

Phil 104, April 12, 2007
Harman: Ethics and Observation

Harman: Intuitively, science seems objective in a way in which morality is not. But how are we to make this contrast more precise?

Morality is not confirmed in the way in which scientific hypotheses are confirmed.

- Moral principles are “confirmed” by thought experiments.
- Moral principles are not confirmed by observation.

A theory that predicts that p is confirmed by an observation that p only if we need to appeal to the fact that p in the best explanation of why the observation took place. Moral theories are never confirmed by observations in this way.

- Harman does *not* deny that there *are* moral observations.
- Moral observations are explained by the facts that you saw the kids burning the cat and that you have a moral sensibility, or implicitly hold a moral theory, that says that burning cats is wrong.
- We need not appeal to the supposed fact that burning cats is wrong.

In sum, moral principles are not confirmed by moral observations, because we do not need to appeal to the truth of those principles in order to explain those observations.

Harman’s overarching argument seems to be:

- (1) A belief is justified by observation only if we need to appeal to the truth of the belief in order to explain why the observation takes place.
- (2) We do not need to appeal to the truth of any moral belief in order to explain why any moral observation takes place.
- (3) Therefore, moral beliefs are not justified by observation.
- (4) Therefore, moral beliefs are not justified.

Yet the argument seems to need a further premise:

A belief can be justified *only* by observation.

Do we justify mathematical beliefs, like $2+2=4$ by observation?

A somewhat different argument:

- (1) A belief is justified only if we need to appeal to its truth in order to explain why *something* happens.
- (2) We never need to appeal to the truth of any moral belief in order to explain why any *observation* takes place.
- (3) We never need to appeal to the truth of any moral belief in order to explain why *anything else* happens.
- (4) Therefore, moral beliefs are not justified.

The reason why we no longer believe that there are witches is that we can explain, without appealing to witches, the phenomena that witches were once invoked to explain.