

THE MORAL SPECIAL SCIENCES

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TWO FUNDAMENTAL THEORIES

Take Act Utilitarianism. It's theoretically virtuous, but we might worry that it doesn't capture the richness of the moral world.

Take Newtonian mechanics. It's theoretically virtuous. Do we worry that it doesn't capture the richness of the natural world?

Perhaps not, because there is a familiar leveled picture of the natural world. The fundamental physical level seems to give rise to a variety of special sciences – biology, geology, oceanography, economics etc..

These special sciences have *predictive* and *explanatory* power. Often they seem to explain certain phenomena *better* than lower-level sciences. And they generally proceed *autonomously* of the lower-level.

Could we have an analogous leveled picture of morality?¹

PHYSICAL DIFFERENCE-MAKING

Imagine you see a projectile move to the right. What is the explanation for this (assuming Newtonian mechanics)?

1. Detailed Newtonian Explanation: cites all the component forces

- This explanation looks (objectively) flawed. It's far too specific.
- The gravitational effect of the moon, for example, is not a *difference-maker*.²

2. Abstract Newtonian Explanation: cites just the resultant force

- This explanation can look unsatisfyingly abstract – the projectile moved right because forces pushed it right.³
- It can also seem too specific – the details of the fundamental physics are not a difference-maker. It doesn't make a difference whether the world is relativistic or Newtonian.⁴

3. The protester explanation

- This abstracts away from the fundamental in a different way.
- The explanans doesn't necessitate the explanandum – nevertheless it looks like a genuine and valuable explanation.

Pluralism seems correct. There isn't one unique explanation of the projectile moving right.

¹ Rule consequentialism, sophisticated consequentialism, and Daniel Star's (2015) view all share some of this spirit. But these views don't generate the analogous multi-level explanatory structure.

² See Strevens (2008, chapter 2-3) on accounts of difference-making. For other (related) ways of cashing out this explanatory flaw see e.g. Yablo (1992) and Woodward (2018) on *proportionality*; Wilson (1994), Weslake (2010) and Bhogal (2020) on *robustness*; and Jackson and Pettit (1992) on *modal informativeness*.

³ This is in the spirit of Lange's (2012, p.485-7) objection that Strevens's (2008) view sometimes abstracts too far and common worries about 'proportionality' e.g. Bontly (2005); Weslake (2013); McDonnell (2017) .

⁴ Of course, *some* changes to fundamental physics would make a difference.

MORAL DIFFERENCE-MAKING

We should understand the utilitarian view as saying that fundamental right-makers of the action are facts about the effects of the action on people, not abstract facts about utility.⁵

Why is it right to comfort your partner when they are upset?

4. Detailed Utilitarian Explanation: cites the effect of that action (and competing actions) on each relevant person, into eternity.
5. Abstract Utilitarian Explanation: cites just the maximization of utility.
 - The details of the fundamental moral theory are not a difference-maker – the consequentialist and the Kantian both say that you should comfort your partner.
 - For a wide range of ordinary cases there is a wide range of theories that don't make a difference.

There is space for an explanation that abstracts from the Detailed Utilitarian Explanation but not along quite the same axis as the Abstract Utilitarian Explanation.

Take some education policy that has many consequences. Part of what it does is to lead to increased income equality. We can abstract to that as a coarse-grained difference-maker of the policy's rightness.

6. Equality explanation
 - The explanans doesn't necessitate the rightness. But it's still a valuable explanation
 - It's not a 'horizontal' extension of the abstract utilitarian explanation. It's an abstraction of the detailed utilitarian explanation.

This structure suggests cases where the coercion, or the unfairness, or the exploitation, are the difference-makers for the wrongness of the action. Or the comfort your partner received is a difference-maker for the rightness.

This story doesn't change the extension of rightness for the act utilitarian. All that's added to AU are thoughts about explanation that we should be compelled by anyway.

GOING FORWARD

This is barely the start of theorizing. Most notably, I haven't given an account of difference-making (or right-making, or moral naturalness etc.).

But the project looks promising and has many interesting consequences – notably, the idea that people in their everyday life might be directly motivated by the non-fundamental right-makers of an action.

⁵ Chappell (2021) makes this point distinguishing between the 'ground-level' right-makers from the criteria that when those right-makers actually make something right.

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