

24.231 Ethics – Handout 5 Harman, “Ethics and Observation”

Harman’s Thesis:

Moral theories, unlike scientific theories, do not seem to be confirmable through observation.

What is an observation?

- “observation has occurred whenever an opinion is a direct result of perception” (p. 207); “an immediate judgment made in response to the situation without any conscious reasoning having taken place” (p. 208)
- Harman: “There are no pure observations. Observations are always ‘theory laden.’ What you perceive depends to some extent on the theory you hold, consciously or unconsciously.” (p. 207)

So Harman is not making the simple argument that because observation can only tell us what *did* happen, and not what *should* happen, moral theories can never be confirmed through observation.

Harman thinks there can be moral observations:

Example: When we see a group of kids set fire to a cat and think “That’s wrong!”

Also, Harman does not think that scientific observations, unlike moral ones, do not depend on our background beliefs:

Example: The physicist relies on her background beliefs when she sees a vapor trail in a cloud chamber and observes, “There goes a proton!”

So what is the difference between scientific and moral explanations, according to Harman?

Harman says that an observation supports a theory when the truth of the theory is part of the *best explanation* for the observation’s having taken place.

Harman argues that the best explanation for why the physicist observes “There goes a proton!” will include references not just to her background beliefs but also to the fact that there really was a proton going through the chamber. But we can explain our observation that setting fire to a cat is wrong perfectly well – indeed, better – without making any reference to moral facts; we can explain it best just by referring to our moral beliefs.

Questions:

- (1) Even if we grant Harman that observation doesn't support moral theories, what conclusions should we draw from that about moral theories?
- (2) What if we grant Harman that facts about our psychological dispositions to react in certain ways when we witness certain events explain our moral judgments; should we conclude from this that there are no such properties as *wrongness*? (Color properties might be a helpful analogy to think about here.)
- (3) To drive a wedge between scientific and moral observation, Harman has to establish not only that we *need* not suppose there are moral properties to explain moral observations, but that the *best* explanation of our making such observations makes no reference to moral properties. Can Harman establish this?
 - Harman: "there 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." (p. 209)
 - Can Harman's proposed explanation adequately account for "moral conversion" – cases in which moral observations cause us to change our moral beliefs? Or is the assumption that some moral theories are true (that there are moral facts) a *better* explanation of changes in our moral beliefs?
 - Which explanation best accounts for our belief that experience can make us better moral judges?
 - Harman considers only one kind of moral explanation; but we regularly appeal to all kinds of moral explanations to explain a wide range of observations – can his proposed explanation in terms of our psychologies handle the whole range of these observations?
 - What makes the explanation of the physicist's observation that refers to the actual presence of a proton the *best* explanation?

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