

On the Intelligibility of Grounding Autonomy

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Thesis submitted to the faculty of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts  
In  
Philosophy

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May 8, 2019  
Blacksburg, VA

Keywords: Grounding, Autonomy, Essence, Grounding facts, Purity, Fundamentality

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## ABSTRACT

Metaphysical grounding has received a great deal of attention in the metaphysics literature within the last decade, offering what many see as an attractive theoretical alternative to other attempts to analyze the nature of fundamentality, e.g., dependence, supervenience, identity, conceptual analysis, etc. Still, a number of commentators note a bevy of issues facing the notion of grounding, leading some to believe it cannot perform the relevant work it has been tasked to do. One such issue is the purity dilemma, posed by Ted Sider, which follows from a plausible constraint placed on our theorizing about fundamentality, viz., that the fundamental bedrock of the world contains nothing but purely fundamental phenomena. It is argued that purity creates a problem for metaphysical grounding in that it makes it increasingly difficult to see what might ground the facts about what grounds what. In this paper, I explicate the purity dilemma, and an attempt made by Shamik Dasgupta to sidestep the challenge, and provide a secure grounding foundation for such facts. I then proceed to defend Dasgupta's view from objections made by Sider, and conclude that, at the very least, the crucial notion (autonomy) on which the former's view rests is intelligible, if it is not tenable.

# On the Intelligibility of Grounding Autonomy

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## GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

In this paper I discuss an ongoing debate over the nature of metaphysical grounding. Metaphysical grounding (or, “grounding”) is of interest to metaphysicians due to the satisfying way in which it handles a number of long-standing problems in the field. As Johnathan Schaffer (2009) notes, metaphysics has often concerned itself with what the most basic nature of reality is like, and grounding promises to furnish many of our metaphysical theories with the tools to answer such questions. Still, there remains a number of problems with characterizing grounding. The relevant problem I tackle in this paper has to do with whether or not grounding can be understood in its own terms. Ted Sider, for example, has suspicions that it cannot. I argue, on the behalf of Shamik Dasgupta, that there is an intelligible way to understand grounding in its own terms, and work to provide constructive answers to some of Sider’s objections.

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## I. Introduction

There is a concerted effort in metaphysics these days to cast its various topics in terms of fundamentality. In fact, a number of commentators argue that metaphysics is, at bottom, the study of fundamentality.<sup>1</sup> By ‘fundamentality,’ commentators—following Jonathan Schaffer—are typically talking about something like the Aristotelian notion of a *substance*. It might be thought that there are a number of non-substantial matters, e.g., facts about tables, cats, basketballs, etc., which are in turn rooted in some substantial (or more substantial) matter, e.g., facts about the particle interactions of tables, cats, basketballs, etc. happening at the subatomic level. The idea is that the fundamental stuff (substance) is responsible for why all the nonfundamental stuff is such as it is, or why it exists or obtains at all.

Assuming that the foregoing is correct, it still remains open as to which notion best suits the relevant work metaphysicians are trying to do. Attempts to unpack fundamentality by recourse to, say, supervenience are rivaled by attempts to do just the same by analysis, identity, dependence, etc.<sup>2</sup> Also among this survey of options is the notion of *ground*. Metaphysical grounding has received a great deal of attention in the literature, and has widely been considered an attractive theoretical alternative to its aforementioned rivals.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, for all its apparent theoretical utility there are lingering issues concerning the very nature of ground, and how it should be characterized.

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<sup>1</sup> See Schaffer (2009) and Sider (2011).

<sup>2</sup> Dasgupta (2014a)

<sup>3</sup> Dasgupta (2014a)

It is not in my power to examine all the issues facing “fans of ground,” but there is one such issue that strikes a number of commentators as deeply threatening to the project in general, viz., considerations stemming from the “purity dilemma”—discussed extensively by Ted Sider in [2011] and [2016]. Very briefly, it is plausible to think that the fundamental bedrock of the world contains nothing but purely fundamental phenomena, and that any theory (or notion) attempting to “carve nature at the joints” ought to respect this constraint. However, it is not clear that ground is especially well-suited to do so. The problem is that even if we are able to point out that some facts ground others, it is not easy to see whether or not derived higher-order facts involving those grounding relations are themselves grounded. Grounding facts, given their status as “level-connecting facts,” essentially involve non-fundamental phenomena, so purity implies that they are non-fundamental facts, hence they are grounded in other facts. Still, it is not clear what kinds of facts might play this role.

Undaunted, Shamik Dasgupta advances *brute essentialism* as an account of what grounds the grounding facts.<sup>4</sup> The idea is that grounding facts are grounded in certain *autonomous* facts that are not themselves “apt for being grounded.” Dasgupta is relatively mum on what autonomy is supposed to come to; he mostly provides examples, and declines to give it a reductive analysis.<sup>5</sup> As it stands in the literature, it is not clear *exactly*

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<sup>4</sup> It is here that I should make it clear that Dasgupta is operating with a particular idea of ‘ground’ that not all metaphysicians endorse. For him, ground is an explanatory relation holding between collections of sentences appearing in the *explanans*, and a single sentence in the *explanandum*. However, Dasgupta also uses facts in place of sentences. It is also important to note that, as an explanatory notion, we can suitably cast ground as a special kind of determination relation such that it is i) irreflexive, ii) asymmetric, and iii) transitive. For more on this topic, see Dasgupta (2014a), (2014b), and (2016). For competing conceptions of ground, see Koslicki (2012), Audi (2012), and Bennett (2013).

<sup>5</sup> Dasgupta notes that he is skeptical that we might give a reductive analysis or definition of ‘autonomy’; for more on this see Dasgupta (2016).

why Dasgupta thinks that certain facts involving general metaphysical connections are autonomous, but I believe that he leaves us with enough to make the idea intelligible.

In this paper, I work to make the notion of autonomy clear. I make no pretense to have given a final word on the matter, but I think that the argument(s) I provide put us on the right track to understanding it in more detail. In section two, I lay out some preliminaries by going into greater detail about the “purity dilemma,” and briefly outline brute essentialism and one of its chief rivals. In section three, I respond to two important objections to brute essentialism and autonomy given by Ted Sider in [2016]. I conclude that only one of my replies gives the notion of autonomy any weight, but should give the brute essentialist stronger ground with which to advocate for her view. I conclude in section four.

Before I move to characterizing the issue I consider in this paper, I should make it clear that ‘grounding’ is used by metaphysicians in a variety of different ways. The particular notion operant in the discussion to follow is one associated with Schaffer [2009], Koslicki [2012], and Dasgupta [2014a] whereby it is taken to be a kind of non-causal, *explanation* (in a certain sense of “explanation”) with the constraint that grounds *necessitate* what they ground. So, a given grounding explanation, on this account, will do two things: (i) identify facts (to go in the *explanans*) that contain only information as would suffice for the explanation of some fact (to go in the *explanandum*) under consideration, and (ii) hold (at least implicitly) that if F grounds G, then necessarily, if F obtains, then F unavoidably gives rise to G. With respect to (ii) it should not be thought that the grounded fact obtains only if what grounds it obtains. Rather, it is that, as we might say, grounds are sufficient for what they ground, though the grounded might obtain

in some other possible world where what grounds it (in the actual world) does not obtain. While some grounding-theoretic views might build in the necessity of its grounding statements (such as Dasgupta's brute connectivism), these kinds of commitments are not accepted by all, and presumably must be argued for on independent grounds

Another relevant idea is that grounded facts are “nothing over and above” their grounds in the sense that they, together, come in a package, as it were. That is, when we say that a fact  $F$  grounds some fact  $G$ , it is meant that there is nothing more for  $G$ 's obtaining than for  $F$  to obtain; or, to put it in the words of JS Russell: “When we take our metaphysical inventory, the grounded doesn't count as “extra”, over and above its ground”.<sup>6</sup> Not all metaphysicians, are quick to endorse the reference to “over-and-aboveness,” however, e.g., Audi [2012], and consequently reject that grounding relates fundamental facts to nonfundamental facts. I mention this to contrast the particular notion of grounding with which this discussion will proceed.

## II. The Purity Dilemma

Let  $\phi$  be the collection of physical facts involving only Bill's brain states as would account for the fact that he is conscious, and let  $X$  be the fact that Bill is conscious. Supposing, then, that physicalism (about consciousness) is correct, we get the following grounding claim:  $\phi$  grounds  $X$ . If this is the case, then we can derive the higher-order fact [ $\phi$  grounds  $X$ ]; call this fact “ $C$ ,” and more generally let us call any fact of this form a “grounding fact.” The question facing fans of ground, then, is whether or not  $C$  is itself

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<sup>6</sup> Russell (2017).

grounded. More specifically, we wish to know if there is a metaphysical explanation for why C obtains rather than, say, the fact that some collection of non-physical facts involving Bill's conscious states ground the fact that his brain is in such and such a state.

We can state the question in the form of a dilemma: either C is ungrounded, or it is grounded. The first horn of the dilemma is that C is ungrounded, but purity implies that this is false. Grounding facts, given their status as "level-connecting" facts essentially involve non-fundamental phenomena, but purity prohibits us from treating facts that involve non-fundamental phenomena as fundamental. Before I demonstrate what implications this has for our example, allow me to say more about the purity principle, and what it comes to. Although Sider initially casts purity in other terms—restricting his statement to fundamental *truths* and fundamental *notions*—I am choosing to unpack it in terms of fact fundamentality and entity fundamentality to keep things more faithful to the discussion. So, we can construe purity along the following lines:

*Purity* Assuming that there is a domain of entities occupying the most fundamental level of the world  $E_f$ , a fundamental fact F is such that it ranges over  $E_f$  (to the exclusion of its ranging over the domain of entities occupying the nonfundamental level of the world), and *moreover* if F involves an entity in  $E_f$ , call it "e", then e is a fundamental entity. For example, if [Sparky the electron has a half-integer spin] is a fundamental fact, then Sparky occupies the most fundamental level of the world<sup>7</sup>, and Sparky is itself a fundamental entity.

Now, in our example, C involves *consciousness*, which by physicalism's lights is a non-fundamental phenomenon. Thus, it seems that we should accept the second horn of

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<sup>7</sup> As would the property 'having a half-integer spin.' It is important to note also that this fact will involve nothing existing at the nonfundamental level.

the dilemma—that C is grounded. But what kind of fact(s) might play this role? Bennett and DeRossett argue that grounding facts (by physicalism anyway) are in turn grounded in the physical facts—a view Dasgupta calls “simple reductionism”<sup>8</sup>—and this generalizes to all grounding claims, e.g., if the natural facts ground the normative facts, then the fact that the natural facts ground the normative facts is grounded in the natural facts, and if the qualitative facts ground the individualistic facts, then the fact that the qualitative facts ground the individualistic facts is grounded in the qualitative facts, and so on.

The issue with this kind of view, however, is that it recreates our dilemma at a higher level. Consider: if  $\phi$  grounds C, then we can derive the higher-order fact involving that grounding relation, viz., [ $\phi$  grounds C]. Notice, though, that this new fact involves consciousness in virtue of its involving C, so simple reductionism, along with purity, entails that  $\phi$  grounds [ $\phi$  grounds C]. But if  $\phi$  grounds [ $\phi$  grounds C], then we can derive the higher-order fact [ $\phi$  grounds [ $\phi$  grounds C]] which is in turn grounded in  $\phi$ , and we can repeat this pattern *ad infinitum*. As Sider notes, it might appear as if we are off and running on a regress, but this is not quite the correct way to view things, for if it is a regress, then it is not “chained,”<sup>9</sup> and otherwise it is not vicious. But in any case it is not clear that there is a regress occurring here at all. There is a presumption, however, in favor of thinking that there is something wrong with a ground-theoretic view that

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<sup>8</sup> See, Bennett (2011) and DeRossett (2013) for the original words on this view, and Dasgupta (2014b) for relevant name.

<sup>9</sup> An example of a “chained” regress (as opposed to an “unchained” one) would be something like the following: say that x grounds the grounding fact x\*, and that the grounding fact involving this grounding claim, x\*\* is grounded in x\*, and that the grounding fact involving this grounding claim, x\*\*\* is grounded in x\*\*, and so on. The important difference between this kind of regress, and the one above (if it is a regress at all) is that it is *always* x that grounds in each case. Thus, we would have something like x grounds x\*, and x grounds x\*\* and x grounds x\*\*\*, and so on.

generates an infinite number of grounding claims; as Schaffer [2009] puts it, the problem is that “being is infinitely deferred, but never achieved.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, there is no satisfying stopping point to the line of question of “what grounds the grounding facts.”

Supposing that simple reductionism does not adequately address our problem, have we yet run out of options? Dasgupta thinks not. In place of reductionism, he advances *brute connectivism*. Roughly speaking, the view is that grounding facts are grounded in facts involving general metaphysical connections between facts on both sides of a given grounding explanation. For example, C, by connectivism’s lights, is grounded (at least partially) in some fact involving a general metaphysical connection between collections of physical facts and facts involving consciousness. This view is promising because it (purportedly) does not generate an infinite descending chain of ground, and perhaps most importantly it provides a general explanation as to why the fundamental facts give rise to the facts that they do. That is, it explains why it is the case that when, say, one’s brain is in some state or another, she is also conscious; simple reductionism, on the other hand, implies that these patterns are as brute as the facts that ground them!

Leaving this aside, what might we say about the general metaphysical connections that Dasgupta has in mind? That is, what kind of metaphysical connection is best suited to explain the grounding facts? There is arguably a host of options, e.g., necessity, metaphysical law, conceptual truth, etc., but for Dasgupta the relevant notion is *essence*. The resulting view, then, is what he calls “brute essentialism.” Returning to our example, we can say that C is grounded in something like the following fact: (E) it is essential to

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<sup>10</sup> For a full survey of the problems associated with simple reductionism, see Dasgupta (2014*b*) and Sider (2016).

being conscious that if one's brain is some or other as would account for her being conscious, then she is conscious. In other words, the fact involving an essential connection between certain brain states and consciousness grounds the fact that Bill's brain states ground his being conscious; we can write [E grounds C].

But, one might object, shouldn't we think that E is a non-fundamental fact? After all, E involves consciousness, and the physicalist wishes to claim consciousness among the non-fundamental structure of the world, so purity implies that E is grounded. Here Dasgupta makes a crucial move in the dialectic: *we ought to treat E as ungrounded despite its involving a non-fundamental phenomenon*, and this, of course, generalizes to all other facts of the same type. The idea is that E is "not apt for being grounded" such that the question as to what grounds it should not be viewed as a genuine question in the first place—we can call these "autonomous facts." Compare: take any given formal system, say, first-order logic and its various axioms, theorems, and definitions. It surely makes sense to ask how we might go about proving the theorems of FOL from the axioms, and how we might prove some axioms from the others even if the answer to both questions is "nothing." In the case of definitions, however, it simply does not make sense to ask what might prove them. Definitions are stipulative, and thus by their nature are not the sorts of things that come under provability's purview. The important difference between an axiom that lacks a proof, and definitions is that if the former lacks a proof, then this has to do with the system to which it belongs rather than its having to do with the kind of thing an axiom is. Definitions, on the other hand, do not have proofs in *any* formal system because stipulative matters preclude, by fiat, proof from entering its

domain. Keeping with Dasgupta's aphorism, we might say that definitions "are not apt for being proven."

Comparing this to ground, the relevant idea is that autonomous facts stand to ground as definition stands to provability. The important difference, then, between substantive (read: non-autonomous) facts that have no grounds, and autonomous facts is that if the former lacks a ground, then this has to do with the particular grounding claim according to which it is implicated. Autonomous facts by their very nature are precluded, by fiat, from being grounded in other facts. Thus, essentialist facts, such as E, escape the grasp of the purity dilemma, and do not fall victim to a Bennett-style regress. Still, as Sider points out, it is not clear what exactly autonomy comes to, and it appears as though we need a substantive argument in support of it, or at the very least it warrants further clarifying remarks. In the following section, I respond to a number of objections with the aim of sailing somewhere in-between the two.

### III. Objections and Replies

*Objection:* Inference to the best explanation implies that brute essentialism is false, for its theoretical virtues do not outweigh its putative costs. If brute essentialism is false, then autonomy must be advanced from some independent consideration(s), but it is not clear what those considerations might be.

*Reply:* It is true, as Sider seems to imply, that brute essentialism faces trouble when it is compared to other views in its immediate vicinity. Relatedly, it is not at all clear that the view has all the virtues that Dasgupta ascribes to it, and I argue that it is lacking in an important respect that is not made explicit in the literature. However, brute essentialism

enjoys a number of theoretical virtues that prevents the objection from blocking the obvious route to securing autonomy.

First, Sider contends that (implicating Bennett and DeRossett's view as well) that we need not think that an answer to what grounds the grounding facts is exceedingly simple. This side of Lewisian naturalness, to say that we wish to "carve nature at the joints" is not to say that nature is irreducibly simple. It might be such that the operations of nature approach limitless fecundity at both the fundamental and non-fundamental levels, and if this is the case, then simple explanations will just not cut it. This undermines the brute essentialist's (and the simple reductionist's) presumption that "simpler is better," and so it appears as though we have weakened her view's status in the arena of inference to best explanation.

Second, Sider in *Writing the Book of the World* motivates the completeness principle in partnership with the aforementioned purity principle.<sup>11</sup> Completeness—stated so as to oblige fans of ground—says that every non-fundamental fact holds in virtue of some fundamental fact.<sup>12</sup> To be sure, the brute essentialist cannot endorse this principle, for it implies that autonomous facts given their status as non-fundamental facts hold in virtue of some fundamental fact—an unhappy result. However, there is something intuitive about thinking that "non-joint carving" facts (non-fundamental facts) hold in virtue of some underlying, joint-carving facts, and that the latter are in a sense responsible for why everything at the non-fundamental level is the case. It is here that I

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<sup>11</sup> Sider gives extensive arguments for the independence of both notions—that our theorizing about fundamental matters might proceed with one, but not the other. However, it is still correct to state that they constitute two of the basic principles that capture plausible intuitions about what the fundamental level of reality is like.

<sup>12</sup> Sider (2011), pp. 105

should make clear that the discussion has implicitly been operating with a definition that explicates ‘fact fundamentality’ in terms of ‘entity fundamentality.’ That is, a fact F is fundamental =def. if it involves *only* fundamental entities.<sup>13</sup> This, of course, renders purity trivial, but makes it such that completeness cannot be taken for granted. I leave the defense of completeness at an intuitive level, but for more on this, see Sider [2011]. In any case, there is admittedly something odd about a view that posits facts that “get left out” of the complete telling of the story of the world— this is to say that there are facts in our metaphysical inventory that are in some sense unaccounted for. Thus, brute essentialism lacks yet another theoretical virtue; it is, in a sense, metaphysically incomplete.

What, then, can be said in brute essentialism’s favor? For one, it predicts necessitation, i.e., if some physical facts regarding Bill’s brain states ground the fact Bill is conscious, then necessarily, those physical facts ground the fact that Bill is conscious. As I mentioned in the introduction, the particular notion of ground with which this discussion operates takes necessitation to be one of its guiding principles. The reason for this is that it would be something of a drawback if, when inspecting our grounding claims for their veracity, we find that they obtain only some of the time, or only in certain contexts, or otherwise in some increasingly haphazard fashion. Thus, it is thought (by Dasgupta at least) to be natural to suggest that if ground is to be taken seriously, then we ought to fixate on the versions that render it such that it is necessary that if the fundamental facts obtain, then the nonfundamental facts obtain; remembering that ground has been developed to aid our aim of studying fundamentality, whereby fundamentality

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<sup>13</sup> Sider (2011), Dasgupta (2014b)

has to do with substance, i.e., that which is in some sense responsible for why everything else (the non-substantial matters) is such as it is. Furthermore, it is thought that if some ground-theoretic view has the resources to predict for necessitation, then *ceteris paribus* it is better than a rival ground-theoretic view that does not.

Now, it is important to note that necessitation does not imply that grounding theses are necessary in the sense that they are true in all possible worlds. We might hold that physicalism is false in some possible worlds, but not in all of them while also holding that physicalism is itself necessary in the sense that if there are physical facts, then they ground the nonphysical facts. In other words, necessitation does not imply that there are physical facts in all possible worlds; indeed, it is (at the very least) conceivable that there are possible worlds where there are no physical facts at all, but the nonphysical facts still obtain (a world, perhaps, occupied by nothing but Cartesian souls). If grounding theses are necessary in this other sense, then presumably we should think that this is for some other reason. I take no stand on whether or not, for example, physicalism is necessary in this sense, but in any case it is important to draw the distinction.

Next, Dasgupta maintains that brute essentialism can also explain general patterns in grounding explanations whereas, say, simple reductionism cannot. The idea is that, for instance, simple reductionism implies that there is no further explanation as to why when the fundamental facts obtain, the relevant nonfundamental facts unavoidably follow. Instead, the simple reductionist must settle for thinking that there is no metaphysically perspicuous reason for thinking that grounding facts obtain. Rather, she will hold that it is coincidental that when there are physical facts, they ground the nonphysical facts. All else being equal, if a ground-theoretic view provides a reason for why grounding patterns

appear in nature, then it is a more theoretically virtuous view than one that does not. This should be familiar, so I will not unpack it any further.

Finally, brute essentialism purportedly ensures that every fact that is apt for being grounded is accounted for, avoiding the Bennett-style profligation of grounding claims (though I have doubts about this point, and say a bit about it in closing). If all of this holds, I submit that brute essentialism, by IBE's lights, possesses enough theoretical might to take it seriously.

There is a lurking concern that Sider's preferred explication of fundamentality—metaphysical semantics—scores just as well as brute essentialism on roughly the same fronts, but that it also can do even more. However, the discourse ranges over *ground-theoretic* views, so this particular argument from IBE should be viewed as restricted in scope to views that make use of ground rather than some other notion. Perhaps the grounding project is doomed, but that is a question for metametaphysics to answer. The important point is that I have made the case that IBE does not imply that brute essentialism is false; at the very least it is unclear as to what it has to say about the view given the uncertainty over what virtues it does and does not possess. However, if the matter is unclear, then it appears as though we have not satisfied the objectors worry that autonomy requires an independent defense. The next objection and reply aims at doing just that.

*Objection:* We should not think there are autonomous facts because there is no antecedent reason to think that metaphysical explanation is restricted in scope in the way that Dasgupta thinks provability is restricted in scope to axioms and theorems.

*Reply:* I agree with Sider that one of the hallmarks of metaphysical explanation consists in its comprehensiveness. That is, metaphysics tends to proceed upon the assumption that we can give a general and distinctive metaphysical characterization of *any* matter of philosophical interest, and that attempts to relegate arguably one of its most powerful tools to piecemeal utility should proceed with the utmost caution, or else not at all. If there are matters of interest that grounding cannot touch, then an argument is wanted. Dasgupta sows the seeds of this defense in independent works<sup>14</sup>, and the familiar Finean treatment of essence is once again pertinent. My aim here is state these points explicitly, and draw out the relevant consequences.

Returning to Dasgupta's example about provability and definition, we said that the former's restriction in scope to axioms and theorems has to do with the kind of the thing definition is-- and that being its status as a stipulative matter, wholly unsuited for being proven from any logical statement whatsoever. It might be helpful to clarify why the example about definition and provability has bearing on the matter at hand. As Dasgupta [2016] notes, essentialist facts are the "worldly analogues" of nominal definitions in the sense that identifying whether this or that thing has certain essential properties is to identify what goes in its *real definition*.<sup>15</sup> Thus, similar to the way in which nominal definitions lack proofs, real definitions (or, alternatively, essentialist facts) lack grounds. In any case, the purpose of this paper is to go beyond Dasgupta's analogies, and assuage Ted Sider's worry that there might be no such *argument* as to why we should think that the autonomous facts are groundless, so merely making the analogy explicit will not work in this context. However, if the analogy tracks to that of grounding explanations (which I

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<sup>14</sup> See, especially, (2014b) and (2017)

<sup>15</sup> Dasgupta (2016).

think it does), then a clear argumentative strategy appears: we must say what it is about autonomous facts that make it such that they are wholly unsuited for being grounded.

I have two responses in mind, and the first is that it has to do with the way in which we come to ascertain the grounding connections involving them. More specifically, it is thought that first-order grounding is an *a posteriori* affair,<sup>16</sup> while it seems appropriate to case grounding theses involving essentialist facts as (at least partly) an *a priori* affair. Allow me to be clearer about what I mean. As Dasgupta mentions, the question as to what grounds, say, the physical facts makes sense even if the answer turns out to be “nothing.” Why should we think this? A natural suggestion is to say that it has to do with the kind of thing physicality is.

I said in the previous section, the sense in which ground is necessary is that if fundamental facts of a certain kind obtain, then necessarily, they suffice to give rise to some type of nonfundamental facts. But this kind of necessity does not mean that we come to know these connections in an *a priori* fashion. Surely, if we discover that the physical facts ground the nonphysical facts, then this would have required a deferment to the physical sciences to tell us (at least partly) what physical matters are like, and why they are good candidates for grounding the nonphysical matters. For example, if facts involving conscious states obtain in virtue of facts involving certain brain states, then presumably we will need to learn a great deal about the brain and its various states, as well as the self-reports made by subjects who instantiate those brain states. In other words, we will need to perform a number of experiments aimed at discerning the relevant connections—perhaps by mapping what we learn about the brain from fMRI scans to the

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<sup>16</sup> Schaffer (2009), Dasgupta (2014a), Sider (2011) all seem to be in agreement here.

pertinent self-reports of a subject's mental states. Once we have learned enough, we ought, it is supposed, to be able to tell whether or not the physical facts lack grounds, but without this kind of knowledge, it surely makes sense to ask what grounds them.

Now compare this with essentialist matters. A fact like E, though likely discernable through some *a posteriori* knowledge-gathering, whether it has grounds will be learned *a priori*. Indeed, what kinds of experiments could we perform in order to uncover the relevant connections? Presumably any inference made as to whether or not it is essential to nonphysical facts that if the physical facts obtain, then the nonphysical facts obtain will go beyond the data, and thus it seems intuitive to think that we know that autonomous facts lack grounds *a priori*. As I understand it, Sider's worry is that the characterization of autonomous facts is perhaps too thin, and thus it is unclear that any such fact exists.<sup>17</sup> So, the chief point is to show that we can (at least partially) make the distinction along the lines of how we come to know the grounding connections in question. Autonomous facts (and the grounding relations they stand in) can be known (at least partly) *a priori* which makes them distinct from, say, the facts that are apt for being grounded (and the grounding relations they stand in) which are known entirely *a posteriori*. There are two issues with this response, however. The first is that some metaphysicians might find it unattractive to read off our metaphysical commitments from an epistemological standpoint opting instead to give a distinctly metaphysical account of

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<sup>17</sup> The metaphysical characterization of autonomous facts, so it seems, has largely been taken care of.<sup>17</sup> It is precisely because they cannot appear in the "antecedent" of grounding explanations, and additionally that they involve non-fundamental entities that they are autonomous, and hence not implicated among the fundamental bedrock of the world. Similarly, we have a metaphysical characterization of 'fundamental fact', but we would (or in any case, should) question the intelligibility of the notion were it increasingly difficult to see any example of it nature. Furthermore, we ought to be able to say what it is about *those* facts that make them prime candidates for being the fundamental ones.

why the autonomous facts lack grounds (I provide such an account in what follows). But perhaps more troublesome is the fact that it is not clear that we know that the autonomous facts lack grounds *a priori*. Why not think, for instance, that the purportedly autonomous facts are in turn grounded in increasingly higher-order facts involving those essential connections? I do not have a response ready to this line of objection,<sup>18</sup> but in any case I think there are other options available to the brute connectivist.

Returning a final time to the relevant notion of essence at play in this discussion, it is supposed to be a theoretical primitive similar to the way we treat ground. That is, we cannot explicate essence in more familiar terms. If this is the case, then it would not make sense to ask what grounds the essentialist facts. Remember, ground is an irreflexive relation that relates distinct facts, and should not be thought of as a kind of equivalence. If all of the this is the case, then I hold that it would be incorrect to ask what grounds the essentialist facts because i) the only candidate facts that might suffice for explaining them would be further essentialist facts (or, more properly, one and the same essentialist fact), and ii) the notion of ground with which this discussion operates is such that it is irreflexive and precludes facts from grounding themselves. If we allow that autonomous facts could have grounds, then we contradict our assumptions about the logical nature of ground, and implicitly allow that the autonomous facts ground themselves, which is a severely unpalatable result.

When we say that a fact is “apt for being grounded,” we presumably mean that there *could have been* some distinct fact that explains them (in the metaphysical sense) even if some of those facts lack explanations. However, this response simply is not open

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<sup>18</sup> I do, however, say more about this line of objection in the conclusion.

for the essentialist facts, for this is precluded from the outset-- similar to the way in which we rule out a definition's being provable is precluded from the outset. This, I believe, is the crucial move to make: *autonomous facts retain their status as such because an analysis of the "autonomous notions," e.g., essence, shows that it is chimerical to expect that they would have grounds in the first place, and moreover if we allow that autonomous facts are apt for being grounded (even if nothing grounds them), then we violate our assumptions about the logical nature of ground.* Fundamental facts, in contrast, lack grounds not because there is some antecedent reason that they do; we simply cannot take the groundlessness of the fundamental facts for granted in the way we can with autonomous facts.

#### IV. Conclusion

I have now met the aim I set for myself at the beginning of this paper: to get clearer on what the notion of autonomy is supposed to come to. My first attempt at this endeavor was to advance the notion from considerations stemming from inference to the best explanation, but I concluded that i) it is not clear that this strategy works, and ii) it does not do much in the way of clarifying autonomy on substantive grounds. My second attempt was much more promising. I said that we can understand that autonomous facts are groundless because this is *a priori*—quite unlike the facts that are apt for being grounded. I conclude that this strategy does clarify the notion of autonomy beyond that of the first strategy, but that some might find this kind of account unacceptable. To supplement this point, I indicated that essence's status as a theoretical primitive rules out that facts involving it could be explicated in terms of ground in the first place. The idea

was that ground is an irreflexive determination relation, and thus confers, by fiat, that no explanatory matters bear on the essentialist facts.

I do not pretend to have given a decisive argument in favor of the notion of autonomy, nor, perhaps, have I made it as clear as it could be. I take it as plausible that there are threatening objections lying in wait. In fact, one possible objection might look like this: Even if we accept that essentialist facts are autonomous, what is the status of grounding facts involving them? If, say, [E grounds C] obtains, then is it legitimate to ask whether or not *it* is grounded? Given that [E grounds C] is, well, a grounding fact, brute essentialism implies that it is grounded in some essentialist fact. More specifically, we might say that it is grounded in some essentialist fact E' such that E' grounds [E grounds C], but then it appears that we are off and running on a Bennett-style regress. Whether this is fatal to the notion of autonomy, I cannot say for certain, and must resign myself to the tired cliché “this matter is beyond the scope of this paper.” In any case, I believe that I have provided an interesting clarification of the notion that should assuage *some* of the apprehension arising from the Siderean worries.

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