The Relativity of Ethical Explanation
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If you ask a philosopher what ethical theory is you are likely to get an answer that mentions explanation. Here are some examples from the books on my shelf. In describing the “subject matter of ethics” Russell says that it involves “ask[ing] why such and such actions ought to be performed, and continu[ing] our backward inquiry for reasons until we reach the kind of proposition of which proof is impossible.”¹ More than a century later Mark Timmons strikes a similar note:

What makes an act right or wrong? What makes an individual morally good or bad? How can we come to correct conclusions about what we morally ought to do and what sorts of persons we ought to be? Moral theory attempts to provide systematic answers to these very general moral questions.²

If Russell and Timmons and most others are right, then ethical theory is not just concerned with rendering moral verdicts, but with saying why those verdicts are true. It is an explanatory enterprise.

But what is it to explain an ethical fact? And how should ethical theorists go about constructing these explanations? These questions have received some attention, but not much of it has come from ethical theory itself.³ In this paper I make a start on answering such questions by focusing on a feature of ethical explanation that I think has been so far overlooked by ethical theorists, that it takes place relative to a contrast space. What this means and why we should believe it I explain in the next section. In the two sections that follow I elaborate on the thesis and discuss its implications for the explanatory ambitions of ethical theory.

1. The relativity of ethical explanation

Like most worthwhile philosophical topics, the phenomenon I am interested in is best introduced by a joke. In the Marx Brothers film A Night at the Opera a famous tenor wonders aloud why the audience pelted him with apples. To this Groucho replies that watermelons are out of season. It’s easy enough to see how this joke works. The way the explanandum is stated suggests

³Metaethicists care about these questions, but they are mostly interested in the explanatory relationship between ethical and non-ethical facts. This is not irrelevant to the explanatory demands of ethical theory, but it is not the quite question I am interested in.
a certain contrast to be explained—why did they throw apples at me instead of applauding? But Groucho’s answer attends to a different contrast—why did they throw apples instead of bigger fruit? We slap our knees because of the incongruity and the way it allows Groucho to put down the puffed up tenor.

Groucho’s joke trades on the fact that many explanatory questions are posed relative to a background contrast space—to a set of foils. The tenor wanted to know why the audience threw apples instead of throwing nothing at all or instead of applauding, but Groucho understands the question as asking why they threw apples instead of some other fruit. Fred Dretske offers another nice example. Jerry is fired for insubordination. He needs some money to make ends meet until he finds another job. George lends him $300. Now here there are at least three different questions we might ask with the words, “Why did George lend Jerry $300?” Accordingly, there are three different explanations one can give for George’s lending him $300. One might want to know why George lent $300 rather than some other sum. We might want to know why George lent $300 rather than giving it to Jerry. And we might want to know why it was George who lent the $300 rather than someone else. An answer to the first sort of question—that it’s all the money George had—will not satisfy someone asking the third, someone wondering why it was George who lent the money. An answer to the third—that George is Jerry’s closest friend—will similarly not satisfy anyone wondering why George lent the money instead of giving it as a gift. We see the same phenomenon in scientific explanations. The dinosaurs went extinct at the end of the Cretaceous period. What explains this fact? Well, it depends on which contrast we are interested in. If we are asking, “why was it the dinosaurs (and not certain species of mammals) who went extinct at the end of the Cretaceous period?” then an adequate explanation will cite differences between dinosaurs and mammals. If we are asking, “why was it at the end of the Cretaceous period (and not a different time) when the dinosaurs went extinct?” then an adequate explanation will tell us about something special that happened at the end of the Cretaceous period.

These are examples where what suffices as an adequate explanation of a fact does not depend on the fact alone. Two different theories may explain the same fact relative to different contrasts. Thus if these examples are indicative, then the relation of being an adequate explanation is not a two-place relation between a theory and a fact, but a three-place relation between a theory, a fact, and a contrast space.

These contrast spaces can be distinguished both by which kind of contrast is to be explained (why the dinosaurs went extinct versus why the dinosaurs went extinct then) and which particular foils are regarded as relevant to the explanation (why dinosaurs did dinosaurs and not some subset of {raptors, mammals, land animals…} go extinct?) I will say more in a moment about what this space of contrasts consists in and how it is fixed. For now, however, I want to consider the claim that this is how explanation works in general. Actually, I am interested in the thesis only as it pertains to the explanation of ethical facts. What I want to defend is this:

(Ethical Explanatory Relativity) The relation of being an adequate explanation of an ethical fact is not a two-place relation between a theory and a fact, but a three-place relation between a theory, a fact, and a space of contrasts.

In what follows I give some initial reasons for accepting this thesis and respond to some objections.

The first reason to accept the relativity of ethical explanation is that there are examples that support the thesis. I tell you that Will is a cad for sleeping with Deanna. You ask me why. It is not clear what kind of explanation is being sought until we know what the contrast space is. Is the question why Will is a cad for sleeping with Deanna, as opposed to other people he may sleep with? Is it why Will, as opposed to Deanna’s other lovers, is rendered a cad by their coital act? Is it why Will is a cad for sleeping with Deanna, as opposed to other activities they may pursue? Is it why Will is a cad for sleeping with Deanna, as opposed to a bastard or a blackguard?

Your valet drops a tray and you get up to thrash him with a blackjack. I tell you that it would be wrong for you to do such a thing, and you ask why. Here again, what you are asking, and so what explains the fact in question in this instance will depend on the contrast space being invoked. Why would it be wrong for you to thrash your valet, as opposed to the cook or the butler? Why would it be wrong to thrash someone for dropping a tray, as opposed to some other offense? Why would it be wrong to thrash someone, instead of a milder rebuke?

These examples appear to work no different from the non-ethical case involving Jerry, George, and the dead dinosaurs. Will’s marriage to Betty may explain why he alone among Deanna’s many lovers is a cad, but it does not explain why sleeping with her in particular makes him a cad. That it’s not usually a valet’s job to carry trays may explain why it’d be wrong to thrash

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6 I should at least three places. I don’t want to rule out the possibility of other relevant factors.
your valet *rather than your butler*, but it doesn’t explain why a *thrashing* is an inappropriately severe punishment. So the first reason for accepting the relativity of ethical explanation is that there are cases where understanding explanatoriness as a two-place relation fails to capture its conditions. In these cases what contrast space a theory is attending to affects whether or not that theory is an adequate explanation.

A second thought that could be deployed in defense of the thesis is a piece of semantics: we request explanations by asking “*wh*-questions, and “*wh*-questions presuppose a space of possible answers—what is, in effect, an analogue of what I have been calling a contrast space.⁷ If I am looking around the department and ask you, “where is Rosie?” and you say “on a planet orbiting the sun”, then something has gone wrong. There was a class of possible answers to my question—“in her office” or “teaching”—and you have given a description of Rosie’s location not from that class. From the perspective of linguistics, then, the relativity of explanation is a special instance of the semantics of “*wh*-questions.

Now some might be tempted to say that this is *all* my thesis comes to—that there is no more to the relativity of explanation than this feature of the semantics of questions. And they might go on to suggest that the “reasons” for believing this thesis that I am in the midst of offering are really unnecessary since I am just pointing out a well-known semantic fact.⁸ I am reluctant to accept this gloss because it is possible for the conditions on being good ethical explanations to diverge in significant ways from the felicity conditions on answers to ethical why-questions.⁹ Compare the case in the philosophy of science. Here we have the same linguistic fact about “*wh*-questions, but no one thinks that this definitively shows that van Fraassen’s deflationary account is correct as a *theory of what a good scientific explanation is*. The linguistic fact may be evidence for that theory, but it is logically distinct from it because the two propositions concern different subject matter: one is about how to analyze a bit of language, and one is about what it takes to be a good scientific explanation. The same distinction seems appropriate for ethical explanation, so I don’t think we should understand my thesis as a claim just about the semantics of why-questions, but as one about the property of ethical explanatoriness.

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⁸ Thanks to an anonymous referee for putting this objection to me.

⁹ For this reason Ethical Explanatory Relativity should not be understood as the claim that ethical why-questions are syntactically three-place relations. It is instead, as I have been saying, a claim about what is relevant to something being a genuine ethical explanation.
One reason, the third one on this list, that speaks directly to the latter rendering of the thesis is that other facets of our practical lives exhibit an analogous sort of relativity. When we deliberate, we do not consider absolutely all options open to us. Our limited cognitive and executive capacities would be unable to cope with such a confrontation. Instead, we find certain options “silenced”, to use McDowell’s word, or “unthinkable”, to use Frankfurt’s. Actually, something stronger than this is probably true. It’s not just that the odd option is excluded, but that when we first embark on deliberation, we encounter not an undifferentiated space of possibility, but a bounded set of discrete alternatives.\(^{10}\)

This fact bears on our question about the structure of ethical explanation in a few ways. First, there is a “companions in guilt” thought. We face similar cognitive limitations on the epistemic and deliberative side, so it should not surprise us that we cope with these limitations in similar ways. If deliberation takes place against a backdrop of discrete alternatives, it’s plausible that ethical explanation does too. Second, and more importantly, there is a close connection between deliberation and the formulation of practical explanations. I come home with an orphan I adopted on my way back from the office. I remark that adopting the orphan was the right thing to do. My wife asks why. In formulating my explanation, I am likely to rehearse the deliberation that led me to the adoption. I will cite those considerations that in the moment made me feel that it alone was the appropriate option. But if this deliberation is about which of some discrete alternatives to pursue, then my explanation is likely to be situated against the same background. If in deliberating I considered which of the alternatives in \(A = \{\text{adopt the orphan, keep walking, make a donation to the orphanage, \ldots}\}\) to perform, it seems only natural that my explanation for why the one I chose was the right choice will be an explanation of why it rather than the other members of \(A\) was right. In other words, it will be relative to contrast space inherited from deliberation. A consequence is that options I don’t even consider in this deliberation will be contrastive foils untouched by my explanation. If I say, “adopting the child was the right thing to do, instead of merely giving a donation, because the orphanage is being shuttered”, this does not explain why it wasn’t right to \emph{eat} the orphan. In context, this omission doesn’t make my explanation any less adequate.

The relationship between explanation and deliberation runs in the other direction too. I will often ask for an ethical explanation in preparation for some choice I have to make. I get a large

\(^{10}\) For a theory of where this set comes from, see Michael Bratman, “Practical reasoning and acceptance in a context” in \textit{Faces of Intention} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
inheritance from my great aunt and ask you, “why is Oxfam such a deserving charity?” I naturally plan to use the explanation you give me to help me choose amongst some set of familiar charities. But now you explain that unlike the Ku Klux Klan, Oxfam does not commit terrorism in defense of the purity of the white race. There is something right about this explanation—it is a merit of Oxfam that it does not burn down churches in the name of white nationalism—but this is an inadequate explanation all the same. And part of the reason it is, is that it does not fit with the frame of my deliberation: it does not explain in a way that will help me choose amongst the alternatives I am entertaining. So the fact that we ask for ethical explanations in hopes of using them in various ways suggests that those explanations will inherit some of the structure of those uses. Of course this isn’t to say that all ethical explanations inherit a contrast space from some deliberative episode, but merely ethical explanation (and practical explanation more generally) is commonly integrated alongside deliberative episodes, and this gives us a reason to think they are similarly structured.

These are three initial reasons for believing that ethical explanatoriness is really a three-place relation. Some additional considerations are best exhibited as replies to objections. The most obvious way to resist the conclusion is to insist that while individual requests for explanation may be contrast-relative in the way I suggest, we can nevertheless come to the best explanation—a non-relative explanation—by agglomerating all the features we might cite in these requests together into a single theory. For example, several things contribute to the fact of Will’s caddishness: his being married, the special status of sex, the constitutive standards of caddishness. We might think that the contrastive explanations canvassed above are merely incomplete and we could come to a non-relative explanation if we joined sufficiently many of our ostensibly contrastive (actually partial) explanations together. (This, we might think, is a decent description of how ethical theorists go about their business.) Thus the fact that Will’s sleeping with Deanna makes him a cad is explained—fully and non-relatively—by the conjunction of all the features of Will, Deanna, their relationship, their conduct, and the standards of caddishness that contribute to this fact. In the same spirit an ethical theorist might offer what looks like a deductive-nomological explanation. She might suggest that the fact that you shouldn’t thrash your valet is explained by deducing that proposition from general laws about what you should and shouldn’t do—a slate of axiomatic perfect duties, the principle of utility, the Formula of Humanity, etc.—and auxiliary premises that show those axioms applying to the case of your valet. Together these laws and auxiliary premises will entail that it is wrong to thrash your valet. (Indeed, we might think that this kind of project is the
point of normative ethics, and so we are likely to abstract away from all those features that give rise to contrastivity once we pursue lofty goal of giving a proper ethical theory.) So we face a question: how could an explanation like these fail to be an adequate explanation relative to any contrast space whatsoever?

There is clearly something right about this thought, insofar as these are indeed natural ways to go about cobbling together progressively more complete theories of ethical phenomena. But there is a mistake in it as well. The mistake is to think that we can come to an explanation of $p$ through, as it were, overwhelming force—through conjoining together everything that jointly guarantees $p$’s obtaining. This is a mistake because it neglects a crucial fact about the epistemic function of explanations: they are selective. Proceeding in the way suggested is likely to swamp the person considering such an explanation with so many facts of remote relevance that she cannot find the pattern amidst the noise, and this would undermine the epistemic function of explanation.

What I mean will be clearer if we consider the analogous feature of scientific explanations. Why does Wesley have paresis? The way to answer this question, it would seem, is to cite a cause of Wesley being in this sorry state. So what causes Wesley’s paresis? Quite a few things, it would seem. Wesley caught syphilis on a trip to Spain with his college chums and failed to get it treated because he was too engrossed in reading *Clarissa*. Here it seems that everything from Wesley’s enrolling in a particular college to Samuel Richardson’s birth is making a causal contribution to Wesley’s paresis. So a proposal analogous to the one sketched above would see us saying that the complete, non-relative explanation of Wesley’s paresis consists in this vast causal history. But this is clearly a mistake. The causal histories of events are “long and wide”, as Peter Lipton explains, “and most causal information does not provide a good explanation. The big bang is part of the causal history of every event, but explains only a few.”\(^{11}\) A complete causal history of the universe up to the point that Wesley gets paresis is not an explanation, if by “explanation” we mean something that gives us understanding.

The same is true of ethics. The facts that contribute to—whatever that means, exactly—Will’s sleeping with Deanna rendering him a cad are similarly long and wide (if I can extend Lipton’s metaphor). That Deanna is alive and not dead, that Will is not Deanna’s father, that Will and Deanna are members of the same species, that their tryst was a lustful one and not pursued as

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a way to propitiate kinky aliens—these things all contribute to the putative ethical fact. The problem is that if we say that an explanation properly consists in the totality of all facts that contribute to a fact’s obtaining (or in a general moral principle paired with enough facts to guarantee its application) then we are saying that the explanation of this fact is a rather unwieldy sea of propositions, and it is difficult to see how presenting a confused interlocutor with such a set could serve the epistemic function of explanation. It is difficult to see, that is, how such explanation could *enlighten* us.

Lipton goes on to suggest that what we are looking for in causal explanations are “difference-makers”. When we are asking for a causal explanation, we are not asking for an efficient cause or the sum of all causal contributions—these would not give us any understanding of Wesley’s condition—but for the cause that makes the difference between Wesley getting paresis and Tasha not. This is a contrastive question, though: we are asking why Wesley got paresis but his schoolchum Tasha didn’t. That Wesley contracted syphilis on the trip to Spain and Tasha didn’t is an answer to this question; that Samuel Richardson wrote a brutally long novel about a young woman’s quest for virtue is not.

The same is true of ethical explanation. Good explanations of ethical facts are difference-making explanations because those are the ones that allow us to see important regularities amidst the maelstrom of contributions to an ethical fact. But difference-making explanations are contrastive: the relevant difference is one that distinguishes an item amongst a space of foils.

Sometimes we can explain why an act would be wrong by citing the non-universalizability of the maxim (or some other general principle) on which it would be performed. But not often. Telling us this about an act will often have as much epistemic value—it will enlighten as much—as showing how Wesley’s paresis follows from the earliest events of the universe.12

None of this is to deny that we have epistemic reasons to join our explanations together and unify them under general principles like the various formulations of the Categorical Imperative. Nor is it to deny that ethical theory is guided by an ideal of systematic unity. But we can agree that we ought to strive for such systematic unification without further supposing that the adequacy

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12 On the relevance of non-nomological explanations to the metaethical debate between particularists and generalists see Uri Leibowitz, “Scientific explanation and moral explanation” *Noûs* 45(3), 2011, pp. 474-503.
of *individual explanations* is simply a matter of their exhibiting such systematicity by, e.g., deducing an explanandum from the most basic principles of the system.\(^{13}\)

This rebuttal turns on an important point about explanation. The conditions for a story to qualify for the epistemic achievement of *being explanatory* are closely tied to our character as inquirers, and in particular to our limitations. Imagine a creature like Laplace’s demon: a creature who knows the precise location and momentum of every bit of matter in the universe, has this information at his fingertips, and possesses unlimited computational resources. Such a creature would have little need for the sorts of explanations that human beings offer each other. Instead it would grasp why the world is in some state by locating that state in the grand evolution of the universe. Now imagine a moral analogue of Laplace’s demon who can grasp the structure of the moral realm—moral facts and their various dependence relations—at a glance. If we were like this, then maybe we wouldn’t even need moral explanations. Or perhaps we would, but all they would amount to is pointing out where a given fact sits in this vast moral web. It would involve listing the totality of facts that contribute to the explanandum about Will’s caddishness. But we are not like this—we are computationally limited, of finite vision (including moral vision), and situated in small regions of space and time—and the structure of moral facts is sufficiently complex that such an account would not explain anything for us.

This may be the most basic reason for accepting the relativity of ethical explanation. Our epistemic limitations mean that we cannot recite the myriad facts that variously contribute to a moral explanandum and expect to be enlightened. (We needn’t be particularists to think this: we just need to think that ethics is sufficiently complicated.) In order to gain understanding, we need devices of selective attention—devices, as I said before, that allow us to find patterns amidst the noise. That we ask questions, instead of simply beholding a scene, is one device for doing this. The relativity of explanation is another: by sending us off looking for “difference-makers” this feature of explanation invites us to appreciate a phenomenon in a cognitively tractable way. Therefore, I suggest that the relativity of ethical explanation is ultimately rooted in the mismatch between the complexity of the ethical realm and our cognitive capacities. Epistemically successful

\(^{13}\) Indeed, such a conception can get in the way of explanation, if it sends us looking for exceptionless regularities. Nancy Cartwright makes this style of objection against the D-N model in general in “The truth doesn’t explain much” reprinted in *How the Laws of Physics Lie* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).
explanations are contrastive because we are not moral Laplacean demons but limited creatures trying to grope our way to understanding.

A second important objection accepts the argument I have given but questions its implications. My argument is about the practice of explanation, so it is not at all surprising that such a practice ends up having important pragmatic features, including a relativity to context. But the argument does not touch the idea that there is a metaphysical relationship between ethical judgments wherein one obtains in virtue of the other, depends on the other, or is grounded in the other. And even if explanation—the ethical cum epistemic practice—is a three-place relation, this does not mean that this metaphysical dependence relationship is. Consequently, perhaps what I have said should be taken as an argument that we ought to be interested in this metaphysical dependence relationship rather than explanation per se. Maybe, that is, ethical theorists and people on the street should not be interested in what explains what—since this is a messy, relativistic business—but in what grounds what.

I have three things to say about this. The first is to concede the initial point. I have indeed said nothing that directly implicates the grounding of ethical propositions, if this relation is meant to float free from the practice of explanation. The second is more skeptical. If the idea is that there is a metaphysical dependency relation that obtains between ethical judgments but is not merely a codification of the epistemic relation of explanatoriness—and so does not exhibit the same relativity—then I am skeptical that we could ever have access to such a notion. For it seems the only way we could learn about it is through our explanations. Naturally, defending such skepticism would be a much bigger project than I can take on here. Fortunately, I think we can resist the final piece of the objection on more modest grounds. This is my third point. The proposal broached is a practical one, about whether we should engage in one project or another—explaining versus looking for grounds. And it is pragmatic reasons that I think ultimately recommend against such a change. We have a practice of requesting, offering, and evaluating ethical explanations, one feature of which, I have argued, is a certain relativity to context. This practice appears to work relatively well by our usual standards, and is integrated not just into philosophy but into many more quotidian activities. And given the cognitive limitations that I have dilated on, it is far from clear that metaphysical inquiry into the grounds of ethical propositions could do the same work that we demand of ethical explanation, even assuming such inquiry is possible. It therefore strikes me as a radical
kind of metaphysical hegemony to say that this practice of ethical explanation should be abandoned in favor of a search for some purer or more metaphysically estimable grounding relation.

My defense of the relativity of ethical explanation involves a few discrete claims. First, there are examples which seem to force the proposed liberalization of explanatoriness. Second, this relativity is homologous to a well-known semantic feature of questions. Third, ethical explanation is entangled with other practical activities that have this structure. Fourth, the relativity of ethical explanation performs an important epistemic function for cognitively limited creatures like ourselves. And, finally, suggestions to simply dispense with explanation in favor of a more metaphysically robust device are too radical to be heeded.

Once we accept the relativity of ethical explanation it is natural to ask whether it has any interesting consequences for how we go about doing ethical theory. I cannot attempt anything like a comprehensive survey, but in the next sections I suggest two.

2. The ethical evaluation of explanatory contrasts

The first consequence involves the possibility of evaluating explanatory contrasts. Once we accept that ethical explanation is relative to a contrast space we might ask whether some of these spaces are better than others. This is an evaluation we are apt to make in science. Some contrasts put us on to more important regularities than others, and so appear, other things being equal, to be epistemically superior. Indeed, it is part of Alan Garfinkel’s case for the relativity of scientific explanation that major advancements in science are driven by a change from one contrast space to another. The medievals theorized about motion by asking why a thing keeps moving; they asked, for a given t why a thing is moving at t instead of not moving. Newton’s methodological breakthrough was to move to a different, more profitable contrast space for this question, one that asked why, for a given t, does a thing have a given acceleration at t rather than some other?14 If this is right, then it seems sensible to entertain epistemic evaluations of our choice of contrast space.

But what about the possibility of evaluating contrast spaces morally? That’s my question in this section. I want to argue that such evaluation is possible, and that the giving and accepting

14 *Forms of Explanation*, pp. 25-6.
of ethical explanations may itself be an ethically problematic enterprise. It can be ethically problematic because the contrast class incorporated by an explanation may reflect false and onerous presuppositions. (Though, as I will suggest in a moment, this fault need not always be reflected in agents’ beliefs.) For example, these contrast spaces can invidiously exclude foils, individuate foils according to an ethically suspect scheme, and place focus on a particular contrast over another in a fashion that systematically biases the allocation of fault or merit. These are all ethical flaws in the framing of an explanation. Nonetheless, I shall further suggest, explanations that are problematic in this way can be adequate as explanations. All this has consequences for how we conceive of the ambitions of ethical theory.

Let’s begin with some examples. I think that Jeff ought to be the one to be permitted to take my daughter to the cotillion, and I explain why by saying that it’s Jeff who likes her best. This explanation will attend to one kind of contrast or another—Jeff versus someone else, my daughter versus my niece, the cotillion versus the jamboree. And it will entertain a particular (if implicit) set of discrete foils with respect to this contrast. In this latter respect, there is room for mischief. The selection of particular foils may be morally invidious if it reflects false presuppositions about who is an appropriate foil or, more simply, who matters to this question. It may do this, for example, by including only the children of my fellow aristocrats or by excluding members of certain groups.

One might reply that while this is possible, it means that my explanation is thereby a failure—it must be inadequate because its apparent success is predicated on a mistake. But I don’t think this follows. Note, first of all, that this is not a case where I say, “Jeff likes her best, and only the white men matter”—that would be false. It is a case where my story is perfectly true, but only works as an explanation because of a dubious feature of the contrast class. Moreover, assume for the sake of argument that it is Jeff who ought to be permitted to take my daughter to the cotillion, and the fact that he likes her best is the relevant “difference-making” feature of him relative to the salient foils that I and my audience implicitly entertain. In giving this explanation I have offered that audience epistemic access to those features of Jeff that distinguish him amongst these foils. And this, I would submit, suffices to secure the modest epistemic achievement that we associate with explanation.

15 Nor should my claim should be taken to entail that we can explain moral falsehoods relative to certain suitably distorted contrast classes.
There are also examples that involve the individuation of elements in the contrast space. We may ask why a party deserves a certain share of some resource. But how we individuate these “parties” is morally significant. For example, we may think that making the unit of distribution the family or household is morally dubious because it obscures issues of justice that operate beneath that level. And developing and applying an ethical theory premised on this mistake could serve to further entrench this injustice by making it appear unobjectionable. If this is right, then someone could give a perfectly good explanation as to why the Jeffersons deserve this share of the pie that was nonetheless conditioned on a morally dubious individuation of the contrast class—dubious because it presupposes a false claim about the significant granularity of individuation.

Once again, I think it would be wrong to say that this feature must make this an inadequate explanation. We can well imagine cases like this where it is true that the Jeffersons deserve this share of the pie and where our story does an admirable job of illuminating what it is about this family that makes them deserve this share, while still thinking that there is something troubling about the explanation’s focus on the family unit.

Finally, there are examples that concern which contrast type we attend to. Suppose that Anna is married to Brad but has a dalliance with Jeff. We agree that this is wrong and ask why. But compare two different contrasts: What is it about Anna’s dalliance with Jeff that makes it wrong? What is it about the institution of marriage that makes it wrong for Anna to do this? The first of these asks what it is about Anna and her activities that is wrong, as compared to other people who do other things. If this is the standard contrast attended to by our questions about the ethics of sex and marriage—we ask this same question about Anna, Adam, Avis, and Adriana’s dalliances—then we are going to get an ethical theory filled out with a subtle accounting of marital wrongs. But if we ask the question with the other contrast, we will get a theory focused on the institution, one which may inform us about which functionally similarly institutions will support and condemn this kind of act. A problem arises if we habitually ask only one of these questions—if (as is most likely) we fill out our ethical theory by focusing on the contrast concerning action to the neglect of the contrast between marriage and other possible relationships. Doing this would take the institution of marriage, its legal and ethical obligations, and its place in society for granted for the purposes of ethical theory. Anna and her actions would receive the brunt of our ethical

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16 I have in mind a (very rough version of) Susan Moller Okin’s critique in *Justice, Gender, and the Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1989).
evaluation, while the ethical dimensions of the institution would fade into the innocuous background. This would be morally problematic because it would exclude an institution from moral scrutiny that may be very much in need of it, and so it would tend to reinforce the moral problems with the institution. This is a very simple and slightly caricatured example, but it is representative of a more systemic concern with ethical theory: that it is too focused on the actions of individuals and not enough on the varieties of social order in which those actions occur.  

These are examples of what seem like successful explanations conducted against dubious contrast spaces. In each of them I have spoken in the passive voice about the constitution of such spaces. But since we are imputing ethical problems to contrast spaces, it is worth asking how (by whom?) they get fixed. What makes it the case that an answer to a why-question is attached to one space and not another, and how do we come to have our explanations bound up with the dubious ones?  

Sometimes it’s quite explicit. I may place stress on a certain word to signal a particular contrast, or I may announce my exclusion of certain foils. In other cases the process is hidden from view but easily excavated. If we live on Tara Plantation in 1859, then no one needs to offer instructions about the exclusion of slaves, since it is part of the common ground of every conversation that slaves are not part of the moral community. In other cases the selection of the contrast class is not obviously mediated by a belief shared by the interlocutors. The liberal but oblivious patrician doesn’t include whole swathes of the population in the contrast space for some explanation, but not because he thinks all of them have some property that ought to exclude them. He is simply habituated to this exclusion. Similarly, if I ask you why it’s impermissible to eat meat, what entities our common taxonomy classifies as food will affect what a decent explanation can be, but will not depend on an explicit belief about what so counts (or at least not obviously). What counts as a good explanation of the asperity of Charlotte’s declaration during the dinner party will be sensitive to which actions our common etiquette envisions as possible. Why a certain romantic affair is an indiscretion, as opposed to something else, will depend on the subtlety of the battery of evaluations we have available to classify affairs. These are all prima facie factors in the structuring of the contrast space that a person might rely on in giving an explanation, but none appears reducible to the beliefs of the explainer or her audience.

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17 Sally Haslanger, for example, lodges this complaint in her “Ideology is a moral issue” (ms).  
18 A point on which Cora Diamond dilates in her “Eating meat and eating people”, reprinted in The Realistic Spirit.
This means that if we are going to understand the ethical problems with contrast spaces as arising from some mistaken presupposition of that space, we are going to have to understand “presupposition” rather liberally—as including elements beyond the belief set of those interlocutors. It means that while sometimes an explanation’s being framed in a particular way is a consequence of relatively shallow and manifest features of the situation—explicit instructions or shared beliefs—in many others it seems to figure in a deeper part of the parties’ cognitive outlook. We might call this the “framework” or “perspective” that we take on a subject: a feature of how we structure our thought about the subject, as opposed to which thoughts we have.\(^\text{19}\)

It’s been oft-remarked that these perspectives can be ethically problematic in ways that outrun the particular thoughts they might structure and the actions they might motivate. One might, to take a well-worn example, involve a conceptual scheme that organizes and classifies according to concepts that result in suffering or perpetuate political marginalization.\(^\text{20}\)

Here I am suggesting that the framing of ethical explanations is an example of the very same phenomenon. One way that our ethical thought is structured is by the contrasts we see as salient in giving and asking for explanations. This structure can be ethically criticizable, even when the target explanandum is true and the story we offer is illuminating. The structure may always send us looking for moral flaws in individuals rather than institutions, it may invidiously exclude or include foils, and it may individuate foils in a way that obscures injustice.

This picture becomes all the more plausible when compared to the one we have in science. The person who can give moral explanations, but only relative to a cognitive framework (including the structuring of explanatory contrasts) that is morally problematic is like the scientist who can give scientific explanations only relative to a cognitive framework that reflects erroneous presuppositions about nature. And we should credit them with the same achievement. It would be absurd to deny that the Aristotelian physicist can produce adequate, if not ideal, explanations of simple mechanical events even though his cognitive framework is deeply flawed by, inter alia, looking at

\(^{19}\) This notion has some obvious affinity for some recherché philosophical devices, like Kuhn’s paradigms or MacIntyre’s traditions. For a more sober development of the idea that focuses on the idea that these frameworks include non-propositional elements, see Elisabeth Camp, “Metaphor and that certain ‘je ne sais quoi’”, *Philosophical Studies*, 129(1), 2006, pp. 1-25.

the wrong contrastive questions about the motion of bodies. For the same reason, we should not deny the adequacy of explanations conditioned on ethically dubious contrast spaces.\footnote{One could insist that there is a disanalogy here. For the person who invidiously excludes certain individuals from an explanatory contrast space has evidence that these people do matter, whereas the Aristotelian physicist does not have such a straightforward rejoinder to his explanatory approach. But this is relevant only if the invidious exclusion is premised on a belief that this evidence might undermine. I suggested above, however, this is not always the case. Moreover, it is not obvious to me that there is any major difference in the obviousness of the mistakes: sometimes the moral failings of the explanatory scheme may be as subtle as the inadequacy of pre-Newtonian physics.}

Of course it is one thing to say that adequate explanations can be constructed relative to dubious cognitive frameworks, and quite another to say that this is the end of the story. Just as it was an improvement when Newton suggested a change in the contrast space that mechanics took as primary—if we agree with Garfinkel’s history—it would be an ethical improvement to amend and revise the explanatory schemes I have pointed to here. Of course, some of these revisions would be epistemically disastrous. Responding to the invidious exclusion of our forefathers on the issue of cotillion attendance by instead being maximally liberal and taking every living thing as a contrastive foil would sacrifice a great deal of selectivity. But not all liberalizations will be like this: adding local non-whites would certainly not make the question intractable and may even point to an epistemically superior account. We will have to strike a balance between the two kinds of demand.

The upshot of these examples of the ethical evaluation of contrast spaces, I want to suggest, is a distinction between two kinds of explanatory virtue in ethical theory. There is the ability to give explanations relative to some cognitive framework (including particular contrasts), and then there is a distinctive kind of insight into the ethical merits and shortcomings of these frameworks. We should not suppose that good ethical theorizing is the practice of only the first type of virtue. It requires not only successfully explaining ethical facts, but understanding which kinds of explanations are the ones (ethically) worth seeking.

3. **It is sometimes a mistake to look for a single explanation of an ethical fact**

In the previous section I discussed how the relativity of ethical explanation opens one avenue by which such explanation can become, so to speak, corrupted. In this section I want to talk about a different consequence of the thesis, one involving an error that it leaves ethical theorists vulnerable to. In a word, ethicists can take themselves to be in substantive disagreement about a subject when they are in fact answering slightly different questions. Here I want to focus on one
example. It is sometimes appropriate to treat people differentially for no other reason than the relationships we share with them. It is sometimes appropriate, that is, to show partiality in our treatment of other people. Why is this?

Answers to this question have tended to clump into three genera related to the three things involved in relationships. One kind of answer says that the appropriateness of partiality is explained by something about the person who is showing partiality. For example, Bernard Williams, maintains that it is because I have certain ground projects that incorporate different people and these projects are essential to my integrity as an agent, that it is appropriate for me to treat different people differentially. Thus the explanation for the appropriateness of partiality, or the reason why we should be partial, lies in this fact about me, the agent. Another kind of view locates the explanation in the other person. It is something about the objects of differential treatment that explains the appropriateness of partiality. For example, David Velleman offers a reading of Kant on which impartial treatment is not required by the dignity of persons because that dignity is a kind of worth that “forbids comparisons.” Thus it is a feature of the other person—their possessing a distinctive kind of value—that explains the appropriateness of partiality. Finally, a third class of views says that it is something about the relationship that explains the appropriateness of partiality. It is because relationships themselves have intrinsic or, as Niko Kolodny puts it, “final” value, and we have duties in virtue of this value, that partiality is appropriate. On this view, the explanation for the normative fact in question is to be found in the nature of the relationship.22

So we have three candidate explanation schemas—not complete explanations, but hints of what sort of consideration will explain the appropriateness of partiality: that it is something about the agent, about the object of partiality, about the relationship. And we have various suggestions for filling out these schemas: with talk of projects, the incomparable worth of persons, the final value of relationships. But let’s focus on the bare schemas for a moment. It is commonly thought that these explanation schemas are in competition with each other, that they are aspiring to be the unique explanation of the fact about partiality. To take just one example, Simon Keller organizes

his recent book around these schemas, and frequently talks of each view aspiring to be “the explanation” or “the ground” for the fact I am calling the appropriateness of partiality.  

But I think this framing of the problem may be too hasty. For if I am right about the relativity of ethical explanation, then there is not necessarily going to be such a thing as the explanation of the appropriateness of partiality. Rather, there will be different explanations that are adequate to this normative fact situated in different contrast spaces—different fact/foil pairs.

This isn’t yet an objection, of course. There is no trouble in talking about these schemas being in competition if they are keyed into the same contrast. But I don’t think that’s the case. Look more closely at the explanandum. What are the different contrasts we might be interested in explaining here? One thing that might puzzle us is how partiality might be reconciled with plati- tudes about moral equality. If we think that all items in a group are equally good, we are apt to think they are all equally deserving of attention, favor, employment, and so on—that a certain symmetry of regard is appropriate—so any systematically differential treatment may appear unwarranted. We might then ask: what is it about the value of persons in particular—as opposed to the value of other things—that makes partial treatment appropriate? Why is partiality appropriate for them, but not for other sorts of things?

That’s one way of construing the partiality explanandum. It also seems to precisely the sort of question the “other person” explanation schema is trying to answer. Velleman’s Kantian suggestion tracks this exactly. Persons with dignity demand unique treatment, while things with price do not, because the worth of persons in particular is of a sort that forbids comparison: persons have a value that commands a distinctive regard. This is why partiality is appropriate.

Are the advocates of the explanation schemas also aspiring to answer this question? Maybe, but I have my doubts. We might say, in the mode of one them, that this contrast is explained by relational facts about persons concerning the relationships we can share with them, or in the mode of another that it is explained by facts about how persons figure into our projects. But these answers don’t seem to track the contrast. We can stand in lots of relationships with other persons that don’t support partiality, and it’s not just persons that can play special roles in our projects. So these schemas don’t seem to explain what it is about persons (as opposed to things) that makes them

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23 Partiality (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013). See the first chapter for Keller’s framing of the question as one about which schema explains the partiality explanandum. Keller also talks of “the reason”, “the ground”, or “the explanation” of partiality explicitly on pp. 7, 31, 45, 79.
appropriate for differential treatment. We could try to resist this conclusion by saying that the specialness of persons (as opposed to things) is explained by the capacity persons have (and things lack) to occupy particular relationships—call them \( p \)-relationships—or play a particular role—call it a \( p \)-role—in our projects. This claim would track the relevant contrast, but the explanation is still incomplete, since it immediately raises a descendant of our original explanatory question: what is it about persons, as opposed to other things, that enable them to play \( p \)-roles and stand in \( p \)-relationships? These questions may be answerable, but answering them sends us back into the “other person” schema. We have to say what it is about persons (as opposed to things) that makes them special in this regard. We could go on dreaming up possible explanations in these two schemas, but the basic point is that it is hard to see how we could explain a contrast between persons and things without saying something about persons and things, and thus giving some kind of explanation in the “other person” mode.

There is another natural way, a more first-personal way, to understand our explanandum. It is the question of why \textit{I} of all people should treat others in the specified way—what it is about me in particular that makes me subject to a requirement to pay some certain regard. This construal works in a way similar to the following example. A group of us are at a sports bar. I walk up to Rick and tell him he should pay attention to the Orioles-Tigers game. Noticing that I have singled him out despite his not being a fan of either of these teams, Rick asks “why should I care about the Orioles-Tigers game?” I answer that Rick is a Red Sox fan, and if the Tigers lose, then the Red Sox will make the playoffs. This explanation is successful because it connects what I am saying Rick ought to do to a commitment or project that he in particular already recognizes. It explains why Rick, given his distinctive loyalties, ought to pay attention when Eustace, Butch, and Bunthorne needn’t.

This kind of contrast is one that our agent-centric explanation schema seems well-suited to explaining. For it tells us why a particular agent with a distinctive practical orientation to the world—particular ends, commitments, projects, desires—ought to act in a certain way by connecting that way of acting to his practical orientation. It offers an explanation of why a person practically oriented in this way, rather than a different way, ought to offer a certain kind of special treatment.\(^{24}\)

\(^{24}\) This also seems to be the style of question that Williams is particularly keen on. In one part of his brief against utilitarianism (\textit{Utilitarianism: For and Against}, pp. 116-7) he says: “The point is that [an agent] is identified with his
Are our other explanation schemas also trying to explain this contrast? Again, I have my doubts. It is tempting to think that the relationships schema can do the job. At first blush, the question, “why should I of all people let that crazy old lady move in with me?” seems adequately answered by the observation, “because she’s your mother!” But this answer is ambiguous between two different thoughts: that you should let her move in with you because you have a certain commitment to her that I can draw to mind by calling her your mother, and that there is something about the relationship itself independent of any projects that means you should do this. We can distinguish these answers by imagining someone who doesn’t have such a commitment but nonetheless stands in the relationship—someone who doesn’t care about her mother. If this person asks, “why should I of all people do this thing?”, then citing a relationship she is indifferent to will not speak to the contrast between her practical orientations and others’, and so it will not answer the question. (It goes without saying that citing your mother’s dignity as a rational creature, without any elaboration, will not do much to explain this contrast.)

There is one more way that we might construe our explanandum. It involves a contrastive focus on the particular form of treatment required. Why are we to treat a given individual in this particular way rather than some other? I agree that I owe my niece something, but why is that I owe her a reasonably priced Chanukah gift instead of a tenure-track job? Here the relationship explanatory schema appears well-situated to explain this contrast. It is part of the nature of niecehood that one kind of treatment is called for and the other not. In one place Kolodny is explicit about his interest in this contrast:

Imagine the exhaustive List of partiality principles, of all of the true normative claims of the form:

one has reason for parental partiality toward one’s children,

one has reason for spousal partiality toward one’s spouse,

and so on. […] Our challenge is then to explain the List: to explain why all and only the partiality principles that it contains are true. To be clear, the challenge is not to provide reasons to believe the List. […] Nor is the challenge to explain how actions as flowing from projects or attitudes which […] he takes seriously at the deepest level, as what his life is about. […] It is absurd to demand of such a man, when the sums come in from the utility network which the projects of others have in part determined, that he should just step aside from his own project and decision and acknowledge the decision which utilitarian calculation requires. It is to alienate him in a real sense from his actions and the source of his action in his own convictions.” We can read this as a claim about the explanatory failure of utilitarianism. The view in general cannot answer the contrastive why-question associated with an agent’s practical orientation.
any partiality principle could be true. [...] Rather, granting (at least for the sake of argument) that partiality principles are not otherwise problematic, the challenge is to explain why only those partiality principles on the List, and no others, are true.25 This question naturally leads Kolodny to a view that emphasizes the characteristics of different sorts of relationships.

Are our other explanatory schemas as well-suited to explain this contrast? And once again, I’m dubious. Citing my niece’s dignity as a person seems a non-starter. That sort of consideration will never speak to the difference between tenure-track jobs and reasonably priced Chanukah presents. The agent-centric schema may appear more plausible. Generally my long-term attitude about what I owe my niece, which we can understand as a sort of project, will dictate what sort of gift I give her. But there’s a problem. The principles on Kolodny’s List are supposed to constrain our projects. If someone finds me pursuing my project of securing academic employment for my niece, they can correct me. They can legitimately say, “no, being your niece is not a relationship that entails that kind of partiality.” So there are considerations about relationships that outstrip our personal projects involving those relationships. This data point suggests that there are questions about the particular kinds of treatment appropriate for a relationship that cannot be answered just by citing my projects.

I have identified three different contrasts that may interest us about partiality, and I have suggested that each of our three schemas is well-positioned to explain one of these contrasts but not obviously suited to the other two. There are two lessons here. First, our putative explanandum—the appropriateness of partiality—is in fact ambiguous between at least a few different explananda corresponding to these contrast spaces. Second, it is not obvious that the explanation schemas I have surveyed target the same contrast. This gives us a prima facie reason to doubt that these explanation schemas are necessarily at odds with each other.

This is not to say that there is no disagreement to be found, but it should make us think harder about where that disagreement lies. Obviously one place where we will find disagreement is in the filling out of our schemas into proper theories. Another place we may think we can recover the conflict is in claims about which contrasts are worth explaining. I suggested before that sometimes epistemic and moral progress can come from shifting from one framing of an explanatory

question to another, and we might think that this is the case here. Perhaps we think that some of the contrasts I have suggested do not actually require explanation. For example, one might think that the contrast picked out by the question, “why do persons, as opposed to other things, merit this kind of differential treatment?” does not merit an explanation because it carries a false presupposition: persons are not distinctive in this way. Another possibility is that all these contrasts do indeed stand in need of explanation, but some of them are more fundamental than the others, that some of the contrasts track the metaphysical “ground” of partiality, while the others concern something more parochial.

I cannot adequately address these possibilities here, but I want to record one reason for skepticism about claims to the effect that some of these explanatory contrasts are discardable or less fundamental than others. The three construals of our explanatory question seems to correspond to fundamental perspectives we can take on an ethical fact. “Why should I of all people…?” is the sort of explanatory question one would ask when searching for something that engages one’s will, something that makes the putative ethical fact normative from the agent’s first-personal perspective.26 “Why do persons in particular…?” is a question one is likely to ask from a more objective, more impersonal point of view, the point of view of one trying to dispassionately understand the disposition of values in the world. And the question “why do I owe this particular thing…?” is the question someone asks once they have decided on a generic course of action, once their will is engaged, and they are deliberating about what precisely to do.27

I cannot imagine dispensing with any of these points of view. Nor can I imagine any of them collapsing or reducing to another. Perhaps if we were different sorts of creatures—a god or a moral Laplace’s demon—we could imagine one perspective reducing to another. We could imagine being so computationally sophisticated that there is no difference between questions of the general direction of our will and the particular action. Or we can imagine being so knowledgeable that there is no difference between questions asked from the agential perspective and ones asked from the point of view of the universe. But we are not like this, so such a reduction seems unlikely. Now I do not to mean to be arguing that such a reduction is absolutely impossible, just that carrying one out would be quite an achievement and so we should not simply assume that one is possible.

26 It is an instance of what Korsgaard calls the “normative” question” in The Sources of Normativity (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 7-10.
27 The idea that there are multiple irreconcilable perspectives on ethical thoughts goes back quite a ways, at least to Sidgwick.
This leaves us with a modest methodological suggestion. Beware supposing that there is such a thing as the explanation for an ethical fact. For an ostensibly univocal explanandum may conceal multiple distinct contrasts that each call out for a different kind of explanation. Moreover, these explanations may be equally fundamental in the sense that they reflect basic perspectives we can take toward ethical facts. I realize there is a whiff of banality about this suggestion—I am saying “look at the problem from different angles!” and no more. This is fair enough, but, as Wittgenstein tells us, sometimes the work of the philosopher consists in marshalling reminders, and here I think we need reminders to remedy the urge to find the explanation for some fact.

4. Conclusion

In closing I would like to briefly pull together the claims I have made into a slightly more sweeping one. I claim that ethical explanation is relativized to a contrast space, that ethical explanatoriness is a three-place relation between a fact, a theory, and a space of foils. I have described two consequences of this thesis. First, insofar as these contrast spaces are a place where morally dubious presuppositions can sneak in, they can render ethical theory morally problematic, even when it succeeds as an explanatory endeavor. For this reason we need a distinction between two kinds of explanatory virtue: one tied to a particular cognitive framework, and one related to see the limitations of a framework. Second, because it seems that certain contrasts can reflect fundamental perspectives on ethical facts that are themselves indispensable and mutually irreducible for agents like ourselves, we should greet hasty attempts to locate the one-and-only explanation with some suspicion and instead look for how rival theories may be attending to subtly different explananda. The more basic point lying behind these claims is that human beings are cognitively limited creatures, and this is going to affect how explanation works for us, including how ethical explanation works for us. This means that a certain ideal of ethical theory—an absolute, sage-like understanding of the ethical order—is simply not available to us. Instead, we must adopt devices like the relativity of explanation to cope with these infirmities. But doing so leaves us with the vulnerabilities and limits I have described. So long as we are the kind of creatures we are, these will be features of ethical theory. The best we can do is acknowledge them.28

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