

The Grounding Mystique

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ABSTRACT

Grounding has become all the rage in recent philosophical work and metaphilosophical discussions. While I agree that the concept of ground marks something useful, I am skeptical about the metaphysical weight many imbue it with, and the picture of ‘worldly layering’ that grounding talk inspires. My skepticism centers around the fact that grounding involves necessitation, combined with reasons for thinking matters of necessity are matters of logical or conceptual (semantic, psychological) relations. I sketch an argument for deflationism about ground based on this sort of deflationism about necessity and essence. I also note that in at least some cases, the considerations supporting modal deflationism *directly* support deflationism about whatever grounding relations may obtain in these cases.

Grounding has become all the rage in recent philosophical work and methodological and metaphilosophical discussions. Let me say up front that I am happy with the notion of some things being true, or obtaining, or existing, in virtue of others, and agree, for instance, that in philosophical analysis, we want to know what it is in virtue of which something is F—good, or just, or known, or a salad. ‘Mere’ necessary equivalence will not cut it. And I agree, similarly, that various philosophical issues can be fruitfully formulated as questions or disputes about what, if anything, grounds the holding of truths or obtaining of properties of certain sorts—moral, psychological, economic, astrological—or the existence of complex objects. Where I am more skeptical concerns the metaphysical weight that many seem to think grounding bears. Grounding, it is said, reveals to us the structure of the world; it is that which provides the layering of reality, and glues the layers together, and discovering these deep relations is the (or at least a) central philosophical task. It is my skepticism about this that I will try to articulate in this paper. Roughly speaking, I am doubtful that there is anything metaphysical about grounding, or about grounding facts. When x grounds y , it is a matter of logical or conceptual relations, and nothing more worldly. Let me say that I don’t think the articulation and uncovering of conceptual relations is trivial—indeed, I think it comprises a great deal of philosophical work, and that understanding this is extremely valuable.¹ But as an empiricist rather than a rationalist, I don’t think it reveals to us anything about the *world*, and I think that much that seemed problematic in the ‘pre-grounding’ era remains equally problematic, despite some rhetoric (and maybe that is all it is) suggesting otherwise. Just as I think matters of necessity and essence are conventional,

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and reveal only facts about our concepts and conceptual scheme, so it is with questions and answers about grounding. There is nothing more metaphysical or substantive to it.

Let me quickly add that various philosophers working in this new tradition have allowed for this possibility.² But it doesn't seem to fit with the *way* people, in general, engage in their ground-driven work, or the significance they seem to put upon it. At any rate, I will leave it for others to determine whether I have a nonexistent opponent, and I claim no novelty for my position. It is very much in the spirit of Dasgupta's "Constitutive Explanation": ground 'limns' at philosophical joints, but what it reveals is the structure of our conceptual scheme. It is also in the spirit of Sider's understanding of 'connecting truths' holding in virtue of 'metaphysical semantics'—but I am less clear whether he would be happy with Dasgupta's idea that it nonetheless 'carves at the joints'. I imagine Sider's view is that grounding—like his 'structure'—so carves—but *what* grounds *what*, not being objective, is not so structural. This being so, again, I claim no originality, except, perhaps, for the angle at which I am entering the fray. But I do think it is a position which deserves a more prominent place in the discussion.

THE BASIC ARGUMENT

I will be approaching grounding through thinking about necessity. While our starting point will be the widely accepted connection between grounding and necessitation, the broader picture that will emerge is that the reasons to be suspicious of substantive-looking matters of necessity pretty straightforwardly carry over as reasons to be suspicious of substantive-looking matters of grounding.

Let us begin with a rough, intuitive distinction between interesting and trivial necessitation claims. A trivial one might be 'necessarily, if p, then p' or 'necessarily, if p and if p then q, then q'. An interesting one might be 'necessarily, if x is human, then it is wrong to intentionally bring about x's death' or 'necessarily, if something is wholly composed of H₂O, it is water.' There is plainly a spectrum here, and even the ones usually deemed 'trivial' might be challenged and so become in some way interesting. But the intuitive distinction is useful for exposition. Similarly, we can equally distinguish trivial and interesting grounding claims. A trivial one might be 'if p&q is a fact, it is grounded in the fact that p and the fact that q'. More interesting ones would include 'the wrongness of any act is grounded in its bad consequences' or 'a treewise arrangement of simples grounds the existence of a tree'. Again, the distinction is not meant to be sharp or deep—just a useful starting point for presentation.

The fundamental overall argument I am presenting is:

1. Grounding involves necessitation—if p grounds q, then either p necessitates q, or there is some context, c, in which p occurs, such that p+c necessitates q (see [Bennett 2017](#), ch.3).³
2. If a grounding claim is an interesting one (see below), this necessitation will be nontrivial.
3. There is no nontrivial metaphysical necessitation.
4. So any interesting grounding claim, if true, is true only because it includes a conceptually determined necessitation which is conventional, or reduces to a logical necessity. Otherwise, it will be false, or indeterminate.

(On the other hand, 'uninteresting' grounding claims—those where the necessitation is trivial—already obviously involve a merely logical or conceptual necessity.)⁴

To illustrate what I mean by (4), consider Paul Coppock's example of 'Socratoon' (1984). Coppock stipulates that 'socratoon' is to rigidly designate Socrates's favorite color. Suppose, in fact, Socrates's favorite color was maroon. Then, it is necessary—and necessary a posteriori—that

whatever is socratoon is maroon. And presumably, my sweater's being maroon grounds (maybe along with maroon's being Socrates's actual favorite color) its being socratoon.⁵ Now, since it is not a priori that what is maroon is socratoon, it is also 'interesting' to claim that my sweater being maroon grounds its being socratoon—at least, suppose John makes such a proposal in the absence of full knowledge of Socrates's favorite color.⁶ Nonetheless, the only reason it is necessary that what is socratoon is maroon is given by the entirely nonmodal fact that Socrates's favorite color is maroon, and the trivial fact that necessarily, what is maroon is maroon. Similarly, the 'grounding' just comes from how we have defined 'socratoon.' The metaphysical innocuousness of both this necessity and the grounding claim is what I have in mind by (4), and so, is meant as a deflationary proposal about 'interesting' grounding claims. Grounding claims will be 'interesting' if they are a posteriori, and also if they are a priori, but nontrivial (see 'Beyond the A Posteriori,' below). Roughly, if the necessity of p, or of o's necessarily being F can be meaningfully disputed, the grounding claim that entails it is interesting.⁷ My thought is that for trivial grounding claims, it should be pretty transparent that nothing metaphysically interesting is going on—e.g., that being unmarried partly grounds being a bachelor comes from that conceptual requirement.

Two caveats about my formulation: (i) I am confining this to 'interesting' grounding claims because I am unprepared to give a conventionalist account of logic (or math, for that matter—but that plays less of a role in connection with other cases). So there could (epistemically) be something metaphysical about the fact (if it is a fact) that p grounds p or q, or that a's being F grounds something being F. But for anything that is not a matter of logic (or math, and which cannot be proven [in the strongest sense])—that is, anything which is such that its negation can be conceived, and this conceiving cannot be proven to be impossible (as, e.g., some non-obvious mathematical theorem)—will involve a substantive necessity claim, and so falls within the scope of my proposal.⁸ (ii) The disjunctive nature of (4) stems from the fact that the very considerations which challenge the substantiveness of various proposals of necessity (and so, of grounding) also pose at least some challenge to the claim that there *are* the sort of conceptual connections there would need to be for the necessity claim to be true. So when there are substantive disagreements about whether p is necessary, that is, in my book, *prima facie* evidence that in the public language, it is *not* (determinately) *true* that p is necessary: that the conceptual rules that would need to be in place that would make it true, are *not*—not determinately—in place. But *insofar as* one is *taking* it to be necessary, one should think it is so in virtue of such rules.^{9,10}

Premise (1) is generally accepted.¹¹ There is some disagreement as to whether grounds *themselves* must necessitate, or whether they only do so in context, so 'ground plus context' necessitates p.¹² For an example, one might think my current visual experience, in my current, normal context, grounds my being justified in believing that there is a computer in front of me. But I could have exactly this experience, while also having evidence that I have been given a hallucinogen which would make me have equally vivid experiences of things that are not here. In this case, I would not be justified (given the evidence that I could well be hallucinating). So, in ordinary cases, my experience—that which (on many views) grounds my being justified—does not necessitate that I am justified. One might alternatively take this to show that the absence of such counterevidence is to be included in the grounds, so as to have grounds which *do* necessitate my being justified. It does not matter—so long as it is agreed that in context, or including the context, there *is* necessitation. If we suppose that in circumstances just like these, I could *fail* to be justified, it just does not seem that we have been given the total story: we have not been fully told *why*, or *in virtue of what* I am justified. If I can be in such circumstances, and both *can* and *cannot* be justified, then in the cases where I *am*, *something extra* must be the case—even if it is *merely* an ungrounded fact of my being justified (in which case, of course, it is not an 'extra' part of the grounds for justification). But if it needs to be *added*, then our epistemic status has not,

in the other cases, been entirely accounted for. And if something *else*—*e*—is added, the same question will arise about grounds+context+*e*: if it suffices for justification, then fine; if it does not, we again have pairs of situations differing with respect to justification.¹³

Premise (2) is just part of what I mean by ‘interesting’ in this discussion. I don’t mean to imply that there is nothing interesting at all in grounding claims in logic and mathematics, or when it is entirely obvious to everyone that there is a conceptual entailment—such as that something’s being a closed three-sided figure necessitates that it is a triangle, or something’s being crimson necessitates its being red. But in such cases, it is doubtful that there is really a ‘layering’ of reality. While we may say “being a triangle just is being a closed three-sided figure,” most of us (perhaps I exaggerate) think all there is to this is that it is what ‘triangle’ *means*, and so both the necessitation and the grounding amount to the fact that what is closed and three sided is closed and three sided (and that this defines ‘triangular’), and that what belongs to a subregion of the color space picked out by ‘red’ falls within that region. My thought is that there are cases where one can (seem to) conceive, or argue about, whether *q* necessitates *p*, and others where one cannot. Where one cannot,¹⁴ we have either a logical necessity or an obvious conceptual one, and these only have whatever metaphysical significance logical necessity has (on which I do not here take a stand. See note 8.)

So that leaves us with (3)—basically, a denial of metaphysical necessity (beyond, perhaps, logic). I (and others) have argued at length for this elsewhere (Sidelle 1989, 1992; Chalmers 1996, ch.2, 2002; Thomasson 2013, 2020; Asta 2013) and cannot repeat the whole story here. However, I will sketch the argument, hoping not only to give the reader some sense of why (3) seems plausible, but also how these very considerations can be applied *directly* to interesting cases of grounding, to make *them* seem metaphysically shallow, even if we do not ‘go through’ a general worry about metaphysical necessity to get to our worry about grounding.

DOUBTS ABOUT METAPHYSICAL NECESSITY

The notion of metaphysical necessity—as something going beyond logical necessity and reflecting the ‘metaphysical nature of things’—first came widely to be taken seriously (in contemporary philosophy) with the work of Kripke (1980) and Putnam (1975).¹⁵ They argued convincingly that there are necessary a posteriori truths—necessary truths that are ‘interesting’ in the sense I have used above. Some of the more familiar examples include: Hesperus = Phosphorus; water is composed of H₂O; gold is an element; cats are animals; Nixon is human; Queen Elizabeth II was not a child of the Trumans. Because such truths need to be established empirically—and indeed, many of the more interesting candidates are the results of advanced scientific inquiry—they cannot obtain in virtue of the meanings of words: they are not analytic. So, it seems, they must represent necessary *facts* and *real essences*—the modal structure of the world. They go beyond the ‘need’ for triangles to have three sides. Further, insofar as their negations are conceivable—for instance, we can imagine water not being composed of H₂O, or cats turning out to be robots or demons—the traditional epistemology of modal claims and proposals about essence seems undermined: just because one can (seem to) conceive of something does not show it is possible (Putnam, 151). This means we can defend claims of essence and necessity (and grounding) even in the face of such imagined counterexamples.

I agree that there are necessary a posteriori truths, and am convinced by many of the familiar arguments for the claims noted above, and similar ones. But I do not think they commit us to any sort of metaphysical or worldly necessity, nor do they give us any reason to accept it. A first clue that, despite the conceptually novel aspect of these truths, they do not reveal anything *metaphysically* novel is that the supporting *arguments* on their behalf are *just as dependent on intuition and thought experiment* as the supporting arguments for conceptual necessities—that is, for the claim that something is part of the meaning, or concept, of ‘lying’ say. Just as we engage in thought

experiments to see whether one can lie while saying something true, or whether the Pope is an unmarried male who fails to be a bachelor, so Kripke and Putnam ask us to engage in such thought experiments. The difference is just that in their hypotheticals, we are to take for granted some empirical assumptions, such as that all water (or: the relevant samples, or the vast bulk of things we judge to be water) is composed of H_2O , and science says this is the ‘deepest’ fact about it; or that gold is an element; or that Biden *is* human; or Hesperus *is* Phosphorus. We assume these to be actually true, and *then* ‘redo’ our imaginings. ‘Do your best to imagine this to be false in another world, while it is true here.’ It is the inability to do so which Kripke and Putnam offer us in support of the claims that they are necessary. So while ‘necessarily, water is H_2O ’ depends on the discovery that it *is* so composed, ‘if it *is*, then it is necessarily so’ seems to be based entirely on the same sort of thought experiments we use about bachelors.¹⁶ If we had reason to think the one tells us only about the meaning of ‘bachelor’ and not mind-independent essences, so we have reason to think the new arguments tell us about the meaning of ‘water’, and not a mind-independent essence.

But wait! We already know that ‘water’ does *not* mean H_2O ! So how can we be learning about the meaning of ‘water’? Well—we learn that we will not apply ‘water’ to something, in other scenarios, if it differs in deep microstructure from these actual samples (see the caveats in note 16). So we govern our counterfactual use of ‘water’ by ‘has the same microstructure as this stuff’, rather than, say ‘having a water-y appearance’ or ‘being what fills the lakes’. Since the specific microstructure is not specified, it is not a priori that water is H_2O : indeed, ‘water’ then does not *mean* H_2O —not even after we have discovered that this *is* the microstructure. After all, it is still and always an empirical hypothesis. But this ‘indirect’ way of constraining the application of a term can still be a semantic constraint, and if we do so govern our use, there will be necessary a posteriori truths. But these truths involve no metaphysical necessity: there is just a semantic rule, and the nonmodal fact that most of these samples have this microstructure. This was illustrated earlier with the example of socratoon. The proposal here is that natural kind terms, and other terms that feature in necessary a posteriori truths, function like ‘socratoon’. The difference is simply that we explicitly stipulated this semantic rule for ‘socratoon’, whereas our use of ‘water’ (or those of us who share the Kripke-Putnam intuitions) is only implicitly governed by such a rule, and so to discover the rule, we need to engage in these sorts of thought experiments, just as we more generally engage in such investigations to figure out how we are semantically constraining our terms.

The mere possibility of this sort of semantic rule shows that it does not *follow* from an a posteriori necessity that it is in any way metaphysical, or that it reflects a real essence. But is there reason to prefer the story I am suggesting—one which, I hope the reader can see, can easily be adapted to any proposed a posteriori necessity—to the more metaphysical alternative, which is usually the way Kripke and Putnam’s results are treated, and the way in which most of post-Kripke-Putnam philosophy (and not just in metaphysics) has proceeded in its subsequent treatment of necessity and essence?

Well, we have already seen one such reason, from seeing the sorts of considerations offered in support of the claim that these are necessary: it is, again, just the familiar thought experiments and intuitions. It is straightforward how these would vary reliably with our referential intentions and rules for applying the terms in question.¹⁷ It is less clear why or how they should give us any insight into mind-independent modal facts. The dependence on these thought experiments is sometimes obscured by some of the presentation. For instance, Kripke writes:

Let us suppose that scientists have investigated the nature of gold and have found that it is part of the very nature of this substance, so to speak, that it have the atomic number 79. (124)

In general, science attempts, by investigating basic structural traits, to find the nature, and thus the essence (in the philosophical sense) of the kind. (138)

This has encouraged many subsequent philosophers to write and speak as if somehow, it is a straightforward part of scientific practice to establish modal claims and claims of essence. If one actually reads Kripke (and Putnam), it is perfectly clear that he says no such thing, and that even while saying things like this, he is relying on his thought experiments to get from any scientific discovery to the more metaphysically substantial conclusions. Of course, if you think the conclusions are true, it makes sense to speak of ‘the scientific discovery of essence’—after all, science *does* provide crucial (nonmodal) premises. But if you are not emphasizing or paying attention to the overall epistemology (something, I hope it is clear, of which I am emphatically *not* accusing Kripke), one might easily be led to overlook the crucial role played by the thought experiments and appeals to intuition.

Of course, it is *possible* to deny that any such intermediate step is needed. Indeed, the current use of ‘essence,’ since Fine (1994) made it plausible that essence is not modally defined, seems to have encouraged some to think of essence as ‘purely an actual’ matter which just has modal *consequences*, and so scientists (or others) can discover essence *without* relying on such thought experiments, and can then just conclude that these properties are had necessarily. And even aside from this, it is not unusual to find it suggested simply that scientists discover essence. But it is hard to see how this might go. There is simply a gap between anything scientists could discover, and a claim of essence or necessity. It is clear enough (more or less!) how scientists could discover that all water is composed of H₂O and that this is its most explanatory feature. How would this support the claim that this is essential? I see two broad possibilities. The first is that ‘essence’ *really is* being used *just* to mean something like ‘what is (actually) most explanatorily important (to a, or to F’s):’ *That*, of course, *can* be empirically ascertained—but this has no modal consequences at all.¹⁸ The other is that ‘essence’ *does* mean something which entails necessity—that if being G is essential to being F, then necessarily all F’s are G. But what can we possibly discover empirically to support this sort of relation between being F (or being a) and being G? What better can we do than the very sort of finding noted above? The language of essence being ‘what F is’ or ‘what it is to be F’ can be used, but it does not make the epistemology any easier. We need to be given reason to think being G is *criteria*l for being F, and for this, any empirical findings would need to be supplemented by intuitions or thought experiments. (Or some background principle like ‘if G is the deep explanatory feature of F’s, it is essential to/what it is to be F.’ But this, of course, just puts us back where we were. For related discussion, see my [1992b].)

There can be room for doubt about this epistemological argument. Some may think it puts too much weight on how we *actually do* argue for modal claims. Others may think that rather than support claims about meaning, it should instead just make us skeptics about this modal knowledge (see, e.g., van Inwagen [1998]). And others urge that we should ‘put the metaphysics first’—if we assume that there *are* essences, and, for instance, that in the case of natural kinds, they are deep explanatory features, then we *do* discover essences when we discover what these features are, and inferences from that to essence *are* reliable, even without ‘directly’ testing this modally to bridge the ‘is-must’ gap. I find all these suggestions implausible, but cannot argue the case fully here.¹⁹ But the epistemological considerations can be supplemented, and when they are, they not *only* supplement them, but (I think) help show the mistake in the above suggestions.

Let us return to water. Kripke argues for water’s being necessarily H₂O as follows:

If there were a substance, even actually, which had a completely different atomic structure from that of water, but resembled water in these respects [feel, appearance, taste], would we say that some water wasn’t H₂O? I think not... and this applies... when we talk about counterfactual situations. If there had been a substance, which was a fool’s water, it would then be fool’s water and not water. On the other hand, if this substance can take another form... with very different identifying marks... it is a form of water. (128–29)

Putnam's Twin Earth case (when Twin Earth is taken as another possible world, rather than another place in the actual world) is similar, though Putnam doesn't *ask* the reader whether XYZ—which looks and behaves just like water, but with this different microstructure—is (would be) water: he just asserts (not unreasonably) that it is not (150–51).

Here, I am less concerned with the epistemology than the metaphysics. We have (at least) two sorts of things, which are coextensive, or very close to coextensive, in the actual world (or more to the point, in our experience—in the cases in which we apply the word 'water'). There is 'water-y stuff'—that which displays the 'superficial' characteristics of water, or perhaps which is 'functionally' like water. And there is H_2O . These are simply two things, even though something having the latter explains (in fact) why it has the former. Now, consider Kripke's thought experiment. It in effect 'prizes apart' these two properties, and asks us 'which one is, or determines that something is, water?' Kripke asserts it is the structure. Now, suppose someone disagrees, and judges that this 'fool's water', or Putnam's XYZ *is* water. Would she be mistaken about the essence of water? In order for this to be so, our use of 'water' must 'latch on' to something in the world, something which is essentially H_2O . But all there is is: watery stuff and (wholes composed of) H_2O .²⁰ We apply the word 'water' in the presence of both. The thought experiments show us which governs our use of 'water.' If the person who dissents is wrong, it is only because she is using the word differently from the rest of the community. After all, there *is* H_2O —which has to be H_2O —and there *is* watery stuff, for which being watery suffices. The only thing to make 'water is essentially H_2O ' true, rather than false (or to make it true, rather than false, that XYZ is not water) is that we are *governing the application* of 'water' by microstructure, rather than appearance. And *that* is why, in the epistemology, we need to go beyond the empirical and look at counterfactual cases (or intuitions)—because these judgements (or the intentions or dispositions which give rise to them) show *how* we are governing our terms. There *is no mistake to make*. However we apply 'water' we will speak truly, unless we are either out of step with our linguistic comrades, or are contradicting some other intention we have. Because 'water' *does not get its reference determined* just by actual application. How could it? There are too many candidates. *Not* candidates that differ in their *essences*—it would be quite extravagant to call 'being composed of H_2O ' 'essential' to being H_2O . The candidates are just different properties, any of which is a candidate to govern the application of 'water.' And whichever *does* govern it will be such that 'water is essentially _____' will be true. But it will be 'essential' to water only as being maroon is essential to socratoon. I think reflection on this suggests that adopting one of the above attitudes towards our epistemological predicament is quite out of place. It is not that there are essences which are quite hard to get a handle on, but rather that, aside from our concepts, *there are no essences to discover*. Whenever we feel like we have a thought about what it would be for, say, water to 'really' essentially be H_2O , we should remind ourselves that there *is* 'watery stuff', and that it is not necessary that watery stuff be H_2O . If water's being essentially H_2O does not preclude watery non- H_2O , what does it amount to? 'If it is not H_2O , it is not *this very stuff*.' But all there *is* to 'this very stuff' is *being H_2O* : H_2O is H_2O , and it not being *water* if it is not this is *just* this being the rule for the application of 'water'.²¹

This will plainly generalize for all a posteriori necessities: we will always be able to 'conceive' that a is not F, or F's that are not G, and if, in the light of finding that a *is* F, or that G 'goes with' our application of 'F' in a certain way, we don't consider our imagined 'a' to 'really be a', or this non-G to 'really be F'; that will only tell us how we are using 'a' or 'F' (or 'this thing' or 'this substance'). A realist might propose that there *is* this variety of things, each with their own essences, and our linguistic dispositions or decisions merely tell us which we are talking about.²² But aside from being an unnecessary extra posit in addition to the actual world and how we talk counterfactually, it is just hard for me to actually understand. What *is* 'this thing' that is 'really' essentially H_2O ? There are two candidates: water, or H_2O . The latter I am dismissing as a genuine

essence: it is a trivial identity. But the former only *seems* substantive when I picture to myself a lake or a glass of water, and think ‘this *has* to be H_2O ; H_2O is *what this is*’. But of course, I am *also* holding some watery stuff, and it does *not* have to be H_2O ; H_2O is *not* ‘what this is’. And now the supposed essentiality of H_2O to ‘something in this glass’ is just the necessity of being H_2O to being H_2O , or the requirement of being H_2O to the application of ‘water’.²³

BACK TO THE ARGUMENT AND GROUNDING

How does our discussion of a posteriori necessities deflate the metaphysical force of grounding? There are several routes here.

First, our discussion supports premise (3) in our ‘master’ argument. If a posteriori necessity is conventional, then there is equally a conventional element in a posteriori grounding claims. Without that necessitation, there would not be grounding of p by q . (Of course, insofar as grounding is something more than necessitation, this ‘something more’ can be substantive and mind-independent. But it is hard to see how it could be the sort of thing to deliver genuine ‘layering.’)

Second, our discussion *directly* supports a deflationary, conventionalist picture of grounding, at least for cases involving the sorts of facts we have been looking at. Something’s being composed of H_2O grounds its being water because of our conventions governing ‘water’. We can, of course, describe scenarios in which we have no such rules, or in which, indeed, there are no language speakers or concept users, and in such cases, something’s being composed of H_2O will still ground its being water. But of course, we are employing our rules when describing such cases. (See my [2009]; Thomasson [2020]). Had we reacted to Twin Earth and other cases differently, nonwatery H_2O would not have fallen in the extension of ‘water’, so the sentence ‘ a ’s being H_2O grounds a ’s being water’ would have been false, despite all the facts aside from our judgments about these cases being that same. Being H_2O could still be *causally* responsible, in many worlds, for something’s meeting the application conditions for ‘water’—but that is not sufficient for grounding. By the same token, while ‘being water-y grounds being water’ is false, it (the sentence) would be true for these alternative language speakers.

Again, it is not to the point to respond “if we used ‘leg’ to mean ‘tail’, the sentence ‘Dogs have four legs’ would be false, and ‘Dogs have one leg’ would be true, but that does not establish any conventionality for how many legs Lassie has.” Being a tail is not a candidate meaning for ‘leg’, and making counterfactual decisions about whether a normal dog has four legs is not needed to settle the reference of ‘leg’, nor then, the truth value of ‘Dogs have four legs’. But that precisely *is* needed to settle whether ‘water is H_2O ’ is necessary and whether ‘being H_2O grounds being water’ can be true. And this is *not* because there are two things, one of which is ‘really grounded’ in being H_2O , and another which is ‘really grounded’ in being watery: there just *is* ‘being composed of H_2O ’ and ‘being watery’, and they compete for being the application condition of ‘water’.

Third, and relatedly, there is a plausible case to be made that when q grounds p , it is ‘in the nature of p ’ to be grounded by q —for instance, it is part of the essence of bachelorhood that something’s being a never-been-married-but-eligible-to-be male, grounds its being a bachelor. The essence of F , or *that* being G suffices to meet the defining conditions for something to be F , may not be part of the *grounds* for something being F , but it is an ineliminable part of the overall story (e.g., Rosen 2010; Correia 2013; Dasgupta 2019). The story I have told above provides (I believe) a plausible general template for facts about essence. Given this tie between grounding and essence, this sort of deflation about essence would carry over to a deflationism, or conventionalism, about grounding as well.

BEYOND THE A POSTERIORI

In the above, I have been appealing to the a posteriori nature of some necessary truths—and consequently grounding claims that depend upon them—to count them as ‘interesting’, for in all such cases, ‘not-p’ will be conceivable. And it is the fact that in some important way, the necessity of p (in such cases where p is necessary) does *not really* rule out these not-p cases as possible—it is just that our semantic rules require us to describe it otherwise—that shows there is no *real* metaphysical necessitation in these cases. But we can find the same structure even in cases that are not (or do not seem to be) a posteriori: we can find them in domains where there are philosophical disputes where neither side is obviously making a conceptual mistake.²⁴ I will illustrate this in the case of the metaphysics of material objects, both as concerns when, if ever, composition occurs (or, if you like ‘what there is’) and in how objects persist through time. And in these cases, we will see more directly how our worries cast doubt on the substantivity of grounding facts.

There are long-standing disputes in the metaphysics of material objects, both concerning when composition takes place, and the conditions under which objects persist.²⁵ As far as composition, some (nihilists) believe there are no composite objects, however matter is arranged; others (universalists) believe wherever there is some matter (or at least some objects), there is another object it entirely composes; and there are a variety of positions in the middle, including commonsense and organicism, according to which composition takes place when some simples ‘participate’ in a life. In the case of persistence, an extreme view is that no object ever persists through change of any sort. Most views have it that objects traverse spatiotemporally continuous paths, but vary on what is required for such a path to be ‘of the right sort’—‘human’ paths, which require a certain sort of biological continuity, ‘person’ paths, which call for psychological continuity, statue and lump paths, and so on. On some views, wherever there is an object, only one persistence condition can be realized, whereas on others, there may be multiple such conditions and consequently multiple objects. And within each of these views, there is room for dispute about the details—what sorts of causal connections are needed between states at different times? How much material change can there be at once? And again, at a further extreme is a view Karen Bennett (2004) has labeled ‘bazillion thingism’ which will have persistence conditions ‘built around’ any feature, or cluster of features, instantiated (perhaps at the time of an object’s creation), as well as a view that for any continuous path through space time, there is some object that entirely occupies that region of spacetime.

So—a variety of views, with arguments available for each view, and arguments against each view, as it conflicts either with commonsense or plausible looking principles—for instance, that there not be vagueness about what exists, or vagueness about whether a and b are identical; or that the difference between composition or persistence, or their absence, should not be arbitrary; or that there is not more than one object wholly located in a place at a time, or in a region of spacetime; and others. But in both domains, there are reasonable—and certainly coherent—replies on behalf of each position. And in both domains, the arguments and replies are (almost) all a priori, based on intuitions and judgments about cases and principles. (In any case where there is appeal to an actual case or phenomenon, the same epistemic force would attach to judgments about the case considered hypothetically—so even if the support is in fact a posteriori, it was available a priori as well.)

And so, for instance, where one person judges there is a table or a dog, another judges that there are only simples arranged tablewise or dogwise; where one person judges a human being has gone out of existence, another judges that some flesh and bones has merely lost the accidental property of being human. And there are lot of interesting consequences to be drawn out from each view or set of judgments, but they generally generate no contradictions,

or none that cannot be avoided with slight modifications. Most importantly, there are in both domains a wide array of views that are compatible with any possible arrangement of matter in spacetime.

This sets the stage for a view about these disputes along the same line as our view about disputes and facts (such as there are) about necessity and essence. The epistemology, again, is a priori and based upon intuitions and descriptions of possible cases, and metaphysically, it is hard to see what can make the difference between any of the views. Modality again bolsters the case: the *only* way one can really make sense of one of the views being mind-independently true would have it be a brute fact that when matter is so-and-so arranged in spacetime, there is an object, or an object of a given sort, or a given object persists through all or some of it.²⁶ But why *this* rather than *that* overall story of composition and persistence? If it is not a brute fact, it is not a fact at all, unless it is a conventional one. But if it is a brute fact, it surely cannot be necessary—again, it doesn't really rule out any of the possibilities it would need to rule out.²⁷ And the arrangement of matter would then not necessitate there being an object, or an object with a given modal profile, or a persisting object.²⁸

In sum—if facts about what objects there are, or whether or where a given object has persisted through time, are grounded in facts about matter and its distribution in spacetime, we have the same sorts of reasons to doubt that there are mind-independent facts of such grounding as we do about necessity and essence. Any purported facts about grounding here would be 'interesting' in the sense I have used for purported a posteriori necessities and essence: there is a range of competing possibilities and nothing other than decisions about how to talk to make one rather than another correct. Nor, obviously, does it help if such facts are to be grounded in a combination of such facts about matter *and* facts about essences, as we have already argued for the conventionality of essence; such is the route to grounding through essence with which we ended the previous section.

BROADER QUESTIONS

While there may not always be the same range of options as in the metaphysics of material objects, there will always *at least* be the option analogous to the nihilist, or flatlander, who denies that there is anything composed or complex. And so, reasoning similar to what we have rehearsed will be available across the board, for thinking that what facts there are about grounding will depend upon conceptual and linguistic choices (in the broad sense of 'choices' in which an evolutionarily hard-wired 'way of proceeding' in concept application or object identification counts as a 'choice' insofar as alternatives are possible and would not be metaphysically mistaken). Aside from similarity of reasoning, the general dependence of facts upon object and kinds itself means that grounding deflation of the sort we have discussed will permeate the grounds of facts more generally.²⁹ So while we have directly looked at a limited class of cases, perhaps broader morals can be drawn.

Do the arguments of this paper amount to the claim that there really are no grounded facts and entities, that really, all there is, is what is fundamental? I do not think so. For one thing, I have said nothing in support of belief that anything *is* fundamental. For another, nihilism with respect to the grounded is one among the various views that—at least in many cases—is a genuine competitor, as for instance, my view does not support compositional nihilism over organicism or common sense. And while I have focused on issues of necessity and purported connections between objects and facts, similar considerations can be brought, say, between holistic, top-down and more familiar bottom-up views about fundamentality and what grounds what. So, I think, this sort of skepticism about 'grounding realism' neither casts doubt on the existence of grounding or grounded entities, nor could it support either an 'only atomic simples'

view nor its monistic alternative (or a stuff-fundamentalism, which might look like monism, with a rejection of the claim that ‘all the stuff’ composes anything, viz. that ‘the world’ or ‘the one’ denotes an object).

The overall situation is, I think, the same as for philosophers who believe(d) that philosophy was fundamentally conceptual analysis. For some, this picture of philosophy deprived it of any significance, relegating it to a poorly practiced branch of linguistics or psychology. For others, it remained an important investigation into the structure of our world, as ‘our world’ is infused with, and structured by our concepts, even if this makes such structure less ‘metaphysical’.³⁰ And of course, there is a range of positions in between. If I am right, the study of ground is conceptual analysis—and perhaps conceptual engineering or ‘explication’ in Carnap’s sense—in a new key. For some, this will make investigation into particular cases of grounds less interesting and important, but it need not do so. But whatever one’s attitude towards it, I do not think we are unearthing a mind-independent layered structure of reality.

I understand that what is contained herein will not convince everyone to accept a conventionalist or otherwise deflationary view about necessity, or the metaphysics of material objects, and so, the implications for grounding may seem slight. But I hope to have at least shown that *if* there is reason to be a skeptic about real necessity, there is equal reason to be skeptical about real grounding, and this not just because grounding involves necessitation, but because the very same sorts of considerations which make essences seem at best a matter of our conceptual scheme apply directly to cases of grounding as well.³¹

NOTES

1. For more on this, see [Thomasson \(2020\)](#).
2. For instance, [Sider \(2011, ch. 7; 2020\)](#); [Bennett \(2017, 58–59\)](#); and [Dasgupta \(2017\)](#). For another approach to which I am sympathetic, see [Miller and Norton \(2017\)](#).
3. Some may prefer to put this in terms of supervenience. That is fine with me; I put it like this because my target is necessity as such.
4. Since grounding involves more than necessitation alone, there can be something interesting about a grounding fact. But if the necessitation is conceptual, it seems extremely likely that the ‘extra’ is also not a matter of deep metaphysical significance, and is more likely to reflect some order of explanation in our concepts. Our examples in the text to follow will bear this out. At the end of the day, the key idea will not be that grounding is shallow because necessitation is shallow, but that the same considerations which show that necessitation is shallow show that grounding is as well.
5. At least, if Vera’s being female, and a fox, grounds her being a vixen. For those who question this, the challenge to the substantivity of grounding will instead be a challenge to the purported facts of grounding. For instance, answers to Socratic “what is F?” questions will not provide answers about what grounds F. For doubts about whether some ‘standard’ cases of grounding should count as grounding, see [McSweeney \(2020\)](#).
6. Well—not very interesting, given how ‘socratooon’ is stipulatively introduced. But claims *like* this will seem interesting insofar as such rules are *not* introduced stipulatively, and one ‘discovers’ the necessity through a combination of reflection and discovery of some relevant nonmodal, nongrounding fact—such as: most samples we call ‘water’ being composed of H₂O, or Obama’s being human.
7. This is, plainly, a stipulative definition of ‘interesting’. A grounding claim may be in some way interesting even if the necessitation claim is trivial, since the conceptual basis of the necessitation claim, in some cases, can be meaningfully discussed/disputed. But if the necessitation claim is not worldly, neither will the grounding claim be (see note 4).
8. However, see [Tennant \(1987\)](#) and [Warren \(2017\)](#) for suggestions about a conventionalist account of logic (and [Warren \[2020\]](#) for math). Aside from this concern, ‘uninteresting’ grounding claims and claims of necessity seem to wear their metaphysical triviality on their faces.
9. Or, in many cases, such rules plus whatever nonmodal, empirical facts the rules specify as providing the semantic constraints on the application of the concept—as the facts about Socrates’s color preferences, for being socratooon.

10. So, for instance, [Hirsch \(2005\)](#) thinks that in English, it is determinately true that (necessarily) when there are simples arranged tablewise, there is a table (and presumably, that these simples standing in this arrangement grounds there being a table). I (and he) would then attach little metaphysical significance to either this necessity or the grounding claim. But I am also skeptical of the claim about English. Since my deflationary position is independent of whether or not there are such facts, I put my claim disjunctively.
11. In what follows, I am basically following Bennett's discussion in her ([2017](#), ch. 3.3).
12. Worries about grounds *themselves* necessitating can be found in [Leuenberger \(2014\)](#) and [Skiles \(2015\)](#); Bennett responds to both in the material cited in note 11.
13. This is one respect in which causation differs from grounding: we can (I think) understand non-necessitating (i.e., indeterministic) causation, but not grounding. This is because causation holds between *distinct events*, and the effect does not (perhaps) need to be *entirely* accounted for. But the whole idea of grounding is precisely such *complete* accounting. In the absence of a complete account, something is missing—either in the grounds (or total context), or else there is something ungrounded. Of course, one can insist that this is also true for causation; I only suggest that the concept of causation (but not grounding) has space for this. (I also doubt that the concept of causation has room for *logical* necessitation.) For more on differences between causation and grounding, see [Bernstein \(2016\)](#).
14. By 'cannot', I include cases where *p* deductively follows from 'uninteresting' necessities, which are either directly intuited or stipulated ($a=a$; if *p*, then *p*; nothing can be a bachelor if married) or uncontroversially and obviously established by thought experiments with no factual premises ('Would a 5 year-old boy be a bachelor?' 'Does one lie if one (mistakenly) believes that *p*, and asserts that not-*p*, intending to deceive the audience?'). Here, we attempt to find not-*p* cases, and if we believe we can't even find a decent candidate, we conclude that *p* is necessary. I call them 'uninteresting' because these thought experiments tell us how we are using the terms in question, and so pretty straightforwardly reveal nothing metaphysical. Perhaps *logical* necessity is presupposed (if we fail to apply 'lie' to something that is true, though believed by the speaker to be false, then perhaps the necessity in 'one cannot lie while saying something that is true' depends on the necessity of 'it is not possible to say something that is not true while that thing is true'). But that is of little metaphysical moment—it can hardly be thought of as a metaphysical essence of lying. (Admittedly, some of these examples may strike others as more potentially disputable, and so candidates for being interesting. That is fine—they will then be subject to the analysis to follow. My claim is only when they are *not* contentious, they are more directly likely to look semantic rather than metaphysical.)
15. There may be a less committal use of 'metaphysical necessity' which simply means 'true in all possible worlds ('the widest sense'), but neither a logical nor conceptual truth'. On this use, there need not be anything particularly metaphysical about metaphysical necessities—i.e., even if the conventionalist account sketched below is correct, 'water is H₂O' will still count as metaphysically necessary. Plainly, I am using the expression in the text in the more 'loaded' sense, though I can see a use for the more neutral one.
16. That is not to say that there might not be hidden empirical assumptions even here. Perhaps if we found out that even though water is H₂O, this chemical composition is not so important in explaining the rest of water's properties, we would retract. But of course, *this* is something which, if true, is in principle amenable to the same sort of reflection. In Chalmers's (2013) useful phrase, any empirical consideration which *could* make us change our mind about the proper description of hypothetical scenarios can be 'frontloaded' into the antecedent of a conditional which is then a new candidate for (a) being the more basic explanation and (b) being a priori. The hypothesis that some claim here—if *q*, then necessarily *p*—is *a priori* is as fallible, but also as well supported, as the hypothesis that *p* is necessary.
17. Of course, it will hardly be infallible, and reliability may vary with one's skill in thinking of 'best case scenarios' for the falsity of *p*, and discerning constitutive rather than 'merely correlated' candidates for a term's application. The deeper point here is that *the very same tests* would properly be applied for judging whether being *G* is essential to being *F*, and whether being *G* is (perhaps given empirical facts) a semantic constraint on the application of 'F'.
18. I mean *metaphysical* modality. Of course it is relevant to *nomological* or *causal* modalities—though this, of course, is presupposed in attribution of this sort of 'essence', rather than a consequence. Some believe what is causally necessary is metaphysically necessary—but this, of course, is a substantive claim, to be established (if at all) just like any other claim about metaphysical necessity. For an extended argument that laws of nature are *not* metaphysically necessary (in the robust sense of 'metaphysical necessity' I have been using here), see my (2002).

19. One concern for a ‘reliability’-based approach is that these various concerns, and (independently) the seeming ability of many to imagine and judge otherwise, present relevant alternatives or defeaters that believers need to be in a position to overcome.
20. Of course, this is an idealization—the creative philosopher can no doubt find other coextensive, or nearly so, properties (or ‘stuffs’ defined by such properties).
21. The situation is not relevantly changed if one assumes that some properties are more natural than others, and that this feeds into a ‘reference magnetism’, insofar as nothing in naturalness requires or supports a claim of necessity.
22. This suggestion appears in [Bennett’s \(2004\)](#) bazillion-thingism, and perhaps in some of Eklund’s criticisms of Carnapian views.
23. There will be some differences of detail in cases of individual essences (in particular, meanings will usually only provide *constraints* rather than sufficient conditions for the application of a name or singular term, and we have essential properties but not full ‘essences’ [if these are supposed to be necessary and sufficient]. For more argument and details, see my [[1992a](#), [1992b](#), [1995](#)]).
24. This should not really be surprising, because even in the cases we have considered, the relevant ‘conceivability’ of the alternatives was not due to the *a posteriori* of the proposition, but to the *a priori* issue of whether this or that sort of feature is essential to, or criterial for, being F or being a.
25. Here, I put aside disputes between three- and four-dimensionalists—endurantists and perdurantists. On either approach, there are questions about persistence under certain conditions—they are just alternatively asked as questions about identity conditions or unity conditions. Perdurantists *tend* to be universalists, but they need not be. And even when they are, the usual disputes about identity for objects of given *sorts* can still be played out along the usual lines.
26. One may disguise the bruteness here, by ‘grounding’ it in the essence of objecthood, or of tables, or ‘the very identity of x’. Alternatively, one may turn to ‘zero-grounding’ or grounding grounding facts in the grounds themselves, or to ‘the laws of metaphysics’. I hope by this point it is clear that all of these strategies just push the bump in the rug, so long as there are broadly coherent alternatives to the purported grounding claims—though we can understand the truth of one in terms of conventions. For why conventions would not have the result that the grounding claims are contingent, see my ([2009](#)), [Einheuser \(2006\)](#) and [Livingstone-Banks \(2017\)](#).
27. Similar arguments appear in my ([2002](#)) and [Chalmers \(2002\)](#).
28. Hopefully it is obvious that the same issues arise if one adds ‘the laws of metaphysics’ to the distribution and arrangement of matter in the grounds of facts about objects and their persistence—it is the real necessity of such ‘laws’ which is directly implicated here.
29. If, on the other hand, one believes facts are prior to their constituents, our arguments will simply apply to the facts themselves—e.g., purported facts like ‘there are three tables in the room’ or ‘this table has existed for over 100 years’, and their purported grounds.
30. A *locus classicus* for this is [Strawson \(1966\)](#).
31. For helpful thoughts and encouragement, I would like to thank Chris Daly and Bruno Whittle.

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