

# Grounding, Explanation and the Tasks of Metaphysics

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## Abstract

Thinking about metaphysical problems in terms of grounding has its uses, but those uses are limited. This paper argues against attempts to see issues of grounding as having a central and organising role in metaphysical inquiry. After arguing that grounding does some useful work, this paper will argue that grounding is neither the central tool for understanding explanation in metaphysics, nor defines the subject matter of metaphysics. Instead, grounding tracks only some of the metaphysical explanations we should be looking for, and is only one among many of the topics metaphysics aims to address.

## 1. Grounding

There has rightly been a lot of excitement in the past twenty years about grounding, and related topics like fundamentality, metaphysical explanation, and “in virtue of” connections. I think the constellation of metaphysical questions phrased in terms of these notions is important: we can and do make sense of questions about dependence of one kind of fact on another, and we want to ask and answer questions about whether anything is fundamental, and if so in what sense. Talking about one phenomenon being “grounded” in the one that underpins it, or metaphorically underlies it, has become a standard part of contemporary metaphysical idiom.

As with any philosophical trend, some advocates have made startling claims about what grounding can do for philosophical theorising. Some philosophers have suggested that answering questions about grounding is the central task of metaphysics (Schaffer 2009 pp 351, 356), and others have argued that grounding questions are the centre of providing explanations in metaphysics, or even that grounding itself is, or backs, the relation of metaphysical explanation. These claims for grounding go too far, as I will argue in sections 2 and 3. While I am not sceptical that grounding questions have a place in metaphysical inquiry, the main aim of this paper is to point beyond grounding, to remind the reader of

explanations in metaphysics and topics of metaphysical investigation that are not grounding-theoretic. While I am a friend of inquiry into grounding, we should be careful of imperialistic approaches to the topic.

I also think we should resist grounding nihilism. The booming literature on grounding can often seem focused inwards to an outsider, and some have been sceptical that there is even a phenomenon here to be theorised about. (See e.g. Daly 2012, forthcoming.) Another concern is that the apparent unity of grounding cases is spurious: that instead of theorising about grounding, we would be better off theorising directly about the metaphysical relationships that obtain when grounding claims seem plausible. For example, one common grounding claim that is made is that wholes are grounded in their parts (or perhaps facts about wholes are grounded in facts about their parts). Perhaps we would be better served talking directly about the part-whole relationship and its characteristics? Versions of this latter concern are raised by Wilson 2014 and Koslicki 2015, among others, so before moving to argue for limiting the role grounding should have in our metaphysical theorising, it is worth saying something about why we may want to recognise questions about grounding in their own right rather than dissolving those questions into questions about more specific metaphysical relationships. Wilson 2014 famously distinguished between "small-g" and "big-G" grounding relationships (p 539). One way to put the challenge I want to address is that we could theorise entirely in terms of the small-g relationships, and not lose anything important.

I do think the various small-g relationships are important, and well worth investigating in their own right. While there are many potential responses to this challenge<sup>1</sup>, a response I find more convincing than most is to motivate the usefulness of a generic notion of metaphysical dependence that different relationships may underpin in different cases. It is worth remembering that part of the explicit interest in these topics came from a widespread recognition that supervenience and similar modal notions did not capture all we wanted for articulating when one thing is derivative from another, or held in virtue of another. Sometimes when one set of truths or properties supervene on another, it is because of an intimate linkage between the two sets. (I believe the biological truths supervene on the physical truths, and I think this is because biological systems and their environments are complex physical systems underpinned by mechanisms that operate through physical interactions, for example.) But sometimes

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1 Bliss and Trogdon 2021 discuss a list of proposed roles for grounding.

there can be supervenience without any very intimate linkage. In a two-way deterministic world, the past supervenes on the present, the future and the laws: but it does not immediately follow that velociraptors or the Big Bang would be somehow ontologically derivative of present and future things, for example. Furthermore, theories that agree on supervenience can differ dramatically in the explanation of that supervenience. Someone who thinks that mental states supervene on physical states because mental states are identical with physical states is likely to have a very different philosophy of mind than someone who thinks that mental states supervene on physical states because of *sui generis* metaphysical principles functioning as the analogue of laws of nature to corral mentality into forms permitted by physical reality.

It looks fruitful to have a notion of dependence, or "in virtue of", to use in metaphysics that goes beyond the kind of modal co-variation captured by supervenience, and is also not just causation, i.e. the kind (or kinds) of dependence that typical effects have on their causes. Notions of grounding; ontological dependence; spelling out "in virtue of" connections; and one thing being derivative of another more fundamental thing have all been suggested as useful for filling out accounts of dependence that are not merely modal, on the one hand, and not merely causal, on the other.

It is useful to be able to posit and talk about a generic relation that leaves open which species of connection there is: sometimes we may be trying to work out whether there is grounding between A and B at all, and only once we suspect that e.g. B grounds A, do we move on to work out exactly what the exact relation between A and B is. In this way, the use of grounding in our philosophical investigations is a lot like the older use of supervenience. The question of what grounds what can serve as an intermediate question to answer before moving on to specifics.

This limited, generic use of grounding is also argued for by Schaffer 2016. He points out, in my view correctly, that generic uses of causal judgements can be very useful in inquiry and play important roles in explanations. Discovering that smoking causes cancer, e.g. by epidemiological means, can be very important even in advance of being able to specify the particular mechanisms by which it might do so. (Schaffer 2016 p 147). Being able to ask whether A causes B, even in advance of being able to specify particular mechanisms to ask about, is a valuable tool in inquiry. Schaffer argues that the same is true of grounding questions. Once a grounding relationship has been made plausible, we can go on to ask

more about the connections between A and B in other terms, but the fact that we can inquire further no more undercuts the usefulness of the original grounding claim than finding a specific mechanism connecting nicotine in the bloodstream to cancer undercuts the usefulness of the earlier epidemiological research proving that smoking causes cancer.

As I see it, this argument for the usefulness of grounding is almost the reverse of an argument Kathrin Koslicki offers in Koslicki 2015. There she argues that grounding as a theoretical tool suffers from saying too little about the metaphysical structures we care about, and when presented with a grounding claim, "we are left in the dark with respect to many other questions which ideally should be resolved by a sufficiently fine-grained approach to relative fundamentality." (p 341) I agree with Koslicki that there are many other relevant questions left unresolved when we are presented by a grounding claim, or even when grounding is demonstrated to our satisfaction. I also agree that there is a range of more "fine-grained" relationships that metaphysics should invoke when giving an adequate account of the relationship e.g. between minds and brains, or the colours red and scarlet, or mammals and cells. Where Koslicki sees rival questions to questions about grounding, I see more specific follow-ups. Sometimes the question about grounding may be sufficiently taken for granted that we can move immediately to those other questions, but in other cases the question of whether there is any suitable dependence of A on B is one to usefully focus on.

There is of course much more that could be said about whether this is an adequate vindication of grounding, and to answer objections that e.g. interesting dependence relations fall into *two* categories that we blur by treating them all as part of one genus (see Turner 2017). I will restrict myself to only one question for this approach to defending grounding questions: why not raise these generic dependence questions by asking about supervenience instead? (Daly forthcoming suggests supervenience can do a lot of the work grounding theorists claim for grounding.)

Supervenience, as I understand it and as became pretty standard, is a modal notion: phenomenon B supervenes on phenomenon A when there can be no difference in B without difference in A. When supervenience obtains there is often a further specific story about the connection between A and B, and supervenience does seem to be a useful concept to have when navigating between options, since theories according to which As supervene on Bs tend to be markedly different from ones according to

which the relationship between As and Bs is even more contingent than that. For example, an anti-reductionist proposal about social facts that denied even *supervenience* of the social on the physical (or the physical-plus-psychological) may need to be evaluated very differently from ones that accept supervenience of social facts on the world characterised in non-social terms.

Unfortunately, there are very many ways that there could be supervenience of As on Bs, and some of them, on examination, do not seem explanatory at all: it is not true that any two necessary truths explain each other, even though there is always mutual supervenience. I am inclined to think, at the moment, that asking about what grounds what gives us a more fine-grained story than supervenience, though not as fine grained as the story about what relations underneath grounding hold. If even contingent supervenience fails between the mental and the physical, so that we can have physically duplicate worlds but different mental lives (and no non-actual ingredients in either world), then we may need to embrace a fairly radical dualism about the mental and the physical. But we may still need some fairly radical dualism if there is only supervenience of the mental on the physical without the mental somehow being grounded by the physical. Options of each kind can be considered and debated before we get into the fine-grained questions of exactly what relationships mental states and physical states stand in.

Whether it is worth approaching classes of views in this way is a question to be determined, in the end, by metaphysical practice.<sup>2</sup> If it turns out that attempts to argue for or against grounding connections in one direction or another quickly have to descend to arguments about specific relationships that might underpin grounding, then grounding claims will be at a level of abstraction that turns out to be unhelpful. On the other hand, if it proves to be productive to group together all the theories according to which the normative is grounded in the descriptive versus those that reject this; or all the theories according to which the mental is grounded in the physical versus those that deny that grounding; or

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<sup>2</sup> Wilson 2014 pp 554-555 claims that the groupings we get from considering e.g. theories that maintain a supervenience relation between the mental and the physical, and those that do not, "fails to mark any clear doctrinal or dialectical division", and *a fortiori* dividing theories into camps on the basis of what grounding relationships they accept will also fail to mark any such divisions. The difference between Wilson's view and mine is presumably to be settled by a close look at the practice of using these distinctions. If it is fruitful, that is evidence we are on to a genuine doctrinal distinction, but if the practice gets us nowhere, that would suggest Wilson's take is correct. Or perhaps we do not disagree, since Wilson is prepared to allow that dividing theories up this way may be useful for "fallible, first-pass sorting" (p 555), and I think I would be happy with groupings of theories that help inquiry even if the generalisations they support have some exceptions and even if the sorting is "first pass".

those that include the dispositions of experiencers as central grounds of aesthetic properties versus those that do not, etc., then grounding is here to stay.

## ***2. Grounding and Explanation***

One of the most important roles often claimed for grounding is that it plays a central role connected with explanation in metaphysics: those who talk of explanations as objective structures in the world sometimes talk of grounding as *being* the relation of metaphysical explanation, and others suggest that metaphysical explanations are always "backed" by grounding relations (see Bliss and Trogon 2021 section 1.1 for discussion of both options). While I do think some metaphysical explanations are of grounded facts by their grounds, I disagree that explanations in metaphysics are *all* of grounded facts by appeal to their grounds. There is a wide range of legitimate explanations we might appeal to or even endorse in metaphysics, and many of them lack the features that explanations involving grounding are supposed to have. Even apart from explanatory appeal to relationships that might be thought to underpin grounding connections, such as part-to-whole, determinate-determinable, or set-membership relations, some of the explanations offered in metaphysics seem to have little to do with grounding.

It seems to me that sometimes metaphysicians want to appeal to explanations invoking identity. How come, wherever I am, my body is as well? Well, perhaps because I am distinct from, but grounded in, my body. Or perhaps I am a spirit passenger trapped inside this physical object. Or perhaps because I am identical to my body. If the third metaphysical view is correct, we have the basis of an appealing explanation: there is even less mystery to my accompanying my body than on the passenger story. Typically, however, it is thought that if A is identical to B, A is not also grounded in B. (Since grounding is irreflexive, but identity is reflexive.)

Perhaps this particular explanation does not appeal, either because you believe in the possibility of out-of-body travel, or because you reject the identity of people and their bodies, or you are sanguine about identical things coming to be non-identical. But it would be odd to try to banish all explanations by identity from metaphysics. I think lightning is a certain kind of electrical charge, and bolts of lightning are identical to particular electric discharges. That's debatable (you might think lightning is multiply

realisable by electrical discharge, or Thor's hammer, or something else), but it strikes me as a view in the purview of metaphysics, and the explanations it offers of the connection between lightning and electrical discharges to be metaphysical ones. Even if you are far along the spectrum of often preferring to deny identity claims and accepting views where objects are distinct but connected, presumably you would not want to deny that anything is identical to anything: and once some true identity claims are admitted, I suspect *some* explanations of the connection between some A and some B in terms of identity are not far behind.

On the other hand, you might think that explanations invoking identities can be good metaphysical explanations, but think that A can ground B even when A is identical to B, and so these metaphysical explanations that rely on identity are grounding explanations after all. (See Jenkins 2011 for a defence of the view that there can be grounding together with identity in some cases.) I am myself tempted to talk this way sometimes: to say that one way it might turn out that the mental is grounded in the physical is for e.g. mental states to be physical states. So this genre of examples is likely to be convincing only for those with a strong antecedent commitment to the irreflexivity of grounding.

Another way a grounding theorist can allow these sorts of explanations as grounding explanations, without compromising the reflexivity of grounding, is to point out e.g. that e.g. the *fact* that I am at a particular place and the *fact* that my body is at that place are distinct, even if I am identical to my body. (Or the *fact* that there was a lightning bolt and the *fact* that there was an electrical discharge are distinct, even if the lightning was the electrical discharge.) Even supposing we grant that the facts are distinct, and also grant that we can explain one by the other via a relationship between *them* rather than the identity of the objects the facts are about, grounding theorists still would face a challenge of ensuring the grounding connection matches up with the explanatory direction. Presumably, if there is grounding between the one fact and the other, it goes in only one direction (grounding is supposedly asymmetric). But I can explain why I am somewhere in terms of the location of my body, *and* (perhaps on another occasion) where my body is on the basis of where I am. (You made sure I would attend the meeting, and sure enough we find my body in the meeting room too.) It does not look like both of those explanations could be grounding ones, even if there is a grounding relation of some sort between facts

about my location and facts about my body's.<sup>3</sup> Some other explanations that are commonplace in metaphysics are even less like grounding explanations, however.

While grounding is often supposed to be non-causal, or at least not a matter of efficient causation (see e.g. Bernstein 2016 for some recent pushback against the idea that grounding is causal), some proffered explanations in metaphysics are straightforwardly causal. Consider the issue of the relationship between particles and fields in physics: for instance the relationship between massive particles and the gravitational field, or electrically charged particles and the electromagnetic field. One possible view is that the relationship is explained through identities: particles are identical to especially high field-strengths in particular locations, for example. Some other options are grounding ones: perhaps fields are grounded in the distribution of particles, for example, perhaps through being the potentialities of forces due to the arrangement of particles; or perhaps particles are grounded in field strengths, though not identical to any part of the field. But one option is that the relationship between particles and fields is purely causal: a particle acts on a field changing its strength at locations, and the field acts on particles to change their positions over time, for example. (A Minkowskian picture where massive bodies curve space and spatial curvature causes the bodies to move in certain ways can be an example of this, depending on what we want to identify the gravitational field with in Minkowskian metaphysics of gravity.)

The relationship between particles and fields seems to be a respectable, and indeed important, question in the metaphysics of physics. Related questions, like "why does the strength of the gravitational field increase as a massive body approaches?", look like part and parcel of this metaphysical question. It does not seem to me that whether the question is a metaphysical one depends on whether the answer is a causal or a grounding answer. If the answer is a causal one, the causal explanation of the relationship between particles and fields is one proper to metaphysics. It doesn't seem to me that the case of particles and fields is unique either: we will frequently face a question about what the relationship between two phenomena is, and it may be entirely appropriate for a metaphysician to defend a causal answer to that question, and adopt causal explanations of one phenomenon by the other.

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<sup>3</sup> Thanks to Jonathan Schaffer and Aaron Segal for raising this option, and for discussion. There are more options the focus on facts give us: perhaps the fact that the lightning and the electrical discharge are identical is a basis for *both* explaining facts about lightning in terms of facts about electrical discharge, and explanations of facts about electrical discharge in terms of facts about lightning, for example. Further exploration of trying to fit explanation by identity into grounding terms will have to be left to another occasion.



Other explanations offered in metaphysics are conceptual. Why does the causation we observe typically run from past to future? Among the answers that have been offered to this are those that make it, directly or indirectly, a *conceptual* truth that causation is typically, or always, from past to the future: for one simple account like this, consider the classic account attributed to Hume on which A causes B provided that A occurs in spatial contact and immediately before B, and that things of type A are always followed by things of type B. If we interpret this account as offering a conceptual or linguistic analysis of "cause" (e.g. because it is offered as giving our concept of causation), it would just be analytic that causes *always* immediately precede their effects, and so it would follow that causes typically do so in cases around here.

You might object that this is a terrible theory of causation and a terrible explanation of why causes typically precede their effects. But it should serve to illustrate the fact that non-obvious conceptual analyses are the sort of thing that can sometimes be used to shed light on philosophical puzzles, even if that simple Humean attempt failed. A less toy example may be found in the contemporary debate about free will and the principle of alternative possibilities. When someone freely  $\Phi$ s, does it have to be the case that they could have refrained from  $\Phi$ -ing? (In a relevant sense of "could" tied to ability?) Some say yes, some no. Suppose that this is required for free action. How do we explain that requirement? (And e.g. explain away cases where there seems to be free action without it?) We could look for a story based in the nature of action, or intention, or something in the vicinity. Or we could look for a conceptual connection between the concept of acting freely and the concept of being able to do otherwise, so that the latter is a necessary condition for the former. Some of the traditional debate about free will seems to me to have been carried out in this way, and seeing it in these terms would explain why reliance on thought experiments is so common. In performing thought experiments we get information about how we are disposed to apply our concepts, and at least on the assumption that we are competent users of those concepts, this gives us information about the correct application conditions for those concepts. (I do not mean to suggest this is the only way thought experiments might be useful.)

A final class of explanations, crucial to metaphysics, is the explaining of metaphysical evidence. Sometimes the explanation of evidence is a matter of citing a ground of the evidence's existing or

obtaining: we explain people growing, for example, by citing their adding small parts (new atoms, new cells, etc.): and the addition of these new parts is plausibly the *ground* of their increase in size. However, other evidence is not explained in this way. I might offer to account for a metaphysical intuition by vindicating it, for example: it seems that *p* because it *is* that *p*. I might account for the features of a scientific inquiry by offering a theory that meshes well with it: explaining the appeals to selection in biological explanations by providing a theory of selection where it has causal influence, for example. (There is a controversy in the metaphysics of biology whether selection is causal or a mere statistical phenomenon—but one advantage the causal story has is that it is easy to see how selection explains outcomes on the causal story.) In general, there are all sorts of ways to explain one's evidence in light of one's metaphysical theory.

A special case of explaining metaphysical evidence is the explaining away of misleading intuitions or beliefs. Almost any metaphysical theory will have some counter-intuitive consequences, or consequences that otherwise strike us as odd. And whatever other sources of metaphysical evidence we use, theories that we come up with to accommodate those starting points will often not seem to be a perfect match. In some cases, perhaps, explaining misleading evidence will involve citing something that the misleading evidence is grounded in. But a lot of the time it does not. If I explain a misleading intuition by saying that people have it because they are in the grip of an outdated picture of the world, I am offering something like a genetic explanation of the presence of the intuition, perhaps with some debunking ambitions. If I explain an intuition as being a result of a rough-and-ready cognitive heuristic gone astray, that is another kind of causal explanation for its presence. If I explain the sense that a metaphysical picture is unsatisfactory by pointing out that we have inconsistent starting desiderata, and arguing that all the remaining possible solutions must feel unsatisfactory in the same way, it may well be that this explanation is primarily appealing to familiar facts about the psychology of inquiry, perhaps as part of a causal explanation.

Explanation in general is rather promiscuous. All sorts of matters receive explanations, and a single phenomenon is often susceptible to a number of good, non-competing explanations. So my suspicion is that there will be even more kinds of explanations properly offered in metaphysics that do not rely on grounding, besides the grab-bag offered above. Even the cases discussed above should be enough to show that the explanations in metaphysics go well beyond information about what grounds what.

Those who wish to preserve the idea that the explanations connected with grounding are all and only the "metaphysical explanations", they are free of course to stipulate that by "metaphysical explanation" they mean something considerably narrower than the class of explanations that are the province of metaphysics. I do not think this victory by stipulation would be worth having, myself: restricting the expression "metaphysical explanation" by stipulation risks being misleading, and a more neutral term like "grounding explanations" might be a better choice of jargon. And even the victory by stipulation would not help very much to show that talking about grounding was crucial or central to metaphysics: while metaphysics may be crucially an explanatory enterprise, once we realise that a lot of those explanations have little or nothing to do with grounding, giving a particular subset of explanations in metaphysics the honorific "metaphysical explanation" leaves open the question of whether "metaphysical explanation" in this sense is very important, even by the standards of metaphysics.

### ***3. Grounding and the Tasks of Metaphysics***

Perhaps the most ambitious claims made about grounding is that "[t]he task of metaphysics is to say what grounds what" (Schaffer 2009 p 351, suggesting this is also how Aristotle saw metaphysics). *The* task. Perhaps there is some exaggeration here, as on p 356 Schaffer does leave open that some existence questions remain important along with grounding questions, and as the paper develops talk of providing answers to grounding questions is described as "central" rather than as the only appropriate concern of the metaphysician. Still, Schaffer ends his manifesto by saying "metaphysics as I understand it is about what grounds what. It is about the structure of the world. It is about what is fundamental, and what derives from it." (p 379), and this picture of metaphysics has been influential, even if few would go quite as far as Schaffer advocates.

Note that Kit Fine has claimed a central role for the investigation of essences in metaphysics, and even that it characterises what the subject of metaphysics or "at least part of it") is about. (Fine 1994 p 1) And at the height of interest in metaphysical necessity, some metaphysicians thought of the defining job of metaphysics to tell us the extent and structure of the space of possibilities (e.g. Lowe 1998). It is an understandable temptation for metaphysicians to identify one question or one set of questions as being what metaphysics is about, or failing that to characterise a core of metaphysical inquiry, so we

should not be surprised that questions of ground should take their turn being touted as the centre of metaphysical inquiry.

I do not think we should search for a single topic to be a replacement for questions about ground or questions about essence as the putative centre of metaphysics. My view is that, on the contrary, there is no very specific task for metaphysics, just as there's no particularly narrow question to be answered by many other disciplines. So I would reject not just the claim that the task of metaphysics is to determine what grounds what, but any anti-pluralist story about what the task of metaphysics is. By analogy, some, for example, think that the goal of physics is to predict and explain motion. But I think it is part of the job of physics to predict and explain many other things, such as charge and water pressure and light, and attempts to make the explanations and predictions about these things "really" about motion seem rather procrustean to me.

Likewise, metaphysics seems to cover lots of different topics: properties and relations, the nature of space and time, the existence and nature of abstract objects, general theories of causation, and so on. To try to say that all of the interesting questions about these topics are "really" questions about grounding looks on the face of it false. For a start, we can ask and answer many of the interesting questions in these areas without mentioning grounding or one of its close relatives. "In what circumstances is a person at one time the numerically same as a person at another time?" is a question at the centre of many debates about personal identity, for example, but it does not mention grounding or ontological dependence or fundamentality. This section will outline a few important kinds of metaphysical questions besides questions about grounding.

### **Questions about What Exists**

There are questions about what exists. There are still traditional arguments about whether we should recognise the existence of entities like events, worldly states of affairs, tropes, laws of nature, non-physical minds, and other alleged metaphysical furniture of the world; whether we should accept the existence of disputed entities of the sciences such as strings or ecosystems or proper classes; and whether we should help ourselves to abstract objects such as possible and impossible worlds; Russellian structured propositions; Leibnizian monads, and so on. Minor debates flare up about all sorts

of dubious entities, including shadows, holes, glints, scenes, sakes, hallucinatory objects, objective aesthetic qualities; and so on. If we accept the existence of a range of entities, we face challenges coming up with a good theory of their existence conditions, their identity conditions, and how we come to know about them. And it often seems like a good way out of finding answers to these puzzles is to deny the existence of the relevant objects altogether.

Schaffer 2009 suggests that existence questions in metaphysics are easy, since the answer to the question of whether something exists is almost always "yes", and furthermore it is relatively obvious or "trivial" that the answer is yes in traditional cases of metaphysical interest (Schaffer 2009 pp 356-362). Fine 2009 says something similar about the objects posited by science or commonsense.<sup>4</sup> To be fair, I suspect this "obviousness" is only for (many of the) objects traditionally thought to be proper to philosophy, or perhaps specifically metaphysics: I predict Schaffer does not think we could have short-circuited the search for the Higgs boson before building the Large Hadron Collider by consulting a local metaphysician, who could have told us that Higgs bosons definitely did exist and that their existence was trivial.

One reason existence questions can seem trivial is that it is easy to slip into taking our ontological commitments for granted. Those of us with fairly abundant ontologies, who believe in platonic numbers, events, possibilities, impossibilities, spacetime, and the rest, can be lulled into thinking that our more austere philosophical opponents are not just wrong but somehow silly. I have two recommendations for those tempted to think that abundant ontological theories are not just correct but somehow trivial. One is to reflect on the apparently substantial nature of the history of the debate about parsimonious ontologies. The idea that the world is an austere place and the profusion of nouns we use reflect only linguistic devices we have rather than a wide array of kinds of things in the world is not absurd on its face, and whether it is Plato's fight between the gods and giants, or medieval clashes between realists and nominalists, or contemporary attempts to pursue austere materialist or empiricist world-views, it is a perennial issue whether there is much more in the world than we can sense or kick. The question of how our talk about numbers connects to what exists in the world should seem like a matter for discovery, rather than that it is obvious that abstract objects exist.

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4 For a different set of objections to Schaffer's and Fine's claims about the obviousness of existence claims, see Daly and Liggins 2014.

Another is to explore the limits of one's ontology. Even for those with abundant ontologies, there are likely to be some ontological commitments that some people have that they do not share. Do you believe in literally inconsistent objects? Do you believe in Cartesian egos? A thing such that its existence would exclude from existence all other entities? (Some traditional notions of infinite substance look like this—the notion might be used to dismiss infinite substance, or to motivate a kind of numerical monism according to which we are not distinct from the One thing.) Is there phlogiston or *elan vital*? Someone who wishes to answer "yes" to all these questions has some more explaining to do than remarking that the existence of all these is trivial. (Schaffer himself rejects the existence of some objects that would contravene the claims about grounding he accepts: Schaffer 2009 p 359.)

One argument form that Schaffer suggests may seem to offer a specific reason to suppose almost everything we might ask about exists.<sup>5</sup> In the particular case of God, Schaffer claims, even though he is an atheist, that it is still relatively trivial that God exists (p 359). Schaffer thinks that the atheist and theist should agree that God exists, and rather dispute whether God is a (merely) fictional character or not. Since Schaffer also thinks that there is a strong (decisive?) case for the existence of fictional characters, even fictional deities exist.

I do not think that it is entirely clear that we *should* admit the existence of fictional characters: talk about fictional characters, including in so-called "critical contexts", seems like a paradigm case where we may be talking as if a range of things exist even though we are not genuinely saying that they do. (And there are of course a range of ways of trying to spell out that thought in detail.) But let us accept, for the sake of the argument, that fictional characters do exist. There is a further question whether the objects apparently talked about in myth, or in theories we take to be false, all exist (albeit as "mythical beings" or "theoretical entities"), in the same sort of way that fictional characters do. And even some people who argue for the existence of fictional characters reject these other putative entities (see Braun 2005). But let us also grant, for the sake of argument, that these all exist as well. Even so, admitting fictional objects would not trivialise all existence questions.

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5 Schaffer does not admit the existence of everything one might believe in: he wishes to keep a "rubbish bin for the non-existent", and offers some examples of existence claims he would not endorse, such as the posit of non-self-identical objects. (p 359) I am not quite sure when Schaffer would like to treat a posit as corresponding to an existing fictional character and when he would wish to treat an existence claim as false.

As well as posing existence questions using names, for instance "Does Sherlock Holmes exist?" or "Does Vishnu exist?", we can also ask existence questions by employing descriptions. "Was there a cocaine-using private detective who discovered that an alleged curse on a gentry family involving a demonic hound was not as it seemed?" "Is there an animal more than five metres in length that lives in Loch Ness?" "Is there a dwarf planet with an orbit between the Sun and Mercury?". The answers to these questions should not be a trivial "yes", at least when asked in a literal way. Likewise with metaphysically interesting existence questions. "Are there regions of space-time distinct from particles and fields?" "Is there an omnipotent person?" "How many properties exist?". For the answers to all these questions to be "yes" (or "many"), when asked in a literal way, we would start to lose the distinction between fact and fiction in the first place. Even if we accept that Superman exists, we should not expect to see him in the sky during our commute.

So existence questions are not trivial, and we can continue our investigations into the existence of proper classes, God, free will, and the rest. Or at least we can continue arguing about whether there are any entities with set-theoretic members that are not themselves members; divine people; any freely chosen actions; any Baker-Street-dwelling detectives; and so on.

### **Questions About the Nature of Objects**

Once we have established the existence of some phenomenon, there are often interesting and difficult to resolve questions about the nature of that phenomenon. Suppose we determine that, as commonsense suggests, there are causal relationships between events: flipping a switch making a light go on, or the introduction of non-native predators causing ecosystem collapse, or the approach of a magnet causing the movement of iron filings, and so on. We can go on to ask *what is it* for this relation to stand between events? Is it a primitive relationship, or can it be analysed in terms of sophisticated regularities, or laws of nature, or mark transmission, or something else? Can causal relationships also stand between non-events, and are these the same kind of relation or not? Does causation come in degrees or intensity? For another example, consider debates about the nature of time. How much is time like space? Is there a dimension of time (either non-relative or as a perhaps relative-to-a-reference-frame aspect of spacetime), and if so are past and future times like now, or radically different? Are there times, or are there only objects and events with temporal characteristics? Are there

minimum durations of time, and if so are they of zero-duration (temporal points), or some non-zero minimum? Some questions about the metaphysics of time might be connected to grounding questions (is time grounded in temporal entities, or is the reverse true, or are they grounding-wise independent?) but it is natural to see many of these questions about the nature of time as having limited connections to questions about grounding.

### **Questions about Non-Grounding Relationships Between Entities**

There are questions to be asked and answered about the relationships between phenomena of interest besides questions of which phenomena ground which. Suppose an Oracle reveals to us that the mind is grounded in the brain, or perhaps the brain plus the physical environment. That would not, and should not, be the end of inquiry into the metaphysics of mind. We can continue to ask interesting questions about the relationship between the mind and the brain: what does a human brain have to be like for there to be a headache? We can also ask general metaphysical questions about minds and brains that are not answered just by an answer to the grounding question. For example, might different kinds of minds stand in radically different relationships to different kinds of brain: for example, might there be radical differences between the connection between minds and brains in humans, and the connection between minds and brains in octopi? Can there be a mind that never acts on the external world? Can there be instantaneous minds? And so on.

As well as asking for more information about relationships between grounded phenomena and their grounds, there are also interesting metaphysical questions about the relationships between entities that do not stand in grounding relationships to each other at all. To take up an example from earlier, suppose we decide, on the basis of our theorising, that particles and fields both exist, and neither are grounded in the other. (This conclusion is not uncontroversial!) Now what? It is natural to try to work out how particles and fields are related. The relation might be causal, for example, with the movement of particles causing changes in the fields they inhabit, while the strengths of fields around particles in turn cause their movements. Or there are less plausible options: perhaps there is a pre-established harmony, or perhaps fields have no causal role and are epiphenomena that it makes sense for us to keep track of as a means of predicting particle movements. Which of these options is correct would remain even after we have offered an answer to the relevant grounding question. (Note that I am not endorsing



the claim that neither particles nor fields ground each other: the purpose of the example is to illustrate how questions remain for metaphysics even after questions about grounding are settled. Nor would I want to suggest that grounding questions are epistemically prior: I imagine it is often the case that a theory must be evaluated as a package deal, including grounding claims but also ontological claims and claims about the other relations entities stand in.)

If the claim that metaphysics is really all about grounding is supposed to be true despite its apparent falsehood, there are various ways we could try to force metaphysics into the procrustean bed of the theory of grounding. One way is to dismiss many questions of traditional metaphysical interest as not being interesting, or having obvious answers, or not requiring metaphysical work to solve. I mentioned the dismissal of existence questions as "trivial", above, but moves like this could be made about causal questions, nature questions and relationship questions as well. Whatever their appeal in specific cases, I cannot see how these moves could be plausibly made simultaneously for all the non-grounding questions cited above.

Another way to support the claim that grounding is the central issue of metaphysics is to allow that questions about whether there are proper classes, or tropes, or whether causation comes apart from counterfactual dependence, or whether time travel is possible, to be legitimate and non-trivial metaphysical questions, but to argue that their status as metaphysical questions is derivative from their status as inputs to answer questions about grounding. We might legitimately ask about the existence of proper classes *in order to* determine what mathematical objects are grounded in; or whether anything grounds proper classes; or exactly what the connection is between class-membership and grounding is. We might ask about the relationship between causation and counterfactuals in order to shed light on how conditional truths are grounded, or how causal truths are grounded, or on both issues. We might ask about time travel in order... well, I expect we could work out some connections to grounding.

I expect we could connect every metaphysical issue to the theory of grounding somehow. I lean towards a certain amount of epistemic holism, so it may be that almost any area of metaphysics is related, at least via some intermediaries, to any other.<sup>6</sup> But to show that metaphysics was really about

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<sup>6</sup> There are a lot of things one might mean by "epistemic holism", so perhaps I should say a little more. I am inclined to the view that evidence that immediately bears on one topic often indirectly bears on other topics, sometimes on topics far removed from the ones most directly connected to the evidence. We are familiar with some cases like this: evidence that suggests our guru has set up his organisation as a way of bilking devotees, without concern for whether his

grounding, or primarily about grounding, or sometimes, it would not be enough, presumably, to show that every metaphysical issue could be connected, sometimes fairly indirectly, to some grounding question or other. For one thing, that might be true of all sorts of questions—maybe every metaphysical question bears somehow on the issue of what exists, or what the True Will Of God is, or what should be put in the Jumbo Funbook of Metaphysics. That would not show that any of those questions is *really* what metaphysics is all about.

This diversity of metaphysical questions spells trouble for any attempt to find the "central" questions of metaphysics to organise the rest around. My guess is that for the time being at least we will be left without a snappy yet informative characterisation of the "central" questions that fall under its purview. Of course this might be regrettable news for some: metaphysics might have been more tractable if there were one or two master-questions we needed to solve to make the rest fall into place.<sup>7</sup>

#### **4. Conclusion**

Grounding is not as central to metaphysics as its advocates have claimed. It should take its place in the philosophical toolbox with a range of other important resources, and questions about grounding should be considered along with many metaphysical questions that have little to do with grounding. If all we know about two phenomena is that A grounds B, there is much metaphysical work still to be done to work out how A and B stand to each other, and many important questions in metaphysics do not require a detour through grounding for their answer.

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teachings are correct, might cast doubt on doctrines about the gods, or the ultimate nature of reality, or the maintenance of tractors, or whatever else we have trusted the guru's testimony about. In the case of metaphysics more specifically, I think it is often, or maybe usually, the case that considerations that bear directly on one metaphysical topic bear indirectly on others. If grounding is no exception, then many or most metaphysical considerations may influence the epistemic status of some grounding claim or other, at least indirectly.

<sup>7</sup> One concern that Aaron Segal has put to me is whether this pluralism about the tasks of metaphysics might endanger the idea that metaphysics is a "joint of intellectual inquiry" or otherwise lacks the unity we might expect from a discrete sub-discipline. Of course there is a risk that philosophy in general, and perhaps metaphysics in particular, is a bit of a basket of leftover questions after more tractable inquiries have been divided out. But I don't think this pluralism has to go with thinking metaphysics is an especially miscellaneous enterprise. If I am right above, physics is also an inquiry with no single overarching question. (Something like "what is the nature of physical reality" is too broad, since many non-physics inquiries study the nature of e.g. rocks or bacteria or stars.) My hunch is that most reasonable joints of inquiry are not delimited by a single question or handful of questions, but still have worthwhile unity.

We should therefore resist grounding imperialism. We should also resist grounding nihilism: while it is entirely reasonable to ask what the grounding family of notions contribute in our overall investigations, questions asked in those terms have substantial answers at least given that the questions about the small-g grounding relations underpinning grounding have substantive answers. Grounding questions also contribute something distinctive for our inquiries, allowing us to be non-specific about whether a certain kind of thing depends on another, in one of the metaphysically intimate ways we might eventually hope to specify further whenever there is a true grounding claim.

When the grounding dust has cleared, it should become easier to recognise the range of questions that metaphysics as a sub-discipline has traditionally taken to be central. We can, and should, continue to ask questions about what exists, about the natures of different kinds of objects, and about the important relationships between those objects, now including grounding relationships and the "small-g" relations that underpin grounding. Metaphysics beyond grounding will look rather like metaphysics before grounding, at least in subject matter.<sup>8</sup>

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