FINDING DRY GROUND[1]

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Abstract: I restructure debates about grounding in a way that reclassifies the teams and reveals new possible positions for those with a taste for desert landscapes. I then offer a novel deflationary take on the class of concepts consisting of grounding, determination, ontological priority and the like.

Keywords: grounding, fundamentality, dependence, priority, realism, error theory, noncognitivism, conventionalism

[1] Thanks to xxxxxxxxxxx. I consider myself entitled to have fun with desert metaphors because I spent my adolescence in (what was then) the northern outskirts of Phoenix, with East Coast parents who fell in love with both the natural world and the art and history of the original inhabitants. I moved away, but they stayed and took joy in the desert until they died. In contrast, it's not clear to me that Quine ever saw an actual desert landscape until long after he wrote "On What There Is," published in 1948. According to https://www.wvquine.org/wvq-lecture-travel.html, he did not travel to either the American Southwest or Australia until later.

***Note of August 2025**:* this currently comes to a sudden halt at the end of §7. (Readers wanting to see that 'novel deflationary take' promised in the abstract will have to wait.)

Right now, the whole set-up and spin is as per the abstract. But I'm starting to think that this may have to be 2 papers, or even 3. So I'm not sure whether to describe this as half a paper, or as most of a whole paper that is currently framed incorrectly!

- One paper would consist of basically current sections 2-5, set up differently. This would be a paper arguing for i) the need to broaden our sights from just grounding to a bigger category, and ii) the need for a neologism, such as 'plexic', for that category. (Useful cognates include 'plexology' for the study of it, and 'plexity' as a generic noun that can be used much like 'morality' or 'modality'.) This is basically the current sections 2-5.
- One that helps itself to the results of the first paper, and takes up the task of recentering plexology around a clarified understanding of the primary insights and arguments that kicked off the 'hyperintensional revolution'. They do not immediately show that reality contains some or other primitive plexity, like a worldly grounding relation. Rather, they show that a certain kind of *thought and talk*—plexic discourse—cannot be given straightforward modal truth conditions. This is compatible with a number of reactions, from an error theory about plexic discourse to noncognitivism[2] to a robust realism that posits primitive grounding. (Compare the array of available reactions to a similar claim in metaethics, that moral discourse cannot be given straightforwardly naturalistic truth conditions.). Then explore and articulate some non-robust-realist views.

Anyway, here is a table of contents for what you have in front of you:

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[2] Or quasi-realism, etc. xxxx

Over the past twenty-five years or so, it has become orthodox to think that philosophy requires a primitive notion of ground. Here is Gideon Rosen, concluding a paper with dramatic flair:

> If you're allergic to ground, you should stop asking what it is for a thing to be a person or for a creature to be conscious or for a fact to be a law of nature or for two expressions to be synonymous or for an object to be colored or for an action to be free or for an artifact to be an artwork, since you can't explain your questions without invoking a concept you reject. On the other hand, if you think these questions make good sense, you should make your peace with metaphysical grounding, since you are committed to making sense of it by the questions you make it your business to ask and answer (2015).[3]

I myself am at least broadly sympathetic to this speech and standard variations thereon.[4] But I also think that the current climate is not favorable to the person who is "allergic to ground" and would prefer more arid desert conditions. A damp fog is closing in, and it is hard to see the rocky outcroppings that offer refuge. It's even become a little hard to see who is friend and who is foe.

My first goal in this paper is to dispel this fog and better reveal the trail map. I do this in sections I through IV, by unpacking what I'll call 'the standard argument' for primitive grounding in a way that highlights parallels with other philosophical areas where the available dry land has been better explored. My discussion here will not only reveal these places, but also redraw the primary existing battle line in an important way. Those who like their terrain mapped visually as well as through prose can avail themselves of the appendix.[5]

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[3] In this particular passage, Rosen only says that an idiom of real definition—'to be *F* is to be *G*'—commits us to grounding. But he also thinks other idioms of determination and dependence commit us to grounding as well, arguably more directly.

[4] Xxxdeleted for blind reviewxxx

[5] The order of the flowchart in the appendix does not match the order in which the ideas unfold in the main text, and may be most useful after reading through the end of §3.

My second goal is to xeriscape one particular spot. In section V, I describe a novel conventionalist position,[6] with the modest aims of characterizing it and locating it with respect to other desert-landscape-y options. I offer it in much the same spirit in which Ned Hall offers his recent epistemic approach to ground:

> Is [it] the right approach? I don't know… But it passes the right test: an important corrective if true; and if false, worth the effort of exposing as such. Consider this essay, then, an invitation to develop [it] in much more detail than I will be able to (Hall 2023, 240).

The relation between Hall's proposal and my own is an interesting topic in itself that I will address in §VI. For now, all that matters is that this essay, too, is an invitation to explore the terrain. There are still dry places to homestead, places where the ground is hard caliche,[7] free of those pesky allergens. It remains to be seen whether this caliche soil will be fertile enough for what we want to grow.

I. The Standard Argument

What I will call "the standard argument" for primitive ground starts by calling attention to the fact that philosophy is shot through with claims about what exists or obtains in virtue of what, what makes what the case, what depends on what, what is ontologically prior to what, what defines what, what is fundamental, and so on. The next claim is that these ideas cannot be understood in modal terms. Our unshakeable intuition that {Socrates} exists because Socrates does, and not *vice versa*, survives the realization that they each necessitate each other. Notions like supervenience,

[6] ELSEWHERE, NOT IN INTROxxxxxxWhat I will lay out is effectively a conventionalist implementation of the view of metaphysical structure I develop in my 2017. (There, I only suggest in passing that this might be done (58-59; 184-185).

[7] Caliche *[ka-lee-chee] [kə ˈliː tʃi]* is a hard layer of calcium carbonate that forms in or on arid desert soils. It is found around the world, including in the Sonoran desert of the southwestern United States and northern Mexico. The term is well known in the urban areas of Phoenix and Tucson, because the caliche layer poses an everyday obstacle to gardening and landscaping.

necessitation, and counterfactual dependence do not cut finely enough do the work. To make sense of grounding discourse, we must instead posit a primitive worldly grounding relation.[8]

One can see hints of this argument in the Rosen passage with which I began. It is tempting to also cite, as canonical sources, Fine 1994 and 1995,[9] Schaffer 2009 (esp. 363-365), and Rosen 2010 (as well as Bennett & McLaughlin 2005, §3.5 for the premise about the failure of supervenience). Certainly, those are the papers that get cited when people talk of the grounding revolution. But I do not in fact want to attribute the standard argument to any of them. It is a caricature. It is a more accurate representation of how claims by people like Schaffer, Fine, and Rosen *have been received* than of what any of them *actually said*.[10]

I intend the standard argument to be an articulation of an implicit argument that has quietly seeped into philosophical culture. I am neither interested in pinning it on, nor exonerating, anyone in particular. Is the standard argument a straw person? Maybe, I suppose, but my criticisms of it in §§xx-xx are important even if no one has actually given it in print, and even if the park rangers (Schaffer, Fine, and Rosen) would agree that my criticisms are good criticisms of an argument that is not theirs. The

[8] Here and throughout, I speak as if the issue is about a primitive grounding *relation*, which is how both Rosen and Schaffer also speak. Xxxxcites. Kit Fine prefers to use a primitive grounding *operator*. While questions about ontological commitment are more delicate in the operator case, I suspect that most of what I say in this paper can be translated into Fine's preferred regimentation.
[9] Sort of. In neither paper is Fine actually talking about grounding. xxxxx
[10] For example, what Rosen actually says (2010) is that "impossible to say in advance" that grounding discourse is hopelessly confused. He then takes it as a "*working hypothesis*" that there is a single primitive grounding relation, and then explores what such a view would look like (2010, 113-114, italics mine). This is not the standard argument as I have depicted it. Relatedly, maybe the standard argument should be understood as having a background methodological premise about taking discourse at face value until and unless we have good reason not to do so. The question then becomes whether the friend of primitive ground needs to identify and block all alternative explanations of grounding discourse, or whether they have done enough to be justified in their posit until and unless some anti-grounder comes up with a plausible alternative. For present purposes, I am no more interested in adjudicating this burden-of-proof question than I am in pinning the standard argument on anyone in particular.

standard argument is undeniably crude, but it is also undeniably in the air, and has been for a while. It is time to explicitly look at it for what it is. Using it as a foil helps reveal both patches of dry land and the inadequacy of the currently existing maps.

The standard argument has two underappreciated features that will figure centrally in what's to come. One is that it moves from our acceptance of certain ways of thinking and talking to a metaphysical claim about what exists—from "discourse"[11] to ontology. It says that our ways of thinking and talking about the metaphysical structure of the world ontologically commits us to a primitive grounding relation.[12] It is basically a Quinean indispensability argument.

The other underappreciated feature of the standard argument is that even if we are on board with deriving the existence of a primitive *something* from the relevant kind of thought and talk, it's not obvious that grounding is the right something. There is a danger of mismatch between the discourse and the posit.

Together, these underappreciated claims will help me find some paths back to dry ground—i.e., will enable me to articulate several novel positions that are 'anti-grounding' in one sense or another. Soon we will start to pick our way along the creek, looking for places to climb out of the canyon. But the very first thing we need to do is get a somewhat clearer grasp on the kind of discourse in question.

[11] The scare quotes, which I will henceforth drop, are meant to highlight the fact that the term refers to far more than *sentences* uttered in an actual human language. It is also intended to apply to internal mental things like intuitions and beliefs. By 'discourse', I just mean 'ways of thinking and talking'.
[12] There is an amusing irony in the fact that the standard argument for the existence of primitive ground is pretty Quinean: Schaffer 2009 gives it in the course of persuasively arguing against a Quinean existence-based approach to metaphysics, and in favor of an Aristotelian grounding-based one. (As he pointed out to me, though, there's no tension in accepting the

II. The Discourse

I characterized the standard argument as moving from thought and talk to ontology, and indeed to a particular piece of ontology: a primitive grounding relation. But we need to start at the very beginning, and get clearer about the kind of discourse at issue: what kind of thought and talk are we talking about, exactly? In this section, then, I will temporarily bracket the move to ontology to focus on this. I initially said that the relevant discourse consists of

> claims about what exists or obtains in virtue of what, what makes what the case, what depends on what, what is ontologically prior to what, what defines what, what is fundamental, and so on.

What shall we call these ways of talking, this tangled family of concepts and expressions about metaphysical structure?

Bizarrely, neither ordinary English nor academic Philosophese has an adequate expression here, despite having well-established labels for other similarly broad categories. We happily talk of 'mereological notions,' 'modal notions' and 'normative notions', but have no general word for metaphysical-structure-ish notions, despite their centrality to philosophy in general, and despite the fact that they have been at the center of attention of metaphysics in particular for twenty years.[13] We need one.

I propose to call them the *plexic notions*, from the Greek *πλεκτω* for 'to braid or weave'.[14] This new label is only supposed to roughly ostend the subject matter, in the same way that labels like 'normative notions' do. It can be used by people that disagree about a lot: about exactly what falls under it, and—crucially—how much, if any, of it, is

[13] The hyperintensional revolution really took hold in the mid-aughts, about ten years after Fine's papers from the 90's.
[14] ADD FOOTNOTE ABOUT ALL THE ALTERNATIVES I CONSIDERED AND REJECTED

real or true or fundamental or anything of the sort.[15] The entire point of the label is to enable us to point at the relevant kind of thought and talk in a vague way, and *afterwards* ask what the world would have to be like to make it true, and whether the world in fact is that way. It is, and is only, a label for the subject matter. It is completely neutral on the underlying metaphysics.

But why think we need a new piece of terminology here? And why care? I can practically hear the grumbling: "first of all, we don't need a neologism; we have perfectly good terminology already right here in the backpack. And, second, even if we *did* need a new word, it would not affect anything of substance. It's all just words!"

No to both. We do need a new term. The two existing candidate descriptors for the relevant discourse are 'grounding' and 'hyperintensional', both of which are terrible labels. And the lack of decent terminology has led to real philosophical confusion. I will make these points in section III through V.

III. Why We Should Not Call Plexic Discourse 'Grounding Discourse'

The problem with calling the relevant kind of thought and talk 'grounding discourse' is that doing so names a broad category by re-using the name of one of its proper subcategories,[16] like using 'squirrel' as a synonym for 'mammal' or 'blue' as a synonym for 'color'. Remember, the topic here is, as I put it in §1,

> claims about what exists or obtains in virtue of what, what makes what the case, what depends on what, what is ontologically prior to what, what defines what, what is fundamental, and so on.

[15] Compare my 2011, 2017 on the class of building relations, including 2017, §2.3 on the ways in which a family of related notions might be unified. Note that the class of building relations would be a subset of the class of plexic notions, regardless of whether 'grounding' is taken to be a synonym for 'building' or to pick out a single member of the class.

[16] Or like naming a genus after one of its species, or a determinable property after one of its determinates, or a plurality after one of its subpluralities, or a whole after one of its proper parts…

Only the first two entries on this list even purport to directly refer to grounding. The others instead pick up on other threads in a *broader family of notions*: dependence, ontological priority, real definition, fundamentality.[17] (This family might well have other members, like essence (probably) and naturalness (probably not),[18] but they will have little role to play in what follows.) What we need is a label for that broad family—a family that includes grounding, *but also includes more besides*.

Perhaps it is obvious that the family of notions I've been gesturing towards contains more than just grounding. *I* certainly think it is. But, if argument is required, here goes. One thing can be ontologically prior to another without even partly grounding it, and one thing can ground another without that thing's ontologically depending on it (c.f. Bennett 2017, xxx).[19] So grounding isn't identical to either ontological priority or dependence,[20] and the relevant family contains more than just grounding.

This pointis perfectly compatible with the very natural idea—which I myself wholeheartedly endorse—that some or all of the relevant concepts can be characterized in terms of others. My point is even compatible with the claim that they can all be fully characterized in terms of grounding in particular. My point is simply that these notions are not all *identical* to grounding. The terms in English are not synonymous, and the concepts are distinct.

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[17] People who are pluralists about any one of these ideas: about ontological dependence, say (as per Koslicki?xxx), or grounding or grounding-like determination (Wilson, Bennett…. Also normative vs metaphysical

[18] Xxxdeleted for blind reviewxxxxx

[19] Here are cases to illustrate. Case 1: let *a* be the fact that some particular electron on the moon exists, and let *b* be the fact my left thumb hurts. *a* is ontologically prior to *b* but does not even partly ground it. Case 2, grounding without ontological dependence: let *c* be the precise actual ground of your mental state *d* right now. By definition, *c* grounds *d*. But *d* doesn't ontologically depend on *c*, because you could have been in *d* in virtue of a different ground. (cf Pereboom, xxx; token version of MR)

[20] Bear in mind that I need to establish is that the *concepts* are distinct, that the *linguistic expressions* are not synonymous. At this stage, I am merely carving out an area of discourse, and talking about what we should call it, without regard to whether any of it is true, or anything worldly answers to it.

Compare (biological)[21] family relations. The terms 'parent' and 'cousin' are not synonymous. This is the case even though 'cousin' can be defined in terms of 'parent', and even though all cousin-facts are or are fully grounded in parent-facts. Indeed, all biological family expressions can be defined in terms of the parent-child relation (plus gender properties). But it would be bizarre and confusion-generating to start referring to the *whole cluster of expressions*—'aunt', 'brother', 'cousin', and so on—as 'parent discourse'. It's *family* discourse, even if the expression 'parent' (and perhaps the worldly relation it picks out) has a special place in it.

This is why I insist that plexic discourse not be called 'grounding discourse'. It is particularly distasteful to call it 'grounding discourse' at the very beginning of the standard argument, which is intended to establish the centrality of grounding.

IV. Why We Should Not Call Plexic Discourse 'Hyperintensional Discourse'

A better competitor is the label 'hyperintensional'. But this is no good either, even assuming that all the relevant notions indeed are hyperintensional. The word 'hyperintensional' just names a kind of logical behavior: it has to do with the failure of substitution of necessary equivalents, the inability of a notion to be defined modally, and so forth.[22]

The first problem is simply that plexic notions are not the only ones that behave this way. For example, belief attributions are famously hyperintensional: the fact that Lois believes that Superman can fly does not entail that she believes that Clark Kent can

[21] I use biological family relationships rather than their non-biological role-based counterparts, not because they are more real or more important, but because they are vastly simpler. My definitional claims in the main text are obviously false of the more role-based versions.
[22] I am purposely running roughshod over irrelevant niceties about what, exactly, gets to be called 'hyperintensional:' contexts? sentences? worldly things? This makes it impossible to precisely define it.

fly, despite the fact that Superman is Clark Kent. So any generalizations about hyperintensional discourse will be broader than corresponding ones about plexic discourse.

Second, if the kind of discourse or class of notions is named after the logical behavior of its members, it will be analytic that the members have that behavior. 'Hyperintensional notions are hyperintensional' is trivial in a way that 'the plexic notions are hyperintensional' is not. And it sure seems like it is the non-trivial claim—crystallized by Fine, Bennett and McLaughlin, and others FTNTxxthough bubbling in the ether beforehandXXX—that grabbed the attention of the metaphysics community. It was *surprising* to learn that our existing locutions for structure and dependence were never going to be adequately captured by necessitation, supervenience, or counterfactual dependence. What transpired is often called the 'hyperintensional *revolution'* xxcite?Nolan?, and tautologies don't generally start revolutions.

While there are ways of wiggling out of this complaint,[23] doing so seems pointlessly defensive, particularly in light of the first problem. Better to make the claim wear its surprisingness on its face: it turns out that this area of discourse, carved out by its subject matter, exhibits the following logical behavior. It turns out, that is, that plexic discourse is hyperintensional.

V. Why Having a Decent Label Matters

Miranda Fricker has taught us (2007) that sometimes the availability of a concept or label matters, and this is one of those cases. Having the label 'plexic'—and the bonus

[23] The most obvious one involves pointing out that it is not analytic that any member of the class is a member of the class. That is, while it is analytic that the hyperintensional notions are hyperintensional, it is not analytic that, say, grounding is a hyperintensional notion. Maybe that was what surprised us.

terms ‘plexology’ and ‘plexological’!—is useful in at least two ways.

The first is that it solves a small sociological issue in that having the new terms enables better characterization of some people’s research. It feels awkward at best to describe, say, Kathrin Koslicki or Jessica Wilson—or me—as“working on grounding”. But we all definitely work on plexology (e.g. Koslicki 2012, 2015, 2020). xxxFINISH CITES

More importantly, using the label ‘plexic’ reveals, in glaringly bright light, one of the problems with the standard argument. And while the argument can be reformulated to avoid it, doing so changes the space of available responses.

With the new piece of terminology in hand, the standard argument now looks like this:

1. Philosophers (and others) frequently engage in plexic discourse.
2. That discourse cannot be accounted for modally.

So we must posit primitive grounding.

This is… not a valid argument. Perhaps now would be a good time to reiterate that I am not attributing it to any actual philosopher.

The question about pulling ontology out of a discourse-y hat is still there, of course, and I shall return to it in §xxxxx. The newly salient issue is the mismatch between premises and conclusion. It was there all along, but obscured by the tendency of metaphysicians to haphazardly refer to the thought and talk as ‘grounding discourse’. Even if we take the big step of granting the proponent of the standard argument the need to posit primitive *something*, no reason has been given as to why it must be *grounding in particular*. Why not posit a different fundamental plexic notion, like, say, fundamentality or ontological priority? And why think it is only one primitive? Maybe we need multiple.

This is important. Really important. May I politely suggest that you pay attention? Here is a section break to nudge you awake.

VI. True Xerophilia vs. Nonstandard Varieties of Plexic Realism

Having a label for the plexic allows me to distinguish the following two questions:

> is there a fundamental grounding relation?
> are there *any* fundamental plexic properties or relations?

It also allows me to distinguish between the views that result from answering 'yes' to the two questions respectively.

> Robust *grounding* realism: there is at least one fundamental grounding relation.
> Robust *plexic* realism: there is at least one fundamental plexic property or relation.

Note: the word 'robust' is intended to underscore that these are views about fundamental ontology. There may well be room for more deflationary realisms—finding the space for such unorthodox views is much of the point of his paper—but that will come later.

I have just opened conceptual space for plexic realism without grounding realism. (There is no space for the converse.)[24] I have, as a corollary, opened conceptual space for two quite different kinds of skeptic: the *true xerophile*[25] who denies there are any fundamental plexic notions, and the *mere anti-grounder* who thinks that there indeed are, and just denies that grounding is among them.

[24] In contrast, robust grounding realism entails plexic realism, because grounding is a paradigmatically plexic notion.
[25] 'Xerophilia' means love of desert landscapes. A true xerophile about a domain is someone who defends a view without any ontological posits distinctive to that domain. So, for example, a Quinean nominalist about universals could be described as a xerophile with respect to predication.

Jessica Wilson embodies these distinctions. Despite being one of the first people most metaphysicians think of when asked to name a 'grounding skeptic', *Wilson is a mere anti-grounder, not a true xerophile*. She is a robust plexic realist who is not a robust (G)rounding realist.

Wilson explicitly takes fundamentality to be primitive, and—less amiably—needs to additionally posit a primitive relation of ontological priority (Bennett, forthcoming). While the view that fundamentality is primitive is definitely in her early anti-grounding work (2014, 459-62; 2018, 497), it becomes more front-and-center in new work that further develops her overall picture (2019, forthcoming a, forthcoming b). Now, she famously also denies that there is a single Grounding relation, instead opting for a cluster of "small-'g' grounding relations". This is the main aspect of her view that has hitherto gotten attention. But her pluralism is not the only thing, nor even the main thing, that drives her resistance to the Grounding framework. What really drives her resistance is that she wants to take *fundamentality* as the primitive plexic notion, and define directed, relational, priority-ish determination in terms of it.

I have argued against Wilson's approach elsewhere (deleted for blind review). But even though I reject her view, I defend its right to be properly marked on the map, next to its competitors. *It is a form of robust realism about plexic discourse.* It is different from the Schaffer-Rosen form, yes. (It isn't robust grounding realism.) But it is a form of robust plexic realism nonetheless. The dispute here is a matter of infighting among robust realists. The question is whether fundamentality ought to be defined in terms of primitive grounding, or whether instead grounding (xxx) ought to be defined in terms

of primitive fundamentality.[26]

Well…. actually, matters are a bit more complicated than this, because *really* the question over which these robust realists are infighting does not require robust realism at all. Really the new question is not about which plexic notion is *fundamental*, but about which plexic notion is *more fundamental than the other*. This is a question of relative fundamentality, or priority relations among the plexic. It's a question that arises for non-robust-realists too, and I will thus return to it. All that matters at the moment is that the dispute between Wilson and the groundhogs is in fact a dispute between robust plexic realists, though there is or could be a parallel dispute between non-robust-realists.

There are other possible versions of anti-grounding plexic realism worth considering. Here's a view that no one has yet claimed: ontological priority is fundamental, and both grounding and (absolute) fundamentality are defined in terms of it. On this view, there is a primitive relation between different portions of reality, expressed in English by phrases like 'prior to' and 'more fundamental than.'[27] This relation is not grounding, and can hold between entities and facts that are not grounding-related. Consider Bennett's example of a hydrogen atom and a spatially distant water molecule (2017, 137-8). That particular hydrogen atom (or the fact that it

[26] Jonathan Schaffer has said something similar, using 'hyperintensional' where I would use 'plexic' (2016, 157-8). Wilson explicitly considers and vehemently rejects the point, but only because she misinterprets it as the claim that she is a *grounding* realist:

> I respond that my view is not a version of a Grounding view. I do take fundamentality to be a primitive hyperintensional notion, but that is very different from taking metaphysical dependence to be a primitive hyperintensional notion—not least because the latter, unlike the former, is ultimately relational (2014, 562-3).

She is right that her view is different in these ways, but she is a plexic realist nonetheless. Wilson herself fell victim to the Frickerish conceptual lacuna.

[27] Or *less fundamental than*.

exists) is ontologically prior to the water molecule, but does not ground it.[28] Somehow or other, this primitive relative fundamentality relation is to give rise to non-primitive grounding and absolute fundamentality. I will call this the 'inverse Bennett view', because it is the opposite of her claim that ontological priority can be characterized in terms of grounding (2017, chapter 6).[29]

I don't like the inverse Bennett view any more than I like Wilson's view. But, as with Wilson's view, it's one thing to argue against it (which I will not do here), and another to not allow it onto the map at all. There is a path to explore here, and there may be other viable ones in the vicinity. But in exploring them, we must remain aware that we are well down the realist branch of the trail, choosing among realist options, none of which are bone-dry and dusty.

In the next section I will start to reveal some possibilities that really are bone-dry. But let me first clarify two matters. First, I have highlighted the existence of anti-grounding plexic realism because that's what matters to my project here. But there is clearly also room for competing versions of *pro*-grounding plexic realism, such as the following:

> metaphysical grounding is the only plexic primitive
> metaphysical grounding and essence are the only two plexic primitives
> metaphysical grounding, normative grounding, and essence are all primitive
> …

[28] I do not mean to suggest that grounding *cannot* hold across spatial regions (or temporal ones, for that matter). It certainly can; the fact that I am a sister is not locally grounded. I am simply saying that this example isn't intended to be like that: that there is some water here just is not grounded by the fact that there is some hydrogen thousands of miles away.

[29] There are further complexities here, notably that Bennett in fact defines ontological priority in terms of a plurality of grounding-like relations that she calls 'building relations'. But all that matters for my discussion is the overall *shape* of her view, which is that the determination relation/s fix the priority relations, rather than the other way around.

These positions, many of which *are* occupied, differ not in whether they take grounding to be primitive, but in whether they take any other plexic notions to be. The disagreement is about how many plexic primitives we need, and which ones.

Second, in emphasizing that these disputes are infighting among realists, I do not mean to suggest that they are not interesting or substantive. I am inclined to think they are both, though I do agree that there is metametaphysical work to be done here. Some disagreements about choices of primitive feel more towards the trivial end of the spectrum, such as whether we should take proper parthood, or parthood and identity, to be our mereological primitive. Others feel much more substantive, such as whether it could be true that *being intrinsically good* is the only fundamental moral property (as per Moore), or that *being a reason* is the only fundamental normative property (as per Schroeder 2021).[30]

I will not even try to address this metametaphysical issue here. My point is just that even assuming that disputes over whether, which, and how many plexic primitives we need *are* substantive and interesting, they are infighting among realists, and worth calling out as such. They are not about the Big Question, 'does our overall theory of reality require at least one dedicated primitive in order to render plexic claims true, a primitive that our theory of reality would not otherwise require?' (Compare the parallel Big Question about whether our theory of reality requires dedicated

[30] Thomas Hurka offers a nice overview of some historically important options. According to Hurka, what he calls the Sidwick-to-Ewing school of ethical theory (2) agreed that

> there are not a great many irreducible normative concepts… but only a small number, in terms of which all normative judgements can be expressed. They also agreed on the leading candidates for this role, most centrally 'good' in the sense of 'intrinsically good' on the one side and 'ought', 'right', and 'duty' on the other; any other apparently normative concepts are either reducible to these few or not truly normative (Hurka 2014, 22).

primitives—fundamental phenomenal properties—in order to account for experience and talk thereof.).

This is the important redrawing of the primary battle line that I promised in the introduction. It may seem surprising to put Wilson on the side of the groundhogs, but this is the better taxonomy. The primary line in the sand ought not be Wilson vs. the groundhogs, but *plexic realists vs. true plexic xerophiles.*

VII. How to Be A True Xerophile

We have finally reached the dusty trailhead of the true xenophile. How could such a view work? Can we really make our way without any plexic primitives at all?

The place to start exploring is by remembering that the standard argument is a Quinean one, driven by claims about the ontological commitments of a discourse. The two basic ways to dodge such commitments are familiar (and, indeed, appear in Quine 1948[31]): we can i) deny that the discourse really is committal, or ii) jettison the discourse.

This presents us with two paths. Luckily, we can borrow a useful trail map from any passing metaethicist. (See appendix.)

The 'jettison the discourse' option is an error theory of the sort that John Mackie defended about ethics (1977). The plexic error theorist agrees with realists that the truth of the discourse would ontologically commit us to fundamental plexology—it has truth-conditions that invoke at least one dedicated primitive—but disagrees with them about

[31] Quine pointed out both avenues of resistance when introducing the idea of ontological commitment (1948). The first is a theme throughout "On What There Is," and the second underlies his discussion of simplicity towards the end. Quine's own attitude was that that the mere use of predicates in first order logic does not in fact carry ontological commitment to universals, but that mathematical discourse really does commit us to numbers.

whether the world provides any such thing. She thinks that all atomic[32] plexic discourse is false. She thus faces another fork in the path as she decides whether or not to stop engaging in it. If she opts to stop, she goes eliminativist about the discourse; if she opts to continue, she would go fictionalist. (See Eklund, 2007/2024 and Kroon, 2011 for general overviews of fictionalism, and see Joyce 2024 for a recent defense of moral fictionalism.)

Grounding error theory has not really taken off, though Naomi Thompson has recently argued for a fictionalist version (2022), and Chris Daly could be classified as an eliminativist (2012). Perhaps this is not surprising; error theory has never been very popular in ethics, either.

A second, and rather different, path also starts from the main trailhead of the true xerophile. This one denies that plexic discourse really carries ontological commitment to any dedicated primitives in the first place. What's distinctive about this option is the desire to take the discourse seriously; this xerophile does not say that it is false from top to bottom. Thus all trails that branch off from here are versions of what Ned Hall has recently called "respectful deflationism," on which plexic discourse can still have "an important role to play in at least some serious philosophical theorizing, but not because it marks out any distinctive kind of metaphysical structure" (2023, 248). They are therefore aptly described as *paths back to dry ground.* (Fictionalism arguably deserves the title as well, but it would be odd to describe eliminativism that way.)

Contrary to what the current grounding literature would suggest, there genuinely are some paths to dry ground worth exploring. There are two main branches. One is completely unexplored. The other is widely believed to be well-

[32] The error theorist does not have to say that *negated* plexic claims are false as well.

charted, but I will suggest that the previous cartographers have missed some crucial turnoffs.

The unexplored path to dry ground is *non-cognitivism*[33] about plexic discourse. The idea would be to say that such talk does not have truth-conditions at all, let alone ones that mention primitive grounding or any other plexic notions. It is not truth-apt, and is not in the business of describing the world, but instead serves some other sort of linguistic function. In the ethics case, this is usually taken to be some version of expressing or recommending; here it would likely be something else. I will say a bit more in §xxx, but otherwise will leave the development of this noncognitivist path to others. Amie Thomasson's work would likely be the best starting point (especially her 2020).[34]

The other path back to dry ground stays cognitivist and non-error-theoretic. It parallels the realist trail for some distance, past both the claim that plexic talk does have truth-conditions, and the claim that some of it is true. It takes a sharp turn just afterwards, at the claim that the truth of plexic talk requires a primitive plexic notion. According to this path, something *else* makes the talk true. It does have truthmakers, but they do not include primitive plexology of any kind.

This path is universally believed to be both well-mapped and hopeless. But it is neither. It only looks hopeless because we have mistaken one branch of the trail for the whole trail. That branch is indeed hopeless—but it's not the only way to go.

The branch in question, of course, is the one that claims that plexic discourse has modal truth-conditions, which it doesn't. I agree with orthodoxy that the discourse is

[33] Well-known noncognitivists about moral discourse include A.J. Ayer, Charles Stevenson, R. M. Hare, Simon Blackburn, and Allan Gibbard. See xxxxxxx for an overview of the cognitivism/noncognitivism distinction.
[34] FTNT about the line btw quasi-realism and noncognitivism xxxxx

not made true just by necessitation, supervenience, or counterfactual dependence. This is the idea that kicked off the 'hyperintensional revolution', and I will not dispute it here.

But… what else *could* make plexic discourse at least sometimes come out true, if not a primitive plexic notion, or some modal notion like supervenience? What other alternatives could there be?

I will sketch two. At this point, though, we can return the trail map we borrowed. (Ask not what ground can do for metaethics, but what metaethics can do for ground.)

VIII. Conventionalism

IX. Hall's Epistemic Approach

X. Conclusion