

Can moral facts be an explanation?

An important question that has played a role in the debate between moral naturalism and non-naturalism is whether or not there are any moral explanations of non-moral facts. In this paper, I aim to describe two major positions in the debate and give reasons why I think that, if moral facts exist and are objective, moral explanations are possible. I will also argue that the answer to our main question is affected by whether or not the moral norms we accept are objective or relativistic.

In his paper “Ethics and Observation”, Gilbert Harman argues that there are no moral explanations of non-moral facts. Harman’s view, however, should not be considered just as a version of skepticism (that is, certain knowledge is impossible so observations cannot be used as evidence in general); as a matter of fact, he argues that observations can provide evidence to scientific theories whenever they are “relevant to a reasonable explanation of why the observation was made” (Harman, p. 33). The same, however, does not hold for observations of the moral kind, whose truth or falsity he considers “completely irrelevant to any reasonable explanation” of why the observation was made (Harman, p. 33). As a consequence of that, the claim about observations providing evidence for scientific theories just does not hold when we are talking about moral observations. In Harman’s view, then, whenever we see something that makes us make a moral judgment of any sort, we can explain our reaction by referring only to the non-moral aspects of our observation. This is made clear by an example that Harman makes: suppose that a

man sees a group of children pouring gasoline on an innocent cat with the purpose of setting the animal on fire. Clearly, according to Harman, whoever sees that will think that what's going on is just wrong. However, that person will just see that it's wrong – his knowledge of children, gasoline, fire and cats will be enough for him to make that judgment, and the wrongness or rightness that the act itself has (if it does have such a thing as rightness or wrongness) has no bearing on that man's reaction. The argument is attractive because it seems very natural for anyone that sees children igniting a cat to see that the act is wrong, not to conclude that it is on the basis of some moral facts. Following Harman's view, we conclude that observations have no weight in confirming moral claims – thus contradicting views such as Boyd's, that gave major importance to using observation as a tool for moral inquiry. Boyd wrote, for example, that "observations will play the same role in moral inquiry that they play in the other kinds of empirical inquiry about people" (Boyd, p. 332) and then proceeds to state that there should not be distinction between the value of observations between social sciences and other fields of empiric inquiry. Clearly, Boyd's view cannot be compatible with Harman's, since according to the latter observations in the moral field are explanatory irrelevant.

However, Harman's is not the only way we can consider this question. Nicholas Sturgeon, for example, wants to argue against Harman and claim that moral facts do in fact have an explanatory value. For example, Sturgeon urges the reader to think about cases such as Hitler's: if Hitler had not been morally depraved, Sturgeon writes, then he would not have done all he did. This means that a moral fact, namely Hitler's depravedness, has a role in explaining a non-moral fact – his

actions. If we don't like Hitler's example, Sturgeon gives others: the opposition to slavery in the United States before the Civil War, he says, was due to slavery being morally worse than at other times and places. What really matters in Sturgeon's argument, however, is not just the example: the point that he is making is that Harman's statement (that is, moral facts being completely irrelevant to any reasonable explanation of why observations are made) presupposes another statement, that is that then our observations would be identical regardless of moral facts. In Hitler's case, this means that if Hitler had not been a morally depraved person, he still would have done what he did (Sturgeon, p. 221). Similarly, in the case of the cat being ignited by the children, our observation would have been the same even if the young hoodlums' act had been perfectly moral. Given the story that Harman tells, then, we can consider a similar scenario. Suppose that the children were actually not doing anything wrong. Then, we want, Sturgeon says, to imagine a situation that is the most similar possible to the original one – except different enough that whatever the children are doing is not actually any wrong. Then, barring extraordinary circumstances (such as the observer hating children and thinking that their actions are wrong whenever they are having fun), anyone that sees the new situation will likely not think it is wrong: thus, moral facts do actually have an impact on our judgments and observations (Sturgeon, p. 225). This is because in order to have done something not wrong, the children had to be doing something different, that would likely not be called “wrong” by our observer.

We can express Sturgeon's argument as follows: if moral facts are explanatorily irrelevant, then it must be the case that changing the moral facts

related to some events does not change the events themselves or whatever we observe. So, if, for example, the fact that Hitler's moral depravedness is irrelevant to the explanation of his actions must mean that if Hitler had not been morally depraved he would still have done what he did. There are two ways to read the consequences of this: if we want to be friendly to Harman, we'd say that changing Hitler's psychology just enough to make him not morally depraved would have no impact on his actions. If, on the other hand, we want to be friendly to Sturgeon, we would conclude that changing Hitler enough to making him not morally depraved could indeed have prevented all his actions from happening. Now, what Sturgeon argues is the following: not only his reading is more natural (and, if we do not like Hitler's example we can consider many others); also, if we want to follow Harman's reading we end up in another pitfall. That is, if Harman's was the standard way of interpreting counterfactuals, we would have to give up explanatory relevance for all observations, including non-moral ones.

So, applying this in general makes Harman's theory just like any skeptical theory that denies the value of any observation (Sturgeon, p. 233-234). Harman, in his paper, also mentions another example: assume that a physicist sees a vapor trail in a cloud chamber, he says; then, the scientist rightfully concludes, according to his theory, that there is a proton (Harman, p. 33). However, if Harman was consistent between science and ethics, then by the reasoning above (that we cannot trust any theory that says that something is caused by something else) he would have to give up any value that he gives to the scientist's conclusion. By this logic, following

Sturgeon's argument, what Harman says is either invalid or just an example of skepticism, which is no independent claim.

As a consequence, while Harman's argument seems attractive at first, Sturgeon successfully shows why it is not enough to claim that moral facts have no explanatory value. However, Harman could still have ways to respond to Sturgeon's argument. Being a moral relativist, Harman can easily give, for any example that Sturgeon may find, an analogous case where different moral facts lead to the same reaction. I shall give an example to make this point clearer. Sturgeon argues, when he considers the cat's example, that we cannot really change the situation enough to make the children's act not wrong without making the average person's reaction change in response to that. Imagine, however, that we bring the observer (the man that saw the children igniting the cat) to some other neighborhood on some other planet (not much different than Horgan and Timmons's Moral Twin Earth) where people hate cats so much that their entire culture is in adamant agreement that any evil towards cat is beneficial to all. Just as our observer gets to this planet, he sees some children igniting a cat, and we may claim that what they are doing is perfectly consistent with their moral norms, because doing harm to cats is considered a morally good act in the society and culture that the children are part of. Under moral relativism, we can have the children perform the same exact action on Earth and on Anti-Cat-Earth, but the act would be not be wrong on this other planet. However, our Earthling observer, at the sight of these "moral" hoodlums, would react in the same exact way regardless of the planet he's on. In this case, we have imagined a scenario change that was just different enough to make an action not wrong leaving

the reaction identical: so the moral rightness of the act was completely irrelevant to explaining anything related to it or to the reaction of observers. A similar argument could be made for any example given by Sturgeon, and could give a reasonable basis for holding a double standard for science and ethics when deciding the explanatory validity of observation.

As a conclusion, I believe that the upshot of the debate between Harman and Sturgeon eventually depends on whether or not we want to accept objective moral norms (versus relativistic ones). In the case that we do, then of the two views Sturgeon's appears to be the correct one. However, this does not establish that there are moral explanations of non-moral facts in the general sense, since this requires moral objectivism to be true.

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