



Causal Explanation without Ontological Ground: Buddhism as a Structural Counterexample

Ye Si Thu Aung^{1*}, Nguyen Hoang Hai²

Vietnam National University

Corresponding Author: Ye Si Thu Aung yesithuaung3000@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Philosophical explanation has recurrently been governed by the constraint that causal intelligibility requires termination in an ontological ground, articulated as first cause, permanent being, or unmoved mover. This paper isolates that constraint as structural presupposition rather than logical necessity and argues that early Buddhism constitutes a fully articulated counterexample. The Buddhist causal grammar demonstrates that continuity, efficacy, and explanatory closure can be achieved through conditional relations alone, without unconditioned terminus. Crucially, this counterexample is methodological rather than metaphysical. Through disciplined transmission and cessation-oriented constraint, Buddhist analysis sustained a causal framework that excluded ultimate origin, substrate, or metaphysical foundation, thereby repositioning debates over grounding, regress, and explanatory termination

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary analytic metaphysics has been increasingly preoccupied with the concept of grounding – a metaphysical relation often framed as what underpins or explains why things are the way they are (Bliss and Trogdon 2024). In these debates, it is commonly assumed that explanatory chains must be well-founded: they terminate in fundamental entities or facts that themselves have no deeper explanation (Schaffer 2017). In other words, most philosophers maintain that explanations cannot go on forever or loop back onto themselves – eventually, one must hit bedrock reality, an ontological ground, that serves as the final explanation for all else. This idea of an inevitable endpoint of explanation is often treated as a bulwark against infinite regress or circularity. We refer to this prevalent assumption as “ground-compulsion”, the notion that every explanation is compelled to bottom out in some ontologically basic ground.

However, the necessity of grounding as the only mode of explanation has come under scrutiny. A handful of theorists have begun to question whether all explanatory structures must conform to this linear, terminating model. Some even countenance the theoretical possibility of infinite regress or mutual dependence in explanation, though these scenarios are usually treated as exotic exceptions rather than viable general frameworks. By and large, grounding foundationalism – the view that all phenomena ultimately trace back to fundamental building blocks – still dominates mainstream metaphysical thinking. The result is a dearth of recognized large-scale counterexamples to the ground-compulsion thesis: we have few well-studied philosophical systems in which explanation proceeds without a terminating ground. As one recent commentator observes, Western metaphysics has been “dominated by forms of foundationalism” with surprisingly little attention to how things might work in a truly groundless world. Even efforts to imagine alternatives, such as metaphysical infinitism or coherentist networks of mutual dependence, remain largely speculative and without broad consensus in the literature (Thompson 2018).

It is against this backdrop that early Buddhist philosophy proves especially significant. Historical scholarship reveals that the Indian Buddhist tradition developed a radically different outlook in which the “widespread dominance of foundationalism” seen in Western thought “is not reflected to the same extent”. Instead, Buddhist philosophical history – particularly in its early strata – embraces alternatives that amount to a kind of ontological anti-foundationalism. In early Buddhist doctrine, everything is conditioned by something else; nothing possesses an independent, self-sufficient existence or explanatory prerogative.

Crucially, there is no notion of a first cause, unmoved mover, or fundamental substance that terminates the chain of explanation. The Buddha’s teaching of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) encapsulates this: every phenomenon arises in dependence on a web of prior conditions, and when those conditions cease, the phenomenon ceases. This principle is famously expressed in the *Nikāya* texts as: “When this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises. When this does not exist, that does not come to be; with the cessation of this, that ceases.” (Shulman 2008). In this formulation, explanation is entirely

relational – a matter of specifying the network of conditions – with no appeal to any metaphysically primitive element outside that network.

From a modern philosophical standpoint, early Buddhism thus offers a compelling counterexample to the ground-compulsion intuition. It provides a real-world model of an explanatory framework that neither demands nor desires an ontological ground. Where standard analytic approaches might insist that an infinite regress of causes or a circular causal structure is unacceptable, Buddhism is, by contrast, comfortable with an infinite regress of natural causes. The early Buddhist worldview does not implode in paradox for want of a first cause; instead, it positively asserts the coherence and sufficiency of groundless explanation – a self-contained web of interdependent phenomena.

This stands in stark contrast to the typical view in analytic metaphysics that non-terminating or looped explanations are at best rare quirks and at worst impossible (Schaffer 2009). The significance of this cannot be overstated: if early Buddhist thought truly implements a large-scale, systematic form of explanation without ontological grounding, it challenges a deep-seated assumption in contemporary theory. It suggests that the “well-founded” structure of reality might be a culturally contingent intuition rather than a universal metaphysical truth, thereby opening the door for serious reconsideration of infinite or holistic modes of explanation.

This study aims to demonstrate and analyze early Buddhism as just such a structural counterexample to grounding-based explanation. By drawing the Buddhist perspective into dialogue with current metaphysical debates, we hope to fill a notable gap in the discourse. To do so, we must address two tasks. First, we situate our inquiry at the intersection of grounding theory and Buddhist philosophy, ensuring that our use of terms like “explanation,” “ground,” and “dependence” bridge both traditions. Second, we must clearly articulate our methodology in examining the Buddhist texts, given that our approach is not an experimental or quantitative analysis but a conceptual and textual one. With these foundations in place (ironically, foundations of an argument against foundations), we will be prepared to explore how early Buddhist explanations function and why they do not require a terminating ground.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Grounding and the Problem of Explanatory Termination

In analytic metaphysics, grounding has emerged as a key concept for describing how less fundamental facts depend on more fundamental ones (Schaffer 2009). Grounding relations are typically held to be transitive, asymmetric, and anti-reflexive, mirroring the intuitive picture of reality as a hierarchy: higher-level phenomena are built upon, and fully explained by, deeper-level reality (Bliss and Priest 2018). A classic illustration is the relationship between mind and brain states, or between a statue and the lump of clay constituting it – philosophers often say the mental states are grounded in neural states, or the statue in the clay, indicating an explanatory arrow pointing downward to a more basic substrate.

On this view, to explain a phenomenon is precisely to identify its grounds. And if one asks for the explanation of those grounds in turn, one expects a further, more fundamental ground – until, eventually, the chain ends. The termination of explanatory chains is usually secured by positing a layer of *fundamentalia* (sometimes called *ungrounded facts*, *prime movers*, or *ontologically basic entities*) which, by definition, have no deeper explanation (Lowe 2007). These are the self-subsistent building blocks of reality that stop the regress of “why” questions. Metaphysical foundationalists thus endorse a principle of well-foundedness: every chain of ground has a finite descent terminating in something underived.

Debates about explanatory termination often intersect with age-old philosophical questions about infinite regress. In the Western tradition, infinite regresses of explanation have generally been viewed with suspicion – either as fallacies to be avoided or as paradoxes that signal the need for a different explanatory mode (such as a self-explanatory being or a brute fact) (Schermsbrucker 2024). A well-known principle in this vein is that “brute facts are not explanations but a refusal to explain; infinite regress defers explanation without providing it”. Most cosmological arguments for the existence of God, for instance, hinge on the impossibility of an infinite regress of causes, concluding that a first cause or necessary being must exist. This encapsulates the intuitive ground-compulsion: one feels that explanation must terminate somewhere, or else we have explained nothing at all.

Yet, contemporary scholarship has started to challenge whether this intuition is as ironclad as it appears (Schaffer 2009; Clark 1988). Philosophers like Jonathan Schaffer have examined the formal structure of explanation and noted that, while few would “want to say that circular or non-terminating explanatory structures are generally required in all cases,” it is at least conceivable in particular cases to allow that “explanations can circle or never terminate” (Schaffer 2009). Others have proposed explicit alternatives to the well-founded model: for example, metaphysical coherentism or interdependence, where dependence relations form a holistic network rather than a strict hierarchy (Bliss and Priest 2018). In these models, explanation is non-linear – a web of mutual support rather than a one-way downward grounding.

Naomi Thompson argues that metaphysical grounding might be non-symmetric, involving “complex networks of ground...closely analogous to the networks of justified beliefs in coherentist epistemology,” a position she terms “metaphysical interdependence.” (Thompson 2018). Such work underscores a crucial point: our usual insistence on asymmetry and termination in explanation could be a contingent preference rather than a mandatory feature of reality (Bliss and Priest 2018). The fact that a few analytic metaphysicians countenance the logical possibility of infinite or holistic explanation suggests that ground-compulsion might not be a metaphysical necessity so much as a guiding heuristic that has gone largely unchallenged.

However, what remains striking is the lack of large-scale, real-world philosophical systems that exemplify these non-foundational models in a comprehensive way. Theoretical possibilities aside, analytic metaphysicians have rarely engaged with fully-developed worldviews that operate without a fundamental ground (Siderits 2007; Ronkin 2005). This is where early Buddhist philosophy enters the conversation as a game-changer. Buddhism presents a mature, coherent, and influential philosophical system – one with two and a half millennia of development – in which notions of an ultimate ground or first principle are explicitly rejected. Early Buddhist metaphysics, as recorded in the Nikāyas (the earliest discourse collections) and systematized in the Abhidhamma, is an extended meditation on causality, change, and contingency absent any reference to a foundational entity or substance (Kalupahana 1975).

There is no creator God, no permanent ātman (soul or self), and indeed no concept akin to Aristotle's unmoved mover or Plato's Form of the Good. Instead, the doctrine of dependent origination provides the schema for all explanation: phenomena exist conditionally, arising and ceasing due to the presence or absence of specific causal factors. As Owen Flanagan aptly notes, "Buddhism is comfortable with an infinite regress of natural causes.

Indeed, the idea fits well with the metaphysical idea of dependent origination, according to which everything that happens depends on other things happening." (Flanagan 2011). In short, early Buddhism turns the usual Western account on its head – rather than an absolute foundation, reality is characterized by an absolute lack of foundation (an idea later referred to as *śūnyatā* or emptiness, in Mahāyāna Buddhism) (Siderits 2007). Everything is groundless in the sense of having no independent existence, yet everything is intelligible because it is integrated into a lawful causal nexus. For the early Buddhists, an infinite causal regress is not a defect in explanation; it is the natural way that existence unfolds.

By bringing early Buddhism into dialogue with grounding theory, we find a structural counterexample to the supposed necessity of ontological grounds. This counterexample is not merely a fanciful thought experiment, but a well-documented intellectual tradition (Ronkin 2005). As recent cross-cultural studies have pointed out, the Western commitment to fundamentality is not universally shared: "Buddhist philosophical history has been through periods in which alternatives such as ... anti-foundationalism ... have been favoured," suggesting that the intuition for a terminating ground might be culturally relative rather than universal. Our research builds on this insight, proposing that early Buddhism offers a proof of concept for a world without ontological grounds – a world where explanation does not bottom out in something fundamental, yet does not devolve into chaos or unintelligibility.

In what follows, we will argue that early Buddhist texts provide a rigorous account of causal explanation without recourse to an ultimate ground, and that recognizing this enriches contemporary metaphysical debates. To ensure our analysis is clear and credible, we now turn to a detailed account of our methodological approach. This will clarify how we selected and examined the Buddhist sources, what criteria we used to identify “groundless” explanations, and how we tested the robustness of those explanations. By making our method explicit, we aim to demonstrate that our conclusions about Buddhist causal structure are firmly grounded (so to speak) in textual evidence and logical analysis, rather than in misinterpretation or projection. Such methodological transparency is especially important in a cross-disciplinary study like this one, which straddles ancient scriptural analysis and modern metaphysical theory.

METHODS

Analyzing Buddhist Texts for Structural Explanation

Corpus Selection: Our investigation focuses on the early Buddhist canon, primarily texts in the Suttapiṭaka (the Nikāyas of the Pāli Canon) and the Abhidhamma Piṭaka. These sources were chosen to cover both the doctrinal expositions of the Buddha’s teachings and the systematic analyses by early Buddhist scholastics. The Nikāyas (such as the Saṃyutta Nikāya and Dīgha Nikāya) contain numerous discourses where the Buddha explicates dependent origination and causality in everyday language and practical contexts. For example, the Nidāna Saṃyutta is a collection of suttas devoted to exploring the chain of conditioned arising, often repeating the general causal principle: “When this exists, that comes to be; ... with the cessation of this, that ceases.”. Such passages provide direct evidence of how early Buddhism articulates explanation in terms of conditioned relations rather than underlying substances.

Complementing these are texts from the Abhidhamma, especially the Paṭṭhāna, which is the seventh and final book of the Theravāda Abhidhamma Piṭaka. The Paṭṭhāna is renowned for its in-depth enumeration of conditional relations – it details 24 distinct modes of causal relations and offers a comprehensive framework for categorizing conditioned phenomena. This treatise essentially systematizes the myriad ways in which phenomena can condition one another, from straightforward cause–effect relations to more complex interdependencies, all without ever invoking a fundamental entity that lies outside those relations. By including the Paṭṭhāna and related Abhidhamma sources, we ensure our analysis isn’t limited to a few sermons, but extends to the formal theoretical model that early Buddhist scholars used to understand reality. In sum, our corpus spans both primary doctrinal statements (for narrative and illustrative context) and secondary systematic texts (for analytic rigor), providing a well-rounded base for identifying the structure of Buddhist explanations.

Structural-Textual Analysis: Given that our aim is to uncover the structure of causal explanation in Buddhism, we employed a structural-textual analysis of the selected sources. This means we read the texts with a focus on patterns of explanation – how do the texts explain phenomena, and how are those explanations organized? Concretely, this involved parsing the causal statements and exegetical sections to identify architectural features such as:

Chains or Networks of Conditions: Do the texts present causes in a linear sequence, a branching network, or a loop? We mapped sequences like the twelve links of dependent origination (from ignorance to aging-and-death) and noted that they form a cycle (with ignorance being conditioned by latent mental fermentations tied to ignorance, per certain interpretations) rather than a simple linear chain with a beginning or end. We also looked for instances of multiple conditions converging on one effect, indicating a pluralistic causal network rather than a single-line chain. Indeed, dependent origination often highlights that phenomena arise from a confluence of factors (*hetu-pratyaya*) – “many factors, not just one or even a few” contribute to any given occurrence.

Presence or Absence of Terminating Entities: We scrutinized whether any explanation in the corpus invokes an uncaused cause or a fundamental substratum. Particular attention was paid to how the texts deal with cosmological or existential questions. In every case we examined, the Buddhist texts either refuse to answer in terms of ultimate beginnings (the Buddha famously set aside questions about the absolute origin of the world as *avyakata*, “undetermined” or not useful to liberation), or they explicitly describe existence as beginningless (for instance, the cycle of rebirth is often said to be without discernible first point). This structural absence of a first cause or a metaphysical ground in the textual explanations is a critical data point. It suggests that the causal web is conceptually complete in itself – there is no explanatory gap that the texts expect a ground to fill.

Explanatory Roles and Hierarchy: We analyzed whether the Buddhist explanations imply any kind of hierarchy of reality (for example, are some phenomena treated as more real or more causally primary than others?). In early Buddhism, we found a strong tendency to treat all conditioned phenomena as ontologically on par – everything conditioned is *sabhāva* (having its own nature) in *Abhidhamma* terms, but nothing is *svabhāva* in the sense of independent essence. Causal relations do not privilege a substratum; even seemingly fundamental elements (e.g. the *dhammas* enumerated in *Abhidhamma*) are defined by their relations and functions, not by standing as uncaused causes. Thus, structurally, Buddhist explanations lack the vertical layering (base level vs. higher level) characteristic of grounding explanations; instead, they display a flattened ontology where explanation is horizontal (phenomena explaining each other reciprocally) rather than vertical.

Throughout this structural-textual analysis, we engaged in a close reading of the texts in Pāli (with translation support from authoritative sources like Bhikkhu Bodhi and the Pali Text Society translations) to ensure we captured nuances. We also cross-referenced commentarial literature (such as the *Visuddhimagga* and the commentaries on the *Nikāyas*) when needed to clarify difficult points about causal relations. For instance, commentaries sometimes explicitly state the necessity of each link in the dependent origination cycle or discuss why the cycle has no beginning – these insights were used to inform our understanding of the implicit rules governing Buddhist explanation.

Causal Saturation Criteria: A key analytical concept we applied is what we term “causal saturation.” This refers to the idea that a given phenomenon is explanatorily sufficient by the set of conditions identified for it, such that introducing any deeper factor (like a metaphysical ground) would not enhance the explanation. To operationalize this, we looked at textual passages to see when an explanation is considered complete. For example, consider the arising of suffering (dukkha) in Buddhist doctrine: the texts explain suffering through a chain of causes (craving leads to attachment, leading to becoming, and so on). We ask: once the Buddha has enumerated these causes, is there any suggestion that one must then ask “But why do these causes themselves exist?” – in other words, do the texts point to a further grounding explanation for the entire chain?

We consistently found that the answer is no. The explanation is saturated at the level of the causal chain itself. Suffering is fully explained by the presence of craving and ignorance and other links; nothing more is needed to account for it. In fact, the Buddha’s teaching style often involves showing that once you remove those conditions (through spiritual practice), the effect – suffering – is eliminated. This demonstrates explanatory closure: the conditions given are not only necessary and sufficient for the effect, but they also illustrate how no remainder of the effect is left unexplained.

Our criterion for causal saturation was as follows: a set of conditions $\{C_1, C_2, \dots, C_n\}$ counts as explanatorily saturated with respect to an effect E if (i) whenever all C_i are present, E invariably arises; (ii) whenever any C_i is absent, E does not arise; and (iii) the relevant textual context does not invoke any factor outside $\{C_1 \dots C_n\}$ as necessary to account for E . When these three criteria are satisfied, the explanation of E by $\{C_1 \dots C_n\}$ is considered complete within the given framework.

We applied this criterion across a range of cases, from elementary conditional formulations (e.g., “with fire as condition, there is smoke”) to more complex doctrinal structures such as the twelvefold chain of dependent origination. In each instance examined, the Buddhist sources fulfilled the saturation conditions: the causal account was internally exhaustive. Nowhere does the analysis suggest that the entire sequence itself depends upon a further ontological ground or first principle. The absence of any appeal to an external explanatory terminus indicates that the identified conditions function as wholly sufficient explanantia. This procedure thus enabled a systematic demonstration that early Buddhist causal analysis does not presuppose an implicit metaphysical foundation, but instead achieves explanatory closure through conditional sufficiency alone.

Redundancy Testing: An important part of our structural evaluation was to ensure that the Buddhist explanatory framework has no superfluous elements inserted merely to adhere to a symmetry or aesthetic, and conversely, that it does not covertly smuggle in a ground under another name. We conducted a form of redundancy testing on the components of the causal structures we identified. In practice, this meant examining scenarios both within the texts and via thought experiments: If one condition in a given Buddhist explanation were removed or replaced, does the explanation still hold?

The early texts themselves often perform such tests. For instance, they emphatically state that without ignorance, volitional formations (*saṅkhāra*) do not arise, and without volitional formations, consciousness does not arise, etc., demonstrating that each link in the chain is non-redundant and necessary. We mirrored this logic by temporarily “removing” a condition in our analysis to see if the explanatory gap appears. It invariably did – confirming the texts’ own insistence that every link is required. Moreover, we looked for any element of the explanations that did not seem to do explanatory work. If, for example, the Buddha had ever posited a cause that seemed to play no role except to halt questioning (analogous to a brute fact “just because”), that would indicate a disguised ground. We found no such elements: every cause given has a discernible job in the explanatory economy.

This redundancy testing reinforces that early Buddhist explanations are minimalistic and parsimonious. They contain nothing superfluous – no idle axles in the causal machinery – and therefore no hidden placeholder for a metaphysical ground. Each part of the explanation is there because it contributes causally. This finding is important when comparing to grounding explanations in analytic metaphysics, which sometimes do include a terminus (like “it’s a brute fact that the fundamental entities exist” or “God’s will is the ultimate cause”) that isn’t explained further. In Buddhism, by contrast, even something as grand as the existence of the world or the continuation of *saṃsāra* (the cycle of rebirth) is not attributed to a single unexplained initiator, but to an interplay of conditions. Redundancy testing confirmed that Buddhist causal accounts are tightly structured: remove any piece and the structure collapses, but add an extra piece (like a proposed ontological ground) and the structure does not improve – it is already complete.

Comparative Framing: Finally, to interpret our findings in a broader philosophical context, we employed a comparative framing that sets the Buddhist explanatory model against the backdrop of contemporary grounding theory and related metaphysical concepts. This part of the methodology is more synthetic: having extracted the structural features of Buddhist explanation (e.g. lack of a fundamental layer, cyclicity, mutual dependence, etc.), we frame these features in the terminology used by analytic metaphysicians to facilitate a clear dialogue. For example, if analytic metaphysics discusses the asymmetry of explanation as a given, we highlight that Buddhist causality is notably non-asymmetric (some links are actually reciprocal, and the overall structure can be seen as symmetric in the sense of interdependence).

If Western discussions assume that an explanatory chain must terminate in an ungrounded fact, we point out how Buddhist doctrine violates that by presenting an infinitely iterable structure with no endpoint. In doing so, we also take care to address potential objections or misalignments: for instance, one might argue that Buddhist explanations are causal whereas grounding is typically seen as non-causal metaphysical explanation. Our comparative framing clarifies that while Buddhist explanation is indeed couched in causal language, it fulfills an analogous role to metaphysical grounding in that it explains why things are the way they are. The difference is that Buddhism accomplishes this

without positing a more fundamental layer of reality – a point that directly challenges grounding theory to broaden its conceptual horizons.

As part of comparative framing, we also examine whether early Buddhism's approach could be seen as a form of metaphysical coherentism. The idea of metaphysical coherentism (or interdependence) in recent philosophy posits that reality's structure might be like a web with no foundation, similar to how coherentist theories of knowledge have no basic beliefs but rather mutual support. We find that this description fits the Buddhist model quite well. Indeed, Buddhist scholars like Nāgārjuna later explicitly argue that all phenomena are empty of self-nature precisely because they exist only in dependence on others – a statement of metaphysical interdependence. By framing early Buddhist thought in this way, we do not anachronistically impose modern ideas onto ancient texts, but rather use modern vocabulary to highlight the philosophical import of those texts. This framing exercise involved engaging with secondary literature in philosophy of religion and cross-cultural philosophy to ensure we accurately capture both sides of the comparison. We consulted works such as (Garfield 2015) on Buddhist philosophy's relevance to contemporary debates, and (Bliss and Priest 2018) on fundamentality, to refine our comparative analysis.

In sum, our methodology combines textual analysis with conceptual analysis. It proceeds from carefully reading the primary sources, extracting their explanatory structures, and then evaluating those structures using defined criteria (saturation, non-redundancy) and comparing them to the prevailing paradigms in metaphysics. We have been mindful to keep the interpretation faithful to the Buddhist texts (e.g., not reading a notion of “ground” into Buddhism where it doesn't exist) while also making explicit connections to contemporary discourse (so that the significance of the Buddhist example is clearly understood in modern terms). By detailing this methodology, we hope to make transparent the bridge we are building between early Buddhist thought and the issues of grounding and explanation at the forefront of current philosophy.

With this methodological foundation established, we now proceed to apply this approach to the texts and debates at hand. In the next chapter, we will delve into the specific Buddhist doctrines and analyses that illustrate how causal explanation operates without ontological grounding, presenting our findings on why early Buddhism can be seen as a structural counterexample to the compulsion of ground. We will then discuss the implications of these findings for the general understanding of explanation and whether the requirement of a metaphysical ground is indeed as indispensable as it has been assumed. The ultimate goal is a coherent synthesis: showing that early Buddhism not only differs from Western metaphysical assumptions, but that it offers a philosophically sound and insightful challenge to the grounding paradigm – one that contemporary metaphysics can ill afford to ignore.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Conditional Sufficiency without Ontological Termination

Buddhist philosophy holds that every phenomenon arises in dependence on prior conditions, without invoking any independent substance to terminate the causal chain. The Pāli canon repeatedly affirms that “those dharmas which arise from a cause, the Tathāgata has declared their cause, and also their cessation”. In other words, dependent origination (*pratītya-samutpāda*) provides a complete conditional explanation: whenever a set of conditions obtains, it is wholly sufficient to bring about its effect, and likewise to bring about its end. Importantly, Buddhist thought explicitly denies any ultimate substratum or *svabhāva* underlying these conditions. As one authoritative commentator notes, Nāgārjuna “argues... that there is no such end-point” of ontological grounding and “denies the existence of an ontological foundation” (Goshima 2010). Emptiness (*śūnyatā*) is thus understood not as non-existence but as absence of self-nature: every conditioned thing is empty of an independent essence. For example, Nāgārjuna famously declares.

“Whatever arises dependently
Is explained as empty...
Since there is nothing whatever
That is not dependently existent,
For that reason there is nothing
Whatsoever that is not empty.”

This shows that emptiness (absence of intrinsic being) is simply the flip side of dependence. The upshot is that Buddhism explains phenomena purely by referencing their causal conditions, in an open-ended regress that never demands a “bottom” – no founding entity or final ground is needed. In effect, the Buddhist account treats conditionality as sufficient in itself: causes and conditions determine effects fully, and each effect’s cessation is likewise grounded in conditions, but there is no extra-layer of reality beneath those conditions. Nāgārjuna and other Madhyamikas insist this avoids any incoherence: all dharmas lack inherent existence, yet none are asserted unreal. Thus, the Buddhist schema delivers a conditional (structural) explanation that is conceptually groundless – it requires no ultimate terminus to halt the regress.

Institutional Stabilization and Doctrinal Constraint

Buddhist explanatory claims are embedded within an institutional context that helps fix and constrain doctrine. Canonical texts and councils functionally stabilize the teaching through formal recitation and codification. For example, tradition holds that three months after the Buddha’s parinirvāṇa a First Council met at Rājagṛha (Rajgir) to preserve the message. Five hundred Arahants gathered, chanting in unison: Ānanda recited the Suttas and Upāli recited the Vinaya (Sarao 2017). This collective recitation effectively canonized the Buddha’s discourses and monastic code, ensuring a uniform corpus for future interpretation. In broader terms, the Vinaya Pitaka itself exemplifies institutional

stability: it “contains detailed prescriptions governing the behavior, conduct, and communal procedures of monks (bhikṣus) and nuns” (Weinstein 2005). Notably, the Buddha consistently paired Dhamma and Vinaya (doctrine with discipline) as inseparable: the term Dhamma-Vinaya signals that teachings are meant to be lived out under regulatory rules.

1. **Vinaya Piṭaka (Discipline):** As one of the three “baskets” of the canon, the Vinaya contains hundreds of rules for the Sangha. It was compiled after the Buddha’s death and fixes what conduct is permitted or forbidden. In practice, adherence to these rules constrains how doctrine can be taught and practiced.
2. **Councils and Recitations:** The First Council (Rajgir) formalized the split into Sutta (discourses) and Vinaya (rules) by recitation. Later councils (e.g. the Third Council under Ashoka) further settled doctrinal disputes and removed heterodox practices (Sarao 2017). These events illustrate how institutional mechanisms shape Buddhism’s intellectual content.
3. **Doctrinal Authority:** Because the Vinaya was solemnly affirmed by the Arahants, its content acquires normative force. Any doctrinal interpretation must reckon with the Sangha’s rules. For instance, innovations that conflict with monastic ethics would be dismissed as against the Vinaya.

Together, these institutional features create a framework in which Buddhist theory is stabilized. Doctrines are not floating free but are channeled through the canon and the Sangha’s regulations. This interplay is another aspect of the counterexample: structural (institutional) conditions bear on what explanations are allowed. In sum, Buddhist metaphysics and soteriology are articulated within a disciplined community – canonization and vinaya anchor the teaching, limiting arbitrary reinterpretation. This shows concretely how a “structural” (institutional) context can stabilize a philosophical system without appealing to an ontological foundation.

Structural Resonance without Derivation

Buddhist explanation often proceeds by highlighting patterns of interdependence, akin to a web of mutual support, rather than positing unidirectional derivations from a hidden base. In Huayan Mahāyāna for instance, reality is famously likened to a “reciprocal frame structure” where “interconnected rods mutually support each other” (Kang 2025). This metaphor captures a key idea: events and properties resonate with one another within a holistic network. No single part lies at the bottom; instead every part of the structure contributes equally to the whole. Similarly, early Buddhist thought views mental and physical events as dynamically interlocked: e.g. perceptions,

feelings, and intentions arise in close temporal and causal succession, each defined by its role in the pattern rather than by an intrinsic essence.

Crucially, this structural view does not posit an external generator. Nothing is “shot out” from a metaphysical gun; rather, everything is explained by reference to all other relevant factors. Contemporary scholars note this sharp contrast with foundationalist metaphysics. Whereas foundationalism treats reality like a building (with lower levels underpinning higher ones), the Buddhist (Huayan) ideal is precisely non-hierarchical: every phenomenon’s identity and function emerge within the net of conditions (Kang 2025). In Madhyamaka terms, all entities are understood by their dependent designation, not by invoking an enduring substance.

The effect is that explanation is resonant rather than singular: each cause-effect nexus is understood as echoing through the causal web. For example, the principle of dependent origination is said to imply emptiness: because all things arise dependently, “they are empty of inherent existence” (Shulman 2008). Thus structural dependence itself is the explanation – one points to the pattern, not to something beyond it. This resembles certain modern “structural realist” accounts in philosophy of science, where one appeals to the pattern of relations rather than unobservable essences. In Buddhist practice too, insight often comes from observing the flow and cessation of events (the “resonance” of phenomena) without needing to posit any hidden puppet-master. In short, Buddhism demonstrates a purely relational account of causation: the explanatory power lies in the network of conditions, not in an additional ontic substrate.

The Reversal of Explanatory Burden

Because Buddhist theory already explains each event by its conditions, it turns the usual burden of explanation upside-down. Conventionally, metaphysicians seek an ultimate ground or fundament to explain why anything exists; Buddhism instead effectively says that no extra ground is needed. If all dharmas are dependently arisen, then one has already accounted for their coming-to-be and passing-away (Kalupahana 1975). Nagarjuna’s dictum captures the shift in perspective: since “nothing whatsoever...is not dependently existent,” there is likewise “nothing whatsoever that is not empty” (Oetke 2007; Siderits 2007). This can be read as follows: emptiness (lack of self-existence) is the baseline; to claim any entity has intrinsic existence is what requires justification.

Put differently, the default stance in this view is that dependence and emptiness explain everything; anyone insisting on some autonomous reality must explain why. In practice, Buddhist philosophers challenge claimants of independent existence: for example, Nāgārjuna argues that assuming such independence leads to a logical impasse (something would both exist and not

exist inherently). Thus he effectively hands over the explanatory task to those positing essential natures. We might say the burden of proof is reversed: rather than demanding Buddhism show why things lack essence, one asks why anything would have essence if all phenomena can be accounted for by interdependence.

This reversal is also reflected in pedagogical analogies. The famous verse from the first sermon places the responsibility on ending suffering: “See dependent origination, and you see the Dharma” implying that understanding causation suffices for understanding the teaching, not the other way around (SuttaCentral, n.d.). In short, Buddhism treats causation itself as explanatorily primary, so the “why” question is redirected to the assumption of inherent being. As the Madhyamaka position insists, it “avoids both of the extreme views” (Garfield 1995)– neither asserting an ultimate essence nor descending into nihilism. Hence, in this framework, the explanatory burden lies with those who would assert fundamental substances; Buddhism provides a complete causal scheme that no longer needs them.

Limits, Non-Claims, and the Structural Status of the Counterexample

We must be clear about what this counterexample does and does not claim. We do not claim that Buddhism entails some bizarre metaphysical nihilism or that it alone is the true ontology of all reality. Rather, it provides a structural model showing that causal explanation can be carried out without invoking an ontological foundation. In fact, classical Madhyamaka explicitly cautions against both extremes: it neither affirms *svabhāva* (inherent existence) nor endorses absolute voidness. As the Stanford Encyclopedia notes, Nāgārjuna and his successors were “very clear that their position avoids both of the extreme views” (Nagarjuna 1995).

Accordingly, our argument is circumscribed. We do not, for instance, offer Buddhism as a literal scientific theory or a comprehensive world-system; nor do we insist that all Buddhist elements (karma, rebirth, *nirvāṇa*, etc.) must be taken as metaphysically true in an empirical sense. We simply treat Buddhism as a coherent theoretical framework that demonstrates a particular point: that the structure of dependent causation can serve explanatory work in lieu of ontological grounding (Ronkin 2005). Any philosopher who objects that “Buddhism doesn’t explain why the system itself exists” is pointing to a question outside the scope of our inquiry. Our focus is internal: given Buddhist commitments, one does not need to posit a grounding substrate.

We also acknowledge practical limits. Some might worry that Buddhism merely “pushes back” the problem to explaining why dependently originated things exist at all. This is a legitimate question, but it is no more mysterious than asking why a causal network exists. In Buddhist thought the problem of ultimate existence is treated differently: *nirvāṇa* is described as “unborn” and not a conditioned phenomenon, effectively marking the end of inquiry (Gethin 2001). Moreover, Buddhism is primarily a soteriological path; its metaphysics serves the practical goal of ending suffering. So our counterexample must be understood as an internal-stratagem rather than an ontic dogma.

In sum, we present Buddhism not as an ontological dogma but as a methodological exemplar. Its main claim is negative (denying a required ground) and formal (concerned with structure). We align this with contemporary metaphysical debates about fundamentality: one might compare it to deflationary views on grounding that question the necessity of privileged depths. The Buddhist counterexample thus stands as a conceptual proof-of-concept: it shows that a well-developed philosophical tradition coherently does without ontological termination in causation. It does not pretend to solve every metaphysical problem, but it does demonstrate a radical alternative structure for explanation that recent metaphysicians should take seriously.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper has defended a narrowly defined but structurally significant claim: causal explanation does not require ontological grounding. The argument has proceeded not by refuting foundational metaphysics, but by identifying a sustained counterexample in early Buddhist thought. Dependent origination, together with its systematic articulation in Abhidhamma causal analysis, demonstrates that explanatory closure can be secured through conditional sufficiency alone. Explanation terminates when relevant conditions are exhausted, not when an ontological base is posited.

The analysis has shown that Buddhist causal grammar satisfies three criteria often thought to require grounding: continuity without collapse into arbitrariness, closure without infinite explanatory paralysis, and durability without metaphysical anchoring. The system neither invokes a first cause nor substitutes an alternative absolute. Instead, it restricts admissible explanation to conditionally operative factors and excludes explanatorily idle posits. The result is a structurally coherent account of causation that dispenses with ontological termination.

The force of the counterexample is methodological. It does not establish that grounding is false, nor that foundational metaphysics is incoherent. It establishes that grounding is not necessary for intelligibility. Once a large-scale explanatory framework operates coherently without ontological ground, necessity claims regarding grounding lose default authority. Grounding becomes an optional explanatory strategy rather than a structural requirement.

The implications are limited but decisive. Any theory that treats ontological termination as a prerequisite of explanation must now supply argument rather than presumption. The burden of justification shifts. Philosophy after this point proceeds under a revised constraint: explanatory adequacy is measured by causal discrimination and sufficiency, not by appeal to metaphysical endpoints.

Buddhism's role in this revision is exhausted by its function as a counterexample. Nothing further is required. Once compulsion is removed, grounding remains possible – but no longer compulsory..

FURTHER STUDY

This study still has limitations, so further research on Causal Explanation Without Ontological Ground: Buddhism as a Structural Counterexample is needed to refine this study and enhance the insights of readers and the authors.

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