

Lecture 5: The Explanatory Argument for Nihilism

I. Background for the Explanatory Argument: Inference to the Best Explanation

According to a view held by many (but first espoused by Harman), there are only two types of *valid inference*: *deductive inference* and *inference to the best explanation* (a.k.a. *abductive inference*).

In making an *inference to the best explanation*, one infers, from the fact that a certain hypothesis would explain the evidence better than all other hypotheses, that the hypothesis is true.

What makes one hypothesis a better explanation than another? Such factors as simplicity, plausibility, comprehensiveness, being less *ad hoc*, and so on.

Suppose X and Y are facts. Then, on this view, there are two types of evidence corresponding to the two types of inference:

X is *deductive evidence* for Y if and only if X entails Y.

X is *abductive evidence* for Y if and only if Y is part of the best explanation of X.

Note that, in the second of these, the order of X and Y is switched on the right-hand side of the ‘if and only if’.

II. Harman’s Two Examples

In Harman’s view, moral claims are cut off from observational evidence in a way that scientific claims are not.

Harman uses two central examples to motivate this (alleged) distinction between our evidence for moral claims and our evidence for scientific claims:

the cloud chamber (p. 6): A physicist is making an observation to test a scientific theory. Seeing a vapor trail in a cloud chamber, she thinks to herself, “That’s a proton.”

the hoodlums (p. 4): You round a corner and encounter a group of young hoodlums tormenting a cat. Seeing them pouring gasoline on the cat and igniting it, you think to yourself, “That’s wrong.”

In the first case, Harman insists that *the physicist’s observation that the vapor trail is a proton* is abductive evidence for *its really being the case that the vapor trail is a proton*, because its really being the case that the vapor trail is a proton is part of the best explanation of why the physicist observes what she observes.

In the second case, Harman insists that *your observation that the hoodlums’ action is wrong* is not abductive evidence for *its really being the case that the hoodlums’ action is wrong*, because its really being the case that the hoodlums’ action is wrong is not part of the best explanation of why you observe that their action is wrong.

There is a better explanation, Harman claims, which only assumes that “you have certain more or less well articulated moral principles that are reflected in the judgments you make, based on your moral sensibility,” a sensibility that is presumably acquired “as a result of your moral upbringing” (pp. 7, 4).

It is important to be careful of the *-ing/-ed* distinction here. The term ‘observation’ is ambiguous (p. 8):

‘observation’ as ‘observing’ = the *act* of making an observation that *p*

‘observation’ as ‘observed’ = the *content* of an observation that *p* (i.e. the proposition observed)

What is being explained in these examples is a given *observing* (which, for Harman, is equivalent to *the fact that you [or the physicist] believe some proposition as a direct result of perception*), not a given *observed* (which, for Harman, is equivalent to *the proposition which you [or the physicist] believe as a direct result of perception*).

III. Harman’s Central Argument

Harman presents his argument as if it hinges on the issue of whether moral facts ever help to explain moral observations. However, as Sturgeon notes in “Moral Explanations” (the reading for Tuesday), Harman’s initial focus on the notion of observation is misleading.

- *first problem*: Harman has a very idiosyncratic definition of ‘observation’, according to which an observation is any belief arrived at as “a direct result of perception” (p. 5). So on this definition, one can observe/perceive/see that *p* without knowing that *p*, and without its even being true that *p*.
- *second problem*: It seems that one could meet Harman’s challenge by showing that moral facts can be part of the best explanation of a moral belief that does not count as a moral *observation* (such as a moral belief *that such-and-such action in such-and-such imagined scenario is wrong*).
- *third problem*: It seems that one could meet Harman’s challenge if by showing that moral facts can be part of the best explanation of an observation that does not count as a *moral* observation.

(Compare Harman’s account of how mathematical beliefs are justified: according to him, it’s not that mathematical facts must be appealed to in order to explain *mathematical* observations, but rather that mathematical facts must be appealed to in order to explain certain *physical* observations.)

Thus Harman’s crucial claim seems to be that moral facts aren’t needed to explain *any non-moral facts*, not that moral facts aren’t needed to explain *any moral observations*.

With that in mind, here is one way of glossing the essential core of Harman’s argument:

Harman’s explanatory argument for nihilism:

1. Non-moral fact *N* is evidence for moral fact *M* if and only if either *N* entails *M*, or *M* is part of the best explanation of *N*. [*premise*]
2. No moral fact is ever part of the best explanation of a non-moral fact. [*premise*]
3. No non-moral fact ever entails a moral fact. [*premise*]
4. So, we cannot have evidence for any moral facts. [*follows from 1, 2, 3*]
5. So, there are no moral facts. [*follows from 4*]