Moral Explanation and Moral Objectivity
Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity by Gilbert Harman; Judith Jarvis Thomson
Review by: Peter Railton
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I. Moral Explanation

What is the real issue at stake in discussions of “moral explanation”? There isn’t one. Not because there is none, but because there are many. We may distinguish two broad kinds of relevance of explanatory questions to morality, one internal to moral thought and practice, the other external.

Internal. Commonsense moral frameworks and prevalent moral theories deploy a number of concepts which integrate normative purport and explanatory ambition. Such notions as moral obligation, moral virtue, and moral responsibility typically embody or presuppose models of action and its causation, often incorporating rather specific notions of cognition, motivation, and deliberation. Notions of intrinsic good and moral rightness are characteristically assumed to have “internal” connections with what is or could be intrinsically motivating for a judge or an agent. And moral reasoning is governed by a quite general principle of supervenience, which imposes a broad explanatory constraint on moral discourse: nothing can be good, or right, but that something non-moral makes it so.

External. In any domain where we claim to discourse meaningfully or possess knowledge we must be able to meet appropriate conditions of semantic and epistemic access. Our best-developed models of such access involve causal-explanatory links between the domain in question and human cognitive activities and linguistic usage. Domains of purported knowledge where such links seem absent or problematic—such as mathematics, modalities, and universals—pose familiar skeptical challenges. And even where access appears less problematic, as in the empirical realm, skeptical questions arise about how we can obtain evidence for our hypotheses since they characteristically logically outstrip our evidential base. A leading approach to this problem is inference to the best explanation, pioneered by Gilbert Harman. But its applicability depends upon the hypotheses’ contribution to explanation.

Moral claims could not play their role in human action, judgment, and society were they not accessible through experience and intimately connected
to the how’s and why’s of human conduct. Those who would avoid error theory, instrumentalism, or serious revisionism—be they Humean or Kantian, cognitivist or noncognitivist—must show how moral discourse is able to play both its normative and explanatory roles and to discharge its explanatory presuppositions.

II. Moral Objectivity

As with moral explanation, so with moral objectivity—there is no one “real issue”. Objectivity partly concerns the metaphysics of value, especially, value’s relation to subjective aims. Is honesty (e.g.) good because we admire it, or do we admire it because it is good? Objectivity is also an issue about the kinds of reasons that support morality. Are they objective, in the sense of being binding upon or necessarily motivating for all rational agents as such? And objectivity is an issue about moral epistemology. Is there objective evidence—evidence other than subjective conviction, or independent of subjective variation in those judging—for any moral claims?

In Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity,1 Gilbert Harman and Judith Jarvis Thomson focus especially on epistemic objectivity, and it is primarily in this connection that their interest in, and disagreement over, moral explanation arises (though the objectivity of reasons also proves crucial). Harman presents his view on explanationist grounds: the best explanation of what goes on in our moral discourse and practice does not involve hypothesizing a domain of objective, nonrelative moral facts answering to our moral claims (63). Instead, he argues, our moral discourse is best accounted for by a two-part theory involving both relativized moral propositions (for which there is a domain of relative moral facts and associated reasons with “relative normative force”) and quasi-absolutist moral judgments (for which there is no corresponding domain of absolute moral facts or reasons with “absolute normative force”, but only a language of facts and reasons that is to be understood quasi-ly or “projectively” (44)).

Thomson takes Harmanian explanationist concerns seriously, pronouncing his epistemic strictures initially “plausible” (92). That would appear to require her, as a defender of moral objectivity, to counter Harman by finding an explanatory role for objective, nonrelativistic moral facts. Yet when she examines purportedly objective “moral explanations” she finds them implausible (90). She concludes, however, that this is not “a disaster for friends of Moral Objectivity” (91), since a weaker explanationist requirement—to the effect that nonmoral features (non-causally) explain and thus give evidence for moral propositions—can be met for nonrelativistic moral claims. This, she

1 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1996). All parenthetic page references in the text are to this volume.
believes, suffices to fend off epistemic skepticism about moral objectivity (93).

Harman counters by endorsing a form of argument parallel to Thomson's own critique of (putatively objective) moral explanations of nonmoral facts. Thomson's explanatory requirement might be met and we still would lack evidence for any one nonrelativistic moral framework rather than another (68, 171). He concludes that Thomson's weaker explanatory requirement is too weak to help vindicate moral objectivity (169–70).

Now since his earlier book, The Nature of Morality, Harman has been widely perceived as rejecting any sort of "moral explanation". But in his contributions to Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity he reaffirms earlier claims that the issue for him is not whether there are any moral explanations, but whether these explanations could provide the sort of evidence we'd need to adjudicate epistemically between rival moral theories or frameworks (171). To discuss this question, as well as Thomson's criticisms of purported moral explanations, we'll need to look at some examples.

III. Some Examples

In a "moral explanation", what is supposed to explain what? Again, there are many explanatory tasks and so no one answer. But some kinds of purported moral explanation are crucial to meeting Harman's epistemic challenge. Since Thomson recognizes that the status of moral propositions is precisely what is at issue, she begins her discussion by asking whether an uncontroversial nonmoral proposition's truth could ever be explained by the (purported) truth of a moral proposition (74). She examines several types of "moral explanation" that allegedly show just this—that the justice of Alice's action of keeping a promise can explain why others judge it to be just, that Bob's honesty can explain why he brought forth certain evidence even when he knew it would seem to incriminate him, that the injustice of the Transylvanian state can explain the increasing disaffection of its people even before the

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3 As he previously wrote:

... the question is not just whether there are "moral explanations." It is rather whether there are the sorts of moral explanations that would make moral claims empirically testable in the ways that scientific claims are empirically testable.


Thomson identifies the "Thesis of Moral Objectivity" as "It is possible to find out about some moral sentences that they are true" (68). To put the thesis in Harmanian terms, "It is possible to find out about some nonrelativistic moral proposition that it is (objectively) true" (compare 174). Harman believes that even the most plausible moral explanations would not support such a finding.
state is judged by them unjust (compare 76–90). She concludes that while these may appear to be explanations of nonmoral phenomena based upon moral properties, sober assessment reveals that the moral features cited are not doing the explanatory work—they instead are epiphenomenal to the explanations (79, 90). Bob’s honesty, for example, supervenes on his psychology, and Transylvania’s injustice supervenes on its institutional structures and social inequalities. It is these psychological, sociological, and political features, Thomson contends, that are in fact doing the explaining.

Now a claim of epiphenomenalism may be either particular or systematic. The shadow cast by a schoolchild’s punch on the schoolyard wall is epiphenomenal to the punch itself as an explanation of his classmate’s being knocked down. But the boy-punching shadow is not epiphenomenal to all explanations. It may, for example, explain why a lunch-hour supervisor suddenly turned his head to see what the boys were up to.5

Moral facts, by contrast, are deemed systematically epiphenomenal by Thomson, and her argument is indeed perfectly general. Thanks to supervenience, there will never be a moral distinction—say, between honest and dishonest or just and unjust—where there is not also a nonmoral difference underlying it of a kind able to participate in familiar causal-explanatory relations. Explanatory credit can then always be given to these right- or good-making features, and the moral features themselves will “play no role at all” (cf. 90).

Of course, were the moral features identical with (or otherwise reducible to) these right- or good-making features, there would be no room for an interesting charge of epiphenomenalism—the moral features would be right there in the midst of the causal-explanatory whirl after all.6 So let us assume that moral features are non-reductively supervenient (in some suitable sense). This, however, does not yet suffice for explanatory irrelevance. A large number of philosophers hold that psychology, sociology, and biology supervene non-reductively on the physical, yet as Thomson points out, “it is very implausible to think that no social, psychological, or biological facts ever explain anything” (80n).

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4 I have amended the examples slightly.
5 Note that we have no special difficulty about achieving semantic or epistemic access to shadows, or knowledge of them, epiphenomenal though they be in certain explanatory contexts.
6 Some contexts of explanation are intensional, so the mere fact of identity between moral features and right- or good-making features would not always permit the moral features to play a full explanatory role as such. Identity would, however, secure their causal connectedness.

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Why is this so implausible? Why not always give all the explanatory credit to the underlying physical facts? Here is a suggestion. Psychologists, sociologists, and biologists have formulated worthwhile theories using the distinctive categories of their disciplines. Such theories contain generalizations that may not be strict or exceptionless, but that do illuminate functional connections, causal dependencies, and other relations at a particular (supervenient) level of description of the phenomena. These relations support counterfactuals and afford explanatory insights that would not be evident at the (subjacent) level of a purely physical description of events. For example, evolutionary biologists might explain patterns of male appearance or behavior partly in terms of sexual selection, in which females favor males able to visibly manifest bodily health, so that we find showy (and often otherwise inefficient) coloration, physique, display, etc. in males across a wide range of species. Now down at the level of physics, some or other complex micro-physical process does in a law-abiding way yield all the molecular motion that underlies these evolutionary histories. But that account, though itself explanatory, would not supply the additional explanatory insight evolutionary theory affords. Indeed, if complex life-forms have evolved on other planets, organisms might have a quite different physio-chemical base yet still show patterns of sexual dimorphism, sexual selection, and mating display. Neither physical nor biological explanation drives the other out; both contribute to the full explanatory story.

If this enables us to see why biology, though supervenient, can be seriously explanatory, then the case against moral explanation must be that moral categories and generalizations do not afford this sort of distinctive contribution to understanding causal, functional, or structural relations. That might be so, but is it obviously so? That moral categories answer to normative purposes doesn’t settle the matter, since, as we’ve seen, those normative purposes themselves involve important explanatory conditions and presuppositions.

Return to honest Bob. Honesty amounts to different things in different contexts, and the interests to which it answers, though familiar, are quite complex features of the social landscape. Consider what honesty requires of Bob if: he is describing an illness to a child, or to an adult of great emotional vulnerability; or he has promised confidentiality to one friend but not another; or he is playing a friendly game of poker; etc. Let us suppose there to be no compact, otherwise psychologically unified set of characteristics that

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7 I do not know whether Thomson would accept this account. For further discussion, see P. Railton, “Explanations Involving Rationality”, in John Earman and John D. Norton (eds.), The Cosmos of Science (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997).

make up honesty. (Common sense seems to permit that honest people could vary considerably in other aspects of their personalities or “depth psychologies”.) We nonetheless think we are giving a distinctive kind of explanation when we attribute Bob’s having come forward with self-incriminating evidence to his honesty, rather than, say, to his naiveté, or to a coolly self-interested calculation. Bruce, say, has also come forward with evidence that incriminates Bob, but unlike Bob, he stands to gain from it. We can meaningfully ask whether Bruce, whose situation and depth psychology might be quite different from Bob’s, is testifying “for the same reason” as Bob, and our answer will be reflected in how we receive their testimonies. There appear to be social mechanisms—trust, alliance formation, etc.—that work at the level of honesty and function to provide feedback and incentives. Indeed, honesty is bound up with a number of psychological dynamics found in quite diverse individuals: self-deception, repression, dissonance, etc. Humans are evolved, social, communicating animals who have had the most vital interests at stake in processes of co-ordination, trust, and the exchange of information. To be sure, many of the effects of honesty can be gotten by seeming or being believed to be honest. So attentiveness to honesty and dishonesty has special social importance and even self-deception about honesty can be expected to be rife. But this hardly removes the distinction between honesty and its appearance. And as Lincoln indirectly pointed out, being honest is often the best way of convincing others (and, we might add, convincing oneself).

Exclusive attention to the diverse psychological or physiological dynamics upon which honesty supervenes might not make the unifying characteristics of these phenomena evident. The category of honesty, which owes its shape partly to normative interests, enables us to see the relationships and their dynamics, and (we seem to think) to convey distinctive explanatory information. This may or may not be high-octane explanation, but it seems to me an open empirical question—and not a matter to be settled by a quick appeal to intuition—whether such a partially normatively-shaped category can help us gain genuine explanatory insight.

IV. Comparative Normative Explanation

If this is an empirical question, then it should be possible to begin to address Harman’s challenge:

Whether or not [examples like Bob’s honesty] are cases in which a moral claim explains some uncontroversial facts, they are not cases that support one moral framework as compared with another. [170]

Call this the comparative explanation test for normative theories or frameworks. Might it help us decide about the tenability of the (putatively objective) virtue framework we used to explain and evaluate Bob’s act?

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How good, really, is the virtue-based explanation of Bob’s act? Virtues are supposed to be persistent traits of character that yield similar acts across a range of different circumstances. Virtues, too, are supposed to have or promote certain values and coherencies: the life of virtue is to be a good life both for the agent who leads it and for those around her (where, as before, the goodness of a life is tied in turn to what is or might be intrinsically motivating); moreover, the life of virtue is to have a certain rationality and integrity—the different virtues are supposed to fit with and reinforce one another. For honesty to exist and be a virtue, all or nearly all of these elements must be realized. For honesty to virtuously explain Bob’s act, that conjuncture must be central to the story of what he did and why.

Recently, social psychologists have cast doubt on the existence of stable traits of character of the kind various virtues are supposed to be. Situations appear to have much greater influence on behavior, and personalities less continuity, than characterological common sense supposes.9 Moreover, moral philosophers have argued that, apart from a natural or religious teleology, it is only under special conditions that the classic virtues would meet all or most of the conditions of value and coherence. The constellation of normative and explanatory concerns meant to hold the notion of virtue together and permit it to play a central role in our moral experience might come apart. Nor can we plausibly retain the normative purport of classical virtue theories while rejecting their characterological psychology.

Honesty might nonetheless survive as an important category of conduct, answering to distinctive, functionally important interests in a range of contexts. A less characterological moral theory might link these interests systematically to situational criteria of moral assessment, and so offer a better—but still moral and non-debunking—explanation of behavior like Bob’s and why we regard it as we do.

Would this sort of comparative testing satisfy Harman? He does believe that his own two-part relativist account of morality, which also draws upon the systematic dynamics of situations and interests (e.g., in bargaining), offers the best explanation of our moral experience (63). Moreover, he takes his account to possess an appropriate normative force: “Moral relativism rejects moral nihilism and asserts instead[:] Morality should not be abandoned” (6).

Of course, what it possesses is “relative” rather than “absolute normative force” (28). To some philosophers, that makes Harman’s explanation debunking, or highly revisionist. But for Harman relative normative force is not a pseudo-force—it is what morality has always had (28) and all it needs. (Such

a force presumably lies behind the ‘should’ of “Morality should not be abandoned.”) Harman uses as a model the relativity of motion (3–5), according to which absolute motion is a fiction, but motion relative to a spatio-temporal framework is as real as can be. He does not question the status of relative reasons as reasons for those who have them, and further as reasons we all acknowledge when we say “S has reason to D” or “there are reasons for S to D” (46), even when we are not S or ourselves have no reason to D. This parallels the case of relative motion. We acknowledge a real, relative displacement of bodies with respect to a given framework when we say “A is in motion relative to F”, whether or not we are A or ourselves in motion relative to F.

Neither does Harman seem to reject the possible role of relative reasons as explanatory. Thanks to the “internal” linkage of an agent’s reasons and her motives, we can appeal to someone’s reasons to explain why she acts as she does, at least in favorable cases (people can be irrational). This linkage to the agent’s motivation is an advertised advantage for Harman’s explanations over his non-relativist competitors’. His moral theory’s non-quasi-absolute judgments, suitably understood as elliptical, have objective truth conditions (43) and track real, potentially explanatory reasons for agents to act (62). If he’s right, then the comparative explanation test for normative theories is alive and well—and working for him.

Note that while this in some sense might earn his view the title of relativistic moral realism, it does not make him into a moral objectivist, as that thesis was interpreted in note 3, above. On his view, there are no non-relativistic moral propositions with objective truth conditions (42), and so a fortiori none that could be known to be objectively true.

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