Thomson Against Moral Explanations

NICHOLAS L. STURGEON
Cornell University

One prominent feature of this debate between Harman and Thomson may surprise readers who have followed recent discussions of moral knowledge. Harman is well-known for having argued that supposed moral facts never seem relevant to the explanation of nonmoral facts. He does not repeat that argument here, however; when he mentions moral explanations, he concedes that many appear perfectly reasonable, insisting only that they are of little help in settling deep moral disagreements (168–70). Thomson, on the other hand, although aiming to defend moral knowledge, takes up Harman’s earlier skeptical argument, not to challenge it, but in order to agree with its (proximate) conclusion. She argues that moral facts never explain nonmoral ones, and that the moral skeptic must therefore be met on other grounds. Since she also thinks such grounds are available, her conclusion is that moral explanations contribute nothing to moral knowledge, but that that knowledge is secure without them.

As a friend of moral explanations who believes that they matter to our moral knowledge, I want to address Thomson’s argument. She raises important challenges clearly and forcefully. I offer three replies, the first two including a limited measure of agreement. First, I agree that if the moral explanations Thomson considers were defective for the reason she offers, their defectiveness would not threaten our moral knowledge. What limits my agreement, however, is my thinking that what look like moral explanations—even if Thomson is right that they need somehow to be reconstrued—would still play a central role in our acquiring moral knowledge. Second, I believe that Thomson correctly identifies a reason why moral explanations (reconstrued or not) cannot solve the problem of moral skepticism as she presents it. But I believe that this shows a difficulty, not with moral explanations, but with her way of presenting the skeptical problem. Third, I shall argue that moral

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explanations do not in any case need reconstruing; I do not believe that Thomson makes a plausible case for rejecting any of the sorts of moral explanation that she considers.

Thomson’s skepticism about moral explanations is explicitly meant to be “local,” in two respects. First, although she regards moral facts as explanatorily irrelevant—“epiphenomenal”—partly because they supervene entirely on other explanatory facts, she does not want to call all supervenient facts of this description (such as psychological facts) epiphenomenal.3 The moral case is somehow special (79–80n). Second, she thinks that the “explanatory strategy,” of trusting good explanations of our evidence, may defeat some familiar varieties of skepticism, such as skepticism about the past; its failure against the moral skeptic is again supposed to be an exception (75). It will thus be an embarrassment to Thomson’s argument if, in criticizing moral explanations, she appeals (as I shall suggest) to considerations that would equally show either that all supervenient facts are epiphenomenal or that other applications of the explanatory strategy fail.

(1) How much difference would it make to our moral knowledge if we were to reject moral explanations, such as

(a) Injustice caused revolution R,

for Thomson’s reason, that moral facts are epiphenomenal? Not much, I believe. In a situation in which I would conclude that (a) was true, someone with the same evidence, and the same background moral beliefs, but with Thomson’s view of the metaphysics, will infer only that

(b) Some nonmoral properties on which injustice supervenes caused revolution R.4

But it follows from (b), just as from (a), that the situation causing the revolution was unjust. So, if we can know that (b) is true, moral skepticism is mistaken, and mistaken because of what we know about the explanation of the revolution.

3 Thomson does not fully explain what she means in calling moral facts epiphenomenal. The key idea, clearly, is that although their existence is explained by nonmoral facts, they do not explain any nonmoral facts in turn. It is not clear, however, whether she thinks that they explain nothing. Perhaps she could allow that general moral facts help explain more specific ones, for example. However, she will presumably reject many moral explanations we often give of further moral facts—for example that children of honest parents tend to grow up honest themselves—because it is hard to see how the honesty of the parents could produce this effect without producing many nonmoral effects as well.

4 And when people propose explanations like (a), Thomson, while regarding them as mistaken, can credit them (sometimes) with being right about an explanation like (b).

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Someone is likely to object: in any circumstance in which we thought we had reason to believe (b), we could nevertheless provide a better, because more austere, explanation just by citing the relevant nonmoral facts, thus:

(c) Nonmoral facts A, B and C caused revolution R.

And this nonmoral statement is therefore all that we would be entitled to believe as an explanation.

But this reply is weak, for two reasons. First, it is not clear that explanations like (c) always are better than explanations like (b). Moral categories, like those of other supervenient disciplines, may help identify commonalities that matter to explanation but that would not be apparent without their use. This is a difficult issue; all I insist here is that it is obviously not a question one can settle a priori.\(^5\) Second, it is in any case false that whenever we are confident of an explanation like (b), we are equally confident of a corresponding one like (c). Sometimes we are more certain (as I would say) of the effects of some moral fact, or (as Thomson could put it) of the effects of whatever nonmoral facts the moral fact supervenes on, than we are of just which nonmoral facts those are; and in such cases we use our views about the former question to test those about the latter.\(^6\) We bring to our thought about the virtues, individual and social, many assumptions about their causal roles. The simplest illustration is the near-truistic view that, other things equal, justice stabilizes a society whereas injustice destabilizes it. An account of injustice that had it supervening on properties that had never produced a revolution, or even pressure for reform, would thus be a terribly implausible account.\(^7\) We also commonly trust some judgments (about any moral topic) more than others because of the conditions under which they are formed. We think that when judgments are made under favorable, non-distorting conditions, the explanation of their being made is more likely to lie (as I would say) in their truth or (as I suppose Thomson would say) in responsiveness to the very nonmoral facts that make them true. Debates about which facts we are responsive to in such circumstances are therefore commonplace in norma-

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\(^5\) This issue—which, since it concerns whether the moral categories are doing any “explanatory work”, might be thought to bear also on whether to believe (a) rather than just (b)—is nowhere mentioned by Thomson.

\(^6\) I have cited the two kinds of case I describe here in “Nonmoral Explanations,” in James E. Tomberlin, ed., Philosophical Perspectives 6 (Atascadero, California: Ridgeview, 1992), 98–99.

\(^7\) Thus, John Rawls argues (A Theory of Justice [Cambridge: Harvard, 1971] Sec. 76) that, on plausible psychological assumptions, a society just by his standards would be significantly more stable than one just by utilitarian standards. (This is not merely a claim about the effects of the society’s being thought just, for that factor is held constant in the comparison.) He does not offer this as one of the “main grounds” favoring his view, but regards it as helping to rebut possible doubts.
tive debates—that is, in argument about just which nonmoral facts the moral ones supervene on.

It is not clear, therefore, that joining Thomson in rejecting explanations such as (a) would require much (indeed, any) change in the epistemological principles I accept. In rejecting explanations like (a), Thomson takes herself to be arguing for this conclusion:

(i@): There is no moral sentence whose truth would explain the truth of a factual sentence. (74)

But statements like (b) appear themselves to be moral statements whose truth would explain that of nonmoral ones. If so, then (i@) is mistaken even if we ignore explanations like (a), and there seems nothing to keep me from retaining a principle like the one Thomson attacks as (ii@):

The truth of a factual sentence is evidence for a moral sentence only if the truth of the moral sentence would explain that of the factual sentence. (75)

(2) One objection Thomson raises is not to the plausibility of moral explanations but to their usefulness in rebutting moral skepticism. Alice, who has promised Bert a banana, keeps her word at some cost to herself. Might we ascribe Alice’s action to her just character? Thomson does not (here) deny that we might. She objects, however, that this explanation will appear plausible only to those who already believe something the moral skeptic doubts. For

a person’s being just would explain his or her doing such and such … only on the assumption that his or her doing the such and such was just. But what entitles us to assume that Alice’s giving Bert a banana was just?

Someone might deny that statements like (b) are really explanations. (The objection might be that (b) states that there is an explanation of the revolution, but doesn’t provide it.) In that case, call such statements (for obvious reasons) “epi-explanations.” Then my epistemological principles will indeed require modest restatement. For example, I will then hold that we may often reasonably infer the best of competing moral epi-explanations of nonmoral facts; that global explanatory plus epi-explanatory coherence is a virtue of belief systems; etc.

This principle needs modification, however. At the very least, it is crucial that (ii@) allow us (as Thomson probably intends) to infer not only an explanation of our evidence but whatever we can deduce from that explanation (e.g., in the case of (b), that the situation was unjust).
Now, although I reject some of the assumptions behind this question, I believe that it fastens on a point of great importance: namely, that the procedure of inferring plausible moral explanations of our nonmoral evidence is not a way of throwing, across an is-ought gap, a bridge that would satisfy a certain sort of determined skeptic—the sort Thomson seems to have set out to answer. For when a moral assumption (that Alice is just) appears to us to explain some nonmoral fact (that she kept her word), that is always partly because of other moral assumptions (e.g., about what justice leads the just to do) that we rely on in assessing the explanation. Our inference to the moral explanation thus proceeds partly from what are already moral premises. What the determined skeptic demands, however, is an inference from nonmoral premises only.

This might indicate a problem with moral explanations; or it might mean that it is a mistake to try to meet the determined skeptic on his own grounds. Two reasons incline me to the latter view. One is that other applications of the "explanatory strategy" (which Thomson regards as successful (75)) encounter a precisely parallel problem. There are indeed statements about the past, for example, that would plausibly explain our evidence about the present—but only so long as we assume a great deal else about the past. So the explanatory strategy, however plausible, will not satisfy a determined skeptic about that topic either. We can also pinpoint, I believe, what is wrong with the determined skeptic's challenge. That challenge typically assumes not just that there exists one of the inferential "cracks" Thomson mentions, but also (i) that epistemological foundationalism is correct, and (ii) that all our basic knowledge falls on one side of the crack: it is all, for example, about nonmoral facts. If we hold the foundationalism fixed, and decline to claim basic knowledge of facts on the far side, our only nonskeptical option appears to be to find the sort of bridge the skeptic demands. But of course we need not hold the foundationalism fixed, and can reject the determined skeptic's challenge by denying it.

That moral explanations do not defeat a determined skeptic does not mean that they contribute nothing to our knowledge. On any plausible nonfounda-

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10 For example, I don't agree that we could see an action as explained by a person's justice only if we had already, independently, decided it was just; and I have answered in Section (1) the question of what justification we might have for thinking the action just (though, for the reason explained here, that justification, too, is one that would disappoint a determined skeptic).


12 All the responses to skepticism that Thomson mentions fall into one of these latter two categories (69–73). She describes one option as rejecting the skeptic's "presupposition" by denying that there is the relevant "crack in the universe of discourse"; but, despite the change in imagery, this seems to mean no more than that where there appear to be cracks, there are in fact adequate bridges.
tionalist epistemology, explanatory coherence remains a virtue in a belief-system, so it matters that it is one in which moral beliefs can share. Nor does the dependence of plausible explanation on background assumptions mean that just anything goes. As Thomson notes (86–87), people who accept religious explanations will hold further beliefs that support them. But the standards of a more global coherence can be quite severe; and against them, in my view, the prospects for religion are dim, whereas those for morality—partly because it need not be tied to religion—are much better.

(3) Thomson’s argument against explanations like (a) depends mainly on her contention that the situations to which these explanations would apply resemble an example she introduces to illustrate “paradigm epiphenomenality” (81). Her example features a bored Donald suddenly shouting “Boo!” at a speaker in the middle of a speech. This is rude, and it also puts the sound, “Boo!” onto a recording of the speech. But, Thomson says, the moral fact that Donald’s shouting “Boo!” in mid-speech was rude is obviously no part of the explanation of the sound’s appearing on the recording.

It strikes me as important that whether this example even appears to illustrate any kind of epiphenomenality depends on what question we ask. If we were wondering whether rudeness could ever produce a sound on a tape, this example would seem a convincing argument that it could have such an effect, rather than an argument that it could not have it. To elicit the answer she wants, Thomson has to ask a different question. This question focuses on the subvening nonmoral fact (Donald’s shouting “Boo!” in mid-speech) that, all parties agree, is sufficient by itself to account for the physical effect; and it asks what it could possibly add to this explanation to mention that a certain moral fact (that Donald’s act was rude) also supervenes on this explanatorily sufficient nonmoral fact.

Now, I agree that it is tempting to answer this second question as Thomson wants: that the supervening moral fact makes no physical difference. However, I do not believe that this temptation can help her establish that moral facts are epiphenomenal. For, as many have noted, a question constructed on just this pattern can be used to tempt a similar response about any facts that supervene on others agreed to be sufficient to produce some effect. It can be argued in just this way, for example, that if the mental supervenes

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13 If we are allowed only statements like (b) rather than (a), and if it is denied that (b) states an explanation, then the relevant epistemic virtue will include “epi-explanatory” as well as explanatory coherence. See note 8.

14 Harman cites Thomson’s remarks about the example of Alice to support his complaint that moral explanations, unlike scientific ones, are no help in deciding among competing theories (168–70). But the feature Thomson points out—that the assessment of this explanation depends on assumptions that will appear to a skeptic to be in the same epistemic boat with it—is one pervasively shared by scientific explanations. If Harman’s complaint were correct, therefore, that would have to be for some reason deeper than this one.
on the physical, then mental facts are epiphenomenal. But Thomson does not want to be committed to the epiphenomenality of the mental. Unless she can distinguish the intuitions she elicits about her case from the equally powerful ones she must discount in apparently parallel cases, therefore, her main argument for rejecting moral explanations like (a) seems to me one she is not entitled to.

Thomson directs one further argument against an important special sort of moral explanation. Alice acts justly in keeping a promise at cost to herself. Bert, noting this nonmoral feature of her act, thinks her act just for precisely that reason. Does the justice of Alice’s act then explain Bert’s thinking it just? Thomson denies that it does, on the ground that the fact Bert takes as a reason for his verdict, though it makes Alice’s act just, is not explained by that moral feature. But requiring the believer’s reason to be explained by the moral feature, before we may count the moral belief as explained by its truth, seems too restrictive. Unless we also count it sufficient for the believer’s reason to advert to the very facts constituting the moral one (as in this case), we face very odd consequences. For there are some nonmoral explanations of moral beliefs that clearly conflict with any explanation appealing to the truth of the belief—but others that do not. If we ask whether the New England anti-slavery movement of the 1830’s was really a response to the evil of slavery, an explanation like David Donald’s, according to which the abolitionists were largely a displaced professional elite expressing resentment at industrialists who had supplanted them, is likely to convince us that it was

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As Stephen Yablo summarizes the “exclusion argument,” as applied to the mental: “How can mental phenomena affect what happens physically? Every physical outcome is causally assured by preexisting physical circumstances; its mental antecedents are therefore left with nothing further to contribute.” “Mental Causation,” The Philosophical Review 101 (1992), 246. Yablo provides references to important earlier discussions of the problem (247n), and notes that the same pattern of argument has been applied to other cases in which supervenient properties appear relevant to explanations.

There is further indication that Thomson is relying on the exclusion argument in her comment on an example of Peter Railton’s, in which, as summarized by Thomson, the injustice of a social arrangement in “Badland,” which supervenes on such nonmoral facts as that the interests of the poor are discounted there, partly explains widespread discontent. Thomson says: “it seems to me that the fact of Badland’s being unjust plays no role at all in explaining Badlandian discontent—that Badland discounts interests by itself suffices” (90, emphasis mine). What follows the dash here reveals, I believe, a misunderstanding of Railton. For, as I read him, he agrees that the discounting of interests (plus other nonmoral facts) is sufficient to produce the discontent; but he rejects the exclusion argument. Thomson, by contrast, appears to be taking the sufficiency of the nonmoral explanation to assure the irrelevance of the moral one, and so does appear to be relying on that argument.

Her principle is: “if a person believes that there is such a fact as F because he takes the fact X to be reason for believing that there is such a fact as F, then F explains the person’s belief only if F explains X” (84).
But most of us would give a very different answer if we thought that the explanation of the abolitionists’ views was, instead, that they noticed the very features we think made slavery wrong, and believed it wrong for those reasons. Thomson will have to deny this contrast, however. On her view, these two nonmoral stories both conflict equally with the suggestion that abolitionism was a response to the evil of slavery, and so equally undermine that explanation. I find this implication of her view most implausible.

Even with these two arguments aside, Thomson and I may be left with some conflicting intuitions. Such disagreements are hard to adjudicate. But we could do worse than follow Thomson’s advice and consult our grocers. Do grocers doubt that dishonesty leads people to cheat, that children often benefit from their parents’ goodness (and suffer from their faults), or that persistent rudeness in a supervisor or coworker can be a source of stress? Awaiting further argument, I’m happy in the meantime to live with answers from the checkout counter.

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17 Or, at least, that it mostly was not. See “Nonmoral Explanations,” 97–101, for complications and more details about the relation of nonmoral to moral explanations. Donald’s discussion is in “Toward a Reconsideration of Abolitionists,” in Lincoln Reconsidered (New York: Viking, 1956), 19–36. The usurping industrialists owned, among other things, cotton mills that depended on slavery for their raw materials; one of Donald’s suggestions is that seeing slavery as evil thus provided a satisfying way of seeing the industrialists, too, as complicit in evil.

18 “It is a good heuristic in philosophy to be suspicious of views that would shock your grocer” (211).

19 Thomson denies that there is such a feature as moral goodness (144), but as Harman notes (185–86) her reasons may not persuade. The example could in any case be of any more specific virtue.