

JUSTIFYING ONESELF AS A FOUNDATION OF MORALITY

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Justifying Oneself as a Foundation of Morality

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## DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

I, Yener Çağla Çimendereli, certify that

- I am the sole author of this thesis and that I have fully acknowledged and documented in my thesis all sources of ideas and words, including digital resources, which have been produced or published by another person or institution;
- this thesis contains no material that has been submitted or accepted for a degree or diploma in any other educational institution;
- this is a true copy of the thesis approved by my advisor and thesis committee at Boğaziçi University, including final revisions required by them.

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## ABSTRACT

### Justifying Oneself as a Foundation of Morality

In this thesis, I aim to expose a common pattern in Meta-ethics. It consists in comparing ethics and science in order to understand the nature of ethics. I believe that this pattern makes more harm than good, and should be replaced with a better approach for the sake of meta-ethical studies. To this end, I devote this thesis to a close analysis of an instance of that pattern, namely Gilbert Harman's argument in *The Nature of Morality: An Introduction to Ethics*. Harman argues that unlike science, morality does not have a certain explanatory power, and that, accordingly, it does not need to be postulated. I try to show that even though morality might not need to be postulated for the reason why science needs to be postulated, it might need to be postulated for other reasons. I argue that this other reason is the justificatory power of morality.

## ÖZET

### Ahlakın Temeli Olarak Kendini Meşrulaştırmak

Bu tezde, Meta-etik alanında sıkça görülen bir meseleyi ortaya koymayı amaçlıyorum. Mesele, ahlakın doğasını anlamak için ahlak ile bilimi karşılaştırmaktan oluşuyor. Meta-etik alanındaki çalışmaların bekası için bunun yerine başka bir yaklaşımın benimsenmesi gerektiğine inanıyorum. Bu sebepten ötürü tezimi, aynı meselenin bir örneğini teşkil eden, Gilbert Harman'ın *The Nature of Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* adlı kitabındaki bir iddiasını incelemeye ayırdım. Harman, bilimin sahip olduğu açıklama gücüne ahlakın sahip olmadığını, dolayısıyla var sayılmasının da gerekli olmadığını savunuyor. Bense buna karşın, ahlakın açıklama gücünden olmasa bile başka bir gücünden dolayı var sayılmasının gerekebileceğini ve bu gücün de meşrulaştırma gücü olduğunu öne sürüyorum.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

*What should I do?* This is a question that I occasionally find myself asking to myself. Not all the time, obviously. I am not always acting on deliberate decisions. Instead, I mostly follow the patterns of daily life without much reflection: Answer to the phone when it rings, have lunch when the time comes, call friends when life gets boring... Yet, I also make deliberate decisions sometimes; I engage in a cognitive process in order to decide what to do next. In these relatively rare instances, I seek good reasons that I can rely on. In front of the infinitely many distinct possible actions<sup>1</sup>, I try to find out the right decision to make and sometimes I ask myself, even explicitly, “What should I do?”

Why do I ask this question? Under which circumstances do I genuinely wonder what I should do? I do not know. Maybe when I am about to make a relatively important decision, or maybe when there is no daily life rule to cope with that situation, or maybe when I have spare time to think... Nevertheless, my concern now is not why I ask that question, but that I *do* ask it.

As I ask this question, an obvious answer follows immediately: I should do that which I should do. Unfortunately, however, it is not that obvious what is that which that I should do. How am I going to depict that? If I knew the basis on which I should decide what I should do, then the rest would be a mere hypothetical reasoning. If only I had a criterion! A criterion that guides me to detect the right action to take among infinitely many possible ones...

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<sup>1</sup> As Thomas Nagel (1986) describes it, “...when we act, alternative possibilities seem to lie open before us: to turn right or left, to order this dish or that, to vote for one candidate or the other—and one of the possibilities is made actual by what we do...” (p.113)

It would be wonderful then, if I could find something which might serve me as a criterion. Could there be such a thing, though? In order to answer to this question, I must first clearly delineate what I am looking for. Since my research has a practical purpose to find something with a specific function, this alleged criterion should have specific characteristics too. It would be absurd to claim something which is unable to guide me at these moments of questioning what I should do to be the criterion that I have been looking for.

In that regard, it seems that such a criterion should have two distinct qualities. Firstly, it should have to-be-pursuedness. In other words, it should be able to convince me that it is the right criterion to pursue, so that I don't need to make yet another decision in order to use it as my criterion. Secondly, it should not depend on me. Because, if I believe that the criterion is merely what I believe to be the criterion, then I would need another criterion to choose to believe in that criterion, and so on. So, my purpose is to find –or to show the possibility of finding- a criterion, i.e. something which is both independent of me (objective) and to-be-pursued (prescriptive).

Many prominent philosophers think that such a criterion is unlikely to be found. A discouraging start for me... Interestingly though, when I consider their arguments in more detail, a significant pattern reveals itself. Most of the arguments approach the issue from an irrelevant -and I must say- wrong perspective! Here lies the glimmer of hope which constitutes the main motivation of this thesis. If I can show that the common approach to this issue has its own problems and also suggest a better approach, then I might raise my expectations to eventually find that criterion.

Hence, in this thesis, I aim to demonstrate the weakness of a distinct pattern that is commonly used in meta-ethical discussions. I argue that if we are genuinely

curious about anything, we should first seek the right questions, instead of insisting on familiar but inappropriate ones. Thus, my argument builds upon a very intuitive principle: In order to understand the nature of something, we should ask questions that are relevant to that thing. Even though it sounds almost self-evident, meta-ethics literature seems to disregard it. That is why, as I draw attention to that principle in this thesis for a distinct ultimate purpose, I also hope that it gives rise to more fruitful research in meta-ethics.

Accordingly, this thesis may be considered as a meta-meta-ethics paper. It promotes a way in which meta-ethical study, which concerns the nature of all that is concerned with ethics, i.e. the good, the bad and that alleged criterion which supposedly rules my decision-making processes, should be conducted.

To this end, I analyze an instance that I think to be representative of that pattern, namely, Gilbert Harman's (1977) *The Nature of Morality: An Introduction to Ethics*. It is a good instance of formulating the meta-ethical question in a way that cannot capture the intrinsic characteristics of its subject, which is morality.

I devote the following chapter to an analysis of Harman's argument. I try to explain that it consists of two distinct but related arguments, one of which is subtler but also weaker than the other one. I plan to start by illuminating these arguments and to proceed to show why at the end I choose to reconstruct the main argument on the latter. Then, in Chapter 3, I will argue that this argument is sound but irrelevant, because it does not address the intrinsic characteristics of the subject-matter of the research. Finally, I will suggest another way to formulate the question, hoping that my suggestion serves as a model for the whole meta-ethics literature.

## CHAPTER 2

### EXPLANATORY POTENCY OF A THEORY

#### 2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I am going to focus on the argument that Gilbert Harman (1977) developed in his book *The Nature of Morality: An Introduction to Ethics*, more specifically on its first chapter, the main topic of which is the role of moral facts in explaining moral observations.

Harman (1977) distinguishes moral observation from scientific observation. It seems that the reason why he tries to make this distinction between moral and scientific observations is to challenge moral facts. His strategy is to show that there is no need to postulate a moral theory in order to explain moral observation in the sense that there is a need to postulate a scientific theory in order to explain scientific observation.

First I will try to summarize his argument very briefly, in order to give the reader a rough idea. I will evaluate the argument in detail, only after I make some clarifications regarding the terminology that Harman uses in this extract. Because, I think, understanding Harman's terminology is the crucial part of this analysis, given that his argument heavily depends on a peculiar conceptualization. Once I clarify his terminology, I will proceed to the reconstruction of the argument.

My claim is that Harman develops his argument in such a way that two distinct arguments are mingled with each other. One of them is subtle but weak, the other one is straightforward and strong, and they pose as one argument that seems both subtle and strong. Thus, in order to evaluate the argument, first I will

reconstruct them as two separate arguments. At the end I will try to explain why one of them is valid and the other is not.

## 2.2 The argument

Harman (1977) argues that moral principles cannot be confirmed in the same way as scientific principles (p. 7). The reason he gives is that scientific observation may confirm a scientific theory, while moral observation cannot confirm a moral theory.

He attempts to show his point by comparing scientific observation with moral observation via a thought experiment. In the scientific observation, a scientist looks at a cloud chamber, sees a vapor trail and thanks to her scientific background information, she makes an observation: There is a proton. Similarly, a moralist walking down the street sees children burning a cat and thanks to his moral background information, he makes an observation: That is wrong. (Harman, 1977, p. 6-7)

Obviously, in order to make these observations, certain conditions should be met. For instance, both observers should have visual sense; they both should have the relevant background information to make this observation etc. However, according to Harman, there is a condition that does not have to be fulfilled for the making of the moral observation, though it has to be fulfilled for the making of the scientific observation. It is the accuracy of the theory that is included in the background information of the observer, according to which the observation has taken place. Harman contends that when a scientist observes a proton, we have good reason to assume that there really was a proton. The fact that there was a proton is the best explanation for the fact that a scientist observed the proton. However, when a

moralist observes something to be wrong, we do not have good reason to assume that it really was wrong (Harman, 1977, p. 7). I will examine this argument in detail later.

Thus, Harman (1977) argues, while the making of the scientific observation may turn out to be an observational evidence for the scientific theory depending on which the observation was made, the making of the moral observation does not turn out to be an observational evidence for the moral theory depending on which the observations was made (p. 7).

### 2.3 Terminology

I think it is useful to make some clarifications with regard to the terminology that Harman adopts, given that he sometimes uses certain terms with different meanings and occasionally uses different words interchangeably, and that the accuracy of his argument heavily relies on these concepts. In the following I will try to clarify in what senses he uses the words “theory”, “principle” and “observation” respectively.

First of all, Harman uses the term “theory” in a confusing way. It seems like a theory includes concepts with which people can make immediate observations. Harman (1977) says “Observation depends on theory because perception involves forming a belief as a fairly direct result of observing something; you can form a belief only if you understand the relevant concepts and a concept is what it is by virtue of its role in some theory or system of beliefs” (p. 5). So, when we observe the world, we do it via concepts such as *cat*, *burning*, *life stage*, *suffering*, *etc.*, whose definitions might be found in the theories we endorse.

Furthermore, we have good reason to believe that according to Harman “principles” are also included in a theory. Throughout the article, Harman uses these

two words, namely “principle” and “theory”, interchangeably. Especially when he discusses the confirmation provided by observational evidence, he makes use of both terms, without making a distinction (Harman, 1977, p. 7). Even though assuming that Harman equivocates these two terms may be too much, I think it is safe to conclude that principles take part in theories together with concepts.

There is a further issue concerning theories. It is the ambiguous use of the truth of a theory and the existence of a theory. Though the nature of theory is outside of the scope of this thesis, I think it is useful to draw attention to that distinction since it may cause obscurity. Postulating a theory may concern either believing in a theory to hold true or assuming the existence of theory whether it is true or false. I do take it in the first sense, since Harman (1977) seems to have no objection against (a certain type of) existence of theories, given that he talks about competing theories that are all false except one (p. 6). So, from now on, when I say, “postulating a theory”, I refer to believing in the truth of a theory.

However, taking the theory postulation in this sense has its own problems. It is because, a theory is postulated as a whole, while it can be *partly* true and, accordingly, partly confirmed. In this case, if we allow for the (partly) confirmation of a theory to constitute a reason for the postulation of that theory (as a whole), then we may end up with strange consequences. For example, one may postulate a theory for good reason, i.e. when a part of the theory is confirmed, even if the rest of that theory is mostly wrong.

Other notions that deserve attention are the notions of observation and observational evidence. Harman (1977) defines observation as “an immediate judgment made in response to the situation without any conscious reasoning having taken place” (p. 6). In this regard, observation amounts to identifying objects.

Accordingly, postulating any theory that contains the definition to identify that object is sufficient to make that observation. For instance, if I postulate the Ghost Theory *G*, which tells me that white sparkles seen at nights are ghosts, when I see white sparkles at night, I observe a ghost.<sup>2</sup> In its simplest form, Ghost Theory does not have to give details about the characteristics of ghosts or explain the rules that govern their relations with other entities. In other words, it does not have to contain principles. All it has to do is to provide me with a definition to make the relevant observations. So, according to Harman's conceptualization, what an observation requires is the postulation of any theory which endorses the object of my observation.

There is another important distinction regarding observation that Harman (1977) himself explicitly makes: The observation made vs. the making an observation (p. 8). Obviously, there is a difference between the first sense of the observation which refers to the end product of someone's making an observation, (that product being something like a proposition) and the second sense of the word which refers to the act of making a specific observation.

The last term that I will define is "observational evidence". Though it will become clear in the next section, one may presume that Harman defines it as the making of an observation when it confirms the theory with which the observation has been made (Harman, 1977, p. 6). One may wonder why Harman does not consider counter-evidence. I think, counter-evidence could not take a place in this picture anyway. Because, this account of observation and confirmation cannot produce something that can be considered as counter-evidence.

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<sup>2</sup> I would like to thank Irem Kurtsal Steen for providing me with the name "Ghost Theory".



## 2.4 Reconstruction of the argument

Here is the story that Harman (1977) tells us: A scientist looks at a vapor trail and thanks to his background information which also includes certain scientific theories, he judges that there is a proton. As I tried to explain above, Harman conceives of these scientific theories as those which contain concepts and their relations. In other words, this scientist believes that under such and such circumstances, if there is a vapor trail, then there is a proton. The scientific theory that he believes in is such that it includes descriptions, it helps him to define things as scientific objects when he sees them. He can identify a vapor trail, and point to a proton he assumes to be there. That is why, when he sees the vapor trail, he believes that there is a vapor trail and thereby a proton (p. 6).

Harman argues that in order to explain this event, namely the making of the observation, we need to postulate a scientific theory which endorses the existence of the proton. According to him, there is a chain of explanation, which goes back to the existence of the proton: There is a proton, which contributes to the making of the vapor trail, which the scientist looks at and sees and perceives as a vapor trail thanks to his scientific theories and then again via these theories he observes as a proton. So, his argument is that, if any scientist does make this observation, in order to explain his making that observation, it is not enough that we recognize his postulation of the proton theory, but *we also* should postulate a proton theory, as those who try to explain the making of the observation. He says, “in order to explain the making of 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 is reasonable

to assume that there was a proton going through the cloud chamber, causing the vapor trail” (Harman, 1977, p. 7).

Harman (1977) continues his argument with an example of moral observation (p. 7). He contends that, in contrast to scientific observations, moral observations do not require us to postulate a theory which contains moral entities.<sup>3</sup> His example is cat-burning for fun. A moralist looks at children burning a cat for fun and then he thereby observes wrongness. Obviously, just like in the case of the scientist’s observation of a proton, the moralist needs to postulate a theory which contains the entity “wrong”. He looks at the children, sees them and thanks to his theory in mind, he observes the wrong. But Harman asks: Do *we also* need to postulate a moral theory which contains wrongness? According to him, we don’t. Harman argues that unlike the case of scientific observation explained above, in order to explain the making of moral explanation, we don’t need to postulate a theory which contains wrongness. He says, “...an assumption about moral facts would seem to be totally irrelevant to the explanation of your making the judgment you make” (Harman, 1977, p. 7).

Even though it should have been clear by now, there is no harm in making this point explicit: In Harman’s argument, there are two different levels of postulating a theory. The first one is done by the observer himself and the second one is done by us, who are now trying to explain the making of the observation. So, when Harman questions the necessity of postulating a moral theory, he refers to the second level of postulation, i.e. our postulation of a theory as the explainers.

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<sup>3</sup> Harman does not use this word “entity”. However, when the whole text is considered, I think this the best way to formulate his position. Note that what I mean by entity does not require a metaphysical commitment. It simply functions to question a possible counterpart of physical entities in order to compare moral and physical.

The reasoning that Harman follows seems simple. He says that in order to explain the scientist's observation of the proton, we need to assume that there really was a proton. However, in order to explain the moralist's observation of the wrong, we don't need to assume that there really was a wrong (Harman, 1977, p. 7). Let us think counterfactually. If there was no proton there, the scientist could not perceive it in the first place, even if he postulates the protonness theory. Yet, if there was no wrong there, the moralist could still perceive the wrong, since he postulates the wrongness. So, Harman's argument is that, the fact that the scientist postulates the protonness theory does not suffice for him to make the observation. That is why if he made the observation, then there should have really been a proton there. Unfortunately, the fact that the moralist postulates the wrongness theory does suffice for him to make the observation. Even if he made the observation, we cannot say that there should have really been a wrong there. In short, the postulation of a moral theory at the second level is not necessitated by the fact that moral observations are being made. We don't need to postulate a moral theory.

## 2.5 The limits of observational evidence

Since the need to postulate a theory is closely bound with the concepts of confirmation and observational evidence, I will try to shed light on these concepts before I start to evaluate Harman's argument.

First of all, I should note that the proton theories that the observer postulates and that we postulate don't have to be same. Even though Harman does not mention this, according to his argument explained above, the scientist should postulate one theory which contains a definition for a proton and enables him to make the

observation, and we should also postulate a theory, but not necessarily the same one, which contains the proton as an entity and enables us to explain his making the observation. To that extent, both theories may contain nothing in common but these definitions.

Let me illustrate this with an example. Assume that S makes an observation; she individuates a proton thanks to his concept C1 in T1. The fact that she individuated the proton can be best explained by assuming that there really was a proton. My point is that, any theory that contains C1 would work here. What Harman means by “the theory which explains best among competing theories” is all theories which include C1.

Assume that there are T\*1, T\*2 and T\*3. None of them includes C1. (For example T\*1 says that whenever a sailor dies, you see vapor trails and T\*2 says that whenever you see vapor trail, there is a ghost) And there are also T1, T2 and T3. They all contain C1. Harman says that the fact that this observation is made is best explained by postulating a theory that includes C1. The best explanation of why this observation was made has to be one of T1, T2, T3. So, in fact, T1, T2 and T3 explain the making of that observation equally well. Harman is not saying something against it. He only says that we have to postulate a theory including C1.

How we are going to choose among T1, T2 and T3 is a further question. We need further criteria to choose the best theory among them. In short, Harman’s argument does not (need to) provide with us a criterion to find the best theory. His argument attempts to show that if someone observes an instance of C1, then she herself and we as the observers of the observation should conclude that whichever theory that explains it best includes C1. So, we should postulate a theory that contains C1.

Obviously, if the person who tries to explain the making of the observation is the maker of that observation and she did not change her theories since the observation, having already favored T1 over other competing theories (or maybe she is not even aware of competing theories it does not matter), would postulate T1, to explain her having made that observation.

But other people who did not necessarily make this choice already may have competing theories T1, T2 and T3. The question is, do they have to postulate the same theory that the observer had in mind while making that observation? I think, Harman does not give us a reason to think so.

So, let us assume we, the explainers of the observation, know that the observer had T1 in mind; she was not aware of equally good theories T2 and T3. For example, let's say that C1 is "In a cloud chamber, if there is a vapor trail, then there is a proton." C2 is "a vapor trail is..." etc. Assume all three of them contain these definitions C1, C2 etc. But their relations are described differently. T1 says that in a cloud chamber, when a proton meets an electron, there happens to be a vapor trail. T2 says that in a cloud chamber, when a proton hits a water molecule, there happens to be a vapor trail. T3 says that in a cloud chamber, protons feel so good and come together and make a vapor trail. In that case, we have good reason to eliminate T3, because our knowledge about the nature tells us that protons can't feel good and do things. However, the reason why we eliminate that theory is not that it does not explain the making of the observation as well as T1 and T2 do. We eliminate it for other reasons (e.g. lack of consistency with known facts about nature, lack of narrowness of scope) which convince us that T1 and T2 are better than T3, given all we accept.

Let's say we eliminate T3. How are we going to choose between T1 and T2? Does the observation's being made on T1 prevent us from saying that T2 explains it best? It does not. If both theories contain C1, i.e. whenever there is a vapor trail, there is also a proton, then someone's making the individuation of a proton provides evidence for both T1 and T2.

## 2.6 Confirmation

It seems that the making of the observation gives us a reason to postulate a theory. In other words, the observational evidence confirms the concept thanks to which we made the individuation. Then my question is the following: On the basis of this model, is it ever possible to confirm a principle? Unfortunately, it is not. Given that observation is limited to individuation via concepts, the fact that an observation is made can only be an observational evidence for that concept, as I illustrated in the previous section.

Concepts help us to perceive the world and make observations. So, when I make an observation and, for instance, individuate a proton thanks to a scientific theory I endorse, if it really is a proton, then the theory is confirmed. In this regard, a theory may be confirmed, if it makes us make the right individuations, even though it does not contain any principle or that it contains wrong ones.

Harman (1977) starts his argument by using the concept *confirmation* (p. 3). However, he soon starts to lead the discussion in terms of observational evidence (Harman, 1977, p. 6). That is why I will simply delineate how confirmation is different from observational evidence according to his account. In order to have an observational evidence, it is enough to make an observation which is best explained

by the theory which enables the observer to make that observation. Harman does not argue that the fact that the scientist observes a proton *guarantees* the existence of the proton. If that were the case, then we would not need this sophisticated strategy called the Inference to the Best Explanation. We could easily postulate the existence of the proton with great self-confidence. So, observational evidence is actually what is considered to be a sufficient but incomplete evidence for postulating a theory. Theoretically, there is room for mistake. In other words, a scientist can be mistaken in her observation of a proton. In this case the making of the observation would remain as an observational evidence, but it would not be a good evidence. However, a particular act of confirmation of a theory does not come in degrees. If we say that a particular observational evidence *confirms* a particular theory and that we are wrong, then this particular observation must be mistaken. If it is not mistaken, then we were wrong and the observational evidence really confirms that theory.

## 2.7 Evaluation of the argument

Harman (1977) says:

In the scientific case, your making that observation is itself evidence for the physical theory because the physical theory explains the proton, which explains the trail, which explains your observation. In the moral case, your making your observation does not seem to be evidence for the relevant moral principle because that principle does not seem to explain your observation. The explanatory chain from principle to observation seems to be broken in morality... the wrongness of that act does not appear to help explain the act, which you observe, itself. (p. 8)

In order to evaluate this argument, it is crucial to interpret the quotation above correctly. Harman seems to argue that the reason why the making of the moral observation does not provide observational evidence is that the moral theory according to which one makes the observation does not posit a causal chain with that

which is observed. In this section, I will start with this interpretation. Then, I will move on to seek other possible interpretations.

### 2.7.1 Causal explanation

If what Harman really means is that in the scientific observation there is a causal chain that the moral observation lacks, then there are versions of the interpretations to choose between. He cannot mean that the moral principle does not cause that which is observed, since, obviously, principles cannot cause things. The scientific principle that protons in a cloud chamber hit water molecule and cause a vapor trail does not cause either the protons or the vapor trails.

So, what Harman means must be that unlike in scientific observation, in moral observation the facts postulated by the theory do not cause the things perceived. In other words, while (if the scientific theory is true) protons cause the vapor trail, the wrongness of the act does not (typically) cause children's burning the cat.

Yet, on this interpretation Harman comes out as subjecting moral theory to tests that it by definition cannot pass. Clearly wrongness is not a physical entity and cannot be the cause of other physical entities the way in which proton causes a vapor trail. Furthermore, in this case, wrongness is a property of the action. A property of something cannot precede that thing and cause it.

In short, I think, causal explanation would mean nothing but discovering the fact that moral properties are not physical, or do not have physical causal powers. Not a great discovery, though.



### 2.7.2 Figure into the best explanation

Another –and I think stronger- interpretation of Harman’s argument would be that while the truth of the observation would best explain the scientific observation, this is not the case for the moral observation. While the fact that the existence of a proton figures into the best explanation gives us good reason to postulate it, the fact that the action is wrong does not figure into the best explanation; we do not have good reason to postulate that there has been an instantiation of wrongness.

The difference between the previous interpretation and this one is that the latter concerns concepts, while the former focuses on the entities that the concepts refer to. In other words, this interpretation is directed at the theory. If a concept which is confirmed by the observational evidence best fits to the theory, there is good reason to postulate it.

The problem of that argument stems from the Harman’s conception of observation. Given that an observation is limited to the individuation of something that falls under a concept, I wonder what its accuracy even amounts to. For example, how the making of the observation of a proton can confirm the theory and thus *proton* best explains the theory with which the observation was made? If the part of the theory which can be confirmed is limited to the concept of *proton*, I think this interpretation provides circular confirmation.

My contention is that, if we see good reason to postulate a theory in the scientific observation, we should also have good reason to postulate a theory in moral observation. Or we should admit that we do not have good reason to postulate a theory in any of these cases. First of all, we should keep in mind that, in both cases, the observer does not directly see the object of the observation, but identifies it

through an immediate judgment without conscious reasoning. Given that both moral and scientific observation consists of the individuation of something, and that in this regard both moral and scientific theories are on an equal footing, I think that individuations of things provide the same level of evidence for both theories. They all “confirm” the concepts with regard to which they have been instantiated in the first place.

Hence, this interpretation fails to demonstrate that moral theory lacks explanatory power, since the way in which Harman conceptualizes observation makes his theory untenable and explanatory power impossible. This argument could work, only if he had a different account of observation which contains more than identifying an individuation of a concept – i.e. observation of causal principles. Unfortunately, however, this present way of conceptualization cannot provide a meaningful account of confirmation which seems crucial for the success of this argument. Hence, not only moral, but also scientific confirmation of a theory becomes impossible.

## 2.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, I evaluated Harman’s argument that scientific theories have an explanatory power and moral theories lack this power. I suggested two interpretations for that argument. I concluded that though the second one, namely “Figure into the best explanation” looks more sophisticated, it fails to demonstrate Harman’s argument. The reason is that this interpretation turns explanatory power into a meaningless and impossible characteristic.

The first interpretation performed better, given that it matches explanation with physical causality, and according to this account of explanation moral theories lack explanatory power. However, this is nothing more than saying that moral entities are not physical entities, and if this is really the interpretation that Harman prefers, I do not understand why he chose such a complicated way to make this simple claim.

Nevertheless, I think, the way in which Harman argues, namely showing that the moral domain lacks certain qualities that by definition distinguish the moral from the scientific is neither useful nor fair. Unfortunately, this approach is not uncommon in the literature: Show that moral principle/theory/observation/judgment etc. do not have characteristics inherent to their scientific counterpart, then conclude that moral principle/theory/observation/judgment etc. lack another characteristic that their scientific counterparts have, such as truth and reality. I think if we are genuinely curious about the nature of morality, then we should look at its inherent characteristics. In the following chapter, I will suggest some candidates.

## 2.4 The bigger picture

The account against the explanatory power of moral observation that Harman provides constitutes a full argument against moral realism if it is taken together with two more premises. Here is an attempt to reconstruct this argument:

- 1) One should seek ontological parsimony.
- 2) Ontological parsimony requires that one should not postulate a theory unless it would have explanatory power once it is postulated.
- 3) A moral theory would not have explanatory power once it is postulated.

Therefore, one should not postulate a moral theory.

The first premise stems from an ancient idea; and it has become familiar even to the layperson. Now, it seems quite intuitive to favor ontological economy. That is why I will leave the critique of this premise to the ontologist. I take the third premise warranted and thus, I will focus on the second premise in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER 3

### JUSTIFICATORY POTENCY OF A THEORY

#### 3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I am going to defend that even if moral theory is deprived of explanatory power, it has its own power, which is justification. My contention is that given the fact that we are free agents, who are bound to make their own decisions, we need to postulate a second order moral-theory which enables us to justify our actions, and thus make moral decisions.

To this end, first I will explain the way in which I use the word “justification” and how it differs from its common use in contemporary epistemology literature. Then, I will move on to explain how the third person perspective which Harman also adopts leads to an inadequate understanding of moral theory. Afterwards, I will show how these concepts, namely freedom, morality and justification can be best understood from the first person view and that disregard for this distinction between first person and third person perspectives is the main culprit for why theories that concern these concepts are incomplete. Lastly, I will try to demonstrate my argument that moral theory is needed for its justificatory power.

#### 3.2 “Justification”

I think it is again useful to start the argument with some clarifications regarding the terminology that I will use, especially because the widely accepted meaning of a

crucial term that I will frequently use in the following chapter, namely justification, is different than the meaning with which I will use it.

When I use the word “justify”, I simply refer to the act of showing the justness of an action. (I must also note that I take “justification” as the act of justifying) Hence, my use of the word differs from its usual meaning in three distinct senses. First, I am thinking of moral justification of *actions*, not epistemic justification of *belief*. Further, in the way I use the word, justification is not limited to “citation of reasons”. Lastly, justification does not imply a negative freedom, but also a positive requirement.

I shall start by explaining the relation between the justification of actions and justification of beliefs. Even though in everyday speech the meaning of “justification” has a connotation that is related to *just*, in contemporary philosophy, the same word has lost its ties with that notion to the extent that even some philosophers who deny moral properties can consistently talk about justification.<sup>4</sup>

One of the reasons for that is that in contemporary philosophy, the word justification is used in a very particular way, namely in epistemology, to delineate the act of showing the basis for a belief. In other words, when someone gives reasons to show that she has a right to hold this belief, she is supposed to be giving a justification for her belief. Obviously, these reasons are not any reasons, but good ones; and whether a reason is good depends on the account that we endorse as the theory of justification.<sup>5</sup> Currently, I will focus on the epistemic justification for a

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<sup>4</sup> I should note that I have my doubts on the possibility of talking about justification of belief in any sense while rejecting moral properties without being inconsistent.

<sup>5</sup> Justification of belief may concern different virtues such as epistemic and moral (Alston, 1988, p. 258). However, since the issue of justification in epistemology involves huge debates and it is outside of the purposes of this paper I will content myself with explaining it very broadly to the extent that it enables me to delineate its difference from the justification of an action.

belief, because the most common discussion of justification happens in that context and I will try to explain the common use of the word in contemporary philosophy.

The cardinal virtue that epistemic justification seeks to attain is *truth*. When someone gives an epistemic justification for her believing in the truth of a judgment, she cites evidence supporting the likelihood of the truth of a judgment in order to show that she has a right to believe in that judgment. So, in this account of justification, what gives someone the right to hold a belief, at the end, is its being true. The idea that what we have a right to believe is what is true enables us to move the focus from *just* to *true*.

However, what justifies an action is its being just. In order to justify his actions, one needs to show that he has a right to perform that action. Obviously, the relations among certain concepts such as just, right, good and appropriate have been discussed much and I don't attempt to repeat the discussion here. I simply claim that unlike justification of belief, where one may operate without moral qualms, justification of action requires moral understanding. In short, when I use the word "justification" in the following, I refer to the act of demonstrating the justness of an action, if I don't particularly refer to the epistemic account of justification for belief.

Another different aspect of the way in which I use the word "justification" is that it is more than making a list of reasons which gives you the right to do something, but it also concerns convincing you that you would better do that thing. I will try to elaborate on this idea below, but for the time being I should add that this extra step that is included in the concept is the source of justificatory power.

### 3.3 Ontological parsimony and justificatory power

As I explained in the previous chapter, it is argued that ontological parsimony requires us to economize with what we postulate. In the remaining of this chapter I will defend the thesis that moral theory is also necessary to postulate with regard to its justificatory power.

Now, I go back to Harman's story: There is an observer who makes the observation and we, from the third person view, try to explain the making of this observation. At the end of this story, Harman (1977) concludes that moral theory would not have an explanatory power to explain the act of moral observation. My suggestion is that the power of moral theory which necessitates us to postulate it is lost in this narrative. I think, in order to understand the nature of moral theory, we should focus on the first person perspective, according to which this observer makes that observation.

Let us suppose that Harman is right and there is no need to postulate a moral theory for the making of a moral observation. Given that his conceptualization of observation amounts to moral evaluation, he could be right, because in that case all observation would be limited to immediate reactions without conscious reasoning to the external world. However, evaluative judgment also concerns self-assessment; and furthermore, evaluative moral judgment is not the only sort of moral judgment there is.

If Harman's conceptualization were correct, people would never be able to question their moral evaluations, while they make them. In other words, his story cannot capture reasoned moral evaluations. When I say, "reasoned moral



evaluation”, I refer to a judgment which contains conscious reasoning.<sup>6</sup> It is similar to the moral observation to the extent that they are both evaluative judgments and that they both appeal to moral theory. The difference is that reasoned moral evaluation requires an active involvement of the observer, while in the moral observation case the observer remains comparably passive. Harman’s conceptualization does not allow reasoned moral evaluation.

Let us try to make sense of a reasoned moral evaluation from Harman’s conceptualization. For example, the moralist observer in Harman’s story starts to question the wrongness that he observes. As opposed to the moral observation, this evaluation requires conscious reasoning, i.e. active participation of the observer. In this case, observer needs a moral theory not only to form a judgment consciously, but also to justify his belief in the moral judgment he makes. At this point, as the third person observers, we may still insist that the accuracy of the moral theory does not have any explanatory power for this observation. Yet, *the observer* needs a moral theory to justify *his* observation. I think this is where we should look if we want to understand the necessity of moral observation.

Further, I believe that the justificatory power of moral theory manifests itself best in terms of action. Harman seems to confound the distinction between moral evaluation which allows for third person view and moral decision which calls for first person view. Below, I will explain moral decision in detail. For the time being it is sufficient to assert that while moral evaluation concerns relations among moral properties, moral decision seeks the action to be taken.

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<sup>6</sup> The reason why I suggest “moral evaluation” as opposed to “moral observation” is that I try to remain within the picture Harman draws, in order to evaluate his argument from his own point of view. I don’t argue that these two categories “moral observation” and “moral evaluation” are the best ones to describe moral properties.

Thus, I criticize Harman's story for two distinctions that he did not make: The first one is between active (reasoned) and passive (immediate) moral evaluations and the second one is in between moral evaluation and moral decision. My argument is that this conceptualization remains inadequate in order to understand the power of moral theory, mainly because it is strictly from third person perspective, while morality has its roots in the first person perspective.

#### 3.4 First person perspective, freedom, justification and morality

In the previous section, I claimed that the primary power of morality is its justificatory power and this power is obvious from the first person perspective. In this section I will try to demonstrate this relationship. My strategy is to show that first person perspective is necessary for understanding freedom which in turn requires agency and thus justification. In the next section, I will also explain how justification constitutes the foundation for morality.

What I suggest is simple. I think, certain problems in philosophy such as the so-called (metaphysical) problem of freedom stem from a disregard for this distinction between first and third person views. Further, I believe that the problem of understanding morality and understanding freedom are somehow related to each other, since they are all instances of the same problem: the difficulty of making sense of the first person view. When you try to understand it via third person, you lose sight of its internal characteristics. As Nagel (1986) says, "In acting we occupy the internal perspective, and we can occupy it sympathetically with regard to the actions of others. But when we move away from our individual point of view, and consider our actions and those of others simply as part of the course of events in a world that

contains us among other creatures and things, it begins to look as though we never really contribute anything” (p. 113).

Thus, I argue that just like the problem of freedom, the problem of justification stems from how the third person view eliminates *agency*: to the extent that third person view ignores agency, it excludes both freedom and justification.

Now, I will reconsider Harman’s story under these assumptions. According to that story, we, the explainers of the observation, are supposed to explain a moral observation made without any conscious reasoning. In other words, we are not in the position even to ask about a reasoned (active) moral evaluation or moral decision. From that perspective, all look as if the observers need not to contribute to the acts that they performed. They are not active; they are deprived of agency. The way in which their action, namely immediate observation, is conceptualized deprives them from agency. That does not create a problem for Harman’s argument, because, his purpose of explaining the observation is in line with this conceptualization. However, I think that this is obviously inadequate –since people do make conscious judgments- and thus, I will not try to show why it is so. Instead, I will try to make sense of a more plausible version of it.

A more plausible theory would be the one which has room for the conscious judgments of the observer. In this case, the conceptualization allows for an active participation of the observer; there is room for agency. Yet, this time the third person view prevents us from capturing the whole story, because from that point of view, it is not possible for us to detect the fact that these observers also need theories for their conscious reasoning.

In short, Harman's narrative does not allow for agency either because of its conceptualization or because of its point of view. From these perspectives, including the original immediate moral observation case and extended reasoned moral observation case, everything is explained by a previous event. If you are making an immediate or reasoned moral judgment, you make it because you have a certain set of beliefs and the world is in a certain way etc. However, the fact that these judgments are a product of your being you and of your environment does not erase the fact that you still have to make that judgment. In order to explain it better, now I will focus on my narrative which hopefully enables us to understand the role of agency in freedom and justification.

Let us shift the focus from moral evaluations to moral decisions. As an agent from the first person view, most of the times there are hundreds of different actions that you may choose. All the possibilities open up in front of you when you are looking from the first person (Nagel, 1977, p.113). These possibilities indicate the very essence of freedom and justification. As a free agent, you have to make decisions. When you look retrospectively, it may look as if you meant to make these decisions in that way. However, when you are actually making that decision, you feel the freedom that you face and this freedom is the source of your autonomy. In this case, when you decide to take an action, you need to justify yourself that this is what you should really do. In other words, your justification must convince yourself, and I argue that this is only possible through the appeal to a moral theory.

Obviously, this account of decision making that I suggested above is not immune to criticisms. One may say that we do not make our decisions always consciously. Another may say that even in these cases where we make conscious decisions, it is not the case that we always choose the morally best option. I think

they are all good questions, but I don't think that either I can provide a complete explanation for all of them inside the scope of this paper or I should do that for the relevant purposes. That is why I will content myself by emphasizing my argument that in most of the accounts for decision-making, it is common to assume that a free-agent decides her actions via a rational process and her deciding consists of her conviction for that decision.

Now, the question is whether you can make any conscious moral decision if you know that there is no moral theory. In other words, if we all know that anti-realists were right and that moral properties were just an illusion, would it be possible for us to make any decision?

We could not make any conscious moral decision if we believed that there was no moral property, because making conscious moral decisions requires us to justify our actions. We need to convince ourselves that the action that we apparently should take is the action that we really should take. Without a criterion which can guide us, we cannot justify our moral decisions. Obviously, this part of conscious decision-making is lost in the third person perspective.

### 3.5 Justifying oneself as a foundation of morality

As a person who believes herself to be free, I need to decide my actions. In order to decide my actions, I need to answer this question: What should I do? Clearly, this question is not always explicit and I do not make all my decisions consciously. However, personally, there are many times when I ask this question genuinely. In these cases, once I ask myself that question, I tend to not stop myself with the first-order answer. Because, the purpose of this question is to find an answer, which

would justify my action. Consequently, it is not enough for me to pick any answer, which convinces me; and it is possible only if I believe that there is an objective prescription because of which I should do such and such.

For example “Go home and complete your thesis.” convinces me if I presume the fact that there are values that distinguishes actions from each-other and makes some of them the best candidate so that it becomes the right thing for me to do. Had I known that there was no such thing as good, an objective prescription, I could not know what to do and hence, act. The core of my argument is the fact that I cannot fool myself. I cannot convince myself of the goodness of my action while I believe that there is no such thing as good.

In order to make sense of my argument, it is crucial to take the first person view. Imagine yourself in that situation. Assume for a moment that all the moral properties are meaningless. There is no such thing as right or good. They are all illusions. What are you going to do? Can you not ask yourself what you should do? If you cannot, how are you going to convince yourself that such and such are what you should do, in the absence of moral properties? How are you going to make the final decision without assuming that there are actually moral properties? Can you keep assuming something to be true while you believe it to be wrong? You cannot.

In order to continue being a free agent, that we all bound to be, we need to assume moral properties, if not a consistent moral theory. My argument is not that every free-agent needs to postulate a first-order moral theory, but a second-order moral theory, which contains the idea of good.

### 3.6 Other powers, other theories

An expected objection to my argument would be that how we decide which necessities are good necessities to the extent that they do not conflict with the principle of ontological parsimony. For example, one may say that he needs astrology to live his life, because the prophetic power that astrology has is indispensable for his living. In that situation, I must admit that this argument should be given a chance too. If the reason why we believe that scientific and moral theories secure their places in our ontology, exactly because of their necessary powers, and because we want to be intellectually honest, we should permit astrology to take the test and see what happens.

Is it really possible for astrology to pass the test? We cannot answer to that question without understanding the argument given for astrology. We can cite the differences between astrology, morality and science, and try to infer a conclusion, but this would be exactly the same fallacy that I have been arguing against throughout this thesis. If astrology has a particular power which necessitates its postulation, it should be different than the moral and scientific theories have. Thus, it cannot be derived from either of them.

In short, I do not offer a meta-theory about theories. All I say is that if we do not hesitate to allow that explanatory power is a good reason to postulate a theory, there is no reason to hesitate to allow that justificatory power is a good reason to postulate a theory.

### 3.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I showed that, if we take the explanatory power of scientific theory as a reason to postulate the theory, we can also take the justificatory power of moral theory as a reason to postulate that theory.

Obviously, I cannot point a theory with my finger. All I can do is to give a reason to postulate it, just like Harman did, because, you cannot sense a theory. This is the reason why Harman himself resorts to the strategy known as Inference to the Best Explanation which he dubbed. However, I think I did save moral theory following the same reasoning. From the ontological parsimony perspective, if we should postulate scientific theory, we should definitely postulate moral theory too.



## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUSION

In this thesis I analyzed Harman's argument in *The Nature of Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* (Harman, 1977). First, in Chapter 2, I reconstructed the argument and concluded that only part of the argument is actually tenable. Even though the argument seems sophisticated and intuitive at the first sight, as I provided with a close reading of the argument, it became clear that the argument actually consists of two distinct arguments - one sophisticated and one intuitive- which happen to have the same conclusion.

Then, I refuted the sophisticated one with regard to Harman's own terminology. I argued that, this sophisticated argument that I refer to in this thesis as "Inference to the best explanation argument" fails, since, at the end, it cannot discriminate between a scientific theory and a moral theory. This is because "confirmation", which is found at the heart of this argument, becomes possible only in a circular form because of the way in which Harman defines "theory" and "observation". Hence, the conceptualization on which the argument is built prevents the argument from going through. I exposed in detail how this flaw disguised by loose terminology.

The other argument, which is crude but intuitive, survived my evaluation. Nevertheless, my ultimate purpose was not criticizing Harman's argument. I tried to trace the best interpretation of his argument only because I wanted to provide an instance of a certain problematic approach in meta-ethics, adopted by Harman as well as other philosophers.

In Chapter 3, considering only that part of the argument which is tenable, I argued that Harman directs his attention to the wrong side of the issue. He questions whether morality has certain characteristics that science has. The problem is that these characteristics are already the ones that we use to discern between science and morality. In other words, morality lacks these characteristics by definition, while science obtains them, again, by definition. Obviously, no one would argue that “wrongness” does not exist as a physical entity as “proton” does. However, this does not imply that it does not exist at all. In fact, this constitutes the source of the problem: What kind of an existence is possible other than physical existence?

Hence, I argued that, if we are really curious about that problem, we should stop blaming morality for not being science and start to ask relevant questions concerning its own nature. Further, I suggested that, this nature requires us to look at the autonomous actions from the first-person perspective. I concluded that, if we do so, we could capture the peculiar power of morality, which is justification.

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