

What's your evidence?

Reason, Relativism, and Reality

Spring 2005

Better skeptical argument --
this one peculiar to morality
Try to show factual statements don't even
provide *evidence* for moral conclusions

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Harman's Thesis: E is evidence for H iff H explains E.

No-explanation argument for moral skepticism

Explanatory irrelevance:

Moral sentences (MS) can never explain the truth of factual sentences (FS)

Harman's thesis:

FS is evidence for MS only if MS explains FS.

Inferential thesis:

Inference from factual evidence is the only way to find out MS is true.

Skeptical conclusion:

one can never find out that MS is true.

Does the no-explanation argument generalize too?

- NO. The counterpart of *Explanatory irrelevance* would be "Smith's pain cannot explain why he is moaning," or, "An external dog could not explain my doggish experience." These are totally implausible.
- *Irrelevance* by contrast looks plausible. How could Alice's goodness explain a non-moral effect, e.g., that the bells are ringing?

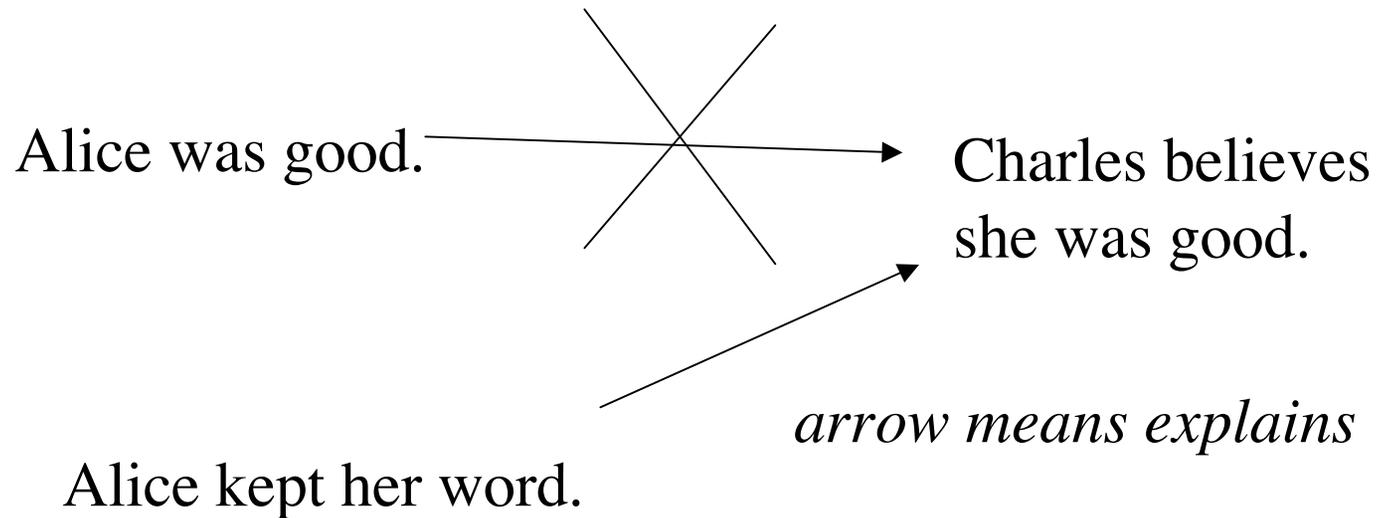
Not so fast

- Granted, Alice's goodness can't *directly* explain why the bells are ringing.
- But perhaps it can *indirectly* explain it, by directly explaining Charles's *belief* that Alice is good. Charles then rings the bell in homage to Alice.
- Idea: Moral sentences explain factual sentences about people's moral beliefs; those beliefs then have other effects.

Defending *Irrelevance*: the exclusion argument

- What really led Charles to believe Alice was good?
- It was her keeping her word when that wasn't an easy thing to.
- If Alice's keeping her word explains the belief, then how can Alice's goodness *also* explain it?
- The factual explanation supersedes and exclude the supposed moral explanation.
- This holds for all moral beliefs
- All beliefs have a factual explanation; the explanatory job is already done by the time the moral factors get onto the scene
- Conclusion: Moral factors are irrelevant and "epiphenomenal"

Exclusion in action

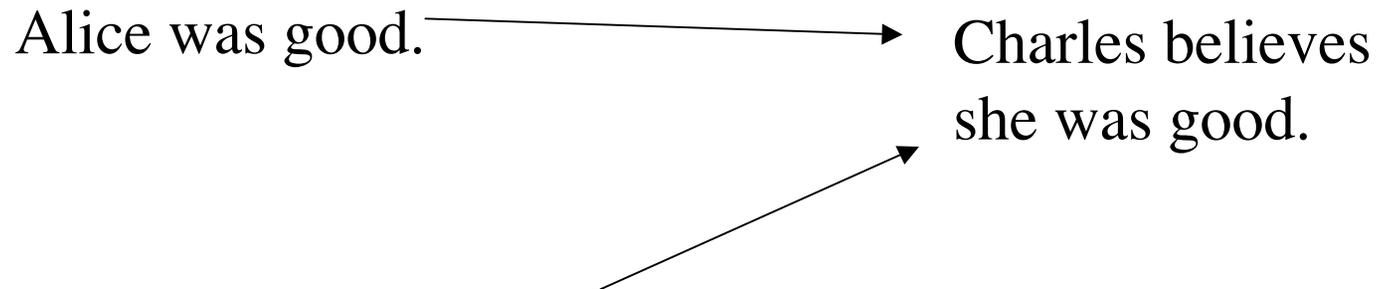


Alice's goodness is irrelevant or "epiphenomenal." Her keeping her word is the only relevant ("operative") factor.

Sturgeon's "counterfactual" test for relevance or operativeness

- X is relevant to Y iff had X not been there, neither would have Y.
- Question is, would Charles still have had the belief had Alice not been good; answer is, NO
- Alice is good by virtue of keeping her word
- But then had she not been good, she would have failed to keep her word -- in which case Charles would not have been so impressed
- Alice's goodness passes the test!

Sturgeon's picture



Alice kept her word.

Charles's belief counterfactually depends on both, so both are relevant (aka operative).

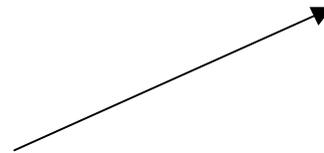
Against the counterfactual test for explanatory relevance

Donald was rude.



Boo! sound on tape

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Donald shouted "Boo!" in
a crowded room.

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Suppose Donald had not been rude. Then he would not have shouted Boo! in a crowded room; so no Boo! sound on tape.

The rudeness passes Sturgeon's test. But the tape recorder was responding to the Boo!, not the rudeness. So the test is wrong.

Then is moral knowledge unattainable?

- Not necessarily
- All we've got so far is that moral factors are not *shown* to be relevant by Sturgeon's test
- Two possible ways out
 1. Moral factors *are* relevant, even if Sturgeon's test doesn't tell us why
 2. Moral factors don't *need* to be relevant

1st strategy: moral factors are relevant

- Go back to the exclusion argument
- The argument says that if P is enough for an effect, then Q is irrelevant. But that's not always true.
- A pigeon pecks at a crimson dot. The dot's property of being crimson was enough. Does that mean its redness was irrelevant?!?
- Sturgeon might be right that Charles's belief was caused by Alice's goodness. (He might not have registered what she did, only that it was a nice thing to do.)
- Also consider Railton's example: injustice in Badlands leads to discontent and revolution.

2nd strategy: moral factors don't *have* to be relevant

- Harman assumes that H has to explain E for E to be evidence for H.
- But that's wrong.
- Tomorrow's sunburn doesn't explain today's staying out in the sun too long
- That doesn't mean Smith's staying out in the sun all day can't be evidence Smith will have sunburn tomorrow!
- Thomson: the moral skeptic has no good argument.
- For next week read chapter 7, "Emotivism"