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Troubles for Content II: Explaining Grounding

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1 Introduction

In Chapter 5, “Troubles for Content I,” I argued that the most promising understanding of appeals to deference in the theory of mental content is that they specify an additional way of having a concept – one that does not involve satisfying a conceptual-role or covariation theory’s main account of what it is to have a concept. If that is so, once a theory of content adds a proviso about deference, it no longer offers an account of what it *is* to have content. In this companion chapter, I address the potential response that we should be satisfied with a specification of modal determinants or, differently, *grounds* of content. I argue that a specification of types of facts that can ground content facts is no substitute for what I call *a constitutive account* of the phenomenon—an account of its nature or essence.¹ A claim that a phenomenon can be grounded in distinct ways poses an explanatory challenge that a constitutive account can meet: an account of the nature of a phenomenon can help to explain the way in which it is grounded.² In the case of the theory of content in particular, we want an account of what it *is* for a representation to have content that explains why content facts can be grounded in at least two very different ways, one that involves deference to others and one that does not.

¹ As I use the term here, a constitutive account need not be reductive—i.e., it need not use only terms or resources that are explanatorily more basic than the target phenomenon. For example, understanding of the target phenomenon can be gained by explicating how it is connected to other phenomena and what explanatory work it does. I will use “constitutive account of F,” “account of what it *is* to be F,” and “account of the nature or essence of F” interchangeably. For further discussion of constitutive accounts, see Greenberg (2005).

² Gideon Rosen’s (2010) excellent discussion offers a closely related conjecture about the explanation of grounding by essence. Rosen’s conjecture is much stronger than my claim, and my main arguments are different from his. An important way in which my claim is weaker is that I do not try to argue that a *full* explanation of grounding can always be provided by the natures of relevant phenomena. As will be obvious, my discussion, like Rosen’s, owes much to Fine (1994).

Because of Kit Fine's (1994) influential work, discussed briefly below, the corresponding points are more familiar in the case of modal determination than in the case of grounding. Indeed, given that grounding is an explanatory notion the use of which has been motivated in significant part by the inability of modal accounts to satisfy the explanatory demands of philosophy, there might be a tendency to think that a specification of what grounds a phenomenon is an account of the nature of the phenomenon or, at least, renders talk of "natures" or "essences" unnecessary. In part for these reasons, I focus on grounding; the considerations that I offer apply for the most part to modal determination as well.³

My goal is relatively modest in several respects. First, I will not try to show that a constitutive account can always provide an explanation of the way in which a phenomenon is grounded—for one thing, for some phenomena, it may not be possible to give a constitutive account. Second, as noted, I do not argue that a constitutive account of a phenomenon can by itself provide a full explanation of the way in which the phenomenon is grounded, only that it is part of the explanation. Third, in part because I will make several simplifying assumptions, the considerations that I offer are intended (even more than is usual in philosophy) to be suggestive rather than demonstrative.

A few preliminary and terminological remarks. I will take the grounding relation to be a relation between facts (though for expository convenience, I will often talk loosely, saying, for example that a's being a triangle is grounded in its being a three-sided, closed, plane figure).⁴ And I will use "in virtue of" and "grounds" (and "←") as interchangeable ways of expressing the relevant relation. To simplify discussion, I will focus on grounding statements in which all constituents but one are held constant between the left-hand and right-hand sides. (The point of this focus is to set aside the complication of multiple candidates for the phenomenon or phenomena whose natures figure in the relevant explanation.) Moreover, I will often focus on cases in which only a single fact does the grounding. At appropriate junctures, I will indicate ways in which the considerations can be generalized.

2 Disentangling grounding and essence

Certain examples might make it tempting to think that claims about what grounds a phenomenon *are* claims about the nature of the phenomenon—or at least that they allow straightforward derivation of such claims.⁵

³ In Greenberg (2005), I argue that we obtain a better understanding of the space of possibilities in the field of mental content by understanding theories of content as offering constitutive accounts rather than specifications of modal determinants or of constitutive determinants (in effect, grounds, though I do not use that term).

⁴ I will take facts to be true propositions, where propositions are structured entities that are individuated by their constituents and their manner of composition.

⁵ I have found that, once it is clear that "←" is being used to express grounding, there is a split among philosophers. Some take (1)–(3) to be paradigms of true grounding statements. Others, however, take

- (1) [a is water] \leftarrow [a is H₂O]
- (2) [a is a morally wrong act] \leftarrow [a is prohibited by the fundamental moral principles ρ]
- (3) [surface s is triangular] \leftarrow [surface s has (approximately) the shape of a three angled, closed plane figure]

Let us give a general characterization of the type of grounding facts expressed in (1)–(3).⁶ Obviously, in each case, there is a close link between the lower level fact that grounds the target fact and the nature of the phenomenon. More precisely, the grounding fact has the form [Fa] in virtue of [Ga], where *G* is the nature of *F*. Or, more generally, the nature of the grounded phenomenon is a constituent of the fact on the right-hand side. Call such grounding facts *essence-grounding facts*.

From such examples alone, one might even think that “ \leftarrow ” is being used to express a claim about essence. For instance, one might take (1) to mean that a’s being water is its being H₂O. And of course some of the locutions commonly used to express grounding—for example, “in virtue of,” “makes it the case that”—are used variously in philosophy, including as ways of expressing claims about essence. Even once it is clear that “ \leftarrow ” is being used to express grounding, some might be tempted to think that (1)–(3) support, say, the thesis that [Fa]’s being grounded in [Ga] entails that *G* is the nature of *F*—or, more generally, the thesis that a constitutive account of a phenomenon can be straightforwardly derived from a grounding statement.⁷

But other examples make clear that no such thesis can be true.

- (4) [a is water] \leftarrow [a satisfies micro-physical description π ; laws Λ obtain] (where π is a highly specific description at a subatomic level of the positions of electrons, protons, and so on)
- (5) [a is a morally wrong act] \leftarrow [a is the torturing of a cat for fun]
- (6) [surface s is triangular] \leftarrow [surface s satisfies micro-physical description σ ; laws Λ obtain] (where σ is a highly specific description at the molecular level).

In (4)–(6), the property expressed by the relevant predicate on the right-hand side of each statement is not even coextensive with the property expressed by the

(1)–(3) to be *false* because they hold that, in each case, the fact on the right-hand side is identical to the fact on the left-hand side, and no fact can ground itself. Since I take facts to be true propositions, I take the fact that a is water and the fact that a is H₂O to be distinct facts, as they have distinct constituents. I will mostly assume that (1)–(3) and the like are true grounding statements (more generally that if *G* is the nature of *F* and a is *F*, then a’s being *F* is grounded in a’s being *G*), but even without this assumption, arguments along similar lines could be developed as long as it is granted that there is an explanatory asymmetry—i.e., that something’s being H₂O explains why it is water, but not vice versa. See also footnotes 11 and 14.

⁶ I am using the term *grounding fact* for the fact that one fact is grounded in another, not for the lower-level fact that grounds the target fact. For example, the fact that a is water in virtue of a’s being H₂O is a grounding fact.

⁷ Of course, those who take (1)–(3) to be false will not be tempted in this direction, and they can skip the next four paragraphs.

predicate on the left-hand side. Many instances of water do not satisfy micro-physical description π ; many morally wrong acts do not involve torturing cats; and so on. Obviously, therefore, a grounding fact of the form $[Fa] \leftarrow [Ga]$ does not entail that what it is to be F is to be G. More generally, (4)–(6) illustrate that no property that is a candidate to be the essence of the relevant phenomenon need be a constituent of the fact on the right-hand side. And (4)–(6) also show that there need be no straightforward way to derive an account of the essence of the target phenomenon from a grounding fact. Even if we know a great many—or all—of the ways in which a phenomenon can be grounded, it may be not at all obvious how to derive a constitutive account of the phenomenon. For example, we are familiar with diverse ways in which moral wrongness can be grounded, but the essence of moral wrongness is highly controversial. It does not seem likely that even a specification of all of the specific ways in which moral wrongness can be grounded (not including a specification of an essence-grounding fact) would reveal a unified account of what it *is* to be morally wrong.

Of course, a disjunction of all of the types of facts that can ground something's being water or being morally wrong would capture the extension of the target phenomenon. But such an exhaustive disjunction is not a plausible candidate for an account of the essence of either phenomenon. To be water is to be H_2O , not to satisfy such a disjunction of micro-physical descriptions. And even if moral wrongness, counterintuitively, is disjunctive, it is wildly implausible that it is as deeply disjunctive as the imagined exhaustive-disjunction account would entail. As I discuss below in the case of content, we want an understanding of what the target phenomenon is such that it can be grounded in such different ways. The present point is that a specification of what grounds a phenomenon is not an account of the nature of the phenomenon, nor does it in general permit straightforward derivation of such an account.⁸

3 Explaining grounding

Having disentangled claims about grounding from claims about essence, I now turn to the strain of thought according to which we should be satisfied with a specification of the types of facts that ground a phenomenon. If we are interested in a phenomenon F, a specification of the kinds of facts that ground instances of F (or, differently, on which the F facts supervene) can be philosophically important. But a very natural

⁸ One can imagine a regimentation of grounding statements according to which (1)–(6) are all, strictly speaking, incomplete. On such an approach, for example, (1) and (4) are both part of the full story of what grounds the fact that a is water. Another approach would allow that (1)–(6) are complete, but hold that (4), (5), and (6) give non-immediate grounds, and that in each case there is an additional statement of immediate grounds ((1), (2), and (3) respectively) without which information is lost. (In Greenberg (2005), I argue that one problem with specifications of modal determinants is that they collapse intermediate levels of constitutive structure.) I will not address such issues because, to the extent that essence-grounding facts are a necessary part of the full grounding story, so much the better for my argument.

idea is that it is in part *because of F's nature* that certain kinds of facts determine or ground instances of F.⁹ (This explanation might itself be an instance of grounding: that is, the fact that certain kinds of facts ground instances of F might be grounded in part in facts about F's nature. I don't take a stand on this question here.) After all, how could the explanation of why something makes it the case that a is F not involve *what it is to be F*?

In Greenberg (2005), I took this natural idea to be supported both by reflection on particular cases and more abstract considerations. Here is an example (Greenberg 2005: 313). That a particular event *e* is a regicide may be grounded in part in complex social facts. We can explain why such social facts are part of what grounds *e*'s being a regicide by appealing to an account of the nature of regicide: A regicide is the killing of the King, and whether a person is a king depends on complex facts about the person's relation to others. So a hypothetical theorist of regicide who used thought experiments in which the social facts varied while the "internal" facts were held constant to support "externalism" about regicide would have pointed out something true. But such a theorist leaves mysterious why regicide depends on social facts, and an account of the nature of regicide can provide what is missing.

Similarly, it is valuable to learn that facts about a thinker's natural and social environment are part of what grounds the contents of the thinker's mind. But we want to understand what it *is* for a representation to have content such that it can be grounded in these ways.

In very many cases in which we understand the nature of a phenomenon, that nature can help us to explain its grounds. That certain subatomic facts ground the fact that there is water in this glass is in part explained by water's being H₂O. That certain complex social facts ground the fact that the United States was at war with Germany in 1944 is in part explained by what it is to be at war. That my being an American citizen grounds the fact that I am an American citizen or I was born in the 17th century is in part explained by its being of the essence of disjunction that for a disjunction to be true is for one of its disjuncts to be true. It is easy to multiply examples.

We can also adduce some suggestive general considerations in favor of the natural idea that the nature of a phenomenon will in general be part of an explanation of its grounds. The natural idea can be expressed schematically as follows: if [Fa] is grounded in part in [Pa], then the nature of F will figure in the explanation of this grounding fact. The intuitive line of thought behind the idea, which I will attempt to elaborate, is that, if G is the nature of F, [Pa] can make it the case that [Fa] only by making it the case that [Ga]. But, in that case, the explanation of why [Pa]

⁹ Cases of supervenience in which the subvening facts are not part of what makes it the case that the supervening facts obtain are potential exceptions. One kind of case is where the F facts supervene on facts that are metaphysically less basic. In another kind of case, the F facts supervene on the G facts because of some brute metaphysical necessity. In a third kind of case, supervenience obtains because of a rule of discourse. Compare Blackburn (1984: ch. 6).

makes it the case that [Fa] will be that [Pa] makes it the case that [Ga] and G is the nature of F.

In the case of essence-grounding facts, it is relatively easy to see that a full explanation of the grounding fact would include the facts about the nature of the phenomenon. The grounding fact—for example, that a's being water is grounded in its being H₂O—obtains in part because to be water *is* to be H₂O. One might fail to see that this explanation is an *explanation*—that it goes beyond the explanandum—if one had not carefully distinguished the grounding fact from a fact about the nature of water. But given that “←” is univocal in (1) and (4), (1) does not entail that to be water *is* to be H₂O, so this essence claim does indeed go beyond the explanandum. Corresponding points apply to all essence-grounding facts. I therefore set aside the easy case of essence-grounding facts and turn to non-essence-grounding facts.

Let F be a phenomenon for which a complete, reductive constitutive account can be given: to be F *is* to be G. Now let us assume that there is a non-essence-grounding fact.

$$(7) \quad [Fa] \leftarrow [Pa] \quad (P \neq G)^{10}$$

Given that to be F *is* to be G, and Fa, we have: Ga.

The crucial question is: what is the relationship between [Pa] and [Ga]?¹¹ Because G is the nature of F, we can rule out the possibility that [Pa] and [Ga] are metaphysically independent of each other, i.e., that neither metaphysically depends on the other.¹² If [Ga] and [Pa] were metaphysically independent, but [Pa] makes it the case that [Fa], it would not be true that to be F *is* to be G. Since [Pa] and [Ga] are not identical, one must be metaphysically dependent on the other.

¹⁰ The example assumes that [Fa] is grounded in a single fact [Pa], rather than a collection of facts. For greater generality, we can take the example to be that [Fa] is only partially grounded in [Pa]. Versions of the arguments below, with appropriate modifications, can be developed for this case.

¹¹ As noted, I take facts to be true propositions, so when G is the nature of F, [Fa] is not identical to [Ga]. If we suppose, to the contrary, that [Fa] = [Ga] (and therefore that there are no essence-grounding facts), then the relationship between [Pa] and [Ga] is straightforward: [Ga] ← [Pa]. On the face of it, then, one explanation of the grounding fact [[Fa] ← [Pa]] is that [Ga] ← [Pa], and to be F is to be G. (Since identity statements can be informative, they can play a non-redundant role in explanations.) Thus far, however, we do not have an explanatory asymmetry. The fact that [Ga] ← [Pa] may just as well be explained by the fact that [Fa] ← [Pa], and to be G is to be F. That a particular complex subatomic fact can ground a's being water is intuitively explained by the fact that it makes it the case that a is H₂O, and to be water is to be H₂O. But not the other way around. The fact that the complex subatomic fact grounds a's being H₂O is not intuitively explained by the subatomic fact's making it the case that a is water, and that to be H₂O is to be water. One who holds that facts are worldly items and takes the fact that a is water to be identical to the fact that a is H₂O may take the intuitive asymmetry to be at the level of the concepts under which the relevant property is apprehended. For example, the concept H₂O is better suited to make explanatory connection with the concepts under which subatomic properties and objects are apprehended than is the concept WATER.

¹² I talk of metaphysical dependence here because I want to allow for the possibility that there are kinds of metaphysical dependence other than grounding. The intuitive considerations spelled out in this paragraph show that there must be some kind of metaphysical dependence of [Pa] on [Ga] or [Ga] on [Pa], but I don't want to assume that it is grounding. As will become clear, if the dependence is in fact grounding, so much the better for my argument.

Suppose, first, that [Ga] metaphysically depends on [Pa]. In that case, the obvious explanation of the grounding fact stated in (7) is that [Pa] grounds [Ga], and G is the nature of F.¹³ So, in that case, the fact that G is the nature of F figures in the explanation of the grounding fact. Could it be that [Ga] metaphysically depends on [Pa], but [Pa] does not ground [Ga], for example, because [Pa] grounds another fact [Ra], which grounds [Ga], and grounding is not transitive? But if [Pa] does not ground [Ga], then how could it be that it grounds [Fa], given that [Ga] grounds [Fa] and [Pa] is not a metaphysically independent ground? Figure 6.1 illustrates the situation. (The upward arrows represent grounding, and the “X” represents that grounding does not obtain.)

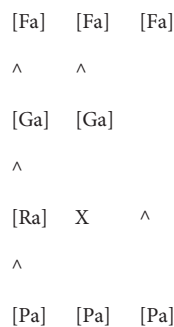


Figure 6.1 A case in which [Ga] metaphysically depends on [Pa] but is not grounded in it (though both [Ga] and [Pa] ground [Fa])?

The situation is bizarre because, although transitivity breaks down along the chain from [Pa] to [Fa], it nevertheless holds from [Pa] to [Fa]. More generally, we can set aside the question of whether [Pa] grounds [Ga] and bring out the intuitive idea as follows. By assumption, [Ga] metaphysically depends on [Pa], so [Pa] is more metaphysically basic. But if [Pa] is more metaphysically basic than [Ga], and G is the nature of F, then it must be that the obtaining of [Pa] explains the obtaining of [Fa] via the obtaining of [Ga]. And so the explanation of why [Pa] grounds [Fa] will involve the fact that to be F is to be G.¹⁴

Suppose, to the contrary, that [Pa] metaphysically depends on [Ga]. If [Pa] were grounded in [Ga], then [Pa] could not make it the case that [Fa], given that to be F is to be G. [Pa] cannot explain the obtaining of [Fa], *given that to be F is to be G*, if [Pa]’s

¹³ It might be suggested that an adequate explanation is that [Pa] grounds [Ga], [Ga] grounds [Pa], and grounding is transitive. (Thanks to Alexis Burgess for asking me to address this suggestion.) But this explanation makes use of the essence-grounding fact $[[Fa] \leftarrow [Ga]]$, which, as argued above, is explained by the fact that G is the nature of F.

¹⁴ The argument in this paragraph uses the assumption that $[Fa] \leftarrow [Ga]$. If one rejects essence-grounding facts because one takes [Fa] and [Ga] to be identical (see footnote 5), then $[Ga] \leftarrow [Pa]$. In that case, all that is needed to complete the argument that the nature of F helps to explain the target grounding fact $[[Fa] \leftarrow [Pa]]$ is that something’s being G explains its being F, but not vice versa. For, in that case, the explanation of the target grounding fact is the fact that $[Ga] \leftarrow [Pa]$ and that a’s being G explains a’s being F.

obtaining is itself explained by [Ga]’s obtaining; the direction of explanation would be the wrong way around for the obtaining of [Pa] to explain the obtaining of [Fa]. But this point would seem to apply with respect to any form of metaphysical dependence. If [Ga] is more metaphysically basic than [Pa], [Pa] is not going to be able to explain the obtaining of [Fa], given that to be F is to be G.¹⁵

I have so far limited consideration to cases in which there is, in principle, a complete reductive account of the nature of F. At the other extreme, if there is nothing that can be said about the nature of F, then, obviously, an account of the nature of F cannot figure in an explanation of what grounds [Fa] (though it remains plausible that F facts are grounded in the way that they are because of F’s nature). In between, however, there are cases in which a partial, yet reductive, account of the nature of F is possible—i.e., an account that makes use only of notions more basic than the target notion, but does not give a complete account of what it is to be F. For example, even if a complete account of knowledge is not possible, we know that it is part of the nature of knowledge that what is known must be true. The general considerations sketched above apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to partial reductive accounts. And, indeed, the just-mentioned aspect of the nature of knowledge explains why my knowledge that the Eiffel Tower is in Paris is grounded in part in the Eiffel Tower’s being in Paris (or in the arrangements of molecules that make it the case that the Eiffel Tower is in Paris).

It more difficult to see how to adapt the general considerations above to the case of non-reductive, as opposed to partial, accounts, in part simply because there are diverse kinds of non-reductive accounts. But as I will illustrate below, a constitutive account, whether complete or partial, need not be reductive in order to shed light on the way in which the target phenomenon is grounded. Indeed, in the knowledge example, the explanation of why my knowledge that the Eiffel Tower is in Paris is grounded in part in the Eiffel Tower’s being in Paris does not depend on the account’s being reductive (though it plausibly is). The explanation would go through even if truth were not more basic than knowledge.

The above discussion can be applied to the case of theories of content. Consider, for example, the grounding claim of a conceptual-role theory of content (where m_1 is a mental representation):

- (8) [“ m_1 ” has the content DOG in thinker t] \leftarrow [t has a disposition to deploy m_1 in accordance with DOG’s canonical pattern of use]¹⁶

By the argument above, if even a partial account of the nature of the having content relation can be given, we would expect it to figure in an explanation of (8).

Kit Fine’s (1994) attractive and influential account of the relation between essence and modality also supports the suggestion that facts about what grounds instances

¹⁵ Perhaps there is a case in which [Pa] grounds [Fa] because being P consists in part in being G. But then the explanation of the target grounding fact will depend on the fact that G is the nature of F.

¹⁶ On the notion of a concept’s canonical pattern of use, see my Chapter 5, “Troubles with Content I.”

of a phenomenon can be explained by the nature of the phenomenon.¹⁷ Fine argues that necessary truths have their source in the essences of different entities. Consider the necessary truth that, if certain subatomic facts (including facts about basic physical laws) obtain, then the fact that there is water in a particular container obtains in virtue of those subatomic facts. It is not plausible that this truth can be wholly explained by the nature of the objects, for example, electrons, that are constituents of the subatomic facts and the nature of the grounding relation itself. Rather, we will need to appeal to the nature of water to explain the necessary truth about the grounding of the fact in question (perhaps in conjunction with the nature of grounding).

Similarly, consider:

- (9) If *t* has a disposition to deploy *m*₁ in accordance with DOG's canonical pattern of use, then ([“*m*₁” has the content DOG in thinker *t*] ← [*t* has a disposition to deploy *m*₁ in accordance with DOG's canonical pattern of use])

This statement presumably expresses a necessary truth (assuming the truth of the relevant conceptual-role theory of content). Which object (or objects) might be the one whose nature (or natures) explains this necessary truth? The problem with *m*₁, DOG, and *t* as candidates for this role is that theories of content typically aspire to offer a general account—an account of what it is for a representation to have content *C*, for arbitrary *C*.¹⁸ The theory that yields (9) will also yield countless other statements of the same form in which “*m*₁, DOG, and *t*” do not figure. For example:

- (10) If *R* has a disposition to deploy *m*₇ in accordance with ELECTRON's canonical pattern of use, then ([“*m*₇” has the content ELECTRON in thinker *r*] ← [*r* has a disposition to deploy *m*₇ in accordance with ELECTRON's canonical pattern of use])

It's difficult to take seriously the idea that each of these necessary truths of the same form has an utterly different explanation, stemming from the nature of a different object. And it is difficult to see how the nature of grounding could supply what is missing; what is common to all of the necessary truths is not plausibly explained by the nature of grounding. To borrow an argument from Rosen (2010: 133), one could know what it is for a fact to ground another without knowing anything about the way in which content is grounded.

The only serious candidates for an entity whose nature could explain the commonality (perhaps together with the nature of the grounding relation) are thus the “having content” relation and the “having a disposition to deploy . . . in accordance with . . .” relation that figures in (9) and (10). Just as it is implausible that the nature of the objects that figure in the subatomic facts explain the necessary truth in the water example, it is implausible that the nature of the relation on the right-hand side will

¹⁷ As noted above, Rosen (2010) argues along similar Finean lines for a more ambitious conjecture.

¹⁸ But see the discussion of Horwich's account in Section 4.

explain the corresponding necessary truth (9) in the case of content. How could it be in the nature of having a certain disposition to deploy a mental representation *M* that having that disposition makes it the case that *M* has a given content? Again, a scientist could understand the relevant essence fully—could know *what it is* to have such a disposition—without knowing that it grounds mental content. Of course, theorists of content appeal to resources other than dispositions, such as causal, counterfactual, nomic, and historical relations and social facts, for example, about patterns of deference. But, again, these seem the wrong place to look for an explanation of the grounding of content facts.

4 Accounts of content that specify determinants or grounds

Consider David Lewis's (1984, 1983: 370–7) proposal that “objective sameness and difference in nature” plays a role in determining the content of thought. In response in part to the Kripkenstein problem, Lewis argues that there must be some additional determinant of content if we are to avoid radical indeterminacy. He proposes that the world is that additional determinant (1984: 227–8, 1983: 371–2).

Lewis claims, in effect, that the “naturalness” of a property is part of what makes it the case that a property figures in the content of a representation. I am very sympathetic to the claim that the structure of the world plays an important role in grounding mental content (though I would propose a different understanding of naturalness).¹⁹ On Lewis's account, however, we are left without an understanding of what it is for a representation *R* to have a content involving a concept *C* (for arbitrary *R* and *C*) such that the structure of the world plays the conjectured role. It is not that there is anything wrong with the type of argument on which Lewis relies. He motivates the need for an additional determinant and argues that a particular candidate would fill the need. These considerations support Lewis's proposal. But the proposal raises the question of whether there is more to say about a representation's having content that sheds light on why the structure of the world should be a determinant of it. What is it to have content such that a property's naturalness is part of what makes it figure in the content of a representation?

A similar criticism would apply to any theory of content that characterizes the determinants or grounds of content, but resists offering a general account of what it is for a representation to have content that would explain why the alleged determinants are the determinants of content. Paul Horwich's (1998, 2005) account is illustrative. In my terms, he maintains that, for each word, the fact that it means what it does is grounded in—and reduces to—its having a particular basic use property that explains

¹⁹ This discussion of Lewis draws on Greenberg (2001), which sketches a positive proposal about what it is to have content, such that the structure of the world plays an important role in grounding content facts.

all the other use properties of the word.²⁰ But he denies that there can be a general account, for an arbitrary content C, of which use property determines C because he denies that there is any essence or nature of having meaning. (1998: 42, 66, 2005: 27, 35, ch. 3). Consequently, the only available kind of explanation of the particular grounding facts is that the essence of each word's meaning is the corresponding basic use property. That is, the essence of the meaning or concept DOG is its basic use property, and the essence of the meaning or concept ELECTRON is its basic use property, and so on. (Horwich's position is thus a version of the kind of view mentioned above according to which each individual meaning or concept's nature separately explains what grounds a representation's having that content.)

On Horwich's account there is an important uniformity between the different basic use properties: each word has its meaning in virtue of the use property that explains all of the other uses of the word. A natural thought is that something about the nature of meaning explains why each individual meaning is grounded in this way. Horwich's account seemingly leaves the uniformity unexplained.

Moreover, in response to cases of incomplete understanding, Horwich, like the theorists of content discussed in my companion piece, Chapter 5, introduces an alternative way in which a word's having its meaning can be grounded: "In order for an individual member of the community to mean a certain thing by a given word, it is not necessary that he himself uses it precisely in accordance with the regularity that fixes the meaning of the word type" (1998: 86). Rather, Horwich says, what is necessary is that "the individual is disposed to defer to the experts" and "that his use of the term conforms to that regularity at least to some extent" (1998: 86; 2005: 52). Horwich's discussion of deference is brief and not entirely clear, but we seem to be left with the disjunctive position that what someone means by a word can be grounded *either* in the basic use property that explains his other use of the word *or* in the basic use property that explains the use of experts to whom he defers. If this reading of Horwich is right, it undermines his claim that each individual meaning property reduces to the corresponding basic use property. More importantly, it leaves unexplained why each individual meaning property is grounded in two systematically related ways. That each individual meaning property is grounded in these two ways is precisely the kind of explanandum that we would expect a general account of the nature of meaning to be able to explain.

It is also worth considering Soames's (1998) important response to the Kripkenstein problem, as it might be taken to provide comfort to the view that no more should be expected of an account of content than a specification of modal determinants. Soames points out that nothing in Kripke's discussion provides reason to doubt that content

²⁰ Horwich (1998: 40–1; 2005: 26–57). Horwich uses a variety of verbal formulations, writing, for example, of a word's meaning's being constituted by its basic use and of a word's meaning what it does in virtue of its basic use. I will follow Horwich in using more or less loose formulations for expository convenience.

facts supervene on dispositions or other non-intentional facts. (He argues that the requirement that we be able to “read off” the content facts from the determining facts is unmotivated, as the modal determinants need not a priori entail the content facts.) Soames does not consider the possibility that an account of the nature of the phenomenon could help to explain why it has the determinants that it has. Notice that, even if such an explanation were possible, it would not follow that we would be able to “read off” the content facts from the determining facts. For one thing, the explanation might be only partial. Even if it were complete, the nature of the phenomenon and thus the explanation might not be a priori. Finally, it is not obvious that an explanation of the determining facts would be sufficient to enable an inference from the determining facts to the content facts. Thus, Soames’s argument that the “reading off” requirement is unjustified is consistent with the possibility that an account of the nature of meaning or content could help to explain why it has the determinants that it has.

5 Implications for the theory of content

I have tried to support the intuitive idea that it is because of the nature of the phenomenon of a representation’s having a particular content that instances of that phenomenon are determined or grounded in the way that they are. We should be unsatisfied with an account that simply specifies determinants or grounds of content and tells us nothing about what having content *is* such that it should be determined by these factors. In the end, it may be that the nature of the phenomenon cannot be understood, or that whatever understanding we can attain is inadequate to help us explain why it is grounded in the way that it is. But absent a direct argument for that strong conclusion, support for it can come only from the failure of attempts to provide an understanding of the nature of content.

In the previous chapter, I argued that conceptual-role and covariation theories that appeal to deference to address the phenomenon of thoughts involving incompletely grasped concepts are left without an account of what it *is* for a representation to have content. Understood in the most promising way, such theories specify two different ways in which content facts can be grounded. It is important to notice that deference is supposed to ground content in some cases, but not others. (More precisely, in these other cases, the relevant theories may have to hold that the absence of deference is part of what grounds content—see three paragraphs below.) If an account specifies two apparently very different kinds of grounds for different instances of a phenomenon F, the question becomes especially pressing what the nature of F is such that it can be grounded in such apparently different ways. What is it to have a concept such that having a concept’s canonical disposition and deferring to others who have such a disposition can both make it the case that one has the concept?

There are at least three possibilities. First, it may be that the phenomenon’s nature is fundamentally disjunctive. The fact that an object is made of jade can be grounded

in two different ways. The explanation is that jade's nature is disjunctive—it is two different things. (Perhaps another possibility is that what unifies the phenomenon is its appearance to humans.)

Second, it may be possible to give a unified account of the nature of the phenomenon that explains why it has different kinds of grounds. Metamers provide an example.²¹ One metamer of a pair is, say, a particular shade of blue in virtue of its having certain surface reflectance properties, and its counterpart is the very same shade of blue in virtue of its having very different surface reflectance properties. We may be able to explain these very different grounds with a unified account of the nature of blueness, for example in terms of the responses it produces in humans.

In the case of content, a unified account would explain why having a concept's canonical disposition and deferring to others with respect to the concept (or the concept-word) could both ground having the concept. More precisely, once we have recognized that deferring to others can make it the case that one has a concept, it is no longer plausible that having a concept's canonical disposition is even sufficient for having a concept. (The reason is that, in some cases, a thinker's incomplete understanding of a concept C will constitute mastery of a different, "bent" concept C*. But, despite the thinker's exercise of C*'s canonical disposition, the relevant thoughts may involve C, rather than C*.) At best, the sufficient condition would be something like having a concept's canonical disposition *and* not deferring to others with respect to that concept. So a unified account needs to explain what this condition has in common with deferring to others such that they are both ways of having a concept.

By way of illustration, I have elsewhere (Greenberg 2005: 311–15, 2007: § 8) sketched a type of position that has the potential to provide such an explanation. On the *responsibility view*, which can be developed in diverse ways, what it *is* to have a particular concept is to be subject, or responsible, to standards that are individuating of that concept. A theory based on the responsibility view has the potential to explain the data discussed above concerning the determinants or grounds of content: the general idea is that a fact grounds content because it is (part of) what makes it the case that a thinker is subject to a standard. For example, deferring to others with respect to the use of a word or concept is plausibly the kind of thing that can make a thinker subject to the standards of the community. (And the reason why so little is required for a speaker to use a word with its public meaning is that very little is needed to make a participant subject to the standards determined by the linguistic community.) Conversely, not deferring to others with respect to the use of a word or concept is, in effect, taking one's own competence to be the relevant standard, which is again the kind of factor that plausibly can make one subject to a standard. (I don't mean to suggest that such factors are *sufficient* to make one subject to a standard; for example, certain minimal capacities are also plausibly necessary.) Similarly, the structure of the

²¹ Thanks to Alexis Burgess for suggesting this example, and to Will Davies for helpful discussion.

world may be a determinant of content because it is a source of relevant standards. Millikan's (1984, 1990) theory of content can be understood as a way of developing the responsibility view according to which thinkers are responsible to the relevant standards in virtue of their evolutionary history.²²

An important point is that the type of explanation of the grounds of content I have just gestured at does not require that the responsibility view be reductive (in the precise sense of appealing only to more basic resources). That explanation stands whether or not the relevant normative facts (that thinkers are subject to particular standards) are more basic than facts about a representation's having content. Also, the responsibility view is neutral with respect to whether a reductive account can be given of the relevant normative facts themselves.

The third possibility is that the phenomenon is unified, but basic in the sense that it is not possible to give a complete account of its nature, even one that is not reductive. (It is vague whether a phenomenon is basic in this sense because, among other things, the notion of a complete account is vague.) By way of illustration, perhaps it is not possible to give a complete account of what it is to have an obligation, though we can specify, in each case, what grounds a person's having an obligation. One person may have an obligation because she has sworn an oath, another because he has knowingly participated in the relevant practice and accepted its benefits, and so on. Although the phenomenon is basic, it is presumably because of the nature of the phenomenon that different instances are grounded in particular ways. (Even if a phenomenon is basic, the intuitive plausibility of the idea for which I have been arguing—that a phenomenon is grounded in the way that it is because of its nature—is unaffected, though I will not develop the point here.) And we may even be able to use our understanding of what an obligation *is* to understand why particular kinds of facts ground obligations, though by hypothesis we will not be able to spell out this understanding fully. I do not address here whether a basic phenomenon could be disjunctive, but I conjecture that our understanding of a basic phenomenon can give us reason to believe that the phenomenon is not disjunctive.

In other cases of basic phenomena, we may be able to say enough about the nature of the phenomenon to explain aspects of its grounding. I gave an example above involving our partial understanding of the nature of knowledge.

The three possibilities are extremely different in their implications for the theory of content. First, if the phenomenon of having content is fundamentally disjunctive, that

²² See Greenberg (2005: 312–15 & fns. 34–5). The responsibility view also suggests a way of explaining the relevance of a historical chain in determining the reference of names. Kripke (1980: 89–97) does not offer a general view of what it *is* for a name to have a certain reference that explains why it is that a historical chain reaching back to an initial baptism can help to make it the case that a name refers to a particular person. According to the responsibility view, the potential relevance of a historical chain is that it can be part of the explanation of why a thinker's use of a name is subject to a particular standard. The reason that a person's intention to use a name "with the same reference as the man from whom he heard it" seems to make a crucial difference (Kripke 1980: 96) is that such an intention could plausibly make a thinker subject to a standard. On the responsibility view, however, there is no reason to think that such an intention is the only kind of factor that could do so.

would be a major, and majorly deflationary, result. The theory of content would lack a unified subject matter. (Arguably, this result would be a rejection of the phenomenon of incomplete understanding. For the conclusion would be that thoughts involving concepts that are incompletely grasped do not have something in common with thoughts involving completely grasped concepts that makes them both instances of the same phenomenon of a representation's having content.) Certainly, this result is not what theorists have in mind when they offer conceptual-role or covariation theories with deference provisos.

Second, if a unified account of what it is to have content could be found that could explain the grounding of the phenomenon, that would again be a major result in the theory of content. Third, that the phenomenon was basic but unified would be a very different and important conclusion again. And, as noted, even if the phenomenon were basic, it might be possible to explain why having a concept can be grounded in having a concept's canonical disposition and also in deferring to others.

A conceptual-role or covariation account with a deference proviso leaves open which of these three possibilities is the case. Given how different the possibilities are, it seems that such accounts are seriously underdeveloped. The obvious way forward is to seek an account of the nature of the phenomenon that explains the different ways in which it can be grounded.

6 Conclusion

In the companion Chapter 5, "Troubles with Content I," I argued that many prominent theories of content are unable to account for incomplete understanding. The addition of a proviso about deference results in a disjunctive position, according to which a representation's having a particular content can be grounded in very different ways.

In the present chapter, I argued that a specification of ways in which a phenomenon is grounded is not an account of the nature of the phenomenon. Moreover, in general, a constitutive account of a phenomenon has the potential to explain the way in which the phenomenon is grounded. I am not optimistic about the prospects for a complete, reductive account of what it is for a representation to have content. But an account of a phenomenon need not offer a reduction—and certainly not a reduction to physical, causal, or similarly low-level terms—in order to explain the way in which the phenomenon is grounded. The responsibility view, which I offered as illustrative of a unified account, explicates content in normative terms, and is neutral as to whether the normative is explicable in more basic terms. Yet it has the potential to explain the different ways in which a representation's having content can be grounded.²³

²³ I am very grateful to several people for detailed comments or discussion: Josh Armstrong, Tyler Burge, Alexis Burgess, Alejandro Pérez Carballo, Sam Cumming, Gabriel Greenberg, Gilbert Harman, Eliot Michaelson, Michael Rescorla, Georges Rey, and Brett Sherman. I would like to thank Alexis and Brett for inviting me to be part of this volume and for their invaluable input, and Alexis for encouraging me to develop the ideas about grounding.

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