

**Philosophy 256: Becauseal Relations (revised 10/23/21)**  
**Harvard University, Fall 2021**

**Instructor:**

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*Office hours:* Thursdays, 12:45–2:45 p.m., or by appointment

Because of the continued pandemic, office hours will be held outside at one of those tables in front of the entrance to Café Gato Rojo in Harvard Yard if the weather is decent, and under the tent in the courtyard bordered by Emerson, Sever, and Robinson Halls if the weather is not decent.

**Seminar Time and Place:** Wednesdays, 3:00–5:45 p.m., in Emerson 310 (a.k.a. the Tanner Room)

**Course Description:**

When we claim that an act is wrong because it is unjustifiable to others, or a person fails to know something because their belief on the matter easily could have been false, or a creature is conscious because it is in a neural state with such-and-such functional profile, we appear to be using ‘because’ to pick out a distinctively non-causal form of explanation or dependence that has come to be known as grounding. Grounding is all the rage in contemporary analytic philosophy. Some rage in its favor: grounding enthusiasts insist that grounding is an indispensable tool for philosophical theorizing that cannot be cashed out in terms of counterfactual covariation, supervenience, or other more familiar notions, and that deserves to itself be the subject of serious philosophical study. Others rage against it: grounding skeptics either doubt the intelligibility of grounding claims or grant their intelligibility but deny that there is a general notion here that can do the philosophical work grounding enthusiasts want it to do. The first third of this seminar will provide an overview of some of these debates. We will cover the arguments for and against grounding’s philosophical usefulness and survey recent work that has been done on grounding’s formal properties, its relation to other notions such as fundamentality and reduction, various distinctions that have been made between types of grounding, and the question of what, if anything, grounds the grounding facts, among other topics. We will also glance, in passing, at the analogue of each of these issues in the case of causation.

The reason for that passing glance is that, in the second third of the seminar, we will explore in detail the relationship, if any, between the ‘because’ of grounding and the ‘because’ of causation. Grounding is often introduced by distinguishing it from causation and from causal forms of explanation; for many, grounding is *by definition* a non-causal form of dependence or explanation. But we shall see that some prominent ways of defending a unified notion of grounding can be used to motivate not just a unity among different varieties of grounding but also a similar unity between grounding and causation. For instance, consider the following inference: “Xanthippe is a widow because Socrates died; Socrates died because he drank the hemlock; so, Xanthippe is a widow because Socrates drank the hemlock.” The first premise here employs the ‘because’ of grounding, the second the ‘because’ of causation. But what about the ‘because’ in the conclusion? Is it a mixture of both? And why do we find this such a natural inference to make, if grounding and causation are fundamentally distinct relations that yield fundamentally different forms of explanation? We will investigate how far the analogy between causation and grounding can be pushed. Can there be probabilistic grounding? Can some of the formalisms that have been used to model causation also shed light on grounding? Is grounding nothing more than a metaphysical form of causation, as some have alleged?

Finally, in the final third of the seminar, we will turn our attention to a third use of ‘because’ that features prominently in analytic philosophy, namely the ‘because’ of rationalizing basis, which we find in sentences such as “She believes that *p* because *q*,” “They went to the store because there’s a sale,” and “I hate him because he’s an inveterate liar.” Work on this “becauseal relation” (as Harvard philosopher Roderick Firth

once jokingly referred to it) has been fractured across various subfields, depending on whether the thing being based is a belief, an action, an emotion, or an aesthetic reaction, and that work has been almost entirely disconnected from the recent explosion of research on grounding. This is surprising, because there are just as many fertile parallels and interconnections between grounding and basing as there are between grounding and causation. Consider the Euthyphro dilemma, often used to introduce the topic of grounding. Socrates famously asked Euthyphro, “Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?” The second half of this question invokes the ‘because’ of grounding; the suggestion, on this horn of the dilemma, is that the gods’ love is what makes it the case that a given act is pious. But notice that the question’s first half invokes the ‘because’ of rationalizing basis, not of grounding; to say that the gods love an act because it is pious is to specify the reasons for which the gods love that act, not to say what makes it the case that they count as loving that act. But if Socrates’ question invokes two different senses of ‘because’, why think we even have a dilemma here? Or are there deep links between grounding and basing that allow us to reinstitute a dilemma after all? More generally, we shall see that every one of the structural and substantive questions that we will have asked about the ‘because’ of grounding and the ‘because’ of causation in the first two units of the course have direct analogues for the ‘because’ of basing, although those parallel questions have rarely been investigated in a systematic manner. Is basing transitive, asymmetric, and irreflexive? Should we be pluralists about basing? How do we understand the distinction between immediate and mediate basing? Can instances of basing themselves be based? Moreover, we shall also investigate the degree to which there is pressure to unify basing with grounding and with causation. But before we can do any of this, we shall need to spend some time on the vexing question of what the relata of the basing relation are; in particular, what ontological category of things can serve as bases? Are they mental states, or facts, or propositions, or what?

In addition to these general issues about the nature of—and interrelations between—grounding, causation, and basing, we will devote ~~three~~ two sessions to specific applications of these issues in several normative disciplines. First, we will consider a recent debate between the instructor and several other philosophers over the content of moral principles and whether such principles partially explain particular moral facts; doing so will require us to consider a structurally analogous debate in the philosophy of law. Second, we will consider a recent argument about the ethical significance of hypothetical consent that turns on whether the ‘because’ of grounding and the ‘because’ of basing can be woven together via a mixed transitivity inference parallel to the one given above for the ‘because’ of grounding and the ‘because’ of causation (the one involving Xanthippe and the hemlock). Third, we shall consider whether the causal theory of knowledge can be made into a less hopeless theory of knowledge by replacing its appeals to causal chains with appeals to “becausal chains” (in which each link is a relation of either causation, grounding, or basing) and the relevance of this generalized “becausal theory of knowledge” for evolutionary debunking arguments about causally inert entities.

**Course URL:** <https://canvas.harvard.edu/courses/90157>

The course website will contain all readings and handouts for the course, as well as future iterations of this syllabus if it needs to be revised (as it inevitably will). To access everything on the site, you will need to login using either your HarvardKey or an XID (an external ID for people without a HarvardKey). You can obtain an XID at <<https://xid.harvard.edu/xid-apps/>>; after you do so, please contact the instructor so that your XID can be added to the website guest list.

### **Course Admission Policy:**

This is a graduate-level course; undergraduates and students in a graduate program other than philosophy will only be allowed to take the course for credit if they have the proper background. Auditors are welcome but will be limited to Harvard University ID holders and cross-registered students from other universities that have their own COVID testing protocols; this policy is necessary to ensure that everyone in the seminar room is undergoing regular COVID testing.

**Readings:**

Each week's readings will be available for downloading on the course website.

**Requirements:**

The breakdown of grades will be as follows:

30% *Seminar attendance and participation.*

Evaluation will be based on attendance, preparation, and contributions to discussion. Discussing material from the course during office hours may count toward your contributions to discussion.

70% *Term paper.*

A 15–20 page (double-spaced) term paper will be due at a date and time during Final Examination Period (Dec. 9–18) to be determined by the Registrar's Office. Students are highly encouraged to meet with the instructor during the course of the semester to discuss potential paper topics.

**Distribution Requirements:**

Harvard philosophy PhD students who take this course for credit may count it as a course in Contemporary Theoretical Philosophy if they write a final paper that is primarily in metaphysics (or another subfield falling within that distribution requirement) and may count it as a course in Practical Philosophy if they write a final paper that is primarily on a topic in ethics (or another subfield falling within that distribution requirement).

**Electronic Devices:**

The use of laptops, tablets, cell phones, etc. during class meetings is strictly prohibited (except in cases of medical necessity, in which case follow the guidelines given below for students with disabilities).

**Classroom Safety Guidelines:**

As per Harvard policy, it is expected that everyone attending this class is fully vaccinated for COVID-19 and that everyone wear a three-layer procedure mask during all seminar meetings. If you forget your mask one day, extra masks should be available both by the photocopier on the third floor of Emerson Hall and in Kim Costigan's office (Emerson 309). Eating and drinking during class are strictly prohibited.

If you feel unwell on a given class day, please stay home and get tested for COVID-19 immediately. If your test comes back positive, you will need to isolate for ten days. In either case, please contact the instructor about your situation, so that steps can be taken to make sure you don't miss too much class material.

**Accommodations for Students with Disabilities:**

Students needing academic adjustments or accommodations because of a documented disability should present the instructor with a Faculty Letter from the Accessibility Education Office (AEO) by the end of the second complete week of term, namely Fri., Sept. 17. All discussions will remain confidential.

**Academic Integrity Policy – Collaboration Permitted in Written Work:**

Discussion and the exchange of ideas are essential to academic work. For assignments in this course, you are encouraged to consult with your classmates on the choice of paper topics and to share sources. You may find it useful to discuss your chosen topic with your peers, particularly if you are working on the same topic as a classmate. However, you should ensure that any written work you submit for evaluation is the result of your own research and writing and that it reflects your own approach to the topic.

## Meeting and Reading Schedule [some of this may change]:

NOTE: Readings listed in brackets are optional.

*Wed., Sept. 1:* NO CLASS (Harvard classes will be following a Monday schedule that day)

*Wed., Sept. 8:* Crash Course on Grounding (Pt. 1)

[Fabrice Correia & Benjamin Schnieder, “Grounding: An Opinionated Introduction,” §§1–5]  
Jonathan Schaffer, “On What Grounds What”  
Gideon Rosen, “Metaphysical Dependence: Grounding and Reduction”  
[Gideon Rosen, “Real Definition”]

*Wed., Sept. 15:* Crash Course on Grounding (Pt. 2)

Kit Fine, “Guide to Ground” (skip or skim §§1.9–1.10)  
[Louis deRosset, “What Is Weak Ground?”]  
Shlomit Wygoda Cohen, “Not All Partial Grounds Partly Ground: Some Useful Distinctions in the Theory of Grounding,” §§1–3

*Wed., Sept. 22:* Transitivity of Grounding (and Causation)

Jonathan Schaffer, “Grounding, Transitivity, and Contrastivity”  
[Naomi Thompson, “Strict Partial Order”]  
Kevin Richardson, “Grounding Pluralism: Why and How”  
Shlomit Wygoda Cohen, “Not All Partial Grounds Partly Ground: Some Useful Distinctions in the Theory of Grounding,” §§4–5  
[Ned Hall, “Causation and the Price of Transitivity”]

*Wed., Sept. 29:* Iterated Grounding (and Causation)

Karen Bennett, “By Our Bootstraps”  
Shamik Dasgupta, “The Possibility of Physicalism”  
Jon Erling Litland, “Meta-Ground”  
[David Mark Kovacs, “The Question of Iterated Causation”]

*Wed., Oct. 6:* Pluralism about Grounding (and Causation)

Kit Fine, “Guide to Ground,” pp. 37–40 (reread)  
Jessica Wilson, “No Work for a Theory of Grounding”  
Selim Berker, “The Unity of Grounding”  
[Ned Hall, “Two Concepts of Causation”]  
[Peter Godfrey-Smith, “Causal Pluralism”]

*Wed., Oct. 13:* Unifying Grounding and Causation? (Pt. 1)

Jonathan Schaffer, “Grounding in the Image of Causation”  
[Kathrin Koslicki, “Where Grounding and Causation Part Ways: Comments on Schaffer”]  
Sara Bernstein, “Grounding Is Not Causation”

*Wed., Oct. 20:* Unifying Grounding and Causation? (Pt. 2)

Karen Bennett, *Making Things Up*, chs. 1, 4  
Jonathan L. Shaheen, “Ambiguity and Explanation”  
[Ralf Bader, “The Fundamental and the Brute”]

~~*Wed., Oct. 27:* Causation’s Relata (and the Backing Model of Explanation)~~

~~Douglas Ehring, “Causal Relata”  
Jonathan Schaffer, “The Metaphysics of Causation,” §1  
[Michael J. Raven, “Ground,” esp. §5]~~

~~[David Mark Kovacs, “Four Questions of Iterated Ground”]~~

*Wed., Oct. 27:* NO CLASS (because of graduate student strike)

*Wed., Nov. 3:* An Application in Metaethics: The Explanatory Role of Moral Laws

Selim Berker, “The Explanatory Ambitions of Moral Principles”

David Enoch, “How Principles Ground”

Gideon Rosen, “What Is a Moral Law?”

[Gideon Rosen, “Ground by Law”]

*Wed., Nov. 10:* Crash Course on Basing

[Maria Alvarez, “Reasons: Justification, Motivation, Explanation”]

Keith Allen Korcz, “The Epistemic Basing Relation” (don’t worry so much about the details of Swain’s complex account in §2 and Korcz’s equally complex account in §4)

Kurt Sylvan, “Epistemic Reasons II: Basing”

Christopher Blake-Turner, “The Hereby-Commit Account of Inference”

[Christopher Blake-Turner, “Acting on the Basis of a Reason”]

*Wed., Nov. 17:* NO CLASS (because of graduate student strike)

*Wed., Nov. 24:* NO CLASS (Thanksgiving Break)

*Wed., Dec. 1:* Basing’s Relata

[Ram Neta, “Rationally Determinable Conditions”]

Jonathan Dancy, “How to Act for a Good Reason”

John Turri, “The Ontology of Epistemic Reasons”

Kieran Setiya, “Reasons and Causes”

~~*Wed., Dec. 1:* An Application in Ethics: The Explanatory Role of Hypothetical Consent~~

~~David Enoch, “Hypothetical Consent and the Value(s) of Autonomy”~~

*Wed., Dec. 8:* An Application in Epistemology: Generalizing Causal Theories of Knowledge (make-up class during Reading Period)

Alvin Goldman, “A Causal Theory of Knowing”

~~Selim Berker, “A Becausal Theory of Knowing”~~