

GROUNDING  
&  
METAPHYSICAL  
EXPLANATION

WORK-IN-PROGRESS GROUP  
2023–24, SEMESTER 2



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# Work-in-Progress Group

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## Introduction

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

Six sessions will take place fortnightly across the semester. The schedule and abstracts are listed [below](#). **The first three sessions will be held on Mondays at 10:45 am (UK time)** on Microsoft Teams. Following the Easter holidays, **the second three sessions will be held on Mondays at 3 pm (UK time)** on Microsoft Teams. 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. Dates and times are subject to change with respect to speaker availability.

The work-in-progress group began in September 2022. The termcards for previous Work-in-Progress series can be found [here](#).

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 email address is 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 the group's email address, [GandMEphilosophy@gmail.com](mailto:GandMEphilosophy@gmail.com). 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.

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# Abstracts

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Monday 19<sup>th</sup> February, 10:45–12:15

Singa Behrens

*Bielefeld University*

## **NO GUIDE TO GROUND: RIGHT-MAKING AND RIGHT-MAKERS**

It is often taken for granted that right-makers, i.e., the things that *make* an entity right, do so by *explaining* why that entity is right. This view can be spelled out in terms of *metaphysical ground* as follows: right-making just is grounding of facts that attribute rightness to an entity ('rightness facts' for short). In this paper, I argue that grounding rightness facts is not sufficient to qualify as a right-maker. I defend a novel reasons-based account of right-making, according to which right-makers are grounds that ground *in virtue of providing a normative reason*. This account, I shall argue, provides a unified solution to challenges faced by purely ground-based accounts of right-making. One important upshot of the discussion is a novel argument for the buck-passing account of value, i.e., the view that value can be explained in terms of normative reasons. On a buck-passing accounts of value, the account developed in this paper is applicable to value-making relations. Thus, buck-passing accounts of value can avoid the challenges that purely ground-based accounts of value-making face.

In the first part of the paper, I present three challenges to purely ground-based accounts of right-making. Each challenge relates to a structural feature of grounding. I consider several ground-internal modifications of a simple ground-based account and argue that they do not satisfactorily respond to the challenges outlined.

*The first challenge* is based on the distinction between right-makers on the one hand and background conditions on the other hand. Commonly, it is assumed that full grounds necessitate what they ground. I argue that, given this assumption, purely ground-based accounts of right-making cannot adequately represent the distinction between right-makers and background conditions. In particular, I argue that attempts to avoid this consequence, such as the account based on the notion of conditional ground in (Bader 2016), are not satisfactory because they do not provide an informative analysis of right-making.

*The second challenge* is based on the observation that facts that inhabit comparatively low levels of reality, such as microphysical facts, usually play at best a minor role in ethical theorizing. For this reason, they do not seem to belong to the class of facts that are of particular interest to ethicists in virtue of their right-making role. However, since grounding is commonly taken to be a transitive relation that allows for chains of ground, lower-level facts mediate ground rightness facts. The transitivity of ground makes it difficult for ground-based accounts to explain why metaphysical priority does not coincide with normative priority. Moreover, purely ground-based accounts, I shall argue, lack the resources to draw a non-arbitrary line between grounds that make the act in question right and those that seem to be too remote to do so.

Finally, some ways of talking about right-making features suggest that there is also a non-factive notion of right-making. This observation motivates the *third challenge*. If this way of talking is correct, then it is

legitimate to say that an act that is over-all right possess some wrong-making feature. In its standard applications, however, grounding is a factive relation. This makes it difficult for purely ground-based accounts to incorporate a non-factive notion of right-making, especially, if they want to do justice to the intuition that wrong-making features do some actual work.

A common strategy for responding to at least some of the challenges outlined is to appeal to an alternative notion of explanation, such as an epistemically or a normatively constrained notion, and to deny that the facts in question are *explanatory* in the relevant sense (cf. Väyrynen 2009, 2021). I argue that the strategy to deny that the facts are *explanatory* is too costly. In response, I defend an alternative strategy: explaining why an entity is right is necessary, but it is not sufficient to qualify as a right-maker.

In the second part of the paper, I argue that a right-maker must not only ground a rightness fact, but must do so because it provides a normative reason for the act in question. This account combines a first-order and a second-order grounding claim. The first-order grounding claim requires that the right-maker grounds the rightness fact; the second-order grounding claim requires that this grounding relation obtains because the right-maker is a normative reason for the act in question. After presenting the account, I show that it provides a *unified* response to the challenges outlined in the first part.

In the last part of the paper, I turn to value-making relations such as good-making. Purely ground-based accounts of good-making face exactly the same challenges as purely ground-based accounts of right-making. I show that my account is applicable, if it is granted that normative reasons are prior to value. Consequently, buck-passing accounts of value can provide a satisfactory account of good-making that avoids the challenges outlined. Alternative accounts of value still owe us such a satisfactory account. Thus, my account provides a novel argument for the buck-passing account of value.

**Monday 4<sup>th</sup> March, 10:45–12:15**

James Clark Ross

*University of Southampton*

**GROUNDING AND CAUSATION: A METAPHYSICAL ANALOGY**

Grounding and causation are similar kinds of relational dependence. They share formal features and play similar roles in the explanations that track them. Through grounding, metaphysical explanations ‘vertically’ trace levels of fundamentality in reality’s hierarchical structure. Through causation, causal explanations ‘horizontally’ trace order in reality’s temporal structure.

The striking resemblances between grounding and causation invite talk of unity. Metaphysicians in recent years have cashed out this unity in a few different ways. Schaffer (2016) argues that grounding and causation are both relations that back a particular explanatory pattern. Wilson (2018) thinks they’re species of one causal genus. Zhang (2023) puts forward a view on which they’re identical; any apparent differences are explained in terms of differences between the relata. Each theory has its merits. But I argue that none has the virtues of metaphysical analogy, which hitherto hasn’t been explored as an option.

On my particular view, grounding and causation are specifications of an analogous relation called ‘bringing-about’. They exemplify bringing-about’s features according to a governing logic and bring things about in a characteristic way. I raise some significant challenges to this view and deal with each one in turn. Notwithstanding these challenges, I think that the metaphysical analogy is a good way to account for the unity between grounding and causation. My theory (i) satisfyingly explains the systematic sharing of features by grounding and causation through a substantive metaphysical framework; (ii) explains their differences through the notion of modes; and (iii) structures the relations such that bringing-about is a highly natural relation and grounding and causation are less-natural relations which are understood in terms of bringing-about.

**Monday 18<sup>th</sup> March, 10:45–12:15**

Katja Stepec

*Independent*

**GROUNDING BETWEEN SYMMETRY AND WELL-FOUNDEDNESS  
OR THE STRANGE CASE OF HOLISTIC SYSTEMS**

This paper discusses the possibility of applying the metaphysical concept of grounding to holistic systems. While grounding is successfully used to describe structure in stratified metaphysics or priority monism, the complex relationships in holistic systems challenge the applicability of this concept. Holistic structures are generally seen as anti-foundationalist and can be described as a case of coherentism with symmetric and interdependent relations between the parts. Recent discussions about symmetric grounding relations, therefore, open the door for an application of grounding to holistic structures. However, the notion of all internal relations being contained in the whole evokes the notion of well-foundedness. Thompson (2016) excludes grounding in the case of symmetric and well-founded relations. It is therefore questioned whether grounding is applicable for the description of holistic systems. It can be argued that the so-called type 1 and type 2 approaches that are discussed in the literature on holism can be seen as two complementary approaches that can account for both symmetry and well-foundedness. I discuss the connection between symmetry and well-foundedness on the grounds of these two types and conclude that grounding may be applicable to holistic systems, but it also shows some peculiarities.

**Easter Break**

Note the time change

**Monday 29<sup>th</sup> April, 15:00–16:30**

Noël Saenz

*University of Illinois*

**GROUNDING THE LOGICALLY COMPLEX**

Logical cases of grounding explanation have dominated the grounding literature. Cases of the kind

that dirt is brown explains that dirt is brown or coal is black,

that dirt is brown, that coal is black explain that dirt is brown and coal is black,

that dirt is brown explains that something is brown

are everywhere. There are at least two reasons for this. First, such cases are intuitive. They are seen as convincing cases of explanation and so are cases on which one can begin to theorize about grounding explanation. Second, such cases are clear. If a skeptic or someone unfamiliar with the notion of grounding asks for a case of grounding explanation, appealing to logical cases is perhaps the best way of making what seems to them obscure plain.

But such cases are a mistake. Or so it seems to me. And so an alternative story on what it is that explains logically complex facts is going to be told. In order to begin to see how this story goes, take the conjunctive fact that

Dirt is brown and coal is black.

This fact is not about a fact or how a fact is. What is of concern here are not facts but things (dirt and coal) and their properties (brown and black). That dirt is brown and coal is black is about dirt and coal and how they are, brown and black. This is important. Since grounded things exist and are the way they are because their grounds exist and are the way they are, then a conjunctive fact involving dirt and coal and how they are needs to be explained *in terms of a fact involving the grounds of dirt or coal or how they are*. Failure to do this is to miss out on something about the fact being explained. Generalizing, the kinds of explanations this paper is concerned with move us from logically complex facts about grounded things to logically complex facts about their grounds. And so one of the goals of this paper is to present a battery of principles governing logically complex facts that takes us from logically complex facts about grounded things to logically complex facts about their grounds. The other goal is to defend the principles advanced from two worries. The first says that such principles fail to capture the logical atomist's thought that at bottom, there is only the logically atomic. The second says that such principles drastically inflate the number of unexplained facts. Both concerns will be addressed.

**Monday 27<sup>th</sup> May, 15:00–16:30**

Tommaso Soriani

*University of Reading*

**THE PERSONITE PROBLEM, DERIVATIVE MORAL EXPERIENCES  
AND THE GROUNDS OF MORAL STATUS**

The *Worm Theory* posits that persons perdure as four-dimensional worms, viz. maximal aggregates of appropriately interrelated temporal parts, person-stages, existing at different times (Sider, 2001). However, the endorsement of *Mereological Universalism* (MU) (Builes & Hare, forthcoming) by Worm-Theorists implies the existence of overlapping non-maximal aggregates, compositionally similar to persons but not qualifying as such. According to Johnston, these aggregates, *personites*, can be individuated for each sufficiently extended time interval during a person's lifetime. The massive overlap of personites gives rise to the *Personite Problem* (PP) (Johnston, 2016, 2017), challenging the Worm Theory as it potentially neglects personites' moral status.

Johnston's argument suggests that personites have moral experiences derivatively by sharing the same mind and thoughts of the person they overlap (Longenecker, 2020). However, persons themselves derive experiences from person-stages who instantiate the relevant set of grounding experiential properties *simpliciter*. Both persons and personites have temporally-extended experiences, inheriting properties as time-indexed by stages, as per the standard Worm-Theoretical framework (Hawley, 2001). This dilemma prompts an ethical question: can derivative moral experiences sufficiently ground moral status? A negative answer would resolve PP but introduce a more significant *Person Problem*, while a positive response would concede Johnston's argument. This paper explores potential resolutions for the Worm-Theorist.

An experience E is had by a subject S iff S instantiates the relevant set of grounding experiential properties G; E is had derivatively by S if one or more overlappers Ts instantiate G. In *Endurantism*, where persons are three-dimensional entities wholly present at every time of their existence, Bob's moral experience of guilt at *t* results from him instantiating the relevant set of grounding experiential properties. Even if Bob's spatial parts were deemed to instantiate some or all of these properties, Bob would still be the rightful owner of the experience due to his whole presence at *t*. Furthermore, the Endurantist may reject MU in favor of a more restricted view of composition, without having to deal with potential problems related to parts, while the Worm-Theorist could not do the same as easily. In WV, Bill's derivative moral experience of guilt at *t'* is the result of Guilty-Bill instantiating the relevant set of grounding experiential properties *simpliciter*: Bill and his overlapping personites at *t'* are only partially present in virtue of the whole presence of Guilty-Bill at *t'*.

One potential approach to address this issue is to adopt an *Externalist* strategy (Madden, 2016). This strategy would provide a way for persons to have moral experiences and moral status even without instantiating all the relevant grounding properties, while personites would not. Alternatively, the Worm-Theorist could bite the *Derivativist* bullet: as long as S has moral experiences, whether derivative or not, S possesses moral status (Stratton-Lake, 2021). Then, there would be two options: (1) argue that personites do not have experiences at all (Shoemaker, 2007) or (2) adopt an *Egalitarian Theory* of distributive justice that ensures fair treatment of personites (Lippert-Rasmussen, 2015), mitigating concerns about them being deemed ‘second-class’, *pace* Johnston.

**Monday 10<sup>th</sup> June, 15:00–16:30**

Maşuk Şimşek

*Bilkent University*

**REGRESS IN HOW AND WHY EXPLANATIONS**

Are all explanations with infinite regress vicious? Many such explanations are obviously bad. For instance, *the homuncular theory of perception* includes such vicious reasoning. Perception occurs, the thought goes, by means of a homunculus situated behind the eyes of the subject. This homunculus perceives sensory data coming from the eyes and makes the perception of the subject possible. But how does this homunculus perceive? It perceives, again, by means of a further homunculus situated within the first one, and the story goes on and on, appealing to the notion of perception at each step in explaining perception. Introduced by Ryle (1949), the homuncular theory of perception is mentioned as one of the paradigm instances of vicious regress. In my presentation, I will use Litland’s (2013) distinction between *how* and *why explanations* and argue that the homunculus example demonstrates the problem regress creates in the former. However, a similar regress wouldn’t necessarily make the reasoning in the latter vicious. Moreover, I will argue that this difference can be accounted for without thereby appealing to relativism about viciousness, unlike Cameron (2022).

There are two critical applications of this distinction. Firstly, provided that metaphysical explanations are *why* explanations, regress by itself doesn’t create a problem for non-wellfounded infinite chains of metaphysical explanation. Secondly, I will follow a similar argument by Richardson (2020) and claim that the distinction between *how* explanations and *why* explanations give us a reason to embrace *pluralism* regarding grounding—the idea that there are different kinds of grounding, assuming *contra* Cameron (2022) that the structure of metaphysical explanations mirrors the structure of the relevant metaphysical determination relations (e.g., grounding).