

A PLEA FOR PRAGMATICS

Arnon Levy
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THE LIFE OF A PROJECT



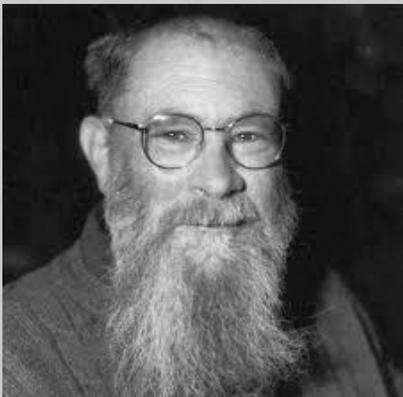
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TWO POLAR ATTITUDES



“Many writings ostensibly about explanation are best understood as not about explanation at all... that should not be true about this paper. It is not about causality, or reality, or why or how; it is about explaining and explanation and only about that.”

(Bromberger 1962, 81)



“There is no special subject: the pragmatics of explanation”

(Lewis 1986, 228)

WHAT A THEORY OF EXPLANATION SHOULD DO

Two (related) goals:

1. Account for explanatory relevance: what information must an explanation cite?
2. Account for explanatory power: what makes one explanation better than another?

THREE SENSES OF 'EXPLANATION'

1. Explanatory episode: a communicative act in which one attempts to clarify an event or phenomenon to an audience.
2. Explanatory fact: the causes \ laws \ probabilities that get cited in the course of an explanatory episode.
3. Explanatory vehicle: the means by which info re explanatory facts is conveyed during an explanatory episode.

Factualist vs. pragmatic approaches: which is prior to which?

THE FACTUALIST APPROACH

“Scientific explanations are constructed and communicated by limited cognitive agents with particular pragmatic orientations. [but these issues are] downstream from discussions of what counts as an explanation... Psychological questions about the kinds of explanation that human cognitive agents tend to produce or tend to accept are not relevant to the philosophical problem of stating when a scientific explanation ought to be accepted as such.” (Craver 2014, 29)

“Explaining is, primarily, a speech act, something people do with words.”
“[I do not] deny that it is an interesting question what distinguishes this speech-act, but if you had to assign the task of answering it to a branch of philosophy, you would assign it to the philosophy of language, not to the philosophy of science.” (Skow 2016, 11).

THE FACTUALIST APPROACH

- A philosophical theory of explanation = a theory of explanatory facts.
- Lewis: everything else that philosophers have said falls under general Gricean maxims.
- Which facts? First and foremost causes. Maybe other dependency relations.
 - Counter-examples to DN & other accounts.
 - Scientific practice.

THE FACTUALIST APPROACH

Can the factualist approach give an account of explanatory power?

Doesn't seem so:

- Explanatory facts aren't better/worse as such.
- The more (casual) info the better? Unlikely
- Can't accommodate simplicity, generality, unifying power.

THE PRAGMATIC APPROACH

General structure: an explanation is something that “salvages” an audience from lack-of-understanding.

"S explains q by uttering u" iff "S utters u with the intention of rendering q understandable by producing the knowledge that u expresses a correct answer to the question Q."

(Achinstein 1985/2010, 131).

A natural account of explanatory power: the better the understanding supplied, the better the explanation.

THE PRAGMATIC APPROACH

Can the pragmatic approach give an account of explanatory relevance?

Unlikely, sans a substantive account of understanding:

- The question at issue Q "admits of a right answer. But [the agent] can think of no answer to which, on [his] views, there are no decisive objections" (Bromberger, 1962, 85)
- "A understands q only if A knows a correct answer to Q which is a complete content-giving proposition with respect to Q."
(Achinstein, 1985/2010, 108)

UNDERSTANDING

S understands a phenomenon P to the extent that S can use a representation R of P to draw (good) inferences about P's counterfactual behavior.

- A two-factor concept.
- Understanding as an ability.
- Restriction to counterfactual inferences – to distinguish from descriptive knowledge.
- No specific constraints on R's content: no truth\accuracy requirement.

UNDERSTANDING

S understands a phenomenon P to the extent that S can use a representation R of P to draw (good) inferences about P's counterfactual behavior.

Considerations for:

- Problems with alternatives.
- Helps with issues re explanation (more anon.)
- Explains the value of understanding.
- Fits how we attribute understanding.
- Straddles the internal/external divide in the right way.

FROM UNDERSTANDING TO EXPLANATION

General structure – like the pragmatic approach: explanatory vehicles to be assessed in term of how they contribute to understanding.

But a more substantive account of understanding. So a criterion of relevance akin to factualist\causal approaches.

So enjoys up sides of both approaches.

EXPLANATION & IDEALIZATION

Idealization = introducing known falsehoods into a theory/model.

Most accounts do not allow for idealizing explanations.

But science is full of them; and often they're the best.

On the present view: if an idealizing explanation enhances understanding it has greater explanatory power.

- Highlight important factors
- Highlight non-difference makers.
- Unify phenomena.

CONCLUSION

A view of explanation that synthesizes pragmatic and factualist approaches.

- A pleasing overall package.
- Enables us to handle outstanding issues, like explanatory idealization.

One lesson: unlikely we can read off causal content from explanatory locutions.

Thank you!