Irrealism about Grounding

NAOMI THOMPSON

Abstract
Grounding talk has become increasingly familiar in contemporary philosophical discussion. Most discussants of grounding think that grounding talk is useful, intelligible, and accurately describes metaphysical reality. Call them *realists* about grounding. Some dissenters reject grounding talk on the grounds that it is unintelligible, or unmotivated. They would prefer to eliminate grounding talk from philosophy, so we can call them *eliminitivists* about grounding. This paper outlines a new position in the debate about grounding, defending the view that grounding talk is (or at least can be) intelligible and useful. Grounding talk does not, however, provide a literal and veridical description of mind-independent metaphysical reality. This (non-eliminative) *irrealism* about grounding treads a path between realism and eliminativism.

Contemporary metaphysics is awash with talk about *grounding*. Grounding is taken to be a relation of metaphysical dependence which can act as a way of cashing out the intuition that reality exhibits a kind of *structure*; metaphysics is not just about what there is, it's about what depends on what.[1] Grounding is generally assumed to be a theoretical primitive; it is not analysable in other terms.[2] Friends of grounding thus often attempt to introduce the notion by appeal to some canonical examples of grounding claims, such as the following:

(a)   Sets are grounded in their members
(b)   The proposition <snow is white> is true in virtue of snow's being white
(c)   Tables are grounded in the atoms that compose them
(d)   Moral facts depend on natural facts
(e)   P ∨ Q because P

Most friends of grounding think a number of different locutions can be used to express grounding claims, as in the examples above.

---

[1]   See Schaffer, 'On What Grounds What' in D. Chalmers, D. Manley, & R. Wasserman, *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 347–383.
[2]   See e.g. Schaffer, 'On What Grounds What', 363–4; Rosen 'Metaphysical Dependence: Grounding and Reduction' in *Modality: Metaphysics, Logic, and Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 109–136, 113.

Naomi Thompson

Friends of grounding also tend to agree that the relevant locutions are *explanatory*. There is, however, widespread disagreement about the best way to articulate grounding claims, as well as about the precise nature of the relationship between grounding and explanation. Further points of dispute include what are the relata of the grounding relation (whether grounding relates only facts or true propositions, or also entities of other ontological categories),[3] and how grounding talk is to be connected to the notion of fundamentality.[4] Orthodoxy has is that grounding is transitive, asymmetric, irreflexive, non-monotonic and hyperintensional, though many of these suppositions have come under fire in some of the recent literature.[5] Details of the logic of ground are still hotly debated.[6]

   This is not the place to survey different conceptions of grounding.[7] Instead, the aim of this paper is to challenge a fundamental

---

[3]   For a defence of the former conception see e.g. Audi, 'A Clarification and Defense of the Notion of Ground' in *Metaphysical Grounding: Understanding the Structure of Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 101–121; Audi, 'Grounding: Toward a Theory of the In-Virtue-Of Relation', *Journal of Philosophy* 109 (2012), 685–711; Fine, 'The Question of Realism', *Philosopher's Imprint* 1:1 (2001), 1–30; Fine, 'A Guide to Ground', in *Metaphysical Grounding,* 37–80. In defence of the latter conception see e.g. Schaffer, 'On What Grounds What' and 'Monism: The Priority of the Whole', *Philosophical Review* 119 (2009), 31–76.

[4]   See e.g. Fine, 'The Question of Realism'; 'A Guide to Ground'; Schaffer, 'On What Grounds What'; Sider, *Writing the Book of the World* (Oxford: OUP, 2011); Trogdon 'An Introduction to Grounding' in *Varieties of Dependence* (Munich: Philosophia Verlag, 2012), 97–122.

[5]   See Schaffer, 'Grounding, Transitivity, and Contrastivity' in *Metaphysical Grounding*, 112–138 on transitivity; Jenkins, 'Is Metaphysical Dependence Irreflexive?', *The Monist* 94 (2011), 267–76 on irreflexivity, and Thompson 'Metaphysical Interdependence' in Jago (ed.) *Reality Making* (Oxford, OUP, 2016), 38–55 on asymmetry. Rodriguez-Pereyra argues in 'Grounding is not a Strict Order', *Journal of the APA* 1/3 (2015), 517–534 argues grounding is neither transitive, nor asymmetric, nor irreflexive.

[6]   See e.g. Correia, 'Grounding and Truth Functions' *Logique et Analyse* 53 (2010), 251–279; deRossett, 'Better Semantics for the Pure Logic of Ground', *Analytic Philosophy* (forthcoming); Krämer & Roski, 'A Note on the Worldly Logic of Ground', *Thought* 4/1 (2015), 59–68; Fine 'Some Puzzles of Ground', *Notre Dame Journal of Formal Logic* 51, 97–118.

[7]   For that, see Clark and Liggins, 'Recent Work on Grounding', *Analysis* 72 (2012), 812–823; Correia and Schnieder, *Metaphysical Grounding*; Trogdon, 'An Introduction to Grounding'; Bliss and Trogdon,

24

assumption that pervades the work of (almost) all philosophers discussing grounding; that of realism about grounding. We can think of realism about a given domain of discourse as the conjunction of two (related) theses: (i) that the objects in that domain exist, and (ii) that they do so independently of anybody's beliefs, linguistic practices, and conceptual schemes.[8] Realists about grounding think that grounding relations are part of metaphysical reality, and that their existence and nature is not dependent on or determined by anything anybody thinks or says about grounding.

I take irrealism about grounding to be the rejection of all forms of realism about grounding. Irrealists might deny that there are any grounding relations, or they might deny that those relations exist independently. The aim of this paper is to get some options for irrealism about grounding on the table, and thus to pave the way for future, more detailed discussion. Because of limitations on space, the vast majority of the paper focuses on versions of irrealism where the existence dimension of realism is rejected (rather than the independence dimension). There are a number of further interesting possibilities for accounts of grounding where the independence but not the existence dimension of realism is rejected (e.g. response-dependent accounts, subjectivist accounts and projectivist accounts). Discussion of these must remain a project for another time.

I begin with a discussion of eliminativism about grounding, and argue that a more nuanced form of irrealism is preferable. In section 2, I present three interrelated arguments for non-eliminative irrealism about grounding, and in the rest of the paper I explore some possibilities for such an irrealism. I construct three fictionalist accounts of grounding (section 3), and two non-cognitivist accounts (section 4). Section 5 concludes.

1. Eliminativism

The only form of irrealism about grounding that has been thus far considered in the literature is an outright rejection of the existence of any such relation. Proponents of this eliminativism about

---

'Metaphysical Grounding', available at: http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2014/entries/grounding/ (2014); and Raven, 'Ground' *Philosophy Compass* 10/5 (2015), 322–333.

[8] This is a rough and ready characterisation, but it will do for present purposes.

grounding advocate the elimination of grounding talk from metaphysics. They maintain that there are no grounding relations, and that we are better off not talking about grounding. Eliminativists might claim that grounding talk is incoherent, or that it has no distinctive role to play.[9]

1.1. Intelligibility

Chris Daly's arguments for the first kind of eliminativism consist mostly in rebutting realist arguments for the intelligibility of grounding talk. Since friends of grounding generally assume that grounding is a theoretical primitive, the onus is on them to clarify the nature of the relation. Daly argues that each of the strategies employed by friends of grounding to explicate their notion is unsuccessful.

First, Daly argues that the formal properties of grounding don't fix the content of the term 'grounding' (because those properties are shared with 'explanation').[10] Second, he claims that tracing analytic connections between grounding and other notions won't help,[11] because those other notions are either too close to grounding not to be themselves tainted by its obscurity, or far enough away that their connection to grounding is questionable. Daly's final claim is that appeal to purported examples of grounding to elucidate the notion will fail because anyone who fails to understand 'grounding' will consequently fail to understand any examples using that notion.

Though Daly's arguments go some way to towards motivating irrealism about grounding, we ought not to exaggerate their efficacy.[12] That the formal properties of grounding don't serve to fix its content is not by itself reason to resist realism about grounding. By taking those properties into account we might intend only to restrict the

---

[9]   For the former strategy see Daly, 'Scepticism about Grounding', *Metaphysical Grounding*, 81–100 and Hofweber, 'Ambitious, Yet Modest, Metaphysics', *Metametaphysics*, 280–289; *Ontology and the Ambitions of Metaphysics* (Oxford University Press, 2016), Chapter 13. For the latter see Wilson, 'No Work for a Theory of Grounding', *Inquiry* 57 (2014), 1–45, and Kosliki, 'The Coarse-Grainedness of Grounding' in *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 306–344.

[10]   Explanation is generally considered to be transitive, asymmetric, irreflexive, non-monotonic and hyperintensional.

[11]   This is the strategy taken by Rosen in 'Metaphysical Dependence: Grounding and Reduction', and by Trogdon in 'An Introduction to Grounding', amongst others.

[12]   See Audi, 'A Clarification and Defence of the Notion of Ground'.

26

notion sufficiently to get a fairly good idea of what is at stake, even if doing so does not distinguish grounding from all other notions in the vicinity. Similar responses also limit the scope of Daly's second argument. Although, if successful, the argument robs the grounding-advocate of an attractive way to elucidate grounding talk, the friend of grounding can still endorse Rosen's plea that we 'relax our antiseptic scruples for a moment and admit the idioms of metaphysical dependence into our official lexicon', in the understanding that 'if this only muddies the waters, nothing is lost; we can always retrench', but that 'if something is gained…we may find ourselves in a position to make some progress'.[13] In fact, the case Rosen makes for making use of grounding locutions is one that might appeal to an irrealist about grounding (see e.g. section 2.4).

Most parties to the grounding debate agree that the most effective way to argue for the intelligibility of grounding talk is by appealing to purported examples of grounding, but Daly's sceptical response elicits a kind of dialectical stalemate. It is true that the sceptic can always claim not to understand the examples, and such a claim might sometimes be appropriate. The worry is that one can always deny understanding, whether doing so is really appropriate or not (one is reminded of Lewis' quip: 'any competent philosopher who does not understand something will take care not to understand anything else whereby it might be explained').[14] If the majority of people think they do have a good enough grip on the notion, the fault may be with the eliminativist rather than with the proponent of grounding. If we have a notion that enough people understand enough for it to do useful, recognisable metaphysical work, we at least ought not to dismiss it out of hand. Other irrealist strategies discussed in the sections below allow for grounding talk to do that work without incurring the problematic commitments of full-blown realism about grounding.

Hofweber defines 'esoteric' metaphysics as metaphysics that is focused on questions involving distinctly metaphysical terms, and takes idioms of dependence meant in a metaphysical sense to belong to esoteric metaphysics. So far as Hofweber is concerned, grounding talk is unintelligible to the uninitiated. Moreover such talk is redundant because purported instances of grounding are really just examples of logical entailment, or conceptual priority, or mathematical priority.[15] Whether or not we buy into Hofweber's

---

[13] Rosen, 'Metaphysical Dependence: Grounding and Reduction', 110.
[14] Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 203.
[15] Hofweber, 'Ambitious, Yet Modest, Metaphysics', 267.

characterisation of esoteric metaphysics, one particularly interesting suggestion he makes is that the idioms of dependence he attacks conflate an understanding of priority in the sense in which it is familiar from natural language and from more 'egalitarian' metaphysics (i.e. metaphysics where questions are expressed in ordinary, everyday, accessible terms) with a distinctively metaphysical conception of priority. Examples given to elucidate the notion of grounding are of the former understanding of priority, where the notion they are employed to encourage understanding of is of the latter. The possibility of this sort of conflation motivates some of the positions discussed below.

1.2. Level of grain

A related argument for eliminativism about grounding is given by Jessica Wilson, who claims that philosophers almost never make general 'big-G' Grounding claims without a more specific relation in mind.[16] For example, when naturalists say that the mental is grounded in the physical, they might be a type-identity theorist, or a token-identity theorist, or a functionalist. When people say that the dispositions of a thing are grounded in its categorical features, they again have in mind either a token-identity theory, or a functionalist theory, and so on. Wilson claims that grounding is 'metaphysically underdetermined' because further more highly specified accounts of the dependence in question are always available. She argues that it cannot then be the case that Grounding is needed in specific investigations into metaphysical dependence, because we can always work with the more specific account we have in mind.[17]

The best response to this argument is one Wilson herself considers – that (big-G) Grounding marks an appropriate level of grain for investigations into metaphysical dependence. Grounding is a useful addition to our toolkit alongside the more specific 'small-g' grounding relations we already admit because it allows as to make appropriately general claims (e.g. that grounded entities cannot come apart modally from their grounding entities).[18] We might add that this is cause to reject Wilson's characterisation of things – it is not the case that philosophers always have a more specific relation in

---

[16] Wilson, 'No Work for a Theory of Grounding', 549.
[17] Koslicki, 'The Coarse-Grainedness of Grounding' makes a similar point.
[18] Wilson, 'No Work for a Theory of Grounding', 554–7.

28

mind when they make grounding claims, because sometimes those claims are claims *about big-G grounding.*

Wilson's reply to this response is that it motivates adopting grounding as a merely pragmatic, and not as a metaphysical notion. This she takes to rob grounding of any interesting metaphysical substance, and thus to make it into a very different notion to that which friends of grounding are keen to discuss. The irrealist about grounding can hold that Wilson's arguments provide excellent motivation for irrealism about grounding, but not for the eliminativism we have been discussing. The idea that grounding talk might have some pragmatic benefit independently of the metaphysical status of grounding relations is itself a strong argument for non-eliminative irrealism. The point of departure between Wilson and the non-eliminative irrealist concerns how interesting an irrealist account of grounding might be.

2. Arguments for non-eliminative irrealism

In this section I outline three interrelated arguments for non-eliminative irrealism about grounding. These arguments motivate non-eliminative irrealism in any form, and are to be taken in combination with the more specific arguments offered later on in the paper for distinct versions of non-eliminative irrealism about grounding.

2.1. Explanation

Grounding claims are thought to be explanatory. In the minds of at least some prominent friends of grounding the connection between ground and explanation is one of identity; grounding *is* a relation of metaphysical explanation.[19] According to Fine, this means that in addition to familiar causal explanation there is a distinctive kind of metaphysical explanation in which explanans and explanandum are connected through a constitutive determination relation – grounding.[20]

On the realist picture, there seems to be a tension between the metaphysical and the explanatory aspects of ground.[21] On the one

---

[19]   E.g. S. Dasgupta, 'The Possibility of Physicalism', *The Journal of Philosophy* 111/9 (2014), 557–592; Fine, 'A Guide to Ground'; M. Raven, 'In Defence of Ground', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 90/4 (2012), 687–701; Rosen 'Metaphysical Dependence: Grounding and Reduction'.
[20]   Fine, 'A Guide to Ground'.
[21]   Raven, 'Ground', 326.

hand, ground is an objective, mind-independent, worldly relation which describes reality's fundamental structure. On the other, it is a relation of explanation, and explanations are sensitive to explanatory interests and the background beliefs and commitments of enquirers. Friends of ground have work to do in order to explain how this apparent tension is to be reconciled.[22]

Should the friend of grounding move towards taking metaphysical explanation to be somehow more robust or 'objective' than more familiar forms of explanation, she risks losing the benefits that are supposed to come from thinking about grounding claims as explanatory. The most important of these is that thinking of grounding as a form of explanation helps to shed light on an otherwise opaque, primitive notion, open to sceptical attacks on its intelligibility. Our understanding of and intuitions about explanation can only help elucidate grounding if the relevant sort of explanation is one we understand and have intuitions about. If metaphysical explanation is a distinct form of explanation, the friend of grounding must either demonstrate that we are already familiar with it or provide us with a stand-alone account.

Should this prove too difficult a challenge, the friend of grounding might instead widen the gap between explanation and ground. Perhaps the connection between grounding and explanation can be preserved in a weaker form by taking metaphysical explanations to 'track' grounding relations (in much the same way as causal explanations might be said to track causal relations). One worry about such a picture concerns the mechanism for this tracking; how is it that metaphysical explanations are able to 'latch on' to worldly grounding relations? Proponents of grounding talk might be tempted to describe such tracking relations by appeal to grounding; grounding relations ground metaphysical explanations.[23] But such an account would be viciously circular. We can't expect to shed light on the connection between ground and explanation by appeal to grounding.

Non-eliminative irrealism about grounding allows for reconciliation of the apparent tension between the metaphysical and the explanatory aspects of grounding. Talk of grounding is talk of metaphysical explanation; metaphysical in the sense that the relata of the grounding relation are worldly facts, and explanatory in the sense that when such a relation obtains, we come to expect or to understand the *explanandum* on the basis of the *explanans*. The

---

[22] N. Thompson, 'Grounding and Metaphysical Explanation', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 116/3 (2016), 396–403.
[23] J. Kim, 'Explanatory Knowledge and Metaphysical Dependence', *Philosophical Issues* 5 (1994), 51–69.

threat of elimination on the basis of unintelligibility diminishes because grounding is an explanatory relation, and familiarity with the notion of explanation can help elucidate that of grounding. But this isn't a realist view of grounding, because grounding relations are not out there in the world for us to discover.

2.2. Epistemology of grounding claims

This section raises concerns about the epistemology of grounding claims; that grounding relations conceived of in a realist spirit are not the sorts of things we can reliably come to know about.

One species of worry is that we are not in possession of adequate resources for forming reliable beliefs about grounding, and so knowledge of grounding claims ought to be considered impossible. Note, however, that grounding facts are generally assumed to be metaphysically necessary,[24] and so care must be taken to present such epistemic worries in a way that doesn't rely on our being able to evaluate counterfactuals which the friend of grounding will take to be metaphysically impossible (i.e. counterfactuals of the form 'if A didn't ground B, then…'). For example, a sensitivity constraint on knowledge of grounding claims (for an agent S to know some grounding claim G, it must be the case that had G been false, S would not have known G) does not provide a legitimate basis for an argument that we cannot have knowledge of grounding claims. The friend of grounding can simply deny that G could have been false, and the argument cannot get off the ground.

Like most debates in metaphysics, discussions about what grounds what are insensitive to empirical investigation. Instead, judgements about grounding are generally made by appeal to intuitions about cases. The debate about the kind of justification that can be afforded by intuitions rages on, and this is not the place to get into it. It seems fair to assume though that the irrealist about grounding is at least as justified as the realist in taking intuitions about grounding to provide support for the truth of grounding claims. The difference is that it is fairly easy to see why we might take intuitions about grounding to justify grounding-talk if the truth of grounding claims depends, somehow or other, on our mental lives.[25] The realist about grounding

---

[24]   See e.g. K. Trogdon, 'Grounding: Necessary or Contingent?', *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 94 (2013), 465–485.
[25]   I assume here that irrealists about grounding will maintain that it is at least sometimes appropriate to make a claim about grounding (I think they

must demonstrate that intuitions about grounding are somehow capable of providing evidence for the truth of claims about an objective, mind-independent grounding relation. This seems at least to be a harder task.

What we can reliably expect to learn from reflecting on our intuitions about purported examples of local grounding relations (such as the relation between Socrates and his singleton set) is how the entities concerned are related within our conceptual scheme, and we do not have good reasons to think that our conceptual scheme (which is partly dependent on our theoretical commitments) provides a perfect reflection of reality. As David Wallace quips, 'our intuitions…were designed to aid our ancestors on the savannahs of Africa, and the universe is not obliged to conform to them'.[26] It is certainly conceivable that the structure of the world could have been the same, and our beliefs about it have been very different.

2.3. Metaphysical queerness

A different form of scepticism about realism about grounding bears some similarity to Mackie's argument from queerness.[27] Mackie thought that if moral properties existed, they would be both metaphysically and epistemically queer; metaphysically queer because of their unusual motivational force, and epistemically queer because of the perceptual faculty we would seem to require in order to track these strange properties. There are at least two ways in which grounding seems metaphysically queer.

First, primitive grounding relations are 'spooky' in much the same way as primitive causal relations are often considered spooky. For those who take grounds to necessitate what they ground, the analogy is particularly strong; grounding relations are *necessary connections* in nature, and to the extent that we are suspicious of such connections, we should be suspicious of the grounding relation so

---

might also take such claims sometimes to be true). I defend this claim in sections 3 and 4.

[26]   D. Wallace, 'Decoherence and Ontology: or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love FAPP' in *Many Worlds? Everett, Quantum Theory, and Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 69.

[27]   J. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (New York: Penguin, 1977).

32

understood. But even those who don't find this species of spookiness disquieting might find grounding relations metaphysically 'queer'.

In section 2.1 above we reviewed the options concerning the connection between ground and metaphysical explanation. Grounding relations are such that they either are themselves relations of metaphysical explanation, or they back metaphysical explanations. Suppose first that ground is a relation of metaphysical explanation. Not only does this objective, worldly explanation itself seem metaphysically queer but it must have an unusual motivational force not unlike that of Mackie's moral properties.

First, the idea of objective explanation is in itself somewhat jarring. The idea that reality comes furnished with an explanatory structure conflicts with our understanding of explanation as an epistemic phenomenon. Explanations (unlike information that might figure in an explanation) aren't 'out there' in the world for us to discover. Explanations are constructed to improve the epistemic position of an agent given her explanatory interests, background beliefs, and theoretical commitments. It is an assumption in the literature on explanation that explanation is intimately connected to understanding, such that in being provided with an appropriate explanation one comes to understand or to expect the explanandum on the basis of the explanans. As Kim remarks, 'the idea of explaining something is inseparable from the idea of making it intelligible; to seek an explanation of something is to seek to understand it'.[28] This Kim takes to be 'untendentious and uncontroversial', and yet we must reject it if we are to maintain that explanations obtain in the absence of explanation-seekers.

Even supposing we can reconcile our understanding of explanation with the requisite objectivity of metaphysical explanation, some mystery remains. When presented with a good explanation, we come to understand the explanandum on the basis of the explanans and thus are motivated to accept the explanation. In the normal case, we can account for this motivation by pointing out that part of what constitutes a good explanation is that it increases our understanding. *Metaphysical* explanations are supposed to be exemplary, qua explanations. Thus, Fine says 'if there is a gap between the grounds and what is grounded, then it is not an explanatory gap'.[29]

But because what makes metaphysical explanations good explanations must (if they are to remain objective) be divorced from their effect on our understanding, it is perfectly conceivable that we

[28] Kim, 'Explanatory Knowledge and Metaphysical Dependence', 54.
[29] Fine, 'A Guide to Ground', 39.

might be presented with a good metaphysical explanation which we are not motivated to accept. Caveats usually introduced to ensure that explanations are proportionate, informative, and not overly complex can't get any traction. This is the sense in which the friend of grounding must (when ground is identified with metaphysical explanation) countenance a relation with an unusual motivational force. An agent may find herself in the unusual position of believing an explanation without understanding it.

We already noted that there is another position available to the friend of grounding; perhaps metaphysical explanations merely *track* grounding relations. The above might be considered reason to adopt a tracking view of the connection between grounding and explanation, maintaining that grounding relations are objective and mind-independent, but the explanations that track them need not be. But recall the problems introduced in section 2.2; the weaker the connection between grounding and explanation, the harder it is to explain how it is that we can come to know about grounding relations.

Here we should be mindful of a disanalogy between the case of grounding and that of causation. In the causal case we generally distinguish between the network of causal relations, and explanatory information about that network. The former is objective and interest-insensitive, and the latter is not. But it is not the case that our only knowledge of causation is based on our understanding of and intuitions about causal explanation. The availability of independent accounts of causation allows us to distinguish between causation and casual explanation, and there is no analogue of these independent accounts in the case of grounding.[30]

Here's a different way to put the argument of this section. Knowledge of grounding requires a hyperintensional epistemology; a way of knowing that is sensitive to different epistemic intensions. The kind of knowledge we get from explanations gives us precisely this kind of sensitivity, and so it is attractive to think of grounding as a form of explanation (rather than merely as a relation that backs explanations). But if the relevant form of explanation is the objective, Finean kind, grounding starts to seem metaphysically queer. This problem can be resolved by rejecting the existence dimension of realism; by denying that there is any relation of grounding to be the bearer of this metaphysical queerness.

---

[30] For those who think causation is a primitive relation, the cases are much more similar. Knowledge of primitive causal relations would be hard to come by.

34

2.4. Against eliminativism

Arguments based on the epistemology of grounding claims provide reasons to be sceptical about the existence of any grounding relation whatsoever. One might be tempted then to think of such arguments as motivating eliminitivism rather than some form of non-eliminative irrealism. The non-eliminative irrealist must show both that an objective, mind-independent grounding relation would be metaphysically dubious, and that eliminativism is not a credible option. Plausible versions of irrealism about grounding must therefore demonstrate that grounding talk has an important role to play in philosophical theorising. There have been a number of attempts by realists about grounding to make such arguments by way of motivating realism about grounding. Those arguments can also be used to motivate irrealism, so long as the irrealist can tell a plausible story about how those roles can be fulfilled within the framework of her irrealist approach. Here is one example.

Rosen offers a clarification of notions such as *grounding* and *metaphysical dependence* and a plea that we might 'relax our antiseptic scruples for a moment and admit the idioms…into our official lexicon'. This is to be done in an experimental spirit, under the understanding that 'if this only muddies the waters, nothing is lost; we can always retrench. If something is gained, however…we may find ourselves in a position to make some progress'.[31] Rosen proceeds to offer examples of grounding, to formulate the logical and structural properties of the notion, and to undertake an extensive survey of metaphysical principles that might be framed in terms of grounding, and to demonstrate how those principles might interact with other accepted principles. His discussion covers interactions with (amongst others) logic, universal facts, modal truths, reduction, and the determinable-determinate connection.

The purpose of Rosen's project is to demonstrate that framing metaphysical principles in terms of grounding doesn't lead to confusion or incoherence. If such notions can be put to use in making sense of the puzzling domain of metaphysics, then 'the strategy of acquiescing in these ways of speaking will be vindicated'.[32] Grounding is established as a legitimate resource for metaphysics. Rosen's target is the grounding eliminativist who claims that we do not understand the relevant notions. But demonstrating that grounding talk has instrumental value in metaphysics does not serve to vindicate realism.

---

[31] Rosen, 'Metaphysical Dependence: Grounding and Reduction', 110.
[32] Ibid., 134.

Naomi Thompson

Non-eliminative irrealists can appeal to Rosen-style arguments to justify their continued engagement in the grounding discourse, but doing so is consistent with adopting various forms of irrealism. To see this, we need to know more about some plausible irrealist proposals. Outlining some such proposals is the project for the remainder of the paper.

3. Fictionalism

One way to make sense of continued engagement in the grounding discourse in the absence of any grounding relations is to adopt a form of fictionalism about grounding. Fictionalists maintain that grounding-talk is best understood not as aiming at literal truth, but rather as engaging in a form of pretence or make-believe. Sentences characteristic of the discourse are representations that are good or interesting or useful independently of their truth value.

Fictionalism grows out of an error theory, where error-theorists take sincere utterances of sentences about grounding to express propositions about grounding, and hence to be genuine representations of putative grounding facts. Error theorists maintain that acceptance of a sentence about grounding involves believing the proposition expressed, but since (according to the error-theorist) there are no grounding relations, propositions about grounding are systematically false,[33] and are believed in error.

Fictionalists about grounding combine the error-theory with a rejection of eliminativism about grounding. Alongside the considerations discussed in section 2.4 above, fictionalists can point out that the arguments for eliminativism as discussed in the literature and rehearsed above were shown to be found wanting. Moreover, eliminativism is uncharitable because it convicts both philosophers and ordinary speakers who employ grounding locutions of massive unexplained error. Far more charitable, if they do indeed talk in error, is to find some suitable explanation for their engagement in the discourse. Fictionalism about grounding dampens the assertive force of the problematic utterances.

---

[33]   Of course, not *all* sentences about grounding are false according to the error theorist. Sentences like 'there are no grounding relations', '*A* doesn't ground *B*' and '*B* is ungrounded' might all be true (because they don't commit us to the existence of grounding relations). As is standard, I describe the error theorist's commitment as being to the *systematic* falsity of grounding sentences in order to circumvent this complication.

36

There are various ways in which we might sharpen the fictionalist's account. Here I'll mention three such sharpenings. I'll call the proposition expressed by a target sentence of the grounding discourse *fictional content*. Fictionalists usually deny that typical utterances of the target sentences are assertive (i.e. that they assert the fictional content) but many fictionalists maintain that some content is *quasi-asserted*. The *real content* of the target sentence is the proposition (if any) associated with a quasi-asserted sentence.[34]

We should note that orthogonal to the distinction between the versions of fictionalism discussed below is a distinction between *hermeneutic* and *revolutionary* or *revisionary* fictionalism. Hermeneutic fictionalism is a thesis about the actual nature of the discourse – it holds that statements made within the discourse do not aim at the literal truth but only appear to pretend to do so; normal use of the discourse involves pretence. Revolutionary fictionalism by contrast is a prescription for reforming the discourse – it holds that we *ought* only to make quasi-assertions, and that the point of engaging in the discourse would be achieved if we made only quasi-assertions.

Given that grounding is a semi-technical notion, most often discussed by philosophers who think carefully about the way in which they use language, hermeneutic fictionalism about grounding seems *prima facie* implausible. Why, in the hundreds of recent contributions to the grounding literature, would not one author indicate that he or she was engaging in a pretence? For this reason the metalinguistic fictionalism described in 3.1 and the non-assertion fictionalism described in 3.3 are best understood as versions of revolutionary fictionalism. However, objectual fictionalism is (for reasons discussed in section 3.2) is plausibly taken to be a form of hermeneutic fictionalism.

3.1. Metalinguistic fictionalism

A simple form of metalinguistic fictionalism employs operators to give an account of the real content of a speaker's grounding claim. Following Lewis,[35] it is standard to understand utterances of a sentence like 'Smaug is a dragon' as elliptical for 'according to *The Hobbit*, Smaug is a dragon'. One version of metalinguistic fictionalism about grounding similarly appeals to fiction operators,

---

[34] This terminology is borrowed from Kalderon, *Moral Fictionalism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), Chapter 3.

[35] D. Lewis, 'Truth in fiction', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 15 (1978), 37–46.

but in an account of grounding-talk. When a speaker utters a grounding claim S, this metalinguistic fictionalist takes the real content of her claim to be <according to the grounding fiction, S>. Other kinds of metalinguistic views maintain that the real content of a quasi-assertion about grounding concerns some other non truth-involving property of the fiction. For example, that the fictional content of the relevant claim is pragmatically advantageous in simplifying and systematising metaphysical theories and disputes.[36]

3.2. Objectual fictionalism

Fictionalists need not accept that the real content of a target sentence is about the content of a fiction. Instead, they might maintain that the real content of a sentence S about grounding is the real-world conditions that make it fictionally true that S. The champion of this approach to fiction is Kendall Walton, who takes fictions (in all their forms) to be games of make-believe.[37] Imagine a group of children playing a game of Cops and Robbers. If one of the children playing a robber starts to run away, and a child playing a cop shouts 'Quick, a robber is getting away!' then she asserts something that is true in the pretence (although it is, of course, literally false that a thief is running away from the children). What makes the cop's assertion appropriate is the real-world event of a child, designated 'robber' starting to run away. Real-world conditions generate fictional truths.

So long as a speaker is engaged in a pretence, a quasi-assertion of S does not commit her to the truth of its fictional content.[38] When a speaker makes a grounding claim such as 'singleton sets are grounded in their sole members' she quasi-asserts that certain real-world conditions obtain. We can give various accounts of what real-world conditions a speaker quasi-asserts obtain when she utters such a sentence. The view I think most plausible is that the speaker conveys that the world is in a condition such that she is apt to find the member of a singleton set metaphysically explanatory with respect to that set.[39]

The fictionalist can tell a further story about the origin of the pretence. Some such stories make plausible hermeneutic fictionalism

---

[36]   Cf. Kalderon, *Moral Fictionalism*, 121–123.
[37]   K. Walton, *Mimesis and Make-Believe* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990).
[38]   Kalderon, *Moral Fictionalism*, 124.
[39]   This view is developed in detail in my 'Getting the Story Straight: Fictionalism about Grounding' (in progress).

38

about grounding. Causal explanations are backed by causal relations, and so we assume that *metaphysical* explanations are also backed by some metaphysical dependence relation. Metaphysical explanations *are* backed by (small-g) dependence relations, but not by any generic notion of dependence. Some are backed by set-theoretic relations, others by composition relations, identity relations, determinate-determinable relations, and so on. The assumption that there must be some generic relation of metaphysical dependence led to the development of the grounding fiction.[40]

3.3. Non-assertion fictionalism

A final option for the fictionalist is to deny that any proposition is associated with a quasi-assertion of a target sentence. The sentence thus has no real content at all, but is to be used merely as a device for simplifying or systematising the relevant discourse.[41] The non-assertion fictionalist about grounding could argue that grounding talk plays a useful role in metaphysics, but refrain from commenting on what (if anything) sentences in the domain could be used to assert.

The difficult task for our non-assertion fictionalist is that of justifying our continued engagement in grounding talk. For the metalinguistic fictionalist and the objectual fictionalist there is some kind of link between the propositions expressed by the target sentences in the domain, and the quasi-asserted real content associated with utterances of the target sentences. Where there is no such real content and merely a false proposition expressed by utterances of the target sentences, the fictionalist has a harder task justifying the continued use of the relevant sentences. Field justifies our continued engagement in mathematical discourse by claiming both that mathematical theories are conservative over nominalistic ones (that nothing that can be proven using mathematics cannot be proven without it), and by making a strong case for the instrumental benefits of continued engagement in mathematical discourse.[42]

---

[40] See my 'Getting the Story Straight: Fictionalism about Grounding' for more details.

[41] This is arguably the position of Field in *Science Without Numbers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), where he defends the view that there are compelling instrumentalist justifications for continuing to engage in mathematical discourse, but declines to say what, if anything, mathematical utterances might be used to assert.

[42] Field, *Science Without Numbers*.

Naomi Thompson

Like the non-assertion fictionalist about mathematics, this kind of fictionalist about grounding can point to various benefits of continued engagement in the grounding discourse. Alongside the aforementioned role grounding might play in simplifying and systematising debates in metaphysics, reference to 'big-G' grounding is beneficial because it ranges schematically and neutrally over more specific 'small-g' grounding relations (composition, set membership, type identity, functional realization, etc.).[43] It is often beneficial to talk in terms of features common to all of these relations, perhaps because we want to convey some sort of significant dependence (its nature and its direction) without getting clear on the details, or because it's not yet clear to us *which* of these small-g relations obtains (though it is obvious that at least one of them does) or because our metaphysical theorising is guided by a distinctive epistemic feature of these small-g relations, such as a direction of explanatory dependence, or an understanding that a grounded entity is 'nothing over and above' the entity that grounds it.[44]

One might object here that if we shouldn't be realists about grounding, continued engagement in grounding-talk just serves to make metaphysics more murky. The goal of metaphysics is to get to ultimate categories and explanations, and irrealists deny that grounding is among these. But this view of metaphysics is overly concerned with which entities and notions belong in a description of fundamental reality. Notions of dependence which we might use to frame metaphysical principles might have no place themselves among the fundamental, but they are nevertheless useful for the practice of metaphysics (compare how we might use inaccurate models to teach scientific concepts).

I'll mention one further pragmatic advantage of appeal to grounding-talk. Fine appeals to grounding-talk in order to mark a distinction between realist and irrealist about a given domain of discourse.[45] The motivation for antirealists to accommodate the way in which language is used by ordinary speakers, combined with the rise in popularity of minimalist theories of facts and truth (such that all there is to truth is something like collected instances of the schema ⌜S⌝ is true iff S) has meant that realists and antirealists alike are willing to utter the same sentences. Fine suggests that we can distinguish proponents of each position by asking what *grounds* a relevant proposition (e.g. <murder is wrong>). Fine argues that whilst

---

[43] See Wilson, 'No Work for a Theory of Grounding', 557.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Fine, 'The Question of Realism'.

the realist's answer will involve reference to moral properties, the irrealist takes the proposition to be grounded in something like speaker-attitudes towards child-torture.[46] The key move is that in asking a grounding question, we can adopt a 'metaphysically neutral' stance concerning the reality of the proposition in question – we can consider grounding questions whether we are realists or irrealists about the relevant discourse, and the language used to frame the question is neutral on the issue of realism.

This benefit of engagement in grounding talk does not require realism about grounding. Grounding talk merely brings out a distinction that is already present in the commitments of the realist and of the irrealist, but it is a distinction that is hard to get at in other terms (here the analogy with Field's project is fairly close). The collected benefits of engaging in grounding discourse provide justification for our continuing to talk in terms of grounding in spite of the systematic falsity of propositions about grounding.

4. Non-cognitivism

Non-cognitivists about grounding deny not only that grounding relations exist, but also that utterances of the target sentences express propositions at all. Non-cognitivists hold that utterances of the relevant sentences conventionally express non-cognitive attitudes, rather than beliefs. Varieties of non-cognitivism are to be characterised by differences in explicating the semantic function of grounding expressions, and the nature of the mental states expressed by those who utter sentences about grounding. Here I'll briefly introduce two forms of non-cognitivist views about grounding: prescriptivism and expressivism.

4.1. Prescriptivism

Prescriptivists about grounding emphasise the familiar claim made by grounding theorists that grounding locutions are explanatory locutions, and that the relevant explanatory connection (between explanans and explanandum) is very tight. The prescriptivist about grounding takes statements of (full) ground to be prescriptions to *understand* or to *cease explanatory enquiry*. For example, when we say then that the fact that P grounds the fact that P∨Q, we prescribe

[46] See Fine, 'The Question of Realism' for the details of the proposal.

41

the end of enquiry concerning P∨Q; we dictate that there is no further explanatory work to be done in accounting for P∨Q, once we have understood that P.

Support for this view might be extracted from the work of philosophers such as Kit Fine, who draw attention to the explanatory character of ground. Fine says that it is 'properly implied by the statement of (metaphysical) ground that there is no stricter or fuller account of that in virtue of which the explanandum holds…if there is a gap between the grounds and what is grounded, then it is not an explanatory gap';[47] and that there is 'no explanatory connection that stands to ground as grounding stands to…other forms of explanation…it is the ultimate form of explanation'.[48] It is the view of such friends of grounding that ground provides the most illuminating explanation; the explanation which, when we are in possession of it, dictates that we have no need for further explanatory inquiry. It is a small step, the prescriptivist claims, from the view that grounding is a relation of metaphysical explanation to the idea that *all there is* to a statement of ground is a prescription that we end explanatory inquiry. In the face of concerns about the legitimacy of any notion of ground that goes beyond this claim about explanation, prescriptivism might look like an attractive alternative to realism about grounding.

Prescriptivism about grounding of the form described here requires that we think of the relevant sort of explanation as something objective enough that it will be the same in relevantly similar contexts – that similarly situated agents would make the same judgements of ground (it is this that guarantees that the prescription be *universal*). It is this fact that is responsible for grounding talk being subject to various constraints, including restrictions on the logical and structural features of ground. Friends of grounding might welcome this apparent legitimisation of the somewhat obscure notion of metaphysical explanation, and the independent role that the grounding prescriptivist takes metaphysical explanation to play. Nevertheless, one might worry that some reasons for suspicion about the notion of ground (particularly those based on concerns about the epistemology of grounding claims) will carry over to any notion of explanation we can think of as objective enough to play the relevant role. Those persuaded by such arguments are likely not to find this sort of prescriptivism about grounding attractive, and so might think that a different form of non-cognitivism is more plausible.

---

[47] Fine, 'A Guide to Ground', 39.
[48] Fine, 'The Question of Realism', 16.

42

4.2. Non-cognitive expressivism

Non-cognitive expressivism can be characterised as the conjunction of two theses, one negative and the other positive. The negative thesis states that the grounding vocabulary is not 'descriptive, not belief-expressing, not fact-stating, not truth-evaluable, or not cognitive'.[49] The positive thesis says that the vocabulary expresses a non-cognitive attitude. The task for an expressivist about grounding is to give an account of the non-cognitive attitude expressed when competent speakers utter sentences involving grounding locutions. There are various accounts the grounding expressivist might choose to give of the relevant non-cognitive attitude. I'll mention one promising proposal.

The non-cognitive expressivist is can take grounding claims to express attitudes of acceptance towards particular systems of explanation; to say that x grounds y is to endorse a particular system of explanation in accordance with which x explains y, and thus to 'plan' to take relevantly similar explanations to be explanatory. The expressivist position here is subtle. The realist about grounding generally takes it to be the case that when x grounds y, x explains y, but the realist takes claims of the form 'x grounds y' to be truth-apt, and to be made true by mind-independent features of reality. The expressivist denies both of these realist commitments. The claim 'x grounds y' expresses an attitude (rather than a proposition) and its appropriateness depends on the attitudes of the speaker (i.e. on their endorsement of a system of explanation in accordance with which x explains y).

This form of expressivism shares some features with the plan-expressivism associated with Gibbard,[50] and also with the prescriptivism about grounding described above. To judge that x grounds y is to judge that it is apt to find x explanatory with respect to y. Unlike with the prescriptivism introduced above, the expressivist need not think of the relevant sense of explanation as a particularly objective one (though there is room for positions on which the relevant sense of explanation is an objective one). This form of expressivism takes seriously the explanatory nature of grounding claims, but does so without stating any facts about what explains what. The position is motivated by the thought that agents are apt to find relevantly similar systems of explanation explanatory, and that interpreting

---

[49]   H. Price, 'Expressivism for Two Voices' in J. Knowles and H. Rydenfelt (eds) *Pragmatism, Science, and Naturalism* (Peter Lang, 2011).

[50]   A. Gibbard, *Thinking How to Live* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003).

their grounding claims as expressing this attitude makes sense of the apparent connection between grounding and explanation. Making a grounding claim functions as an invitation to others to endorse a similar system of explanation, and so the expressivist can account for disagreement about grounding: disagreements represent different attitudes towards a given system of explanation.

5. Concluding Remarks

The intention here has not been to argue for a specific form of irrealism about grounding, but instead to carve out the terrain in order to pave the way for future discussion, and to highlight areas of particular interest. More needs to be said by way of defence of any given position, but it seems very likely that at least some irrealist proposals are likely to prove viable alternatives to realism about grounding, and so would be a mistake to assume that all friends of grounding must be realists.[51]

University of Southampton and Göteborgs Universitet
n.m.thompson@soton.ac.uk