

Review of Lutz (2016)

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Ideally, this book will not go under the radar of metaethicists who wish to deepen their views on metaphysics. Nor, for that matter, should metaphysicians who want to develop their metaethics ignore it. Both are in for a treat. That said, its 300 pages or so could have been parcelled in a more reader-friendly way. The chapters are long (one runs to over 70 pages) and dense with information and argument, and there is also no index. This makes for a challenging reading experience. However, these are but pimples and blemishes. Lutz has written an otherwise impressive and captivating work. It will amply reward colleagues who are ready to roll up their sleeves and scrutinize new and familiar views on supervenience, grounding, and the in-virtue-of relation.

Good In Virtue Of has six chapters. The first mainly summarizes the author's objectives, the most central of which pertains to the following question: "What kind of relation is this 'in-virtue-of' or 'making' relation that holds between the instantiation of other properties and the instantiation of a certain normative property?" (Lutz 2016, 2).

The final chapter recapitulates Lutz's main conclusions. Chapters 2–5, then, are the real body of the work.

In Chapter 2 Lutz develops the intuition, familiar to moral philosophers, that evaluative properties do not, as she puts it, obtain "brutally". Much should be of interest here to metaethicists. For instance, Lutz's take on the formal features of the in-virtue-of relation is illuminating. I particularly enjoyed her discussion of Väyrynen's argument against the transitivity of the in-virtue-of relation (albeit I am not sure I fully agree with her). However, the chapter also reveals important scope restrictions and assumptions informing Lutz's discussion. Let me mention just two. First, in her attempt to understand the in-virtue-of relation she confines herself to evaluative (rather than normative) properties. Second, she assumes moral realism, because "if there are no evaluative properties at all, or if there are at least no instantiated evaluative properties at all, then the desired relation never obtains" (Lutz 2016, 16). Thus, we need, she thinks, to accept some version of moral realism, since otherwise

there would be no in-virtue-of relation in the first place. Is this right? It would seem so: “no relata no relation” is an important truth. However, things may be less straightforward. For instance, the issue depends on how one regards a certain kind of conditional fact. If there are these peculiar facts, and they obtain in virtue of some other facts, then, I think Lutz is mistaken.¹ Somewhat ironically, the required adjustment would have made her book more interesting to a wider readership. For then it would not only be realists, with their commitment to the idea that evaluative properties are instantiated, who would gain from learning more about her approach to the desired in-virtue-of relation. An example of the kind of fact I have in mind is that *some object is good on condition that goodness is instantiated*.² If there are such peculiar facts, which do not depend on, or require, if they are to obtain, that, goodness is ever actually instantiated, we might wonder: In virtue of what do these obtain? To answer that question, we need a grip on what this relation is all about, and I think Lutz’s book is an excellent starting point for this.

Chapter 3 is a penetrating inquiry into why supervenience cannot be the desired in-virtue-of relation. A small caveat is in place here. At the outset, I had some problems following Lutz’s setup. I suspect they were age-related. Long ago, I was trained to regard supervenience as something other than merely strict covariance between evaluative and natural properties.³ My guess is that, for many philosophers of my generation, what we had in mind all the time was a relation of dependency—one we often expressed by employing the in-virtue-of idiom. Admittedly, much has been said about supervenience, some of which points in various different directions. Lutz is perfectly aware of this. She maintains, then, that there is an important line of thought which conceives of supervenience, precisely, as covariance. As she argues at length, the in-virtue-of relation cannot merely boil down to covariance. She points to several reasons for this, the most important being that the in-virtue-of relation is one of determination and metaphysical priority while the relation of covariance is not.

I can’t help wondering whether some of the issues relating to whether supervenience/grounding is the desired in-virtue-of relation may turn out to

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- 1 I should add here that according to Lutz, nothing much hinges on whether we talk about properties or facts (Lutz 2016, 147–148). I am inclined to agree. However, in light of my example in the main text, she might change her view on this.
 - 2 For more on this kind of fact, see Rønnow-Rasmussen (2016).
 - 3 Lutz is aware that not everyone in the past considered supervenience mere covariance. E.g. see Lutz (2016, 82).

be verbal in character. For instance, I believe that many of those in the past who were thinking of supervenience as covariance had a special kind of covariance in mind—namely, a one- and not a two-way direction of covariance. I suspect they would argue that their accounts express a kind of metaphysical priority. As Lutz herself points out, many philosophers recognize the phenomenon of multiple supervenience bases, and for those who accept this supervenience *qua* covariance will in effect be a one-direction variance: it will not be the case then that, necessarily, if something instantiates, say, goodness, it instantiates the natural property *N*. Is this a way of expressing determination of some sort? I know people who believe it is. Whether or not we agree with them, I am inclined to concur with Lutz that there is more to the in-virtue-of relation than covariance. At all events, this is an impressive chapter in which Lutz shows how well-versed she is in the relevant literature. In fact, she spreads metaphysical and metaethical insights better than a farmer spreads seed, and her illuminating comments and arguments make for a most worthwhile read. I thoroughly enjoyed the discussion.

On top of what I have already referred to, in an extensive excursus Lutz serves the reader a buffet of core realist metaethical views (and, not least, some of the challenges they face). You get the sense that you are in the hands of an excellent chef who carefully points out that, however appetizing these dishes may seem to you, they all contain ingredients that make them more or less difficult to digest. Lutz does not take a stand and state which realist view she endorses. Some might believe this to be a fault on her part. I had no problem with it, mostly because I found her discussion thorough and highly informative. Readers familiar with metaethics will also appreciate her decision not to beat around the bush, and to directly address the core issues. The facility and clarity with which she unwraps numerous complex issues made me envious. For instance, I suspect her discussion of the alleged identity of value properties and natural properties will be illuminating for many readers, whether they are metaethicists or metaphysicians. Should we, for instance, maintain that the instantiation of an evaluative property is token-identical with the instantiation of a natural property? Lutz is wary of such a position because she takes it to imply a trope theory of properties. She regards the trope theory as highly controversial (Lutz 2016, 100–101). Personally, I wish she hadn't set it aside quite as swiftly.

So-called “response theories” also come under Lutz's powerful lens. Again, without much ado, she quickly goes to the central problems and identifies the challenging questions. I'm not sure I always agree with her on the weight

she places on some of her worries. I also think there are responses to some of the challenges she raises that appear in work with which she is apparently unfamiliar. But this shouldn't detract from the fact that she provides a concise account of the main issues surrounding response theories. She categorizes different so-called Fitting-attitude (FA) analyses as response theories. I think this is misleading. She also believes that an FA analysis must identify the subject for whom it is fitting to favour something, and that this should be a matter of concern for the FA analyst. It is a worry shared by many. However, I am less troubled by it. Arguably, if you cast the FA account in terms of *pro tanto* reasons, there is no need to specify the subject when something is, say, admirable, if you think (real or possible) subjects who can respond to *pro tanto* reasons are capable of admiring something. I also think that attempts to understand goodness, period, as problematic unless it is understood as a kind of relational goodness-for-someone (or vice versa) rest on mistaken views on goodness, period, and goodness-for (see [Rønnow-Rasmussen 2021](#)).

Chapter 4 presents a long and detailed discussion packed with metaphysical minutiae of the notion of grounding. It asks whether we should apply the grounding framework to evaluative facts and eventually settle on grounding as the *in-virtue-of* relation.

So should we? Lutz does not aim to provide a definitive answer, but she argues that grounding is a plausible candidate as the *in-virtue-of* relation. Why? The swift answer is that it meets the following criteria: “it is a non-causal, metaphysical determination relation which imposes hierarchical structure on reality” ([Lutz 2016, 178](#)); it introduces metaphysical priority. However, Lutz is explicit that she is not giving a “full-blown defence of grounding in this chapter” ([Lutz 2016, 135](#)). As far as I can see, this defence is not provided in the remaining chapters.

But what is grounding? Lutz identifies two core notions in the literature. The one she is attracted to is (somewhat puzzlingly) not the one she adopts. She sticks with the less controversial variety, which identifies grounding with metaphysical explanation (rather than with what is identical to the “relation that backs metaphysical explanation” ([Lutz 2016, 144](#))). Despite its being widely employed nowadays, metaphysical explanation is, to say the least, far from being a transparent notion. For one thing, it is debatable whether reality contains explanation relations on its own—as opposed to there being merely people who offer explanations of things the success of which is conditional, in part, on the way the person who is given an explanation understands it. The last kind of explanation is an epistemic success notion. Attempts to

understand grounding in terms of metaphysical explanation are therefore challenging. Lutz's attempt to meet the challenge is certainly laudable.

Things heat up when Lutz begins to outline the formal properties of grounding. Besides agreeing that grounding is an asymmetric, transitive, and hyper-intensional relation, Lutz stands with those who conceive of grounding as an irreflexive relation: if x grounds y , then x and y are non-identical. If x and y are not identical, it seems that x cannot be reduced to y (or vice versa, for that matter). Or so Lutz thinks. However, as Gideon Rosen (2010) has argued, that is not an uncontroversial inference. For, briefly, if we conceive of reduction as a relation between facts, reducing one fact to another is not a matter of identifying the one with the other.

The idea that you cannot reduce something to that to which it is identical will, I suspect, appear plausible to some, perhaps many, of Lutz's readers. However, she maintains that it requires a fine-grading of facts (something she resists). For instance, consider the fact that $ABCD$ is a square. On the fine-grained approach, it would not turn out to be identical with the fact that $ABCD$ is an equilateral rectangle. Against this, Lutz (in line with Paul Audi's (2012) critique) suggests that the approach is committed to a "wordy" instead of "worldly" view of facts. She makes two important points in this connection. First, she rightly stresses that "grounding and reduction can only go together if one adopts a different conception of reduction to what we might call the identity conception" (Lutz 2016, 152). Second, she makes it clear (Lutz 2016, 153) that she is not ready to do the latter. She accepts an identity conception, and "hence grounding and reduction excludes each other" (Lutz 2016, 153). This is, of course, an important statement in the book. Unfortunately, she is not terribly forthcoming with the reasons for her choice, and so readers might feel shorth-changed at this point. In all fairness, the issue is a tricky one. However, because I believe we can explain value most successfully with a combination of worldly and wordy facts,⁴ I am inclined to side against Lutz on this matter. On the other hand, given that what we are talking about here is "metaphysical explanation"—a notion the conceptual contours of which are still very much in need of clarification—I do wonder whether retaining an open mind on this matter would have been preferable.

Lutz is open-minded on other issues. For instance, there is an important discussion in the grounding literature of the idea that metaphysical necessity

⁴ See Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen (2021) (esp. the discussion of two kinds of fact on pp. 2479–2480).

is what distinguishes grounding from causal relations. If a fact, p , grounds q , is it the case that necessarily (metaphysically speaking) if p , then q ? While so-called necessitarians affirm this, contingentists deny it. This is a vexed issue, and if we are to make headway with it, as Lutz elegantly shows (Lutz 2016, 155–166), we will need a clearer picture of what we have in mind by “metaphysical explanation”. I find it easy to agree with Lutz, and therefore I think her openness on this issue is understandable.

Another question about grounding that Lutz addresses with care is whether it is non-monotonic. Non-monotonicity guarantees that grounds do not contain arbitrary facts. Whatever is in the ground is part of what makes the fact ground some other fact. This is an important feature, but it is also not obvious how we should understand it. In metaethics, for instance, it is common, following Dancy, to distinguish between a value’s resultance (base), which contains only those properties of the value bearer that make it valuable, and the supervenience base, which is understood as a larger base containing all the facts on which the value, in a broad sense, depends (Dancy 2004). The larger base may contain so-called enablers, which are facts (or features) that enable other facts (or features) to be value-making. Dancy typically takes enablers to be facts about the context in which the valuable object is located. However, as Rabinowicz and I have recently argued (Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen 2021), enabling facts need not be facts of this sort. Consider, admirability. The explanation of this kind of value seems to require us to refer to those features that make the object admirable (valuable) and those that enable the properties of the value bearer to be value-making. In this particular case, these are in part the features that make an attitude one of admiration, and facts about these essential features are arguably “wordy” (conceptual) facts.

This discussion raises some fundamental meta-questions. To what extent should we allow our metaphysical views and intuitions to govern our value-taxonomic views? Should we perhaps adjust our metaphysics in light of our value notions? There are convincing arguments in the literature that not every final value is an intrinsic value (and even that not every final intrinsic value accrues to its bearers in virtue of features that necessarily belong to the value bearers). This suggests that the grounds of final extrinsic values may, in one sense of “arbitrary”, contain arbitrary facts. It is perhaps to ask too much of an already rich book, but it would have been enlightening to read about Lutz’s views on these meta-issues.

One of the many strengths of Chapter 4 is that it brings out the ways in which arguments in the metaphysical literature correspond to arguments that

are discussed by metaethicists, and vice versa. Thus, in her overview of the metaethical holism-atomism debate (Lutz 2016, 166–178), Lutz finds interesting similarities with metaphysical debates over necessitarianism. Perhaps she is even right in thinking that this resemblance is an indication that her quest for the in-virtue-of relation within the grounding framework is on the right track.

The grounding framework comes, she thinks, with an important extra advantage. Since there is so much grounding about (as it were) that does not concern the evaluative, or the normative, at all, realists are handed a response to Mackie's queerness objection—namely, that there is nothing queer about grounding. Lutz advances the following argument (Lutz 2016, 179):

- (P1) The in-virtue-of relation is a grounding relation
- (P2) The grounding relation is ubiquitous in our world; we know it from many other philosophical contexts, and hence it is not metaphysically queer.
- (C) *Pace* Mackie, the in-virtue-of relation is not a metaphysical queer relation.

Lutz identifies two related problems with her argument (Lutz 2016, 180). First, if there are different kinds of grounding, the worry is that grounding *qua* the in-virtue-of relation might still come out as queer in comparison with other kinds of grounding. For instance, we might follow Kit Fine and distinguish different kinds of grounding in terms of metaphysical, normative, and natural necessity (Fine 2012). So if value has a normative grounding (is grounded in normative necessity) it might be regarded as queer in comparison with metaphysical grounding. Lutz is not really worried, though. She is sceptical about enriching the notion of necessity beyond conceptual and metaphysical necessity. Whether or not we agree with her, there may yet be other kinds of grounding. For instance, if I have understood her properly, she takes grounding to be factive. That is, she assumes that it is impossible for grounding to be exemplified when the relata of the grounding relations are not facts. This is a reasonable view, but since grounding eventually comes down to metaphysical explanation, why couldn't there be such explanations when we consider abstract entities that do not obtain? (Admittedly, this would require some work on how best to understand relations).

The second difficulty Lutz raises centres on scepticism about the grounding relation in the first place. In effect, she identifies three kinds of scepticism:

one can be a sceptic about the primitiveness, and/or intelligibility, and/or usefulness, of grounding. However, after discussing these varieties, she assumes they can all be resisted. She reminds us that her aim is to show that using the framework of grounding leads to interesting insights in metaethics, and that it is not her intention to “establish and defend this framework” (Lutz 2016, 183). Interestingly, Lutz’s assumption that scepticism about grounding fails seems to backfire. Ultimately, isn’t the need for this assumption just an expression of scepticism? Perhaps I am wrong. However, some of the things that Lutz herself recognizes appear to open the door to a sceptical conclusion. While it is certainly conceivable that someone with strong “grounding intuitions” would reach (C), one can also easily imagine error theorists being unconvinced by the argument. From what I know about Mackie’s queerness argument, and in particular why he thought the nature of supervenience provides a strong incentive to be a sceptic about it, I would expect him to reason in the following way. We do not quite know what metaphysical explanation is (something that Lutz acknowledges), and therefore we do not quite know what grounding is. Hence we do not quite know that (P₁) is correct, and for this reason, we do not quite know that (P₂) is correct. It would therefore be a mistake not to be sceptical about grounding, so we should not endorse (C).

Another challenge to the argument comes from the idea that grounding is not the only kind of metaphysical relation that can be identified with the elusive in-virtue relation. Lutz discusses the following three alternatives in detail: composition, constitution, and realization. She rejects the first two of these proposals. Composition is not a relation of priority, as the in-virtue-of relation is, and constitution is either an identity relation or, more plausibly, in effect boils down to composition (implying that that which is doing the constituting is part of that which is constituted). If it is neither of these things, then it is a *sui generis* relation which, very probably, we cannot invoke as the in-virtue-of relation, if we are to make progress with Mackie’s scepticism (Lutz 2016, 194). Having compared what has been said about grounding with the ways in which realisation is generally characterized, Lutz draws the conclusion that realisation is a subspecies of grounding (Lutz 2016, 200).


Some metaethicists have explored a relation that seemed to be absent from Lutz’s discussion. It goes back at least to a paper by Rabinowicz and Österberg (1996) in which it is suggested that what value subjectivists have in mind by value is something that is “constituted” by the non-cognitive attitudes of subjects. However, it is clear that what is meant here by constitution is not

what metaphysicians generally have in mind. Still, it is certainly a view that can be interpreted as having metaphysical implications.

In Chapter 5, “The Explanatory Challenge Revisited”, Lutz turns her attention to two questions. Can grounding explain evaluative supervenience? Can we explain why certain natural facts ground evaluative facts?

As we move further into the chapter, the metaphysical focus steps up another notch, and it becomes quite clear that several tough challenges face anyone wanting to apply the grounding framework—both about value and about natural facts. Lutz probes deeply into metaphysics in her attempt to develop her own answer to these questions, and the result is close to a metaphysical tour de force. In carving out her position, she oscillates between more or less reasonable views about what the fundamental metaphysical entities are. Frequently fascinating, at a few points the discussion also borders on the puzzling. Some readers may struggle to follow it in places. This happened to me a few times, but I always suspected that this showed I needed to think harder about the issues I had begun to find puzzling.

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