sentence, yet grounding never occurs, then the sentence (as well as many other *prima facie* plausible sentences) must be false after all. I take this to be an undesirable consequence; it’s preferable for grounding skeptics to argue instead that the sentence in question is true but doesn’t

express grounding, because no expression of ordinary language expresses grounding. For this reason, I will henceforth assume that would-be grounding skeptics prefer to be non-quotidians.⁸

The second assumption concerns the sense in which grounding is an “explanatory relation”. It has become standard in the literature to distinguish between two notions of grounding: grounding *qua* metaphysical explanation and grounding *qua* that-which-backs-metaphysical-explanation. According to the first interpretation, grounding is the metaphysical analogue of causal explanation; according to the second, it is a metaphysical analogue of causation itself. After Raven (2015), these conceptions of grounding have become commonly known as ‘unionism’ and ‘separatism’, respectively, although whether the two conceptions are rival accounts of the same notion or simply concern two different theoretical posits remains a matter of controversy.⁹ What’s important is that grounding *qua* that-which-backs-metaphysical-explanation (in what follows: grounding *qua* backer) presupposes grounding *qua* metaphysical explanation (without metaphysical explanation, there is nothing to back), but not vice versa. This suggests that of the two notions, grounding *qua* metaphysical explanation (the chief concern of unionists) is the more fundamental one. Accordingly, I will henceforth understand skepticism about grounding as skepticism about metaphysical explanation.

It needs to be said that grounding skeptics typically don’t structure their criticism around this distinction, and that many of them (especially J. Wilson [2014] and Koslicki [2015]) are most naturally read as skeptics about grounding *qua* backer. However, I think it is useful to reinterpret their views as views about grounding *qua* metaphysical explanation, and I will accordingly do so in section 4. As I noted above, this seems to be the more basic of the two notions. But also, this is what many grounding theorists (including authors of the first seminal works that are already among the stated targets of early grounding skeptics) have always meant

by ‘grounding’. Fine (2012), Rosen (2010) and Correia (2005) never meant to commit themselves to worldly relations of determination that supposedly underlie metaphysical explanation; as Schaffer (2016a: 84) puts it, they construe grounding “in the image of causal explanation” rather than in the image of causation. Thus, skepticism that only targets a notion that presupposes metaphysical explanation but isn’t presupposed by it is skepticism of a very limited scope. On my view, the question of whether there is a relation that backs metaphysical explanation, and if so, what its nature is, is best seen as an in-house debate for philosophers who are already on board with ground-theoretic metaphysics. Grounding skeptics should focus instead on metaphysical explanation itself: whether it’s intelligible, and if so, whether it ever occurs and whether it displays any kind of unity.

The third assumption concerns the nature of ground-theoretic discourse. I will assume a realist interpretation of such discourse, meaning that ground-theoretic sentences have a truth value and that philosophers utter them with the purpose of expressing truths. These assumptions have been questioned in the literature; I will nonetheless make them, for two reasons.¹⁰ First: anti-realism about ground-theoretic discourse stands apart from both ground-theoretic and ground-skeptical views. On the one hand, anti-realists don’t make the normative claim that we *shouldn’t* use ground-theoretic notions in philosophical theorizing; they think it is permissible and often useful (in some practical, non-veritistic sense) to assert ground-theoretic sentences. On the other hand, extant criticisms of grounding were never meant to attack such views, and anti-realists often propose their views as a kind of compromise position between the skeptic’s criticism and what they see as the apparent usefulness of ground-theoretic discourse. Second: if we assume the non-quotidian view of grounding, it seems fairly easy to neutralize anti-realist approaches. After all, non-quotidians can simply *stipulate* that they are using ‘grounding’ and

‘because’ solely to pick out a concept that plays certain theoretical roles, explicitly severing any connotation with non-technical past uses that might be amenable to an anti-realist interpretation.

My fourth and final assumption is that the relevant notion of grounding is primitive: *if* there is a serviceable notion of grounding at all, it resists analysis in simpler terms. This, too, is a controversial assumption, as several proponents of grounding have offered reductive analyses in recent years: for instance, Correia (2013) and Zylstra (2019) in terms of essence, Correia and Skiles (2019) in terms of generic identity, Wilsch (2015) in terms of entailment and metaphysical lawhood, Poggiolesi (2016) and Poggiolesi and Francez (2021) in terms of logical complexity, and McDaniel (2022) in terms of minimal necessitation. Assuming the non-quotidian approach to ground-theoretic notions, these analyses are best understood as recommendations about how to use a certain piece of technical jargon, rather than as analyses of a standing concept. Thus (assuming non-quotidianism), on these views questions about the theoretical utility of grounding entirely boil down to the theoretical utility of the notions that occur in the analyses. However, the status of these notions would need to be determined on a case-by-case basis, and we cannot just assume that the dialectic that surrounds grounding automatically carries over to them. Therefore, for the rest of the paper I will put these reductive approaches to the side.¹¹ Similar remarks apply to certain non-reductive conceptions of grounding that make substantive assumptions about the relation between ground and essence, necessity, or the ontology of facts. While many theorists of grounding make such assumptions, they are typically not regarded as part of the core notion. Thus, while arguments against grounding that exploit such features are of considerable interest on their own, I take them to be arguments against certain *theories* of grounding rather than against grounding *per se*.¹²

In the sections to follow I will discuss several candidate versions of grounding skepticism, keeping in mind the caveats mentioned above. The emerging picture will be murky. Some versions of grounding skepticism look more promising than others. But more importantly, the disagreement between grounding acolytes and grounding skeptics is sometimes subtle enough to look like a taxonomic rather than substantive metaphysical issue. I will start with the oldest form of grounding skepticism, according to which the notion is unintelligible.

3. Defectivism

It is natural to start with the earliest form of grounding skepticism, the view that grounding is unintelligible: we shouldn't use the word 'grounding' in theoretical contexts because it doesn't express any coherent notion. Call this view "defectivism".

It's worth noting that defectivism is varyingly expressed in two different (and non-equivalent) ways. One is to say that the *concept* of grounding is unintelligible, or more perspicuously, that there is no intelligible concept of grounding. Another is to claim that the *word* 'grounding' (along with its cognates) is unintelligible. The latter claim is weaker, as it leaves open the possibility that there is a concept answering the stated theoretical needs of self-titled grounding theorists, but that the expressions 'grounds', 'in virtue of' and 'because' fail to express this concept and are used too confusedly to express anything coherent. Henceforth, I will focus on the first claim. It will be sometimes convenient to use semantic ascent and speak of skepticism about ground-theoretic vocabulary. When I do so, this should always be understood as skepticism about the claim that there is an intelligible concept in the vicinity of what grounding theorists are trying to express with 'grounds', 'in virtue of' and similar expressions.

For reasons explained in the previous section, by ‘grounding’ I mean metaphysical explanation, rather than grounding *qua* backer.¹³

How can we decide whether grounding *qua* metaphysical explanation is intelligible? It should be clear that the common anti-skeptical strategy of offering intuitive examples of grounding is futile against a defectivist who explicitly took the non-quotidian approach, for such a skeptic is already on record for not understanding the examples, either (at least when interpreted ground-theoretically). Nor should we be impressed with the common anti-skeptical strategy of trying to make grounding intelligible by embedding it in a formalism (e.g. by laying out axioms, stating certain formal properties, or representing it via structural equation models).¹⁴ These formal tools can aid those who already have a rudimentary grasp of the target notion, but I don’t see why someone who genuinely thinks that the notion unintelligible should find them even remotely helpful.¹⁵

In my view, a more fruitful anti-skeptical strategy is to press the defectivist on the *source* of the supposed unintelligibility of grounding. If defectivism is true of the concept of metaphysical explanation, then either ‘explanation’ or ‘metaphysical’ is unintelligible, or they are intelligible when taken separately but their concatenation is unintelligible.

Let’s start with the first of these options. Explanation *tout court* surely isn’t unintelligible. It isn’t controversial that there is such a thing as scientific explanation, that there are causal explanations, and so on. Thus, the ‘explanation’ part of ‘metaphysical explanation’ isn’t unintelligible. It won’t do to argue that ‘explanation’ is intelligible as it occurs in ‘scientific explanation’ but unintelligible as it occurs in ‘metaphysical explanation’. This would imply that the word changes its meaning when concatenated with ‘metaphysical’, but there’s no reason to assume this. If there are metaphysical explanations, they aren’t explanations in a different *sense*

than scientific explanation or mathematical explanation; they don't fall under a different *concept* of explanation. Rather, they are different species of the same genus, unambiguously expressed by the word 'explanation'. There are many different kinds of explanation, and perhaps metaphysical explanation is one of them. But this doesn't imply that 'explanation' is ambiguous between different concepts of explanation. To the contrary, the claim that there are several kinds of explanation requires that 'explanation' occur univocally in the sentence 'There are several kinds of explanation'.¹⁶ So, if the composite concept of 'metaphysical explanation' is unintelligible, this cannot be due to the 'explanation' part.

Is, then, 'metaphysical' (as it occurs in 'metaphysical explanation') unintelligible? It's hard to see why it would be. In the grounding literature, the predicate 'metaphysical' is usually used for a connection between the explanans and the explanandum that is not causal but "constitutive" – not in the sense of material constitution, but in the sense that the explanans makes the explanandum the case. This kind of "constitutive" or "making the case" connection was recognized long before the appearance of grounding on the scene: it's what is at issue between composite objects and their proper parts, structured propositions and their Boolean components, truths and their truthmakers, and so on.¹⁷ To be clear, none of these examples is uncontroversial. Nor do I claim that the intelligibility of these notions entails the intelligibility of grounding. I'm making only the following weaker claim: (1) the sense in which metaphysical explanation is taken to be "metaphysical" by its proponents is the same sense in which these metaphysical relations are taken to be metaphysical, and thus, (2) the unintelligibility of 'metaphysical' cannot be the source of the unintelligibility of 'metaphysical explanation'.

What we have so far is that neither constituent of the composite concept of metaphysical explanation is plausibly considered unintelligible. Perhaps, then, the concept of metaphysical

explanation is unintelligible without either of its constituent concepts being unintelligible. Perhaps it is on a par with the concept of a turquoise explanation or that of an overweight explanation, which display some sort of category mistake. However, I don't know how to motivate this claim. There doesn't seem to be anything confused about the idea that an explanation features the sort of constitutive connection that is at issue in cases of composition, Boolean operations on propositions, truthmaking, and so on. This is all the more so because there may even be *scientific* explanations that feature such connections (Skow 2016, Emery 2018, McKenzie 2022). One might try to explain away these cases as not genuine explanations. But nothing about them seems confused, unintelligible, or a category mistake.

It's time to take stock. I find defectivism an unpromising view for would-be grounding skeptics. This is because on non-quotidian unionist approaches, 'grounding' is just shorthand for metaphysical explanation, but we have no good reason to believe that either constituent expression in 'metaphysical explanation' or their concatenation is unintelligible. This doesn't yet tell us anything about whether grounding ever occurs, whether it's a unified phenomenon, and whether it's of any use in theory building. But it strongly suggests that the most plausible form of grounding skepticism isn't defectivism.

4. Nihilism and pluralism

Grounding skeptics who don't claim that grounding is unintelligible often express their view as a thesis about the grounding *relation*: either there is no such relation as grounding ("nihilism") or if there is one, it is at best a disunified, heterogeneous relation ("pluralism"). In this section, I will do two things. First (4.1), I will take a closer look at what (in the present framework) nihilism about grounding amounts to. I will distinguish three degrees of "ground-theoretic

involvement”: in order of decreasing level of involvement, ontological, ideological in the Siderian sense, and ideological in the Quinean sense. Next, I will suggest that in light of what most grounding theorists take to be their own core commitments, nihilism is best understood as a view about ground-theoretic ideology in the Quinean sense. Then (4.2), I will argue that we can also distinguish three analogous types of pluralism. These are close cousins of the nihilist views, and the choice between them and their nihilist counterparts turns on semantic rather than metaphysical considerations.

4.1. Grounding nihilism: ontological and ideological

One straightforward way to express a skeptical attitude toward grounding is to say that there is no such thing as grounding; the concept may not be unintelligible, but nothing falls under it. Call this view *nihilism*. On the face of it, nihilism is an ontological thesis: it denies the existence of the relation of grounding. As it will soon become clear, it isn't mandatory to understand nihilism in this way. It will therefore be useful to have a label for this specifically ontological interpretation of nihilism, to which I will henceforth refer as *o-nihilism*. It is instructive to start with this simple and intuitive formulation of nihilism and then proceed to less straightforward formulations.

4.1.1. O-nihilism. Nihilists about grounding often phrase themselves as o-nihilists. For example, Duncan, Miller and Norton deny the existence of a grounding relation but allow that there may be true 'because'-sentences that express ground-theoretic connections, as long as they don't ontologically commit us to a grounding relation.¹⁸ In a similar fashion, Naomi Thompson characterizes what she calls "eliminativism" about grounding in relational terms, i.e. as the view that there are no grounding relations.¹⁹ Moreover, MacBride and Janssen-Lauret (2022: section

5) are also primarily, although not exclusively, interested in defending o-nihilism. For example, one of their main arguments (on behalf of David Lewis) is that there are no facts, and therefore there cannot be any relation whose relata are facts.²⁰

Now, many self-titled grounding theorists explicitly refrain from ontologically committing themselves to a grounding relation. Instead, they think that grounding should be expressed with a sentential connective ('because' or its formal-language counterpart) that takes sentences, or sets or pluralities of sentences, on both of its argument places (Fine 2012, Dasgupta 2014, Litland 2017). O-nihilism as formulated above is consistent with the self-understanding of these theorists. Does this mean that o-nihilism isn't "really" a version of grounding skepticism? We should refrain from sweeping verdicts like this: there is no consensus on the minimal commitments on ground-theoretic approach to metaphysics, and accordingly there is no consensus on what counts as a rejection of this approach, either. It's more neutral (and more accurate) to say that o-nihilism rejects a certain degree of ground-theoretic involvement, although it is compatible with a lower degree of such involvement. It is, however, possible to adopt more hardline varieties of grounding nihilism phrased in terms of ideology rather than ontology. To these options I turn below.

4.1.2. Ideological nihilism: Quinean and Siderian. A would-be nihilist grounding skeptic might object not only to grounding as an ontological posit but also to all ground-theoretic ideology: 'grounds', as well as 'in virtue of', 'because' and their cognates in so far as they are used in the sense intended by ground-theoretic metaphysicians (there is of course no problem with causal or epistemic uses of 'because'; in what follows I will often leave this qualification implicit). We can distinguish between two senses in which one might be opposed to ground-theoretic ideology. In a minimal sense (which is also the original sense intended by Quine), a

theory's ideology consists of its "range of severally expressible ideas" (Quine 1951: 14). There are different ways of making this idea more precise. Some contemporary Quineans describe a theory's ideology as its set of primitive concepts (Cowling 2013: 3892). Others have defined a theory's ideology as the set of primitive expressions required to state the theory (Finocchiaro 2021: 962). Those who share Quine's opposition to abstract entities such as concepts will prefer this second formulation, but for ease of expression I will freely help myself to talk of concepts – nothing of substance hangs on this. What's important is that ideology in the Quinean sense is a representational matter: it concerns what a theory can say about the world, rather than the world itself. Let "q-nihilism" be the view that we shouldn't accept any ground-theoretic ideology in Quine's sense of 'ideology'.

In recent years, some philosophers – most notably Sider (2011) – have defended a more robust conception of ideology. According to Sider, a theory's ideology consists of the notions that it treats as structural or joint-carving, where 'notion' is a dummy word for any kind of metaphysical structure.²¹ Ideology in this sense doesn't have to do with our concepts or with representational matters of any sort. Rather, it concerns aspects of the world that would need to be mentioned in a metaphysically perspicuous description of reality but which we shouldn't automatically reify. For example, Sider believes that quantificational expressions should be accepted as primitive ideology, even though there isn't any *entity* in the world that corresponds to the existential quantifier – rather, the world has quantificational structure (the existential quantifier "carves at the joints"), and a good theory captures this fact. Sider's notion of ideology opens up the possibility of a further kind of nihilism, s-nihilism, according to which ground-theoretic notions don't carve at the joints. It may be acceptable to use a primitive concept of

grounding (or ‘in virtue of’, or ‘because’), but such concepts cannot appear in a metaphysically perspicuous theory because the world lacks ground-theoretic structure.

S-nihilism is a weaker thesis than q-nihilism. The former grants that there may be a primitive notion of ‘ground’ and that sometimes it is the case that A because B (where ‘because’ gets a ground-theoretic reading); it merely says that a metaphysically perspicuous language must get rid of such concepts. Q-nihilism, by contrast, denies that there is a serviceable, primitive notion of grounding even in non-joint-carving languages, such as English (or on a non-quotidian view, the “philosophers’ English” that grounding enthusiasts speak). Below I will say a few words about how either view could be motivated and in what sense they are “skeptical” views about grounding.

4.1.3. S-nihilism. The natural way to motivate s-nihilism is via considerations of ideological parsimony, understood along Siderian lines: in a metaphysically perspicuous language, one could argue, a full description of the world doesn’t mention grounding. That is, the s-nihilist can accept that there are true positive sentences about grounding in English and even that ‘grounding’ in ordinary English is unanalyzable. She only needs to maintain that grounding has what Sider calls a “metaphysical semantics”, i.e. truth conditions cast in joint-carving terms that completely do away with ground-theoretic notions (which, however, don’t have to capture the meaning of ‘grounding’ in any commonly accepted sense of ‘meaning’).

Sider (2011) himself gives something like this parsimony-based argument for s-nihilism. Grounding, he argues, is supposed to be a level-connecting notion: it connects derivative bits of reality to fundamental bits. According to Sider’s principle of Purity, a fundamental truth must contain only joint-carving notions. But then no grounding truth can be fundamental, since the grounded side of a grounding truth always contains a non-fundamental notion (being grounded is

the hallmark of derivativeness). Thus, no grounding truth occurs in a joint-carving description of reality. Grounding theorists reacted to this puzzle in different ways. Some endorse trialism, the view that grounding has the special status of being outside the fundamentality ordering but at the same time basic in some sense (Dasgupta 2014). However, the most common answer has been to simply accept that grounding isn't joint-carving and therefore not an ideological primitive in Sider's sense (Bennett 2011, deRosset 2013, Schaffer 2016a).

I don't think we are in a position to consider this debate settled, but it's important to observe that many grounding enthusiasts accept that grounding cannot be joint-carving in Sider's sense, precisely because it is a level-connecting notion. As before, this doesn't show that s-nihilism isn't a genuine form of grounding skepticism. Rather, it shows that it is a form of skepticism about a certain degree of ground-theoretic involvement, which many self-titled grounding enthusiasts don't accept themselves. There is no further substantive question about whether s-nihilism is a form of "real" skepticism about grounding.

4.1.4. Q-nihilism. Q-nihilism is a view about grounding-theoretic ideology in the Quinean sense of 'ideology'. It claims that our best total theory of the world shouldn't contain 'grounding' or any of its ontologically non-committal cognates ('because', 'in virtue of', etc.) insofar as these are understood as undefined primitives. These expressions, and the concepts they express, aren't unintelligible (as the defectivist says), but they never apply to anything.²² To put it succinctly: every sentence whose main connective is 'because' (under a ground-theoretic reading) is false. (Negated 'because'-sentences and disjunctions with a 'because'-sentence disjunct may well be true.) Some q-nihilists may want to endorse a modally robust version of the view, according to which as a matter of necessity, grounding never occurs. This would distinguish the q-nihilist from a mere "flatlander" who holds that ground-theoretic ideology is in

perfectly good standing, but the actual world happens not to involve grounding connections.²³ To keep things simple, I will henceforth focus on the simple thesis that every sentence whose main connective is ‘because’ in the ground-theoretic sense is false.

Why believe q-nihilism? One possible argument is based on ideological parsimony, this time understood in Quinean terms. Keep in mind that as per section 1, we are assuming that grounding is unanalyzable; so parsimony-based considerations cannot be used in defense of an analysis of grounding. Rather, the desideratum of parsimony may be used to support an *explication* of grounding in Carnap’s sense²⁴: we can replace ground-theoretic notions with more serviceable alternatives that are better fit to play the same theoretical roles but aren’t extensionally equivalent with grounding. This would mean that ground-theoretic sentences are false, but many of them imperfectly approximate the truth. It’s difficult to evaluate this proposal in the abstract; its feasibility depends on one’s particular explication strategy. For example, in earlier work (Kovacs 2017) I suggested as potential substitutes constitution between moral properties for moral grounding, the subclass relationship between mental and physical tropes for grounding in the philosophy of mind, and a pattern of mereological and semantic relations for logical grounding. But there are many more cases to address, and one might also dispute these specific proposals.

A second route to q-nihilism is via etiological debunking arguments. This is what Miller and Norton (2017) primarily focus on when looking for a non-alethic explanation of our intuitions about ‘because’-statements. As they concede, the mere availability of a non-alethic explanation of our grounding judgments doesn’t show what, if anything, is *wrong* with ground-theoretic metaphysics. Indeed, Miller and Norton themselves note that their explanation of our grounding judgments in terms of our cognitive mechanisms of correlation and causation detection doesn’t

support skepticism about grounding without some further assumptions. Still, etiological debunking is an important and frequently overlooked potential motivation for q-nihilism, and grounding skepticism in general. It remains to be seen how successful etiological debunking is as an argumentative strategy, and whether these arguments are promising in metaphysical contexts.²⁵ One important subtlety to note is that in most of their writings about grounding, Miller and Norton presuppose a *quotidian* account of grounding (Miller and Norton 2022). This means that even if etiological considerations undermine ordinary people's intuitions about grounding, it's not clear that they automatically carry over to *philosophers' beliefs* about grounding *qua* metaphysical explanation. The epistemic basis of these beliefs is rarely specified explicitly, but it arguably isn't exhausted by brute intuition and also comprises systematic theoretical considerations.

Unlike s-nihilism, q-nihilism is incompatible with the self-conception of almost all grounding theorists. The view that we should dispense with metaphysical explanation in favor of other notions, which play similar theoretical roles but cannot be used to analyze it, is *paradigmatically* skeptical in spirit. I'm hard-pressed to think of a self-titled grounding theorist who could embrace these claims.

Where does this leave us? We can distinguish three degrees of ground-theoretic involvement: ground-theoretic ontology, ground-theoretic ideology in Sider's sense, and ground-theoretic ideology in the Quinean sense. Accordingly, we can distinguish three degrees of nihilism about grounding. Of these, the only view that by any reasonable standard qualifies as skeptical is q-nihilism. This is not to say, however, that s-nihilism and o-nihilism aren't skeptical views. They are skeptical views about more demanding conceptions of grounding, which many grounding enthusiasts accept. I don't think there is an interesting substantive question about

where we draw the line between grounding enthusiasts and grounding skeptics; being clear about these three degrees of ground-theoretic involvement is more important than attaching labels to them.

In the next section, I will look at one of the most widely discussed forms of skepticism about grounding, the pluralist view that there is such a thing as grounding, but it's too disunified to be useful for theoretical purposes. As we will see, not only is pluralism a close cousin of nihilism, but also, for every version of pluralism there is a structurally analogous nihilist view. Moreover, the choice between a nihilist view and its pluralist counterpart ultimately turns on semantic considerations, and the assumption of non-quotidianism generally favors the nihilist view.

4.2. From nihilism to pluralism

Grounding pluralism is a close cousin of the nihilist views described in the previous section. This is especially clear when we consider the main argument that has been marshaled in its favor. Although Wilson and Koslicki differ on many details and also raise more targeted objections to certain specific accounts of grounding, their central point is that grounding is redundant: it does no useful theoretical work that isn't already done at least as well, if not better, by "small-g" grounding relations (for Wilson) or various species of ontological dependence (for Koslicki). This sounds similar to the parsimony-driven argument for nihilism that I considered in the previous section.

The main difference between nihilists and pluralists (aside from Koslicki's and Wilson's explicit commitment to relations, which I will bracket for the moment) is semantic rather than metaphysical: they can agree on a primitive ideology that doesn't include grounding, but while the nihilist dispenses with grounding as a result, the pluralist keeps it as a piece of *non-primitive*

(and in some yet to be sharpened sense dispensable) ideology. So, both the nihilist and the pluralist can agree that there are various explanations, or true ‘because’-statements, which are not causal and which comprise more or less the examples that grounding enthusiasts use in order to illuminate grounding. What they disagree on is whether we can refer to all of these cases collectively as ‘grounding’. The pluralist thinks that we can; it’s just that we don’t add anything informative or theoretically significant by doing so. The nihilist thinks that we cannot, because the disjunction of these explanatory types doesn’t deserve to be called ‘grounding’.²⁶

Analogously to the threefold distinction among different types of nihilism, we can also distinguish three corresponding types of pluralism: o-pluralism holds that the grounding relation is disunified and heterogeneous; q-pluralism maintains that grounding cannot be accepted as a primitive in our best metaphysical theories; and s-pluralism claims that grounding isn’t joint-carving, i.e. it won’t occur in a complete description of reality when expressed in a metaphysically perspicuous language.

Where do self-titled pluralists fall in this threefold taxonomy? On the face of it, both Wilson and Koslicki sound like o-pluralists: their discussion focuses on the nature and unity (or lack thereof) of the grounding *relation*. Moreover, at least Wilson seems sympathetic not only to s-pluralism but to q-pluralism as well. She argues not merely that grounding is metaphysically disunified but also that the notion doesn’t correspond to a “coarse but useful” level of metaphysical grain; it isn’t even pragmatically or epistemically useful (554–7) and doesn’t even provide terminological unification (567–8). Koslicki’s arguments are more clearly restricted to metaphysical disunity, so perhaps she is more naturally read as just an s-pluralist but not necessarily a q-pluralist. To make things a bit more complicated, it’s worth noting that both Wilson and Koslicki are plausibly interpreted as pluralists about grounding *qua* backer rather

than about grounding *qua* metaphysical explanation. Both Wilson's "small-g" grounding relations (constitution, realization, force composition, etc.) and Koslicki's various species of ontological dependence are candidates for being species of explanation-backing rather than of the general relation of explanation; contending otherwise would amount to a kind of level confusion between explanations and their relational backers.²⁷ Since for reasons I discussed in section 1, I think the interesting skeptical thesis concerns grounding *qua* metaphysical explanation, in the rest of the discussion I will abstract away from Wilson's and Koslicki's particular commitments and will focus on varieties of pluralism understood as theses about metaphysical explanation.

How should we adjudicate the choice between each of the three nihilist positions and its pluralist counterpart? As I said, the difference between the nihilist and the pluralist views boils down to semantics. If the pluralist thinks that grounding is redundant in the same sense that her nihilist counterpart thinks it is, but sentences about grounding can nonetheless be true, then in all likelihood she tacitly assumes a quotidian view of grounding. Throughout my discussion of nihilism, I assumed that 'grounding' and its cognates are pieces of technical jargon specifically introduced for theoretical purposes, which implies that atomic sentences about grounding can be true only if the notion fulfils the theoretical purpose for which it was introduced. However, quotidian theorists don't need to accept this. They can agree that the notion is useless but maintain that we simply already have it, irrespective of its uselessness, and that the best account of this useless notion is a pluralist one. However, this difference between nihilism and pluralism amounts to a difference in bookkeeping rather than substance.

This difference aside, the main points I made about the three types of nihilism also apply to their pluralist counterparts. The view that the relation of metaphysical explanation is disunified

has the same skeptical credentials as the view that there is no such relation; both views are consistent with the thesis that some ‘because’-sentences, understood in a distinctively metaphysical way, are true and perhaps even joint-carving.

Pluralists who think that the debate over grounding isn’t about ontology (because many grounding enthusiasts refuse to commit themselves to a relation of grounding) may understand the claim that grounding is heterogeneous and disunified in terms of ground-theoretic ideology instead. Thus, s-pluralism amounts to the view that ground-theoretic notions, such as $\text{because}_{\text{ground}}$, don’t carve at the joints: in a full description of the world, expressed in a metaphysically perspicuous language, sentences about what metaphysically explains what or what is the case $\text{because}_{\text{ground}}$ of what don’t occur. Everything I said about s-nihilism applies to its s-pluralist counterpart. Most grounding theorists don’t claim that grounding is a joint-carving notion, and many are on record for explicitly denying that it is. Thus, while s-nihilism is inconsistent with a certain degree of ground-theoretic involvement, it remains compatible with less inflationary accounts of grounding.

This brings us to q-pluralist views. On these views, we shouldn’t accept grounding as primitive ideology (in the Quinean sense). It is conceptually redundant in theory building: everything that is worth saying with it about the world can say at least as well without it. Since pluralists are reasonably construed as quotidians about grounding, they differ from nihilists in holding that the concept is one we already have, even though it’s theoretically useless. This means that they aren’t committed to the nihilist’s claim that grounding is explicable but not analyzable in terms of other notions. However, since a successful analysis of grounding looks to be a formidable task, the explication route still strikes me as the more promising option for pluralists.²⁸ At this point it shouldn’t come as a surprise that I consider q-pluralism the most

unambiguously skeptical view of grounding in the pluralist family. Any grounding enthusiast worth his salt should reject the view that grounding serves *no* theoretical purpose.

Let me sum up what I take to be the main lessons of this section. Once we abandon the idea that ground-theoretic concepts are unintelligible, we need some other reason for thinking that they shouldn't be used in theoretical endeavors. And the most likely route to this conclusion will proceed via considerations about parsimony. The kind of parsimony that matters is ontological parsimony for the o-views, Quinean ideological parsimony for the q-views, and Siderian ideological parsimony for the s-views. The choice between a nihilist view and its pluralist counterpart boils down to semantic considerations. If grounding serves no useful theoretical goal, then if our starting assumption was the non-quotidian view that grounding is purely a theoretical construct, we shouldn't accept that anything ever grounds anything. Alternatively, if a quotidian approach is correct, then the meaning of 'grounds' isn't hostage to the theoretical goals the notion was introduced to serve, and much less is required of the world to make sentences that use it true.

Independently of the defensibility of the six views described above, there is a question about their status: do they substantiate *skepticism* about grounding? Ultimately this is a terminological question, and as such it doesn't deserve outsized attention. It's best to just say that the o-, s- and q-views come with different degrees of ground-theoretic involvement. The q-views reject any degree of involvement that ground enthusiasts are plausibly committed to; the o-views only reject a very high degree of ground-theoretic involvement, which isn't required by all grounding enthusiasts' self-understanding; and the s-views are somewhere in between. Instead of trying to legislate which of these views captures the spirit of skepticism about grounding, it's best to say that the q-views are the most and the o-views are the least skeptical.

5. Conclusion

The maturation of the grounding literature over the past few years necessitates a reevaluation of grounding skepticism: what it is, what it would take for it to be true, and why anyone should believe any version of it. The purpose of this paper was to grapple with these questions, rather than pass the final verdict either against or in favor of grounding skepticism.

The main lessons to draw are as follows. First, defectivism, the view that grounding is outright unintelligible, is an unpromising view, at least when understood as a view about grounding *qua* metaphysical explanation, because there is no plausible answer to the question of what the source of such unintelligibility is. More defensible versions of grounding skepticism say instead that grounding is intelligible but that its extension is either empty (nihilism) or disunified (pluralism). Second, although the choice between nihilism and pluralism is semantic rather than metaphysical, given the assumptions about ‘ground’-discourse that are most congenial to the would-be skeptics’ goals, the preferable view seems to be nihilism. Third, there are a number of broadly nihilistic views that all deny something in the vicinity of grounding; and similarly a number of broadly pluralist views that claim that grounding is in some sense disunified. However, it’s difficult to give an unambiguous evaluation of these views’ skeptical credentials. It’s more natural to see them as points on a spectrum: o-pluralism is the most conciliatory view, acceptable to many self-titled ground enthusiasts, whereas q-nihilism is the most uncompromising view in its rejection of any degree of ground-theoretic involvement.

Whether considerations of ontological or ideological parsimony can justify any version of grounding skepticism is difficult to judge in the abstract. It depends first and foremost on the

alternative: the set of replacement notions that can be used to “explicate” grounding, i.e. to approximately fill the theoretical roles assigned to it. My purpose in the present paper was primarily exploratory and taxonomical. I hope to have imposed some conceptual order on our thinking about grounding skepticism: what it is, what is at stake in the debate over it, and what turns on one’s choice among its many variants. Either way, the *labels* ‘grounding enthusiast’ and ‘grounding skeptic’ aren’t very important. Once you know where whatever it is that you mean by the word ‘grounding’ fits in the taxonomy provided in the foregoing sections, you know everything that is worth knowing about my views; it won’t matter if I consider myself a friend or a foe of grounding.²⁹

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¹ Who count as genuine historical predecessors of the contemporary notion is a matter of controversy. See Raven 2019 for a brief survey of the history of ground and Part I of Raven 2020 for more in-depth overviews of several historical periods.

² Corriea 2005: Ch. 1, Schaffer 2009, Rosen 2010, Fine 2012.

³ Audi 2012, Raven 2012, deRosset 2020.

⁴ Cameron 2016, Schaffer 2016b, Dasgupta 2017, Raven 2017, Berker 2018, deRosset 2020.

⁵ See, for instance, the exchange between Maurin 2019 and Trogdon and Skiles 2019, 2021.

⁶ See Schaffer 2009, Rosen 2010, and Audi 2012 for relationist and Fine 2012, Dasgupta 2014 and Litland 2015 for connective-theoretic approaches. See also deRosset 2017.

⁷ See Wilsch 2015, 2016 and Grajner 2021 on deductive-nomological, Kovacs 2017, 2020a and Baron and Norton 2021 on unificationist, Trogdon 2018 on mechanistic, Krämer and Roski 2017 on difference-making, A. Wilson 2018, 2019 and Schaffer 2016a on counterfactual and structural-equations, and Miller and Norton 2017, 2019 and Thompson 2018, 2019 on pragmatic and broadly mind-dependent/anti-realist approaches.

⁸ Indeed, Daly (2012) describes ‘grounding’ as “quasi-technical philosophical talk” (92) and “a philosopher’s invention” (98), clearly taking the non-quotidian approach.

⁹ Dasgupta (2017: 94) and I (Kovacs 2020b: 344) think that the separatism/unionism debate is verbal; for a contrary take, see Maurin 2019: 1578 n9.

¹⁰ See Shaheen 2017b, Locke 2020, Thompson 2022, and Miller and Norton forthcoming for non-realist accounts of ground-theoretic discourse.

¹¹ Dasgupta (2017) argues that grounding theorists need only accept the *methodological* primitiveness of grounding, which means that grounding is “innocent until proven guilty”: it may be amenable to a reductive analysis, but we can assume that it’s a serviceable notion until shown otherwise. However, methodological primitiveness is problematic as a litmus test for skepticism about grounding because it’s too focused on the inquirer’s psychological attitudes to certain theses rather than to the content of those theses. Surely someone who used to keep an open mind about grounding but became persuaded by any of the arguments against it should be considered a grounding skeptic; conversely, someone who doesn’t accept grounding as a methodological primitive but becomes convinced that a reductive analysis is acceptable should qualify as a grounding enthusiast. (Thanks to Fraser MacBride for discussion here.)

¹² MacBride and Janssen-Lauret (2022) argue that Lewis would have rejected grounding due to his opposition to essentialism (understood broadly as *de re* metaphysical necessity with modally constant predicates) and structured facts. But while both are admittedly common assumptions, many grounding enthusiasts don’t make them, and some explicitly reject them (see footnote 20). In a similar spirit, J. Wilson (2014) also raises a number of criticisms that trade on the relation between grounding and reduction or “nothing-over-and-above”-ness. Some grounding enthusiasts (like Rosen 2010) should be more worried about these objections than others (such as Audi 2012).

¹³ Daly argues that both ‘grounding’ and ‘metaphysical explanation’ are unintelligible and considers the latter just “talk of grounding by another name” (2012: 94); thus, his criticism targets metaphysical explanation.

¹⁴ Schaffer (2016a) does all three of these, but he assigns special weight to structural-equation models.

¹⁵ Daly (2012: 91–96) gives a similar answer to both strategies.

¹⁶ Some authors (Diez et al 2013, Shaheen 2017a) have denied that ‘explanation’ is univocal; here, I lack space to address their arguments. For the univocality of ‘explanation’, see Nickel 2010.

¹⁷ See also Dasgupta 2017 for a similar point.

¹⁸ Duncan, Miller and Norton 2021: 398. In earlier work, Miller and Norton (2017) go back and forth between relational and connective formulations; so does Jansson (2017).

¹⁹ Thompson 2022: 344. Note that Thompson is not an eliminativist herself, but a fictionalist: she holds that ‘grounding’-talk conveys facts about what metaphysically explains what. As far as I can see, Thompson is a fictionalist only about ‘grounding’-discourse in the backer sense but remains a full-blown realist about ‘metaphysical explanation’-discourse.

²⁰ Lauret-Jansson and MacBride’s main goal is to argue that Lewis would have been a grounding skeptic, but they themselves are sympathetic to the view they attribute to him. They sometimes phrase their preferred variety of grounding skepticism as the view that grounding isn’t ‘intelligible’, but the overall tenor of their argument is very different from Daly/Hofweber-style defectivism and is much closer to the view that there is no good philosophical reason to accept the theoretical posit of grounding, i.e. a kind of nihilism. Not all of Lauret-Jansson and MacBride’s arguments are restricted to grounding conceived as a relation between facts. Some of the Lewisian reasons they offer are based on specific doctrines he accepted (for example about conceptual analysis, the nature of the set-theoretic hierarchy, etc.), and their second major argument relies on a general denial of essentialism, which many grounding theorists presuppose. Discussing this second argument would lead us too far; as Lauret-Jansson and MacBride themselves note, some grounding theorists deny that grounds necessitate what they ground (Leuenberger 2014, Skiles 2015, Baron-Schmitt 2021). One can also combine ground-theoretic metaphysics with a Lewis-inspired counterpart-theoretic interpretation of essentialist discourse (Guigon 2018). And of course, many more grounding theorists are silent on the question of essentialism, often because the purposes for which they invoke grounding don’t require any stance on it.

²¹ Sider’s structure is a generalization of Lewis’s (1983) notion of a sparse property.

²² This seems similar to the view deRosset (2020) calls ‘hard eliminativism’, although in his taxonomy, defectivism is also a kind of hard eliminativism.

²³ I borrow the expression ‘flatlander’ from Bennett (2011, 2017). Duncan, Miller and Norton (2021) are flatlanders who seem happy to equate their view with q-nihilism.

²⁴ Both Daly (2012) and I (Kovacs 2017) appeal to explication when formulating our preferred versions of grounding skepticism.

²⁵ See Korman 2019a for a recent survey of debunking argument and Korman 2019b for a qualified defense of debunking arguments in metaphysics.

²⁶ Not every view about grounding that goes by the name ‘pluralism’ is skeptical in intent (for non-skeptical pluralist views, see Fine 2012, Rettler 2017, Litland 2018 and Richardson 2020). Nor is Bennett’s (2011, 2017) view of building relations, according to which building is a general category of explanatory or determinative relation and grounding is one of the building relations. The claim that grounding is in some sense dispensable is an important component of pluralism in the skeptical sense meant throughout the paper and isn’t accepted by all who call themselves pluralists.

²⁷ See also Litland 2018: 104 n3 for this point.

²⁸ In deRosset’s (2020) taxonomy, q-pluralists who think that grounding is analyzable in other terms would count as revolutionary reductionists, while those who take the explication route would be considered soft eliminativists.

²⁹ For helpful comments on and conversations about previous versions of this paper, I’m grateful to Louis deRosset, Dana Goswick, Fraser MacBride, Kristie Miller, Mike Raven, Thomas Sattig, and audiences at a workshop titled “Method and Style in Philosophy” at Tel Aviv University and at a department colloquium at the University of Tübingen. I also thank the Israel Science Foundation (grant no. 2035/19), whose generous support I enjoyed while writing this paper.