Lecture 6: Sturgeon on the Explanatory Argument for Nihilism

I. Background: Cornell Realism

Cornell realism (or non-reductive naturalistic realism, or synthetic ethical naturalism):

- **semantic claim**: Moral sentences express genuine propositions that can be evaluated as true or false, and moral predicates ascribe genuine properties.
- **metaphysical claim**: Moral facts and properties are nothing but natural facts and properties (where, roughly, natural facts and properties are the sorts of facts and properties studied by the natural sciences and psychology).
- **epistemological claim**: We come to know moral truths via essentially empirical means.
- **(semantic) non-reductionism**: Moral terminology is not analyzable into wholly natural terminology.

The most famous Cornell realists either taught at Cornell (Nicholas Sturgeon, Richard Boyd, Richard Miller), or were graduate students at Cornell (David Brink).

II. Sturgeon’s (Putative) Counterexamples to Harman’s Argument

Harman’s explanatory argument for nihilism:

1. Non-moral fact N is evidence for moral fact M if and only if either N entails M, or M is part of the best explanation of N. [*premise*]
2. No moral fact is ever part of the best explanation of a non-moral fact. [*premise*]
3. No non-moral fact ever entails a moral fact. [*premise*]
4. So, we can’t have evidence for any moral facts. [*follows from 1, 2, 3*]
5. So, there are no moral facts. [*follows from 4*]

Sturgeon’s main objection is to premise 2 of the argument.

He presents a number of cases in which it is alleged that a moral fact plays a crucial role in a good explanation of some non-moral fact.

**example #1**: According to Sturgeon, “Hitler’s moral depravity—the fact of his really having been morally depraved—forms part of a reasonable explanation of why we believe he was depraved” (p. 54).

Similarly, Sturgeon insists that the fact that Hitler was morally depraved is part of the best explanation of why Hitler initiated a world war and ordered the “final solution” (p. 54).

**example #2**: When the Donner Party was trapped in the Sierra Mountains in 1846, Passed Midshipman Selim Woodworth was in control of the relief effort and (supposedly) was instrumental in those relief efforts being so ineffective. According to Sturgeon, the fact that Woodworth was no damned good is part of the best explanation of why historian Bernard DeVoto believes that he was no damned good (pp. 63–64).

Similarly, Sturgeon insists that the fact that Woodworth was no damned good is part of the best explanation of why Woodworth botched the Donner Party rescue (p. 65).

**example #3**: According to Sturgeon, the fact that slavery was a more oppressive institution in the United States during the years between the American Revolution and the Civil War than it had been before or elsewhere partially explains the growth of antislavery sentiment in the United States during that time (pp. 64–65).
III. Sturgeon’s Counterfactual Test

Sturgeon defends the plausibility of these examples by appealing to the following test for when something counts as part of an explanation of something else (p. 65):

Sturgeon’s counterfactual test for explanatory relevance: Fact X is completely irrelevant to the explanation of fact Y if and only if the following is the case: if X had not obtained, then Y would still have obtained.

According to a simplified version of the Stalnaker–Lewis method of evaluating counterfactuals, the counterfactual “If fact X had not obtained, then fact Y would have obtained” is true if and only if the following is the case: in the nearest possible world in which X does not obtain, Y obtains.

(Why “simplified”? Because we’re ignoring the possibility of ties for the nearest possible world in which X does not obtain, and because we’re ignoring the possibility that we have a series of nearer and nearer possible worlds in which X does not obtain, but no limit to that series. Stalnaker and Lewis disagree over how to handle these sorts of cases.)

Here is how Sturgeon’s test works in the hoodlums case. Name the facts of the case as follows:

\[ W = \text{the fact that the hoodlums' action was wrong,} \]
\[ C = \text{the fact that the hoodlums' action was a case of pointless, deliberate cruelty,} \]
\[ BW = \text{the fact that you believe that the hoodlums' action was wrong.} \]

Sturgeon insists that, in this case, W obtains in virtue of C obtaining: the wrongness of the hoodlums’ action consists in, or is constituted by, its being a case of pointless, deliberate cruelty.

So, Sturgeon concludes, in the nearest possible world in which W does not obtain, C does not obtain, and because of that BW does not obtain in that world either.

Therefore (by the Stalnaker–Lewis method): it’s not the case that (if W had not obtained, BW would have obtained).

Therefore (by Sturgeon’s counterfactual test): W is not completely irrelevant to the explanation of BW.

- objection on Harman’s behalf: In assuming that W is constituted by C, you’re assuming the truth of a certain moral theory—that is, the truth of a certain moral belief. But you can’t assume the truth of that moral belief when evaluating the relevant counterfactual without begging the question.

- Sturgeon’s reply (pp. 67–71): If we’re not allowed to assume the truth of a moral theory when evaluating the relevant counterfactual, then a parallel argument would lead to a skeptical conclusion about the explanatory relevance of physical facts.

On the proposal being considered, we should (when applying the counterfactual test) interpret the conditional “If the hoodlums’ action hadn’t been wrong, then you would still have believed that it was wrong” as “If the hoodlums’ action hadn’t been wrong, but it had still been a case of pointless, deliberate cruelty, then you would still have believed that it was wrong.”

But then, by parity of reasoning, we should interpret the conditional “If there hadn’t been a proton in the cloud chamber, then the physicist would still have believed there was a proton in the cloud chamber” as “If there hadn’t been a proton in the cloud chamber, but there had still been a vapor trail, then the physicist would still have believed that there was a proton in the cloud chamber.”

As both of these more complicated counterfactuals come out true, we would have to conclude (via the counterfactual test) that both moral and physical facts are explanatorily impotent.