

How to be an antirealist about metaphysical explanation

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Abstract

Antirealism about metaphysical explanation is relatively underexplored. This paper maps out the territory for the antirealist, explaining what it would take to be an antirealist given various different conceptions of metaphysical explanation, and of the relationship between metaphysical explanation and grounding.

KEYWORDS

antirealism, explanation, grounding, metaphysical explanation

1 | INTRODUCTION

Metaphysical explanation is generally introduced in contrast with causal explanation, and in conjunction with grounding. Where causal explanations concern why things happen, metaphysical explanations concern what (non-causally) makes something the case. Where causal explanations are primarily discussed in the domain of science, and concern, involve, or cite causal relations, metaphysical explanations are primarily discussed in the domain of metaphysics. They are paradigmatically (though perhaps not essentially) connected with grounding, the non-causal dependence relation thought by many to connect the fundamental and the derivative.¹

2 | ANTIREALISM ABOUT EXPLANATION

Antirealism about metaphysical explanation has been discussed relatively little, and different people seem to have different things in mind when they mention it. The primary aim of this paper is to offer some clarifications and distinctions which can help to make future discussion clearer and more fruitful. Though my primary concern is with metaphysical explanation, much of what I say generalises to other kinds of explanation, and some of my examples

¹For an introduction to metaphysical explanation, see Brenner et al. (2021) and Thompson (2021). For introductions to grounding, see Bliss and Trogon (2021) and Raven (2021).

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come (e.g.) from thinking about scientific explanation. Unless otherwise stated, references to “explanation” are to metaphysical explanation.

One of the reasons that it's hard to get clear on what antirealism about metaphysical explanation amounts to is that it's hard to get clear on what antirealism amounts to in general, for any domain of discourse. What is generally agreed is that where realists think the phenomenon in question is somehow objective and mind-independent, antirealists hold that it is in some way dependent on thought and language or on how we characterise it; that it would not exist or have the nature it does in the absence of minds like ours.²

Applying this to thinking about explanation suggests that for the antirealist, something's counting as an explanation might be constrained by how it is expressed or represented, and that there is a sense in which whether something counts as an explanation is at least partially determined by us (or at least by minds like ours), somehow or other. It's tempting to say then that explanation as conceived of by the antirealist is essentially *subject-involving*, where the details of precisely how that plays out depend on the details of the account, as well as by what we mean by the expression “explanation”. If explanation is essentially subject involving, a world with no agents will be a world with no explanations (at least, there will be no explanations *at* that world—we might still explain the goings on at that world from our perspective at our own world). Pure information, facts, events and so on are never explanatory in isolation.

Broadly, we can distinguish three kinds of constraints on explanation, some or all of which the antirealist will subscribe to. (We might want to refrain from claiming that any such constraint is by itself sufficient for antirealism about explanation, since it is possible to give a realist gloss on at least some of them.) Antirealists might recognise *pragmatic* constraints on explanation such as the complexity of the explanation offered, how well it serves the interests of parties to the explanation, and how the explanation is formulated (e.g. if communicated, the language in which it is communicated). They might also recognise *epistemic* constraints including the background knowledge of any agents involved, the cognitive sophistication of those agents, and whether the explanation is appropriately connected to understanding. Finally, the antirealist might recognise a class of *psychological* constraints on explanation, including the concepts possessed by any agents involved in the explanation, and the psychological state of those agents.³ We might group these things together and say that for the antirealist, *subjective* constraints help to determine whether or not a purported explanation is in fact an explanation. To make these ideas more precise, in the next section we'll distinguish three different things one might have in mind when thinking about explanation, and describe what antirealism about explanation would require on each conception.

3 | THREE LEVELS OF EXPLANATION

The expression “explanation” is commonly used to denote a number of different things. First, an explanation might be a communicative act that takes place between two or more agents, as when a teacher explains to her class why adding bicarbonate of soda to vinegar generates a frothy explosion; or when an unfaithful wife offers an explanation of her actions to her partner. Second, we might use the expression “explanation” for the sentence (or proposition expressed by a sentence) that is given in response to a certain kind of question. So, when a parent asks “why is the sofa stained?” and a guilty teenager responds “because I spilled wine on it”, the explanation is what follows the “because” (which is itself elliptical for a longer proposition like <the sofa is stained because the wine was spilled by Amy>, which we might call a *full* explanation). A third use for the term “explanation” is to pick out whatever complex fact, event, or state of affairs is responsible for the fact or event to be explained. We might

²This, like all broad-brush conceptions of realism and antirealism, is both sketchy and open to counterexamples. (Consider, for example, the way in which we might think of social constructivists about gender as realists who nevertheless think that gender is dependent on there being minds like ours arranged in societies like ours. See e.g. Haslanger (2000)).

³Note that these are often all lumped together and labelled “pragmatic” or “epistemic” features of explanation.

say that the Big Bang itself is the explanation for the presence of cosmic microwave background radiation, or that the event of the wine's being spilled explains the staining of the sofa. So, there are three types of things that we might mean when we use the expression "explanation":

- (i) A communicative act between two or more agents
- (ii) The sentence or proposition involved in (i)
- (iii) The complex fact or state of affairs represented by (ii)

We can think of these different ways of thinking about explanation as corresponding to three different "levels": the communicative level, the level of representation, and the level of what is represented. These levels can be distinguished for scientific as well as for metaphysical explanation. I'll argue below that it is possible to take different attitudes with respect to the reality or otherwise of each of these things we might mean by "explanation".

There is one final thing people sometimes seem have in mind as a suitable reference for our expression "explanation", which is the relation that might feature in something like a complex fact. In particular with respect to metaphysical explanation, it is often said that grounding is an explanatory relation, and so that when we have a grounding relation we have an explanation. We might claim something similar for relations like causation, realisation, and constitution (among others). In specific cases though, it would be a mistake to think of the grounding relation *itself* as an explanation, though we might think that the grounding fact or entity is an explanation, or that a complex fact with grounding as a component could be an explanation, or that propositions involving grounding are thereby explanatory. These options are already covered by (i) – (iii). We should understand the claim that grounding is an explanatory relation not as the claim that the grounding relation itself (if there be any such thing) is an appropriate referent for our expression "explanation", but rather as the claim that grounding is a mechanism for explanation, or is involved in explanations, or is part of some explanations, or similar.

3.1 | Antirealism about acts of explaining

To be an antirealist about explanatory acts is to think that something's counting as an act of explanation depends on pragmatic features such as how the explanation is expressed (e.g. the language used; its complexity along various dimensions) and how interested the recipient is in receiving the explanation, epistemic features (e.g. the shared background knowledge between participants to the relevant conversation; the cognitive sophistication of those agents; whether the act of explaining results in understanding), and psychological features (e.g. the concepts possessed by the participants in the explanatory act), and whether the recipient is in an appropriate psychological state (e.g. open and receptive to the explanation offered).

Many would agree that acts of explaining abide by pragmatic, epistemic and/or psychological constraints. For example, it seems very plausible that a purported act of explanation of some phenomenon among a group of scientists working on that phenomenon might be deemed successful or appropriate in that context when the very same act of explanation would be deemed to fail in a classroom full of 5-year-olds. The language used would be too unfamiliar for the children, they would lack appropriate background knowledge, the explanation might be too complex, and the children would likely lack the cognitive sophistication to follow the explanation even if they understood the words. The purported explanation fails *qua* act of explaining because there has been a failure of effective communication.

Even though it seems clear that we do sometimes use the term "explanation" to refer to communicative acts of explaining, it is rare for people to think that this is the whole story. Usually, people think that what is communicated plays a key role in making something count as an explanation, or failing to do so. On this kind of picture (explored in more detail in the following sections) one might accept subjective constraints on acts of explaining but deny that this suffices for antirealism about explanation. To be clear though, there is a version of

antirealism according to which all that it takes for something to be an explanation is for it to be an explanatory act, where its counting as an explanatory act is subject to certain pragmatic, epistemic, and/or psychological constraints.

3.2 | Antirealism about explanations as representations

A more common view among philosophers of science in particular is that an explanation in the relevant sense is not an event like a speech act, but a representational entity like a sentence or proposition, or a collection of sentences or propositions (including arguments). (I'll focus here on propositions rather than sentences, but most of what I say applies to both.) There are broadly speaking two ways to be an antirealist about explanation who thinks that explanations are at the level of representations. The first is to be an antirealist of one kind or another about propositions/sentences in general. The second is to think that there is something about explanatory propositions in particular that makes explanations mind-dependent, even though we might be realist about propositions in general. I'll focus on the second of these.

Versions of antirealism about scientific explanation where explanations are at the level of propositions have been defended by van Fraassen (1980) and Achinstein (1983). van Fraassen's "pragmatic" account is often described as antirealist because van Fraassen holds that explanations are context sensitive along various different dimensions. An explanation is a proposition (e.g. the ball is coloured rather than not coloured because it is red rather than green), saturated by the context along various different dimensions. Most notably, an answer must bear the relevance relation to the explanandum and the contrast class (the set of possible alternatives to the explanandum). Whether a particular answer is relevant depends on things like what the questioner wants to know about, and so there is an ineliminable role for the questioner and the explainer, and the context they find themselves in. We should not, however, conflate the pragmatic account of explanations as context sensitive questions and answers with an account of explanations as acts of explaining. It is not part of the pragmatic view as here understood that there must be an act of explaining (i.e. as some kind of explanatory event). A proposition can count as explanatory for a subject in a context even if no explanation is sought after, but the view is antirealist because at least one subject is required in order to determine the context.

In other work (Thompson, 2019) I develop a version of the pragmatic account specifically for metaphysical explanation. Metaphysical explanations on this view are ordered pairs of what-makes-it-the-case-that questions and answers to those questions. Explanations are correct when they provide a true, appropriate answer to the relevant question, where appropriateness is determined by the context, including the kinds of epistemic, psychological, and pragmatic features mentioned above. The answer must cite some fact that makes the case the topic of the question in virtue of the obtaining of some metaphysical dependence relation between the question and the answer (or their contents). Metaphysical explanation is thus an ordering on propositions that is determined both by the condition the world is in with respect to the relevant relations (parthood, identity, set membership, determinate-determinable, etc.) and by features of the explanation seeker. As with van Fraassen's account, this view counts as antirealist because of the role of the subject seeking the explanation in determining features of the context.

To feature an ineliminable role for a subject in determining the content of an explanatory proposition is not the only way in which we might think that explanatory propositions in particular are in some sense mind-dependent or subject involving. For example, we might think that a proposition only counts as explanatory if it in fact

4It is sometimes objected that all that is required is that such-and-such a proposition *would* be explanatory for some possible subject in some possible context, and that in this way we can give a fully objective account of explanation even on an account like van Fraassen's. The antirealist should, I think, concede this point, but insist that the resultant notion of explanation is nevertheless antirealist (because it is essentially subject-involving). It's also arguably pretty far removed from what we were looking for in seeking an account of explanation: it tells us for every possible scenario and every possible subject what is explanatory with respect to what, but plausibly part of what explanations do (says the antirealist) is track our interests. This objectified van Fraassen style account does not do that.

contributes towards understanding or “grasping”.⁵ Such a view has it that no proposition can be explanatory unless it has in fact featured in an explanation, though this explanation need not have been communicated. For example, a scientist might come up with an explanation that allows them to understand some puzzling phenomenon, but might not discuss it with anybody else. On this view, the proposition is not explanatory tout court, but explanatory for that agent (in the relevant context).

This view faces a couple of obvious objections. First, that no propositions are explanatory unless they have in fact led to an increase in understanding in an actual agent, and this is implausible. If the window breaks because it was hit by the brick that was thrown at it, then the proposition <the window is broken because it was hit by the brick that was thrown at it> is true and is explanatory whether or not anybody has entertained the proposition and thereby come to understand that the window is broken because it has been hit by the brick that was thrown at it. The second related objection is that we need a notion of explanation that allows us to talk of something being the explanation for something else without always relativising to an agent or group. For example, we should be able to accept that the Earth orbits the sun due to gravitational forces, and accept that this proposition is an explanation, even though not everybody understands why gravitational forces would lead to this kind of movement of heavenly bodies. We should be able to think of some proposition as explanatory without needing to specify who it is explanatory for. The objections suggest two ways in which the view that understanding is a necessary condition in something's counting as an explanation fails to count as explanations things which we ordinarily think should count (first potentially explanatory information not entertained by any agent, and second unrelativised apparent explanations).

It can go some way towards answering both objections to remember that on this view many propositions that would be explanatory in the right circumstances are true, even though they do not count as explanatory unless they have led to an increase in understanding. The antirealist about explanation can of course accept that many propositions about causation, grounding, and other kinds of structural notions are true, and that these propositions might involve the locution “because” to pick out the relevant kinds of relations. The only thing she denies is that these propositions *count as explanatory* for an agent unless they lead to an increase in understanding for that agent. On this view, what distinguishes true propositions about grounding, causation and so on from explanations is that explanations produce understanding. In response to both objections then, the antirealist should insist that while seemingly explanatory propositions might well be true, they are not in fact explanations unless they are explanations for someone in a particular context.

Specifically in response to the second objection, she can further add that where there are well established explanations in a particular context, it is reasonable to talk loosely about a proposition being explanatory without mentioning agents or contexts, even though strictly speaking there are no explanations that are not relativised in this way. When we talk loosely like this, we might expect speakers implicitly to defer to experts. This explains why somebody who does not have a good grasp of the physics might nevertheless take gravitational forces to explain the Earth's orbit of the sun, because they think that so long as scientists who *do* have a good grasp of the physics understand the astronomical facts on the basis of the gravitational ones, the latter facts explain the former.

Another way in which the antirealist might place a condition on explanation understood as a representation is to think about the role the relevant proposition plays or would play in a subject's belief system. For example, we might say that a proposition is explanatory when it is part of a theory that allows us to derive a large number of explananda from a small set of explanantia. Explanatory propositions unify a subject's beliefs and enable them to make a large number of derivations using a small number of stringent argument patterns. This way of thinking is a version of a unificationist account of explanation, for which the locus classicus is Kitcher (1980).

⁵Most would add that this cannot be the *only* factor in a proposition's counting as explanatory, as people might sometimes grasp something on the basis of false information, and in general, philosophers are reluctant to countenance the possibility that something could be false and nevertheless explanatory.

Versions of the unification account for metaphysical explanation are developed in Kovacs (2020). I'll not discuss the accounts here, except to say that this approach to explanation need not be unfriendly to the realist (and indeed is often offered in a realist spirit). An antirealist unificationist though focuses on the belief system of a particular subject, and might also tie the account to a subjective feeling of understanding.⁶

3.3 | Antirealism about what is represented

A third thing we might have in mind when we talk about "explanation" is whatever it is that propositions about explanation represent. This is often described as something like a "worldly fact", but such a description might be misleading once we take seriously the possibility of antirealism. The clearest route to antirealism about explanation at the level of what is represented is to take one or more of the components of (e.g.) a complex fact to be mind-dependent, conceptual, or otherwise "unreal". For example, the antirealist might accept that the ball's being red grounds the ball's being coloured, and that this is a metaphysical explanation. Her antirealism might consist in her insisting, however, that grounding is somehow or other mind-dependent, and so we ought to be antirealists *about grounding*.⁷ She might then hold that we should be sophisticated antirealists about grounding in a way that licences grounding-talk and allows grounding to feature in the kinds of complex facts represented by propositions about grounding.⁸ Similarly for, for example, the Humean about causation, who might hold that the event of the brick hitting the window causes the breaking of the window, and that this is an explanation for the breaking of the window. However, she denies that causation is "really" anything more than constant conjunction. Insofar as she recognises a notion of causation playing a role in the relevant facts, it is mind-dependent.

One might object that the antirealist about e.g. grounding has no right to thinking that there are complex facts about grounding. Because, on her view, there is no grounding relation, there can be no facts involving grounding. In response, the antirealist can point to the discourse around moral antirealism, where many accept that sophisticated antirealists earn the trappings of the realist's discourse.⁹ This might be by accepting a minimalist notion of the relevant kinds of facts, such that all that it takes (for example) for there to be a complex fact or state of affairs of the ball's being red grounding the ball's being coloured is for the ball's being red to ground the ball's being coloured, and what it is for the ball's being red to ground the ball's being coloured is for (for example) there to be a grounding fiction according to which the ball's being red grounds the ball's being coloured.¹⁰ Alternatively, the antirealist can say that complex facts involving e.g. causation are really complex facts about constant conjunction in the Humean mosaic and their (mind-dependent) projection into the future, but that we talk about causation as a kind of shorthand.¹¹ Of course, these two strategies can be combined. In this way the antirealist about metaphysical explanation can maintain that metaphysical explanation is in some sense subject-dependent even if we think of explanations as operating at the level of what is represented.

⁶Kovacs (2020, p. 1673) takes one of the advantages of his account to be that we can recognise the psychological role of explanation in producing understanding, but can do so without adopting a full-blown antirealist view. On his view, we should link explanation to the understanding of properly trained rational agents, and thereby see the phenomenon as both objective and psychological. This should plausibly be considered a moderate form of antirealism because it makes explanation dependent on minds like ours, without making it a fully subjective notion.

⁷Versions of antirealism about grounding are developed in Miller and Norton (2017, 2022) and in Thompson (2018, 2022).

⁸See Thompson (2018) for an overview of the options for the antirealist about grounding.

⁹In fact, this might itself be problematic: see e.g. Dreier (2004).

¹⁰Fictionalism about grounding is developed in more detail in Thompson (2022). Although see also a response in Knowles (2022).

¹¹Antirealism about causation (or grounding) does not necessitate antirealism about the relevant kind of explanation; one might think of causation as mere constant conjunction but be a realist about causal explanation because causal explanation simply tracks facts about the mosaic. Thanks to Anna-Sofia Maurin for pointing this out. The antirealist described above is a genuine antirealist about casual explanation because of the role of (subjective, mind-dependent) projection in the account.

We have seen then that versions of antirealism about metaphysical explanation are available given any of the three ways of thinking about explanation that we distinguished at the outset. Though I have offered little by way of defence of them here, I think that they are plausible and worth taking seriously. In the remainder of this paper, I want to abstract away further from the details of particular versions of antirealism about explanation to discuss some structural issues about how we think about explanation (and in particular, metaphysical explanation) in general.

4 | HOW ARE THE LEVELS RELATED?

Above I described how one might be an antirealist about explanation on various different conceptions of explanation: explanation at the communicative level, the representational level, and at the level of what is represented. In this section I'll mention six options for how the antirealist might think about the relationship between these different conceptions or levels of explanation, discussing some of them in detail. When we focus our attention on *metaphysical* explanation in particular, the distinction between these different levels is perhaps more apparent than it is in the case of (e.g.) causal explanation. One reason for this is that philosophers often claim that there is something distinctively *worldly* (we might say "metaphysical") about metaphysical explanation, whereas we perhaps more standardly think of causal explanation as representational or communicative. Nevertheless, it has not gone unnoticed that thinking of metaphysical explanation as distinctively metaphysical generates some tension with the quite familiar idea that explanations are to do with how we represent the world, and how we communicate those representations to one another (see e.g. Maurin, 2019; Raven, 2015; Thompson, 2016).

A way one might seek to resolve the apparent tension is to argue that explanations operate at more than one level. In other words, a single explanation might have a communicative and/or a representational, and a represented aspect. In this way, one might insist that we should be realists about metaphysical explanation because we are realists about whatever happens at the represented level, whilst also recognising that there is a representational and/or a communicative aspect to metaphysical explanation, and that we can recognise a "pragmatic" dimension to that without counting as antirealists about metaphysical explanation (see Brenner et al., 2021). Something like this position is generally held by "separatists" about metaphysical explanation, who might say that metaphysical explanation is information about the grounding relation (see e.g. Schaffer, 2012, p. 124). This position is held in contrast to "unionism", which holds that grounding just is a form of metaphysical explanation.¹²

In the literature, unionism is generally what I will call "grounding-first"; one first develops a theory of grounding and then claims that grounding and (a certain type of) metaphysical explanation are the same thing (see e.g. Fine, 2012; Raven, 2012, 2015; Rosen, 2010). An alternative is what I will call "explanation-first" unionism, and dictates that we first develop an account of metaphysical explanation, and then identify grounding with that (a good example of this approach is Dasgupta (2017)). The difference between these approaches is primarily methodological, but has important consequences. For example, a grounding-first view typically does not make room for pragmatic, epistemic, or psychological aspects of metaphysical explanation because orthodox approaches to grounding take grounding to be a relation that is entirely objective and mind-independent. In contrast, explanation-first views might not assume realism about grounding, because it might be that metaphysical explanation is constrained by the interests and abilities of explanation seekers, for example.

This allows us to see that one can be an antirealist about explanation in any of the following (structural) ways. We can hold that explanations operate at just one level, and then either: (1) be a grounding-first unionist, holding that metaphysical explanation just is grounding, where we are antirealists about grounding (i.e. metaphysical

¹²The labels for these positions are introduced in Raven (2012).

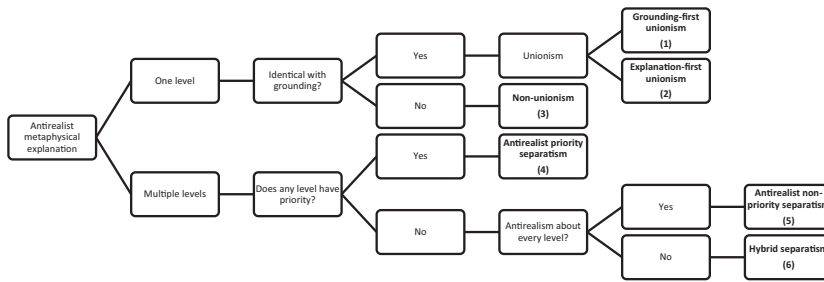


FIGURE 1 The structure of antirealist metaphysical explanation.

explanation is at the level of what is represented); (2) be an explanation-first unionist, holding that grounding just is metaphysical explanation, where metaphysical explanation is understood either as a representation or a communicative act, and be an antirealist about that; (3) be what we might call (for want of a better name) a *non-unionist*, holding that metaphysical explanation operates at just one level but not making any particular claim about grounding. Alternatively, we can hold that explanations operate at multiple levels. These are versions of separatism. One might hold (4) that metaphysical explanations operate at multiple levels but one of these is prior to the others, and we should be antirealist about that level (e.g. that pragmatic constraints ultimately determine whether what is communicated is an explanation or not, but that the state of affairs the relevant communication is about still counts as part of the explanation). This option also covers views according to which the represented level is fundamental and we are antirealist about *that*, and views according to which strictly speaking the only components of an explanation are the communicative and the representational, and we are antirealist about whichever is prior. Alternatively, one might (5) be a non-priority separatist, thinking that whatever components there are of a metaphysical explanation should be weighted equally in the relevant sense. Finally, one might (6) be a hybrid separatist who gives equal weight to realist and antirealist components of an explanation. Because the options here are many, it might help to refer to the chart below which shows how there are related (Figure 1).

5 | UNIONISM AND NON-UNIONISM

In this section I'll give some motivation for each of positions (1)–(3), though as my aim in this paper is to map out the territory, I will not argue for any particular view. These are all views according to which there is strictly speaking only one level of metaphysical explanation. It might be (for example) that metaphysical explanations are at the level of what is represented. We might then communicate information about what is represented, but neither that information nor the act of communicating it is itself an explanation. (We might talk loosely about explaining and about explanatory information, but what makes the relevant sentences, propositions and acts explanatory is that they are *about* explanations (they represent, feature, or otherwise point at them); they are not themselves explanations on this view.)

Many philosophers have argued that grounding is an explanatory relation.¹³ Much of the early motivation for introducing the notion of ground was to make sense of apparent explanations where the explaining fact plays no causal role with respect to the explained fact (see e.g. Audi, 2012). The unionist thinks of grounding as explanatory by its very nature, and thus takes this connection very seriously. For the realist about grounding, this might be the source of some tension. Many think that there are at least some pragmatic, epistemic, or psychological constraints on explanation, and if we are to think of grounding as entirely objective and mind-independent (as does the realist), and of grounding as identical with metaphysical explanation, then we are

¹³For overviews of various aspects of the relation between ground and explanation, see the papers in Part II of Raven (2021).

forced to deny this.¹⁴ (Recall that this kind of thinking motivates many separatists, who might hold that we can recognise these kinds of constraints on some levels of explanation whilst denying that they apply to grounding itself.) Some realist grounding-first unionists of course deny that metaphysical explanation is subject to pragmatic, epistemic, or psychological constraints (see e.g. Bennett, 2017).¹⁵ Given that our focus is on antirealist accounts of metaphysical explanation, I will not discuss this here. Note that for the antirealist grounding-first unionist though, no tension arises. If grounding itself is not objective and mind-independent, but the obtaining of grounding relations is constrained in the way the antirealist argues, then *prima facie* at least there will be no problem in maintaining that grounding and metaphysical explanation are identical (and that both are subject to the relevant constraints).

Extant antirealist accounts of grounding (e.g. Miller & Norton, 2017; Thompson, 2022) have as part of their motivation the idea that grounding is an explanatory relation, and that explanation should be understood as constrained along various epistemic, psychological, and pragmatic dimensions. Grounding-first unionism might thus be a natural view for anybody who is already an antirealist about grounding.¹⁶

Explanation-first unionism will be a natural choice for anybody with a deflationary view of grounding. There is no requirement that the deflationist be an antirealist about explanation (see e.g. Dasgupta, 2017, who leaves it open), but explanation-first unionism leaves open that we might take seriously pragmatic, epistemic, and psychological constraints on explanation. Dasgupta (2017, p. 76) claims that ground, in the deflated sense of the constitutive sense of “because” is an everyday notion that most people recognise, understand, and use. It is not the inflated and metaphysically weighty notion that it might make sense to claim is unintelligible. Those who share Dasgupta’s worries about the reification of ground are likely to be attracted to explanation-first unionism (whether or not they also accept antirealism about explanation).

Dasgupta’s explanation-first unionism is most naturally seen as a view according to which constitutive explanations are at the level of what is represented. If so, they are states of affairs such that (for example) a faculty meeting is occurring because the faculty are gathered in a room discussing matters of importance to the department (see 2017, p. 79).¹⁷ If we take the relevant notion of “because” to be constrained along pragmatic, epistemic and/or psychological dimensions (such that the relevant state of affairs only obtains if those conditions are satisfied) then we have a route to antirealism about explanation on the explanation-first unionist view.

It’s hard to see how explanation-first unionism would go if we think of explanations as representations such that, for example, the proposition <a faculty meeting is occurring because the faculty are gathered in a room discussing matters of importance to the department> is an explanation, and it is also identical to grounding. I’m not aware of anybody in the literature taking seriously the view that grounding is itself something like a proposition (or an explanatory act). It is, however, quite natural to think of metaphysical explanations in this way (and think that one of the things that can be communicated is information about the grounding relation, which itself represents grounding as being a certain way). Putting explanation first and thinking of metaphysical explanation in one of these two ways (as a communicative act or as what is represented) thus motivates the view I have called *non-unionism*, according to which metaphysical explanation operates at just one level, but metaphysical explanation is not identified with grounding.

¹⁴See Maurin (2019) and Thompson (2016).

¹⁵Bennett’s focus is her notion of *building* rather than grounding, but since grounding is one kind of building relation I think we can count Bennett as a grounding-first unionist (it’s just that she would also count as a kind of pluralist due to the fact that several different building relations are species of metaphysical explanation).

¹⁶The exception to this is that some versions of grounding antirealism might require a distinction between grounding and metaphysical explanation. For example, the antirealist might claim that strictly speaking, there is no grounding, but that grounding-talk reveals facts about metaphysical explanation.

¹⁷The example is from Dasgupta (2017, p. 75).

A different reason for preferring non-unionism over unionism as stated is that one might think that multiple relations can play the role that the unionist takes grounding to play, and not wanting to single out grounding for special treatment. (Of course, we might instead expand the view so that unionism encompasses whatever metaphysical dependence relations we think can play the role usually primarily attributed to grounding.) Or, rather than thinking that multiple relations could play the role, one might think that no relations can, and so non-unionism might be motivated by a kind of scepticism about grounding,¹⁸ or perhaps even about dependence in general. Finally, one might prefer a conception of explanation that does not necessarily invoke metaphysical dependence relations at all (see e.g. Taylor, 2022). In any of these cases, we can give an antirealist gloss on non-unionism by thinking of metaphysical explanation as constrained by relevant pragmatic, epistemic, and/or psychological factors.

6 | SEPERATISM

As we have seen, separatists are generally motivated by the thought that there is some kind of broadly pragmatic, epistemic, and/or psychological flavour to explanation, but that explanations (or at least metaphysical explanations) feature objective, mind-independent dependence relations like grounding. Separatism can be seen as an attempt to reconcile the broadly subjective character of explanation with the objectivity of this kind of dependence. According to the separatist, explanations have (at least) two components: they feature both this dependence relation (at the level of what is represented) and also a representation of what is represented, and/or communication about that representation.

This way of thinking about metaphysical explanation has been pursued in the literature by realists who want to maintain that we can be realists despite recognising the subjective dimension to explanation. This suggests taking the level of what is represented to take some kind of priority over the other levels, such that objectivity and mind-independence at the level of what is represented (despite the absence of objectivity and mind-independence at the other level or levels) is sufficient for realism. Call this view *priority separatism*. The *antirealist* priority separatist must either think of each of the components of explanation in an antirealist spirit, or insist that it is one of the levels of explanation which is constrained by subjective factors that takes priority.¹⁹

The final option for the separatist is to claim that at least two levels take equal priority (and that no level is prior to them). If we think of all of these levels as does the antirealist, then this will be another antirealist view. What should we say though if one of these levels or components of explanation is to be understood in a realist spirit, but the other seems constrained as the antirealist insists? I'll call this view *hybrid separatism*, and will return to discuss it shortly.

Realist priority separatists need to maintain that we should be realists about what is represented when we give a metaphysical explanation, and that somehow or other this takes priority (with respect to determining whether we are realists or antirealists about metaphysical explanation) over the other levels about which we are antirealists. As noted above, this is a common and familiar view among separatists. It is somewhat surprising then that what separatists actually say seems to be in conflict with this. Here is Raven when he introduces the distinction between unionism and separatism (2015, p. 236):

...just as causal explanation can be a communicative act sensitive to our explanatory interests and goals which is backed by worldly causal relations, so too metaphysical explanation can be a communicative act sensitive to our explanatory interests and goals which is backed by worldly ground relations.

¹⁸Reasons for scepticism about grounding are given in Daly (2012) and Wilson (2014), amongst others.

¹⁹There is an obvious and interesting question here about what kind of priority is at issue, and how we are to track it. This is related to the more general question about the relation between the levels on the separatist view (see e.g. Wirling, 2020 for discussion). I do not have the space to address this question here.

For Raven, it seems like metaphysical explanation is primarily a subjectively constrained communicative act, where what determines the appropriateness of that act is something worldly (i.e. something at the level of what is represented). This seems like a view according to which *qua explanation*, the communicative act is prior to the relation that backs it.

Maurin (2019, p. 1578) says:

...if grounding is a mind-independently obtaining worldly relation, adopting separatism amounts to saying of explanation that it is not a mind-independently obtaining and worldly relation. Rather, explanation is mind-involving, pragmatic, and/or “epistemic”.

Like Raven, Maurin is explicit about that *qua explanation*, metaphysical explanation is mind-involving, pragmatic, and/or epistemic. This brings out a worry for the realist separatist: if one of the factors motivating separatism is the need to reconcile the seemingly epistemic character of explanation with the objectivity of the relation that explanations track, then *qua explanation* it's hard to see how the position ought to count as realist. When we are thinking about the salient features that make the relevant information or communicative act an explanation, it is essential that they have this broadly epistemic, pragmatic, or psychological character. This to me seems like a version of *antirealist* priority separatism.

The separatist might resist this, perhaps by insisting that it is a mistake to think that the representation or communicative aspect, level, or component of explanation takes priority. Trogdon (2018) gives a clear defence of hybrid separatism,²⁰ which on his view dictates that metaphysical explanations “accurately and informatively” represent portions of reality's objective structure (2018, p. 1296). This is a hybrid between the “ontic” and the “epistemic” aspects of explanation; it requires that the world be in a certain condition, and that the information about the condition the world is in be both accurate and informative, where the latter condition is presumably to be understood as a subject-relative notion. (If we offer an analysis of informativeness that could be understood in an objective spirit, the view could not plausibly be considered hybrid, because there would be no epistemic constraints on explanation.)²¹

More generally then, we can think of the hybrid separatist as somebody who holds that some relevant psychological or epistemic state (e.g. understanding; being appropriately informed) is produced in the right kind of way (i.e. by tracking some kind of objective dependence relation) by the world. The explanation thus fails either if the world is not in the condition the explanation-seeker takes it to be, or if the relevant state is not produced. This strikes me as the best option for the separatist who wants to be a realist; it gives an account of the role of an objective relation at the level of what is represented which plays a role as important as do the subjective constraints on the other levels of explanation. Clearly though, it concedes a lot to the antirealist. Since it is a requirement on explanation that it meet certain subjective constraints (i.e. that it be informative for a relevant subject, given the pragmatic, epistemic and psychological context), I think we should count the view as a moderate form of antirealism.²²

It's worth mentioning a recent objection to the kinds of moves I have made here. Skiles and Trogdon (2021) argue that we can reconcile the subjective character of explanation with the objectivity of what is represented *without* giving up on the objectivity of metaphysical explanation. Very briefly, the idea is that we can view the

²⁰The details of Trogdon's view need not concern us here, but roughly he thinks of metaphysical explanations as representations of grounding relations as being instances of grounding mechanisms (see 2018, p. 1296), where a grounding mechanism is a determination relation that holds between the constituents of grounding facts and the constituents of the facts that they ground (2018, p. 1290). These might include set formation, composition, the determinate-determinable relation, and so on.

²¹Trogdon (2018, pp. 1295–1296) says that it is explanation being an informative representation is characteristic of the epistemic view of explanation, and since there can be objective representations (e.g. propositions) it must be the informativeness constraint playing the key role.

²²I'll not quibble about the labels—perhaps some would prefer to call it a moderate version of realism. What matters is that metaphysical explanation is not objective and mind-independent.

subjective constraints on explanation as constraining either something's counting as an explanation, or counting as a good or successful explanation, or both. The antirealist thinks that subjective constraints constrain both, but Skiles and Trogdon argue that subjective constraints on something's counting as a good or successful explanation are compatible with realism about metaphysical explanation. I agree: it is a necessary condition on antirealism about explanation that something's counting as an explanation at all must be constrained by the relevant pragmatic, psychological and/or epistemic factors.

If, then, the realist can argue that it is only something's counting as a *good* explanation that is constrained in this way, then my attacks on the realist separatist fall short.²³ One might say that something's counting as an explanation is determined entirely by the condition that the world is in, for example, because an explanation is a proposition that accurately represents a portion of the world's objective structure (this would be a realist kind of non-priority separatism). The question for us is whether this kind of view can still account for the epistemic character of explanation (and thus help to motivate separatism in the first place). A proposition that accurately represents a portion of the world's objective structure but does so in an extremely complicated way will count as an explanation on this view, though it will fail to count as a good or successful one.

Skiles and Trogdon think that one counts as an explanatory realist so long as "explanation itself is thought to be fully objective" (2021, p. 4091). We can imagine the hybrid separatist when she mentions subjective constraints on explanation to be providing an account of good or successful explanation, but not on explanation itself. Skiles and Trogdon seem to think that the epistemic grip that we have on explanation (as a whole package) is on good or successful explanation. Presumably this is what explains why we think of explanation as related to understanding in the sense of "grasping", why we think of explanations as illuminating, and why we seek out explanations in order to improve our epistemic position. It also explains why we reject (purported) explanations if they are too complicated, we do not have the appropriate concepts, or we aren't interested in them (for example). If we can think of the subjective constraints on explanation as only constraining good or successful explanation, we are free to think of explanation itself as objective and mind independent.

One problem with this strategy is that it just is not clear *why* we should think that the relevant constraints are constraints on successful explanation rather than on something's counting as an explanation at all. Skiles and Trogdon (2021, p. 4092) say that the strategy is to start with a conception of what it is for something to count as an explanation and to

...revise it so that the subject condition doesn't figure into the nature of explanation but rather something else near at hand, and then point out that the resulting conception of explanation doesn't render explanation obscure.

It's hard to see though why it should be legitimate to revise our conception of explanation in this way. At least part of the motivation for separatism is the contention that there are subjective constraints on explanation, but on this revised conception it is only good or successful explanation (and not explanation *per se*) that is so constrained. This seems at least to weaken the motivation for separatism in the first place. But even if we do accept the revised conception of metaphysical explanation, the notion we are left with plausibly is one that leaves us epistemically impoverished when it comes to knowing whether or not something counts as an explanation. No longer can we judge whether something counts as an explanation based on whether it increases our understanding (and so on); all that tells us is that if it's an explanation, it's a good one. Our ability to judge whether something is an explanation is only as good as our ability to know whether we have accurately represented reality's objective structure, i.e. whether a particular grounding claim is true.²⁴

²³This is not the direction Skiles and Trogdon take their argument, but it is the most salient issue for our purposes.

²⁴One might object that a version of this worry holds anyway, because we have to know that the ontic condition on explanation is met. I think this is a serious concern, and it is part of what attracts me towards more thoroughly antirealist conceptions of explanation.

Setting these concerns aside, suppose we maintain that we can indeed reconcile the subjective character of explanation with its objective nature by maintaining that subjective constraints attach only to good or successful explanation. This implies that our concern all along has not been with explanation simpliciter, but with good or successful explanation. To isolate out the ontic component of good or objective explanation and insist that we be realists about explanation on this basis seems like exactly the sort of thing that the realist priority separatist would say, and my earlier objections to realist priority separatism apply; *qua explanation*, our concern seems not to be merely with the condition that the world is in, and that is what motivated the separatist in the first place.

7 | TENTATIVE UPSHOTS

My main aim here has been to map out the territory for the antirealist about metaphysical explanation, rather than to argue for the view (or for any particular iteration of the view). Nevertheless, I think we can draw some general conclusions. The first is that thinking of metaphysical explanations as operating on only one level requires either full-blown realism (such that there are no subjective constraints on explanation) or full-blown antirealism. Full-blown antirealism is not necessarily *unconstrained* by the way the world is. For example, one might think that a metaphysical explanation is a communicative act citing a portion of reality's objective structure. Since, however, this is a one-level view, the explanation does not fail if the explanation-giver makes a mistake about the structure-facts. One might hope that in general we do not make mistakes, and explanations will fail if (for example) they do not fit with other things we believe. Even so, I suspect that the strength of both the realist and the antirealist unionist and non-unionist positions might push many towards separatism.

I have argued that realist priority separatism is a position that is hard to maintain, because part of what motivates separatism is the idea that *qua explanation*, metaphysical explanations are subject to pragmatic, epistemic, and/or psychological constraints. The antirealist priority separatist recognises this, though there are questions I've not had the space to explore about exactly what the relevant sense of priority amounts to.²⁵ Perhaps the most attractive view to many will be hybrid separatism: the view according to which there are both ontic and subjective constraints on something's counting as a metaphysical explanation. Because of the ineliminable role of these subjective constraints on something's counting as an explanation, the hybrid separatist is a moderate kind of antirealist.

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²⁵One idea is that contributions from the level(s) about which we are antirealist “trump” those from the levels about which we are realist. For example, we can count as having a metaphysical explanation of something in terms of something else even if the world does not quite cooperate, but if the world is in a certain condition but we do not find a representation of it informative (etc.) then a purported metaphysical explanation fails.

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