

The Unity of Grounding

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I argue—contra moderate grounding pluralists such as Kit Fine and more extreme grounding pluralists such as Jessica Wilson—that there is fundamentally only one grounding/in-virtue-of relation. I also argue that this single relation is indispensable for normative theorizing—that we can't make sense of, for example, the debate over consequentialism without it. It follows from what I argue that there is no metaethically-pure normative ethics (in contrast to Ronald Dworkin's claim that there is no normatively-pure metaethics).

1. Introduction

Is the good prior to the right? This question—one of the most central in all of ethics—is not a question about supervenience, or counterfactual dependence, or conceptual priority. Rather, it is a question about that distinctive variety of non-causal dependence which metaphysicians now call 'grounding'. In what follows, I offer a defence of the claims I have just made.

Thus I will be arguing that the metaphysicians' notion of grounding is the very same one being employed in ethics. One prominent threat to this thesis comes from within that group of metaphysicians who have of late been touting the philosophical significance of grounding. Kit Fine, to whom we owe the expression 'ground', and whose work has played a crucial role in the resurgence of interest in the notion, holds that there are three varieties of grounding: metaphysical, natural, and normative. So for Fine, the sort of grounding at issue in metaphysical debates is distinct from the sort of grounding at issue in ethical debates. In what follows, I argue that Fine is mistaken in thinking that grounding is disunified in this way.

Fine is what we might call a 'moderate grounding pluralist': he holds that there exist a small number of fundamentally distinct types of grounding. Grounding pluralism, when pushed to the extreme, becomes a source of scepticism about the importance and interest of grounding. One representative 'extreme grounding

pluralist', as we might call them, is Jessica Wilson, who argues that although there are a large number of specific dependency relations such as the part–whole relation and the determinate–determinable relation, these specific relations do not form a unified kind and nothing is gained by theorizing in terms of a general grounding relation. In what follows, I defend the theoretical usefulness of unqualified 'grounding'-talk against the challenge posed by extreme grounding pluralists such as Wilson.

Therefore I have three primary goals in this essay. The first is to argue that a metaphysical grounding relation is indispensable for normative theorizing. (For the most part I focus on the case of ethics, but I intend my thesis to extend to other normative disciplines, such as epistemology, political philosophy, and the philosophy of law.) The second is to argue against Fine's form of moderate grounding pluralism. And the third is to argue against the sort of extreme grounding pluralism that gives rise to scepticism about the very topic of grounding. These three goals are interrelated in various ways. As already mentioned, achieving my first goal requires achieving the second, since Fine's pluralism represents a notable challenge to my claim that metaphysical grounding is indispensable for normative inquiry. Moreover, success with my first goal helps with the third, since it is precisely in normative contexts that the claims of extreme grounding pluralists such as Wilson are at their weakest. And my second and third goals are likewise interrelated, since my arguments against Fine also have traction against Wilson. It is because of these interrelations that I take on all three tasks in the same essay. Furthermore, pursuing all three goals will allow us to establish a surprising conclusion, at the essay's end, about the relationship between normative ethics and metaethics.

First, though, I should provide some background about the nature of grounding and its history.

2. Grounding: the very idea

What is grounding? The name might sound imposing, but the notion of grounding is no more and no less obscure than the word 'because'. The following sentences are equivalent ways of making the same claim about grounding:

- (1) An act is pious *because* it is loved by the gods;
- (2) An act is pious *in virtue of* its being loved by the gods;

- (3) The fact that an act is loved by the gods *grounds* the fact that it is pious;
- (4) An act's being loved by the gods *makes it the case that* the act is pious.

I will be assuming throughout that these four locutions are different ways of getting at the same idea.¹

As a result of Kit Fine's—no pun intended—ground-breaking work on the notion (2001, 2010, 2012a, 2012b), it has become customary to use 'grounds' and its cognates as the primary term for the sort of dependency at issue in sentences of this sort. I will do so as well, but not without some reservations. Personally I prefer expressions such as 'in virtue of' and 'because' over the now-ubiquitous 'grounds', for two reasons. First, 'grounds'-talk lends itself to the surprisingly common misconception that 'grounds' is a technical term referring to a wholly new relation that was invented by Fine in 2001. But nothing could be further from the truth, and the intended equivalence of 'grounds'-talk to 'in virtue of'- and 'because'-talk helps us see that. Although the use of the word 'grounds' in roughly Fine's sense is a relatively recent phenomenon, 'in virtue of'- and (non-causal) 'because'-talk have been with us from the very beginning, as my Platonic example shows. My second reason for preferring the locutions 'in virtue of' and 'because' is that, to my ears at least, 'grounds'-talk is not yet a dead metaphor—it calls to mind both the base of a building and electrical connections to the earth. As such, the expression 'grounds' tempts us into assuming that everything which is grounded can eventually be traced back to a set of ungrounded grounders that serve as the foundation for the whole metaphysical edifice. Perhaps such a form of metaphysical foundationalism is correct; however, I don't think that view is inevitable, and it would be unfortunate if lingering metaphors attached to our philosophical terminology were unduly to sway our thinking here. Less of a danger arises when we theorize using the terms 'in virtue of' and 'because', since any metaphorical content they might have once had is long since dead. (It takes

¹ Some authors take the following sentence to be synonymous with (1)–(4):

(5) An act's being pious *is nothing over and above* the fact that it is loved by the gods.

However, this is a mistake. Among other problems, the logic for nothing-over-and-above claims is not the same as the logic for grounding claims. For example, nothing-over-and-above claims obey the following principle: if F_1 is nothing over and above G , and F_2 is also nothing over and above G , then it is not the case that F_1 is something over and above F_2 . But there is no analogous principle for grounding claims.

real work to remind ourselves that ‘virtue’ is part of ‘in virtue of’ and that ‘cause’ is part of ‘because’.)

However, despite these misgivings, I will be making free use of ‘grounds’-talk in this essay, partially because that term has now become standard, and partially because ‘grounds’-talk allows us to easily state dependency claims in both directions.² I urge my readers to ignore any metaphorical content that might be attached to such phraseology, and I urge them to remember that all ‘grounds’-talk can be translated into language using ordinary terms such as ‘because’.

Recently, grounding has become a hot topic in metaphysics, due not only to Fine’s work, but also to important and influential papers by Jonathan Schaffer (2009) and Gideon Rosen (2010). An explosion of research has resulted, as metaphysicians have turned their attention to a variety of question about the nature of grounding and its relation to other ideas in the vicinity. Is grounding a relation or an operator? If it is a relation, what are its relata? Can pluralities serve as grounds, and can pluralities be grounded? Do full grounds always necessitate that which they ground? What is the logic of grounding? What are the semantics of ‘grounds’? What is the relation, if any, between grounding and essence, between grounding and fundamentality, between grounding and reduction? What, if anything, grounds grounding facts?

These questions will not be the central focus of this essay. Nevertheless, it is difficult to discuss grounding without weighing in on at least some of them. So I will simply assume without argument that grounding is a relation rather than an operator. I will also assume that the relata of the grounding relation are facts, and that the grounding relation is singular on the side of what-is-grounded and plural on the side of what-does-the-grounding, so that in some cases one fact is grounded in several facts taken together. Nothing I go on to argue will turn on these assumptions, and making them will streamline our discussion.³

² When using the expression ‘grounds’, we can write either ‘F grounds G’ or ‘G is grounded in F’, but with the expressions ‘in virtue of’ and ‘because’ it is more difficult to formulate things in the former, from-grounds-to-grounded direction.

³ On the difference between relational and operational views, see Correia and Schnieder (2012a), pp. 10–12. (They use the label ‘predicational’ for the former sort of view, but I think the term ‘relational’ is more apt since the fundamental distinction here is metaphysical, not semantic: it concerns the nature of grounding itself, not the nature of the terms we use to talk about grounding.) In the recent grounding literature, relationalists include Audi (2012a, 2012b), Chudnoff (2011), deRosset (2013), Evans (2012), Leuenberger (2014a, 2014b), Maguire (2015), Raven (2012, 2013), Rosen (2010, 2015), Schaffer (2009, 2012, 2016), Skiles (2015), Trogdon (2013), and Whitcomb (2012);

During the tumult of research on grounding over the past decade, a sort of narrative has emerged.⁴ According to this narrative, although analytic philosophers during the twentieth century occasionally made use of ‘in virtue of’- or ‘dependence’-talk in their unguarded moments, most of these philosophers either officially disavowed such language or tried to cash it out in terms of more familiar ideas such as entailment or supervenience. But then Fine, Rosen, Schaffer, and others came along in the first decade of the twenty-first century and taught us that entailment, supervenience, and the like are too coarse-grained to capture what we want from ‘in virtue of’- and ‘dependence’-talk. Moreover—so the narrative goes—Fine, Rosen, and Schaffer also showed how a notion of grounding is indispensable for asking certain questions in metaphysics we would otherwise not be able to ask, and they demonstrated how we can theorize about the nature of grounding and its interrelation to other notions in a rigorous manner. Eventually—the narrative concludes—we came to learn that not only is grounding a useful item to have in our analytical toolkit, but it itself can be the subject of serious philosophical inquiry.

Now I count myself a fan of grounding, so I welcome the attention that metaphysicians are now lavishing on the notion. And I certainly agree that the work of Fine, Rosen, and Schaffer has been instrumental in rehabilitating the legitimacy of appeals to the in-virtue-of relation in our theorizing, whether metaphysical or otherwise. I also agree with the growing consensus that supervenience is too blunt a tool to capture the notion of grounding. But there are other aspects of the creation myth I have just told which I consider just that: mythical. I focus here on three of those aspects.

First, the actual history of the relationship between grounding and supervenience is more complicated than the standard narrative would have it. R. M. Hare’s *The Language of Morals* (1952) is usually credited with being the first appearance in print of the distinctively

operationalists include Correia (2010), Dasgupta (2014a, 2014b, 2016), Fine (2001, 2010, 2012a, 2012b), Litland (2013, 2015), and Schnieder (2011). Among relationalists, taking grounding’s relata to be facts is the mainstream view; the primary exception is Schaffer, who takes grounding’s relata to be entities of arbitrary ontological category. The view that grounding—whether construed as a relation or an operator—is singular on the side of what-is-grounded and plural on the side of what-does-the-grounding is also the mainstream view; the primary exception is Dasgupta, who takes it to be plural on both sides.

⁴ Not only does one occasionally encounter this narrative in print (see, for instance, Clark and Liggins 2012), but, in my experience, one very frequently encounters it in conversation.

philosophical use of the term ‘supervene’.⁵ However, when we turn to Hare’s text, we find something rather surprising. Here are the first two passages in which Hare explains what he means by ‘supervenient’:

Let me illustrate one of the most characteristic features of value-words ... It is a feature sometimes described by saying that ‘good’ and other such words are the names of ‘supervenient’ or ‘consequential’ properties. Suppose that a picture is hanging upon the wall and we are discussing whether it is a good picture ... Suppose that there is another picture next to P in the gallery (I will call it Q) ... Now there is one thing that we cannot say; we cannot say ‘P is exactly like Q in all respects save this one, that P is a good picture and Q not’. If we were to say this, we should invite the comment, ‘But how can one be good and the other not, if they are exactly alike? There must be some *further* difference between them to **make** one good and the other not’ ... Sometimes we cannot specify just what it is that **makes** one good and the other not; but there always must be something. (Hare 1952, pp. 80–1, bold emphasis added)

Since, as we have already remarked, ‘good’ is a ‘supervenient’ or ‘consequential’ epithet, one may always legitimately be asked when one has called something a good something, ‘What is good about it?’ Now to answer this question is to give the properties **in virtue of which** we call it good. Thus, if I have said, ‘That is a good motor-car’ and someone asks ‘Why? What is good about it?’ and I reply ‘Its high speed combined with its stability on the road’, I indicate that I call it good **in virtue of** its having these properties or virtues. Now to do this is *eo ipso* to say something about other motor-cars which have these properties. If any motor-car whatever had these properties, I should have, if I were not to be inconsistent, to agree that it was, *pro tanto*, a good motor-car. (Hare 1952, p. 131, bold emphasis added)

In both of these passages we find the idea that supervenient properties necessarily covary with certain other properties: no difference in the first set of properties without a difference in the second set of properties. However, that familiar way of understanding supervenience is combined with another idea, namely, that the supervenient properties *hold in virtue of* certain other properties.⁶ Indeed, in these two passages it is difficult to tell which of these two ideas—(a) that

⁵ I say ‘first appearance in print’ because Hare (1984, p. 1) claims the term was already being used that way in 1940s Oxford, and because the same idea appears without the label ‘supervenience’ in earlier works by Sidgwick (1907, pp. 209, 379), Moore (1922, p. 261), and Ross (1930, pp. 109, 120, 122–3), among others.

⁶ It was Jonas Olson who first pointed out this feature of Hare’s text to me. McLaughlin (1995, pp. 51–2, n. 8) makes a similar observation.

supervenient properties necessarily covary with other properties, and (b) that supervenient properties are always grounded in other properties—is primary, or whether Hare in fact intends both ideas to be definitive of supervenient properties (so that supervenient properties are always grounded in certain other properties with which they necessarily covary). Overall, the textual evidence suggests that Hare was not clear in his mind whether he meant supervenient properties to be defined as properties that necessarily covary with other properties, or as properties that hold in virtue of other properties, or both.⁷

Hare's use of the term 'supervenience' did not catch on until Donald Davidson put it to use in these sentences from his 1970 article 'Mental Events':

Although [anomalous monism] denies there are psychophysical laws, it is consistent with the view that mental characteristics are in some sense *dependent, or supervenient*, on physical characteristics. Such *supervenience* might be taken to mean that there cannot be two events alike in all physical respects but differing in some mental respect, or that an object cannot alter in some mental respect without altering in some physical respect. (Davidson 1970, p. 88, emphasis added)

This passage led to two trends. First, it became standard to *define* supervenience as a relation of necessary covariation. Second, often it was thought that this covariation relation *just is* the grounding/dependence relation. (Note Davidson's use of the 'or' of identity in the first italicized portion of the quotation.)

Now, as I said, an important theme in recent work on grounding has been to insist that this second trend is a mistake—to insist that the supervenience relation (which I will understand, from this point on, purely as a relation of necessary covariation) and the grounding relation are distinct from one another, and more generally to insist that grounding cannot be defined in terms of supervenience. We can extract from the recent grounding literature two main forms of argument for these claims. The first—call it *the argument from formal structure*—is not terribly convincing.⁸ It goes as follows: 'We know the grounding relation is not the supervenience relation because they

⁷ We find a similar commingling of claims about dependence with claims about necessary covariation in Sidgwick (1907, p. 209), Moore (1922, pp. 261–2), and Ross (1930, pp. 109 and 120–3).

⁸ Versions of this argument are offered by Schaffer (2009, p. 364), McLaughlin and Bennett (2011, §3.5), Raven (2012, p. 690; 2013, p. 194), Leuenberger (2014a, p. 228), and Koslicki (2015, p. 308).

have different formal properties. Grounding is irreflexive and asymmetric, whereas supervenience is reflexive and non-asymmetric'. This argument is too quick. At most it is a way of blocking the proposal *that grounding is supervenience*. However, the argument is powerless against the proposal *that grounding is one-way supervenience* (where X one-way supervenes on Y if and only if X supervenes on Y but not vice versa), since one-way supervenience is both asymmetric and irreflexive.

The second form of argument in the recent grounding literature—call it *the argument from fineness of grain*—is more compelling. The central idea is this: the grounding relation can draw distinctions between necessarily co-obtaining facts and between necessarily coextensive properties, but the supervenience relation cannot. This disparity leads to a variety of counterexamples to the proposal that grounding is supervenience (as well as to the proposal that grounding is one-way supervenience). Some of these counterexamples involve two necessarily co-obtaining facts, F_1 and F_2 , which are plausibly held to bear a grounding relation in one direction but not the other; this is problematic, because if F_1 supervenes on F_2 , then F_2 also supervenes on F_1 . For example, as Fine has famously emphasized, the fact that the set {Socrates} exists is presumably grounded in the fact that the individual Socrates exists, and not vice versa. However, the fact that {Socrates} exists and the fact that Socrates exists supervene on one another: no difference with respect to either fact without a difference with respect to the other. A second sort of counterexample involves a fact, F , and two necessarily co-obtaining sets of facts, Γ_1 and Γ_2 , such that it is plausible that F obtains in virtue of Γ_1 but not plausible that F obtains in virtue of Γ_2 ; this is problematic, because if F supervenes on Γ_1 , then F also supervenes on Γ_2 . For example, as Mark Greenberg (2004, p. 159) and Rosen (2010, pp. 113–4) have emphasized, the debate over legal positivism can be interpreted as a debate over whether the legal facts are wholly grounded in the social facts, or whether they are grounded in the social facts plus the moral facts. But if the basic moral facts are necessary, then a given legal fact will supervene on the social facts if and only if that legal fact supervenes on the social facts plus the basic moral facts. So although we can understand this debate in terms of grounding, we cannot understand it in terms of supervenience.

According to the standard narrative, these two forms of argument are innovations due to Fine, Rosen, Schaffer, and the other early contributors to the twenty-first century grounding literature. But—and

here we reach the second way in which I think that narrative is inaccurate—a number of authors had already offered these exact arguments against identifying supervenience and grounding in the 1980s and 1990s, as well as a host of other arguments not as often cited. For instance, Jonathan Dancy's 'On Moral Properties' (published in *Mind* in 1981) is mostly known these days as the first appearance of the view he eventually dubbed 'moral particularism', but that article is primarily devoted to arguing that supervenience and grounding are distinct relations. Another example is Michael DePaul's 'Supervenience and Moral Dependence' (1987), which features versions of *both* the argument from fineness of grain *and* the argument from formal structure. And similar objections to identifying grounding/dependence with supervenience were offered around the same time by a variety of other authors (Lombard 1986, §8.3; Grimes 1988; Kim 1990, §4; Kim 1993, §3; McLaughlin 1995, §1; Savellos and Yalçin 1995a, §6; Garrett 1997).

Thus, on my retelling of the standard narrative, there was only a short period during which supervenience-as-necessary-covariation and grounding were kept cleanly separated from each other and the former preferred over the latter. Not only was 'supervenient property' originally introduced in its distinctively philosophical sense in a way that made it ambiguous between 'property that necessarily covaries with some other set of properties' and 'property that is always possessed in virtue of some other property or properties' before philosophers' practices shifted in the 1970s and the first of these meanings became primary (this was my first point of disagreement with the standard narrative), but moreover all the standard arguments against taking supervenience to be a form of dependence were well known to those working on these issues by the early 1990s (this was my second point of disagreement with the standard narrative). Still, this way of telling the entwined history of grounding and supervenience might seem to share one feature with the standard narrative: it might seem to situate the recent wave of enthusiasm for grounding *as a return*, albeit a return to the mid-twentieth century, instead of a return to antiquity. But talk of 'a return' suggests that grounding had temporarily disappeared from the scene. Perhaps it had in metaphysics. However—and this constitutes my third point of disagreement with the standard narrative—there is one branch of philosophy where the grounding/in-virtue-of/non-causal-'because' relation most certainly never disappeared, namely, moral philosophy.

3. Appeals to grounding in normative inquiry

I now want to argue that there are a number of central debates in moral philosophy—and in normative inquiry more generally—which it is both natural and proper to formulate in terms of a metaphysical grounding relation.

Let us start with so-called ‘first-order’ or ‘normative’ ethics, and with the debate that has dominated that field for the past century or so: the dispute between consequentialists and their opponents. The old way of formulating this debate was to ask ‘Is the right prior to the good, or the good prior to the right?’ More recently, that snappy formulation has given way to a more nuanced one, now that it is generally recognized that even non-consequentialists can hold the good to be prior to the right, as long as they endorse a distinctively non-consequentialist account of the nature of value and how we should respond to it. So now the central question has become ‘Is it the case that (a) the good is prior to the right, and (b) all good is to-be-promoted?’ with non-consequentialists being free to deny (a), (b), or both.⁹ Note, though, that even this more complicated way of characterizing the debate appeals to a notion of priority.

But what exactly is the variety of priority at issue here? When a consequentialist philosopher asserts ‘The good is prior to the right’, and when some (but not all) of her opponents deny this, what exactly is being asserted and denied?

There are a number of proposals we can set aside rather quickly. The consequentialism debate, at least as it exists today, is clearly not a debate over *semantic* or *conceptual priority*. Although G. E. Moore insisted in *Principia Ethica* (1903) that maximizing act-consequentialism is an analytic truth, few philosophers since then have thought we can determine the truth of consequentialism merely by considering the meanings of our moral terms, and even Moore himself changed his mind by the time he wrote *Ethics* (1912). The idea that maximizing act-consequentialism might be a conceptual truth is equally implausible.¹⁰ Can we really believe that non-consequentialists—and, for that matter,

⁹ See Berker (2013a, §2) for a defence of this way of understanding the central issue dividing consequentialists and their opponents. (And see pp. 382–3 of that article if you are wondering why I do not refer to consequentialists’ opponents as ‘deontologists’.)

¹⁰ Although some philosophers treat ‘analytic truth’ and ‘conceptual truth’ as synonyms, these terms have different meanings: ‘analytic truth’ refers to a truth that holds in virtue of the meaning of words, ‘conceptual truth’ to a truth that holds in virtue of the nature and composition of concepts.

consequentialists of a non-maximizing or non-act persuasion—are conceptually confused when they insist that maximizing act-consequentialism is false? Surely consequentialists disagree with their opponents—and with each other—over *substantive* matters, not over *linguistic* or *conceptual* matters.

It is also clear that ‘prior’ in ‘Is the good prior to the right?’ does not refer to a form of *epistemic priority*. Normative ethics is not moral epistemology, and consequentialists are free to accept an account of the order in which we come to know moral truths on which it sometimes is the case that our knowledge of the good is parasitic on our knowledge of the right. Nor does ‘prior’ in this debate refer to a form of *causal dependence*. It is widely believed that evaluative properties (such as *being good*) and deontic properties (such as *being right*) do not have causal powers. And even if such properties *do* have causal powers, it would be odd if making sense of the consequentialism debate required us to take such a controversial stand on that particular issue.

A more plausible suggestion is that the sort of priority at issue in debates over consequentialism can be understood in terms of *supervenience*. However, a variant of DePaul’s (1987, pp. 433–4) version of the argument from fineness of grain shows that this suggestion cannot be correct. Consider the relation between the properties *being right* and *being optimific* (where, by definition, an action is optimific if and only if it produces at least as much overall good as any alternative). If maximizing act-consequentialism is the correct moral theory, then:

(Op) Necessarily, an action is right if and only if it is optimific.

It follows that *being right* supervenes on *being optimific*, and vice versa. But maximizing act-consequentialists will presumably want to say that the fact that an action is optimific is prior to the fact that it is right, but not vice versa. So the notion of priority in this dispute cannot be a matter of supervenience.

Similar reasoning shows that the consequentialism debate is not about *counterfactual dependence* or about *logical entailment*. We cannot construe the maximizing act-consequentialist’s claim that being optimific is prior to being right, but not vice versa, as the claim that if an action were optimific, then it would be right, but not vice versa. According to standard accounts of the truth-conditions for subjunctive/counterfactual conditionals, (Op) entails both <If an action were optimific, it would be right> and <If an action were right,

it would be *optimific*>.¹¹ Of course non-standard accounts are available, but, as with the casual-dependence proposal, it would be surprising if making sense of the debate between consequentialists and their opponents *required* us to adopt non-standard truth conditions for subjunctive conditionals. Similarly, we cannot construe the maximizing act-consequentialist's priority thesis as the claim that <Action A is *optimific*> entails <A is right>, but not vice versa. On some accounts of logical entailment, if <*p*> necessitates <*q*>, then <*p*> entails <*q*>. It follows from such accounts that if (Op) is true, then <A is *optimific*> both entails and is entailed by <A is right>. Other accounts of logical entailment deny that necessitation is sufficient for entailment, perhaps on the grounds that <There's water in that cup> does not entail <There's H₂O in that cup>, and <Carol is Henry's mother> does not entail <Carol is female>.¹² But on almost all accounts of this latter sort, it will—given (Op)—neither be the case that <A is *optimific*> entails <A is right> nor that <A is right> entails <A is *optimific*>. So either way, we fail to have an entailment in one direction but not the other.

Perhaps, then, we should interpret the sort of priority claim being made by consequentialists as amounting to a claim about *identity*; perhaps, for example, we should understand the maximizing act-consequentialist's distinctive priority thesis as consisting in the claim that the property *being right* is identical to the property *being optimific*, and hence the fact [Action A is right] is identical to the fact [A is *optimific*].¹³ But this proposal is not a way of *interpreting* the maximizing act-consequentialist's claim that the latter of these two facts is prior to the former; rather, it involves *denying* that priority claim, since no fact can be prior to itself. As such, this proposal does violence to our usual way of understanding consequentialism. (Consequentialism, as we usually understand it, does not answer the question 'Is the right prior to the good, or the good prior to the right?' with the retort 'Neither: they're identical'.) Moreover, even if this suggestion *were* a charitable way of construing the relationship being put forward by maximizing act-consequentialists between [A is right] and [A is *optimific*], it would not allow us to sidestep the issue of how to understand the priority relation being invoked in debates over consequentialism. Presumably maximizing act-consequentialists hold that there are various facts about the goodness of *specific* actual and

¹¹ Throughout, I use '<*p*>' to denote the proposition that *p*.

¹² See Beall and Restall (2013, §1).

¹³ Throughout, I use '[*p*]' to denote the fact that *p*.

possible outcomes that are prior to the *general* evaluative fact [A is optimific]. So even if [A is right] is identical to [A is optimific], we can still ask about the nature of the priority relation that holds between that general evaluative fact and the more specific evaluative facts about the goodness of each outcome. And at this point we cannot invoke the identity relation once again, since one fact cannot be identical to a plurality of facts.

Where does this leave us? What we are looking for is not a *semantic*, *conceptual*, or *epistemic* notion of priority, but rather a *metaphysical* notion, in the thin sense of concerning how things are, not our knowledge of those things or our words or concepts for them. Causal dependence, supervenience, counterfactual dependence, identity, and (arguably) logical entailment all count as metaphysical relations, in this thin sense, but they are the wrong tools for the job. A far better proposal—and a much more natural suggestion, I might add—is that the type of priority at issue here is *grounding*. On this proposal, consequentialists insist that facts about rightness *obtain in virtue of* certain facts about goodness, that the latter facts are what *make it the case* that the former facts obtain, that it is *because of* the relevant facts about goodness that the corresponding facts about rightness hold. These claims just roll off the tongue, and for good reason. Grounding is what we are after.

I do not intend my proposal here to be controversial; in fact, I think this is the default way of understanding the notion of priority at stake when we ask ‘Is the good prior to the right?’ It has been standard for a while now to insist that consequentialism provides an account of an action’s *right-making characteristics*.¹⁴ All I am suggesting is that we take this ‘making’-talk at face value and see it as picking out the grounding/in-virtue-of relation. Similarly, if a maximizing act-consequentialist were to formulate her central thesis as:

(Op*) Necessarily, an action is right if and only if, and because, it is optimific

instead of

(Op) Necessarily, an action is right if and only if it is optimific

I don’t think anyone would look askance at her for including the ‘and because’-qualifier. Indeed, when consequentialists drop that qualifier and write (Op) rather than (Op*), I think it is customary to take the ‘and because’-qualifier as understood.

¹⁴ The locus classicus for this view is Bales (1971).

I have just been emphasizing the way in which consequentialism should be interpreted as a view that makes certain distinctive claims about the grounds of rightness (and, in turn, about the grounds of goodness). The same is true of consequentialism's traditional opponents: their positive positions are also best interpreted as consisting in various claims about the grounds of rightness, goodness, and whatever other normative notions are under their purvey. For example, one alternative to consequentialism is W. D. Ross' theory of *prima facie* duties. According to Ross, (i) there are a small number of distinctive sorts of properties (such as *being a breaking of a promise* or *contributing toward the improvement of one's own character*) in virtue of which an act is either *prima facie* right or *prima facie* wrong, (ii) the degree of *prima facie* rightness or *prima facie* wrongness grounded in those properties depends on all the facts of the case at hand in an uncodifiable manner, and (iii) an act is either right (*sans phrase*) or wrong (*sans phrase*) in virtue of the overall balance of *prima facie* rightness and *prima facie* wrongness possessed by that act in comparison to its alternatives. My summary here of Ross' view has made free use of the phrases 'in virtue of' and 'grounded', but this is no anachronistic re-reading on my part. Ross first presents his theory in a chapter titled 'What *Makes* Right Acts Right?' (Ross 1930, ch. 2, emphasis added), and his discussion is shot through with many of the traditional ways of picking out the grounding relation, including the expressions 'makes' (pp. 16, 24, 33), 'because' (pp. 18, 44, 46, 47), 'in [*or*: by] virtue of' (pp. 19, 28, 29, 30, 32, 33, 43), 'depends' (pp. 33, 43, 47), 'ground' (pp. 37, 46, 47), and 'due to' (p. 46). It would be a gross misreading of Ross to take him to be formulating his theory using a notion other than grounding.

I believe something similar is true of most other non-consequentialist moral theories. When such theories are in the business of seeking exceptionless principles, they should be understood not merely as proposing biconditionals of the form

(Bi) Necessarily, an action is right if and only if _____

but rather as offering accounts of the *grounds* of moral notions, like so:

(Bi*) Necessarily, an action is right if and only if, and because, _____.

Similarly, when non-consequentialist moral philosophers focus on particular verdicts about particular scenarios, they should be understood not merely as seeking to establish a bald claim of the form

(Ver) Action A is right in circumstances C

but rather as seeking to understand *why* that verdict holds, so that we have

(Ver*) Action A is right in circumstances C because ____.

Again, I don't think I am saying anything controversial here. It is almost a truism that we want our moral theories not merely to be extensionally adequate, but moreover to be properly explanatory.

Thus I see first-order moral philosophy as fundamentally in the business of proposing (and assessing, and establishing) various grounding claims. Moreover, I think the same is true of most other first-order investigations of normative notions. For example, consider the widely popular 'reasons first' approach to normativity, according to which reasons are the fundamental particles of the normative realm, and all other normative facts, properties, and relations can be analysed or accounted for in terms of the reason relation. Two theses are being put forward here: first, that reasons are not analysable or accountable in other terms (as a catchphrase: 'Reasons are first') and, second, that every other normative notion can be analysed or accounted for in terms of reasons (as a slightly-less-catchy phrase: 'Reasons are not tied for first'). When interpreting either of these theses, I think we do best to understand the relevant notion of analysis or accounting-for in terms of the grounding relation, for reasons very similar to the ones we considered in the case of consequentialism.

Consider the second thesis first. When reasons-firsters say that all evaluative and deontic facts can be analysed or accounted for in terms of facts about reasons, they are not—or, at least, not only—making a semantic or conceptual claim, or a claim about epistemic or causal dependence, or a claim about supervenience, counterfactual dependence, or logical entailment. Rather, they are claiming that all evaluative and deontic facts are *grounded in* facts about reasons, that it is *in virtue of* the facts about reasons that these other normative facts obtain. What makes it the case that I ought to perform such-and-such action in such-and-such circumstances? A reasons-firster will say: the various reasons for and against that action and its alternatives. What makes it the case that I ought to believe such-and-such proposition in such-and-such situation? A reasons-firster will reply: the various reasons for and against my holding a belief in that proposition. In other words, the reasons-firsters' second thesis, as captured in the slogan 'Reasons are not tied for first', is most naturally expressed in terms of grounding. Similarly, I think we also do best to interpret the reason-firsters' first thesis, as captured in the slogan 'Reasons are

first', in terms of the grounding relation. The sense in which it is being proposed that nothing comes before reasons is an *explanatory* sense: their central claim is that it is not *because of* any facts about other normative categories that facts about reasons obtain.

This way of characterizing the reasons-first program allows us to easily explain an otherwise puzzling aspect of that program. There is in fact a divide among reasons-firsters: although some of them think that (at least some) facts about reasons are ungrounded, other self-professed reason-firsters think that certain natural facts always serve to explain why a given consideration counts as a reason in a given context. But if natural facts can come before facts about reasons, in what sense are reasons first? The answer is that, when it comes to the reason-firsters' first thesis, we need to distinguish between a stronger and weaker way of reading that thesis, corresponding to a stronger and weaker way of reading the slogan 'Reasons are first', as follows:

'Reasons are first, full stop': All basic facts-about-reasons are ungrounded.¹⁵

'Reasons are normatively first': All basic facts-about-reasons are not grounded (even partly) in any normative facts (although they may well be grounded in certain non-normative facts).

Reasons-firsters who are non-naturalists (Parfit 2011, Scanlon 2014) tend to embrace the first way of interpreting the slogan 'Reasons are first', whereas those who are naturalists (Schroeder 2014, Street 2006) tend to embrace the second.

It must be conceded that here I am going against how reason-firsters sometimes characterize their own program. I have been suggesting that we do best to understand that program in terms of the grounding/in-virtue-of/non-casual-'because' relation. Although reasons-firsters occasionally frame their program using the idiom of grounding and talk of explanation, much more frequently reasons-firsters characterize their view in terms of *reduction*. For example, Parfit rarely formulates his non-naturalist view about the nature of reasons in terms of grounding, but he repeatedly says that, on his view, facts

¹⁵ By 'basic fact-about-reasons' I mean a fact-about-reasons that is not itself grounded in any facts-about-reasons. The 'basic'-qualifier is needed here because almost all reasons-firsters will want to allow that *some* facts-about-reasons obtain in virtue of other facts-about-reasons. For example, it might be in virtue of my having a reason to pursue some end that I have a reason to pursue the indispensable means to that end.

about reasons are irreducibly normative truths.¹⁶ Similarly, here is Scanlon describing the reasons-first view he dubs ‘reasons fundamentalism’:

Truths about reasons are fundamental in the sense that truths about reasons are not **reducible** to or **identifiable** with non-normative truths, such as truths about the natural world of physical objects, causes and effects, nor can they be **explained** in terms of notions of rationality or rational agency that are not themselves claims about reasons. Reasons might be fundamental in the further sense of being the only fundamental elements of the normative domain, other normative notions such as *good* and *ought* being **analyzable** in terms of reasons. (Scanlon 2014, p. 2, bold emphasis added)

A number of potentially distinct notions are mentioned here, including reduction, identity, explanation, and analysis. But most often when Scanlon goes on to discuss the commitments of reasons fundamentalism, he appeals to the idea that truths about reasons are irreducible (or irreducibly normative).

Now the exact relation between reduction and grounding is controversial. On some views, reduction and grounding are one and the same,¹⁷ and if that is so, then my characterization of the reasons-first program in terms of grounding is equivalent to the characterization its practitioners provide in terms of reduction. However, on other views, reduction is distinct from grounding, and if that is so, then it is more in the spirit of the reasons-first program to formulate it in terms of grounding rather than in terms of reduction. The argument for this claim is simple. First, as Rosen (2010, §10) has argued, it is extremely plausible that reduction entails grounding, in the following sense:

(Re) Necessarily, if fact F reduces to set of facts Γ , then F is entirely grounded in Γ .¹⁸

So the only way in which reduction can pull apart from grounding is in a case in which we have grounding without reduction. But in such cases, I think reasons-firsters are more likely to take the presence of grounding, rather than a lack of reduction, to be the issue which is

¹⁶ See Parfit (2011). Although Parfit does not formulate his version of non-naturalism in terms of grounding, the grounding relation does feature prominently in those two books, albeit not under that name. (Parfit prefers the label ‘non-causal making’; see vol. 1, p. 368, and vol. 2, p. 299.)

¹⁷ See, for instance, Ichikawa (2014, p. 185).

¹⁸ Here I assume that facts are the relata of the reduction relation, to fit with reasons-firsters’ talk of one fact or truth being reducible to another.

more relevant to their position. For example, if a philosopher were to claim

- (†) [Agent A has a reason to φ in circumstances C] obtains entirely in virtue of, but is not reducible to, [A ought to ψ in circumstances D]

I think reasons-firsters would view this claim as being in tension with their first thesis. Isn't (†), on its own, enough to block the claim that reasons are first, in the relevant sense? Similarly, if a different philosopher were to claim

- (††) [Agent A ought to φ in circumstances C] obtains entirely in virtue of, but is not reducible to, [A has a reason to φ in C, has no reasons against φ -ing in C, and has no reasons for or against any alternative to φ -ing in C]

I think reasons-firsters are likely to see this claim as offering partial confirmation of their second thesis. Isn't (††), on its own, enough to support the claim that reasons come before oughts, in the relevant sense? In short: if we mark a distinction between reduction and grounding, it is better to formulate the reasons-first program in terms of grounding, and if we don't mark such a distinction, it is harmless to phrase things in terms of grounding.

I have just argued that the very grounding relation being touted by metaphysicians plays a central role in one important debate in moral philosophy—namely, the debate over consequentialism—and also plays a central role in an equally important debate concerning normativity in general—namely, the debate over whether reasons are first. I believe the same is true of most other areas of normative inquiry: each features a number of key debates that turn on the truth of certain grounding claims. Moreover, in many of these cases, framing the relevant debate in terms of grounding is not some innovation we have only recently come to appreciate; rather, most of these debates have been formulated using language such as 'in virtue of', 'because', 'makes the case', and 'depends' from their inception.

4. The threat of grounding pluralism

I have been claiming that appeals to a metaphysical notion of grounding are a crucial component of normative theorizing. If I am right, then philosophers investigating normative matters should welcome the recent upsurge of interest among metaphysicians in the grounding

relation. Moreover, they should view grounding not as some new-fangled invention that can help them with their theory building (or theory destroying), but rather as a tool they have been using all along, albeit not always with full self-consciousness.

In making these claims, I have spoken indiscriminately of ‘the’ grounding relation and acted as if the sort of dependence relation being studied by metaphysicians is the same as that being employed in normative contexts. It turns out, though, that these assumptions of mine are controversial. In particular, Kit Fine—probably the philosopher whose work has had the single largest influence on the burgeoning field of grounding studies—disagrees with these assumptions. According to Fine, there are three distinct grounding relations: *metaphysical grounding*, *normative grounding*, and *natural grounding*.¹⁹ Fine (2012a, p. 37) provides the following examples of each type of grounding:

- [The ball is red and round] is metaphysically grounded in [The ball is red] and [The ball is round].
- [His action was wrong] is normatively grounded in [His action was performed with the sole intention of causing harm].
- [The particle is accelerating] is naturally grounded in [The particle is being acted upon by a positive net force].

Moreover, Fine (2012a, p. 39) denies that ‘each of these explanatory relations [can] be defined in terms of a single generic relation’. But if this is so, then it is not true that the relation being studied by metaphysicians is the same as the one whose importance in normative debates I have been urging. It is also not true that we can argue against the idea that metaphysical grounding is something new by appealing to its ubiquity in normative disciplines over the past few decades.

Thus Fine’s brand of grounding pluralism constitutes an objection to my earlier claims. In what follows, I shall argue that Fine is wrong to hold that grounding is disunified in the way he proposes. In other

¹⁹ Actually, Fine wouldn’t put the matter this way, for two reasons. First, as already mentioned, Fine (2001, p. 16; 2012a, p. 43) believes that grounding is fundamentally an operator, not a relation. Second, Fine prefers to use the mass noun ‘ground’ instead of the mass noun ‘grounding’ to refer to the notion in question (as in ‘relation of ground’, not ‘grounding relation’). Neither of these issues is important for our purposes, so I will continue to ignore them in the main text.

words, I shall argue for grounding monism, the view, roughly, that there is only one grounding relation. But first, I would like to be a bit clearer about what these two positions—grounding monism and grounding pluralism—come to.

So far I have characterized grounding monism and pluralism in terms of the number of grounding relations they countenance: either one (grounding monism) or more than one (grounding pluralism). However, some qualifications are needed here, or else it will turn out that grounding monism is patently false. For instance, it is widely agreed that we need to distinguish between *partial grounding* and *full grounding*. Not only do we want to say that [The ball is red and round] is fully grounded (whether metaphysically or in a single, unified sense) in [The ball is red] and [The ball is round], taken together, but we also want to say that [The ball is red and round] is partially grounded in [The ball is red] by itself. Does this mean that there are at least two grounding relations, and that grounding monism is a non-starter?

No. All it means is that we need to be more careful when formulating our respective forms of monism and pluralism. Here we can take a hint from Fine. Recall that he denied that there is a generic grounding relation in terms of which metaphysical, normative, and natural grounding *can be defined*. Thus the crucial issue is not the mere number of distinct grounding relations that we can list, but rather the number of grounding relations in terms of which all other grounding relations can be defined.

Let us say that grounding relation R_1 is *fundamentally distinct* from grounding relation R_2 if and only if (a) R_1 and R_2 are distinct relations, (b) R_1 cannot be defined in terms of R_2 , (c) R_2 cannot be defined in terms of R_1 , and (d) there is no other grounding relation in terms of which both R_1 and R_2 can be defined. And let us say that grounding relation R is *fundamentally unique* if and only if all other grounding relations can be defined in terms of it. We may then formulate grounding monism and pluralism as follows:

grounding monism: There is a fundamentally unique grounding relation.

grounding pluralism: There are at least two fundamentally distinct grounding relations.

These formulations avoid the worry that distinguishing between partial and full grounding renders grounding monism obviously false. It

is standard to hold that partial grounding can be defined in terms of full grounding, like so (Rosen 2010, p. 115):

(Par) Fact $[p]$ is partially grounded in set of facts $\Delta =_{df}$ for some set of facts Γ , $[p]$ is fully grounded in Γ , and Δ is a subset of Γ .

Since partial grounding can be defined in terms of full grounding, the two grounding relations are not fundamentally distinct, and thus countenancing both does not jeopardize any commitment one might have to grounding monism.²⁰

This way of characterizing grounding monism and pluralism invites the following question: what sense of ‘define’ do I have in mind? My answer: whatever sense in which partial grounding can be defined in terms of full grounding, that is the sense we should use when formulating grounding monism and pluralism. In what follows I simply treat ‘definition’ as a black box into which one can insert one’s favourite definition of definition, as it were.

5. Against moderate grounding pluralism

Fine is a grounding pluralist, but his form of grounding pluralism is relatively *moderate*: he only countenances three fundamentally distinct varieties of grounding, and he does not see his pluralism as licensing scepticism about the significance of grounding as a tool for philosophical theorizing or as a topic for philosophical research. Eventually we shall encounter a more *extreme* form of grounding pluralism, according to which there is no generic grounding relation underlying all others, but rather only a large number of already familiar dependence relations such as the set-membership relation and the determinate–determinable relation, with the result being that we should be sceptical of the idea that there is an exciting new topic here. I intend to argue against both sorts of pluralism, but it will help to start by explaining my argument as it applies to moderate pluralists such as Fine.²¹

²⁰ What if partial grounding cannot be defined in terms of full grounding because sometimes a fact has a partial ground but no full grounds? Well, in that case, if full grounding also cannot be defined in terms of partial grounding, and if both cannot be defined in terms of a third type of grounding, then I think grounding pluralism would be true after all. So really it is not the *mere* distinction between partial and full grounding that should be compatible with grounding monism, but rather that distinction together with the standard way of defining one side of the distinction in terms of the other.

²¹ I lack the space to discuss Fine’s (2012a, pp. 39–40) positive argument for his brand of moderate grounding pluralism. That argument relies on two key assumptions: *grounding necessitarianism* (the view that a full set of grounds necessitate that which they

The basic idea behind my argument is simple. It is standard to assume that there are various logical principles governing the grounding relation, such as a principle of transitivity or the principle that a disjunction is always grounded in at least one of its disjuncts. Some of these principles, when formulated in a pure way so that the same grounding relation appears throughout the principle, hold for each of the grounding relations posited by the pluralist. But what about mixed versions of those principles, in which we formulate them using several different grounding relations in the same principle? If the mixed versions of the logical principles are just as plausible as the pure ones, this gives us excellent reason to think that there is in fact a unity here, not several distinct relations that cannot be defined in terms of each other. Otherwise why would these various distinct relations be logically related to one another in this way?

More specifically, here is how my argumentative strategy works, when applied to Fine's brand of pluralism. Each iteration of the argument involves three steps:

- (i) Find a logical principle which relates several grounding claims to one another and which holds when it is applied exclusively to metaphysical grounding, or exclusively to natural grounding, or exclusively to normative grounding;
- (ii) Argue that the logical principle also holds in mixed cases;
- (iii) Infer that the best explanation of (i) and (ii) is that there is a single generic grounding relation underlying these more specific grounding relations.

There are any number of logical principles for which, I believe, this strategy can be pursued. However, I shall restrict myself to showing how the argument works when applied to two of the most widely accepted logical principles governing grounding, namely, a principle of transitivity and a principle of asymmetry. I focus on these two principles because they are so widely accepted, and because they demonstrate importantly different ways in which my argumentative strategy can work. In what follows I only demonstrate how this strategy

ground) and *modal pluralism* (the view that there are several varieties of necessity, none of which can be defined in terms of the others). However, both of these assumptions are controversial. (On necessitarianism, see Chudnoff 2011, Leuenberger 2014a, and Skiles 2015; on modal pluralism, see Leech 2016.) Moreover, the argumentative strategy I pursue here against grounding pluralism can be adapted to argue against modal pluralism as well.

can be used to unify Fine's notions of metaphysical and normative grounding, since that is the case that most concerns me. It is easy enough to use similar arguments to unite natural grounding with the others as well.

5.1 The Argument from Transitive Links

Let us begin, then, with the argument as applied to transitivity. I call this way of implementing my strategy 'the Argument from Transitive Links'. Let us grant to Fine, for the sake of argument, that there is both a metaphysical and a normative grounding relation. It is extremely plausible that each of these relations is transitive, so that the following principles hold:

(Tran_{met}) If $[p]$ is partially metaphysically grounded in $[q]$, and $[q]$ is partially metaphysically grounded in $[r]$, then $[p]$ is partially metaphysically grounded in $[r]$.

(Tran_{nor}) If $[p]$ is partially normatively grounded in $[q]$, and $[q]$ is partially normatively grounded in $[r]$, then $[p]$ is partially normatively grounded in $[r]$.

For example, if [The ball is red and round, or the ball is orange and oval] is fully (hence partially) metaphysically grounded in [The ball is red and round], and if [The ball is red and round] is partially metaphysically grounded in [The ball is red], then surely [The ball is red and round, or the ball is orange and oval] is partially metaphysically grounded in [The ball is red]. Similarly, if [Action A is right] is fully (hence partially) normatively grounded in [A is optimific], and if [A is optimific] is fully (hence partially) normatively grounded in [A maximizes happiness], then surely [A is right] is normatively grounded (both partially and fully) in [A maximizes happiness].

It is also extremely plausible that the following mixed versions of these principles hold:

(Tran_{met/nor}) If $[p]$ is metaphysically grounded in $[q]$, and $[q]$ is normatively grounded in $[r]$, then $[p]$ is grounded (in some non-rigged-up sense) in $[r]$.

(Tran_{nor/met}) If $[p]$ is normatively grounded in $[q]$, and $[q]$ is metaphysically grounded in $[r]$, then $[p]$ is grounded (in some non-rigged-up sense) in $[r]$.

(Here I drop the 'partially'-qualifiers to reduce clutter; from this point on those qualifiers should be taken as understood, unless I specify otherwise.) It is necessary to include the phrase 'in some non-rigged-

up sense' in these principles because we can always cook up a variety of grounding that would make $(\text{Tran}_{\text{met}/\text{nor}})$ and $(\text{Tran}_{\text{nor}/\text{met}})$ true if that phrase were dropped—by, for instance, defining a (supposed) grounding relation that consists in the transitive closure of the disjunction of metaphysical and normative grounding. But this is a cheap way of ensuring adherence to mixed transitivity principles. By a similar trick, we can make *any* two relations obey a mixed transitivity principle. I think we have a strong intuition that $(\text{Tran}_{\text{met}/\text{nor}})$ and $(\text{Tran}_{\text{nor}/\text{met}})$ are true without our needing to resort to such manoeuvres.

Examples which support these two mixed principles are plentiful. Suppose the moral fact

W = [She acted wrongly in telling him]

obtains normatively in virtue of the natural fact

S = [She could have done something else instead of telling him that would have brought about more overall happiness].

And suppose the disjunctive fact

O = [Either she acted wrongly in telling him, or she acted in a way she believed to be wrong]

obtains metaphysically in virtue of W. Then it is very natural to hold that O also obtains in virtue of S, in some non-rigged-up sense of 'in virtue of'. This offers partial confirmation of $(\text{Tran}_{\text{met}/\text{nor}})$.

Similarly, suppose that W still normatively obtains in virtue of S, and suppose that, in addition, S obtains metaphysically in virtue of

L = [She could have lied instead of telling him, her lying would have brought about 100 overall units of happiness, and her telling him brought about 20 overall units of happiness].

Then it is very natural to hold that W also obtains in virtue of L, in some non-rigged-up sense of 'in virtue of'. This offers partial confirmation of $(\text{Tran}_{\text{nor}/\text{met}})$.

However, if metaphysical and normative grounding were fundamentally distinct grounding relations, as Fine holds, then it would be very puzzling why $(\text{Tran}_{\text{met}/\text{nor}})$ and $(\text{Tran}_{\text{nor}/\text{met}})$ are true. Why on earth are metaphysical and normative grounding logically related to each other in this way, given Fine's conception of their relation (or lack thereof)? Why on earth is it possible to link these two relations together via applications of transitivity and derive additional grounding claims, if the two grounding relations have, at a fundamental level, nothing to do with each other?

Two analogies will help. Sometimes when we say that one city is larger than another, we mean that the first city is *larger in area* than the second, and sometimes we mean that the first city is *larger in population* than the second. Let us use 'larger_{area}' to refer the first of these relations and 'larger_{pop}' to refer to the second. Both of these relations are transitive, but they don't obey mixed transitivity principles analogous to (Tran_{met/nor}) and (Tran_{nor/met}). Dallas is larger_{area} than New York City, and New York City is larger_{pop} than Los Angeles, but it doesn't follow that Dallas is larger, in some sense, than Los Angeles. Why does mixed transitivity fail in this case? Because these two relations are fundamentally distinct: definitionally, they have nothing to do with one another. Now contrast that case with another. *Being a matrilineal descendant of* and *being a patrilineal descendant of* are two transitive relations for which analogues of (Tran_{met/nor}) and (Tran_{nor/met}) do hold. Why? Because each of them can be defined in terms of *being a child of* and either *being female* or *being male* in such a way that the relevant mixed transitivity principles follow.

The case of larger_{area} vs. larger_{pop} is a typical example of what happens when we consider mixed transitivity principles for two fundamentally distinct transitive relations of a given sort. Similarly, the case of matrilineal descent vs. patrilineal descent is a typical example of what happens when we consider mixed transitivity principles for two fundamentally related transitive relations of a given sort. If metaphysical and normative grounding really were fundamentally distinct grounding relations, as Fine suggests, then we would expect mixed transitivity principles involving metaphysical and normative grounding to be as implausible as the analogous mixed transitivity principles involving the two larger-than relations. But what we find is the opposite: the mixed transitivity principles for metaphysical and normative grounding are as plausible as they are in the case of the two descent relations. All of which gives us excellent—though, of course, defeasible—evidence that metaphysical and normative grounding are fundamentally linked to one another in some way.²²

²² Moreover, the first of these analogies gives us extra reason to call into question the idea that we can account for (Tran_{met/nor}) and (Tran_{nor/met}) through the transitive-closure gambit. The transitive closure of the disjunction of the larger-in-area-than and larger-in-population-than relations is not itself a larger-than relation. (As an anonymous referee helpfully observed, not only does such a transitive closure intuitively not count as a larger-than relation, but moreover it fails to be either asymmetric or irreflexive.) So, if metaphysical and normative grounding really have as little to do with one another as the larger-in-area-than and larger-in-population-than relations do, then the transitive closure of the disjunction of the metaphysical and normative grounding relations should not itself count as a grounding relation.

It might appear that in offering this argument, I have relied on an assumption that at least some authors in the grounding literature dispute, namely, that grounding is transitive. Presumably those who deny the transitivity of grounding will deny $(\text{Tran}_{\text{met}})$, $(\text{Tran}_{\text{nor}})$, $(\text{Tran}_{\text{met/nor}})$, and $(\text{Tran}_{\text{nor/met}})$ as well. Does the force of my argument thereby dissipate?

It does not. For what matters to the argument are the overall patterns evinced by the metaphysical and normative grounding relations and the way those two patterns interact so as to entail the presence of additional grounding relations. This pattern of interaction can still occur even if transitivity does not hold in general, for usually those who deny transitivity still admit that *for the most part* grounding is transitive. For instance, Schaffer (2012) has argued that the following is a counterexample to the transitivity of grounding. Imagine a metal ball that, aside from one minor dent, is a perfect sphere. Let 'B' refer to the ball and 'S' to the ball's maximally determinate shape. According to Schaffer, [B has the particular dent it does] partially grounds [B has shape S], and [B has shape S] partially grounds [B is more-or-less spherical], even though [B has the particular dent it does] does *not* partially ground [B is more-or-less spherical]. Now, as it turns out, I don't think Schaffer's example here is convincing.²³ But even if we concede to Schaffer his counterexample, the Argument from Transitive Links for grounding monism is not thereby imperilled. For although Schaffer's example might perhaps show that transitivity does not hold *in every possible situation*, it does nothing to undermine the many individual cases in which it is plausible that instances of $(\text{Tran}_{\text{met/nor}})$ and $(\text{Tran}_{\text{nor/met}})$ hold. And that is all we need to run the Argument from Transitive Links. In particular, Schaffer's example does not weaken our conviction that if [She could have done something else instead of telling him that would have brought about more overall happiness] normatively grounds [She acted wrongly in telling him], which in turn metaphysically grounds [Either she acted wrongly in telling him, or she acted in a way she believed to be wrong], then there *must* be some non-rigged sense in which the first of these facts grounds the third. Moreover, it would be utterly mysterious why this would be so if normative and metaphysical grounding were fundamentally distinct grounding relations. In short, all we need to run the Argument from Transitive Links are the particular instances in which our mixed transitivity principles are true, not those principles in their

²³ See Litland (2013) and Raven (2013).

full generality. This is enough to give us excellent reason to believe that there must be some sort of fundamental link between metaphysical and normative grounding.

But if such a connection between metaphysical and normative grounding exists, what does it look like? One possibility—call it *the identity proposal*—is that there is just a single generic grounding relation, and the so-called ‘metaphysical’ and ‘normative’ grounding relations are identical to this relation. Another possibility—call it *the suppression proposal*—is that so-called ‘metaphysical’ grounding is just the generic grounding relation, and normative grounding can be defined in terms of that relation as follows:

(Nor) $[p]$ is (fully) normatively grounded in $\Delta =_{df}$ there exists a non-empty set, Γ , of fundamental normative truths such that $[p]$ is (fully) generically grounded in $\Delta \cup \Gamma$.

In short: normative grounding is metaphysical grounding in which the appeal to fundamental normative truths has been suppressed. Now personally I prefer the first of these proposals, for the following reason. As already mentioned, I think a typical fundamental normative truth is of the form

(Op*) Necessarily, an action is right if and only if, and (fully) because, it is optimific

rather than of the form

(Op) Necessarily, an action is right if and only if it is optimific.²⁴

However, if we want to say that [Action A is right] is fully normatively grounded in [A is optimific] due to the fact that [A is right] is fully generically grounded in (Op*) and [A is optimific], taken together, we face a dilemma. What variety of grounding does the ‘because’ in (Op*) pick out? If it picks out grounding in the generic sense, then (Op*) is not needed in order to fully generically ground [A is right]; [A is optimific] on its own is enough. But if the ‘because’ in (Op*)—and in the other fundamental normative truths—picks out normative grounding, then our definition of normative grounding becomes objectionably circular, since the normative grounding relation has been defined in terms of something that itself involves a normative grounding relation.

²⁴ Or, at least, if the fundamental normative truths are exceptionless general principles, then that is their form. A similar result follows if the fundamental normative truths take the form of *ceteris paribus* laws or of particular normative verdicts, and also follows if there are no normative truths that qualify as fundamental, since in that case (Nor) is a non-starter.

Regardless, though, of whether we prefer the first way I have mentioned of linking metaphysical and normative grounding, or the second way, or some other way all together, I think the plausibility of (numerous instances of) our mixed transitivity principles gives us good reason to think that some linkage is needed. Additional evidence is provided by consideration of mixed versions of an asymmetry constraint on grounding.

5.2 The Argument from Asymmetric Dovetailing

Grounding seems to be an asymmetric relation of dependence. So if we distinguish between metaphysical and normative grounding, as Fine does, then presumably each of these relations will be governed by a pure asymmetry principle, like so:

(Asym_{met}) If $[p]$ is metaphysically grounded in $[q]$, then $[q]$ is not metaphysically grounded in $[p]$.

(Asym_{nor}) If $[p]$ is normatively grounded in $[q]$, then $[q]$ is not normatively grounded in $[p]$.

However, as with transitivity, mixed versions of these principles are just as plausible as the pure versions. In particular, we are very strongly inclined to hold that

(Asym_{met/nor}) If $[p]$ is metaphysically grounded in $[q]$, then $[q]$ is not normatively grounded in $[p]$.²⁵

But if metaphysical and normative grounding really were fundamentally distinct grounding relations, it would be utterly mysterious why these two relations would ‘get out of each other’s way’ in this manner.

Our two analogies from before help here as well. The relations *being larger_{area} than* and *being larger_{pop} than* are both asymmetric. However, it is undeniable that here a mixed asymmetry principle is false: Dallas is larger_{area} than New York City, but New York City is larger_{pop} than Dallas. Thus in a typical case in which we have two fundamentally distinct relations of the same broad type, the asymmetry of each relation fails to manifest in a true mixed asymmetry principle. The opposite happens, however, in the other case we considered. If we assume that time travel is impossible (or, at the very least, that time travellers can’t be their own ancestors), then *being a matrilineal descendant of* and *being a patrilineal descendant of* are both asymmetric relations. However, in this case a mixed asymmetry principle is

²⁵ In this case there is no need to consider two mixed principles, since by contraposition they are equivalent to one another.

extremely plausible. Why? Because if *a* is a matrilineal descendant of *b* while *b* is a patrilineal descendant of *a*, it follows—given the way in which matrilineal descent, patrilineal descent, and descent *sans phrase* can all be defined in terms of the relation *being a child of* together with other material—that *a* is her own descendant, which contradicts our assumption that it is not possible to be one's own ancestor. In short, it is because the matrilineal-descent and patrilineal-descent relations are not fundamentally distinct kinship relations that a mixed asymmetry principle is true. Mixed asymmetry is strong evidence that two relations of a given type can be definitionally linked.

As before, the argument I am offering here has force even for those who deny that grounding is always asymmetric. One such denier is Elizabeth Barnes (MS), who provides examples of a number of contemporary metaphysical systems which, she argues, are plausibly interpreted as featuring pairs of entities that metaphysically depend on each other.²⁶ However, for all these systems, even though asymmetry fails in general, it holds within certain domains. More specifically, although, in each system, there are certain privileged entities that can mutually ground each other, the grounding relations between privileged and non-privileged entities, as well as among the non-privileged entities themselves, are always asymmetric. But then we can run my argument by restricting its scope to the non-privileged entities for which asymmetry holds in general. When it comes to those entities, a pure version of asymmetry holds for both metaphysical and normative grounding, and presumably a mixed version of asymmetry holds as well. But why would this be so, if metaphysical and normative grounding were unrelated to each other? Why would metaphysical and normative grounding 'get out of each other's way' within this restricted region, if Fine-style grounding pluralism were true? Even if grounding is not universally asymmetric, my argument still has sway.

I call this application of my argumentative strategy 'the Argument from Asymmetric Dovetailing' because the overall picture we get is one in which the pattern of metaphysical grounding relations between facts neatly dovetails with the pattern of normative grounding relations between facts: overlaying the two patterns on one another does not result in any cases in which [*p*] grounds [*q*] in one of these two

²⁶ Actually, Barnes only officially argues that her examples feature instances of mutual *ontological dependence*, not that they feature instances of mutual *grounding* (she takes these notions to be distinct), but most of her examples, if they do indeed involve the former, can also be interpreted as involving the latter.

senses and $[q]$ grounds $[p]$ in the other. In the case of the Argument from Transitive Links, we saw a somewhat different phenomenon: instead of the metaphysical and normative grounding relations meshing with one another in an all-too-convenient manner, we saw that a given instance of a metaphysical grounding relation and a given instance of a normative grounding relation can entail the existence of an additional instance of a grounding relation of some sort. So (to anthropomorphize a bit) in the case of transitivity, it is as if the two ostensibly unrelated grounding relations interact with one another to produce yet more grounding relations, whereas in the case of asymmetry, it is as if the two ostensibly unrelated grounding relations manage to steer clear of each other as they go about their business. What miraculous behaviour! Rather than holding that a pre-established harmony, twice over, has led metaphysical and normative grounding to function in this way, I think we do better to reject Fine's pluralism about these two relations.

It is worth pausing here to clarify the nature of my argument. I am offering an *abductive argument* from the existence of mixed asymmetry and transitivity principles to the unity of metaphysical and normative grounding. I am *not* claiming that if two relations are governed by mixed asymmetry and transitivity principles, then this *deductively entails* that the two relations are fundamentally connected (either by being the same relation, or by being definitionally linked to one another in some way). There are cases in which either a mixed asymmetry principle or a mixed transitivity principle holds between two relations, but the best explanation of why this is so appeals to something other than a fundamental connection between the two relations. Consider, for instance, the relations *being the son of* and *being the nose of*.²⁷ These two asymmetric relations obey the following mixed asymmetry principle:

(Asym_{nose/son}) If x is the nose of y , then y is not the son of x .

However, in this particular case we can explain why mixed asymmetry holds merely by appealing to facts about the relata of our two relations: the left-hand side of the is-a-nose-of relation must be a body part, whereas the right-hand side of the is-a-son-of relation cannot be a body part, so if x bears the first of these relations to y , it follows that y does not bear the second to x . But no such explanation can be offered in the case of (Asym_{met/nor}). Perhaps it is true that only

²⁷ I owe this example to John Mackay.

normative facts can stand in the is-normatively-grounded-in relation to some other fact or facts. However, since it is undoubtedly the case that normative facts can stand in metaphysical grounding relations to other normative facts,²⁸ we cannot derive $(Asym_{met/nor})$ from this restriction on the relata of the normative grounding relation, in the way in which we can derive $(Asym_{nose/son})$ from restrictions on the relata of its constituent relations. And, I claim, no other explanation of $(Asym_{met/nor})$ is in the offing, short of positing a fundamental link between metaphysical and normative grounding.

Finally, although I have presented the Arguments from Transitive Links and from Asymmetric Dovetailing as if they constitute separate arguments that serve as independent sources of abductive evidence for grounding monism, these two arguments are at their strongest when they are combined into a single abductive argument that is stronger than the sum of its parts. Combining the arguments increases their strength because some explanations of mixed transitivity commit us to denying mixed asymmetry, and some explanations of mixed asymmetry commit us to denying mixed transitivity. So finding a plausible explanation of all three of the following

- $(Tran_{met/nor})$ If $[p]$ is metaphysically grounded in $[q]$, and $[q]$ is normatively grounded in $[r]$, then $[p]$ is grounded (in some non-rigged-up sense) in $[r]$;
- $(Tran_{nor/met})$ If $[p]$ is normatively grounded in $[q]$, and $[q]$ is metaphysically grounded in $[r]$, then $[p]$ is grounded (in some non-rigged-up sense) in $[r]$;
- $(Asym_{met/nor})$ If $[p]$ is metaphysically grounded in $[q]$, then $[q]$ is not normatively grounded in $[p]$

is more difficult than finding an explanation of the first two on their own and a separate explanation of the third. In particular, most attempts to explain $(Asym_{met/nor})$ by appealing to restrictions on the relata of the metaphysical and normative grounding relations are incompatible with taking $(Tran_{met/nor})$ and $(Tran_{nor/met})$ to be non-vacuously true (that is, to be true, but not true because their antecedents are never satisfied). Presumably such attempts would involve arguing either that (i) the same type of fact cannot be both on the left-hand side of the is-metaphysically-grounded-in relation and the right-hand side of the is-normatively-grounded-in relation or that (ii) the same

²⁸ For instance, [He did something wrong last week] might be metaphysically grounded in [He hit his brother last Tuesday, and that was wrong].

type of fact cannot be both on the right-hand side of the is-metaphysically-grounded-in relation and the left-hand side of the is-normatively-grounded-in relation. But notice that the non-vacuous truth of $(\text{Tran}_{\text{met/nor}})$ entails the falsity of (ii), and the non-vacuous truth of $(\text{Tran}_{\text{nor/met}})$ entails the falsity of (i). I see little hope of explaining the combination of $(\text{Tran}_{\text{met/nor}})$, $(\text{Tran}_{\text{nor/met}})$, and $(\text{Asym}_{\text{met/nor}})$ unless we posit a fundamental connection between metaphysical and normative grounding.²⁹

6. Against extreme grounding pluralism

I have just argued that the sort of grounding pluralism embraced by Fine is untenable: when we look at the logical behaviour of each of the types of grounding posited by Fine and, in particular, look at how those types of grounding interact (or fail to interact) with one another, the striking patterns in this behaviour and in these interactions give us excellent reason to conclude that there is a single generic notion of grounding underlying these putatively distinct grounding relations. I now want to consider how my argumentative strategy applies to a different kind of grounding pluralist. This sort of grounding pluralist uses her pluralism as a way of casting doubt on the importance and significance of the recent wave of research on grounding. She does this by insisting that ‘the’ grounding relation really bifurcates into a large number of distinct dependence relations, and moreover that these distinct relations are ones that have been familiar to analytic

²⁹ Combining my two arguments also helps address the following reply to the Argument from Asymmetric Dovetailing (inspired by a line of reasoning Karen Bennett attributes to Mark Heller in her 2011, pp. 99–100). Suppose the metaphysical and normative grounding relations both stand in the determinate–determinable relation to a generic grounding relation. Then, assuming that determinates cannot be defined in terms of their determinables, such a view could count as a form of grounding pluralism. But this view can also explain mixed asymmetry in the following way. Suppose, for reductio, that $[p]$ metaphysically grounds $[q]$, and $[q]$ normatively grounds $[p]$. Then, because these relations are determinates of our generic grounding relation, it follows that $[p]$ generically grounds $[q]$, and $[q]$ generically grounds $[p]$. However, this violates the asymmetry of the generic grounding relation.

The main problem with this reply to my arguments is that, while such a proposal might help with the Argument from Asymmetric Dovetailing, it does not fare particularly well when we consider the Argument from Transitive Links. If $[p]$ metaphysically grounds $[q]$, and $[q]$ normatively grounds $[r]$, then—if metaphysical and normative grounding really were co-determinates of a generic grounding relation—it should follow that $[p]$ stands in a type of grounding relation to $[r]$ that is at the same ‘level of determination’ as metaphysical and normative grounding. However, there is no such relation in the offing. So either we must deny mixed transitivity, or we must give up on the determinate–determinable form of grounding pluralism.

philosophers for decades, not some important innovation that has only recently been brought into respectability. I call such a grounding pluralist an *extreme grounding pluralist*, and I shall use Jessica Wilson as my representative example of such a pluralist, since her version of the view is the most detailed and fully developed currently on offer.³⁰

According to Wilson (2014), we need to distinguish the *specific grounding relations* (with a small *g*) in whose terms metaphysicians have been theorizing for years from this new-fangled *general Grounding relation* (with a big *g*) being advocated by Fine, Rosen, Schaffer, and others. Wilson's (2014, p. 539) canonical list of small-*g* grounding/dependence relations is as follows:

- (a) type identity;
- (b) token-but-not-type identity;
- (c) functional realization;
- (d) the classical mereological part–whole relation;
- (e) the causal-composition relation;
- (f) the set-membership relation;
- (g) the proper-subset relation;
- (h) the determinate–determinable relation.

Wilson argues that (i) the big-*g* Grounding relation can't do any theoretical work on its own, without supplementation by the small-*g* grounding relations, and (ii) once the small-*g* grounding relations are on the scene, there is no additional work for the big-*g* Grounding relation to do.³¹ Thus we can see Wilson as advocating a form of extreme grounding pluralism, one which licenses scepticism about the theoretical usefulness of unqualified 'grounding'-talk. From Wilson's perspective, when we consider the explosion of work on the big-*g* Grounding relation over the past few years, it is as if a

³⁰ Other extreme grounding pluralists include Koslicki (2015) and—subject to a proviso—Hofweber (2009). (The proviso is that since Hofweber refuses to refer to his familiar dependency relations as types of 'grounding', preferring instead to call them 'ordinary notions of priority' (2009, p. 268), it would probably be more accurate to label him an 'extreme priority pluralist'. However, he is an extreme grounding pluralist in all but name.)

³¹ I lack the space to discuss Wilson's positive arguments for (i) and (ii). For criticisms of those arguments, see Raven MS and Schaffer MS. In the main text, I focus on the plausibility of her overall position, regardless of how one might argue for it.

group of scientists suddenly started publishing papers about the physical properties of jade without realizing there are two different minerals which go under that name. Worse, it is as if these scientists started doing all this when there already existed well-established results about the physical properties of jadeite and well-established results about the physical properties of nephrite.³²

Before I assess Wilson's position, I should mention a complicating factor. So far I have been assuming that grounding is a relation between facts. However, many of Wilson's relations (a)–(h) do not take facts as relata on both sides of the relation; for example, facts do not have members (in the set-theoretic sense), and facts are not themselves determinates or determinables. (Only properties and relations are.) So to give Wilson a proper hearing, I will temporarily relax my assumption that facts are the relata of the grounding relation(s) and allow entities of arbitrary ontological category to stand in grounding relations with one another.

My sketch, up to this point, of Wilson's position has been incomplete in a crucial way. This aspect of Wilson's view emerges when she replies to a certain objection due to Kit Fine to her position. Since a version of Fine's objection applies to almost all varieties of extreme grounding pluralism, let us consider that objection, and Wilson's clarification of her view in light of it.

Fine's objection is as follows (Wilson 2014, p. 558): for many of the specific relations in list (a)–(h), Fine points out, the mere holding of that specific relation is not enough to establish a relation of ground, and—when there is a relation of ground—also not enough to establish the direction of priority among the relata. For example, $\langle X \text{ is a proper part of } Y \rangle$ is compatible with all the following: $\langle X \text{ and } Y \text{ do not bear a grounding relation to each other} \rangle$, $\langle X \text{ grounds } Y \rangle$, and $\langle Y \text{ grounds } X \rangle$. So, Fine insists, in order for one of Wilson's specific relations to serve as a grounding relation in a given direction, additional facts or assumptions are needed, and these further facts or assumptions crucially involve an appeal to Grounding. Wilson replies that relations (a)–(h) 'are all capable of serving as "small-g" grounding relations, but ... their serving in this capacity will typically depend on certain other facts or assumptions', facts or assumptions which do *not* crucially involve an appeal to big-g Grounding (Wilson 2014, p. 569). For example, to handle cases in which one relatum is fundamental while

³² Koslicki (2015, pp. 318–9) makes a similar analogy.

the other is non-fundamental, Wilson endorses the following principle:

- (Wil) If X bears one of the relations (a)–(h) to Y, and X is fundamental while Y is not, then that specific relation serves as a small-g grounding relation between X and Y, with Y being small-g grounded in X, and not vice versa.³³

Wilson is here appealing to a primitive notion of fundamentality—big-f Fundamentality, as it were—which she argues is not just an appeal to big-g Grounding in disguise (Wilson 2014, pp. 560–1).

In this reply to Fine, Wilson makes an important concession: she is now no longer claiming that relations (a) through (h) are *in themselves* small-g grounding relations. Rather, these eight relations sometimes ‘turn on’ and become small-g grounding relations when certain other conditions are present. (Worse still, some of these specific relations can ‘turn on’ in two different directions of priority.) Therefore, we should be suspicious of Wilson’s claim that her relations (a) through (h) deserve to be called ‘grounding relations’ at all. Rather, they appear to be relations that sometimes underwrite—either in the weak sense of ‘being present when’, or in the strong sense of ‘helping ground’—a grounding relation between their relata (or between facts intimately related to their relata).³⁴

Not that it matters much how we label these specific relations; Wilson’s position cannot be rejected on mere terminological grounds. Let us turn, then, to the heart of the matter. Can we really conduct our theorizing in the way we want if we restrict ourselves to ‘turned on’ versions of relations (a)–(h) instead of a generic big-g Grounding relation? And do we really have good reason to suppose that the versions of relations (a)–(h) that have been ‘turned on’ as small-g grounding relations are not unified in any way?

Here we can return to themes we encountered earlier in this essay. It is when we theorize about normative matters that Wilson’s claim that we can make do with relations (a)–(h) in lieu of a generic grounding relation is at its weakest. When consequentialists and their opponents ask ‘Is the good prior to the right?’ none of Wilson’s relations (a) through (h) adequately captures the notion of priority at issue. Taking

³³ Here I generalize from Wilson (2014, p. 559). Wilson omits my ‘while Y is not’-qualifier, but it is clear from context that she meant to include it.

³⁴ Or at least that is true of some of them. I am suspicious of the idea that token identity, type identity, and the proper-subset relation ever underwrite a grounding relation between their relata, but I won’t take up that issue here.

them in reverse order: the idea that the good might bear *the determinate-determinable relation* to the right is an intriguing proposal, but it most certainly is not the sort of claim that consequentialists typically make when they insist that the good is prior to the right.³⁵ We can immediately set aside the proposal that we can understand the notion of priority in this debate as *the proper-subset relation* or *the set-membership relation*. Since it should be possible for consequentialists and non-consequentialists to have their dispute even if they agree that evaluative and deontic properties do not have causal powers, we can also set aside the proposal that we understand the sort of priority at issue in terms of *the causal-composition relation*. Perhaps if we embrace a heavy-duty conception of facts according to which they can literally stand in *the part-whole relation* with one another, then we can make sense of the idea that, for consequentialists, a given fact about the goodness of some outcome is a proper part of a given fact about the rightness of some action. However, surely it is possible for consequentialists and their opponents to have their dispute without endorsing such a controversial view about the nature of facts. When it comes to *functional realization*, while it is true that there are some philosophers who call themselves ‘moral functionalists’ (Jackson and Pettit 1995, Jackson 1998), and while it is true that these philosophers are usually consequentialists, their commitment to moral functionalism is independent of their commitment to consequentialism. Moreover, it is possible to be a consequentialist without being a moral functionalist. Finally, I have already dealt, earlier in this essay, with the suggestion that we understand the consequentialism debate in terms of *identity* (whether token or type): not only does such a suggestion do violence to our usual way of understanding consequentialists as positing an asymmetric relation of priority between facts about

³⁵ Moreover, there are technical obstacles that must be overcome if we are to construe a consequentialist’s commitment to the good being prior to the right as a commitment to *being good* being a determinate of *being right*. To start with, a determinate property is attributed to the same object as its determinable, but the primary bearers of goodness in a consequentialist theory are often not the same as the primary bearers of rightness. And even if we circumvent this problem by taking actions to be derivatively good to the degree to which they promote good states of affairs, there is the additional problem that—except in rare cases, such as absolute-threshold forms of satisficing consequentialism—it is not just the goodness (in our derivative sense) of an action that, according to consequentialists, determines its rightness, but moreover the goodness of that action in comparison to the goodness of its alternatives. So the properties that a typical consequentialist must propose as being determinates of the determinable *being right* are properties such as *being 10 utiles better than one alternative and 50 utiles better than every other alternative*—a much less attractive idea than the simple thought that *being good* is a determinate of *being right*.

overall goodness and facts about rightness, but such a suggestion leaves unexplained the relation between facts about the comparative overall goodness of all outcomes and facts about the *pro tanto* goodness of specific outcomes, since that relation cannot be identity.³⁶

In short, none of Wilson's relations (a)–(h) is a natural way of construing the priority relation at issue in the debate over consequentialism. The same is true, I believe, of my other examples of normative views that I argued are best understood in terms of a grounding/in-virtue-of/non-causal-'because' relation. When Ross insists that I have a *prima facie* duty to read your manuscript in virtue of my promise to do so, he is not making a claim about type identity, or set membership, or the determinate–determinable relation. When advocates of the reasons-first program insist that facts about what one ought to do can be analysed in terms of facts about reasons, they are not making a claim about causal composition, or functional realization, or the part–whole relation. If all we are left with are Wilson's specific relations (a)–(h), it becomes difficult to make sense of much of normative inquiry.

Of course, we could always try to supplement Wilson's list with an additional specific dependence relation to handle the normative cases, but what would that relation be? Why not just add to that list the relation in whose terms philosophers in normative disciplines have been theorizing for over a century, the relation that arguably the expression 'supervenience' was meant to pick out before it became co-opted as a way of referring to relations of necessary covariation, namely, the relation we pick out with expressions such as 'because', 'in virtue of', 'makes the case', and 'grounds'? There is no need to demean or belittle these expressions by using them with capital letters. When a consequentialist proposes

(Op*) Necessarily, an action is right if and only if, and because, it is optimific

we do not need to stop her and ask 'Wait, do you mean big-b "Because", or are you schematically referring to some small-b "because"-relation?' Our consequentialist is using 'because' in a perfectly natural and sensible way. Of course, there are difficult questions about

³⁶ Nor is it plausible to take this last relation to be any of Wilson's other small-g relations: the *pro tanto* goodness of an individual outcome does not stand in the determinate–determinable relation to the comparative overall goodness of all outcomes, nor is the former a subset, member, or part of the latter, nor does the former functionally realize or causally compose the latter.

the logic, metaphysics, and epistemology of the notion being picked out by that expression, as well as difficult questions about the semantics and pragmatics of the expression itself, and these difficult questions deserve to be their own area of philosophical investigation. But the same is true of most of the other words in (Op*), including ‘necessarily’, ‘action’, and ‘if’.

Thus Wilson’s form of grounding pluralism leaves out the very relations we most want when theorizing about normative categories such as rightness or reasons for action. Wilson’s extreme grounding pluralism is also susceptible to the form of argument I used against Fine’s more moderate grounding pluralism. First of all, we can run a version of the Argument from Transitive Links. The following principle is extremely plausible:

(Tran_{small-g}) If X bears a ‘turned on’ version of one of (a)–(h) to Y (in the from-grounds-to-grounded direction), and Y bears a ‘turned on’ version of one of (a)–(h) to Z (in the from-grounds-to-grounded direction), then there is a non-rigged up notion of grounding such that X grounds Z.

For example, if Socrates’ body parts small-g ground Socrates, because they stand in a ‘turned on’ version of the part–whole relation to him, and if Socrates small-g grounds {Socrates}, because he stands in a ‘turned on’ version of the membership relation to that set, then we are very strongly inclined to hold that Socrates’ body parts also ground the set {Socrates}, in some non-rigged-up sense. Similarly, if Socrates small-g grounds {Socrates}, and if {Socrates} small-g grounds {{Socrates}}, then we are very strongly inclined to hold that Socrates also grounds {{Socrates}}, in some non-rigged up sense. Finally, if certain physical states of Socrates’ brain small-g ground certain neural states of Socrates’ brain, because they stand in a ‘turned on’ version of the causal-composition relation to those latter states, and if those neural states of Socrates’ brain small-g ground Socrates’ desire to seek the truth, because they stand in a determinate–determinable relation to Socrates’ desire to seek the truth (in a Yablo-style way), then we are very strongly inclined to hold that the physical states of Socrates’ brain also ground Socrates’ desire to seek the truth, in some non-rigged-up sense. But in all these cases, none of Wilson’s relations (a)–(h) can serve as the needed non-rigged-up type of grounding relation. Socrates’ body parts are neither a part of nor a member of {Socrates}, Socrates is not a member of {{Socrates}}, and something

which causally composes a determinate of some determinable is not itself a determinate of that determinable. Nor do any of Wilson's other specific relations seem up to the task in each of these cases. This leaves us searching for more dependence relations than the eight relations which Wilson extracts from the recent philosophy-of-mind literature. And it leaves us wondering why, when Wilson's eight relations are 'turned on' as small-g grounding relations, they can be linked together via applications of a mixed transitivity principle, despite Wilson's claim that there is no generic Grounding relation underlying the 'turned on' versions of those eight relations.³⁷

We can also run a version of the Argument from Asymmetric Dovetailing against Wilson's brand of grounding pluralism. Wilson allows for the possibility that the asymmetry of grounding (whether big or small) might fail when we are considering fundamental entities: she thinks it is a live possibility that there might be fundamental entities X and Y such that X grounds Y and Y grounds X. But when it comes to cases in which at least one of X and Y is non-fundamental, Wilson adheres to the following (very plausible) asymmetry principle:

(Asym_{small-g}) If X or Y is not fundamental, and if X bears a 'turned on' version of one of (a)–(h) to Y in the from-grounds-to-grounded direction, then Y does not bear a 'turned on' version of one of (a)–(h) to X in the from-grounds-to-grounded direction.³⁸

But now we can ask: why on earth do the 'turned on' versions of Wilson's small-g relations get out of each other's way in the manner predicted by (Asym_{small-g}), if those relations are fundamentally distinct from one other? Why do these supposedly disparate relations exhibit patterns of instantiation that so neatly dovetail with one another? If, as I have been proposing, what it means for there to be a 'turned on'

³⁷ As before, a version of this argument can be offered even if (Tran_{small-g}) does not hold with full generality, since there are many specific cases—including the ones I have just mentioned—in which it is plausible that an instance of that schema holds.

³⁸ My evidence that Wilson adheres to this principle is twofold. First, in cases in which either X or Y is fundamental and the other is not, (Asym_{small-g}) directly follows from (Wil) (the principle Wilson uses to say what extra conditions are needed in such cases to 'turn on' one of her specific relations in a particular direction). Second, in cases in which neither X nor Y is fundamental, Wilson appears to work with (Asym_{small-g}) as an unstated background assumption. For example, when considering whether her (non-fundamental) hand depends on her (non-fundamental) body or vice versa or neither, Wilson (2014, pp. 564–5) sets aside, without argument, the possibility that her hand might depend on her body due to one of the relations (a)–(h) while at the same time her body depends on her hand due to another of those relations (or due to the same relation being 'turned on' in the opposite direction).

version of one of Wilson's specific relations between two entities, X and Y, is for it to be the case that, in addition to—and possibly in virtue of—that specific relation between X and Y, there is a (generic, unqualified) grounding relation between X and Y (or between two facts intimately related to X and Y, such as [X exists] and [Y exists]), then we have a ready explanation of why the 'turned on' versions of these relations mesh with each other in this way. But Wilson's pluralism leaves this meshing utterly mysterious. Once again we are led to the conclusion that grounding is unified.

7. A surprising consequence

I have argued that we have good reason to reject Fine's brand of moderate grounding pluralism, according to which a metaphysical variety of grounding must be distinguished from normative and natural varieties of grounding. And I have also argued that we have good reason to reject Wilson's brand of extreme grounding pluralism, according to which there is a large number of specific grounding relations such as the functional-realization relation and the set-membership relation, but no generic grounding relation underlying these specific relations. On my view, such a generic relation does exist, and it is precisely this relation which is being invoked when philosophers use locutions such as 'in virtue of', 'makes the case', and 'grounds' (as almost all of them do, at some point), and when they use 'because' in the way characteristic of grounding claims. Grounding is a unity, not a heap of disconnected relations.

I have chosen Fine and Wilson as my foils because they develop the pluralist view in two importantly different ways. Fine's is the sort of pluralism typically favoured by grounding's proponents, Wilson's the sort typically favoured by grounding's critics. One important issue I do not address here is whether there are other forms of grounding pluralism that can escape my general form of argument. I suspect there are not, but it is difficult to say without seeing what these other pluralist positions come to.

Another important issue I do not address here is the degree to which my arguments generalize. Do the Argument from Transitive Links, the Argument from Asymmetric Dovetailing, and other arguments of that general form show not just that various candidates for different types of grounding form a unity, but moreover that grounding and other notions usually thought distinct from it also form a unity? For example, it

is standard to distinguish between at least three uses of the word ‘because’: the ‘because’ of causation (as in: ‘The table broke *because* he put too much weight on it’), the ‘because’ of rational basis (as in: ‘He put too much weight on the table *because* he wanted to see how many chairs he could stack on it at one time’), and the ‘because’ of grounding (as in: ‘It was wrong of him to stack that many chairs on the table *because* the table wasn’t his and he should have known that much weight would break it’).³⁹ Do arguments similar to the ones I have provided here show that the relations picked out by these three uses of the word ‘because’ are not fundamentally distinct from one another? I will not take up that issue here, although I hope to do so on a future occasion.⁴⁰

Instead, I want to end by noting a surprising consequence of the arguments I have offered in this essay. Put most provocatively, the consequence is this: *it follows from the unity of grounding that normative ethics is a branch of metaethics*. Put less provocatively but more accurately, the consequence is this: *it follows from the unity of grounding that many of the central claims of normative ethics are at once claims in normative ethics and claims in metaethics*.

The argument for this consequence is straightforward, given what we have already established. As argued in §3 above, when in normative ethics we are concerned with general theories, we are not just searching for extensionally adequate biconditionals of the form

(Bi) Necessarily, an action is right if and only if _____

but rather searching for biconditionals that are *explanatory*, like so:

(Bi*) Necessarily, an action is right if and only if, *and because*, _____.

Similarly, when in normative ethics we are focusing on a particular verdict about a particular scenario, we usually are not merely interested in establishing a claim of the form

(Ver) Action A is right in circumstances C

³⁹ Some authors refer to this second ‘because’ as ‘the “because” of action explanation’, but I prefer Matt Evans’ (2012, p. 17) term, ‘the “because” of rational basis’, since that same ‘because’ can be used in contexts in which rationally-assessable items other than actions—such as beliefs or emotions—are being explained. (That said, one downside of Evans’ terminology is that it suggests that such a ‘because’-claim can only be true when the item being explained is rational. But such ‘because’-claims are compatible with irrationality. So maybe a better term yet is ‘the “because” of rationalizing basis?’)

⁴⁰ For an argument in favour of unifying the ‘because’ of causation and the ‘because’ of grounding that is in some ways similar to my Argument from Transitive Links, see Schaffer (2016, pp. 89–90).

but rather interested in establishing an *explanation* of why that verdict holds, like so:

(Ver*) Action A is right in circumstances C *because* ____.

It follows from my arguments in §§5–6 against grounding pluralism that the ‘because’ in both (Bi*) and (Ver*) is picking out a generic relation of metaphysical grounding, not some special type of normative grounding (as Fine would have it) or a specific small-g grounding relation such as the determinate–determinable relation (as Wilson would have it). Thus a central portion of normative ethics is concerned with establishing certain metaphysical claims: when we are doing this sort of normative ethics, we are thereby doing moral metaphysics. But, by definition, metaethics includes within it the metaphysics, epistemology, semantics, and so on of morality.⁴¹ So when we are doing a central portion of normative ethics, we are thereby making a contribution to one branch of metaethics—the branch devoted to the metaphysics of morality. In short, one core part of normative ethics is also, at the same time, a subfield of metaethics.

An obvious reply suggests itself. Perhaps we need to distinguish between two distinct ‘because’-relations that are employed in the study of moral notions: the first-order ‘because’ of normative ethics and the second-order ‘because’ of metaethics. But it is precisely here that my arguments for the unity of grounding can be applied. How do these putatively distinct ‘because’-relations interact? Can we string them together using applications of transitivity? I am inclined to say that we can. Do these two putatively different relations conform to a mixed asymmetry principle? I am inclined to say that they do. And so on. The pattern of interaction and avoidance between the ‘because_{metaethics}’-relation and the ‘because_{normative-ethics}’-relation is precisely the sort of pattern we would expect from two relations that are not fundamentally distinct from one another. Therefore, we cannot avoid the implication that normative ethics traffics in metaphysical claims by attempting to cordon off the ‘because’ of first-order investigations of morality from the ‘because’ of second-order investigations of morality. Instead, since some of our canonical examples of first-order moral theories are also, at the same time, second-order moral theories, we should be suspicious of the very distinction

⁴¹ This claim might hold because metaethics is nothing more than the metaphysics, epistemology, and so on, of morality, or it might hold because that disjunctive list of subfields follows from the correct definition of metaethics, whatever that may be.

between 'first-order' and 'second-order' ways of investigating moral matters.

It might seem that what I am proposing here is the reverse of a move made famous by Ronald Dworkin (1996, 2011). According to Dworkin, many claims that philosophers have put forward as second-order/metaethical claims external to normative ethics, such as the claim that morality is mind dependent, are in fact first-order claims within normative ethics. So it might seem that what I have just argued for is the opposite: many claims put forward as first-order claims within normative ethics are in fact metaethical claims, insofar as they concern the metaphysical dependence of moral matters. But this characterization of my position as simply a 'reverse Dworkin' is inaccurate in an important respect. Dworkin's claim is that certain views often taken to be purely metaethical views are in fact not metaethical views at all, but instead are views in normative ethics. My own position is that certain views often taken to be purely normative ethical views are in fact views *both* in normative ethics *and* in metaethics, as those two fields are standardly conceived.

Both Dworkin and I offer our arguments as a way of destabilizing the traditional metaethics-versus-normative-ethics divide. However, Dworkin wants to destabilize that divide in order to get us to stop asking certain questions traditionally taken to fall on the metaethical side of the divide. I, on the other hand, want us to continue to ask all the questions that have traditionally fallen on both sides of the divide. I want self-styled 'metaethicists' to go on asking all the questions they have been asking, and I want self-styled 'normative ethicists' to go on addressing all the issues they have been addressing. I simply want us to stop seeing these questions as sorting into two natural piles of non-overlapping issues, the 'metaethical' ones and the 'normative ethical' ones. There is just one field here: ethics.

The term 'metaethics' first gained its currency during the era of linguistic philosophy. In those days, it was easy to say what distinguished metaethics from ethics proper: metaethics was the study of moral language, and ethics proper wasn't even a part of philosophy. As linguistic approaches to philosophy receded, our conception of the field of metaethics changed: metaethics shifted from being devoted exclusively to the meanings of moral terms to also being concerned with the metaphysics, epistemology, and so on, of first-order moral claims. Hence the currently popular grab-bag conception of metaethics, whereby it just is the metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, and so on, of moral matters.

However, this common conception of how to draw the line between metaethics and normative ethics rests, I believe, on an overly naive view of normative ethics. Many of the so-called ‘first-order’ moral claims at issue in normative ethics are at the same time ‘second-order’ claims concerning the metaphysics of morality, insofar as they concern what makes right acts right, what makes good people good, and so on—that is, insofar as they concern claims about metaphysical grounding.⁴²

Anyway, I think a destabilization of the divide between metaethics and normative ethics has been happening for a while now. In one way, my talk of ‘metaethics’ here is a little quaint. Over the past two decades, the field formerly known as ‘metaethics’ has become broadened to include within its scope—here I revert to the standard language—second-order questions directed at first-order normative claims of any type, not just second-order questions directed at first-order claims about narrowly moral or ethical notions such as what one is morally required to do or how it would be best to live. Metaethics has, in effect, been superseded by ‘metanormative studies’. The standard way of effecting this widening of scope is to discuss reasons in general, not just moral reasons for action, or to discuss rational requirements in general, not just moral requirements on action. But during this transition, something odd happened. Investigations of what, on the surface, appear to be purely first-order issues about reasons or rational requirements in general became perfectly acceptable at a conference or in an anthology ostensibly devoted to ‘metaethics’ (understood now to have been broadened to ‘metanormative studies’). This has led to a bizarre taxonomic situation whereby a paper on desire-based theories of well-being is forbidden at a metaethics conference, but a paper on desire-based theories of reasons for action is perfectly fine for such a conference, even though the positions discussed in each paper might be identical in structure, equivalent in terms of their explanatory ambitions, and subject to the same objections and counter-replies. As long as your seemingly first-order investigation is devoted to a

⁴² My use of the term ‘metaphysical’ here will no doubt scare some people off. But it should be remembered that I use that word in a thin sense whereby it mainly serves as a contrast term for ‘epistemic’, ‘conceptual’, ‘semantic’, and the like. As I understand them, metaphysical claims are those that concern how things are, epistemic claims are those that concern our knowledge of things, conceptual claims are those that concern our concepts, and so on. Thus, the issue of whether the grounding relation is metaphysical, in my sense, does not yet settle whether that relation is ‘metaphysically robust’ or ‘metaphysically lightweight’.

sufficiently general normative category such as *rational requirement* or *reason*, you still count as doing metaethics, in the broad sense.

In effect, I have provided an argument that legitimizes this taxonomic promiscuity within metanormative studies. Moreover, my argument suggests that such taxonomic promiscuity should also be embraced within metaethics, narrowly conceived. If grounding is unified, then a properly explanatory moral theory is *both* a position in normative ethics *and* a position in metaethics. It does not answer all questions in these two fields, but it answers some in each. And, when we broaden our historical focus, isn't that the right way to view things? Consider Kant and Aristotle. Is Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* a book in metaethics or normative ethics? The correct answer is: both. Is Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* devoted to 'first-order' or 'second-order' questions? Again, the answer is: both. And in each case, it is not as if these authors include separate discussions of each type of issue, or use their conclusions in one field as premises to help them establish claims in the other. Rather, in both cases their discussions of questions that we might sort as either 'metaethical' or 'normative ethical' are intertwined with one other. This is why, I believe, it is so difficult to say where contemporary neo-Kantian and contemporary neo-Aristotelian views fall in the traditional metaethics-versus-normative-ethics divide. Such views are positions in both fields at once. And, if my arguments here are correct, the same is true even of utilitarianism and Ross-style pluralism. The unity of grounding grounds the unity of ethics.⁴³

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