

# Does the Unity of Grounding Matter?

Farbod Akhlaghi

University of Oxford

[farbod.akhlaghi-ghaffarokh@philosophy.ox.ac.uk](mailto:farbod.akhlaghi-ghaffarokh@philosophy.ox.ac.uk)

## Abstract

Is the notion of grounding arguably prevalent throughout moral philosophy the same as that found in metaphysics? Selim Berker has argued it is. This, he claims, has a ‘surprising’ consequence: many central claims in normative ethics become claims within both normative ethics and meta-ethics. I argue that whatever important consequences the unity of grounding may have for moral philosophy, it does not, *pace* Berker, entail anything significant regarding the relationship between normative ethics and meta-ethics.

## 1. Introduction

In an excellent paper in this journal, Selim Berker argues for the unity of grounding. Certain normative ethical claims, Berker argues, are metaphysical grounding claims, and since moral metaphysics is part of meta-ethics, this has a ‘surprising’ consequence: ‘many of the central claims of normative ethics are at once claims in normative ethics and claims in meta-ethics’ (2018, p. 769). In this paper, I grant Berker’s grounding monism and ask whether this consequence is a significant one for moral philosophy.

I argue it is not. Asking what Berker means by calling an ethical grounding claim ‘metaphysical’, I argue that his grounding monism either entails that some normative ethical disputes are also meta-ethical by being ‘metaphysical’ in so thin a sense as to make these claims uncontroversial, or, when read in a thicker sense, whatever significant consequences the unity of grounding may have for moral philosophy do not concern the relationship between normative ethics and meta-ethics as standardly conceived. So, *pace* Berker, the unity of grounding has no significant and surprising consequence for the standardly conceived ethics/meta-ethics divide.

## 2. The Unity of Grounding

Certain facts seem to obtain *because* or *in virtue of* others in a way that does not indicate causal, semantic, or conceptual determination. For example, the fact that Socrates exists neither causes, means, nor conceptually entails the existence of the singleton set {Socrates}. Rather {Socrates} exists because Socrates exists, or in virtue of the existence of Socrates. This kind of

non-causal, non-conceptual metaphysical determination has come to be called *grounding*.

Admittance of the notion of grounding is often motivated by appeal to disputes where locutions such as ‘because’, ‘in virtue of’, and analogous terms like ‘making’, are commonplace but where their use does not appear to invoke causal, semantic, or conceptual determination.<sup>1</sup>

Some such disputes, Berker argues, appear within moral philosophy. Take that over what general normative ethical theory is correct. A simple consequentialism, for example, might claim: an act is morally right if and only if that act maximises good consequences. But it also maintains that acts are right *because* they maximise such consequences, that good consequences *make* an act right, and that good consequences are that *in virtue of which* right acts are right. Such claims do not appear to be about anything causal, semantic, or conceptual but, rather, over what metaphysically determines – what *grounds* – some act having the moral status that it does. From this and other examples, Berker argues that some notion of grounding is widespread throughout moral philosophy.

Suppose Berker is correct. Is the notion of grounding found within moral philosophy the same as that widely discussed in metaphysics? For there is internecine disagreement amongst grounding-enthusiasts over:

(Grounding Monism) There is only one grounding relation.

(Grounding Pluralism) There are at least two fundamentally distinct grounding relations.<sup>2</sup>

Some, such as Kit Fine (2012) and Ralf Bader (2017), are grounding pluralists and posit at least two distinct grounding relations, a *metaphysical* and a *normative* grounding relation.<sup>3</sup> If such grounding pluralism is true, then the notions of grounding found throughout metaphysics and moral philosophy are distinct.

Berker argues for the unity of grounding, that is, for grounding monism. His argument takes some logical principles which relate several grounding claims to one another and which

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<sup>1</sup> See Bliss & Trogdon 2016 for an excellent survey on grounding.

<sup>2</sup> Call two relations fundamentally distinct if and only if neither relation can be defined in terms of the other, and there is no plurality of distinct relations in terms of which they can both be defined (Litland 2018, p. 97). Whether grounding is a relation or an operator is disputed. I’ll follow Berker and assume grounding is a relation; nothing I argue depends upon this.

<sup>3</sup> Though Fine would not put it this way since he takes grounding to be an operator. Fine also posits a third form of grounding: *natural*.

hold when exclusively applied to specific forms of grounding, claims that such principles hold in mixed grounding cases, and infers that the best explanation for this is that there is a single generic relation underlying these more specific ones.

But what of significance, if anything, hangs on the debate between grounding monists and grounding pluralists for moral philosophy? There is surprisingly little direct discussion of this question by Berker or others. Stephanie Leary, however, suggests the debate:

‘[...] is significant because it has implications regarding the relation (or divide) between normative ethics and metaethics.’ (Leary 2020, p. 475)

Leary is echoing a suggestion by Berker himself, whose paper builds up to claiming his grounding monism has a ‘surprising’ consequence:

‘Put most provocatively, the consequence is this: *it follows from the unity of grounding that normative ethics is a branch of metaethics*. Put less provocatively and more accurately, the consequence is this: *it follows from the unity of grounding that many of the central claims of normative ethics are at once claims in normative ethics and claims in metaethics*.’ (2018, p. 769, emphasis his)

The thought is this: if grounding monism is true, then a number of central claims in normative ethics – such as those over what the correct general normative ethical theory is – become, in part, *metaphysical* claims over what the *metaphysical grounds* of various ethical claims are. And since moral metaphysics just is part of meta-ethics, such normative ethical claims are *also* meta-ethical.

This *sounds* like a significant consequence. But is it?

### 3. An Insignificant Consequence?

The nature of the relationship between normative ethics and meta-ethics is vexed.<sup>4</sup> Berker himself only provides rough characterisations of the ‘standardly conceived’ normative

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<sup>4</sup> See McPherson & Plunkett 2017 for excellent discussion of just how vexed. They draw the distinction between ethics and meta-ethics at the level of *distinct projects with distinct success-conditions* and not *claims* or *theories*. Their response to Berker is that his account of the ethics/meta-ethics divide is mistaken and that, properly understood, it is

ethics/meta-ethics divide, suggesting it takes the former to address ‘first-order’ and the latter ‘second-order’ questions respectively (2018, pp. 770–771). He lists as examples of ‘second-order’ issues those concerning the ‘metaphysics, epistemology, and so on, of first-order moral claims’ (2018, p. 771).

I’ll take this to capture the common distinction Berker gestures towards:

(Standard) Normative ethics is first-order ethical enquiry. Meta-ethics is second-order enquiry into the metaphysics, epistemology, semantics, and psychology of morality.

(Standard) involves taking it that *at least some* disputes in meta-ethics lack immediate<sup>5</sup> ethical consequences, that the correct methodology to answer some meta-ethical questions will be *distinct* from the correct methodology to answer some questions in normative ethics, and that the mere distinction between ethics and meta-ethics entails nothing regarding the *plausibility* of ethical and meta-ethical theories. (Standard) is not objectionably idiosyncratic, should be familiar to all, and makes use of the same brief characterisations Berker himself provides when discussing this standard conception.<sup>6</sup>

Destabilising (Standard) could have significant consequences. Consider Ronald Dworkin’s (1996, 2011) infamous denial of it. Dworkin argues that a claim or theory is meta-ethical only if it is irrelevant to the justification of normative ethical theories or pure ethical claims. He then argues that all purportedly external, second-order claims about morality – those regarding its metaphysics, epistemology, semantics, and psychology – have normative ethical consequences, so all meta-ethical claims are first-order normative ones in disguise.

This denial of (Standard) has a number of significant consequences because it entails some claims accepted by (Standard) are false. First, there is *no* meta-ethical neutrality: *all* meta-ethical claims become first-order normative ones. Second, it has important methodological

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unsurprising that ethical grounding claims can contribute to both the projects of normative ethics and meta-ethics. I argue that *even if we accept* the standard divide between ethics and meta-ethics, grounding monism fails to challenge it. So, our papers complement each other to form the horns of a dilemma for Berker: either the standard ethics/meta-ethics divide by types of claim/theory is correct and grounding monism fails to challenge it, or a divide like McPherson and Plunkett’s is correct and the unity of grounding still fails to challenge it.

<sup>5</sup> As we’ll see, (Standard) is consistent with meta-ethical claims *in conjunction* with normative ethical ones having ethical consequences (see fn. 7 below).

<sup>6</sup> (Standard) combines two glosses on the divide: one in terms of levels and the other in terms of types of claims/theories. This will not matter here and is done to stay with Berker’s own rough characterisations.

consequences: investigating the nature of morality can be done only through whatever the correct methodology to pursue first-order normative ethics is. Third, it appears to suggest certain meta-ethical theories – such as the error theory – are highly implausible, given the collapse of meta-ethics to normative ethics.

Berker notes he is not offering a ‘reverse Dworkin’, taking *all* normative ethical claims to be meta-ethical. Instead, he argues that *some* normative ethical claims are *also* meta-ethical ones:

‘My own position is that certain views often taken to be purely normative ethical views are in fact views *both* in normative ethics *and* in metaethics, as those two fields are standardly conceived.’ (2018, p. 771; emphasis his)

‘Many of the so-called “first-order” moral claims at issue in normative ethics are at the same time “second-order” claims concerning the metaphysics of morality, insofar as they concern what makes right acts right, what makes good people good, and so on—that is, insofar as they concern claims about metaphysical grounding.’ (2018, p. 772)

But what precisely does it mean to say, for example, that consequentialism is *both* a normative ethical view *and* a meta-ethical one by being partly a view about moral metaphysics? And what follows from this? Does it, for example, have consequences comparable to those that Dworkin’s meta-ethical collapse threatens? To see we need to ask what Berker means by calling a claim or view ‘metaphysical’. Berker offers this clarification in a footnote explaining his claim that his single grounding relation is metaphysical:

‘[...] I use that word [‘metaphysical’] in a *thin sense* whereby it mainly serves as a contrast term for “epistemic”, “conceptual”, “semantic”, and the like. As I understand them, *metaphysical claims are those that concern how things are*, epistemic claims are those that concern our knowledge of things, conceptual claims are those that concern our concepts [...] the issue of whether the grounding relation is metaphysical, in my sense, does not yet settle whether that relation is “metaphysically robust” or “metaphysically lightweight”.’ (2018, p. 772, fn. 42; emphasis and additions in brackets mine)

Claims about what right acts are right in virtue of are also meta-ethical, then, by being claims about metaphysical grounding, where metaphysical claims concern ‘how things are’.

Concerning ‘how things are’, however, is a *very* thin sense of what renders a claim or dispute metaphysical. So thin, I argue, that it robs Berker’s grounding monism of any significant consequences for the standardly drawn normative ethics and meta-ethics divide.

For that normative ethical claims are ‘metaphysical’ in the sense of concerning ‘how things are’ – as opposed to being, say, epistemic and concerning knowledge – is *uncontroversial*. Those who distinguish normative ethics and meta-ethics by (Standard) can happily accept that normative ethical debate over, e.g., what right acts are right in virtue of is a dispute over how things are, namely, over *how things are morally*. (Standard)-theorists can admit of calling such debates and claims within them partly ‘metaphysical’ and so partly ‘meta-ethical’ without this posing any challenge to (Standard).

Suppose the grounding relation consequentialism invokes is metaphysical because it concerns how morality gets determined (as opposed to how we know about morality). Then consequentialism being metaphysical in that sense poses no challenge nor troubles (Standard) since no part of thinking normative ethics is first-order ethical inquiry, and meta-ethics second-order enquiry into how to understand morality, involves denying that normative ethical grounding claims are about how things are morally. That would, of course, be false, since ethical grounding claims are *obviously* about how things are morally.

So, if being about ‘how things are’ morally makes some normative ethical claims ‘metaphysical’, their being so and thus ‘meta-ethical’ for that reason is of no consequence for the standard divide between normative ethics and meta-ethics. The uncontroversial nature of this consequence is further highlighted when, unlike Dworkin who hoped to end morally-detached meta-ethical theorising, Berker notes that he hopes we:

‘continue to ask all the questions that have traditionally fallen on both sides of the divide [...] I simply want us to stop seeing these questions as sorting into two natural piles of non-overlapping issues, the “metaethical” ones and the “normative ethical” ones. There is just one field here: ethics.’ (2018, p. 771)

For if the sense in which these two sets of issues overlap to form one field of ‘ethics’ is the very weak sense that they both concern *how things are morally*, then the fact that they so overlap is uncontroversial and acceptable even to someone who thinks meta-ethics and

normative ethics alone as traditionally conceived have no important consequences for one another.

But perhaps what Berker intends by ‘how things are’ when characterising what makes a grounding claim metaphysical is not fully conveyed by the strict and literal sense of that phrase. The passage I quoted above may suggest this, since there Berker uses ‘metaphysical’ to contrast with ‘epistemic’, ‘semantic’, and ‘conceptual’ even though, strictly speaking, each of these concerns some aspect of how things are. Instead, Berker may be suggesting that some normative ethical grounding claims are metaphysical in the sense that they are non-epistemic, non-semantic, and non-conceptual. This seems in keeping with grounding indicating some form of determination that involves nothing epistemic, semantic, or conceptual. And such a reading provides a thicker notion of ‘metaphysical’ than that given by the strict reading of ‘how things are’.

Understanding some normative ethical debates as metaphysical (and so ‘meta-ethical’) because they involve grounding claims that are wholly non-epistemic, non-semantic, and non-conceptual is not insignificant. It importantly entails, for example, that first-order ethical grounding facts, and disputes over them, are neither semantic nor conceptual. That is a significant consequence, and one that some meta-ethicists have independently denied.<sup>7</sup> Notice, however, that this consequence is not generated by the unity of grounding entailing anything about the relationship between normative ethics and meta-ethics as standardly conceived. Rather, it is taking grounding to be metaphysical in the above sense which entails that debates over the grounding of first-order ethical facts are neither epistemic, semantic, nor conceptual. This may, as explained, entail some seemingly meta-ethical views which maintain ethical facts are semantic or conceptual are false. But the unity of grounding so understood entailing that first-order ethical debate is neither semantic nor conceptual does not show such debate is ‘also meta-ethical’ in any significant sense.

We can see why by noting how this consequence can be explained from within the traditional distinction between normative ethics as concerning first-order ethical matters and meta-ethics as concerning second-order questions about how to understand morality. For the

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<sup>7</sup> For example, analytic forms of naturalism may be ruled out, as may theories that take some ethical truths to be conceptual truths (such as Cuneo & Shafer-Landau’s 2014 view). Some may think an account of the ‘in virtue of’ relation in normative ethics should be neutral regarding whether some ethical facts are conceptual. The grounding monist will likely deny this. Whether an account should be so neutral is an interesting question for another time.

unity of grounding, and the claim that ethical grounding facts are neither semantic nor conceptual, look like paradigm cases of meta-ethical claims so understood: claims about how to understand a feature of normative ethical debate, namely, what determination relation the ‘because’ or ‘in virtue of’ we find throughout it concerns. Showing that this determination relation, properly understood, entails that certain accounts of ethical grounding facts are false looks like a straightforward case of a meta-ethical claim (the unity of grounding) entailing another meta-ethical claim (that ethical facts do not concern semantic or conceptual matters). Since this entailment can be explained from within the ethics/meta-ethics divide (Standard) casts, it poses no challenge to it.

Entailing that ethical grounding claims like:

- (A) Necessarily, an action  $x$  is right if and only if, and because, [...]
- (B) Action  $x$  is right in circumstances  $C$  because [...]

are metaphysical in this thicker sense, and so ‘meta-ethical’, would have significant consequences for (Standard) if it entailed that something (Standard) accepts is false. But it does not. For (Standard) involves no commitment to denying that there some explanatory ethical claims that are about what would non-epistemically, non-semantically, and non-conceptually determine ethical facts. (Standard)-theorists will just think calling (A) and (B) ‘meta-ethical’ for that reason is unhelpfully terminologically promiscuous, ignoring the difference between questions such as, say, whether consequentialism is true and whether ethical supervenience holds with metaphysical necessity, which (Standard) clearly distinguishes.

Finally, recall that Dworkin’s denial of (Standard) had three-fold significant consequences for (Standard): *no* meta-ethical neutrality, substantial *methodological revisionism*, and consequences for the plausibility of some theories *owing* to ethical/meta-ethical collapse. Whilst Berker does not argue for this, perhaps he assumes that ethical grounding claims being non-epistemic, non-semantic, and non-conceptual would have similar consequences. But this is a mistake.

For ethical grounding claims being non-epistemic, non-semantic, and non-conceptual does not entail any specific consequence for the nature and extent of neutrality between ethics



and meta-ethics, and leaves semantic, psychological, and epistemic claims solely meta-ethical.<sup>8</sup> Nor do any methodological consequences follow from conceiving of some ethical claims as non-conceptual, non-semantic, and non-epistemic that (Standard)-theorists must deny (e.g. many will think that whatever method is appropriate to conduct ethical enquiry should be able to generate justification for non-epistemic, non-semantic, and non-conceptual ethical explanations). Finally, it alone does not affect the plausibility of any seemingly meta-ethical or ethical theories or claims through troubling the ethics/meta-ethics distinction. It does importantly entail that ethical grounding facts cannot be conceptual or semantic. But, again, this does not challenge (Standard) since it can explain this consequence as an innocuous case of one meta-ethical claim entailing another.

Of course, there may be further interesting consequences for moral philosophy of the unity of grounding. For example, Bader (2017) argues that non-naturalist moral realism's plausibility depends upon grounding pluralism. If so, and if Berker has established grounding monism, then non-naturalism is false. This would be another significant consequence. But potential consequences like this, again, do not show the unity of grounding entails anything of significance for the standardly conceived relationship between normative ethics and meta-ethics.

#### 4. Conclusion

Berker's grounding monism either entails some normative ethical claims are 'metaphysical' in so thin a sense as to render seeing them as 'also meta-ethical' uncontroversial, or, if this sense is thickened, the significant consequences grounding monism may have for moral philosophy neither concern nor challenge the standardly-conceived relationship between normative ethics and meta-ethics. There are clear ways that the unity of grounding would matter to moral philosophy. But, *pace* Berker, if true, it has no significant and surprising consequence for the relationship between normative ethics and meta-ethics as standardly conceived.

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<sup>8</sup> But if (A) claimed that rightness was *fully grounded* (i.e., fully metaphysically determined) by happiness maximisation, and if full grounding entails reduction, wouldn't this show that grounding monism and consequentialism together entail reductive naturalism? No, since (A) would not settle whether it *itself* is a natural or non-natural fact. And even if it did, this would not challenge (Standard). For a meta-ethical claim (grounding monism) in conjunction with an ethical-cum-metaphysical claim of non-epistemic, non-semantic, and non-conceptual determination (consequentialism) entailing a meta-ethical claim (reductive naturalism) does not challenge a distinction between normative ethical claims as first-order ethical ones and meta-ethical claims as second-order claims about the status of morality. Nor does it challenge the extent to which either alone enjoys some degree of independence from the other: David Enoch [2011: 16–49] nicely illustrates this with his 'Argument from Objectivity's Implications', employing a seemingly ethical premise and a meta-ethical premise to meta-ethical conclusions whilst consistently accepting something like (Standard).

To show that grounding monism makes the determination relation found throughout ethics metaphysical and thereby meta-ethical in a way that challenges (Standard), one must show that grounding monism either challenges (Standard)’s understanding of the nature and extent of neutrality between ethical and meta-ethical disputes, the methodology appropriate to resolving such disputes, the plausibility of claims made in those disputes in a way that challenges the distinction (Standard) draws, or perhaps something else still. I have argued that Berker has failed to do so.<sup>9</sup>

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