

Handout #7 (Revised)

Harman and Thomson 1

First and second order views of morality

A first order view is a claim about what we ought (morally) to do. Is abortion, genetic engineering, the killing of animals for food, the killing of human beings in wartime, and so on, right or wrong? These are first order questions.

A second order (or meta-ethical) view is an account of what morality is. Do moral sentences like 'abortion is wrong' have truth values (that is, are they either true or false)? Are they instead mere expressions of approval or disapproval? Are moral claims relative to cultural norms? Does the wrongness of an act give us a reason to refrain from performing it? These are all second order questions.

Similarly, one may distinguish first and second order views of, and questions concerning, the sciences. Is Fermat's last theorem true? Does the Higgs boson exist? (First order.) Given that mathematical objects do not causally affect us in any way, how do we come to know about them? Is physics merely a convenient device for predicting the future course of experience? (Second order.)

The positions discussed by Harman and Thomson are second order.

Moral Skepticism

Moral skepticism: no one has any moral knowledge (cf. H&T 68)

A first argument for moral skepticism is this. It uses some terminology: Moral sentences (MS) are sentences like 'Alice ought to give Bert a banana', 'Stealing is wrong', 'Alice is just', etc. Factual sentences (FS) are sentences like 'Alice has Bert's banana in her fridge', 'Alice has taken Bert's banana without his permission', 'Alice always keeps her word', etc.

1. If we know any MS, that's because we inferred it from a FS that validly entails that MS.
2. No MS is validly entailed by any FS; you can't derive an ought from an is.
3. We don't know any MS.

This is unconvincing. As against 1, we could know MS because FS provides strong evidence for it without going so far as to entail it. (Also, although Thomson doesn't discuss this, we could know MS non-inferentially; it could be a truth of pure reason, or something we know by perception.)

A second argument for moral skepticism maintains that FS can't even provide evidence for MS. The thought is that A is evidence for B if but only if B figures in the best

explanation of A. If that is right, then FS is evidence for MS only if it explains FS. And MS arguably never does that.

Why not? Certainly the fact that there is a table before you explains why you make the judgment that there is a table before you. But now suppose that you see some children pour gasoline on a cat and ignite it (an example from Harman's *The Nature of Morality* (Oxford University Press, 1977)). What explains your judgment that what the children are doing is wrong?

Non-skeptics will say that the judgment is in recognition of the fact that the children really were wrong to do this. But surely there is a simpler explanation. You judge the children's behavior to be wrong because (a) they set fire to a cat, and (b) it is and was a belief of yours that setting fire to animals is wrong. . Since non-moral facts suffice to explain your judgment, the moral fact if there is one is an unneeded extra. It makes no more of a difference than my waving my arms and shouting "abracadabra" makes a difference to the sun rising.

Now let's turn this into an explicit step by step argument (cf. 74-5). Instead of 'the truth of sentence A is evidence for the truth of sentence B', 'the truth of sentence A explains the truth of sentence B', let's simply say 'A is evidence for B', 'A explains B'.

- a. For all factual sentences FS, MS does not explain FS.
- b. Factual sentence FS is evidence for MS only if MS explains FS.
- c. So no factual sentence is evidence for MS.
- d. If no factual sentence is evidence for MS, then we don't know that MS is true.:
- e. So we don't know that MS is true.

How to respond? One might try to deny (d) maintaining that moral sentences can be known otherwise than by inference from factual sentences. But most have followed Sturgeon in denying (a). Sturgeon points out that we wouldn't have believed that the kids were behaving cruelly, had they not been behaving cruelly. The belief "counterfactually depends" on the cruelty, and so to that extent is explained by the cruelty.

Thomson rejects Sturgeon's response on the ground that counterfactual dependence does not suffice for explanatoriness; she gives the example of rude Donald (make sure you understand the dialectic on 76-83). She is moreover inclined to agree with premise (a) in many cases. For instance, does 'Alice's giving Bert a banana was just' explain 'Charles believes that Alice's giving Bert a banana was just'? Thomson maintains the

Explain Evidence Principle (EEP): A can't explain a belief based on such and such evidence unless A explains the evidence.

Suppose Charles believes that Alice's act is just for the reason that she was keeping her word when it cost her a lot to do so etc. Then the justice of Alice's act explains Charles's belief only if the justice of her act explains why it was a case of keeping her word etc.

But this (the bit after the 'only if') is, Thomson thinks, plainly false. What responses to the argument are available to the anti-skeptic at this point?

Who needs factual evidence?: (d) is false. Moral beliefs are not (always) believed on the basis of factual premises. Perhaps we see what's right. (As the refined eye sees it's an impressionist painting.) Or perhaps we can work out what's right just by thinking about the matter.

Why should moral conclusions have to explain factual evidence? (Thomson): (b) is false. X can be evidence for Y without Y explaining it. Let X be 'Dickenson is gorging himself' and Y 'Dickenson will soon feel ill.' Or X = 'this is a painting with such and such color-properties' and Y = 'this is an impressionist painting.'

Who says moral conclusions can't explain factual evidence? (a) is wrong, EEP to the contrary; indeed EEP is wrong. I believe that Hitler was born in the 19th century because he was born in the 19th century; the belief is explained by the fact that it concerns. My evidence more specifically is that Hitler was born on April 20, 1889. EEP says that my belief can't be caused by his being born in the 19th century unless his being born in the 19th century explains why he was born on April 20, 1889! Just so, the justice of Alice's act can explain Charles's belief without the justice of her act having to explain why it was the keeping of a promise.