

# Is Metaphysical Grounding Irreflexive?<sup>1</sup>

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Philosophers will often claim that one fact, state of affairs, entity, or kind of entity depends upon or is grounded in another. It is often said, for example, that mental states are *grounded* in physical states, composite objects *depend ontologically* upon their parts, truths obtain *in virtue of* the existence of their truthmakers, sets *depend metaphysically* upon their members, and so on.

More recently, metaphilosophical reflection has lead philosophers such as Rosen (forthcoming) and Schaffer (2009, forthcoming) to argue that such claims (or at least many of them) attribute a single philosophically significant relation of metaphysical grounding or dependence. It is also widely assumed that this relation is two-place, and that it is irreflexive: that is to say, it *never holds between an item and itself*.

It may seem very natural to think of grounding this way. How could anything be grounded in itself? If we want to know in what *S*'s pain is grounded, it may be illuminating to be told it is grounded in a certain state of the brain. But to say that *S*'s pain is grounded in *S*'s *pain itself* just sounds silly. Similarly, while it may be interesting to suggest that the truth of a sentence is grounded in the existence of some truthmaking entity, if we tried to claim that the truth of sentence is grounded in the truth of that very sentence, we would get very short shrift. The irreflexivity of grounding is espoused or assumed without comment by Correia (2008, p. 1023), Rosen (forthcoming), Schaffer (e.g. 2009, pp. 364 and 376) and many others.

Convincing though it sounds at first glance, I am not sure that this assumption is appropriate. Suppose I say that *S*'s pain is grounded in some brain state. What happens if I then go on to *identify* the pain state with the brain state? Am I forced to go back and reject the grounding claim? It does not seem to me unreasonable to expect to maintain it, despite the identification. The purpose of this note is to investigate some of possible ways of doing so.

I will grant, for the sake of argument, that it always sounds bad to say 'x grounds x' or 'x grounds itself' (though actually I think the above case shows how we might lessen that effect). That fact, I take it, motivates the irreflexivity thesis. It is natural to take it that the reason these claims sound bad is because they are always *false*, and hence conclude that nothing stands in the grounding relation to itself. Any defence of the claim that grounding may *not* be irreflexive will have to accommodate the *prima facie* inappropriateness of such utterances, either by saying that they are sometimes *prima facie* inappropriate but nevertheless true, or by saying that although they are always false this does not imply that grounding is irreflexive. The latter strategy is considered here.

Why might one want to leave open the possibility that grounding is not irreflexive? One reason is that if we wish to maintain irreflexivity while preserving the truth of certain grounding claims, we will need to make sure we individuate the items that are supposed to stand in the relation in a sufficiently fine-grained way. For example, if we wish to maintain irreflexivity *and* that *S*'s pain is

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grounded in brain state B, we had better divide up the world with sufficient fineness of grain to make S's pain and brain state B come out as distinct states. Certain conceptions of what exists, namely conceptions which would look to identify the two states, are not now an option. If, on the other hand, we want to make the grounding claim while staying *neutral* on other metaphysical issues such as the identity of the states under consideration, we had better *not* assume that grounding is irreflexive.

I take it that such metaphysical neutrality can be methodologically desirable, and so it is worth keeping in mind the possibility that grounding is not irreflexive. It is also worth noting, however, that the project of investigating whether the commonplace assumption of irreflexivity is correct *need* not be motivated by anything more than caution, and specifically the desire to avoid making unwarranted assumptions. If one assumes irreflexivity merely because one hasn't considered the alternatives, one is not proceeding in a philosophically responsible fashion. So although I think there *are* also considerations of methodological neutrality which speak against assuming irreflexivity, I also think these are not the only reason the point is worth considering.

What I want to argue here is not that it is a mistake to treat grounding as an irreflexive relation, but simply that it is a mistake to assume there are no alternatives. The motivating thought that 'x grounds x' always sounds bad can be accommodated without going irreflexive. I will set aside for current purposes the option of saying that it sometimes sounds bad even though it is *true*, for example because it is misleading or uninformative. I will grant for the sake of argument that 'x grounds x' is always false. *Even this* does not force us to think of grounding as an irreflexive relation. For we have the option of treating the semantics of the word 'grounds' as hyperintensional.

To say that 'grounds' is hyperintensional is to say that it creates contexts into which one cannot always substitute necessarily co-extensive terms *salva veritate*. The verb 'believes' is often thought to be like this. We can have all-true triads of the following form:<sup>2</sup>

- i. The Sherriff of Nottingham believes that Robin Hood is wicked
- ii. The Sherriff of Nottingham does not believe that Robin of Locksley is wicked
- iii. Robin Hood is identical to Robin of Locksley

Similarly, one might think that there can be all-true triads of the following form:

- a) Brain state B grounds S's pain
- b) S's pain does not ground S's pain
- c) S's pain is identical to brain state B

A noteworthy feature of this option is that it is compatible with ontologies states that identify brain states with pain states. We are free to identify S's pain with the brain state that grounds it, should we wish (for reasons of parsimony, say) to do so. The hyperintensionality option is less metaphysically committing than the irreflexivity option. Similarly, were we to take the things that ground one another to be facts or states of affairs or objects or whatever else, the hyperintensionality option would enable us to be less metaphysically committed with respect to identifications among those things.

What are we to think about the *relation* of grounding (assuming there is one), as opposed to the *word* 'grounding', if we decide to take this new route? It now seems quite difficult to say whether or not the relation is irreflexive. On the one hand, 'x grounds itself' is always false. But on the other,

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<sup>2</sup> Thanks to Daniel Nolan for the example.

sometimes 'x grounds y' is true where x=y, which, it seems, ought to mean that sometimes x *does* ground itself. Yet in saying that x does ground itself, I will have said something false.<sup>3</sup>

What we are forced *not* to say, if we want to assert all of a-c, is that 'grounds' expresses a single two-place relation throughout that triad. Since relations are extensionally individuated, the truth of any two members of that triad would render the third false if that were the case. The choice we have to make is *not* a choice between thinking of grounding as an irreflexive two-place relation and thinking of it as a two-place relation that lacks the property of irreflexivity.

One option that is open to someone who wants to allow for all-true triads of the form of a-c is to think of the grounding relation as being more than two-place, despite the surface appearance of being two-place created by the way the *word* 'grounds' works. For instance, we could think of the grounding relation as holding between a state of affairs, a (possibly identical) state of affairs, a feature or aspect of the first state of affairs and a feature or aspect of the second state of affairs. We could then say that in order to get a true sentence of the form 'x grounds y', one must present the referents of 'x' and 'y' in such a way that the relevant aspects of them, i.e. the things which stand in the relation's third and fourth places, are sufficiently evident (in context).

For example, suppose S's pain is grounded in and identical to brain state B. The relation of grounding could then be said to hold between

1. B
2. S's pain (i.e. B again)
3. the brain-y aspect of B and
4. the pain-y aspect of B.

It could then be argued that 'S's pain grounds S's pain' is false because the brain-y aspect of B is not sufficiently evident in the first presentation of B in that sentence. That is to say, when you utter 'S's pain grounds S's pain', your first presentation of B as 'S's pain' means that context supplies the pain-y aspect of B in the third argument-place. Since the third argument needs to be the brain-y aspect of B in order for the sentence is to come out true, the sentence will come out false.

By contrast, 'Brain state B grounds S's pain' is true because the brain-y aspect of B *is* sufficiently evident in the first presentation of B in this sentence. That is to say, when you utter 'Brain state B grounds S's pain', your first presentation of B means that context supplies the brain-y aspect of B in the third argument-place, and hence the sentence comes out true.

Is the relation then correctly described as irreflexive? It seems not. Assuming that reflexivity and irreflexivity are both properties of *two-place* relations, then if the relation is really four-place it is not appropriate for Correia, Rosen, Schaffer and the rest to describe it as irreflexive. At best – if, for

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<sup>3</sup> This situation is not unlike that surrounding the 'believes' locution. Consider the classic case of Pierre (Kripke 1979). Pierre is shown pictures of a pretty place called 'Londres' and holds a belief which he expresses by 'Londres est jolie'. One day he finds himself in an ugly part of a city called 'London' and forms a belief which he expresses by 'London is ugly'. He does not realize Londres is London, so does not revise his earlier belief. Does Pierre believe that London is pretty? On the one hand saying so seems false; he believes London is *ugly*, and would dissent if you asked him whether London is pretty. But on the other, he believes *Londres* is pretty, and Londres is as in fact identical to London.

example, all they meant was that it is *not a reflexive relation* – calling it irreflexive would be misleading.

There need, I think, be no concern to the effect that grounding is “not metaphysical enough” just because the mode of presentation of the grounding and grounded entities matters to the truth value of a grounding claim. The *reason* mode of presentation matters, on the example view just sketched, is because of the roles played by certain aspects or features of the relevant states of affairs. One can hold that it is a substantive, metaphysical matter that these features play these roles, and that our language is simply respecting the importance of these metaphysical roles by rendering ‘grounds’ hyperintensional in the way described.

Another option is to doubt whether ‘grounds’ expresses a relation at all (or at least, to doubt whether it expresses any metaphysically interesting relation). While ‘x grounds y’ may appear to assert that a relation of grounding holds between x and y, it could be that something quite different is going on. Perhaps in using the locution ‘x grounds y’ one is simply providing a certain kind of explanation of y in terms of x, and the word ‘grounds’ is a little like the word ‘explains’. It is not hard to see how a word like ‘explains’ could function in a language like ours simply to signal that one is attempting to provide one’s audience with an explanation, rather than to mark the holding of any (metaphysically interesting) relation between the things designated by the surrounding words.<sup>4</sup>

These are not the only two options, of course. Alternatives include taking the truth-value of the English sentence ‘x grounds y’ to be sensitive to things besides the relation expressed by ‘grounds’ and the referents of ‘x’ and ‘y’, though I doubt this sort of approach will have wide appeal unless extra semantic elements can be found in ‘x’, ‘y’ and ‘grounds’, so that we can avoid being committed to a non-compositional semantics for the whole sentence.

I have not argued here that one should take any of these irreflexivity-denying options. I have merely argued that they are available and can accommodate the datum (supposing it is one) that ‘x grounds x’ is always false. Thus, in the absence of obvious reasons to prefer the view that grounding is a two-place irreflexive relation, nobody should be making without comment the assumption that it is.

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<sup>4</sup> For the record, this is not how I myself prefer to think about the word ‘explains’. (Readers interested in how I *do* think about that word should consult Jenkins 2008.) I do, however, agree with the view that the word ‘grounds’ functions similarly to certain uses of the word ‘explains’. It is partly for this reason that I myself suspect that the former may be hyperintensional, though I have not tried to argue that point here.

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