

## Constitutive Explanation

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Pardon the indulgence, but let me begin with some autobiography. When, in the summer of 2009, I first read the influential papers of Fine (2001) and Rosen (2010) on ground, my immediate impression was that they were onto something. The concept of ground they presented seemed intuitive and familiar, and at the same time useful in framing a number of philosophical debates. In particular, it struck me that some of the questions in metaphysics I was thinking about at the time were well articulated as questions about what grounds what, so I started thinking about them in those terms.

But as time went on, I began to read papers on ground that I didn't really understand. The concept was being stretched and deformed in various ways—*reified* in various ways—that went far beyond what had initially attracted me to it. This new literature seemed to take ground to be some *part* of reality, some metaphysical analogue of the Higgs boson that somehow held the world together. The job of a metaphysician, on this new conception, was to peer into reality and discern where these “groundons” were flowing (of course, to see these groundons one needed to be fitted with goggles provided by specialist departments). Worse: I began to read papers attacking the notion of ground as unintelligible, or useless, or a mere gimmick; but all the time attacking this new notion so different than the one I had initially come to like!

In short, I came to think that the conception of ground that initially attracted me was significantly more *deflationary* than the conception being developed—and criticized—in much of the literature. Which raises the question: just how deflationary about ground can one be, and still find use for it in philosophy? I will argue that ground can be significantly deflated: one can hold that it corresponds to no part of reality, that it is not primitive in any metaphysically significant sense, even that it is a person- or culture-relative notion with non-cognitive elements, and yet still find it central to much philosophy. To be clear, I will not argue that the best conception of ground is maximally deflationary in all these respects. But it is worth asking what the limit case looks like, if only to clarify whether certain objections to ground target the core notion or just inflated varieties.

I suspect that some will regard the deflated notion of ground outlined below as not a real notion of *ground* at all. For them, the term ‘ground’ by stipulation picks out something else—something more heavy-duty—so they may read me as showing my hand as a grounding skeptic who agrees with Jessica Wilson (2014) that there is “no work for a theory of ground”. Very well, I am happy to give them the term. My substantive claim is that there is a deflated notion that can play much of the role that ground has been asked to play, and that this is a philosophically important role; what we call the notion is then a verbal issue. Still, I will suggest that nothing in Fine (2001) or (2012) commits him to anything beyond a very deflated notion of ground. Use the term ‘ground’ as you like, but your usage strikes me as rather perverse if it turns out that Kit Fine was never talking about ground!

### **1. The role of constitutive explanation**

I should start by saying what I mean by ‘ground’. As I use it, it is nothing other than a label for one sense of the English word ‘because’. Why is there a table here? One answer: Because

someone put it there yesterday. Another answer: Because there are pieces of wood arranged table-wise. These answers are not in competition. The first explains what causal history led to the table's being here; the second explains what it is about the current situation that makes it the case that there is a table here. The former is called a causal explanation, the latter a metaphysical or constitutive explanation. 'Ground', as I use the term, is just a label for this latter sense of 'because'.<sup>1</sup>

Other examples of constitutive explanation are ubiquitous. Why is there a faculty meeting occurring? Because the faculty are gathered in a room discussing matters of importance to the department, etc and so on. Why is this water getting hotter? Because its mean kinetic energy is rising. Why have I lost this game of chess? Because my king is in check-mate. In none of these cases has one explained what *causally* brought something about—what causal history brought the faculty together, what process caused the temperature to rise, or what series of moves put me in check-mate. Rather, one is explaining what underlying facts *constitute* the phenomena in question. As I use the term, 'ground' *just is* a label for this mode of explanation. This usage is not universal. Some others—in particular Schaffer in his influential papers on this topic—use 'ground' to denote a worldly relation between entities that supposedly underlies or supports these explanations, and we will discuss views about what these relations might be in due course. But even if there is an underlying relation such as this, it is not (by stipulation) what I mean by the term.<sup>2</sup>

As these examples show, this notion of constitutive explanation is utterly familiar: it is a concept of ordinary English, and is also commonplace in science. This point deserves emphasis. Some claim that ground is familiar in the sense that it has been used in *philosophy* since Plato posed the Euthyphro dilemma. Others claim that ground is familiar in the sense that *philosophers* find various *recherché* examples intuitive, such as that sets are grounded in their members, or that a conjunction is grounded in its conjuncts. This may all be correct but I am making a different point, namely that it is *an everyday concept used by the masses*. When I explain the concept to non-philosophers they recognize it immediately and talk intelligibly about it, offering examples of constitutive explanations in their own fields of biology, economics, journalism, or cooking. To them it is not a new concept. The only people I know who claim not to understand it are a handful of philosophers working in the early twenty-first century. In this respect the constitutive 'because' is no different from the causal 'because': the latter is also an everyday concept used by the masses; only a principled philosopher would claim not to understand it.

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<sup>1</sup> I distinguished causal from constitutive explanation, but this is not to say that they are entirely unrelated. Sometimes, what constitutively explains why x is a K are facts about x's causal history. This note is a US dollar bill because (in the constitutive sense) it was made and minted by the US Treasury—an intrinsic duplicate made elsewhere would be a forgery. But this does not mean that the distinction between constitutive and causal explanation is blurry. It is rather that, in these cases, what constitutively explains why x is a K is not intrinsic to x but concerns its causal history.

<sup>2</sup> Schaffer's views on the worldly relation that underlies constitutive explanations—the relation he calls "ground"—are developed in a number of papers, but see in particular Schaffer (2009), (2016), and (forthcoming). Raven (forthcoming) distinguishes between "unionists", who identify ground with metaphysical explanation, from "separatists" who distinguish them. In these terms, I would count as a unionist and Schaffer a separatist. But it seems to me that the distinction here is largely verbal, for there may be no substantive disagreement between Schaffer and myself. We both agree that there are constitutive explanations, and for all I have said they may be underwritten by worldly relations between entities. The only difference would then be a terminological decision of what to call 'ground'.

Of course, I am being blythe. Philosophers who claim to find ground unintelligible may be reacting to fans of ground who use the term stipulatively to denote something else, perhaps a heavy-duty worldly relation between entities. In that case, I have some sympathy with the skeptics. What I claim is an everyday concept used by the masses is just *the constitutive mode of explanation*; the constitutive sense of ‘because’. Even a “grounding skeptic” like Hofweber may agree with this. He argues (2016, chapter 13) that judgements about what grounds what just reflect certain kinds of counterfactual or conceptual priorities. He then assumes that ‘ground’ must denote something *other* than these familiar relationships, and concludes that our everyday judgements about ground do not show that we have an everyday grasp on *that which ‘ground’ denotes*. But from my point of view, the assumption is unwarranted: for all I have said, it may be that constitutive explanations just are reports of the familiar (counterfactual and conceptual) priorities that Hofweber discusses!

More generally, what I have said so far leaves open what the right *theory* of constitutive explanation is. In this respect, again, the situation is the same as with casual explanation. We all trade in causal explanations but very few of us have an opinion on whether the DN model is true, whether the causal “because” (or what it tracks) is primitive in any robust sense, and so on. Likewise, we can all give constitutive explanations without knowing what kinds of structures such explanations might track, what ontological gadgets must be in place for the explanation to be correct, and so forth. I will soon discuss different views about the metaphysics of ground—some more inflationary, others more deflationary—but for now I remain neutral. Thus, in saying that I use ‘ground’ as a label for one sense of the English word ‘because’, I do not mean to settle any *theoretical* questions about the metaphysics of ground; I just mean to fix on the *phenomena*.

My claim, then, is that one can accept a seriously deflated metaphysics of ground and still insist that it plays an important role in philosophy. What role? Put simply, the role of *limning many issues of intellectual interest*. Consider the mind-body problem, the question of whether mind consists in matter. Materialists think it does; that at rock bottom there are just the material events and processes going on within one’s body and its environment, and that mental phenomena are “fixed” or “determined” or “constituted” or “accounted for” entirely by those material phenomena. Dualists think otherwise: they think that at least some mental states are “brute” in the sense that there is no “accounting for” them purely in terms of purely material facts. To take another example, think of the debate between substantivalist and relationalist views of space. The issue here is whether geometric relations between material bodies are “determined” or “fixed” or “constituted” or “accounted for” by their positions in substantival space, as the substantivalist thinks, or whether they are “brute”, as the relationalist thinks. We can all agree, I think, that the divide between the dualist and the materialist is deep, vital, and intellectually significant; likewise for the divide between the substantivalist and the relationalist. Both issues have been a focal point of intense debate since at least the ancient era, both in philosophy and the natural sciences. What I call the “grounding thesis” is the claim that these issues should be understood in terms of ground; as the question of whether mental phenomena can be constitutively explained in terms of material phenomena, or whether geometric relations between bodies are constitutively explained by their positions in substantival space.

The analogous view about *causal* explanation—that *it* also limns issues of deep intellectual interest—is hard to deny. Consider the question of the human origins, the question of how it came to be that we exist. A central issue here is whether we owe our existence to the designs of an intelligent agent, or just to purely natural and non-intentional processes. The divide between

these two answers is clearly a vitally important divide in logical space, and has fittingly consumed much of intellectual history. And the divide here is clearly one concerning *causal explanation*: what is at issue is whether the causal explanation of how we came to exist is design-free or not.<sup>3</sup> The grounding thesis is just the analogous view that the notion of constitutive explanation divides logical space along important joints too.<sup>4</sup>

So put, the grounding thesis may sound trivial, obvious, or hardly worth stating. Who would deny that questions of *explanation* divide logical space at important joints? But here, as in life, what's worth saying depends on one's audience. Take the case of causation. Suppose someone insists that the question of human origins that has (or should have) concerned us over the past 500 years concerns the meaning of "humanity", of whether it can be analyzed in design-free terms. Then one would be right to reply that that distorts the issue; that the issue concerns the world and not our concepts; that Darwin's contribution had nothing to do with the meaning of "humanity" and everything to do with a profoundly brilliant explanation of how complex biological life like our own could come to be. Or imagine someone who accepts that the question of human origins concerns the world and not our concepts, but insists that the issue is whether our existence "nominally supervenes" on non-intentional facts, where Y nominally supervenes on X iff any two nomically possible worlds that agree on X also agree on Y. Once again, one would be right to say that this misses the real issue: if we live in a world with deterministic laws that are time-reversal symmetric, then the present nomically supervenes on the future just as much as it does on the past; yet the question of human origins surely concerns our distant past, not the distant future! Thus, in the face of this theorist it would be well worth stating what might otherwise appear an obvious or uninteresting truism, namely that the important issue that has (and should have) concerned us over the past 500 years is not a matter of nomic supervenience but rather what *causally explains* our existence. This is not trivial, and could in principle be false. But it is plausible.

The early literature on ground can, I think, be read analogously. Even recently there were philosophical trends that understood a range of philosophical questions as questions of conceptual analysis. The mind-body problem, for example, would be framed as the question of whether one can analyze mental vocabulary or concepts in material terms.<sup>5</sup> Faced with such a trend, the grounding theorist insists that this distorts the original question of interest; that many of the vital issues in philosophy concern *the world*, not our ways of thinking or talking about it;

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<sup>3</sup> Thus, I am using "causal explanation" in the broad sense to include explanations of natural selection. One might wish to reserve the term for explanations that reflect the kind of causal pushes and pulls that natural selection does not trade in. But natural selection explanations articulate processes and pressures that *led to some state of affairs coming to be*; in this sense they are not constitutive explanations.

<sup>4</sup> The grounding thesis may be reminiscent of Jenkins' (2013) claim that when metaphysicians use terms like 'dependence', 'fundamentality', and so on, they typically mean something understood in terms of explanation. But the two claims should not be conflated. For one thing, the grounding thesis does not concern what other people typically mean by their terms. And for another thing, one moral of the current paper is just how *deflationary* explanatory talk can be interpreted, in which case it is likely that many metaphysicians mean something more robust by the above terms.

<sup>5</sup> [References.](#)

that the question of (say) substantivalism surely concerns the nature of *space*, not “space”.<sup>6</sup> Nor, she argues, do the worldly questions of interest concern supervenience or other merely modal connections.<sup>7</sup> Rather, the grounding thesis is that the worldly questions at issue are questions of explanation: What explains (in the constitutive sense) the mind? What explains physical geometry? This thesis is not trivial, and it may even be false. But it is, I think, very plausible.<sup>8</sup>

Still, I will not argue that the grounding thesis is correct. To name just one other option, one might say that these pervasive philosophical issues concern what is *structural* (see Sider (2011) for this approach), and I will not argue against this here. (Indeed, the options may not be in tension if a constraint on a good explanation is that it be given in structural terms.) My claim is conditional: that *if* the grounding thesis is correct that these issues are best understood in terms of ground, a significantly deflated conception of ground will do.

Given what I mean by ground, and given the role I just described it as playing, you might think that my conditional claim is obvious; uninteresting even. If so, great! And if you don't think this now, I hope you do after reading the discussion that follows. This is to say that I do not intend to say much that is striking or controversial here. Still, it is worth saying if only because the recent literature on ground has tended to converge on metaphysical theories of ground that are strikingly inflationary in the following respects: (i) they *reify* it, holding that constitutive explanations reflect some genuine *part* of reality such as a worldly relation that holds between facts, propositions, or entities of some other kind; (ii) they hold that constitutive explanation is, or tracks, something *primitive* in a metaphysically significant sense; and (iii) they hold that constitutive explanations are *objective and absolute*, not relative to certain interests or concerns that might vary from culture to culture or time to time. The focus on these inflationary theories is so pervasive that one could be forgiven for presuming that grounding theorists are *committed* to some such inflationary conception of ground, so that by objecting to this or that inflationary framework one has objected to ground writ large. It is just this presumption I want to warn against. I will not argue that these inflationary theories of ground are false; just that ground need not be inflated in these ways in order for it to play its role of limning issues of importance. So let me address these three respects in which ground has been inflated in turn.

## 2. Ontology

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<sup>6</sup> This, I take it, was Fine's point when discussing questions of *de re* constitution, whereby one item is constituted by another (Fine 2001, p. 10). These questions, he argued, particularly resist being framed in terms of linguistic or conceptual analysis. As he puts it, “reduction should be construed as a metaphysical rather than as a linguistic or a semantical relation... Thus in claiming that two nations' being at war reduces to such-and-such military activity on the part of their citizens, we are not making a claim about our language or describing nations and citizens, or even about our concepts of a nation or a citizen, but about the nations and citizens themselves and the connection between them” (2001, p. 10).

<sup>7</sup> These arguments are familiar; see XXXX.

<sup>8</sup> Note that the grounding thesis is not an attempt to delineate the boundaries of metaphysics, or philosophy for that matter. Far from it: as emphasized earlier the concept of ground at issue is one of ordinary language, so it would be surprising if it was particular to one and only one intellectual subject. Moreover the grounding thesis just says that some, not all, important issues are questions of ground. Thus, the grounding thesis is consistent with Bennett's (2015) claims, with which I wholeheartedly agree, that there is no distinctive methodology of metaphysics, and that metaphysics cannot be characterized as the study of what grounds what.

Start with the question of reification. Many discussions of ground give the impression that talk of ground denotes, or otherwise tracks, some kind of distinctive, worldly relation of “grounding” that holds between propositions or facts or entities of some other sort.<sup>9</sup> Let me argue that grounding theorists need not reify the grounding relation, nor the supposed relata. I do not expect this to be controversial so I will be swift.

Explanations are answers to why-questions, and constitutive explanations are no different. Why did a faculty meeting occur? Because the faculty gathered in a room, discussed matters importance to the department, and so on. These explanations can be expressed in a number of ways, using S, T, and U as schematic sentence positions:

- (1) S because T, U,...
- (2) What explains why S is that T, U,...
- (3) The following facts—that T, that U,... —constitutively explain why S.
- (4) The fact that S holds in virtue of the following facts: that T, that U,...
- (5) S in virtue of the fact that T, the fact that U,...
- (6) The proposition that S is true in virtue of the fact that T, that U, ...
- (7) The proposition that S is true because the propositions that T, that U,... are true.

Now, locutions (3)-(7) appear to be committed to facts or propositions, by which I mean (roughly) that they are true only if there are facts or propositions. Let us take appearances at face-value for the sake of argument. But what if one thought there were no such things as propositions or facts. Could one still offer constitutive explanations in the form of (1) or (2)?

One view is that one could not; that while (1) and (2) contain no explicit quantifier, they are nonetheless true only if there are such things as the fact that S, that T, that U. But on an opposing, more deflationary view, the truth of (1) and (2) does not require that there are any such things as facts or propositions. On this view, if one asserts that a meeting occurred because of what various people are doing, one may be committed to the existence of meetings and people, perhaps even actions, but not abstract entities such as facts or propositions.

It is an open question in the theory of ground which view is correct, but I do not wish to settle that question here. My claim is simply that even if the more deflationary view is correct one can still maintain, with the grounding theorist, that many vital questions in philosophy concern which explanations of the form (1) and (2) we should accept—for example whether a person is conscious because of their physical state. This should not be surprising, for presumably the same goes for causal explanation too. Even if one rejects an ontology of facts and propositions, one can still ask whether we exist because (in the causal sense) of the intentions of an intelligent designer, and one can still consider this one of the most urgent questions of intellectual history over the past 400 years.

Thus, the grounding theorist need not believe in propositions or facts; nor (therefore) need she believe in a relation of “grounding” that holds between them. Nor, I note in passing, need she accept an inflationary conception of truth. Admittedly, constitutive explanations are sometimes glossed in form (6); if this is read as an instance of (5), then it is a constitutive explanation of why a certain proposition has the property of being true. And perhaps it is the kind of explanation that an inflationist about truth would give. Still, this does not mean that

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<sup>9</sup> References to statements expressing this.

grounding theorists must offer such explanations; it just means that inflationary views of truth can be expressed in the framework of ground. Thus, suppose one endorsed a deflationary conception of truth, characterized roughly as the view that there is no robust property of truth; that truth is a device of disquotation; that to say that ‘S’ is true *just is* to say that S; and so on. Still, one could maintain with the grounding theorist that deep and vital questions in philosophy concern which explanations of the form (1) or (2) we should accept. This is just a reflection of the fact that explanations—both constitutive and causal—generally concern themselves with worldly phenomena, not representations of such. Thus, when I ask what causally explains our existence, the question concerns *us*, not representations of us or why they are true. Similarly, when I ask what constitutively explains why there is a meeting occurring, I am asking why there is *a meeting*, not why some proposition or representation of the meeting is true.

I said that grounding theorists are not committed to an ontology of propositions or facts, nor (hence) a relation of grounding that holds between them. Might they be committed to a relation of ground that holds between “sub-propositional” entities? One might think so if one’s thinking about ground is based on certain theories of causal explanation. For example, Lewis proposed that to causally explain an event E is to report information about the events on which E causally depends. On that view, every causal explanation is underwritten by a relation of “causal dependence” between events. Schaffer (2016) has developed an analogous view on which every constitutive explanation is underwritten by a relation between entities. If this pen is red because (in the constitutive sense) it is scarlet, Schaffer believes that this is underwritten by a relation between scarletness and redness. Now, he calls the relation between redness and scarletness “ground”, but since I use that term to denote the notion of constitutive explanation let us call Schaffer’s relation “grounding-dependence” to avoid confusion. Thus, just as Lewis thinks that a causal explanation reports information about relations of causal dependence, Schaffer proposes that a constitutive explanation reports information about relations of grounding-dependence.

Should we endorse Schaffer’s view? I am undecided.<sup>10</sup> But put aside the question of whether Schaffer’s view is correct; my point is that, like Lewis’ view of causal explanation, it is just one view amongst many. Thus, an alternative to Lewis’ view is the DN model, which says (roughly) that there is a causal explanation when the thing to be explained follows from the explainer together with a natural law. This does not require that there is a relation of causal dependence between events, it just requires a natural law. Another alternative is the unificationist model, on which (leaving out all the interesting details) an explanation of an event

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<sup>10</sup> See Koslicki (2016) for some objections. And here is another line of concern. Suppose one does not believe in propositions or facts, or logical operators like conjunction. Here I don’t mean that one lacks conjunctive beliefs of the form P&Q; I just mean that one does not believe that there is such an entity as *the proposition* that P, or *the logical operator* conjunction. Still, you might in general think that conjunctions are constitutively explained by their conjuncts, in the sense that you accept explanations of the form ‘P&Q because P, Q’. Schaffer says that this explanation reports a relation between entities, but which entities exactly? There are no propositions or facts or operators to serve as a relata. Or suppose you endorse a deflationary view of properties on which the following scheme is always true: “If x is P, then x has the property P because x is P”, where “is P” is a predicate that does not denote. Schaffer says that this reports a relation of grounding dependence between entities; but again, which entities? We only have the entity x and the property P, but these seem to be the wrong things to relate. For if they are related by grounding dependence in a way that would underwrite the above explanation, then as far as I understand Schaffer’s view it would follow that any metaphysically possible world in which x exists is a world in which x is P. Yet this deflationary view of properties was supposed to encompass contingent properties too. What Schaffer would need is the property P to be grounding dependent on the fact or state *that x is P*. So again: if one does not accept an ontology of facts or states then one does not have the right entities to serve as the relata of Schaffer’s relation.

subsumes it under general, unifying principles. Again, this does not require a relation of causal dependence between events, it just requires general principles that subsume. Correspondingly, in the case of ground an alternative to Schaffer's view would be a kind of "DN" model, on which there is a constitutive explanation when the thing to be explained follows from the explainer together with a general truth of some kind. There is then room to argue about the status of the general truth, whether it must be an essential truth, or a conceptual truth, or an apriori truth, or an analytic truth, or a "metaphysical law" (whatever that is), or what have you.<sup>11</sup> And Kovacs (manuscript) develops a "unificationist" model of ground, on which grounding explanations subsume phenomena under general principles of some kind. If either of these models are right, then constitutive explanations do not require some kind of worldly relation between entities, but rather general truths or principles of a certain kind.

Now, it is clear that even if one rejects Lewis' view in favor of a DN model or unificationist model of causal explanation, one can still understand important issues such as the origins of humanity as an issue concerning causal explanation. My (very weak) claim here is just that the same goes for constitutive explanation: even if you deny that constitutive explanations track relations of grounding-dependence between entities, one may still understand constitutive explanations along the lines of one of the other options; and hence one may still insist with the grounding theorist that questions of constitutive explanations limn many issues that matter.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, if the grounding theorist asserts that there is a meeting going on because various people are doing various activities, what is she thereby ontologically committed to? People, activities, and meetings; perhaps. But not propositions, or facts, or states of affairs; nor a worldly relation of "ground" between such things; nor a worldly relation of grounding dependence between entities. In this sense the grounding theorist need not think that ground is part of reality; she need not (in that sense) think that there is some worldly item, *grounding*, that constitutive explanations track. She just thinks that some things are thus-and-so because of others.

### 3. Primitivism

So much for the question of reification. Let us turn next to the question of primitiveness. Discussions of ground typically emphasize that ground is primitive in some substantial sense.<sup>13</sup> Let me now argue that grounding theorists are not committed to this view: one can coherently insist that ground plays an important role in limning issues that matter without thinking that it is a primitive in any serious sense.

What does it mean to say that ground is primitive? Unfortunately, this is often left unspecified, and in fact there are many senses in which ground might be said to be primitive. I will distinguish six:

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<sup>11</sup> For models of ground along these lines, see Rosen (2010), Wilsch (XXXX), and Dasgupta (2014).

<sup>12</sup> Schaffer has done more than perhaps anyone to explore the analogue between ground and causation. Just to be clear, my point here is not that this analogy is a mistake (though see Koslicki (2016) and Bernstein (forthcoming) for a dissenting view). My point is just that he has drawn the analogy to a very particular model of causation. Thus we should be aware that the ontological upshots of Schaffer's work on ground are particular to a specific model of causation he draws analogy to, not general to ground writ large.

<sup>13</sup> Footnote with references to such statements.



- ideologically primitive
- modally primitive
- scrutably primitive
- metaphysically primitive
- methodologically primitive
- intellectually primitive

As we will see, the first four are relatively substantial senses of being primitive, but the final two are not. To foreshadow, my claim is that grounding theorists must take ground to be primitive in the final two senses, but not in the others.

Let me start by explaining these six notions. Following McDaniel (forthcoming), let us say that a concept is *ideologically primitive* iff it has no reductive definition or analysis. Given how I understand ground, a reductive definition of ground would take the form

S because T, U,... =df .....

where ‘because’ does not appear on the right-hand side.

By contrast, something is *modally primitive*, roughly speaking, if it does not supervene on anything else. It is clear that these two senses of ‘primitive’ can come apart. For example, one might think that ‘knowledge’ is ideologically primitive, given the sustained failure to analyze it in other terms. But it is not modally primitive: worlds agreeing on all the non-knowledge facts about belief, truth, justification, causation, and so forth, surely agree on all facts about knowledge.

Ground is modally primitive if constitutive explanations do not supervene on anything else, but there are different strengths of modal primitiveness depending on what we include in “anything else”. Call a fact *non-grounding* if it can be expressed without the constitutive ‘because’. The non-grounding facts include all the categorical facts, and also facts about essences, laws of metaphysics, or Schaffer’s relations of grounding-dependence (so long as they can be expressed without ‘because’). Then ground is *strongly modally primitive* iff constitutive explanations do not supervene on the non-grounding facts; that is, iff two metaphysically possible worlds can agree on all the categorical facts *and* on all facts about essence and ground-dependence and so on, yet still disagree on what constitutively explains what.

I suspect that few think that ground is strongly modally primitive. More plausible, perhaps, is the idea that ground does not supervene on the categorical facts alone, in which case we can call it *weakly modally primitive*. Thus, if ground is weakly but not strongly modally primitive, then two metaphysically possible worlds can agree on all categorical facts but disagree on what constitutively explains what (perhaps because they also disagree on facts about essences or ground-dependence or such like). Still, I suspect that many grounding theorists would deny that ground is even weakly modally primitive. For a common assumption about ground is that ground is “internal”; that is,

Necessarily, if S because T, U,... then: necessarily, if T, U,... then S because T, U,....

Clearly, this implies that ground is not even weakly modally primitive.<sup>14</sup>

Still, even if one denies that ground is weakly modally primitive, one might think it is primitive in the epistemic sense that facts about ground are not apriori derivable from other facts. This leads us to the notion of being *scrutably primitive*. Formally speaking this is just like being modally primitive except that now we use *epistemically possible worlds*, in David Chalmers' sense of the term, in place of metaphysically possible worlds (see Chalmers (2012) and references therein for more on his conception of epistemic possibility). For Chalmers, an epistemically possible world is, roughly speaking, a way things could be for all one knows apriori. So, ground is *strongly scrutably primitive* if two epistemically possible worlds can agree on all the non-grounding facts and disagree on what constitutively explains what; that is (roughly speaking), if knowledge of all the categorical facts and facts about essences and laws of metaphysics and so forth does not put one in a position to apriori derive what constitutively explains what. And ground is *weakly scrutably primitive* iff two epistemically possible worlds can agree on all the categorical facts while disagreeing on what constitutively explains what. Thus, if ground is weakly but not strongly scrutably primitive, then knowing all the categorical facts of the world would not put you in a position to apriori derive what explains what, but adding knowledge of the non-categorical facts about essences and so forth may do the trick. And if ground is not even weakly scrutably primitive, then one can apriori derive what explains what just from knowledge of the categorical facts alone.

It is clear that being scrutably primitive can come apart from being ideologically primitive. Knowledge, for example, is arguably ideologically primitive, but not scrutably primitive since it is (arguably) apriori derivable who knows what from a complete description of the non-knowledge facts. The relation between scrutable and modal primitiveness is more complex and depends upon background views about the relation between metaphysical and epistemic possibility.

The three senses of being primitive just described are all reasonably substantial: discovering that something is ideologically, modally, or scrutably primitive shows us that it has a "life of its own" in some definitional, modal, or epistemic sense. But one might also think that ground is primitive in some more straightforwardly metaphysical sense. This leads us to what McDaniel (forthcoming) calls *metaphysical primitiveness*. As McDaniel recognizes, this is a "catch all" category that comes in many flavors depending on what tools of metaphysics one recognizes. For example, one might say that ground is metaphysically primitive because it is perfectly "natural" or "structural", in the Lewis-Sider sense of these terms (Lewis 1983; Sider 2011). Or, one might say that ground is metaphysically primitive in the sense that it does not "ontologically depend" on anything else. Or one might say that ground is metaphysically primitive in the sense that constitutive explanations do not themselves have constitutive explanations. There are other flavors of metaphysical primitiveness too; I will not attempt to list them all. Just for the sake of specificity, I will focus on the first flavor and stipulate that ground is *metaphysically primitive* iff it is perfectly natural. I suspect that what I say about this flavor will generalize to the others.

In contrast to these four substantial senses in which ground may be primitive, there are two considerably less robust senses. McDaniel says that ground is *methodologically primitive* iff "it is dialectically permissible to appeal to grounding in one's metaphysical theories without attempting to define or analyze this notion"; or, I will add, without attempting much in the way of

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<sup>14</sup> For certain purposes it may help to make further distinctions here. Say that a fact is *local* to a collection of facts P, Q, ... iff it is one of P, Q, ... or concerns non categorical facts about their constituents. XXXX

clarification either (forthcoming, p. XX). This is not to deny that further philosophical reflection might lead one to doubt the intelligibility of the notion after all; it is just to say that such reflection is not a prerequisite for reasonably using the notion of ground in asking questions and theorizing about their answers. Finally, let us say that ground is *intellectually primitive* if it limns logical space in interesting ways; that is, if the kinds of issues we often find ourselves concerned with are questions of what grounds what.

Now, must a grounding theorist take ground to be primitive in any of these senses? Clearly she must regard ground as intellectually primitive. Her view is that ground limns logical space along lines that matter; this is *by definition* to say that it is intellectually primitive. And given that ground is—like causation—an everyday concept expressed in natural language, it is surely methodologically primitive too. To think otherwise would be akin to claiming that it is dialectically impermissible to ask what causes cancer prior to producing a definition or analysis or clarification of the notion of causation! Insofar as causal explanation is clearly methodologically primitive, so too is constitutive explanation.

But I claim that the grounding theorist need not regard ground as primitive in any of the four more robust senses. This can be seen by a comparison with causal explanation. Lewis famously analyzed causal explanation in terms of causal dependence, and causal dependence in terms of counterfactuals, and counterfactuals in terms of laws, and laws in terms of summaries of categorical matters of fact. Thus, on his view causal explanation is not even weakly modally primitive: worlds agreeing on categorical matters will agree on all facts about laws, counterfactuals, causal dependence, and hence on what causally explains what. Nor, on his view, is causal explanation metaphysically primitive in our sense, since it is (on his view) not perfectly natural. And if we propose his account as a linguistic analysis of terms, it implies that causal explanation is not ideologically primitive either. As for whether causal explanation is scrutably primitive, Lewis' view itself does not settle this one way or another. But it is plausible to combine his view with a view on which full knowledge of the categorical facts puts one in a position to apriori derive knowledge of the facts about laws, and then counterfactuals, and then causal dependence, and finally the causal explanations. Let us adopt this understanding of Lewis' view for the sake of argument.

So, on the view under consideration, causal explanation is not ideologically, modally, scrutably, or metaphysically primitive. But still, I claim, this should cast no doubt whatsoever on the idea that causal explanation is intellectually primitive; that (say) the question of human origins is usefully framed as the question of what *causally explains* our existence. Indeed, I suspect that Lewis himself regarded causal explanation as intellectually primitive in this sense—that is presumably why he took it to be such an important concept in need of philosophical attention!

The same, it seems, goes for ground. Suppose there is some analysis of constitutive explanation that bottoms out in patterns of categorical facts, perhaps analogous in some way to the Lewisian analysis of causal explanation just considered. If so, then ground would not be ideologically or modally or scrutably or metaphysically primitive. But—just as with causal explanation—I see no reason why this should cast doubt on the idea that ground is intellectually primitive; that it limns many questions of interest. The division between views on which minds are constitutively explained in terms of matter and views on which they are not seems deep and important, regardless of whether constitutive explanation is primitive in any of these robust senses.

My claim in this paper, remember, is that the role of ground I started with—that of limning issues of interest—can be filled by a deflated notion of ground. At this point one might object that my claim is true but insignificant. After all, what is emerging is that the role I started with is rather minimal; no surprise then that it can be filled by a deflated notion! But, the objection goes, is it not clear that ground was always supposed to do *more* than this? And is it not precisely because of this that it has been thought to be primitive in some robust sense? Relatedly, one might object that my use of the term ‘ground’ is idiosyncratic: others use it explicitly to refer to something that is primitive in some robust sense, so that all I have shown is that ground (in their sense of the term) is not needed to limn many issues that matter. In short, the objection is that I have changed the subject: if I have said something true, I have not said anything interesting about *ground*.

Let me make two points in response. First and least importantly, I do not think I have changed the subject—or, at least, *a* subject. Much of the contemporary interest in ground stems from Fine’s influential papers of 2001 and 2012, and I have followed his use of the terms here here. For example, in both papers he explicitly uses the term as a label for a constitutive mode of explanation expressed by the word ‘because’, just as I did here. Nothing Fine says in these papers indicates that he takes this to be, or track, anything primitive in the robust senses discussed above. And in both papers the central role he describes the concept as playing is that of limning questions of philosophical interest; see for example (Fine 2001; section X) and (Fine 2012; section 1.2). Thus, I submit that what I mean by the term here, and the central role I emphasize, is an accurate reflection of what Fine talked about in those influential early papers. This is not to deny that others use ‘ground’ differently: as I pointed out in section 2 the term is ambiguous in the contemporary vernacular, and Schaffer (for example) has meant something different by it all along. But it would be odd to say that Fine was never talking about ground in *any* sense of the term!

But that point is largely verbal. The more important point is that even if I am changing the subject, it is a subject worth changing. Putting aside the term ‘ground’, my substantive claim is that there is a philosophically important role—that of limning the logical space of views in ways that matter—that can be performed by a notion of constitutive explanation that is deflated in the above ways. I do not think this should be controversial, but it is easy to miss if one (i) uses ‘ground’ stipulatively to refer to an inflated notion (if to anything) and then (ii) raises skepticism about the inflated notion. For then a rejection of inflationary ground can easily mislead one into rejecting *any* notion in the vicinity, including various deflated notions that might be of use.

For example, Jessica Wilson (2014) argued that there is “no work” for ground in philosophy; that all we need to do metaphysics are particular relations such as identity, parthood, set-membership, functional realization, the determinate-determinable relation, and the proper subset relation.<sup>15</sup> Wilson calls these “small-g” grounding relations, in contrast with the “big-G” Grounding relation that she takes to be posited by recent grounding theorists. She does not entirely reject all talk of constitutive explanation, she just understands it as “schematically and neutrally ranging over specific ‘small-g’ grounding relations” (p. 557). Thus, Wilson’s view is that insofar as it is true that there is a table because pieces of wood are arranged table-wise, this is underwritten by the fact that the pieces of wood are parts of the table. Hence, she concludes, ground has no role to play in philosophy.

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<sup>15</sup> Wilson also thinks that a “big-F” notion of Fundamentality is needed, but I ignore that part of her theory for now.

Is Wilson right that all constitutive explanations are underwritten by the small-g relations she lists? I am not sure.<sup>16</sup> But even if she is right, the conclusion does not follow. At most, what follows is that ground is not metaphysically or modally primitive—I take it that this is what Wilson means when she denies that ‘the metaphysical posit of Grounding [tracks] a course-grained joint in nature’ (p. 556), or that it tracks ‘a distinctive aspect of metaphysical reality’. Perhaps it also follows from her arguments that ground is not ideologically or scrutably primitive either. Still, all that is consistent with the grounding theorist’s central claim that ground is *intellectually* primitive in the sense that it limns many philosophical issues of importance.

Perhaps the disagreement here is merely verbal. Perhaps by ‘big-G’ grounding, Wilson stipulatively means an inflated notion of ground that is metaphysically or modally or ideologically primitive, so that her conclusion is that there is no work for ground in *that* sense of the term. If so, I have no objection.<sup>17</sup> My point is that even so, we may still claim with the grounding theorist that there is work for a deflated notion of constitutive explanation: its work is to limn many issues of importance.

This claim is entirely consistent, note, with Wilson’s observation that we are often interested in more specific questions involving small-g relations. Koslicki (2015) makes a related point, insisting that ground is too course-grained to capture the important differences between the correct account of such diverse items as minds, holes, heaps, artworks, and so on. They are surely correct here: philosophers working on the mind-body problem do not just want to know *whether* the body explains mind; they also want to know *how* the explanation goes, *which* specific small-g relation between mind and body (if any) facilitates the explanation, and so on. It may even be that investigations into what grounds what “conducted without any reference to specific metaphysical details”—that is, without reference to the particular small-g relations —“cannot be carried out” (Wilson 2014, p. 549). But that is consistent with the grounding theorist’s claim that an important division in logical space is between views on which there is *some* explanation or other, and views on which there is none.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> In particular, consider the following constitutive explanations: that P is Q because Q; that Jones is a bachelor because Jones is unmarried and a man; and that two bodies are 1 meter apart because of their locations in substantial space. In none of these cases is there an obvious relation of identity, parthood, set-membership, functional realization, determinate-to-determinable, or subset-to-set, that could underwrite the explanation. Perhaps Wilson can argue that there is. Or perhaps the list of small-g relations she gave was incomplete (though without some constraint on how it can be completed, there is a worry that her claim is vacuous). Still, as it stands it is unclear to me whether every constitutive explanation is underwritten by a small-g relation.

<sup>17</sup> Which is not to say that I necessarily agree. At present I am undecided as to whether there is work for a notion of something primitive in these substantive senses to underwrite grounding explanations.

<sup>18</sup> According to Wilson (2016), Ted Sider made this point in his Locke Lectures at Oxford University in 2016. In reply, Wilson accepts the point but observes that it does not follow that constitutive explanation “has a metaphysical correlate” (p. 11). I agree that nothing like this follows—at least not if “metaphysical correlate” means something that is primitive in the senses discussed above. My point is that the grounding thesis does not require a metaphysical correlate like that. Relatedly, Wilson says on p. 10 that ground cannot be a kind of explanation, since explanation contains epistemic-cum-psychological aspects and is not a “properly metaphysical notion of dependence”. My point is that the grounding thesis does not require that it be a properly metaphysical notion with no epistemic or psychological aspects. Again, there may be no disagreement with Wilson here, if she was stipulatively using “ground” to refer to something primitive in some substantial sense.

Compare again with the case of causal explanation. The division between views on which the causal explanation of our existence appeals to design, and “naturalist” views on which it does not, is clearly of fundamental intellectual importance. But of course there are many possible naturalistic explanations available—some involving evolution by natural selection, others emphasizing genetic drift and other non-adaptationist processes—and naturalists should be interested in which one is correct. And there are many historical particulars to fill out too, including the precise details of the phylogenetic tree over the past 7 million years from *Sehelanthropus* through *Australopithecus* to modern *Homo sapiens*. Naturalists should be interested in all these details. Indeed it may be—to echo Wilson—that investigations into the question of naturalism vs design cannot be conducted without attention to the specific explanatory models in detail. But none of that is in tension with the claim that causal explanation is intellectually primitive; that one of the deep and important issues of the modern era is whether there is *some causal explanation or other* that is design-free.

This point was well illustrated by Mike Pence’s speech in 2002 to the House of Representatives, in which he claimed that natural selection is “just a theory” and that creationism should be given an equal place in the school curriculum.<sup>19</sup> His argument was that a particular naturalistic view about the evolution of humanity—a view involving the relation between Neanderthals and modern humans—was recently overturned by new scientific evidence. This shows, he said, that natural selection is “just a theory” that could easily be overturned tomorrow by new evidence. The reply, of course, is that refuting a specific naturalistic story does very little to refute the general claim that *some naturalistic process or other* was responsible for our existence. Clearly, it is this general issue that is fundamentally at stake between Pence and the naturalists, not any particular theory of the Neanderthals. The notion of causal explanation is ideally suited expressing this general issue. My claim is that the same goes for constitutive explanation. Thus, it is precisely *because* ground is coarse-grained in the ways that Koslicki and Wilson emphasize that it is so well suited to limning big-picture issues such as whether mentation arises from brain processes *in some way or other*. I therefore take its coarse-grainedness to be a virtue, not a vice.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, my main claim—that ground can play the role of limning issues of importance even if it is not primitive in any substantive respect—is consistent with much of what Wilson argues. This illustrates how weak (and plausible!) the claim is. Still, this is not to say that it is entirely uncontroversial. I would expect some push-back on the claim that ground can limn issues of importance even if it is not *metaphysically* primitive; that is, even if it is not perfectly natural.<sup>21</sup> So let me set aside some worries that arise in this regard. If ground is not perfectly natural, one question is whether it is more natural than other things in its immediate vicinity. More precisely, call an expression *indiscriminate* iff out of all the candidate semantic values that roughly fit our usage of the expression, none are (significantly) more natural than the rest. For example, ‘mountain’ is arguably indiscriminate: the properties

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<sup>19</sup> His speech can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ikax0YONJsY>.

<sup>20</sup> Koslicki (2015) argues that there is a dialectical tension here: if notion of supervenience was criticized for being too coarse-grained, why is the coarse-grained notion of ground any better? The reply, I think, is that they are coarse-grained in different respects: supervenience is coarse-grained as to directionality, whereas ground is not. But in any case, the objection to supervenience was not *just* that it was coarse-grained, but also that it was not itself an explanatory notion.

<sup>21</sup> Thanks to Ted Sider for brining this line of concern to my attention.

being a mound over 1000 feet tall,  
being a mound over 1001 feet tall,

and so on, are all candidate semantic values that roughly fit our usage of the term, but none are more natural than the rest. By contrast, 'electron' is arguably discriminate.

Now, if ground is indiscriminate, one might object that it cannot limit issues that matter, contrary to what I just claimed. But why? One reason might be that, if it is indiscriminate, then questions of ground will turn out to be *nonsubstantive* in Sider's sense: each answer comes out true on one of the (equally natural) candidate semantic values. For example, Helm Crag stands at 1001 feet, so the question of whether it is a mountain is nonsubstantive: it hangs on which of the equally natural candidate semantic values we choose for our term 'mountain'. And there is a sense in which nonsubstantive questions are somehow shallow or verbal or uninteresting: given that they turn on arbitrary semantic decision, resolving them appears not to reveal any "deep fact" about the world. But if this is the worry, it rests on a non-sequitur. True, if an expression is indiscriminate then *some* questions involving it may be nonsubstantive. But it does not follow that *all*, or even *most*, questions involving it are. The question of whether there are mountains in India is clearly substantive, for the answer is 'yes' on all candidate semantic values of 'mountain'. There is nothing shallow or verbal or uninteresting about the question at all. The same goes for causal and constitutive explanation. Even if the notions are indiscriminate, it does not follow that all or even most questions involving them are nonsubstantive.

Still, the objection might be pushed that we have no reason to *care* about questions of causal or constitutive explanation, if the concepts are indiscriminate. The worry is that their being indiscriminate "debunks" the importance we previously attached to them: once we see that they do not track anything that stands out from its surroundings, we should truck with the concepts no longer. Now, put like this the objection again rests on a non-sequitur: 'mountain' is indiscriminate, but it is hard to see why we should not care whether there are mountains in India. But perhaps the objection is best heard as shifting the burden of proof; as a request for some reason to care about questions of causal or constitutive explanation, if the concepts are indiscriminate.

I do not know exactly what the correct answer to this request is, but I see no reason to doubt that there is one. To illustrate, here are two candidate answers. Sider defines an indiscriminate concept to be *conventional* iff we introduced it with a certain goal in mind and any of the candidate semantic values would equally serve that goal, so we chose one of them as the semantic value arbitrarily. The concept '1 inch' is his example: we introduced it with the goal of representing distances within a certain small range; any unit length between 1 and 3 inches (say) would have done the trick; so we chose the unit we did arbitrarily. Now, it is precisely *because* we care about the goal of representing distances that we should care about how long various things are in inches. More generally, we should care about questions involving a conventional concept *precisely because* we care about the goal they were introduced to serve. Thus, one answer to the current challenge would be to argue that causal or constitutive explanation is conventional in this sense.

Another possibility is that our concepts of explanation are "projective" in Sider's sense that (i) one (or some small number) of its candidate semantic values *V* is in fact its semantic value, and (ii) what fixes *V* as its semantic value are our attitudes or responses to *V*. As an example, Sider proposes the following toy account of 'beautiful': it refers to a certain physical property *P*,

and does so not because P is more natural than other properties in the vicinity but because we have positive aesthetic reactions or attitudes to things with P. On this view, ‘beautiful’ has an objective semantic value, namely P, but selection of P as its semantic value is a reflection of *us*, not of the world. Now, if this is the right account of ‘beautiful’, it would be odd to complain that we have no reason to care about beauty. To the contrary, one might argue, we should care about beauty *precisely because* it is a property towards which we have positive attitudes!

Thus, another answer to the current challenge would be to argue that causal or constitutive explanation is projective in this sense. On this view, one of the many equally natural candidate semantic values is special because *we* find it particularly elegant, or simple, or aesthetically beautiful in some other respect. This view is attractive in part because it explains why explanations have these aesthetic qualities! But more pertinently, it answers the debunking worry: on this view, far from dismissing our concepts of causal and constitutive explanation for being indiscriminate, we should embrace them precisely because they are reflections of what *we* value.

We are starting to see just how deflationary a grounding theorist. She may insist that ground limns issues of intellectual importance, even while holding the conventionalist or projectivist views of ground just described.

#### 4. Realism

Let me turn now to the third respect in which ground can be deflated. The issue here concerns whether constitutive explanations are objective, or whether they are relative to facts about us such as our interests or concerns; facts which may vary from culture to culture or time to time. As I use the term, a “realist” thinks the former while an “anti-realist” thinks the latter. Thus, the anti-realist picture is that two cultures might offer conflicting constitutive explanations and yet there may be no fact of the matter who is “really correct”: each explanation may be correct relative to their respective interests and concerns, so that in a sense the two cultures do not disagree. Recent discussions of ground tend to tacitly presuppose a realist picture, but I will argue that grounding theorists are not committed to that view: one can coherently think that ground plays an important role in limning issues that matter and still hold an anti-realist view about the status of ground.

This issue of realism vs anti-realism about ground has received very little explicit attention—indeed, the recent literature on ground largely overlooks the very possibility of anti-realism.<sup>22</sup> So let me start by explaining the issue in more detail and outlining some possible motivations for anti-realism. I said that the realist thinks that grounding claims are objective, but there is of course an issue about what this means. A flat-footed characterization would describe the realist as thinking that the “facts” about what explains what have the form

(1) S because T, U,....

while the anti-realist thinks they take the form

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<sup>22</sup> One notable exception is Naomi Thompson (manuscript), who develops an interesting anti-realist approach to metaphysical explanation. The only other instance I know of in which anti-realism acknowledged as a possibility is a brief remark by Schaffer (2010) to the effect that his notion of grounding-dependence can “in principle be relativized to one’s practical interests or theoretical scheme” (p. 347).



(1A) S because T, U,... relative to R.

where R is some feature of us such as our interests, concerns, cognitive constitution, etc. But this appeals to “facts” and their “form”, and I argued earlier that a grounding theorist may not recognize any substantive notion of fact. A somewhat more sophisticated characterization might follow Chalmers’ (2009) characterization of realism and anti-realism about ontology. This approach would describe realism about ground as the view that assertions of the form of (1) have objective truth-values, where a truth-value is objective if it does not depend on a parameter like R. Anti-realism can then be characterized as the negation of realism, and would include views on which the truth-value of assertions of (1) depend on a choice of interests or concerns, and views on which they do not have truth-values in the first place thanks to being non-cognitive in some sense. This is not wholly satisfactory either, but it will do for our purposes.<sup>23</sup> For concreteness, I will assume that R consists in various conative attitudes such as our interests, concerns, desires, and so on.

As just characterized, anti-realism is neutral between a number of semantic views about utterances of (1). An anti-realist might say that the truth-value of an assertion of (1) depends on the attitudes of the *asserter*, resulting in a kind of contextualism. Or she might say that the truth-value depends on the interests of the *assessor*, resulting in a kind of relativism. She might also say that assertions of (1) have a non-cognitive content, for example an expression of (one’s approval of) the relevant conative attitudes. I will not try to decide these issues here. But note the difference between all these anti-realist views and the projectivist view described at the end of the last section. On the projectivist view, our attitudes and responses help fix the semantic value of the constitutive ‘because’, but the semantic value thereby fixed may itself be fully objective in the sense that the truth-value of an assertion of (1) depends only on “the world” and not on our attitudes or responses. By contrast, according to anti-realism our attitudes play a different role: they help determine the truth-value of an assertion of (1), insofar as it even has one.

The anti-realist says that ‘because’ is interest-relative, but it is important not to confuse the relativity here with the interest-relativity in the *practice* of giving explanations. It is a familiar point that *what one should say* in answer to a question ‘Why P?’ depends on what the asker knows, what you know, what the common-knowledge in the conversation is, what purposes and interests the asker has in asking the question, and so on. Thus, even if the DN account of causal explanation is true, it may be that when answering the question “What causally explains why P?” in a particular context, you should only cite a fraction of the full explanation. But this fact about pragmatics has nothing to do with explanation *per se*: it is ubiquitous in any request for information. If I come to your pick-up soccer game and ask what rules you play, it would be some kind of joke to respond “No touching the ball with your hands; no kicking your opponent in the face...”. It is true that you play by those rules, but obviously I know this, and you know that I know this. What I want—and what you know I want—is information about the rules that might vary between different pick-up games: whether you play the off-side rule, whether you allow goalies, and so on. As Lewis rightly said, there is no such thing as the pragmatics of explanation *per se*; there is just pragmatics (see Lewis 1986, p. 227).

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<sup>23</sup> One issue is that someone might deny that explanations are interest-relative, and so count as a realist in the sense I intend, but nonetheless think that explanations are not strictly speaking “true” or “false” at all but rather “correct” or “incorrect”. So perhaps it would be better to characterize realism as the view that assertions of (1) can be evaluated—for truth, or correctness, or whatever the standard of evaluation is—without regard to a set of interests or concerns. But I will not pursue this subtlety here.

Let the “pragmatic causal explanation” of why S, in a context C, be what is pragmatically appropriate to say in C in response to the question ‘What causally explains why S?’. And let the “full causal explanation” of why S be the complete explanation that the pragmatic explanation presumably draws from.<sup>24</sup> We can draw an analogous distinction between pragmatic and full explanations in the case of constitutive explanation. When I said at the beginning that by ‘ground’ I mean constitutive explanation, I meant the notion of *full* constitutive explanation. Thus, the question of realism vs anti-realism concerns whether there is an interest-relativity in *full* constitutive explanations, not pragmatic ones.<sup>25</sup>

One might object that if this is what I mean by ‘ground’ then I am no longer entitled to claim, as I did in the last section, that ground is methodologically primitive. Recall that ground is methodologically primitive if it is dialectically permissible to use it without attempting to analyze or define it, or even give it much clarification. I said that ground is methodologically primitive because it is part of natural language, but if natural language trades in *pragmatic* explanations then one might object that only the notion of pragmatic explanation, not full explanation, is methodologically primitive. I respond that this is a perverse way to think about methodological primitiveness. Consider the English term ‘rule’. In everyday discourse we almost never state the full rules of a game: as in the case of the pick-up soccer game, our talk is typically subject to pragmatic factors that have us describe a fraction of the full rules. But this does not mean that we cannot be methodological primitivists about the notion of rules in the full sense. It is surely permissible to talk about the full rules of soccer in theorizing (say) about doping in sport, without first attempting to analyze what a rule is. (Though of course this is consistent with Wittgenstein’s point that, on further analysis, the notion of a rule is deeply problematic.) Indeed, since there no such thing as the pragmatics of explanation *per se*, just pragmatics, this phenomenon of pragmatic interest-relativity is ubiquitous and will occur in describing recipes, directions to parties, and so on. One almost never describes *everything*. But it surely does not follow that the notion of a complete recipe, or a complete set of directions, is not methodologically primitive! We should be methodological primitivists about recipes; *mutatis mutandis* about ground.

The anti-realist thinks that (full) constitutive explanations are relative to a set of interests, but that leaves open whether all interests are equally rational when it comes to seeking explanations. A “Humean” view would be that any internally consistent set of interests are rational, but the anti-realist might think that there are extra constraints. For example, she might adopt a “constructivist” view on which various rational constraints stem from us, for example from the nature of human agency, or from the proper function of a human being. Or she might think that some rational constraints stem from the world. For example, if one recognized a notion of metaphysical necessity that was understood independently of constitutive explanation, one might conceivably see the principle of necessitation—the principle that grounds necessitate what they ground—as an objective constraint on rational interests. The idea would be that any interests relative to which constitutive explanations do not satisfy the principle are not rational

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<sup>24</sup> Footnote to Railton and Woodward... and the idea that this distinction was wheeled in to save the DN model.

<sup>25</sup> There is a question of the semantics of pragmatic explanations in everyday discourse. Suppose that the full explanation of why S is that T, U, ..., yet suppose that in context C the pragmatic explanation of why S is that T. How should we evaluate an assertion of “S because T” in C? On one view, it is false but pragmatically assertible. On another view, it is true thanks to the fact that, given the full explanation and the context C, “S because T” is the right thing to say. I will not try to settle this issue here. But note that one’s view here may influence the way one defines the realism vs anti-realism issue; see footnote 16.

interests to have when seeking explanations.<sup>26</sup> What the anti-realist cannot do—on pain of giving up anti-realism—is say that constraints on rational interests stem from which objective explanations are correct. Again, I will not try to decide what the best form of anti-realism is.

Why might one find anti-realism attractive? We can already set aside two bad reasons. First, one cannot motivate anti-realism by pointing out the interest-relativity in the pragmatics of giving explanations, for as we just saw that would misunderstand what anti-realism is. Second, suppose the DN model is the true theory of causal explanation. Still, the unificationist model correctly describes *something*; call them causal schmexplanations. Why did our term “because” latch on to explanations, not schmexplanations? Perhaps for pragmatic reasons to do with our interests and concerns. If so, one might then argue that anti-realism follows. But again, that would be a mistake: *at most* what follows is a projectivist view of causal explanation analogous to the projectivist view described at the end of section 3.<sup>27</sup> The point is that anti-realism is not a claim about why we ended up using the concept of explanation we use; it is a view about the resulting concept of explanation.

Still, there are better arguments for anti-realism; let me outline two (a third will emerge as we go along). The first appeals to the connection between explanation and understanding. It is a truism that explanations provide understanding, but what is the source of this truth? On one view, it is true in virtue of what it is to understand. On this “explanation-first” view, the notion of explanation is given independently of the notion of understanding, and then to *understand* something just is to know its explanation. But an “understanding-first” view goes the other way round: we have a notion of understanding that is given independently of the notion of explanation, and then an *explanation* just is something that yields understanding. This second view provides a possible route into anti-realism: one would argue for the (not implausible) claim that whether an agent’s mental state is a state of *understanding* depends on her interests and concerns, and then argue on the basis of the understanding-first view that this induces an interest-relativity in the notion of explanation.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> To be clear, I mention this just as an example and find it implausible that the principle of necessitation would play this role. More plausible, in my opinion, is that metaphysical necessity is understood in part in terms of the notion of constitutive explanation, so that if explanation is interest-relative then so too is metaphysical necessity.

<sup>27</sup> And even that does not follow: it may be that explanation is perfectly natural, in which case a projectivist view would be inappropriate. But still, it may be that the reason we talk about explanation (rather than something else) has to do with our interests and concerns.

<sup>28</sup> To motivate this rationale for anti-realism, note that this understanding-first view is arguably widespread in the literature on scientific explanation. Consider views such as Salmon’s statistical relevance view, on which one can explain an event by citing its probability even if the probability was low. On this kind of view, we can explain why a coin 90% weighted towards heads came up tails by saying that it had a 10% chance of coming up tails. On the face of it, this is puzzling: why not instead say that its coming up tails has no explanation—at least, no full explanation? Woodward (2013) offers the obvious answer: “the intuition underlying the [statistical relevance] model is that we *understand* both outcomes equally well... once we have cited the toss (and specified the probability values for heads and tails on tossing), we left nothing out that influences either outcome... we have specified all information relevant to the [coin toss] and in this sense *fully explained* the outcome” (p. 28; my emphasis). The idea is that once we *understand* everything about the outcome, we have *fully explained* it. This makes sense on the understanding-first view. But on the explanation-first view, Woodward’s passage does not answer the puzzle: why not instead say that there is no full explanation and so, though we understand everything there is to understand, this does not amount to explanation? Thus, it appears that the understanding-first view is presupposed by Salmon’s statistical relevance account.

A second argument for anti-realism rests on the idea that explanations carve at the joints: the correct explanation (causal or constitutive) of why P will be stated in terms that pick out natural kinds, or more generally in “structural” terms, as Ted Sider puts it. If one then agrees, with Kitcher (2012), that the notion of a natural-kind is interest-relative, it follows that explanation is interest-relative too. A similar argument can be run without requiring that explanations must be given in *perfectly* natural or structural terms; all that is needed is that there is some constraint on explanations in terms of the notion of naturalness or structure, for example that the correct explanations use the most natural or structural terms relevant to the thing being explained. If it is an interest-relative matter what is more natural or structural, anti-realism follows.

That should give some sense of what anti-realism is and why one might believe it. But my main concern here is not whether anti-realism is true, but whether the grounding theorist can accept it. And it seems to me that she can. Consider the case of causal explanation. Suppose one thinks that the notion of causal explanation limns many issues of importance such as the question of human origins. And now suppose we are told that anti-realism about causal explanation is true. This gives the question of our origins some perspective: we see it now as a question with “historicity”, situated in our “cultural milieu”, so that answers may depend on our particular interests and concerns and do not reflect fully objective matters of fact. But does that mean that the question is no longer one that matters? I cannot see how it would. Perhaps the worry is that the interest-relativity would render the question of human origins *trivial* or *easy to settle*. But if that is the worry, it is based on a mistake: it may well be that, given our interests and concerns, whether there is a design-free explanation of our existence (for us) will only be settled by extensive empirical investigation into our evolutionary past. Or perhaps the worry is that the interest-relativity would render the question of human origins *unimportant* or *not worth pursuing*. But again, this seems to me a mistake. After all, the question of what one prudentially ought to do obviously depends in part on one’s interests, yet is about as important as it gets! Finally, perhaps the worry is that the interest-relativity renders the question of human origins disappointingly *arbitrary* and *uninteresting*; that it “debunks” whatever meaning the question might have had for us. Once again, this strikes me as mistaken. In deciding what to do prudentially speaking, whose interests am I to use but my own? The fact that what I should do depends on *my* parochial interests does not render the question “arbitrary” in any objectionable sense! Quite the opposite, one might argue: it is precisely *because* the answer depends on *my* interests that the answer is meaningful *to me*! The same goes for questions of causal explanation, says the anti-realist.

Precisely the same goes for constitutive explanation. Suppose that as grounding theorists we frame the issue of substantivalism as the question of whether geometric relations between bodies are constitutively explained by their positions in substantival space. And suppose we then discover that anti-realism is true, so that the answer depends in part on our interests and concerns. As above, this does not imply that the question is at all trivial: it may well be that, given our interests, the right explanation (for us) of geometric relations between bodies hangs on all kinds of empirically and philosophically sophisticated lines of reasoning such as the bucket argument, symmetry arguments, and so on. Nor is the question rendered unimportant, as the case of prudential questions shows. And nor does the dependence on our parochial interests mean that the answer is “arbitrary” or “meaningless” in any objectionable sense. True, in asking whether there is such a thing as substantival space we must choose some interests, but whose interests are we to use but our own? Indeed as before one might even argue that the

fact that the answer depends on *our* interests is precisely what renders the question meaningful *to us!*<sup>29</sup>

Thus, I claim, the grounding theorist is not committed to realism about ground: she can coherently say that ground is interest-relative and still insist that it limns logical space in ways that matter. This is the third respect in which ground can be deflated.

The resulting anti-realist picture of metaphysics is half-way Carnapian. Carnap famously said that metaphysical questions of existence—such as whether there are such things as numbers, properties, or mereological sums—can be understood in two ways. There is the “internal” question of whether (say) numbers exist *relative to a given linguistic framework*. And then there is the “external” question of whether numbers *really* exist, independently of a linguistic framework. Carnap’s view was that internal questions are trivial: a linguistic framework will include analytic inference rules governing when one is entitled to infer that (say) numbers exist, so the internal question of whether numbers exist is a relatively trivial task of analytic derivation. He also claimed that the external questions are meaningless. They ask whether (say) there are “really” numbers independent of a linguistic framework, and yet it is only from a linguistic framework that the relevant terms—like “number”—get their meaning. The result is a pessimistic view of metaphysics: the questions it *wants* to ask are meaningless, but the only questions it *can* ask are trivial. (Or, to adopt Thomasson’s (2015) more optimistic gloss, this is metaphysics “made easy”.)

The picture of metaphysics we get on the anti-realist conception of ground is similar in two respects. First, anti-realism draws an analogous distinction between internal and external questions. The internal questions now concern what constitutively explains what relative to a set of interests; the external questions concern what “really” constitutively explains what, independently of any interests. And second, anti-realism implies that the external questions are without content. (Though it implies this for a different reason than does Carnap. For Carnap, subject-specific terms like ‘number’ lack content in external questions; for the anti-realist, it is the subject-neutral term ‘because’ that lacks content in those questions.) Thus, both views imply that the most a metaphysician can do is trade in internal questions.

Still, there is an important difference. On Carnap’s view the internal questions were trivial, but the same is not true on the anti-realist picture developed above. For as we saw, the “internal” question of whether (say) geometric relations between bodies can be explained, relative to our interests, in their positions in substantival space may be a highly non-trivial, non-analytic matter. The question is not directly about our concepts or ways of representing the world, and cannot always be settled by ordinary apriori reasoning; sophisticated philosophical and empirical reasoning may be required such as the bucket argument, symmetry considerations, and so on. Thus, while anti-realism agrees with Carnap that external questions in metaphysics—of what “really” explains what—are meaningless, it does not lead to a Carnapian pessimism about metaphysics. True, the most a metaphysician can do is trade in internal questions that are relative to their own cultural milieu, but these internal questions are far from trivial. Metaphysics can therefore retain its claim to asking a host of interesting and non-trivial questions.

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<sup>29</sup> Thus we can see here the outlines of a third argument for anti-realism: that only the anti-realist can explain the value of discovering constitutive explanations. I develop this kind of argument in Dasgupta (manuscript).

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