

ABDUCTION, REALISM AND ETHICS

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, I am concerned with the possibility of applying an abductive strategy in founding ethical realism. First, I criticize Harman's position, according to which abduction, though useful for founding scientific realism, does not serve to found ethical realism. Secondly, I examine Sturgeon's critique, according to which distinctively moral facts do constitute the best explanations of the moral evidence. Finally, I conclude that Sturgeon is right in as far as the ontological status of moral properties is concerned but his answer to Harman's point is not properly developed.

Keywords: ethical realism, ethical anti-realism, abduction, moral supervenience, moral explanation.

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In this paper, I am concerned with the possibility of applying an abductive strategy in founding ethical realism. The paper is divided into three main parts. In the first one, I present a general description of the main positions regarding the existence of moral facts. In the second part, I describe two opposite uses of abduction, exemplified in the contemporary metaethical debate. First, I expose Harman's perspective, according to which abduction, though useful for founding scientific realism, does not serve to found ethical realism.¹ Secondly, I introduce Sturgeon's critique, according to which distinctively moral facts do constitute the best explanations of the

moral evidence.² In the third part, I defend my own view on the subject. On the one hand, I agree with Sturgeon that if we can make use of abduction to found scientific realism, it should be equally useful for defending ethical realism; in other words, contrarily to Harman's opinion, I think that there is no special problem with moral explanations. On the other, however, I disagree with the particular way in which Sturgeon defends this point of view and purport to present a different defense. Consequently, the third part contains, first, a critical analysis of Sturgeon's position and, finally, my attempt to develop a new answer to Harman's argument.

1. Introduction: Ontological Positions in the Moral Realm

On a first, rough approach to the issue, it may be said that there are two basic metaethical conceptions regarding moral facts. According to the first one, such facts exist, namely, among the existent facts there are some that are specifically moral; this conception may be characterized as *ethical realism*. The second conception, on the other hand, amounts to a denial of the previous claim: according to this, which I shall characterize as *ethical anti-realism*, there are no specifically moral facts.

Now, the first conception, in turn, may give rise to two different perspectives. On the one hand, it may be thought that the above mentioned moral facts have a nonphysical nature, namely, they are radically different from physical facts as far as their respective natures are concerned. In other words, ethical realism may involve metaphysical *dualism*, i.e., the thesis that the world is basically made of two kinds of substances, the physical (the material) and the nonphysical (the spiritual), among which we can find the moral. On the other hand, it may be thought that moral facts, in spite of being qualitatively different from physical facts, have a physical nature, namely, they are completely determined by physical facts. In other words, far from involving substance dualism, ethical realism may only involve property dualism: although everything is physical or made of a physical substance, there are moral properties that serve to characterize distinctively moral facts. This view draws on the (metaphysical) thesis of supervenience, which gives rise to the so-called "layered model of the world". According to this, world facts are distributed among different layers so that (i) the entities belonging to a certain layer are mereological aggregates of the entities belonging to the immediately inferior one (macro-micro relation between entities) and (ii) the properties belonging to a certain layer supervene on the properties belonging to the immediately inferior one

(supervenient-base relation between properties).³ As is known, supervenience amounts to dependence without identity: supervenient properties entirely depend on but are not identical to their physical bases. By taking moral properties to supervene on more basic physical ones, this second version of ethical realism makes for a form of *non-reductive physicalism*.

As far as the second conception, namely, ethical anti-realism, is concerned, there are also two basic positions to be distinguished. On the one hand, it may amount to the thesis that, given that there are no specifically moral facts, it must be concluded that there are no moral facts at all, which represents a position that may be called "ethical *eliminativism*" or even "ethical *nihilism*".⁴ On the other hand, ethical anti-realism may be taken as stating that even if there are no specifically moral facts there are moral facts after all, that is, facts that are not *specifically* moral. In other words, it may be thought that moral facts are identical to (some kind of) physical facts to which they can be reduced. This version of ethical anti-realism is then a form of *reductive physicalism*.

In a scheme,

1. *Ethical realism*: there are specifically moral facts: 1a. *dualism*: those facts are not related to the physical; 1b. *non-reductive physicalism*: those facts supervene on physical facts.
2. *Ethical anti-realism*: there are no specifically moral facts: 2a. *eliminativism* or *nihilism*: there are no moral facts at all; 2b. *reductive physicalism*: moral facts can be reduced to physical facts.

Recently, the following argument for ethical anti-realism, involving a contrast between scientific and moral principles, has been put forward. On the one hand, the descriptive *status* of scientific principles can be justified on the basis of an inference to the best explanation of the scientific evidence: the existence of scientific facts, described by such principles, makes for the best explanations of perceptual observations. On the other, the ethical case is not parallel: since the existence of moral facts does not make for the best explanations of moral observations, moral principles cannot be said to describe specifically moral facts; therefore, there are no such facts.⁵ This argument for ethical anti-realism may be called "argument from the explanatory irrelevance of moral facts". Interestingly enough, it should be noticed, though, that the same argumentative strategy has been used to found an opposite view, more specifically, a physicalistic version of ethical realism. To put it more clearly, it has been argued that moral princi-

ples do have the same descriptive *status* as scientific principles: moral principles can be said to describe moral facts because the existence of such facts makes for the best explanations of moral observations; consequently, there are distinctively moral facts.⁶ In what follows, I will be then concerned with this debate on the value of the inference to the best explanation or abduction in settling an ontological position regarding moral facts.

2. *Reduction vs. Supervenience*

2.1. *Harman: A Reductivistic View of Ethics*

In the first chapter of his book, *The Nature of Morality*, Harman raises the question of whether moral principles can be justified in the way scientific principles are, that is, through observation and experimentation. His concern is to point out that there is a significant difference between science and ethics in this respect. Whereas scientific explanations necessarily involve assumptions about the existence of physical facts, moral explanations need not involve any assumption about the existence of specifically moral facts. In my opinion, the key to Harman's point is to be found in the following fragment:

Certain moral principles might help to explain why it was *wrong* of the children to set the cat on fire, but moral principles seem to be of no help in explaining *your thinking* that that is wrong. In the first sense of "observation", moral principles can be tested by observation - "That this act is wrong is evidence that causing unnecessary suffering is wrong". But in the second sense of "observation", moral principles cannot clearly be tested by observation, since they do not appear to help explain observations in this second sense of "observation". Moral principles do not seem to help explain your observing what you observe (Harman 1977, ch. 1, p. 8).

According to this, Harman seems to identify particular judgments with observations in the first sense of the expression, while there is another sense in which "observation" refers not to the content judged but to the act of judging (or observing). It is this second sense that makes for the lack of parallelism between science and ethics. On the one hand, scientific principles (such as, to take Harman's example, "Protons are part of the atomic structure of the world") explain both the particular perceptual judgments we make ("There is a vapor trail in the cloud chamber") and the occurrences of such judgments (the act of perceptually judging that there is a vapor trail in the cloud chamber); consequently, they are observationally justified as objective claims or claims about (scientific) facts. In contrast, moral principles (such as "Causing unnecessary harm to animals is wrong")

may be thought to explain particular moral judgments ("Setting the cat on fire is wrong of the children") but they certainly do not explain the occurrences of such judgments (the act of morally judging that setting the cat on fire is wrong of the children), which just requires the existence of some physical entities (such as people and animals), causal interactions among them, pains, beliefs and a moral sensibility; consequently, there is a clear sense in which moral principles are not observationally justified: they are not observationally justified as objective claims or claims about (specifically moral) facts. In other words, in as far as the existence of a moral fact such as wrongness is completely irrelevant to the explanation of moral observations (in the second sense), moral principles positing specifically moral facts cannot be said to be justified in the way scientific principles positing scientific facts are.

As he takes ethical eliminativism or nihilism to be a too strong position, Harman proposes to reduce moral facts to some kind of physical facts, namely, psychological and sociological facts.⁷ Any claim about members of the reduced class is to be understood in terms of a claim about members of the reductive class. In his terms:

Even if assumptions about moral facts do not directly help explain observations, it may be that moral facts can be reduced to other sorts of facts and that assumptions about these facts do help explain observations. In that case, there could be evidence for assumptions about moral facts (Harman 1977, ch. 2, p. 13).

To conclude, there are three points I want to emphasize about Harman's view on ethics: (a) he rejects ethical eliminativism, (b) he claims that there are moral facts, but (c) these are not specifically or distinctively moral but physical facts of a sort that might explain observations (in the second, above mentioned sense of the expression). In as far as his position is only committed to the existence of physical facts, it can be regarded as a form of ethical naturalism.

2.2. Sturgeon: Bringing Supervenience into the Scene

Contrarily to Harman's thesis, in the article called 'Moral Explanations', Sturgeon claims that, once the existence of specifically moral facts is assumed, they do appear relevant to the explanation of our moral observations, in the two senses of "observation" acknowledged by Harman.

First of all, Sturgeon presents many examples in which people do seem to appeal to objective rightness/wrongness and objective virtues/vices as constituting the best explanation of a set of actions and facts that does not

reduce to but certainly comprises acts of morally judging or observing (see, for instance, Sturgeon 1988, p. 211). To be brief, I will only mention the Hitler example: according to Sturgeon, it is just Hitler's moral depravity that makes for the best explanation of his doing the awful things he did as much as of the widespread belief in his moral depravity.

In order to strengthen his point, he offers a counterfactual test of explanatoriness or explanatory relevance, according to which "A explains or is relevant to the explanation of B" is to be understood as "If A had not occurred, B would not have occurred either"; in other words, A could not be taken to explain B if B occurred in the absence of A. In Sturgeon's own terms:

For it is natural to think that if a particular assumption is completely irrelevant to the explanation of a certain fact, then that fact would have obtained, and we could have explained it just as well, even if the assumption had been false (Sturgeon 1988, p. 212).

According to this, if Hitler had not been morally depraved, he would not have committed genocide on the Jews and we would not have thought that he was morally depraved; so, Hitler's moral depravity must be taken to afford an adequate explanation of both the Jewish genocide committed by Hitler and our thinking him morally depraved.

Sturgeon gives these two interrelated arguments in support of his counterfactual test. First, he claims that it is very hard to come up with some evidence for the truth of the opposite counterfactuals (namely, the ones describing situations in which B occurred in the absence of A). As an example, it is hard to imagine a situation in which Hitler is different from the way he actually is so as not to be morally depraved but he stills commits genocide on the Jews and we still think he is morally depraved. Secondly, he claims that this difficulty is due to the fact that such beliefs are part of a common, not at all controversial, moral view. Sturgeon takes thus Harman to be questioning our commonsensical moral beliefs. And, according to Sturgeon, the worst part is that Harman's skepticism is arbitrarily confined to morality: common scientific beliefs are not equally thrown into doubt (see, for instance, Sturgeon 1988, p. 218).

Now, the following question may be raised: what is the ontological *status* of the specifically or distinctively moral facts defended by Sturgeon? At this point, Sturgeon appeals to the above mentioned metaphysical idea of supervenience: he regards moral properties, distinctive of moral facts, as higher-layer properties that supervene on more basic physi-

cal ones. As I have pointed out in the introduction, the relation between the two groups (the supervenient one and its base) is not that of (type) identity but that of *dependence or determination*: supervenient properties are fully dependent on or determined by their physical bases but they are not (type-)identical to them.⁸ Consequently, two facts that are indiscernible regarding their basic physical properties must be indiscernible regarding their supervenient properties or *no supervenient difference can arise without a basic physical difference*. In the light of this, we can have a better grasp of Sturgeon's justification of the counterfactual test for explanatoriness. To take again the Hitler example, claiming that it is not Hitler's moral depravity that caused the Jewish genocide amounts to claiming that the Jewish genocide could have taken place even if Hitler had not been morally depraved. But this amounts to claiming that *there is a possible situation in which there is a moral difference (Hitler is not depraved) without any physical/historical difference (Hitler has the required psychology so as to commit genocide on the Jews)*.

Sturgeon's conclusion is then (i) that the ethical case is just like the scientific case: in both, the question is either accepting that the relevant principles are (correspondence) true, namely, that they describe facts of the matter or subscribing to a general skeptical strategy. Consequently, he thinks that (ii) if we assume the truth of certain background theories, both moral and scientific principles have testable implications. According to this, he concludes that (iii) Harman has not provided us with an independent argument for ethical "skepticism" (notice that, according to the classification presented in the introduction, I would rather say "anti-realism"). Finally, it is worth pointing out that, in as far as moral facts are defined in terms of supervenience, his position does not involve any questionable extension of the physicalistic ontological commitment. However, given he does not hold a reductivistic thesis, he is no doubt offering a different form of ethical naturalism.

3. *An Analysis of the Debate*

First of all, I want to make it clear what my view is: in my opinion, Harman is wrong and Sturgeon is right about the ontological *status* of moral properties and facts. More specifically, I think that *if the idea of supervenience can be used in the philosophy of psychology to defend the thesis that mental states are functional states, then it should be allowed to play a similar role in metaethics so as to support the idea that moral facts are also functional*

facts -of a moral sort. In my view, the main problem to be faced is the one of *legitimizing the explanatory role of supervenient moral properties*. What does the thesis that supervenient moral properties are justified on the basis of their explanatory power amount to? What are the *correlata* of such explanations? In my opinion, the possibility of founding ethical realism on an inference to the best explanation of the moral evidence involves considering two questions, which might be called "the *need* question" and "the *entitlement* question".⁹ In other words, in order to establish ethical realism on the basis of an abductive argument, it is necessary to consider both the problem of whether distinctively moral facts are *needed* to explain the moral evidence and the problem of whether we are *entitled* to such explanations, namely, to causal relations between distinctively moral facts and the moral evidence. In as far as the first problem is concerned with our need of an explanatory knowledge, it may be considered to be a purely *epistemological* problem. In contrast, the second problem, inasmuch as it is concerned with which kind of entities we turn to be committed to by accepting certain explanations, may be taken to be an *ontological* issue.

3.1. *Sturgeon's Counterfactual Criterion: the Need Question*

As we have seen, Sturgeon intends to justify the thesis that commonsensical moral views are roughly true, hence the thesis that moral facts, usually presupposed by them, exist, on the fact that those views provide us with the best explanations of the moral *data*. How is this accomplished?

As mentioned before, he cites many examples of explanations -just like the above mentioned Hitler example-, which, on his view, pass a counterfactual test that determines their *status* as the best explanations: according to Sturgeon, the explanation of a *phenomenon* can be taken to be the best one if and only if it cannot be the case that the *explanans* is false and the *explanandum* true. As an example of a common moral explanation that is considered to pass the test in question, we can mention the explanation of the Jewish genocide in terms of Hitler's moral depravity: since it cannot be the case that Hitler both is not morally depraved and commits the Jewish genocide, Hitler's moral depravity is what best explains the Jewish genocide; consequently, in Sturgeon's view, our commonsensical moral claim saying that Hitler is morally depraved is true and Hitler is as a matter of fact depraved.

The problem with the counterfactual test is that it is not itself adequately justified. *Why* is it that it cannot be the case that the *explanans*

mentioning a moral fact is false and the *explanandum* mentioning an action is true? To take the last example, *why* is it that it cannot be the case that Hitler both is not morally depraved and commits the Jewish genocide? Clearly, the counterfactual test does not seem to be really explanatory of the supposed explanatory power of moral facts. As indicated by its name, it seems to be just a *criterion* or a *way of checking* the existence of the power in question.

As we have seen, Sturgeon claims that moral properties and facts should be taken to supervene on physical ones. Take, for instance, the following paragraph:

I am fairly confident, for example, that Hitler really was morally depraved; and since I also accept the view that moral features supervene on more basic natural properties, I take this to imply that there is no possible world in which Hitler has just the personality he in fact did, in just the situation he was in, but is not morally depraved (Sturgeon 1988, p. 217).

But this only shows that *if the supervenience paradigm is true*, it cannot be the case that a fact has certain natural properties without having certain moral properties. But this is precisely the point in dispute. I will develop this idea by means of the following comments.

First of all, by merely *saying* that moral properties are supervenient ones, the explanatory problem raised by Harman is not at all solved. It is necessary to specify how their supervenient *status* is compatible with their explanatory *status*. The justification in question requires a specification of *how supervenient moral facts can be thought to cause certain situations as much as our acts of morally judging them*; in the particular case at stake, it requires a specification of how a moral vice like depravity can cause both the Jewish genocide and our judging it wrong. In my opinion, Harman's point is that in as far as we cannot make the causal relations involved clear enough, we do not have reasons to think that the explanations appealing to moral facts are the best ones. In other words, we do not know *how* those explanations in fact work, i.e., *how it is possible for a moral fact (a virtue or a vice, objective rightness or wrongness) to cause anything, in particular our acts of morally judging*. What is lacking in the ethical case is the specification of *the complete causal chain*, relating the moral fact, on the one hand, to the moral observation (in the second sense above mentioned), on the other. From my perspective, *Sturgeon's counterfactual test merely takes it for granted that this chain must exist, but it does not provide us with a specification of how it is possible for it to exist*.

Secondly, Sturgeon seems to think that the causal-explanatory character of moral facts is somehow part of our common moral assumptions. Notice the following:

Harman's more important question is whether we should ever regard moral facts as relevant to the explanation of nonmoral facts and in particular of our having the moral beliefs we do. But the answer, again, is that we should, so long as we are willing to hold the right sorts of other moral assumptions fixed in answering counterfactual questions (Sturgeon 1988, p. 220).

According to this, the truth of our background moral assumptions (which are to be "held fixed") is what grounds the right answers "to counterfactual questions". Ultimately, Sturgeon seems to think that the truth of our moral assumptions can be based on the Duhem-Quine thesis of confirmation holism. According to this, he would say, it is not a matter of saying how a particular moral principle explains a particular moral observation: the point is rather saying how the whole set of our common moral views is connected with the moral evidence. But, in my opinion, merely pointing to the fact that a certain theory should be connected with the evidence as a whole rather than on a piece by piece basis does not help us solve the explanatory problem. We still have the problem at issue: how is it possible for an ethical theory to be so holistically or globally connected with the moral evidence?

Besides, I think that when Sturgeon claims that only by being "willing to hold the right sorts of other moral assumptions fixed in answering counterfactual questions" we can (and should) regard moral facts as relevant to the explanations of nonmoral facts, the explanatory problem is not solved but relocated. He just takes it for granted that those "right sorts of other moral assumptions" have, as a matter of fact, an explanatory character.

This is connected with a final point I want to make against Sturgeon -the connection may not be clear at first sight, though. I don't agree with Sturgeon's claim that Harman's thesis involves the falsity of commonsensical moral views or the idea that they are mistaken. In contrast to the expressivistic account offered by the logical positivists, Harman's reductivist account does not question the intuitive idea that moral claims have descriptive or cognitive content; consequently, commonsense moral claims are not necessarily denied by Harman to have the truth-values intuitively attributed to them. To put it differently, Harman may concede that the moral claims that are true are exactly the ones that we intuitively take to be true; namely, that the set of true moral claims is exactly the set of commonsensical moral views. He is by no means concerned with which

moral claims are true but with the philosophical explanation of the concept of truth as applied to them. In other words, Harman is not concerned with either affirming or denying commonsensical moral views (hence with establishing which moral views are true) but with establishing what it is for moral views (whatever they may be, even if they are commonsensical) to be true or to have a descriptive content.¹⁰ To go on with the same example, on the reductivist account proposed by Harman, it may still be considered true that Hitler was morally depraved and that it was his moral depravity that made him commit the genocide; the difference is that the expression "moral depravity" will not be taken to refer to a moral vice but to a psychological structure.

It is at this point where the connection with the previous line of argument can be made manifest: Sturgeon's appeal to the widespread acceptance of commonsensical moral assumptions in support of his test for explanatoriness should be considered not only circular (he sets out to establish the truth of commonsensical moral assumptions on the basis of their explanatory character but ends up by establishing their explanatory character on the basis of their truth) but, more importantly, as involving an *unacceptable mixture of the normative level with the metaethical one*. In as far as the problem of the explanatory relevance of moral facts is a metaethical problem, it can by no means be settled by appealing to commonsensical moral views, which may be taken to play the role of a(n intuitive or folk) normative ethical theory. In other words, the problem at stake is not the normative ethical one of deciding which moral claims are true but the metaethical one of establishing *what it is for a moral claim to be true*. In more ontological words, it can be described as the problem of establishing the ontological *status* of the facts described by true moral claims.¹¹ And this is something that cannot be done by appealing to any particular moral view, whatever it be, since, as is known, the ontology of moral claims is part of no moral view.

Summarizing, I do not think that Sturgeon's response to Harman has put the emphasis on the relevant aspects. More specifically, Sturgeon has not adequately justified the causal-explanatory power attributed to supervenient moral properties and facts; for all he has said, we could think that in order for moral properties and facts to give rise to proper explanations of the moral evidence, they should be reduced to other, more basic entities. Claiming that the belief in their causal-explanatory power is part of our common moral assumptions can provide no answer, since metaethical conceptions are no part of normative moral views. In my opinion, an adequate

justification of the explanatory relevance of supervenient moral facts requires a *complete specification* of the corresponding causal relations and their respective *relata* -or, in other words, a specification of what being a supervenient moral fact amounts to, what constitutes a moral observation and how exactly it is possible for such facts to be causally related to such observations.

The same point can be made by appealing to the above mentioned notions of *need* and *entitlement*. The difference between both notions can be clearly illustrated by quoting the following paragraph:

Related to questions of need are questions of entitlement. Consider the case of the gene. We have a clear need to posit genes to explain inherited characteristics. But what are genes? *Only if there is a scientifically acceptable answer to this question are we entitled to talk of genes, however great our need to talk of them.* With the advance of chemistry, such an answer has, of course, been discovered (Devitt 1991, p. 84; the italics are mine).

Likewise, one thing is showing that we need to appeal to some kind of moral facts in order to explain certain actions; another is showing that those facts are *specifically* moral or, in other words, that we are entitled to specifically moral facts. I think that Sturgeon has rightly pointed out that we *need* to appeal to moral facts so as to explain certain *phenomena* but he has not shown how this explanation can work when the facts in question are understood as specifically moral facts; so, in my opinion, he has not shown that we are *entitled* to specifically moral facts.

3.2. The Case for Moral Supervenience: the Entitlement Question

As we have seen, Harman distinguishes two senses of "observation": in the first sense, an observation is the particular judgment made in front of a certain action or situation; in the second sense, it is the act of judging itself. Then, he goes on claiming that while moral principles might help explain observations in the first sense, they certainly are irrelevant to the explanation of observations in the second sense. It is clear from Harman's text that it is the power to explain observations in the second sense, namely, as acts of observing or judging, that makes a principle explanatory; consequently, scientific principles can be said to be explanatory while moral ones cannot. The turn from the first to the second sense of "observation" is then crucial in Harman's argument because it is crucial in establishing the asymmetry between science and ethics.

To start off with the analysis, I think that this turn may be characterized as a *subjective* or *epistemic turn*. While the full reason for this characterization will be manifest below, it is roughly based on the fact that *the epistemic act of observing (or judging) is favored over the action, situation or, in more general terms, the entity being observed (or judged)*. It is worth pointing out that this turn is highly surprising in an author like Harman, with clearly realistic leanings: how is it that he takes our having the experiences rather than the commonsense entities being experienced to make for the observational basis of a theory? This involves a typical phenomenalist construal of the *explanandum* and, as is well known, phenomenism is a version of anti-realism (about commonsense entities).

Now, once it is assumed that the right kinds of *explananda* describe observations in the second sense, it is easy to create the illusion that the moral evidence can be exclusively accounted for in terms of moral sensibility. In other words, the subjectivistic conception of the evidence proposed by Harman paves the way for his correlated subjectivistic conception of the unobservable or theoretical moral facts. Harman's argument may be then reconstructed in the following terms: on the one hand, sustaining that the *correlata* involved in moral explanations are both physical entities, such as moral sensibility (a psychological structure) and moral judgments (interpreted as a kind of behavior) makes such explanations clear enough; on the other hand, it is difficult to say how appealing to nonphysical facts (like objective rightness and wrongness and moral virtues and vices) may help explain typically physical ones or, in other words, how it is possible for a causal relation to connect entities of such a *different nature*. As is known, even if moral facts are thought to be (as suggested by Sturgeon) supervenient or higher-order physical facts rather than nonphysical ones, the problem persists: claiming that moral facts can cause moral judgments amounts to claiming that downward causation (namely, causation between entities belonging to different ontological layers) is possible.¹² In accordance with this, Harman fosters a pattern of moral explanation that can be exemplified as follows: *what can be said to best explain my act of judging that it is wrong of the children to ignite the cat is the (psychological) fact that I have a certain moral sensibility that makes me react negatively in front of people causing unnecessary harm to animals*.

Now, I think that the above mentioned subjectivistic conception of the evidence is not adequately justified. In my opinion, Harman provides us with no grounds for the claim that the right moral *explananda* are constituted by particular descriptions of a certain kind of behavior, namely, the

subjective acts of morally judging (however much openly conceived they may be), rather than by particular descriptions of the objective entities referred to in morally judging. In other words, I think that *we are given no reasons to consider that the moral evidence (i.e., the phenomena to be explained by an ethical theory) is constituted by a set of acts of morally judging or observing rather than by a set of particular actions or situations being morally judged or observed.* Moreover, I think that, with regard to this, the ethical case is exactly parallel to the scientific one: *neither in ethics nor in science are we justified in construing the relevant explananda as descriptions of the epistemic behavior of judging or observing that something must be the case.* In what follows, I will try to argue for this thesis.¹³

In general, it can be said that an explanation consists in subsuming the description of a certain particular *phenomenon* under a law or a principle. This procedure allows us to attribute a certain degree of corroboration to the law or principle in question by way of confirming the particular judgments derivable from it, namely, the so-called "observational consequences".¹⁴ Now, we may consider those judgments to constitute observations in the first sense distinguished by Harman, namely, judgments made in front of certain actions, situations or whatever. In contrast, observations in the second sense, namely, the acts of observing, may be considered to be just what makes the confirmation process possible; they are thus themselves the object of neither confirmation nor explanation. Let's put this in terms of Harman's own scientific example: according to Harman, protons are what causes not only the observable fact that there is a vapor trail going through the cloud chamber but also our -also observable- act of (perceptually) observing that fact. What I am suggesting, instead, is that the only observable effect of the existence of protons that is ontologically relevant is the fact that there is a vapor trail going through the cloud chamber; the observable act of observing it is a mere *subjective* method of verification, namely, what allows *us* (or, more exactly, the physicist) to know about it by virtue of our particular physiological structure. In this view, the *objective* observational basis (of the law about protons and atomic constitution supposedly under consideration) is just the judgment describing the ontological effect in question.

The underlying idea is that *particular acts of observing are confirmationally relevant only by virtue of the particular entities that they pick out or describe.*¹⁵ It is not the peculiarities of the acts themselves that matter to confirmation. For instance, in the case at stake, the act of observing a vapor trail is confirmationally relevant in as far as it is an act of observing a va-

por trail and not in as far as it is a visual act or represents vapor trails as images of transparent small paths. In other words, it is the objective entity (being) represented rather than the subjective act of representing it that matters; the particular act could have been different in many respects (for instance, it could have had another subject, it could have been of a different, nonvisual kind, it could have been visual but non imagistic): as long as it still represented the same entity, it would have preserved its confirmation value.

At this point, there is something that may be convenient to clarify. The observable may be thought to be itself a certain act: the *phenomenon* to be explained has often been characterized as a behavioral *phenomenon*; according to this, it is only behavior that can be observed. It would be then true that there is an act that matters to confirmation but the act in question, namely, the act to be observed, can be clearly distinguished from the act of observing it. Take, for instance, the psychological case where the *phenomenon* to be explained is a child's acts of escaping reality when feeling abandoned by her parents (such as the act of creating a world of fantasy); what matters is the particular escaping behavior being observed and not the particular ways of observing that *phenomenon*: it does not matter whether we hear or see the *phenomenon* in question, or at what time of the day we make the particular observation unless the time in question reflects an important feature of the *phenomenon*. In other words, we must distinguish the relevance of the observed fact that the child escapes reality in the morning from the irrelevance of having made that observation in the afternoon (for instance, by watching a videotape of the child's morning activities); in as far as the characteristics of the acts of observing do not reflect features of the observed *phenomenon*, they can be thought to depend on our particular perceptual apparatus and perceptual sensibility and seem to be of no relevance in testing principles about children's escaping behavior (though they may be perfectly relevant in testing principles about our perceptual sensibility).

Furthermore, it must be taken into account that the observable (even if it is conceived of in terms of behavior) cannot be described in *strictly* physical terms. First of all, the strictly physical, such as atoms, protons and electrons, is mostly unobservable. Secondly, which is more important, the observable constitutes the commonsense realm and, as such, it must be thought to include all kinds of properties, such as *psychological*, *sociological* and *moral* ones. As is known, this is part of the theory-ladenness thesis, according to which observation is not theoretically neutral but laden,

namely, strongly influenced by the theory being presupposed.¹⁶ But, as widely acknowledged in the social sciences, the fact that there may be a problem in reaching objectivity does not mean that it cannot be at all reached and that the category of the observable entities should be reduced to the category of the epistemic acts of observing!¹⁷

Focusing now on the ethical case, even if it is thought that what exclusively matters to the confirmation of a moral principle are instances of a certain kind of behavior, I do not think that the behavior in question could be described as an act of morally judging. To take the example given by Harman, it is the objective wrongness of the action of igniting a cat that makes for the confirmation of the principle that causing unnecessary harm to animals is wrong, and not our action of judging that action wrong (or observing that it is wrong). Harman gives us no reasons to think that an ethical theory must be basically a theory of moral judgment, interpreted as the action of morally judging rather than the action being morally judged. Acts of morally judging may have certain features that are fully accounted for by appealing to moral sensibility; but there are no *prima facie* reasons to think that all their features are of that sort, namely, that none of them reflect objective features of the action being judged, such as objective wrongness. And the problem with favoring such acts over their respective objects is that we risk reducing the objective properties of the actions represented to the subjective properties of the representing acts.

Moreover, if the observable (realm) is to be described in terms of the different theoretical concepts we can count on, as required by the above mentioned theory-ladenness thesis, there are as many grounds for taking objective rightness and wrongness of particular actions to be part of it as there are for taking acts of observing vapor trails (or even, according to Harman, protons themselves) and psychological structures to be so. In other words, observation is in no sense neutral: there can be thus no problem at all in claiming that we do observe moral properties or, in other terms, that the observable (even if it is just behavior) does have a moral component. Harman seems to first acknowledge the point to a certain extent -when he claims that the term "proton" may occur in observational judgments- but he ends up by ignoring it completely.¹⁸ In the name of the theory-ladenness thesis, Harman should have allowed for an observable *moral* component to be part of the actions morally judged or observed as much as he has allowed for *psychological* acts of morally judging or observing.

Now, once descriptions of observable moral features are admitted to be the right kind of *explanandum*, explanatory realism, along Harman's

own lines, leads us to regard descriptions of *unobservable moral facts* as the best kind of *explanans*. According to this, moral explanations, rather than following the previously illustrated pattern suggested by Harman, may be thought to respond to the following one, parallel to the scientific pattern: *what can be said to best explain the (commonsense moral) fact that it is wrong of the children to ignite the cat is the (distinctively moral) fact that causing unnecessary harm to animals is wrong.*

It is worth emphasizing that this pattern of explanation in terms of distinctively moral facts cannot be said to commit us to the existence of problematic causal relations, of the kind involved in downward causation: the relations in question are held by entities of the *same nature*, hence belonging to the same ontological layer.¹⁹ In the physical case, unobservable *physical* entities (like protons) were thought to cause observable *physical* ones (like vapor trails in cloud chambers). Likewise, in the ethical case, unobservable *moral* entities (like the wrongness of causing unnecessary harm to animals) are thought to cause observable *moral* ones (like the wrongness of igniting a cat). Consequently, the reason why moral explanations in terms of specifically moral facts are rejected cannot be that they commit us to causal relations of a disputable kind: one relating moral entities, namely, something that is not strictly physical, to acts of morally judging, namely, a kind of behavior and hence something physical. If we are ethical realists, just as if we are scientific ones, we are committed to the existence of causal relations between theoretical entities, on one hand, and commonsense entities, on the other. But the relations in question, connect entities of the *same nature*: they are not cross-layered, and are thus far from involving the problem of downward causation. There is then no special *explanatory problem* involved in positing distinctively moral facts. More specifically, the reason why it may be considered that a theory of objective rightness and wrongness does not have the same empirical credentials as a theory of objective protons cannot be a reason derived from their respective explanatory aptitudes.

Finally, subscribing to the above mentioned subjectivistic or epistemic conception of the evidence should lead us to think, contrarily to Harman's opinion, that what best explains the scientific evidence involves no unobservable scientific facts at all. In other words, we may risk reaching the conclusion that just as the best way of explaining our subjective acts of morally judging is given in terms of our subjective ways of reacting and feeling, the best way of explaining our subjective acts of perceptually judging may be given in terms of our *subjective ways of conceptualizing*. In

terms of the previous examples, in as far as moral hypotheses about the wrongness of causing unnecessary harm to animals can be interpreted as referring to mere subjective ways of reacting or feeling in front of certain kinds of violent and cruel behavior, we could think that scientific hypotheses about protons can be interpreted as referring to mere subjective ways of conceptualizing experiences of vapor trails in chambers of saturated vapor. If this were so, the scientific pattern of explanation would not be the one illustrated by Harman, but something along the following lines: *what can be said to best explain the act of observing that there is a vapor trail is the (psychological) fact that there is a certain way of conceptualizing perceptual experiences*. As is obvious, subscribing to this kind of explanatory pattern would amount to giving up scientific realism, which Harman does not seem to be ready to do. Consequently, he should accept distinctively moral properties and facts as object of both the moral evidence and the best moral explanations at the risk of being blamed for an unjustified discrimination against ethical realism.

To summarize, if we allow for the right moral *explananda*, namely, judgments about particular moral actions, situations or facts rather than descriptions of the acts of making such judgments, we will find that there is no special problem with moral explanations. In other words, once we allow for moral terms in the *explanandum* of such explanations (and we should do so on the basis of the theory-ladenness thesis), the most natural thing will be to include moral terms in the *explanans* as well. Now, *if we are explanatory realists and we subscribe to abductive arguments for realism*, as it is the case with Harman, it is natural to take those moral terms to refer to existent properties, namely, properties that are constitutive of moral facts. Consequently, with regard to the problem of establishing how a moral fact may cause a *phenomenon*, I would say that ethics can work it out just as well as psychology and any other science. Once this has been settled, there is a very important problem to solve, namely, the problem of establishing how a moral fact may be composed of natural facts and how a moral property may supervene on a natural property. To solve this problem, we need a detailed (meta)theory such as the ones we can count on for psychological states and properties.²⁰ My purpose in this paper was not even to suggest a particular conception along these lines but, to slightly vary the terms used at the beginning, to reject a metaethical argument that attempts to dismiss *a priori* any conception of the likes.

4. Conclusion

I think that Harman has not succeeded in offering an independent argument for ethical anti-realism: his rejection of the existence of distinctively moral facts seems to be based on ontological prejudices that are independent of both our need for and our entitlement to moral explanations in terms of those facts. In simultaneously subscribing to an abductive strategy for scientific realism and rejecting the explanatory power of specifically moral facts, Harman appears to be trapped by the so-called "naturalistic fallacy", according to which moral properties, just in as far as they are moral, cannot be natural properties. Therefore, I believe that we are faced with the following two options: either we reject the value of abductive strategies in founding realistic positions or we admit distinctively moral facts into the set of entities that we are ontologically committed to. The first one requires, if we want to remain realists, that we should be able to give an alternative argument for scientific realism. The second option involves, if we want to remain physicalists, an enlargement of the ontological commitment in the direction pointed to, even if not properly developed, by Sturgeon, namely, the construal of distinctively moral facts as a kind of supervenient natural ones.²¹

Notes

¹ See Harman (1977, ch. 1, pp. 3-10).

² See Sturgeon (1985).

³ As is usual, I will also call "supervenience" the relation between *facts* of different layers.

⁴ I think that these expressions are to be preferred to "ethical skepticism" because the last one has an epistemological connotation and suggests a conception that may be compatible with the existence of moral facts; in other words, a moral skeptic may concede the existence of moral facts and claim that the real problem lies in our impossibility to accede to them.

⁵ See footnote 1.

⁶ See footnote 2. The references hereafter will be to the 1988 edition.

⁷ It is important to notice that Harman *seems* to be taking here for granted the strong thesis that psychological and sociological facts can be *reduced to* physical ones.

⁸ For a strict formulation of the notion of supervenience as applied to mental properties, see, for instance, the following one: "(SP1) mental properties supervene on physical properties in that for every mental property M, if something has M, it has a physical property P such that necessarily if anything has P it has M." (Kim 1996, ch. 9, p. 223).

- ⁹ I have taken this distinction from Devitt, who made it in relation to the notion of truth. See Devitt (1991, ch. 6, pp. 83-107).
- ¹⁰ It may be worth making the following clarifications regarding the concept of truth. If one holds a correspondence theory of truth, these two expressions ("to be true" and "to have a descriptive content") amount to one and the same because, on a correspondence account of truth, the concept of truth is just the concept of descriptive content or meaning. In contrast, if one is a deflationist about truth, the above mentioned expressions are not synonymous because, according to deflationism, the concept of truth is independent of the concept of meaning. In this case, Harman's point should be interpreted as the problem of establishing what it is for moral claims, not to be true but, to have a meaning. As is well-known, deflationists take the problem of truth to be trivial or simply a matter of applying the disquotational scheme. See, for instance, Horwich (1990).
- ¹¹ It is worth emphasizing that I do not intend to identify metaethical problems with linguistic or semantic ones. I think that metaethical issues can be thought to include ontological problems about the status and nature of moral facts, such as whether they exist or not, if they are independent of subjective faculties, etc. See Mackie (1977, ch. 1, p. 16), for a clear statement of this point.
- ¹² For a clear statement of the problem of downward causation as one of the main problems in the philosophy of mind, see (Kim 1996, pp. 229-233).
- ¹³ At this point, I take it to be necessary to consider a very interesting objection raised by an anonymous referee for *Theoria*. She/he points out that what Harman should be taken to be suggesting is that in the moral case there are no properties to be explained aside from the ones constituted by the very acts of judging or observing; in other words, that Harman is implicitly claiming that moral properties are like secondary properties -which affords a justification for the so-called "phenomenalistic construal" of moral *explananda*. As a tentative answer, I would say that the proposed interpretation seems to involve Harman in a dangerous circle: he is not allowed to presuppose at the beginning of his argument what he sets out to prove by means of it -namely, that there are no objective moral properties- on the basis of the concept of explanatory irrelevance. To put it differently, I think that this interpretation takes Harman to be offering not an argument against ethical realism based on the inapplicability of an abductive strategy in the moral realm (as I think he does) but one based on an anti-realistic conception of moral properties of a certain kind that unsurprisingly turns out to be utterly incompatible with the application of abduction. Moreover, I think that Harman's phenomenalistic construal of the *explananda* is certainly not confined to the ethical case, since he mainly demands scientific theories to explain observations "in the second sense". I see, though, no clear justification for this demand.
- ¹⁴ This is an obvious oversimplification: there is also a very important role to be played by auxiliary hypotheses, as warned, for instance, in Hempel (1966, ch. 3, p. 23).
- ¹⁵ It is worth noticing that this idea does not seem to be far from Harman's own position, since, as we have already mentioned, Harman is a metaphysical realist and realists take entities to exist independently of our subjective epistemic capacities and to be prior to them. (He explicitly claims that vapor trails exist objectively.) In a nutshell, given

that Harman is a realist about commonsense entities, it is not at all clear why he gives the suggested priority to acts over all the other kinds of entities.

- 16 The thesis at issue is clearly stated in Kuhn (1962, ch. 10).
- 17 As stated by Nagel, the difficulty in question is neither insuperable nor exclusive of social sciences. See Nagel (1961, ch. 13).
- 18 Harman (1977, p. 6). In contrast, see Van Fraassen's opinion on the same point: "(...) while the particle [namely, the proton] is detected by means of the cloud chamber, and the detection is based on observation, it is clearly not a case of the particle's being observed" (Van Fraassen 1980, ch. 2, p. 17).
- 19 I have chosen the general word "entity" to leave open the metaphysical question of which specific categories of entities are related by causality (whether they are objects, facts, events, etc).
- 20 See, for instance, Railton's theory, according to which moral facts can be taken to supervene on facts about what is rational from a social point of view, in Railton (1986).
- 21 I want to thank Patricia Greenspan for having motivated my interest in the subject and made useful corrections to a first version of the paper, as well as the anonymous referee for *Theoria* for her/his very interesting suggestions.

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