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Evidentialism, circularity, and grounding

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Abstract This paper explores what happens if we construe evidentialism as a thesis about the metaphysical grounds of justification. According to grounding evidentialism, facts about what a subject is justified in believing are grounded in facts about that subject's evidence. At first blush, grounding evidentialism appears to enjoy advantages over a more traditional construal of evidentialism as a piece of conceptual analysis. However, appearances are deceiving. I argue that grounding evidentialists are unable to provide a satisfactory story about what grounds the evidential facts, and that this provides good reason to reject grounding evidentialism.

Keywords Evidentialism · Grounding · Circularity · Justification · Evidence · Reliabilism

1 Introduction

In metaphysics these days, grounding is all the rage.[1] Emboldened by the idea that grounding plays a central role in metaphysical explanation, many metaphysicians have reformulated traditional positions in metaphysics as grounding claims. To give just one example, whereas physicalism used to be formulated as the claim that all

[1] Typically, grounding is taken to be a form of a metaphysical dependence corresponding to the "in virtue of" relation: a fact F_1 grounds a fact F_2 iff F_2 obtains in virtue of F_1. For recent work on grounding, see Fine (2001, 2012), Schaffer (2009, 2012), Rosen (2010), Raven (2012), Clark and Liggins (2012), (deRosset 2013), and Trogdon (2013a).

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facts supervene on the physical facts, it's increasingly common to define physicalism as the view that all non-physical facts are grounded in physical facts.[2]

For the most part, epistemologists haven't caught the grounding bug yet: positions about knowledge, justification, and the like are rarely formulated as grounding claims. The time seems ripe to explore what would happen if epistemologists followed the lead of metaphysicians, recasting their preferred positions as grounding theses.

This paper is intended as a contribution to this research program. In it, I focus on evidentialism. I begin (Sect. 2) by making a case for construing evidentialism as a grounding thesis (namely, that every fact about what you're justified in believing is grounded in facts about your evidence). I then explore the merits of this view.

At first blush, grounding evidentialism may seem to escape some of the objections that have been raised against evidentialism in the past. In particular, it seems well-poised to escape Goldman's "Circularity Challenge" (2011): the challenge of providing a non-circular analysis of the concept *evidence*. As I explain in Sect 3, Goldman's Circularity Challenge assumes that the evidentialist is offering a conceptual analysis of the concept *justification*. Since grounding evidentialists need not be seen as peddling conceptual analyses in the first place, they can simply reject this presupposition of Goldman's challenge.

However, in Sect. 4 I go on to argue that even if the grounding evidentialist can escape the letter of Goldman's Circularity Challenge, they face a closely-related challenge: the Evidential Grounding Challenge. The Evidential Grounding Challenge is the challenge of providing a non-circular explanation of what grounds the evidential facts: what grounds facts of the form, [S has e as evidence at t]? I go on to argue that grounding evidentialists lack a satisfactory answer to this question. In Sect. 5, I present an argument for the conclusion that all evidential facts are partially grounded in justificatory facts: whenever S has e as evidence, this fact is at least partially grounded in facts about what S is justified in believing. If this is right, then trouble is in store for grounding evidentialists: as I elaborate in Sect. 6, grounding evidentalists cannot adopt this position without denying certain extremely plausible assumptions about the grounding relation. After considering potential rejoinders to my argument (Sects. 7–9), I conclude (Sect. 10) by exploring how the Evidential Grounding Challenge also creates trouble for certain hybrids of evidentialism and reliabilism, such as Comesaña's (2010) evidentialist reliabilism.

2 Evidentialism as a grounding thesis

Typically, evidentialism is formulated in terms of necessary biconditionals. Here's a characteristic statement:

[2] See e.g. (Fine 2001), Rosen (2010), and Schaffer (2009).

> **(E)** [Necessarily,] S is justified in believing p at t iff S's evidence at t on balance supports p. (Conee and Feldman 2008, p. 83)[3,4]

However, there's reason to think that such biconditionals fall short of capturing the heart of evidentialism. After all, evidentialists typically take their view to offer an explanation of justification: justificatory facts are explained in terms of facts about a subject's evidence. Clearly, one could believe a biconditional like (E) is true, while denying that it provides an explanation of epistemic justification. Compare: the sentence "Necessarily, bachelors are unmarried iff water is H_2O" is true, but does not offer an explanation of bachelorhood. One could hold that (E) is similar: true but not explanatory.

A natural way to deal with this worry is to recast evidentialism as a grounding thesis. Call any fact about what S is justified in believing at a time a "J-Fact." Call any fact about what evidence S has at a time an "E-Fact." We can now formulate grounding evidentialism as follows:

> **Grounding Evidentialism:** Necessarily, all J-Facts are wholly grounded in E-Facts

Unlike (E), grounding evidentialism straightforwardly captures evidentialism's explanatory ambitions. After all, grounding relations are supposed to be explanatory: those who hold that the mental is grounded in the physical take the physical to explain the mental; those who hold that dispositional properties are grounded in categorical properties take categorical properties to explain dispositional properties, etc. Indeed, this is the whole point of enriching our metaphysical vocabulary with "grounding" talk: to believe in grounding simply is to believe in a distinctive form of metaphysical explanation.

I don't pretend that grounding evidentialism is the *only* formulation of evidentialism that captures evidentialism's explanatory goals. Another, more familiar option is to construe evidentialism as a piece of conceptual analysis. Call this view, "conceptual evidentialism." According to conceptual evidentialists, the concept *epistemic justification* is properly analyzed in terms of the concept *evidence*. Conceptual evidentialism still has explanatory ambitions, but it purports to provide an analytic explanation of a concept, rather than a metaphysical explanation of a class of facts.

So grounding evidentialism is not the only genuinely explanatory form of evidentialism in town. But it does offer an attractive alternative to conceptual evidentialism—one that will be particularly appealing to those who have grown disillusioned with the project of conceptual analysis. What's more, it's a form of evidentialism that fits particularly well with some of the remarks made by Conee and Feldman. While, as we've seen, Conee and Feldman officially formulate

[3] For the purposes of this paper, I'll follow Conee and Feldman in taking sentences of the form, "S is justified in believing p" to ascribe propositional rather than doxastic justification. However, I'll remain noncommittal on how exactly to understand the relation between the two.

[4] Other epistemologists formulate evidentialism differently; however, many alternative statements of evidentialism also take the form of necessary biconditionals. For instance, Fantl and McGrath (2002) and Weatherson (2005) characterize evidentialism as the view that, for any two subjects S and S′, necessarily, if S and S′ have the same evidence for/against p, then S is justified in believing that p iff S′ is, too.

evidentialism in terms of biconditionals, many of their informal glosses are redolent of "grounding" ideology: they talk about justification being "determined by the quality of the believer's evidence" (2004, p. 83); they also describe evidentialism as "the view that epistemic justification is a product of evidence." (Ibid) A natural way of interpreting this "determination" and "production" talk is in terms of grounding.[5]

3 The circularity challenge

Here's a succinct formulation of Goldman's Circularity Challenge for evidentialism:

> **The Circularity Challenge:** Evidentialists owe us an account of the concept *evidence* as it figures in their analysis of the concept *justification*. If the concept *evidence* can only be analyzed in terms of justification, their analysis will be circular. (paraphrased from Goldman 2011, p. 394)

Goldman goes on to mention various accounts of evidence that have figured prominently in epistemology—accounts that, if adopted by evidentialists, would vindicate the charge of circularity.[6] According to one conception, evidence is simply defined as that which justifies belief (Kelly 2006, Kim 1988, pp. 290–291). Goldman points out that if evidentialists accepted this account, the resulting analysis of justification will obviously be circular.

According to another conception, one's evidence consists in those propositions one knows (E = K). Goldman contends that if evidentialists both (i) analyze *evidence* in terms of the concept *knowledge*,[7] (ii) hold that the concept *knowledge* is only analyzable in terms of the concept *justification*,[8] they will once again be saddled with a circular analysis.

Goldman suggests that the best way to escape from the Circularity Challenge is to analyze *evidence* in terms of reliable indication. On this view, x is evidence for p iff x is a reliable indicator of the truth of p. As Goldman points out, this would

[5] Other authors also talk of "determination" when characterizing evidentialism. See, for instance, Ganson's characterization of evidentialism as "the view that facts about whether or not an agent is justified in having a particular belief are entirely determined by facts about an agent's evidence." (2008, p. 441).

[6] Goldman relies here on Kelly 2006 overview of various conceptions of evidence.

[7] It's worth noting that the primary defender of E = K denies that the equation needs to be understood as a conceptual analysis. (Williamson 2000, p. 186).

[8] Of course, evidentialists might follow Williamson in denying that the concept *knowledge* is analyzable at all, let alone analyzable in terms of the concept *justification*. In a footnote, Goldman contends that "A commitment to defining 'knowledge' in terms of 'justification' is clear at least for Feldman, who writes: 'knowledge requires justified true belief that does not essentially depend upon a falsehood.' (Feldman 2003, p. 37)" (Goldman 2011, p. 394). However, I don't think that this quotation—taken by itself—warrants Goldman's attribution to Feldman of the position that "knowledge" is only definable in terms of "justification." After all, one could hold that "knowledge" is undefinable, but that we can nonetheless formulate at least some necessary conditions for knowledge—conditions that include truth and justification. (Indeed, this is probably Williamson's view on the matter).

enable evidentialists to avoid the threat of circularity. Going this route, however, would involve taking significant strides towards a rapprochement between evidentialism and reliabilism—two approaches towards justification that, at least historically, have been viewed as rivals.

How should evidentialists respond to Goldman's Circularity Challenge? Conceptual evidentialists have a number of options. They could give an alternative analysis of *evidence*—one that doesn't appeal to reliability; they could eschew the demand for an analysis of *evidence*, taking it as a primitive term; or they could embrace a circular analysis. But grounding evidentialists have an easier way out: they can simply reject Goldman's assumption that they are offering a conceptual analysis in the first place.

It's not clear to me which of these options Conee and Feldman are inclined to adopt. In their reply to Goldman (Conee and Feldman 2011), they are very clear about one thing: namely, their repudiation of Goldman's suggestion that evidence should be understood in terms of reliable indication. (2011, p. 464) They go on to claim that "the concept of evidence [they] intend is perhaps the commonest ordinary one" (2011, p. 463) and proceed to offer several dictionary definitions that putatively capture "just what [they] have in mind"—definitions such as "an indication, mark, sign" (OED) and "something, esp, a fact, that gives proof or a reason for believing" (Longman Dict of the Eng Lang 1991). However, they never specify whether they think these definitions provide an analysis of the concept *evidence*.[9]

Conee and Feldman exegesis aside, this much seems clear: evidentialists have a number of potential routes for escaping Goldman's challenge. In particular, grounding evidentialists can simply reject its underlying presupposition.

4 The evidential grounding challenge

While grounding evidentialists can escape the letter of Goldman's Circularity Challenge, its spirit proves harder to dodge. In this section, I articulate a closely related challenge to grounding evidentialism—one that does not assume that evidentialists are engaged in conceptual analysis. In the following sections, I present an argument for the conclusion that this challenge cannot be met while maintaining grounding evidentialism.

[9] Conee and Feldman's reply to Goldman strikes me as puzzling for a couple of reasons. First, not all of their definitions are equivalent. Hence it's not clear whether Conee and Feldman think that something is evidence iff it satisfies all of these definitions, or if they think a sufficient condition for something to be evidence is for it to satisfy one of these definitions. Second, some of their definitions (e.g. "an indication, mark, sign") seem closely akin to Goldman's proposal that we analyze evidence in terms of reliable indication—a proposal that they explicitly reject. (Perhaps the difference lies in the fact that the definitions they provide only mention indication, not *reliable* indication. However, it's not at all obvious to me that an entity e can be an indication of a truth t without being a reliable indication of t.) In light of these perplexing features, I won't commit myself to any particular interpretation of Conee and Feldman's response.

It seems extremely plausible that E-facts are not brute facts. Even if the concept *evidence* is unanalyzable, it's very natural to hold that E-facts obtain in virtue of more fundamental facts. Given this assumption, we can pose the following question:

> **Evidential Grounding Question (EGQ):** What grounds the E-facts? When a person has *e* as evidence, what are the underlying facts that make this the case?

Before advocating any particular answer to EGQ, it makes sense to consider what would make for a satisfying answer. The following strikes me as a plausible desideratum:

> **First Desideratum on an Answer to EGQ:** The answer to the EGQ should be able to accommodate and explain (i) our intuitions about the E-facts (i.e. our intuitions about when a person has *e* as evidence), (ii) the functions that the concept *evidence* serve in our ordinary practice.

One way to motivate this desideratum is by considering a crazed epistemologist who insists that all E-fact are grounded in desires: whenever S has *e* as evidence, this fact is wholly grounded in the fact that S desires *e*. The natural response is to scoff at this suggestion. But why, exactly, does the proposal merit such derision? If pressed to justify our response, it seems two lines of justification would be natural. The first would be to appeal to our intuitions about evidence possession: there are lots of cases where, intuitively, S desires *e*, but S doesn't have *e* as evidence, and vice versa. The second would be to appeal to the role that the concept *evidence* serves in our ordinary practice: we use evidence to support beliefs and rule out various hypotheses, and desires seem ill-suited to play these roles.

We can motivate a second desideratum by considering another hypothetical answer to EGQ: "I'll tell you what grounds the E-facts: certain physical facts!" This response is by no means crazy; indeed, it's almost certainly true. Yet I think most people will regard this answer as less than satisfying. What's the source of this dissatisfaction?

One reason this answer is frustrating is that it's uninformative. Whenever S has *e* as evidence at *t*, this will presumably be grounded in some physical facts that obtain at *t*; but the vast majority of the physical facts that obtain at *t* won't be explanatorily relevant, and hence won't ground the fact that S has *e* as evidence at *t*. The proposed answer to EGQ doesn't tell us *which* physical facts serve as the grounds for E-facts.

This motivates the following desideratum:

> **Second Desideratum on an Answer to EGQ:** The answer to EGQ should take the following form: "Whenever a subject S has *e* as evidence, the fact that S has *e* as evidence is grounded in facts $G_1 \ldots G_n$", where each of $G_1 \ldots G_n$ is a partial or complete explanation of the fact that S has *e* as evidence.

Are there any further desiderata on an answer to EGQ? Consider yet another hypothetical epistemologist. This one insists that there's no general, systematic answer to EGQ. On this view, sometimes when S has *e* as evidence, this fact is grounded in the fact that S sees that *e* is true; sometimes when S has *e* as evidence,

this fact is grounded in the fact that S believes *e* with certainty; sometimes when S has *e* as evidence, this fact is grounded in the fact that S remembers *e*, etc. But, our hypothetical epistemologist insists, there's no further story to be told: there's no systematic account about what all of these cases have in common.

I think many would balk at this suggestion. It's natural to think that there's something that unites the E-facts, and it's natural to hope that an answer to EGQ will capture this.[10] We can articulate this hope as follows:

> **Third Desideratum on an Answer to EGQ:** There should be some fairly general, non-disjunctive, high-level answer to EGQ. This answer should say something illuminating about the relation between the grounds for one E-fact and the grounds for another.

Of course, for all I've said, it may turn out that our third hypothetical epistemologist is right: it may turn out that there is nothing systematic and informative to say about what the grounds for the various E-facts have in common; our third desideratum may turn out to be a fool's dream. However, if there is a theory that satisfies the third desideratum, this will be a mark in its favor: *ceteris paribus*, such a theory is preferable to a theory that does not provide any unified, systematic account of what grounds the E-facts.

The Evidential Grounding Challenge is the challenge of providing an answer to EGQ that satisfies these three desiderata. In what follows, I argue that the most plausible way of meeting the Evidential Grounding Challenge involves abandoning grounding evidentialism. My argument proceeds in two stages. In the first stage (developed in Sect. 5), I argue that the most plausible ways of meeting the Evidential Grounding Challenge entail the following thesis:

> **Justificatory Fundamentality:** All E-facts are partially or wholly grounded in J-facts.[11]

In the second stage of the argument (developed in Sect. 6), I argue that this thesis, together with certain plausible assumptions about the grounding relation, entails the falsity of grounding evidentialism.

[10] In a similar vein, Weatherson considers the possibility that the concept *evidence* can only be spelled out in a "massively disjunctive" clause of the form: "*p* is part of our evidence iff we see that *p* or hear that *p* or smell that *p*, or, etc." (2009, p. 7) Weatherson complains that such an account would be "unfortunate", since (i) it would possess the ugliness of all disjunctive theories, (ii) it would be hard to tell where, exactly, to stop the list of disjuncts. I'm sympathetic to Weatherson's complaints; indeed, I think they apply not just to any disjunctive conceptual analysis of evidence, but also to any disjunctive answer to EGQ.

(Of course, there's probably a level at which the ultimate grounds for E-facts are highly disjunctive. If all the fundamental facts concern physical fields, forces, and particles, this will almost certainly be the case. But we need not deny this to resist our hypothetical epistemologist's suggestion; we need only insist that there's another level at which there's a non-disjunctive answer to EGQ).

[11] In other words, whenever it's a fact that S has *e* as evidence, this fact is partially or wholly grounded in facts of the form: [S is (propositionally) justified in believing *p*].

5 The argument for justificatory fundamentality

One complication that immediately arises for any attempt to answer EGQ is that people appear to ascribe evidentiary status to both propositions (e.g. "The fact that the butler's DNA was at the crime scene is evidence of his guilt") and non-propositional entities (e.g. "Don't touch that knife; it's evidence!"). To deal with this complication, we can divide EGQ into two questions:

> **Propositional Evidential Grounding Question:** When S has some proposition p as evidence, what grounds this fact?
>
> **Non-Propositional Evidential Grounding Question:** When S has some non-propositional entity e as evidence, what grounds this fact?

I begin by addressing the Propositional Evidential Grounding Question, after which I turn to the Non-Propositional Evidential Grounding Question.

5.1 The propositional evidential grounding question

Intuitively, many propositions that we know are part of our evidence. Suppose Janet sees a vulture circling overhead while hiking through Desolate Canyon. That evening, Janet converses with her friend Tom, who contends that scavenging birds never frequent Desolate Canyon. Janet disputes this claim; when asked for evidence, she cites the fact that a vulture circled overhead during her hike through the canyon. This seems perfectly natural: intuitively, Tom's claim is inconsistent with her evidence; furthermore, it seems that the most plausible explanation for this intuition is that Janet's evidence includes the proposition that a vulture was circling overhead during her hike through the canyon.

An example adapted from Williamson (2000, pp. 200–201) furnishes further intuitive support for the idea that known propositions are often part of our evidence. Horatio sees a red ball drawn from an urn. Consider the false hypothesis h: the draw was black. It's natural to say that h is ruled out by Horatio's evidence. This strongly suggests that Horatio's evidence includes the proposition that the draw was red: Horatio's evidence rules out h precisely because it contains a proposition that entails the falsity of h.

Examples such as the foregoing are easy to come by, and can be multiplied indefinitely. Are there any cases where S fails to know that p, but p is nonetheless part of S's evidence? This is controversial; for the purposes of this paper, I wish to remain noncommittal on this issue.[12] However this much does seem clear: in cases where S isn't justified in believing p, S does not, intuitively, have p as evidence. Suppose that, through a process of wishful thinking, Tina comes to believe her son will become a famous novelist. Intuitively, even if her belief turns out to be true, she doesn't have the proposition that her son will become a famous novelist as evidence.

[12] Williamson denies there are any such cases (Williamson 2000, p. chp.9); Maher (1996) and Hyman (2006) seem to agree. For dissent, see Goldman (2009), Littlejohn (2011), and Arnold (2013).

Not only does it seem counterintuitive to claim that S has p as evidence in cases where S isn't justified in believing p, it's also hard to see how evidence could play one of its central roles if such cases were possible. Even if we balk at the suggestion that evidence should simply be defined as "that which justifies belief", it seems extremely plausible that one of the central functions of propositional evidence is to justify the formation of further beliefs.[13] Call this feature of propositional evidence its "justificatory role." Here's one way of cashing out this idea:

> **Justificatory Role:** If S has p as evidence, and S competently infers q from p, then (typically) S will be justified in believing q.

If a person's evidence sometimes included propositions that she wasn't justified in believing, it's hard to see how evidence could play its justificatory role. After all, if (i) S unjustifiably believes p, (ii) p entails q, (iii) S infers q from p, we would not typically regard S's resulting belief in q as justified.

Could one reject Justificatory Role? It would be absurd to insist that we are *never* justified in inferring propositions from our evidence: such a position leads to skepticism. However, one might try to insist that only an epistemically privileged subset of our evidence justifies us in forming further beliefs. Someone who adopts this position might replace Justificatory Role with the following thesis:

> **Justificatory Role*:** If p is part of S's *justified* evidence, and S competently infers q from p, then (typically) S will be justified in believing q.[14]

But it's hard to see what would motivate this replacement. Typically, if we know that someone's total evidence entails $\sim h$, we would regard that person as justified in rejecting h and inferring $\sim h$; we wouldn't first ask whether some privileged subset of their evidence—the justified evidence—entails $\sim h$. For instance, if I read in *The New York Times* that a certain hypothesis (h) about the evolution of theropods is inconsistent with the paleontological community's evidence, whereas an alternative hypothesis is supported by all of their evidence, I'd naturally assume that paleontologists would reject h, and be justified in doing so; I wouldn't suspend judgment until I found out whether h conflicted with the paleontologists' *justified* evidence. This suggests that Justificatory Role, rather than Justificatory Role*, best captures the role that evidence plays in justifying the formation of further beliefs.[15]

[13] See Williamson (2000, p. chp.9) and Kelly (2006) for development of the idea that one important role of evidence is to justify the formation of further beliefs. (Note that this is compatible with the view that often when we come to know (and hence justifiably believe) p, we don't do so on the basis of any evidence that's independent of our knowledge that p. On this point, see e.g. Williamson 2005, 2009).

[14] Schroeder (2011) endorses a "low bar" picture of evidence, according to which S can have p as evidence even if p isn't propositionally justified for S. In such cases p will be *defeated* evidence; on Schroeder's view, if p is part of S's defeated evidence, it won't justify S in believing p's consequences. Thus Schroeder would endorse Justificatory Role* rather than Justificatory Role.

[15] What's more, if p could be part of S's evidence even though S isn't justified in believing p, we'd expect that there would be lots of cases where we could truly say, "Of course, Fred's evidence entails that q is true; nonetheless, Fred has no good reason to believe q." But such sentences sound (to my ears at least) like contradictions; at the very least I think we'd raise an eyebrow at any such utterance.

To take stock thus far, consideration of (i) intuitions about when a person has some proposition as evidence, (ii) one of the central roles that evidence plays, provides strong support for the following theses:

T1: Frequently, when S knows p, S has p as evidence.
T2: If S isn't justified in believing p, S doesn't have p as evidence.

Given our first desideratum, a proposed answer to the Propositional Evidential Grounding Question ought to be able to accommodate and explain both T1 and T2.

What answer to the Propositional Evidential Grounding Question can satisfy this desideratum? The following proposal strikes me as promising:

> **Further Epistemic Grounding:** Whenever S has some proposition p as evidence, this fact is wholly grounded in the fact that S stands in some further epistemic relation R to p. Perhaps the relation is one of *knowing*.[16] Perhaps the relation is something weaker, such as *justifiably believing*. But at the very least, in order for S to stand in R to p, S must be justified in believing p.[17]

Further Epistemic Grounding explains T1 and T2. Here's how it explains T1: the reason why S's knowledge frequently counts as part of S's evidence is that a sufficient condition for S to have p as evidence is for S to stand in some further epistemic relation R to p (where R is *knowing* or *justifiably believing*, etc.). The explanation for T2 runs as follows: in order for S to have p as evidence, this fact would need to be grounded in the further fact that S stands in R to p. Since R requires that S is justified in believing p, there are no cases where S has p as evidence yet S isn't justified in believing p.

So it seems that Further Epistemic Grounding satisfies our first desideratum. Next consider the second desideratum. Regardless of whether R is *knowing* or *justifiably believing*, there seems to be a plausible explanatory connection between the fact that S stands in R to p and the fact that S has p as evidence. Suppose we want to know in virtue of what Jane has the proposition <A vulture circled overhead during this morning's hike> as part of her evidence. Being told that Jane knows this proposition (or is justified in believing it) seems to provide an explanatorily informative answer.

On to the third desideratum. It seems clear that Further Epistemic Grounding provides a systematic and unified answer to the propositional Evidential Grounding Question. According to Further Epistemic Grounding, whenever a subject has a proposition p as evidence, this fact is grounded in the fact that S bears R to p. Further Epistemic Grounding does *not* say that sometimes the fact that S has p as evidence is grounded in the fact that S bears a particular relation R_1 to p, and other

[16] For a defense of the view that evidence is knowledge, see Williamson (2000, p. chp.9). (As far as I can tell, Williamson never takes a stand on whether facts about evidence are grounded in facts about knowledge).

[17] Since Further Epistemic Grounding is noncommittal on exactly what R is, Further Epistemic Grounding is best viewed as a family of answers to the Propositional Evidential Grounding Question. In what follows, I argue for the disjunction of the instances of Further Epistemic Grounding, rather than for any particular instance.

times it's grounded in the fact that S bears relation R_2 to p, and other times… etc. Further Epistemic Grounding thus avoids offering the sort of frustratingly disjunctive answer to the Propositional Evidential Grounding Question that motivated our third desideratum.

So Further Epistemic Grounding satisfies all of our desiderata on an answer to the Propositional Evidential Grounding Question. I take it that this is a strong consideration in its favor.[18] I now show that there's a straightforward argument from Further Epistemic Grounding (together with certain plausible auxiliary assumptions) to the conclusion that all propositional E-facts are at least partially grounded in J-facts.

Suppose that the epistemic relation R cited in Further Epistemic Grounding simply is the relation *being justified in believing*. Then the argument is trivial: whenever S has p as evidence, the fact that S has p as evidence is wholly grounded the fact that S is justified in believing p. What if R is a stronger relation, such as *knowing*? The following principle strikes me as extremely plausible:

> **Knowledge is Partially Grounded in Justification:** If S knows p, then the fact that S knows p is partially grounded in the fact that S is justified in believing p.[19]

The basic intuition is that when S knows p, S's being justified in believing p is part of what makes it the case that S knows p.[20] Since partial grounding is a transitive relation,[21] whenever S has p as evidence, this fact will be partially grounded in the fact that S is justified in believing p.

[18] Of course, I haven't shown it's the *only* answer to the Propositional Evidential Grounding Question that satisfies our three desiderata. In Sect. 7, I'll consider various rival answers that may appeal to evidentialists and argue that none of them constitutes a promising alternative.

[19] This is, of course, compatible with the view that the concept *knowledge* is unanalyzable.

[20] Consider: I know that Kerala is in India. Intuitively, this fact is partially explained by the fact that I'm justified in believing Kerala is in India. What's more, the explanation in question seems to be metaphysical (rather than, say, causal)—exactly the sort of explanation that grounding is supposed to provide.

[21] Certainly, reflection on individual cases makes the assumption that partial grounding is transitive look eminently plausible. The fact that Moore knows <Here's a hand, and here is another> is partially grounded in the fact that he knows <Here's a hand>; this fact, in turn, is partially grounded in the fact, [Here's a hand]. And, intuitively, the fact Moore knows <Here's a hand, and here is another> is partially grounded in the fact, [Here's a hand]. In light of cases like this, the assumption that partial grounding is transitive has won widespread support among metaphysicians; see Schaffer (2009), Rosen (2010), Fine (2010, 2012), and Whitcomb (2012).

However, it should be noted that there are some voices of dissent: recently, Schaffer has revised his view on this front, offering putative counterexamples to the transitivity of partial grounding (2012). A full assessment of Schaffer's alleged counterexamples is outside the scope of this paper; suffice to say that even if Schaffer's counterexamples are successful, it's far from clear that this would necessitate abandoning Knowledge is Partially Grounded in Justification. (Even if there are some cases where fact F_1 is partially grounded in fact F_2, which is in turn partially grounded in fact F_3, even though F_1 isn't partially grounded in F_3, this wouldn't, by itself, show that there are any cases where [S has p as evidence] is partially grounded in [S knows p], and [S knows p] is partially grounded in [S is justified in believing p], but [S knows p] isn't partially grounded in [S is justified in believing p]).

So it seems we have a plausible argument from Further Epistemic Grounding to the conclusion that whenever S has p as evidence, that fact is at least partially grounded in the fact that S is justified in believing p. If all evidence consists in propositions,[22] then we can move immediately from this conclusion to Justificatory Fundamentality (the thesis that all E-facts are partially grounded in J-facts). However, the thesis that all evidence consists in propositions is admittedly controversial, and—as noted earlier—it appears to conflict with our ordinary habits of ascribing evidentiary status to non-propositional entities (e.g. bloody knives, signed confessions, phenomenal states, etc.) Someone who rejects this assumption might grant that facts about whether S has some proposition p as evidence are (at least partially) grounded in J-facts, while denying that facts about whether S has some non-propositional entity e as evidence are grounded in J-facts.

However, someone who takes such a view still faces the Non-Propositional Evidential Grounding Question: when S has some non-propositional entity e as evidence, what grounds this fact? In what follows, I argue that the same sort of considerations that spoke in favor of the view that all propositional E-facts are grounded in J-facts also speak in favor of the view that all non-propositional E-facts (if any there be) are grounded in J-facts.

5.2 The non-propositional evidential grounding question

In all of the cases where it's natural to claim that S's evidence includes some non-propositional entity e, S knows (or is at least justified in believing) various propositions about e.[23] Suppose a lawyer submits a signed confession as evidence. When she does so, she knows a multitude of propositions about the confession. At the very least, she knows the singular proposition: <that particular document exists>; in most cases she'll also know: <that document is a confession>, <that document is signed by the defendant> , etc. Similarly, suppose a person cites his abdominal pain as evidence that he has food poisoning. Presumably, he knows that he's in pain; he'll also typically know a number of further propositions about its nature and intensity.

Furthermore, items of non-propositional evidence seem to play a "justificatory role" in much the manner of their propositional counterparts. Whenever it seems natural to describe S as having a non-propositional entity e as evidence, it's also natural to think that S can potentially use e as a basis for making inferences, and that e can, in some sense, justify S in doing so. For example, the lawyer who submits a signed confession as evidence can use this confession as a rational basis for drawing various conjectures about the defendant.

These observations lend plausibility to the following view:

> **Further Epistemic Grounding*:** If S has a non-propositional entity e as evidence, the fact that S has e as evidence is wholly grounded in the fact that S

[22] For defense of the thesis that all evidence is propositional, see Williamson (2000, pp. 194–200) and Neta (2008).

[23] See Williamson (2000, p. 195) for a similar observation.

> stands in some epistemic relation *R* to various propositions concerning *e*. As before, *R* might be *knowing,* or it might be something weaker. But at the very least, in order for S to stand in *R* to *p*, S must be justified in believing *p*.

Further Epistemic Grounding* bears a satisfying similarity to Further Epistemic Grounding. It also appears to meet our three desiderata on an answer to the Non-Propositional Evidential Grounding Question. Start with the first desideratum. It seems clear that Further Epistemic Grounding* accommodates and explains our intuitions concerning when a person has some non-propositional entity *e* as evidence. (The lawyer has the confession as evidence because she knows many propositions about it; similar remarks apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to the person with stomach pains.) Further Epistemic Grounding* also provides a straightforward account of how non-propositional entities manage to play their justificatory role. The explanation runs as follows: whenever S has a non-propositional entity *e* as evidence, S stands in *R* to many propositions concerning *e*. Typically, S is justified in using these propositions as a basis for drawing further conclusions (since typically when a person is justified in believing propositions $p_1 \ldots p_n$, and $p_1 \ldots p_n$ entail or probabilify a conclusion *c*, S is *prima facie* justified in inferring *c* from $p_1 \ldots p_n$). In the case of the lawyer, for instance, the reason the confession makes it rational for the lawyer to infer a conclusion such as <the defendant committed the crime> is that the lawyer knows various propositions about the confession that, taken together, render the conclusion highly probable.

It also seems that Further Epistemic Grounding* satisfies our other desiderata in much the same manner as Further Epistemic Grounding did. Plausibly, the fact that the lawyer knows (or is justified in believing) various propositions about the signed confession helps explain why she has the signed confession as evidence. What's more, Further Epistemic Grounding* grounds facts about when S has a non-propositional entity *e* as evidence in facts about when S bears a single relation *R* to various propositions about *e*; like its cousin Further Epistemic Grounding, it avoids grounding different E-facts in different relations.

If Further Epistemic Grounding* is correct, then we have a straightforward argument for the conclusion that non-propositional E-facts are partially grounded in J-facts. If the relation *R* cited in Further Epistemic Grounding* is the relation *being justified in believing*, then the argument is trivial: Further Epistemic Grounding* directly entails this conclusion. Let us suppose then that *R* is something stronger, such as *knowing*. We've already seen that the following two principles are extremely attractive: (i) knowledge is partially grounded in justification, (ii) partial grounding is transitive. These two premises, together with Further Epistemic Grounding*, entail that facts about what non-propositional entities S has as evidence are partially grounded in J-facts.

To recap, the most attractive answer to the Propositional Evidential Grounding Question (namely, Further Epistemic Grounding), together with a couple of plausible principles, led to the conclusion that all facts about when S has some proposition *p* as evidence are partially grounded in J-facts. Similarly, the most attractive answer to the Non-Propositional Evidential Grounding Question (namely,

Further Epistemic Grounding*), together with the same plausible principles, led to the result that all facts about when S has non-propositional entity *e* as evidence are partially grounded in J-facts. Combining these two results, we arrive at Justificatory Fundamentality: the thesis that all E-facts are partially grounded in J-facts.

6 From justificatory fundamentality to the falsity of grounding evidentialism

Once we accept Justificatory Fundamentality, the argument for the falsity of grounding evidentialism is straightforward. Consider some arbitrary fact of the form: [S is justified in believing *p*]. Call this fact F_1. According to grounding evidentialism, F_1 is grounded in various E-facts, F_2–F_n. But if Justificatory Fundamentality is true, then each of these E-facts is partially grounded in some J-fact. Since partial grounding is an asymmetric relation,[24] F_2–F_n cannot be partially grounded in F_1; instead, they must be grounded in further facts about what S is justified in believing.

Could this go on and on *ad infinitum*, with these further J-facts being grounded in still further E-facts, which in turn are partially grounded in yet still further J-facts, etc.? Such a scenario seems deeply counterintuitive, and it's hard to see what could possibly motivate us to regard it as a genuine possibility. Indeed, it seems that a great deal of work in various epistemological traditions—internalist and externalist, evidentialist and reliabilist—has been motivated by the conviction that epistemic facts ultimately obtain in virtue of non-epistemic facts: epistemic facts do not float free from the rest of the natural order. Assuming that we are entitled to rely upon this conviction, it seems we can safely dismiss the possibility that some E-facts are grounded in infinite chains of further epistemic facts, none of which is grounded in non-epistemic facts.

If this is right, then the grounds for F_1 must include a class of J-facts that aren't grounded in any E-facts. But then grounding evidentialism is false, since grounding evidentialism insists that all J-facts are grounded in E-facts.

7 Rivals answers to EGQ

My argument for the falsity of grounding evidentialism relied crucially on the following assumptions: (i) the best answer to the Propositional Evidential Grounding Question is Further Epistemic Grounding, (ii) if there are genuine instances of non-propositional evidence, then the best answer to the Non-Propositional Evidential Grounding Question is Further Epistemic Grounding*. In Sect. 5, I provided the main argument for these assumptions: namely, that these two answers satisfied our three desiderata on an answer to EGQ. But, of course, I didn't

[24] As I'm using the phrase, a relation is asymmetric iff it's antisymmetric and irreflexive. So if fact F_1 is partially grounded in fact F_2, then it's not the case that fact F_2 is partially grounded in fact F_1. For a defense of the claim that partial grounding is asymmetric, see Rosen (2010, p. 116).

show that they were the *only* answers that satisfied our three desiderata. At this point, grounding evidentialists may well have grown exasperated. "I grant that *if* we accept Further Epistemic Grounding and Further Epistemic Grounding*, we'll find ourselves in a pretty pickle," the grounding evidentialist may reply. "But this just shows that we should reject these proposals. We should instead adopt an alternative answer to EGQ that satisfies the three desiderata—an alternative answer that does not lead to Justificatory Fundamentality."

This is all well and good, but what's the alternative answer to EGQ? In this section, I consider some proposals are likely to be particularly appealing to traditional evidentialists. (For the sake of simplicity, I focus on evidentialist answers to the Propositional Evidential Grounding Question, but all my remarks can easily be extended to the corresponding answers to the Non-Propositional Evidential Grounding Question.) I argue that none provides the grounding evidentialist with what she needs—each either fails to satisfy our desiderata or leads to a regress similar to that which beset the grounding evidentialist who adopted Justificatory Fundamentality.

A number of evidentialists have been attracted to "mentalist" evidentialism.[25] Cashed out in *grounding* terms, this amounts to the following:

> **Grounding Mentalism:** If S has a proposition p as evidence at t, this fact is wholly grounded in certain facts about S's (non-factive) mental states at t.[26]

It's plausible that Grounding Mentalism is a genuine alternative to Further Epistemic Grounding.[27] However, as it stands, it fails to satisfy our second desideratum on an answer to EGQ. To see this, recall that our second desideratum required that an answer to EGQ take the following form: "Whenever S has e as evidence, the fact that S has e as evidence is grounded in facts $G_1 \ldots G_n$", where each of $G_1 \ldots G_n$ is a partial or complete explanation of the fact that S has e. Grounding Mentalism simply says that that the fact that S has p as evidence at t is grounded in *certain* facts about S's mental states at t; it fails to tell us *which* facts these are.

Could the evidentialist insist that *every* fact about S's mental states at t partially grounds the fact that S has p as evidence at t? Not without abandoning our second desideratum. This is because whenever S has a proposition p as evidence at t, S will almost invariably be in a number of different non-factive mental states, only some of which explain the fact that has p as evidence at t.

To see this point, consider again the case of Janet, who has the proposition that a vulture flew overhead during her hike as part of her evidence at t. Now, suppose that

[25] See, for instance, Conee and Feldman (2004, p. 56).

[26] The "non-factive" qualifier is inserted to keep views according to which (i) knowledge is a mental state, (ii) E-facts are grounded in facts about a subject's knowledge, from counting as forms of Grounding Mentalism. (Since any such view would be a form of Further Epistemic Grounding, it clearly wouldn't be a rival answer to EGQ).

[27] This isn't entirely obvious. After all, a philosopher might claim that *justifiably believing* is a mental state. Or she might claim that whenever S has p as evidence, this fact is grounded in the fact that S is in some particular non-factive mental state M whose content is p—where M is a state that involves having justification for believing its content. However, I'll set these possibilities aside.

at t the following facts also obtain: (i) Janet is feeling slightly anxious about an upcoming exam, (ii) Janet has a slight headache from lack of hydration, (iii) Janet is wondering whether it will rain later. Now, (i)–(iii) are facts about her non-factive mental states at t. But presumably none of these facts has anything to do with the fact that she has the proposition <A vulture circled overhead during her hike> as evidence at t. If we were to explain why she has the proposition <A vulture circled overhead during her hike> as evidence at t, we wouldn't be inclined to cite (i)–(iii); indeed, if we were to cite (i)–(iii) in our answer, it seems we would have provided a defective explanation.

So grounding mentalists owe us an account of which mental states ground the E-facts. And in order to satisfy our third desideratum, it needs to be a unified account. It's not enough to simply say that sometimes the fact that S has p as evidence is grounded in mental state M_1, and sometimes this fact is grounded in mental state M_2, etc. Instead, the grounding evidentialist must single out some non-disjunctive proper subset of non-factive mental states.

What subset will do the trick? Here are some natural candidates gleaned from the literature:

> **Conscious Beliefs:** Whenever S has p as evidence, this fact is wholly grounded in the fact that S consciously believes p.[28]
>
> **Seemings:** Whenever S has p as evidence, this fact is wholly grounded in the fact that it "seems" to S that p is true.[29]
>
> **Experiences and Memories:** Whenever S has p as evidence, this fact is wholly grounded in either the fact that p is the content of one of S's perceptual experiences, or the fact that p is the content of one of S's apparent memories.[30,31]

But none of these candidates will do. Given a plausible principle about grounding, we can show that each of these proposals conflicts with T2 (the thesis that if S isn't justified in believing p, S doesn't have p as evidence), and hence with our first desideratum.

First, the principle about grounding:

> **Grounding Necessitarianism:** If fact F_1 is wholly grounded in facts F_2–F_n at world w, then at any world w* where F_2–F_n obtain, F_1 also obtains.

[28] See Feldman (1988) for the view S has p as evidence at t iff S is thinking of p at t.

[29] Huemer (2007) argues that seemings play an indispensable justificatory role (though he doesn't, as far as I can tell, commit himself to the view that seemings wholly ground E-facts).

[30] For a classic account of evidence in terms of perceptual experiences and apparent memories, see Lewis (1996).

[31] One could also try to combine these proposals in various ways. For instance, Schroeder (2011) proposes that S has p as evidence iff S has a "presentational attitude" towards p, where a "presentational attitude" is any attitude that presents its content as true. Schroeder's discussion makes it clear that he takes both belief and perceptual experience to be presentational attitudes.

To see the plausibility of Grounding Necessitarianism, consider any old conjunctive fact, e.g. Carcassonne is in France and Trenton is in New Jersey. This fact is fully grounded in the following facts: (i) Carcassonne is in France, (ii) Trenton is in New Jersey. What's more, at any possible world where (i) and (ii) obtain, the conjunctive fact also obtains.[32]

But if we accept Grounding Necessitarianism and T2, we can easily concoct counterexamples to the foregoing proposals. Suppose, for instance, that Mac seems to see a dagger floating before him. He's been told by a reliable source that he's been given a drug that frequently produces hallucinations of hovering poniards. Nonetheless, he disregards this testimony, and forms the belief that there's a dagger before him.

Intuitively, Mac isn't justified in believing that there's a dagger before him; though this belief may be *prima facie* justified, it's defeated. So, given T2, he doesn't have the proposition, <There is a dagger before me> as part of his evidence. But on any of the foregoing proposals, he does have this proposition as part of his evidence: after all, he consciously believes it; it seems to him to be true; what's more, he's having a perceptual experience that has as its content, <There is a dagger before me>.

At this point, the evidentialist might suggest that there's an easy fix to any of the foregoing proposals: simply add a "No Defeaters" clause to the grounds. For instance, Conscious Beliefs is transformed into:

> **Conscious Beliefs*:** Whenever S has p as evidence, this fact is wholly grounded in the following two facts: (i) S consciously believes p, (ii) S has no defeaters for believing p.

And similarly for the other proposals.

While this maneuver gets around our counterexample, I think trouble is still in store. The evidentialist owes us an account of what grounds the "No Defeaters" facts: when S has no defeaters for believing p, what grounds this fact?

Furnishing a satisfactory answer to this question is no easy task. Any satisfactory answer will have to accommodate the existence of both rebutting and undercutting defeaters.[33] What's more, both rebutting and undercutting defeaters come in a variety of forms: a subject's background beliefs (about her environment, about her belief-forming faculties, about what sort of beliefs are epistemically justified) can furnish both types of defeaters, as can a subject's perceptual experiences.

From an evidentialist perspective, it will be extremely tempting to ground the facts about defeat in E-facts.[34] But if the grounding evidentialist opts for a move along these lines, it's off to the races: she'll face a regress quite similar to the one delineated in Sect. 5. After all, suppose S has no defeaters at t for believing p. On the proposal in question, this fact is grounded in various E-facts, each of the form:

[32] See Fine (2012) and Trogdon (2013b) for extended defenses of Grounding Necessitarianism.

[33] For the distinction, see Pollock (1986).

[34] It's worth noting that Conee and Feldman (2005) explicitly endorse an account of defeat in terms of evidence.

[S has q as evidence at t]. Given Conscious Beliefs* (or any other account that adds a "No Defeaters" clause to the grounds of the E-facts), each such fact is partially grounded in the fact: [S has no defeaters for believing q at t], which will in turn be grounded in further E-facts, and so on.

Thus, I think the prospects for an evidentialist-amenable answer to EGQ are dim. The most natural candidates either fail to satisfy our desiderata or lead the grounding evidentialist into an infinite regress of epistemic grounding facts.[35]

8 A potential objection

In developing my argument against grounding evidentialism, I leaned heavily on the assumption that E-facts are not brute facts, and hence that the grounding evidentialist must provide an answer to EGQ. But, one might object, a similar worry arises for the J-facts: these, surely, are not brute facts, hence any epistemologist who seeks to explain E-facts in terms of J-facts owes us an account of what grounds the latter. In this paper, I have provided no such account.

This is correct, as far as it goes: such an account is needed, and I have not provided it. Providing a fully developed story about the grounds of epistemic justification is a task for another paper; however, I'll briefly gesture towards three possible accounts.

If some form of process reliabilism can be made to work, presumably process reliabilism can be adapted to provide an account of the grounds of J-facts. According to the envisaged account, J-facts are grounded in facts about the reliability of agents' belief-forming processes. The resulting picture will be one according to which facts about what evidence S has at t are partially grounded in facts about what S is justified in believing at t, and these facts are in turn wholly grounded in facts about the reliability of S's belief-forming processes.

A second, closely related option is to take a page from the virtue epistemologists' playbook. We could hold that J-facts are grounded in facts about the exercise of S's epistemic competences, where "epistemic competences" can then be understood in terms of dispositions to form true beliefs and avoid false beliefs, or else in terms of dispositions to assent.[36]

A third option is that J-facts are grounded in the evaluative attitudes of various subjects. Suppose one holds that whenever an evaluator A deems S's belief that p justified, A is adopting some sort of pro-attitude towards S's belief that p.[37] (Exactly what sort of pro-attitude is a tricky question—perhaps it's a species of

[35] As an anonymous referee pointed out, grounding evidentialists might deny one of my desiderata on an answer to EGQ in order to save their view. While I agree that this is an option, it doesn't seem particularly attractive. Each of the desiderata strikes me as well-motivated (see the discussion in Sect. 4); *ceteris paribus*, a view that satisfies all of them will be preferable to a view that doesn't. If this is right, then Further Epistemic Grounding has a leg up on grounding evidentialism.

[36] For discussion of epistemic competences, see e.g. Sosa (2007, 2011), Mantel (2013), Sylvan and Sosa (2014).

[37] See Field (2009) for an account along these lines.

preference, or a form of approval, or a judgment that S's belief that *p* conforms with certain norms that A endorses.) Such a view could be adapted into a grounding thesis: whenever S is justified in believing *p*, this fact is wholly grounded in the fact that certain actual or hypothetical evaluators adopt (or would adopt, in the right circumstances) such a pro-attitude towards S's relation to *p*. Combining this account with Justificatory Fundamentality yields the following view: E-facts are at least partially grounded in J-facts, which are wholly grounded in facts about actual or hypothetical evaluators' attitudes.

9 Hope for the grounding evidentialist?

Perhaps the resilient grounding evidentialist will see a ray of hope in my response to the objection in the last section. She may be inclined to argue as follows: "You've conceded that there's got to be some answer to the question, 'What grounds the J-facts?' Such an answer will be of the form, 'Whenever S is justified in believing *p*, this fact is wholly grounded in facts F_1–F_n.' (Perhaps, as you suggest, F_1–F_n are facts about the reliability of S's belief-forming processes; perhaps they're facts about epistemic competences; perhaps they're facts about the attitudes of some evaluator; perhaps they're something else altogether.) Now I propose to take any such answer, and offer it instead as an answer to EGQ. That is, my answer to EGQ will be that whenever S has *p* as evidence, this fact is wholly grounded in F_1–F_n. What's more, I'll insist that whenever S has *p* as evidence, this fact is *directly* grounded F_1–F_n; no further epistemic facts—in particular, no J-Facts—intervene between the E-facts and F_1–F_n. This allows me to reject Justificatory Fundamentality and hang on to grounding evidentialism: J-Facts are wholly grounded in E-facts; E-facts, in turn, are wholly grounded in F_1–F_n."[38]

What should we say in response to this maneuver? First, it's not clear what sort of motivation the grounding evidentialist can furnish for her view at this point. At this point, we've got two competing pictures of the grounding hierarchy: the one I've been sketching grounds the E-facts partially in J-facts, which are then grounded in F_1–F_n (where these are, for instance, facts about the reliability of a subject's belief-forming processes); the rival picture grounds the J-facts in the E-facts, and then grounds the E-facts in F_1–F_n. It's not clear what reason the grounding evidentialist can provide to prefer her picture to the alternative I've provided.

Second, this maneuver will presumably be unwelcome to traditional evidentialists such as Conee and Feldman. This is particularly clear if F_1–F_n are facts about the reliability of a subject's belief-forming processes. As we've seen, Conee and Feldman are internalist, mentalist evidentialists, who have been consistently opposed to reliabilist approaches to justification. If they were to suddenly allow that whenever S has *p* as evidence, this fact is wholly grounded in facts about whether S

[38] Sylvan and Sosa (2014) might be sympathetic to an account along these lines. According to their view, facts about justification are grounded in facts about epistemic reasons, which are grounded in facts about epistemic competences. However, Sylvan and Sosa are officially noncommittal on whether epistemic reasons should be identified with E-facts.

formed the belief that p via a reliable process, this would be a serious concession indeed. In fact, it would amount to moving towards a synthesis of evidentialism and reliabilism—the very sort of synthesis that Goldman has recently championed (2011), and that—as we saw in Sect. 3—they have rejected the need for (Conee and Feldman 2011).

10 Conclusion

In this paper, I explored what happens if we construe evidentialism as a grounding thesis (all J-facts are grounded in E-facts). At first blush, grounding evidentialism looked promising: it captures evidentialism's explanatory ambitions; it also offers an easy way of escaping Goldman's Circularity Challenge (which assumes that evidentialists are engaged in conceptual analysis). But on further examination, it became clear that grounding evidentialists face a closely related challenge: the challenge of providing an adequate answer to EGQ (what grounds the E-facts?). I went on to argue (Sects. 5, 6) that grounding evidentialists cannot successfully meet this challenge. To recap: I argued that the most plausible ways of answering EGQ entail Justificatory Fundamentality (all E-facts are at least partially grounded in J-facts). I then showed that, given some plausible assumptions about the grounding relation, Justificatory Fundamentality is incompatible with grounding evidentialism. I went on to consider various ways of responding to this argument (Sect. 7–9) and found them wanting.

Even if my argument for Justificatory Fundamentality fails to convince dyed-in-the-wool grounding evidentialists, I think that Justificatory Fundamentality remains a serious hypothesis, worthy of consideration. And it's one that evidentialists have not paid much heed. This illustrates the extent to which the debate has been shaped by traditional formulations of evidentialism in terms of necessary biconditionals.[39] Most of the debate over evidentialism has focused on whether there are counterexamples to the evidentialist's biconditionals—cases where a subject has a justified belief without having any evidence for it, or cases where the justificatory status of a belief is influenced by non-evidential, pragmatic factors.[40] What my discussion shows is that even if the evidentialist biconditionals are free from counterexamples, grounding evidentialism may still be false, since it may posit the wrong order of metaphysical priority.

In developing my argument, I took Conee and Feldman's brand of evidentialism as my primary foil. But it's worth pointing out that if Justificatory Fundamentality is true, it spells trouble for a number of other views as well. I conclude by examining how Justificatory Fundamentality threatens certain hybrids of evidentialism and reliabilism.

On some natural ways of trying to synthesize evidentialism and reliabilism, the following will still be true:

[39] E.g. Conee and Feldman's (E)—see Sect. 2.

[40] See e.g. Fantl and McGrath (2002).

Weak Grounding Evidentialism: Necessarily, all J-Facts are partially grounded in E-Facts.

As an illustration, consider Comesaña's "evidentialist reliabilism." (Comesaña 2010) Comesaña follows epistemological tradition in formulating his position as a biconditional. Simplifying somewhat, his view is as follows:

[Necessarily,] S's belief that *p* is justified iff

(i) S has evidence *e*,
(ii) S's belief that *p* is based on *e*,
(iii) *e* meets a further reliabilist condition *C*[41]

Now suppose one converted this biconditional into a grounding thesis: necessarily, whenever it's a fact that S's belief that *p* is justified, this fact is grounded in the fact that conditions (i)–(iii) obtain. On the resulting view, even though condition (iii) ensures that every J-fact is partially grounded in reliability facts, condition (i) ensures that that every J-fact is also partially grounded in E-facts.

But the argument from Sect. 6 works equally well as an argument against weak grounding evidentialism. Given weak grounding evidentialism, every J-fact is partially grounded in various E-facts. By Justificatory Fundamentality, these E-facts must be grounded in further J-facts. And so on.

Thus Justificatory Fundamentality is not just a threat for "pure" grounding evidentialism; it also imperils any view that embraces weak grounding evidentialism (e.g. Comesaña-style hybrids).

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[41] I use "*C*" as a placeholder for Comesaña's reliabilist account of what it is for S's belief that *p* to "fit" evidence *e*. See Comesaña 2010, p. 581–584 for details.

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