P v Q

Grounding & Metaphysical Explanation

Work-in-Progress Group
2023–24, Semester 1

Work-in-Progress Group

Introduction

This is a work-in-progress group for philosophers interested in issues of grounding and metaphysical explanation. It is run by Will Moorfoot and James Ross, of the University of Southampton. Will works on contingentist formulations of ground physicalism. James works on the relationship between grounding and causation.

The work-in-progress group began in September 2022. The termcards for semester 1 and semester 2, 2022–23, can be found here and here.

Six sessions will take place fortnightly across the semester. The schedule and abstracts are listed below. Dates and times are subject to change with respect to speaker availability.

Sessions will be held on Mondays at 2 pm (UK time) on Microsoft Teams unless otherwise stated. Each session will last for approximately 1 hour and 30 minutes and consist of a 45-minute presentation followed by questions and discussion. An invite and handout (if available) will be sent out prior to the session.

This group is particularly aimed at academics and postgraduate researchers. However, please do still contact us if you are interested in joining and do not meet these criteria (our contact details are below).

You can register to join the group here.

Presenting

If you are interested in presenting, please send an abstract of no more than 500 words to Will Moorfoot (W.A.Moorfoot@soton.ac.uk) and James Ross (J.C.Ross@soton.ac.uk). Papers should be suitable for a 45-minute presentation (e.g., about 5000 words). Please give an indication of when you would be happy to present.

We are happy to interpret the theme of grounding and metaphysical explanation broadly. However, we particularly welcome work in the following areas.

- Pure work on the metaphysics or logic of grounding and metaphysical explanation.
- Applications of grounding and metaphysical explanation to areas such as ethics, philosophy of mind, wider issues in metaphysics, philosophy of science, social ontology, and philosophy of mathematics.
- More historically-minded approaches.

Last updated: September 21, 2023

Abstracts

Monday 2nd October, 14:00–15:30

Joaquim Giannotti
Universidad de Chile

Is Grounding Physically Superfluous?

Questions of realism occupy a place of pride in philosophy. Is everything physical? Are there abstract objects? Are there objective moral facts? Kit Fine (2001, 2012) has argued that these questions and others concerning the reality of features of interest are to be studied employing the notion of 'metaphysical ground'.

We may wonder, however, whether ground itself is real. This query generated an unresolved dispute in the literature. Typically, realists of ground defend its irreducibility by showcasing the theoretical fruitfulness it brings us in various areas of theorizing (e.g., Rosen 2010; Cameron 2015; Berker 2018; cf. Kortabarria 2023; Nolan forthcoming). One notorious problem with arguing for ground's reality in this way is that judgments about fruitfulness are relative and hard to adjudicate (cf. J. Wilson 2014, 2016; Koslicki 2015; Turner 2016).

This paper explores whether *a posteriori* considerations, particularly from physics, are a better guide to ground's reality or unreality. Though disagreement over cases and scope remains, we have reasons to think that science is a generally reliable guide to what is real. Such an observation motivates this project. Even if one believes that metaphysical dependencies are empirically underdetermined, it is instructive to study exactly why this is so.

My goal is to assess a novel permutation argument against the reality of ground, which is structurally analogous to Shamik Dasgupta's argument against primitive individualistic facts (2009; cf. 2016, 2022). I will argue that our best confirmed physical laws strongly suggest that primitive grounding facts, such as [[p] grounds [q]], are superfluous in the same way primitive individualistic facts—such as [a is F], [a bears R to b], [$a \neq b$] . . .—are. Both kinds of facts are empirically undetectable and physically superfluous, where a fact f is empirically undetectable iff we cannot distinguish between scenarios that differ only with respect to f, and f is physically redundant iff two scenarios differing with respect to f but being exactly the same in all other respects at an initial time will continue being exactly the same at subsequent times.

To evaluate the strength of the permutation argument, I will discuss Ted Sider (2020) objections against Dasgupta's original argument applied to the grounding case. However, I will find them dissatisfactory. Therefore, the threat of superfluousness against ground holds. Are we bound to accept the inevitability of the debate concerning the virtues and vices of theorizing in terms of ground? This upshot seems inescapable. Yet we could attempt to block the very permutation argument by challenging its setup. In the conclusive part of this work, I will discuss two strategies: one is to reject the possibility of permutation, and the other is an identification strategy. I will recommend the latter over the former. Connecting with this approach, I propose that a construal of the permutation strategy is supportive of the unity of ground over a pluralist approach claiming that there is a variety of fundamentally distinct kinds of grounding relationships (e.g., Wilson 2014; Bennett 2017).

Monday 16th October, 14:00–15:30

Damian Aleksiev
University of Vienna

Finding Ground

I introduce and investigate *Mirroring*: a tool for a priori testing *what-grounds-what* claims. Much work has been done on the features of grounding, the nature of grounding, and even on defending the coherence and usefulness of grounding. In comparison, work in the epistemology of grounding is currently lacking. *Mirroring* is one step toward developing a proper epistemology of grounding.

Mirroring is the thesis that grounds mirror the metaphysically explanatory properties of their grounds. For any ground *P* and groundee *Q*, *Q* mirrors a metaphysically explanatory property of *P* iff (i) *Q inherits* that property from *P*, or (ii) *Q* has a corresponding property *analyzable into* that property of *P*. I argue that a lack of *Mirroring* between a putative ground and groundee is *evidence* that the corresponding grounding claim is false. The lack of *Mirroring* results in an explanatory gap and demands an explanation. If this explanatory gap cannot be closed, the corresponding grounding claim *is false*. If so, *Mirroring* can be used for reaching metaphysical conclusions via a priori epistemic considerations.

I will defend *Mirroring* by analyzing multiple grounding claims and argue that *Mirroring* gives the right results in all these cases. Moreover, I will compare *Mirroring* to a priori entailment (an alternative and popular way to characterize explanatory gaps) and argue that *Mirroring* has an advantage. Finally, I will investigate a few cases where *Mirroring* gives inconclusive results and attempt to offer solutions. *Mirroring* is one among multiple factors in a full epistemology of grounding. Ideally, it is best used in conjunction with other a priori or a posteriori considerations. Nevertheless, I believe that *Mirroring* is one of the key factors in the epistemology of grounding, and my current aim is to demonstrate its usefulness and importance.

Monday 30th October, 14:00–15:30

Mario Schärli
Princeton University

The Contingent, the Necessary, and Ground

Some ontologies include entities besides those that exist, such as abstract objects, merely possible objects, impossible objects, and so on. The difference between these objects concerns their *ontological status*. May grounding be put to use to account for their difference?

Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten argues so in his *Metaphysica* (1st ed. 1739). The present paper expounds his approach (I.–II.) and discusses whether it points toward a route unexplored in contemporary metaphysics (III.).

I Baumgarten's ontology comprises three ontological status: possible, actual, and necessary beings. This saddles him with the task of articulating:

(1) how merely possible beings differ from actual and necessary beings;

(2) how contingently actual beings differ from necessary beings.

Baumgarten accounts for (1) in terms of differences in determinateness with regard to internal properties, where a property counts as internal iff it is not a relation to another being. Baumgarten holds that merely possible beings are partly undetermined with regard to internal properties, whereas actual and necessary beings are internally completely determined.

With regard to (2), Baumgarten holds that necessary beings are actual by virtue of their essence alone, whereas the actuality of contingently actual beings is partly grounded in other beings.

II Baumgarten uses grounding to spell out (2). Firstly, his account of necessary beings depends on distinguishing essential from non-essential properties. Baumgarten articulates this difference in terms of grounding: the essential properties of an object are those internal properties which are grounded neither in another individual and its properties, nor in properties of itself. Non-essential properties, correlatively, are either insufficiently or sufficiently grounded in a being's essential properties—if sufficiently, they are attributes (corresponding to Aristotle's *idion / proprium*, or Fine's *consequential essence*), if insufficiently, they are modes (corresponding Aristotle's determinations *kata symbebekos* or *per accidens*).

This, secondly, permits Baumgarten to articulate the difference between necessarily and contingently actual beings in terms of grounding. For a necessary being is actual insofar as it is internally completely determined by its essence alone. Thus, beings whose internal determinations are sufficiently grounded in their essences are necessary beings. On the other hand, beings that bear at least one internal property that is only insufficiently grounded in their essence are contingent beings—be they actual or merely possible.

III One advantage of Baumgarten's articulation of differences in ontological status in terms of grounding is that it does without an existence property. However, it heavily depends on casting the difference between the merely possible and the actual in terms of determinateness. One may hesitate to follow him here, not least because he is forced to give up the law of excluded middle. Yet, nothing ties the Baumgartenian approach to viewing the possible as partly indeterminate. Moreover, Baumgarten's approach is partial as (1) is not articulated in terms of grounding.

Monday 13th November, 14:00–15:30

Tim Button
University College London

Space: a case study in the (f)utility of grounding

There are (at least) two good ways to think about space. On the *points-first* approach, space is made up of extensionless points; we obtain an (extended) region by collecting together a bunch of points; so the points ground the regions. On the *regions-first* approach space is made up of (extended) regions; we obtain an (extensionless) point by considering the ideal limit of a nested sequence of regions; so the regions ground the points. The points-first and the regions-first approach are exactly as good as each other. Specifically: they are categorically equivalent. Indeed, it's hard to see any difference between the two approaches, except as regards their claims about what grounds what. This suggests we should be dismissive of the grounding claims in this case; and probably elsewhere too.

Monday 27th November, *13:00–14:30*

Alex Skiles
Rutgers University, New Brunswick

Generics in Metaphysical Explanation

Linguists and philosophers of language have argued that some uses of sentences like 'tigers are striped', 'ravens are black', and 'mosquitoes carry malaria' express *generic* generalizations rather than *universal* generalizations, and that they can be true even when they admit of exceptions. In this paper, I explore whether putative metaphysical explanations in terms of grounding (e.g. 'propositions are true because what they say is, in fact, the case') or in terms of essence (e.g. 'human persons are what they are because they are animals') can be reasonably put forward and defended as generic generalizations. I explore various accounts of what would constitute a genuine counterexample to a generic metaphysical explanation as opposed to a mere exception.

Monday 11th December, 14:00–15:30

Will Moorfoot & Toby Friend
University of Southampton & Freie Universität Berlin

Nomopsychism: A New Solution to the Combination Problem

Panpsychists claim that facts about consciousness at the fundamental level ground facts about consciousness at the macroscopic level. There are currently two popular candidates for the panpsychist's fundamentalia. First, micropsychists claim that the smallest physical things, the microphysicalia, are fundamental such that facts about microphysical consciousness ground facts about macroscopic consciousness. Second, cosmopsychists claim that the entire cosmos is fundamental such that facts about cosmic consciousness ground facts about macroscopic consciousness. Both micro- and cosmopsychists face variants of the combination problem, which many philosophers think is intractable. It seems, so the problem goes, that one can jointly accept (i) the fundamental facts fully ground the macroscopic facts and (ii) the fundamental facts are phenomenal, without having to accept (iii) the macroscopic level contains any additional phenomenality. In other words, I have a zombie twin who is a microphysical and microphenomenal duplicate of me but who lacks my macrophenomenal properties. In this paper, we consider a novel variant of panpsychism that we call nomopsychism. For the nomopsychist, certain laws are the sole fundamentalia. Therefore, facts about the fundamental laws are the full ground for all other facts. Crucially, facts about nomic phenomenality ground facts about macroscopic consciousness. We will argue that nomopsychism offers a new and attractive response to the combination problem, according to which the combination problem collapses into the inference problem for governing laws. We intend nomopsychism to be an interesting competitor to both micropsychism and cosmopsychism that is worthy of further exploration.