

Ted Sider “Ground grounded”

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1 The question

The question of meta-ground: Suppose that a grounds b . Is the grounding fact “ a grounds b ” grounded or not?

Primitivism: Grounding facts are fundamental (ungrounded).

Anti-primitivism: Grounding facts are non-fundamental (grounded).

1.1 Argument for anti-primitivism I: Purity

Purity: Fundamental (ungrounded) truths involve only fundamental notions¹

“When God was creating the world, she was not required to think in terms of nonfundamental notions like city, smile, or candy.” (Sider, 2011)

“After all, the question of whether the building facts are built is perilously close to the

¹Not all grounding facts involve non-fundamental concepts ($E < E \vee M$ where E and M are fundamental facts), but there are lots of grounding facts involving non-fundamental concepts, which is enough for Sider.

question of whether purity is true. So, yes, insofar as you find purity compelling, you should also be attracted to the view that the building facts are built. But it would be better to have a more independent argument that does not rely upon purity. Luckily, I do.” (Bennett, 2017)

1.2 Argument for anti-primitivism II: Free Recombination

Free Recombination: Whatever the (contingent) fundamental elements of the world are, they are open to free modal recombination.

“(Building facts) are contingent. So if they were fundamental, there would be a possible world w just like the actual world in the distribution of all the rest of the fundamental entities, but without any building facts. In w , no building relations obtain; nothing builds anything else. Yet all of the other actual fundamental entities remain exactly as they actually are. So what about the actually built entities? Are there cars, mental states, glasses of water in w ? I claim that neither a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer is acceptable.” (Bennett, 2017)

1.3 A Siderean worry: the possibility of physicalism

Strong physicalism (as a grounding thesis): All non-physical facts are grounded in physical facts.

If it turns out that grounding facts connecting the physical and the nonphysical are not grounded in physical facts, then we can infer that strong physicalism is false simply from the nature of grounding.

“So the problem is that when formulated in terms of ground these ampliative theses fail at the get-go, prior to any first-order considerations about consciousness or normativity in particular an unacceptable result. To be clear, the conclusion of this argument is not that physicalism or these other ampliative theses are false. The conclusion is that the grounding formulation is inadequate.” (Dasgupta, 2014)

2 Two approaches to the question of meta-ground

2.1 Upwards Anti-primitivism (Bennett & deRosset)

Upwards Anti-primitivism: $a < b$ is grounded by a .

- Advantages of upwards anti-primitivism: (1) preserves the possibility of physicalism; (2) “a lovely solution to the threat of regress”
- Dasgupta’s criticism: Upwards anti-primitivism entails that facts that should get different explanations get the same explanation ($p < (p < p \vee q)$ and $p < (p < \neg\neg p)$).
- Bennett’s reply: We should distinguish between a metaphysical and an epistemic sense of “explanation”.

2.2 Brute Essentialism (Dasgupta)

Brute Essentialism: $a < b$ is grounded by a together with the essences of the constituents of b , and the latter is *not apt for being grounded* (autonomous)².

²Dasgupta thinks that it is intelligible to ask for an explanation of an essentialist truth like “it is essential to {Socrates} that it is the unique singleton containing Socrates”, just as definitions in mathematics are not apt for being proved from the axioms.

2.3 Sider’s criticism

- Criticism of upwards anti-primitivism: (1) relational facts are normally grounded by something that connects the relata in question (or else something that connects the grounds for the existence of the relata, if those relata do not exist fundamentally); (2) grounding should be understood as patterns in a broader sense.
- Criticism of brute essentialism: (1) facts involving non-fundamental notions should not be included in any telling of the complete story of the world; (2) no restriction of scope is built into ground in the way that a restriction to sentences of the object language is built into theoremhood—because of the expansive ambitions of the project of metaphysical explanation; (3) we don’t need to argue for the *sui generis* status of the “metaphysical bridge” posited by Dasgupta and Schaffer, because we have an alternative.

3 Sider’s “unsystematic account” of meta-ground

The question of what grounds a grounding claim needn’t have a simple answer (formulated as a simple function of the ground and the grounded), because high-level facts in general depend on low-level facts in complex ways.

For the grounding fact (1) $Ta < Ta \vee Ca$, the following kinds of facts might help ground it, although Sider himself remains neutral about such issues.

3.1 General facts

- (1) is grounded partly by (2) $\forall x(Tx \rightarrow (Tx \vee Cx))$ (a “Humean” approach)³.
- (2) is grounded in (3) $Ta_1 \rightarrow (Ta_1 \vee Ca_1), Ta_1 \rightarrow (Ta_1 \vee Ca_1), \dots, Tot(a_1, a_2\dots)$ (a Finean approach).
- each instance $Ta_i \rightarrow (Ta_i \vee Ca_i)$ is ground-theoretically equivalent to (4) $\neg Ta_i \vee (Ta_i \vee Ca_i)$, and is thus grounded by its true disjuncts.

“Moreover, the output of this drill-down procedure leading to pure grounds is sensitive to the fact that it is $Ta \vee Ca$, as opposed to some other fact, that is being grounded in (1)”. (Sider, 2020)

3.2 Modal facts

- (1) might be partially grounded in (6) $\Box \forall x(Tx \rightarrow (Tx \vee Cx))$.
- For modal reductionists, (6) is grounded in non-modal facts, and the remaining work can be done in the same way as other sort of facts.
- For modal anti-reductionists, (6) is grounded in pure modal facts: (6) is grounded in (7): $\Box \forall x((T_1x \vee T_2x \vee \dots) \rightarrow ((T_1x \vee T_2x \vee \dots) \vee (C_1x \vee C_2x \vee \dots)))$ (replacing “table” and “chair” in (6) with their metaphysical definitions⁴).
- The posteriori fact (T) $\Box \forall x(Tx \leftrightarrow (T_1x \vee T_2x \vee \dots))$ can be grounded by the apriori fact (T’) $\Box \forall x((T_1x \vee T_2x \vee \dots) \leftrightarrow (T_1x \vee T_2x \vee \dots))$ because it is not apriori that (T)’s ground is (T’).

³Another relevant general fact: $\neg \forall x((Tx \vee Cx) \rightarrow Tx)$.

⁴For Sider, the metaphysical definition of being a table (chair) is more likely to be a functional definition rather than the disjunction of all possible realizers. Also, he is not committed to the general principle that A grounds B whenever A results from B by replacing expressions with their metaphysical definitions.

3.3 Logical form

- (1) might be partially grounded in (8) The antecedent of $Ta < (Ta \vee Ca)$ is a disjunct of its consequent.
- (Assuming a structured conception of facts) On one view, (8) is grounded in the mere existence of the entity a and the properties T and C (plus the syntactic relations of antecedent, constituency, and disjunct, plus some logical concepts); on another view, facts about the holding of fundamental constituency relations or operations would also be required.
- How is the existence of the properties grounded depends on the ontology of properties.

3.4 Mereology, etc.

The grounds of $a < b$ might include internal relationships between a and b :

$$s \in \{s\} < (Es < E\{s\})$$

3.5 Metalinguistic facts

- For a case of non-logical grounding, we might need metalinguistic facts to ground it: $T_1a < Ta$ (T_1 is a realizing property of being a table) is partially grounded by facts about how the word “table” is used, about the environment surrounding our usage of table, about the history of our usage of that term, and so on.
- For those who insist that grounding is entirely independent of language, the metalinguistic facts play only the role of content-selection, while ground is a relation on the contents thus selected, a relation that is blind to the manner of selection, concern-

ing only non-metalinguistic features of the contents. Therefore, it is will be false that $(T_1a \vee T_2a \vee \dots) < Ta$ (but “ Ta because $T_1a \vee T_2a \vee \dots$ ” is still true).

3.6 Fundamentality

- It is central to the conception of ground that it is asymmetric.
- There is a basis for much asymmetry in the list of kinds of partial grounds of grounding statements that we have considered so far (general facts, logical form)—in a great many cases where a in fact grounds b , $G(a, b)$ does not contain any true propositions (G is a ground-grounding function).
- Facts about concept-fundamentality (absolute fundamentality) can also play a role in grounding grounding facts, by helping to identify one end in the entire grounding hierarchy as the most fundamental one.

3.7 Pure grounding facts

- (1) is partially grounded in (9) $(T_1a \vee T_2a \dots) < ((T_1a \vee T_2a \dots) \vee (C_1a \vee C_2a \dots))$, where ground itself is understood as a fundamental concept—so (9) is pure.

“But the most convincing argument for the indispensibility of ground is that ground is needed as a levels-connector. It is this function of ground, for instance, that lets us give suitable statements of sweeping metaphysical theses like moral naturalism. And this aspect of grounds role does not call for a metaphysically fundamental concept of ground”. (Sider, 2020)