**In defense of metaground**[[1]](#footnote-1)

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**Abstract:** Metaphysicians who employ grounding have also addressed the metaground question, ‘what grounds the grounding facts?’ But many people are suspicious of this question, and some have even suggested that this should make us suspicious of grounding itself. I argue that there are no concerns about the metaground question that can provide reason to be skeptical of grounding.

**Keywords**: grounding, determination, metaground, metaphysics, inter-level metaphysics

1. **Introduction**

Over the past 25 years or so, metaphysicians have heavily utilized and explored the notion of grounding. The rough idea is that grounding is the “level-connector” (Sider 2020, 747) that hooks together more and less fundamental facts. The fact that this cup is colored is grounded in the fact that it is blue, which is in turn grounded in facts about what wavelengths of light it reflects and maybe human dispositions to respond to them. More controversially, perhaps the moral is grounded in the natural, and perhaps the mental is grounded in the physical (or perhaps not, in both cases).

Intense focus on grounding quickly led to the question of whether anything makes the grounding facts obtain, which I will call *the metaground question*:

*The metaground question*: what, if anything, grounds the grounding facts?

Karen Bennett (2011, 2017) and Ted Sider (2011, 2020) were the first to explicitly raise the metaground question, which has also been explored by Louis deRosset (2013), Shamik Dasgupta (2014), David Kovacs (2020), Jon Litland (2017, 2020), and others.[[2]](#footnote-2) Appeals to views about the matter have made their way at least as far as metaethics (e.g. Bader 2017, Berker 2019, Enoch, 2019).

But despite this respectable pedigree, the metaground question tends to rub people the wrong way. It strikes people—even people not otherwise opposed to metaphysics[[3]](#footnote-3)—as a recherché, angels-dancing-on-the-head-of-a-pin question that could only be seriously entertained by someone who is on their second or third glass of grounding-flavored Kool-Aid.

This caricature is mostly for comic effect, of course, but I really have had multiple conversations along these lines, and the reaction also appears in print. Jessica Wilson calls the metaground question a “spandrel”—an illusory question “generated entirely by the overly abstract nature of Grounding” (2018, 507), in the way that an evolutionary spandrel is the mere byproduct of an adaptive trait (Gould & Lewontin, 1979). Ned Hall is more restrained, but he too clearly thinks there is something wrong with the metaground question, suggesting that it is a virtue of his epistemic approach to grounding that it deflates it to a “[not] particularly puzzling… question squarely in epistemology-cum-cognitive-science” (2023).

The reaction is misguided. I will argue that the metaground question is a *perfectly ordinary question of first-order metaphysics*, analogous to familiar questions about the nature of causation. I begin by posing a dilemma.

1. **A dilemma**

What in particular might be wrong with the metaground question? Any alleged problem is either purely inherited from a problem with grounding itself, or it is not.[[4]](#footnote-4) In §3, I argue that purely inherited objections are uninteresting, and that we should instead focus on non-inherited objections. In §4, I articulate a number of possible such objections, and argue that none of them succeed. In §5, I dismiss a different reason that Wilson offers for rejecting the metaground question. I conclude that there is no problem with metaground that is both interesting and plausible.

1. **Purely inherited objections to metaground are uninteresting**

The section title is the point, and it’s a pretty obvious one: no criticism of metaground that entirely derives from a related criticism of grounding counts as an *additional* criticism of grounding. No such objection can add to the weight of evidence; it would be circular to try to use it as such. Or—perhaps the same point made differently?—doing so would involve a kind of double-counting. It would be like both directly arguing against the existence of Santa Claus, and then trying to claim, as an additionalargument against his existence, some complaint about the fact that he would have to be self-identical if he were to exist. Or trying to claim, as an additional argument against Santa’s existence, some complaint about questions about his elbow pain or retirement contributions. These are not *extra* problems. They are problems if and only if Santa doesn’t exist.

I can hear your Straw Man Detector start to wail. Your concern likely goes something like this:

Of course we shouldn’t argue that way, but nobody does!People like Hall and Wilson don’t use their complaints about metaground to cast doubt on the existence of a unified, metaphysically robust grounding relation. They have independent reasons for disliking grounding, and reject the metaground question purely as a *consequence*. So the dialectical situation is like that of someone who rightly dismisses questions about whether Santa Claus is self-identical, whether his retirement contributions are adequate, etc. on the grounds that Santa Claus does not exist. It is not like that of someone who dismisses the self-identity and investment portfolio questions as dodgy and then tries to use their dodginess as a further reason not to believe in Santa.

Maybe so. I would be happy if no one made this particular mistake. I do think that both Hall and Wilson sound like they want to take the weirdness of the metaground question as a reason to reject a metaphysically robust notion of grounding. Neither of them think it is a knockdown reason, or the only consideration, or anything as strong as that. But they do both treat it as *a* reason. Hall thinks it should motivate us to explore his epistemic approach, and Wilson counts it as one of several considerations that lead her to reject Grounding altogether. And I say that for it to get *any* traction, for it to have *any* argumentative weight here at all, the concerns about the metaground question have to be independent of concerns about grounding itself.

At the end of the day, though, I do not care whether Hall or Wilson or anyone else have actually made the relevant mistake. It is clear that there is a *possible* mistake here that someone could easily make. Consider it flagged with orange hazard tape. At any rate, it would be more useful to the opponents of grounding if they had an independent objection to the metaground question, an objection not purely inherited from an objection to grounding. That is what I will look for now.

1. **There is no plausible non-inherited problem with metaground**

The best way to ensure the requisite independence is simply to assume the existence of grounding for *reductio*. Under this assumption, the metaground question arises, and we attempt to answer it. If something goes awry, we can attribute the problem to our starting assumption; i.e., we can blame grounding. So, suppose that some fact *φ* grounds some other fact *ψ*. The instance of the metaground question is, what grounds the fact that *φ* grounds *ψ*?

What might be wrong with this question? I can think of exactly three candidates, none of which holds up.

* 1. ***The problem is not that the target fact is relational***

The problem is not that the target fact [*φ* grounds *ψ*] is relational. Grounded relational facts are a dime a dozen, at least by the lights of those who like grounding. The fact that I am a sibling is grounded in facts about what children my parents had, or possibly also the fact that my brother exists. And there are plenty of other, more philosophically interesting, relational facts: facts about reference, representation, the *better than* relation, spatial and temporal relations, and so on. Many familiar questions surrounding these relations are questions about whether they are grounded, and, if so, how.

* 1. ***The problem is not that the target fact involves a generative relation***

Next diagnosis: perhaps the problem is not that the target fact [ *φ* grounds *ψ*] is relational, but that it involves a particular *kind* of relation: one that is generative in the rough intuitive sense that it makes something be the case. After all, this differentiates grounding from more mundane relations like siblinghood.

But this cannot be the problem either. Causation is also generative in this sense, and no one—certainly not Hall or Wilson—bats an eye at the question, ‘what grounds the causal facts?’ Indeed, *this is precisely what the standard debates about the nature of causation are about.*

Suppose that Suzy throws a rock and breaks a window. In virtue of what does her throw cause the window to break? What grounds that causal fact? Counterfactual theories, starting with Lewis (1973, 2000) and progressing through refinements and fancier structural equation versions, say that causal facts like this are grounded in facts about counterfactuals: roughly, that if Suzy hadn’t thrown her rock, the window would not have broken. Regularity theorists say that the causal fact is partially grounded in a generalization that subsumes the events that appear in it, and process theorists say something different yet. And some people, like Michael Tooley (1987, 1990) and David Armstrong (2004, but see also 1983, 133) say that the causal fact is not grounded in anything at all.

This debate isn’t usually *described as* a debate about ‘what grounds the causal facts’. We usually just call it a debate over the nature of causation. And if you ask a grad student what she works on, she is far more likely to say ‘causation’ than she is to say ’what grounds the causal facts’. But it is all the same. To argue about what causation *is* is to argue about what it is in virtue of which particular causal facts obtain—to argue about what grounds the causal facts.[[5]](#footnote-5) And, say I, if it is perfectly fine to argue about what grounds the causal facts, it is perfectly fine to argue about what grounds the grounding facts.

Theories of “metaground” are exactly analogous to, and exactly as legitimate as, theories of causation.[[6]](#footnote-6) If the generativity of causation doesn’t stop us from investigating what, if anything, grounds the causal facts, the generativity of grounding can’t stop us from investigating what, if anything, grounds the grounding facts. Bare generativity is not the problem.

* 1. ***The problem is not that the target fact invokes grounding, thus yielding an iterated claim***

Next diagnosis: perhaps the problem is not that the target fact [ *φ* grounds *ψ*] involves some generative relation or other, but rather that it involves the *same* generative relation that appears in the question.[[7]](#footnote-7) ‘What, if anything, grounds [ *φ* grounds *ψ*]?’ is iterated, and… and… and somehow this means that the question should not be taken seriously.

But how, exactly? What is so bad about a question’s having the form ‘what, if anything, *R*s the *R*-facts’? Why would iteratedness alone justify dismissing the question? I do not see a good answer forthcoming, but here are two attempts.

One possibility might be that their iteratedness makes them collapse into nonsense. But this just isn’t always true. While some iterated questions—such as ‘what siblings the sibling facts?’—may be nonsensical,[[8]](#footnote-8) not all of them are. For example, ‘who heals the healers?’ is a perfectly good question that is sometimes asked about hospital staff and mental health care practitioners. Besides, even in the cases where the question indeed is nonsensical, it is not clear that any interesting metaphysics follows. Certainly, I cannot see why the nonsensicalness of ‘what siblings the sibling facts?’ should be a genuine blow to the reality of siblinghood.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Another possibility, one that Wilson seems to suggest (2018, 507), is that all iterated questions lead to vicious regress. But this is not the case either. First, iterated questions can be answered in the negative—“no, nothing *R*s the *R*s”—which certainly does not generate a regress. Second, some positive answers may not lead to vicious regress either. For example, Bennett largely motivates her view about metaground by claiming that it avoids a vicious regress while claiming that grounding facts are indeed grounded (2011, 2017 chapter 7)*.*[[10]](#footnote-10) So what all iterated questions carry is just the mere *threat* of vicious regress, and that is not enough to justify dismissing them as problematic.

So I do not see any straightforward path from “the metaground question is iterated” to “the metaground question is bad.” That is my primary claim in this section. But I also have a more inchoate reason for not accepting the move.

The more inchoate reason is that it is misleading—though not false!—to characterize the metaground question ‘what, if anything, grounds the grounding facts?’ as being an instance of the iterated question ‘what, if anything, *R*s the *R* facts?’. It is misleading because the metaground question is equally well an instance of a *distinct* question, the first-order grounding question ‘what grounds *x*?’ The two coincide here: the metaground question is both an iterated question and a grounding question. And there is a sense, though perhaps only a nebulous sense, in which the fact that it is a grounding question matters more than the fact that it is an iterated one. The reason we ask the metaground question is not some general need or desire to answer ‘what, if anything, *Rs* the *R* facts?’ for various values of *R*, but rather a general need or desire to answer ‘what, if anything, grounds *x*?’ for various values of *x*.

**5. Wilson’s argument that *something* must be wrong with the metaground question**

I have argued against various ‘diagnoses’ of the putative problem with the metaground question. There is one more base to cover: Wilson offers a reason to think that *something* must be wrong with it, independently of having the particular diagnosis in hand.

Wilson’s primary complaint about the metaground question is that analog questions do not arise for more specific determination relations:

That the question ‘What Grounds Grounding?’ is a spandrel question generated by Grounding’s overly abstract ‘nature’ is supported by the fact that no comparable question arises when the operative understanding of physical dependence is instantiated with one or other small-g relation. This is obviously the case for identity… If someone tells you that mental states are identical to physical states, there’s no temptation to ask, ‘But in virtue of what are they identical? What makes it the case that they are identical? What metaphysically explains why they are identical?’ The same is true of other of the small-g relations that have been offered as characterizing physical dependence. If someone tells you that mental states are determinables of physical determinates, there’s no temptation to ask, ‘But in virtue of what do they stand in the determinable–determinate relation? (2018, 508).

I’m not sure why the question would be a spandrel if it were distinctive to grounding—surely there are all kinds of distinctive claims and questions about all kinds of things—but luckily it doesn’t matter. It isn’t distinctive to grounding.

Philosophers do discuss how facts about the obtaining of various ‘small-‘g’ grounding relations’ are themselves grounded (c.f. Kovacs 2020, 343n11). And such discussions are nothing new; they were going on well before the so-called grounding revolution.

To metaphysicians, the most familiar example is probably the grounding question for composition: in virtue of what does composition obtain, when it does? This is basically van Inwagen’s Special Composition Question (van Inwagen, 1990), which has not exactly lacked for airtime. [[11]](#footnote-11) And it is the same as the question of what, if anything, grounds the compositional facts.

To philosophers of mind, the most familiar example might be the grounding question for functional realization. As in the case of causation, the topic is more frequently described as being about what realization *is*, but the question of what it is for one property (or property instance) to realize another is the same as the question of what grounds the realization facts. Similarly for the determinate/determinable relation: as soon as we ask what it is for the relation to hold, and how the answer differs from that for the species/genus relation, we are asking the grounding question. For both realization and the determinate/determinable relation, there are literatures about exactly this. Ironically, Wilson herself has made significant contributions to both (e.g. 1999, 2009, 2017, 2021), which makes her complaint here somewhat puzzling.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Three counterexamples is enough; I relegate brief discussion of identity and supervenience to a footnote.[[13]](#footnote-13)

1. **Conclusion**

The metaground question “what, if anything, grounds the grounding facts?’ is not a bizarre piece of exotica, and its existence cannot be used as a reason to dismiss grounding. Philosophers have long asked what grounds various relational facts—including what grounds relational facts that involve generative relations such as causation *and* Wilson’s allegedly drama-free small-’g’ grounding relations. If it is unproblematic to think about the conditions in which causation or composition or realization holds, it is unproblematic to think about what grounds the grounding facts. There may be serious objections to grounding itself, or serious objections to metaphysics in general (about which I have already said my piece; xx*deleted for blind review*.) But there is no distinctive and independent problem with the question of metaground.

It is risky business to try to diagnose a mistake, especially when the mistake is mostly made in passing conversation rather than in print. Still, I suspect that the metaground question sounds bad simply because it is an iterated question, and iterated questions have a whiff of silliness to them. Earlier, I pointed out i) that iterated questions aren’t always problematic, and ii) that what we actually care about is a non-iterated question of which the metaground question is also an instance, namely ‘what grounds *x*?’. I will close by sneakily unveiling one final argument for this second point.

Notice that I never referred to the questions about causation, composition, realization, and so forth as ‘metaquestions’. I never talked about the ‘metacausation’ or ‘metacomposition’ or ‘metarealization’ questions. I didn’t talk that way because the relevant questions are *not* ‘meta’. They are not ‘meta’ because they are not iterated. The literatures I pointed to are not literatures about what causes the causal facts, what composes the compositional facts, what realizes the realization facts. They are instead literatures about what *grounds* those facts. The relevant questions are the groundingones, not the iterated ‘meta’ ones.

This helps underscore that what we are interested in is the grounding question, which merely happens to end up iterated and ‘meta’ in this particular case. It is not that we in general care about the iterated ‘meta’ question, which happens to be about grounding in this particular case. Perhaps the title of this paper was not well-chosen: at its core, in its secret heart of hearts, the question of metaground is not ‘meta’ at all.

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1. Acknowledgments deleted for blind review. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Brian Epstein’s complex discussion of anchoring, framing, and grounding (2015) is related to this debate, though it would take me too far afield to spell out exactly how. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Some people think all of metaphysics is like this. I disagree [xxdeleted for blind review], but will not argue the point here. All I am saying is that the metaground question prompts a negative reaction *independently of* a general dislike of metaphysics. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Again (see note 3), I am not interested in worries about the metaground question that are not at all distinctive to it, but instead are inherited from generic criticisms of metaphysics. Neither Hall nor Wilson rejects metaphysics in general, and nor do others from whom I have heard the reaction verbally. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. One could object that it’s a mistake to say that the standard debates about causation are debates about what *grounds* the causal facts, because they are rather about what the causal facts *are*. A counterfactual theorist, for example, will not (or should not) say that causal facts are *grounded in* facts about counterfactual dependence, but rather that they are *identical to* facts about counterfactual dependence.

   This changes nothing. The sideways identification of causal facts with counterfactual facts just opens the question of what how the *counterfactual* facts are grounded. Counterfactual theorists never take them to be brute. Indeed, it is standard in the literature to treat anyone who offers a theory of what it is for *c* to cause *e* as a reductionist about causation. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Someone will inevitably object that causation isn’t grounding. While there is real controversy here—e.g. (Bennett, 2017, 2020; Bernstein, 2016; Schaffer, 2016, 2020; A. Wilson, 2018)—it is not relevant to my claim in this paper. I am not saying that causation and grounding are identical, exactly alike, or even that one is a species of the other. All I am saying is that they are similar in that both are generative relations, and that the uncontested legitimacy of the question about what, if anything, grounds the causal facts shows that it cannot be *generativity* that is the problem with the parallel question about the grounding facts. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The claim is not that grounding is intrinsically problematic—recall that we are assuming that it is not—but rather that it is problematic for it to appear in the target fact of a grounding question. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. I say ‘may be’ because I am granting its nonsensicality for the sake of argument, but am not totally convinced. Maybe ‘what siblings the sibling facts?’ is perfectly meaningful, and the answer is ‘nothing’. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. My use of this example perhaps turns on my background assumption that siblinghood, like many other properties and relations, exists despite not being fundamental. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. She agrees that it generates an infinite series, but she claims this series is harmless. This could either be characterized as the view that there is no regress at all, or as the view that there is no *vicious* regress; the choice is purely terminological. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. van Inwagen himself formulates the Special Composition Question in purely extensional terms: *under what conditions* does composition occur?, or “when is it true that ∃y the *xx*s compose *y*?” (1990, 30). But the grounding formulation is how most people have understood it. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Wilson has an important, influential, and interestingly unified view about realization and the determinate/determinable relation—as well as about how a physicalist ought to explain supervenience—a view that turns on ideas about how the causal powers of a higher-level phenomenon nest within the causal powers of a lower-level phenomenon (explored further in her 2021). None of *that* is puzzling; what’s puzzling is just how this work is supposed to cohere with her 2018 complaint. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Identity: it is true that the grounding question for identity facts has been less discussed. But I suspect this is because many philosophers just assume that identity facts are ungrounded, and this assumption is not a rejection of the question; it’s an answer to it. Besides, Erica Shumener has recently argued against this assumption (2017).

    Supervenience: it is almost irresistible to point out that that rather a lot of philosophers have thought that supervenience cries out for explanation. As Simon Blackburn put it, ‘supervenience is usually quite uninteresting by itself. What is interesting is the reason why it holds’ (1984, 186). In metaethics, this gives rise to a canonical challenge to non-naturalism (see §6 of Ridge 2019 for an overview). The point has long been known in metaphysics and philosophy of mind as well (Kim 1990, Horgan 1993, Wilson 1999, Bennett & McLaughlin 2005 §3.5, Schaffer 2009, 364). But, alas, it isn’t quite fair to add supervenience to the list.

    That’s because I expect Wilson to think that the supervenience facts are mere shadows cast by the *real* (but small-‘g’!) grounding facts. In fact, she may want to deny that supervenience is a small-‘g’ grounding relation precisely *because* the grounding question for it is so pressing. This thought highlights the interesting question of just what Wilson takes to unite the small-‘g’ grounding relations, but that is a topic for another time. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)