Subject area: Ethics

Title: ‘Injustice causes revolt.’ Discuss.


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When we explain phenomena we rely on the assertion of facts. The sun rises because the earth turns on its axis. Are moral facts similarly indispensable in the explanation of some phenomena? Can we really say, for example, that ‘injustice causes revolt,’ such that ‘injustice’ cannot be replaced entirely by other non-moral facts? Harman argues that there is a strong prima facie case we cannot. Sturgeon insists on the opposite view that in explanations like these the moral fact can indeed play an indispensable role. In this paper I will explain and interrogate these two positions. At stake is the question of whether our common sense views are correct on the role of moral facts-of-the-matter in our explanations of real world events. I conclude that Sturgeon is right. It can be the case (subject to empirical testing) that the fact of injustice is at least part of what causes revolt.

**Harman’s observation problem for ethics**

Harman’s argument can be put as follows:

1. If moral realism were true it would be possible, in principle, to independently test moral judgments by means of observation;

2. There is no such thing as the independent test of moral judgments through observation;

3. So moral realism is not true.
In science, Harman explains, we can test our theories against what we observe in the world. Yes, he acknowledges, “[o]bservations are always “theory laden”.”¹ We would not be able to begin to interpret what we perceive were that not the case, and the scientist interprets her observations through the veil of her own pre-existing theory. But in science, being able to test our theories against observations of the real world provides the observation with independence that moral observations lack. A physicist, for example, observes a proton passing through a cloud chamber and concludes that the observation supports her theory about what a proton is and does.

[Making the observation supports the theory only because, in order to explain [the physicist’s] making the observation, it is reasonable to assume something about the world over and above the assumptions made about the observer’s psychology. In particular, it was reasonable to assume that there was a proton going through the cloud chamber, causing the vapor trail.²]

The observation, then, was causally independent of the physicist’s beliefs and expectations. Harman asks us to contrast this with an example of a moral observation. Imagine coming across some children pouring petrol on a cat and igniting it. We do not need to assume moral facts like ‘setting cats on fire is wrong’ in order for us to arrive at a complete explanation of what we are seeing. They are dispensable to our explanations of moral beliefs and moral actions. Indeed:

[T]here does not seem to be any way in which the actual rightness or wrongness of a given situation can have any effect on your perceptual apparatus.³

¹ Harman 1977, 4
² Harman 1977, 6-7
³ Harman 1977, 8
Our moral observations can instead be explained purely in terms of non-moral facts such as our own psychology, our moral beliefs and expectations. That leaves us with no independent point in the form of moral facts from which to arbitrate between our theory and what we observe. What we observe is observed ready-laden with our own theories and interpretations. Any time we wish to explain an event or action in terms of the moral proposition P we can substitute it with an alternative explanation along the lines of ‘believes that P.’ Instead of a claim about moral facts we have a propositional attitude. While we can test our moral beliefs one against another for consistency - we do precisely that when we engage in thought experiments - we cannot get off that Neurathian vessel formed of our beliefs. If we are going to avoid moral skepticism we will have to find ways to reduce moral facts to non-moral facts.

We might object – and Harman assumes that we will – that science is the wrong comparator for ethics, and that mathematics would be better. Moral principles might be more akin to mathematical principles such as “2 + 2 = 4” where objective verification plays little role in testing claims. We cannot perceive numbers, either. Harman responds that mathematics is verified indirectly through its use in supporting scientific theory. There is no analogous use of moral principles to explain other non-moral observations, so this indirect strategy fails, too.

The moral realist, then, according to Harman, has a problem: moral facts cannot be inferred from our moral observations of phenomena. To return to our question, Harman would insist we must look to non-moral facts such as our psychological state of mind for the explanation for revolt, not a moral fact of ‘injustice.’

Sturgeon’s response to Harman is two-pronged: either the claims Harman is making defy common sense, or else Harman is adopting a general skeptical strategy that, if it works for ethics,
will work just as readily for “unobservable theoretical entities, or for other minds, or for an external world.” In this essay I will focus on the first of these, the question of common sense.

**Common sense implausibility**

The first prong of Sturgeon’s response to Harman is that the latter’s sceptical argument defies our common sense understanding of our use of moral facts in moral explanations:

> [S]ober people frequently offer such explanations of moral observations and beliefs, and... many of these explanations look plausible enough on the evidence to be worth taking seriously. 

Our folk theories of social and psychological life are rich with thick descriptions: “Hitler was depraved” or “she was wrong to do that” or “Andrew is a coward – he should have stood up for them.” We know as a matter of common sense what it is to be a coward, both in descriptive and evaluative terms. And we regard the fact of someone being a coward as predictive of behavior that is describable in non-moral terms. We predict that a coward, for example, will avoid certain situations. Far from there being evidence that we should reject *a priori* the possibility of moral facts having an explanatory role, Sturgeon argues, there appears to be a prima facie case for accepting that moral facts can provide our best explanation of observed phenomena. Given how readily we can reach the conclusion from the evidence of what Hitler did that Hitler was depraved,

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4 Sturgeon 1988, 230. To formulate the second prong of his response, that concerning general scepticism, Sturgeon employs a “companions in guilt” strategy. See Lillehammer 2013.

5 Sturgeon 1988, 239
Isn’t it plausible that Hitler’s moral depravity – the fact of his really having been morally depraved – forms part of a reasonable explanation of why we believe he was depraved?"\(^6\)

Sturgeon believes so, and aims to make his case by considering the extent to which moral facts play a role in explaining moral and non-moral observations. While Harman considers moral facts irrelevant to any explanation, Sturgeon aims to show they are indispensable to some explanations and are part of our “best overall explanatory picture of the world” in the same way that the presence of a proton was the best explanation of the physicist’s observation within the cloud chamber.\(^7\)

Copious examples of thick descriptions are to be found in the accounts of historical events prepared by historians. Sturgeon presents examples in which recourse is made to moral character to explain events, and I have already touched on his example of Hitler. Closer to our question, however, would be an example in which the moral features of the observed phenomenon play an explanatory role in the historical account. Here Sturgeon turns to the question of why there was growth in widespread moral opposition to slavery in Britain, France and North America during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, even though slavery was an old institution and existed throughout the New World.\(^8\) Two explanations that have been offered for the change in sentiment are that a) slavery was much “worse” in these particular territories than elsewhere in the New World, and b) in the United States, specifically, slavery became “a more oppressive institution” in the period preceding the Civil War. These views about slavery are not uncontroversial - few are – but they do have some currency as part of the explanation of

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\(^6\) Sturgeon 1988, 234
\(^7\) Sturgeon 1988, 237
\(^8\) Sturgeon 1988, 245-246
the phenomenon. “Worse” and “more oppressive” are here assertions of moral facts. If they are viewed in the historical account as being even a small part of the explanation, Sturgeon argues, it seems plausible to suggest that had slavery not been “worse” in those countries, or “more oppressive” in the run up to the Civil War, the tide would have turned slower against the institution. These facts therefore have explanatory value.

Harman would presumably respond that these claims are mere propositional attitudes. The historian is not saying that “slavery was more oppressive”, but that he “believes that slavery was more oppressive.” Our explanatory impulse turns to why the historian believes this, and the explanation can be provided with no reference to moral facts.

Where Harman faces greater difficulty is in relation to claims about moral properties attaching to situations. There is no easy recipe for translating the proposition into a propositional attitude. Take the historian’s claim made in our question: “injustice causes revolt.” In a situation like the London riots of 2011, if we were to stop participants and ask then why they were throwing bricks through the window of the shoe store, would they explain their behavior in terms of injustice? Some maybe believed that they were responding to an injustice, and we might find an explanation in non-moral terms for that belief. But some had not formulated their reasons for their actions in terms of belief. They were simply angry. Harman might argue that you can explain the whole phenomenon by reference to those who believed they were responding to injustice. But this would have been a minority of the participants, and too few to cause a mass riot. Most were simply acting in anger, and Sturgeon can argue that the moral fact of injustice explains their actions in a way that their beliefs could not. It is not easy to translate the moral fact into a propositional attitude in such cases. Harman’s position does not address this situational possibility, but it would appear to weaken his case greatly.
Moral facts in natural terms

Sturgeon is a philosophical naturalist. As such, he takes “natural facts to be the only facts there are.” If the argument from moral explanations leaves us with the view that moral facts exist, then on the naturalist view they must be natural facts. To address this, the ethical naturalist is usually taken to have to provide a reductive account of moral facts that presents them as supervening on natural non-moral facts. What this account would be – what vocabulary it would use – is unknown.

Sturgeon disputes the need for a reductive account. We do not need one in the natural sciences, so why for moral terms? But Harman’s argument rejects the possibility that even a reductive account of moral facts could have any explanatory potential.

To Sturgeon this seems to beg the question. We simply do not yet know what we might uncover through empirical enquiry. The best way to find out is to do the work. Where should we begin looking for reductive accounts of moral facts? Where will we find, for example, our account of ‘injustice’ in non-moral terms? His response:

[T]he answer will have to be found from our best moral theory, together with our best theory of the rest of the natural world. \(^{10}\)

We would not attempt to account for colour perception without using our best accounts of optical theory, physics and psychology. We can expect no less in the search for reductive accounts of moral terms.

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\(^9\) Sturgeon 1988, 239  
\(^{10}\) Sturgeon 1988, 241
We should also review historical examples such as those discussed above to see whether the use of thick terms has explanatory value, and to attempt reductive definitions of terms to see whether in fact some of our thick descriptions drop out of the picture as unnecessary. Our explanations may improve as a result over time. Sturgeon’s refusal to consider an explanatory role for moral facts second guesses what this empirical work might uncover. We may find that some of our thick descriptions remain necessary to help us to understand our social world. While it may be possible to reduce ‘injustice,’ through this empirical research, to natural non-moral facts like ‘deliberate inequality,’ perhaps those facts alone are insufficient to cause revolt. We must research to find out.
References


