Privilege in the Construction Industry

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The idea that the world is structured—that some things are "built" out of others—has been at the forefront of recent metaphysics. *Making Things Up* presents a comprehensive and distinctive view on these matters. It is a model of good philosophy: ambitious, insightful, open-minded, and guided by sound judgment. Don't be deceived by its conversational tone. The book contains riches on the surface and below; new layers are revealed with each reading.

The basic pieces are these. Bennett starts with a list of what she calls "building" relations. These include composition, constitution, set formation, realization, microbased determination, and grounding. Some examples:

> The handle and bowl *compose* the wok.

> Socrates and Aristotle *form the set* {Socrates, Aristotle}.

> P *grounds* PvQ.

Why call them *building* relations? Well, they all lend themselves to metaphors from the construction industry: the set is "constructed" from its members, the disjunct "gives rise" to the disjunction. "Building" nicely captures this family resemblance. But Bennett goes further and argues that these relations are similar in three specific respects. They are *directed*, meaning that they are antisymmetric and irreflexive. They are *necessitating*, meaning that builders necessitate what they build. And they are *generative*, meaning that builders "generate" or "produce" what they build.

Indeed, Bennett proposes that a relation is a *building* relation if and only if it has these three features. Quite rightly, Bennett presents this not as a conceptual analysis of "building" but a characterization of a theoretically useful resemblance class. She also rejects the idea that "there is a single privileged Building relation" (p. 22). All this is covered in Chapters 2 and 3, and the result is a pleasantly egalitarian picture: there are many building relations out there and they are all on a par, unified only insofar as they are directed, necessitating, and generative.

Here I'll focus on three questions concerning egalitarianism and privilege.

1. Generation as a builder

One immediate question is how generation fits into Bennett's picture. Bennett says that generation is an explanatory notion: to say that the handle and bowl generate the wok is to say that the wok exists *because* the handle and bowl exist; that the wok exists *in virtue of* the handle and bowl (see p. 58). When Bennett says that building relations are generative, she means that they license explanatory statements like these. Some call this kind of explanation "ground" (see Dasgupta 2017), but Bennett reserves that term for one of the building relations that license the explanations. Here I'll use the terms as Bennett does.

Whatever we call it, this explanatory idiom has the same flavor as the building relations we started with. When P explains Q in this sense, we happily say that P "gives rise to" Q, that Q "consists in" P, and so on. These construction-site metaphors are as at home here as they were before. If building relations are unified by family resemblance, shouldn't generation be one of them? Indeed, generation comes close to satisfying Bennett's own conditions for being a building relation: it's arguably directed and necessitating, and if it doesn't strictly *satisfy* the condition of being generative (is generation generative?) it *is* the relation of generation! I found it puzzling, then, that Bennett never calls generation a *building* relation—to me it seems right in the same ball-park as the others.[1]

This threatens the pure egalitarian picture we started with. On Bennett's own view, generation is privileged insofar as it characterizes the class of building relations. Sure, it's not that generation is *metaphysically prior* to other building relations—it's not that set-membership ontologically depends on generation. But generation is privileged insofar as *it* makes the other building relations count *as building relations*. If Bennett wants to use 'building' stipulatively in such a way we can't *call* generation a building relation, fine: all building relations (in that sense) are on a par. But that's egalitarianism in name only. The fact remains that a single building-*like* relation unifies the others under the banner of "building"; the others only get to count as being in the construction business thanks to *this* building(-like) relation. That's some privilege!

To be clear, this doesn't contradict anything Bennett says. When she rejects the idea that there is a single privileged Building relation on p. 22, she rightly notes that the idea is vague enough to be understood in a number of ways. And she explicitly focuses on one implementation of the idea she calls Generalism, the view that "there is a most general building relation *of which others are versions*" (p. 22; emphasis mine). I think Bennett is right to reject Generalism: set-formation and realization (say) aren't versions of some other building relation. Still, I claim we have, in Bennett's own system, *a sense* in which generation is the privileged Building(-like) relation.[2]

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[1]   Perhaps Bennett would resist calling it a *relation:* she emphasizes that to call (say) composition generative is just to say that it licenses explanatory *talk*. But I'm using "relation" in the thin, abundant sense. Take the set of pairs <P, Q> such that "P explains Q" is licensed—this corresponds to a relation in the thin sense. Indeed, one needn't assume that other building relations are relations in any thicker sense to count them as building relations.

[2]   To call generation privileged in this sense is close to calling it "intellectually primitive" in the sense of Dasgupta (2017): it limns logical space in interesting ways. After all, the class of building relations defined by generation is supposed to be theoretically useful and interesting. Since I used 'ground' as Bennett uses 'generation', the view that generation is privileged in this sense corresponds closely to my claim in (2017) that ground is intellectually primitive.

2. Carving at the joints

Another sense of being privileged is being *joint-carving*. Is generation joint-carving? To see the issue, note that we could define countless generation-*like* relations. There is a notion of generation-, which by stipulation is just like generation except that set-formation isn't generative-. A set is *generated* by, but not *generated-* by, its members; the existence of a set is explained, but not explained-, by its members. Likewise, generation+ is (by stipulation) just like generation except the relation *taller than* is also generative+: if x is taller than y, x generates+ y. And so on. Each notion yields a corresponding notion of building: set-formation is a building relation but not a building- relation; taller-than is a building+ relation but not a building relation.

The question is whether one of these generation-like notions is metaphysically distinguished. Bennett distinguishes two views:

> "On one extreme is the claim that some relations are truly generative, and some are not; it's just primitive. On the other extreme is the claim that there is no such relation, only the talk. It's just a matter of convention that certain relations license certain ways of talking..." pp. 184-5.

On the first view it's a primitive fact about one of the generation-like relations that *it* is special—it is "true generation". Call this "primitivism". By contrast, the second, "anti-realist", view is that all generation-like relations are metaphysically on a par. We organize our explanatory practices around one of them but that just reflects something about us—perhaps explanations in its sense of the term tend to please us. If another community focuses on a different relation, they aren't "getting anything wrong" about the world.

Officially, Bennett doesn't take a stand. But I think arguments she runs on another topic in the book can be transposed into arguments against primitivism. I'm thinking of Bennett's arguments in Chapter 6 that relative fundamentality isn't primitive (she analyzes it in terms of building). Let me highlight two of them.

The first is a modal recombination argument. If relative fundamentality were primitive, the facts about relative fundamentality and the building facts would be modally recombinable. There would be worlds that agree on the building facts—e.g. that Socrates builds {Socrates}—but disagree on whether Socrates is more fundamental than {Socrates}. Bennett thinks this is implausible.

The second argument is epistemic: if facts of relative fundamentality were entirely independent of facts about what builds what, we couldn't know the former. We might know that Socrates builds {Socrates}, but if relative fundamentality is a further, primitive matter, how could we infer whether Socrates is more fundamental than {Socrates}?

This is the barest of sketches—Bennett develops both arguments in detail, fleshing out the assumptions about modal recombination and knowledge they rest on. I won't evaluate them here; my point is just that analogous arguments would militate equally against primitivism about generation.

The first argument is that if it were a primitive fact which generation-like relation is "real generation", it would be modally recombinable. There would be worlds that agree on all relations of set-membership, composition, etc, and agree on what explanatory statements we find pleasing, and yet differ on whether generation or generation- is "real generation". In both worlds Socrates forms the set {Socrates} and we find it natural to say that the set exists because of its member. But in one world generation is "real

generation" and hence set-formation is a "real building" relation, while in the other world generation- is "real generation" and hence set formation *isn't* a "real building" relation. This multiplication of possibilities seems just as implausible as the one Bennett discusses.

The second argument is epistemic: if there were a primitive fact about which relation is "real generation", we couldn't know it. We couldn't know, on the basis of information about which things form which sets and which explanations we find pleasing, which of the two worlds described above is ours.

Again, I won't defend these arguments. My claim is just that *if* Bennett's arguments against primitivism about relative fundamentality succeed, I can't see where these arguments against primitivism about *generation* would fail. While Bennett claims neutrality on primitivism about generation, her commitments elsewhere in the book appear to point against it.

This is a good thing, in my opinion, for I believe anti-realism can be independently motivated by asking why we should *care* about which generation-like relation is "real generation" (see Dasgupta 2018). Here we must distinguish the *metaphysical claim* that some generation-like relation has a primitive property, from the *normative claim* that we should align our explanatory practices around the relation with that property. The former doesn't imply the latter: just because one generation-like relation has a primitive property, nothing follows about whether we should organize ourselves around it. You might say "But the relation with the primitive property is *real explanation*; and *obviously* we should care about explanations!" But that's playing fast and loose with language. If you want to reserve the term "real explanation" for a relation we should obviously care about, the question is why a relation with the primitive property deserves the title—*calling* it "real explanation" doesn't *make* it interest-worthy. Thus, my view is that even if one of the generation-like relations has a primitive property, that fact is normatively inert. It's still "up to us" how to organize our explanatory practices, just as the anti-realist said.

Putting this section together with the last, the emerging picture is this. Generation isn't privileged relative to other generation-like relations in the sense that it's no more joint-carving. Still, it's privileged relative to the other *building* relations in the sense that *it* defines what it *is* to be a building relation. While *Making Things Up* doesn't explicitly accept or reject this picture, I've argued that it contains materials pointing in this direction.

3. What generates building relations?

Yet another sense of being privileged is being fundamental. Given Bennett's understanding of fundamentality (see Chapter 5), this amounts to being unbuilt. Is building unbuilt? If *a* builds *b*, does anything build this? In Chapter 7 Bennett argues yes: *a*. This she calls "Upwards Anti-Primitivism". Her discussion focuses on the case of grounding, where her view is that if *a* grounds *b*, that fact is grounded in *a*.

Bennett originally proposed this view in (Bennett 2011). In (Dasgupta 2014) I defended an alternative view on which the fact that *a* grounds *b* is grounded in *a* along with a general, essential truth connecting *a* and *b*. Much of chapter 7 discusses our respective views. Reflecting on Bennett's discussion, I now think there is more to her view than I previously realized. However, I also suspect our disagreement is largely verbal. Here I'll explain why.

One potential source of confusion is that Bennett and I never meant the same thing by "ground". Bennett uses it to denote a relation that *licenses* generative explanations, while I used it to express those generative explanations themselves. Still, this is largely inconsequential: the following dialectic can be read on either disambiguation. If our dispute has a verbal element, it doesn't stem from this difference in usage.

Let me recap our original disagreement. Consider a simple example of grounds:

(D) [Snow is white] grounds [Snow is white or snow is black].[3]

What grounds (D)? Upwards Anti-Primitivism says: [Snow is white]. By contrast, my view was that a general fact about how disjunction works also helps make (D) true, for example that whether a disjunction holds is a function of whether its disjuncts hold (per its truth-table). Intuition pump: just as (D) wouldn't be true if snow weren't white, it also wouldn't be true if disjunction had a different truth-table (say, that of conjunction).[4]

I offered three considerations in favor of my view. First, when asking what makes (D) true one is (in part) asking why the disjunct grounds *the disjunction* and not, say, the corresponding conjunction. Surely the answer has to do with how disjunction works. Second, I noted that Bennett's view implies that

(N) [Snow is white] grounds [not-not Snow is white]

has the same ground as (D), namely [Snow is white]. Yet surely, I said, their grounds are different: (D) holds because of how disjunction works, (N) because of how negation works. Third, I said that my view better explains grounding patterns. For along with (D) we also have

(D*) [Grass is green] grounds [Grass is green or grass is red].

Why is it that *all* (true) disjuncts ground disjunctions? My view has a ready explanation: the general truth about disjunction makes any disjunct ground a disjunction it's part of.

I still find these considerations moving, but I now wonder whether they point in a different direction. My suspicions were aroused by Bennett's central intuition for her view:

> "Use '*x*' to pick out whatever it is that builds the fact that *a* fully builds *b*. Because *x* makes it the case that *a* builds *b*, it contributes to the building of *b*. Therefore *x* helps build *b* itself, not just the fact that *a* builds *b*. It follows that *x* is either identical or contained within… the complete building base of *b*" (p. 196).

Bennett admits that this is somewhat impressionistic, but it moves me nonetheless.[5] This leaves me in a bind: how can I reconcile Bennett's central intuition with the considerations I offered *against* her view that I find equally moving?

Perhaps inadvertently, Bennett provides a clue. Responding to my argument that (D) and (N) have different grounds, she says:

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[3]   Here I use the standard notation '[P]' to denote the fact that P.

[4]   This is just an intuition pump; counterfactuals like these don't *imply* conclusions about ground.

[5]   Bennett also argues that her view avoids a vicious regress of grounds. But that argument is aimed at a different opponent, not me; I argue that my view also avoids the regress in Dasgupta 2014, pp. 587-9.

> "I confess that I do not really understand why Dasgupta thinks that P alone fully grounds two different ground*ed* facts—PvQ and not-not-P—and yet cannot fully ground two different ground*ing* facts" (pp. 201-2).

On reflection, I confess that I don't really understand either! For Bennett, the lesson is that since P *can* ground the two ground*ed* facts it can also ground two different ground*ing* facts (D) and (N). But one might instead stick with my earlier hunch that P *can't* ground either ground*ing* fact on its own; that something about disjunction or negation is needed in each case. What Bennett's clue then suggests is that something about disjunction or negation must have helped ground the ground*ed* facts all along! Thus we might reject (D) and (N) in favor of

(D-complete) [Snow is white] *and the way disjunction works* ground [Snow is white or snow is black].
(N-complete) [Snow is white] *and the way negation works* ground [not-not Snow is white]

And we might say, with Bennett's Upwards Anti-Primitivism, that (D-complete) is grounded in [Snow is white] *and the way disjunction works*; similarly for (N-complete).

This view respects my arguments that the general truths play a role in grounding the ground*ing* facts, and in particular that in the case of negation and disjunction the ground*ing* facts have different grounds. But the view also satisfies Upwards Anti-Primitivism!

Distinguish *first-order* questions of what grounds (say) disjunctions, from the *second-order* question of what, in general, grounds the grounding facts. Upwards Anti-Primitivism answers the second-order question: if *a* grounds *b*, that fact is grounded in *a*. The view that P grounds PvQ answers the first-order question. My earlier arguments against Bennett, I now see, target this *package* of views; a package on which general facts about disjunction play no role in the first or second-order story. Call this an "exclusive" package. If my arguments showed anything, they showed only that the general fact must play a role in the second-order story. This leaves open the "mixed" package I defended in (2014), on which the general fact plays a role in the second-order but not the first-order story. But it also leaves open the "inclusive" package described in the last paragraph, on which the general fact plays a role in both stories. Thus, for all my earlier arguments show you can still accept Upwards Anti-Primitivism; all they show is that you must do so with an inclusive package.

Which package is correct? My earlier arguments point against the exclusive package; Bennett's central intuition points against the mixed package. Should we therefore accept the inclusive package?

Not *quite* yet. To complicate matters Bennett offers another objection to the mixed package which, if successful, would also rule out the inclusive package. The objection is that the general truths can't play their role in the mixed package because they are "temporally posterior" to their instances (see p. 208-10). To illustrate, suppose the fact that event *e* is a *conference* is grounded in the activities of its participants (call these C-activities). On the mixed package, this grounding fact is grounded (partly) in a general truth about what conferences are: they're the kind of thing you get when people do C-activities. Bennett's objection is that this general truth is temporally posterior to its instances in the sense that it didn't (non-trivially) obtain before there were conferences; hence it

couldn't help ground the grounding fact with regards the first conference. If that's right, the same would go against the inclusive package.

I'm not convinced. In Dasgupta (2014) I assumed the general truth was not a bare universal generalization like

(C1) For all x, if x is an event with C-activities then x is a conference.

but an essential truth like

(C2) It lies in the essence of being a conference that for all x, if x is an event with C-activities then x is a conference.[6]

While (C1) may be temporally posterior to its instances in Bennett's sense, (C2) is not. Consider Martian outposts. The analogues of (C1) and (C2) are

(M1) For all x, if x is a human settlement on Mars then x is a Martian outpost.
(M2) It lies in the essence of being a Martian outpost that if x is a human settlement on Mars then x is a Martian outpost.

There are no human settlements on Mars, yet these are both true.[7] Are they vacuously true? Perhaps (M1) is, but (M2) is not. If you substitute "x is a square circle" in for "x is a human settlement on Mars", (M1) arguably remains true but (M2) does not. It may be (vacuously) true that any square circle is a Martian outpost, but that's no part of what it is to be a Martian outpost.

So, is the inclusive package right after all? Maybe, but in fact I suspect the question is largely verbal. If the mixed package were correct, we could still define an expanded notion of ground* thus: if X grounds Y, what grounds* Y is X together with whatever grounds [X grounds Y]. To say what grounds* Y one fills out a statement of what grounds Y by adding what grounds the fact that they ground Y. The inclusive package is then true of ground*. Likewise, we could define a restricted notion of ground** on which to say what grounds** a grounding fact you needn't mention the general truth. The exclusive package is then true of ground**. Similarly, starting with the inclusive or exclusive packages we could define restricted or expanded notions for which the other packages are correct.

Is it determinate which notion is expressed by 'ground'? I doubt it. All notions are available precisifications of our first-order usage of the term; the arguments from Bennett and myself pointing in different directions simply tap into different notions. This is why I suspect our earlier disagreement was largely verbal.[8]

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6   Note that my focus on essential truths was just a working hypothesis. Conceptual truths might be another option. What's important is that the truth is autonomous; see (Dasgupta 2014), pp. 581.

7   Putting aside questions about the intelligibility of talk of essence, that is. The point is that if (M2) is false, that's not in virtue of the current absence of Martian outposts.

8   Bennett considers the possibility that our disagreement was verbal because I used 'ground' to mean epistemic explanation while she uses it to mean something more connected with metaphysical explanation (see p. 202). I'm not sure I get the distinction, but insofar as I do I intended to mean metaphysical explanation. So I don't think our disagreement is verbal on these grounds.

Moreover, the discussion in section 2 suggests that all the notions are metaphysically on a par. Neither is more joint-carving than the others, so we won't make an objective mistake by using one notion rather than another. If so, the important question is not which package is the One True View of ground, but which notion suits our needs on a given occasion.

Still, the central dialectic of my (2014) paper remains unaffected by these changes in heart. The question there was how doctrines like physicalism could be true if formulated as grounding theses, e.g. as the thesis that everything is grounded in physical truths. The problem was that general truths about (say) conferences like (C2) are ungrounded; hence on the mixed or inclusive packages we have ungrounded facts about conferences; hence physicalism couldn't possibly be true as a grounding thesis. My aim was to resolve the problem by showing that if the general truths are autonomous they fall outside the purview of doctrines like physicalism. Since the problem doesn't arise on the exclusive notion, I argued against the exclusive package to show that the problem was pressing. But my mistake, I now see, was to argue that the exclusive package is not the One True View of ground. Instead, I should have argued that the notion it's true of isn't appropriate for formulating doctrines like physicalism. And that seems right: it wouldn't count as physicalism in an interesting sense if everything were grounded in physical facts, but only on a restricted notion of "ground"! The appropriate notion of ground is, rather, one that verifies the mixed or inclusive packages, and either way there arises the problem of ungrounded general truths that my paper set out to resolve.

References

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