

## Moral Explanations of Moral Beliefs: Inappropriate to Demand Them?

JOHN J. TILLEY  
INDIANA UNIVERSITY–PURDUE UNIVERSITY INDIANAPOLIS  
jtilley@iupui.edu

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**Abstract:** A familiar claim, meant as a challenge to moral knowledge, is that we can credibly accept putative moral facts just in case they explain natural facts. This paper critically addresses Elizabeth Tropman’s response to a version of that claim. Her response has interest partly because it falls within, and extends, an influential philosophical tradition—that of trying to expose (some) skeptical challenges as spurious or ill-conceived. Also, Tropman’s target is not just any version of the claim just mentioned. It is Gilbert Harman’s classic version, according to which putative moral facts must earn credibility by explaining the formation of moral beliefs. This version has wide influence, and variations of it can arise in many areas. Tropman’s response is thus well worth attention.

### 1.

Consider the following claim, meant as a challenge to the possibility of moral knowledge:

A putative moral fact must explain (or be part of the explanation of) one or more natural facts, meaning non-normative facts about the empirical world. If and only if it does so is knowledge of it possible.<sup>1</sup>

This and similar claims have been much discussed by moral philosophers. Among those who consider moral knowledge possible, two responses to the claim stand out. The first is to argue that moral facts sometimes explain natural facts; the second is to argue that sometimes, moral facts are knowable even if they explain no natural facts.<sup>2</sup> These responses are well known, as are the replies to them.

A third response, not well known, is to argue thus: Demanding that moral facts explain natural facts, claiming that if and only if they do so is moral knowledge possible, involves a confusion, a fallacy, or some other flaw that permits philosophers to dismiss the demand. The idea here is that faced with the

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<sup>1</sup> Do I really mean “if and only if” here, or just “only if”? This issue, as it pertains to this paper, receives attention in section 7.

<sup>2</sup> For the first response see, e.g., Sturgeon (1984), Railton (1986), and Brink (1989, 182–197). For the second see, e.g., Thomson (1996, 91–94), Shafer-Landau (2007, 321–323), and Enoch (2011, ch. 3). For each response, we sometimes find it aimed not at the above claim but at something similar—for instance, at the thesis produced by substituting “only if” for “if and only if” or by substituting “is it a genuine fact” for “is knowledge of it possible.” But in each case the response is easily adapted to the above claim.

demand, those who consider moral knowledge possible need not undertake either of the first two responses. They can reject the demand as ill-conceived.

This third response generally goes unnoted by moral epistemologists. This indicates, I suspect, that they see it, at best, only as a possibility, not as a response that has proponents. To see it this way is mistaken though natural. It is mistaken because at least one philosopher, Elizabeth Tropman, advances a version of the third response. It is natural because Tropman's response is easy to overlook. Not only is it brief, but it comes in the middle of a paper—"Making Sense of Explanatory Objections to Moral Realism" (Tropman, 2013)—that undertakes several interesting tasks concerning moral explanation.

Tropman's response is fascinating. Not only is it bold, but if it stands up it licenses us to brush off a skeptical challenge that has absorbed much philosophical energy.

I examine Tropman's response in what follows. I think that it fails, but that is not my sole motive for discussing it. My discussion is part of a wider project, some other parts of which appear elsewhere (Tilley, 2008; Tilley, 2009). Tropman's response falls within an influential philosophical tradition of which I am frankly wary. I mean the tradition of trying to expose skeptical challenges as somehow confused, bogus, unmeaning—in short, as flawed in such a way that they need not be met or answered. Classic examples are P. F. Strawson's "dissolution" of the problem of induction and F. H. Bradley's dismissive reply to "Why be moral?" (Strawson, 1952, ch. 9; Bradley, 1927, 58–64). My inclination is to put the burden of proof on such treatments of skeptical challenges, and I find that the burden typically goes unmet. My discussion of Tropman's argument is an instance of putting such treatments to the test.

Tropman's argument is interesting in two further ways. First, as will soon emerge, its target is not just any version of the claim presented early in this section. Rather, it is Gilbert Harman's classic version, according to which putative moral facts must earn credibility by explaining the formation of moral beliefs.<sup>3</sup> This version not only receives considerable attention but also has wide influence. For instance, several recent epistemological debunking arguments are variations of Harman's idea (Wielenberg, 2014, 146–47).

Second, explanatory challenges need not be confined to ethics. They can be, and often are, raised in other areas—in science, for example—and we can adapt Tropman's argument to many of them. Her argument is thus relevant far beyond metaethics. I say more about this in section 6; for now, let us proceed to Tropman's argument.

## 2.

To begin, let us be clear on Tropman's target. The claim I mentioned early in section 1 is dubbed by Tropman the "epistemological reading of the demand for explanation" (Tropman, 2013, 42), which she sees as one of three common

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<sup>3</sup> Harman (1977, ch. 1). See also note 6.

readings of that demand.<sup>4</sup> (We can capture the other two by replacing the claim's final phrase, "is knowledge of it possible," with, respectively, "is it a genuine fact" and "is it an objective fact.") The epistemological reading, she indicates, comes in different forms (Tropman, 2013, 42, 43). One of them we can capture thus:

A putative moral fact must explain the existence (or formation) of someone's moral belief, such as her belief that such-and-such is morally right. If and only if it does so is knowledge of it possible.

Tropman's response aims at a variation, or refinement, of this position. Indications of the refinement emerge on page 43 of her paper. There she often speaks not of the possibility of knowing moral facts, but of the *credibility* of beliefs in them. She also says there that "the ... credibility of our moral beliefs is what is at issue in an epistemological reading of the explanatory objection." By "an epistemological reading of the explanatory objection" Tropman means the epistemological reading of the demand for explanation, combined with the claim that the demand cannot be met (Tropman, 2013, 42–43). So she is saying, in part, that the credibility of our moral beliefs is what is at issue in the position set out above.

Hence, by rewording that position, we can state more accurately Tropman's target:

A putative moral fact must explain the existence of someone's moral belief, such as her belief that such-and-such is morally right. If and only if it does so is our belief in it (if we have one) credible (at least slightly).

Henceforth I call this thesis "the explanatory demand." To be clear, we make the explanatory demand just in case we not only assert or believe the first statement in the above thesis, but also accept the second statement.<sup>5</sup>

The word "existence" in the demand is important. It makes clear that the explanandum Tropman has in mind is not the object, the propositional content, of the relevant moral belief, but rather the *existence* (or formation) of that belief (Tropman, 2013, 42). We must keep in mind that the target of Tropman's response, the explanatory demand, is a form of the broader demand that putative

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<sup>4</sup> Tropman (2013, 38). Instead of "demand for explanation" Tropman usually uses "explanatory demand." I use "explanatory demand" more narrowly: to denote just one variation of one reading (Tropman's epistemological reading) of what Tropman calls the explanatory demand. A second point: Tropman often describes the demand for explanation as a demand that moral facts explain, not just any natural facts, but observations (Tropman, 2013, 37, 38, 39, 42). However, the explananda she has in mind include such facts as "Alice failed to keep her promise to Smith" and "Jones believed that Alice's action was morally wrong" (Tropman, 2013, 38). So apparently, by "observations" Tropman means roughly what I mean by "natural facts": non-normative facts about the empirical world.

<sup>5</sup> As note 4 says, this use of "explanatory demand" is narrower than Tropman's. Another point: This talk of a "demand" I adopt from Tropman. Nothing changes materially, either in her thesis or in my critique of it, if we instead speak of an *assertion*—the assertion, namely, that if, and only if, a putative moral fact explains the existence of someone's belief in it, our belief in the moral fact is credible.

moral facts explain *natural* (rather than normative) facts. The fact that I believe that kindness is virtuous is such a fact; the fact that kindness is virtuous is not.

The explanatory demand is basically Gilbert Harman's influential version of the broader demand just mentioned.<sup>6</sup> An interest in that broader demand naturally arouses interest in the explanatory demand. Arguably, if a moral fact explains a natural fact—the fact, say, that a particular social trend is occurring—it does so by influencing moral beliefs (cf. Thomson, 1996, 76; Wright, 1996, 16).

Tropman (2013, 43) argues that the explanatory demand is “not appropriate.” It is not appropriate, she thinks, because it presupposes the credibility of the very belief which, according to the demand, lacks credibility unless the demand is met.

I clarify Tropman's argument in section 3. In later sections, especially 4 and 5, I respond to it. But first note two readings of the explanatory demand, which Tropman does not distinguish:

- (A) A putative moral fact, P1, must explain the existence of some person *S*'s belief in P1 (meaning a belief of *S*'s the content of which is P1). If and only if it does so is our belief in P1 credible.
- (B) A putative moral fact, P1, must explain the existence of some person *S*'s belief in a putative moral fact, P2 (where P2 may differ from P1). If and only if it does so is our belief in P1 credible.

The balance of textual evidence, I believe, shows that (A) is Tropman's target. For instance, parts of her objection to the explanatory demand make no sense if her target is (B).<sup>7</sup> Also, in examining the explanatory demand, Tropman focuses on Judith Thomson's discussion of it (Tropman, 2013, 42–43). The concern of that discussion—or of the part of it treated by Tropman (Thomson, 1996, 76–85)—is whether the putative fact that Alice's action was morally just can explain the existence of Charles's belief that Alice's action was morally just. Here the putative moral fact and the content of the belief to be explained are identical, just as they are in (A).

However, I consider it unwise to ignore (B). Thus, I will examine Tropman's objection first on the assumption that it targets (A); then on the assumption that it targets (B). My work on the first of those tasks (sections 3 and 4) enables a much briefer treatment of the second (section 5).

### 3.

Assume, then, that Tropman's sights are on (A). She objects to it thus:

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<sup>6</sup> Harman (1977, ch. 1). Harman champions the broader demand, but in doing so he focuses on the version of it that I call the explanatory demand. (The moral beliefs to which he especially gives attention are moral *observations*.) He is thus well known for that version, and the version itself attracts much attention.

<sup>7</sup> Note 9 says more about this.

There is a significant tension between Thomson's argument that moral realists [e.g., Sturgeon, 1984] fail to discharge the explanatory demand and her reasons for pressing the demand in the first place. Recall that a [putative] moral fact's ability to explain something that we observe is important in this context so that we have a way to know about the moral fact. Thomson has selected moral *beliefs*, such as Charles's moral belief about Alice [his belief that Alice's action was just], as that which [putative] moral facts might explain. [However,] unless Charles's moral belief about Alice has prior credibility, it is difficult to see how *its* being explained by [putative] moral facts [i.e., by the putative fact that Alice's action was just] would have any hope of giving us moral knowledge [that Alice's action was just]. ...

The present explanatory objection ... rests on the contention that moral facts fail to explain our moral beliefs. Selecting moral beliefs [in this case, Charles's belief that Alice's action was just] as that which [putative] moral facts [in this case, the putative fact that Alice's action was just] ought to explain only makes sense if we suppose that the moral beliefs in question [Charles's belief that Alice's action was just] are themselves credible. Yet the very credibility of our moral beliefs [in this case, our belief that Alice's action was just] is what is at issue in an epistemological reading of the explanatory objection. For this reason, it is simply not appropriate to require that [putative] moral facts explain our beliefs in them *so that we can have a way to reach [credible] beliefs about these moral facts*.<sup>8</sup>

To serve clarity, I have inserted some parenthetical items into this passage (some of which would differ if we regarded (B) as Tropman's target).<sup>9</sup> They include the word "putative" here and there and the word "credible" in the final sentence. Regarding the word "putative," I assume that in the above passage Tropman is using (as she often does) "moral fact" to mean "putative moral fact." I do so largely because she is discussing a form of the demand for explanation, and she says earlier that "the idea" of that form "is that some *putative* moral fact ... ought to be explanatory ... for knowledge of this fact to be possible."<sup>10</sup>

My insertion of "credible" stems from several things Tropman says, including things in the above passage. Her words indicate that what she has in mind in her final sentence is not the mere reaching of beliefs, but the reaching of *credible* beliefs. Her final sentence is a rough way of saying that "it is simply not appropriate" to issue the explanatory demand.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Tropman (2013, 42–43). The material represented by the first ellipsis receives attention in section 7.

<sup>9</sup> Also, the differences would advise against treating (B) as her target. They would cause the final three sentences in her objection to make little sense. To save space I won't explain this, for as I said, later I will examine Tropman's objection interpreted as aiming at (B).

<sup>10</sup> Tropman (2013, 38, italics mine). In the passage I refer to, Tropman uses "explanatory demand" rather than "demand for explanation." So note 4 is relevant.

<sup>11</sup> Or perhaps she is referring to a *part* of the explanatory demand—the part remaining if we delete "only if." Of course, if that part is inappropriate, so is the demand.

In this section I produce a step-by-step reconstruction of Tropman's objection to (A). We can charitably summarize her main point as follows. First, if we demand that a putative moral fact, P1, explain the existence of some person *S*'s belief in P1, claiming that if and only if P1 does that is our belief in P1 credible, then our demand "only makes sense if we suppose" that *S*'s belief in P1 is antecedently credible ("has prior credibility"). Second, to suppose this is to suppose, tacitly, that our belief in P1, the very belief whose credibility is at issue, is antecedently credible.<sup>12</sup> Third, these facts make our demand inappropriate. For it is inappropriate to issue a demand, claiming that if and only if it is met is a particular belief credible, when the demand is senseless unless we suppose that the belief is already credible.

The core of Tropman's objection consists of the statements below. They form the third, fourth, and fifth steps in my reconstruction of her objection. The other steps are soon to come.

3. If we make demand (A), our demand makes no sense unless we suppose, as we make our demand, that *S*'s belief in P1 is antecedently credible.
4. To suppose that *S*'s belief in P1 is antecedently credible is tacitly to suppose that our belief in P1, the belief whose credibility is at issue in (A), is antecedently credible.
5. If 3 and 4 are true, demand (A) is inappropriate. To make it is to presuppose the credibility of the very belief whose credibility is at issue in it.

The most contentious statement here is 3. Why accept it? Tropman's answer lies in the following sentence in her objection:

Unless Charles's moral belief about Alice [his belief that her action was just] has prior credibility, it is difficult to see how *its* being explained by [putative] moral facts [i.e., by the putative fact that Alice's action was just] would have any hope of giving us moral knowledge [i.e., would give credibility to our moral belief that Alice's action was just]. (Tropman, 2013, 43)

This sentence reveals why Tropman accepts 3. Before discussing that, however, let us be clear on the point of the sentence. That point, generalized beyond the Charles-Alice example (by replacing "Charles" with "*S*," etc.), is that unless *S*'s belief in P1 has "prior credibility"—meaning, presumably, credibility that exists prior to any success P1 may have in explaining the existence of *S*'s belief—"it is difficult to see how" the following could be true:

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<sup>12</sup> I'm not sure that Tropman accepts this assertion regarding just any putative moral fact we might label "P1." But she accepts it, plausibly, regarding the moral fact she discusses. At any rate, I have no need or inclination to oppose the assertion (which is premise 4, below).

EC. Person *S*'s belief's being explained by P1 gives (at least minimal) credibility to our belief in P1. That is, P1's success in explaining the existence of *S*'s belief in P1 gives credibility to our belief in P1.

I call this statement "EC" because it relates explanation to credibility. In formulating it I have interpreted the word "*its*" in the quoted sentence as denoting the existence, not the object, of Charles's belief. To do otherwise would make the quoted sentence unconnected with (A), and thus useless to Tropman. Demand (A) says that P1 must explain the *existence* of a moral belief.

Also, I have interpreted the phrase "would have any hope of giving us moral knowledge," which comes at the end of the quoted sentence, as a means of saying "would give credibility to our moral belief." I take Tropman to be using the first of those phrases with the second phrase more specifically in mind. I do so for reasons explained earlier. Briefly, in the remainder of her objection Tropman speaks not of moral knowledge but of the *credibility* of our moral beliefs, and indicates that such credibility is "what is at issue" in the explanatory demand. She thus reveals that in her earlier talk of "hav[ing] any hope of giving us moral knowledge" she intends something like "giving our moral belief at least infinitesimal credibility."

In brief, Tropman's (generalized) point in the quoted sentence is that EC is true only if *S*'s belief in P1 is antecedently credible. Interestingly, she offers no defense of this point. I will return to this fact later. For now, how does Tropman's point bear on whether statement 3 is true?

The answer is that demand (A)—particularly its claim that our belief in P1 is credible if and only if P1 explains the existence of *S*'s belief in P1—implies EC. This is fairly obvious; so it's unsurprising that it goes unstated in the quoted sentence. The thrust of that sentence, fleshed out with its implicit elements, is this:

Unless Charles's moral belief about Alice has prior credibility—more generally, unless the belief mentioned in (A), *S*'s belief in P1, has prior credibility—then it's difficult to see how EC could be true. In short, EC is true only if *S*'s belief in P1 is antecedently credible. And since (A) implies EC, it follows that if we make demand (A), our demand makes no sense unless we suppose, as we make it, that *S*'s belief in P1 is antecedently credible.

We now see how the quoted sentence bears on 3. That sentence, as fleshed out above, is a three-step defense of 3 (to which I append 4 and 5 for convenience).

1. Proposition EC is true only if *S*'s belief in P1 is antecedently credible.
2. Demand (A) implies EC.

3. Thus, if we make demand (A), our demand makes no sense unless we suppose, as we make our demand, that *S*'s belief in P1 is antecedently credible.
4. To suppose that *S*'s belief in P1 is antecedently credible is tacitly to suppose that our belief in P1, the belief whose credibility is at issue in (A), is antecedently credible.
5. If 3 and 4 are true, demand (A) is inappropriate. To make it is to presuppose the credibility of the very belief whose credibility is at issue in it.

Although 1 and 2 do not by themselves entail 3, they entail 3 given some plausible assumptions. And 3, combined with 4 and 5, entails that demand (A) is inappropriate.

#### 4.

So we see why Tropman considers (A) inappropriate. However, her argument has a defect. To uncover it, let me return to my point that she offers no defense of premise 1. That premise says that EC—the claim that P1's success in explaining the existence of *S*'s belief in P1 gives credibility to our belief in P1—is true only if *S*'s belief in P1 is antecedently credible. We encountered that premise in this passage:

Unless Charles's moral belief about Alice [his belief that her action was just] has prior credibility, it is difficult to see how *its* being explained by [putative] moral facts [i.e., by the putative fact that Alice's action was just] would have any hope of giving us moral knowledge [i.e., would give credibility to our moral belief that Alice's action was just]. (Tropman, 2013, 43)

Tropman apparently sees this statement as plausible enough to stand without argument. To determine whether it is, recall that the word "*its*" in it, which is short for "that belief's," must refer to the *existence* of Charles's belief. Otherwise, the statement is useless to Tropman.

This point is important; so let me expand on it. Suppose "*its*" denotes not the existence, but the object, of Charles's belief, namely, the putative fact that Alice's action was just. Then the quoted sentence, when generalized by substituting "*S*" for "Charles," and so on, does not assert premise 1. It does not assert that proposition EC—the proposition that P1's success in explaining the *existence* of *S*'s belief in P1 gives credibility to our belief in P1—is true only if *S*'s belief is antecedently credible. Instead, it asserts this:

The proposition (call it EC'), "P1's success in explaining the putative moral fact (namely P1) that constitutes the object of *S*'s belief in P1 gives credibility to our belief in P1" is true only if *S*'s belief in P1 is antecedently credible.



This assertion is odd, partly because it suggests that P1 explains itself. But more important, it is useless to Tropman. Substituting it for premise 1 makes her argument invalid. And if we restore validity by revising 2 to say, not that (A) implies EC, but that (A) implies EC', then premise 2 becomes false. This is because (A) concerns the *existence* of S's belief, whereas EC' concerns the *object* of that belief. So (A) does not entail EC'.

Thus, as I said, we must read "*its*" in the quoted passage as denoting the *existence* of Charles's belief. On this reading the passage means this:

Unless Charles's moral belief about Alice [his belief that her action was just] has prior credibility, it is difficult to see how *its existence's* being explained by [putative] moral facts [i.e., by the putative fact that Alice's action was just] would have any hope of giving us moral knowledge [i.e., would give credibility to our moral belief that Alice's action was just].

This sentence basically says that unless Charles's belief in the moral proposition "Alice's action was just" has prior credibility, the power of that moral proposition to explain the existence of Charles's belief about Alice's deed lends no credibility to our belief in that moral proposition. Hence the sentence has the right content to be useful to Tropman. Generalized, it asserts that unless S's belief in P1 is antecedently credible, EC is not true. This is premise 1.

However, the sentence is not plausible enough to stand without argument. Arguably, it is not plausible at all. Suppose the proposition "Alice's action was just" explains a feature of the natural world, namely, the existence of Charles's moral belief. Then that moral proposition, and our belief in it, is at least slightly credible. Even if the proposition (or Charles's belief) had no prior credibility, the fact remains that the *existence* of Charles's belief, his belief being a psychological state, is a feature of the natural world. If the moral proposition explains such a feature, our belief in it has at least infinitesimal credibility.<sup>13</sup> This is especially plausible if we read the explanatory demand charitably, and thus read "explain *x*," both in the demand and throughout this paper, to mean "be an integral part of the *best*, or at least of a *very good*, explanation of *x*."

At least, as I said, all of this is arguable—indeed, highly arguable; we should not deny it without good reason. Its general point is very modest. That point is that if a proposition is an integral part of the best or of a very good explanation of a natural fact, it is more credible than it otherwise would be, which is to say that it has at least miniscule credibility. This point is modest because it does not say that explanatory success is *necessary* for credibility or

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<sup>13</sup> Shouldn't we add, "At least, our belief has such credibility if we *know* that the proposition explains a feature of the natural world"? Maybe so, but this point is minor. Suppose we revise EC in light of it, making EC say this: "P1's success—together, perhaps, with our knowledge of its success—in explaining the existence of S's belief in P1 gives credibility to our belief in P1." This would not cause Tropman to retract premise 1, according to which EC is true only if S's belief in P1 is already credible. If the original version of EC depends for its truth on the prior credibility of S's belief in P1, surely the same goes for the revised version. In fact, it's the revised version that Tropman probably has in mind in the phrase I interpreted as EC.

that such success is sufficient for the *truth* or *rational acceptance* of a proposition. Also, it does not say that explanatory success is sufficient for attributing this or that *ontological status* to the properties or things the proposition concerns. Nor does it say that the use of explanatory success to make inferences is the most basic, the most important, or the most reliable method of non-deductive reasoning. Finally, it takes no stand on exactly what makes one explanation better than another.

Equally important, even if the explanatory power of the proposition about Alice lends no credibility to our belief in that proposition, this almost surely does not stem from a lack of prior credibility in the proposition or in Charles's belief. If a proposition's power to explain a feature of reality can give credibility to a belief in the proposition, it would do so, it seems, no matter what the prior credibility of the proposition or of someone's belief in it.

I do not think that Tropman would deny any of this. (If she did, we should expect her to say that most *any* demand that moral propositions explain natural facts, not just demand (A) or (B), is inappropriate. Such demands generally presuppose that success in explaining natural facts is sufficient for some degree of credibility.) Instead, I suspect that she has momentarily lost sight of the difference between the above sentence ("Unless Charles's moral belief about Alice has prior credibility, it is difficult to see how *its existence's* being explained by ...") and the sentence below. At any rate, we must not confuse the above sentence with the one below.

Unless *the putative fact that Charles's moral belief about Alice exists* has prior credibility, it is difficult to see how *that putative fact's* being explained by [putative] moral facts [i.e., by the putative fact that Alice's action was just] would have any hope of giving us moral knowledge [i.e., would give credibility to our moral belief that Alice's action was just].

This sentence basically asserts that unless the putative fact "There exists a belief, namely Charles's, that Alice's action was just" has prior credibility, the power of the moral proposition "Alice's action was just" to explain that putative fact lends no credibility to our belief in the moral proposition. This assertion is plausible.<sup>14</sup> For suppose the putative fact about Charles—that his belief about Alice's action *exists*—lacks prior credibility. Now suppose that the object of Charles's putative belief, the moral proposition "Alice's action was just," can explain the putative fact about Charles (i.e., would do so if the putative fact were true). Would this give credibility to our belief in the moral proposition? It does not seem so. For to suppose that the putative fact about Charles lacks prior credibility is to suppose that apart from any explanatory power the proposition about Alice may have relative to that putative fact, there is no reason at all to

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<sup>14</sup> So why not revise premise 1 to reflect it? The answer, in brief, is that this would necessitate further revisions in Tropman's argument. Step 4 would become false, and the efforts to repair it would further damage the argument.

think that the putative fact about Charles is true. And if we suppose this, then how could the power of the moral proposition about Alice to explain the putative fact about Charles lend credibility either to that moral proposition or to our belief in it? Most any proposition, no matter how devoid of credibility, can explain a *fictitious* feature of the world (meaning that it would do so if the feature were real), provided we use sufficient imagination in specifying the fictitious feature.

To return to the main point: If we interpret the passage quoted early in this section—the one about Charles’s moral belief about Alice—so that it is useful to Tropman, it is not plausible. At least, it requires a defense, which Tropman does not supply. Also, it is hard to see how a successful defense would go.

This is simply to say that we have good reason to reject, or at least not to accept, Tropman’s first premise: that EC is true only if *S*’s belief in P1 is credible. Consequently, her argument does not establish that (A) is inappropriate.

## 5.

I have been interpreting Tropman’s target as (A). However, nothing changes, materially, if we interpret it as (B), which says that a putative moral fact, P1, must explain the existence of someone’s belief in a putative moral fact, P2. That interpretation would lead me to change some of the parenthetical items I put in the relevant quotation (“Unless Charles’s moral belief about Alice has ...”). The resulting sentence would basically say that unless Charles’s belief in the proposition—call it P2—“Alice’s action was just” has prior credibility, the success of P1 (a putative moral fact that may differ in content from P2) in explaining the existence of Charles’s belief in P2 lends no credibility to our belief in P1. As before, this assertion cannot stand without argument. For instance, even if Charles’s belief in P2 has no prior credibility, P1’s power to explain the *existence* of that belief would seem to give some credibility to P1 and our belief in it.

Thus, the assertion I made shortly ago—that we have good reason not to accept Tropman’s first premise—remains true if we revise it, along with EC, by replacing “*S*’s belief in P1” with “*S*’s belief in P2.” To be fully clear, we have good reason not to accept the premise that only if *S*’s belief in P2 is antecedently credible does P1’s success in explaining the existence of that belief give credibility to our belief in P1. But that premise is crucial to Tropman’s objection, interpreted as arguing that (B) is inappropriate.

## 6.

I have argued that Tropman’s objection is unsuccessful. Soon I will address possible replies. But first let me return to an earlier point: that Tropman’s objection is interesting partly because it has broad relevance. Explanatory demands similar to the one she addresses can arise in widely different areas, and

her objection can be adapted to them. To give one example, we can easily imagine a scientist or philosopher asserting this:

Astronomical propositions earn credibility by explaining beliefs in such propositions. That is, any putative astronomical fact must explain (i.e., be part of the best, or at least of a very good, explanation of) someone's astronomical beliefs (an astronomer's, say). If and only if it does so is our belief in it credible.

Whether ultimately true or false, this assertion does not seem inappropriate. But consider the following objection to it.

Selecting astronomical beliefs as that which putative astronomical facts must explain makes sense only if we suppose that the astronomical beliefs are themselves credible. For instance, unless Charles's astronomical belief that billions of galaxies exist has prior credibility, it is difficult to see how *its* being explained by putative astronomical facts could lend any credibility to our belief in those facts. Hence the demand that putative astronomical facts explain astronomical beliefs is inappropriate. To make it is to presuppose the credibility of the very beliefs whose credibility is at issue in the demand.

If Tropman's argument succeeds, so does this one. This one does not succeed, but I will forgo the task of showing this. It would closely parallel my treatment of Tropman's argument. The point I want to make here is that Tropman's argument is anything but narrow in relevance. Its implications extend far beyond metaethics.

## 7.

Let us consider two possible objections to my critique of Tropman's argument. According to the first, owing to my wording of the explanatory demand's second sentence, I have not captured the demand that concerns Tropman. To do that, I must return to that sentence and replace "if and only if" with "only if." (To replace it with "if" is no good. It would not square with Tropman's text; also, the resulting "demand" would not be a skeptical challenge.)

This objection is not obviously false, for Tropman is not perfectly clear on whether the demand she has in mind asserts merely a necessary condition or instead a necessary and sufficient condition. (Interestingly, some ambivalence on this subject occurs in the wider literature.)<sup>15</sup> The balance of evidence, I believe, favors the second alternative. But more important, to replace "if and only if" with "only if" fails to improve Tropman's argument.

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<sup>15</sup> In the explanatory challenge in Harman's seminal study, the condition in question is characterized as necessary, not sufficient (Harman, 1977, 13). But some philosophers not only understand the condition as allegedly sufficient as well as necessary, but attribute that understanding (perhaps plausibly) to Harman. See, e.g., Brink (1989, 182), Nelson (2006, 417), and Miller (2013, 145–46).

Suppose that we make that replacement in (A), the demand that a putative moral fact, P1, explain the existence of some person *S*'s belief in P1, where it's assumed that if and only if P1 does that is our belief in P1 credible. (To make the replacement in (B) would produce similar results.) This does not affect the content of Tropman's first premise: that EC—the claim that P1's success in explaining the existence of *S*'s belief in P1 gives credibility to our belief in P1—is true only if *S*'s belief in P1 is antecedently credible. For instance, it requires no revisions to the content of EC or of anything else to which premise 1 refers. Hence it does not affect my criticism of premise 1.

Furthermore, to revise (A) by making the replacement is to undercut premise 2, which says that (A) implies EC. Although the revised version of (A) implies that the meeting of demand (A)—that is, P1's success in explaining the existence of *S*'s belief in P1—is *necessary* for the credibility of our belief in P1, it does not imply EC, which says that the meeting of demand (A) is *sufficient* for the credibility of our belief.

In short, to revise (A) so that the condition it includes is allegedly necessary, though not sufficient, is to make (A) invulnerable to Tropman's objection. This fact is important. We find many discussions of the demand that moral facts explain the existence of moral beliefs (or of a subset of them: moral observations), and as that demand is usually understood, the condition it includes purports to be merely necessary, not sufficient (e.g., Harman, 1977, 13; Shafer-Landau, 2007, 314; Enoch, 2011, 51; McGrath, 2014, 189; Schechter, 2018, 446–447). Thus, even if Tropman's objection were successful in showing that demand (A), unrevised, is inappropriate, it would not touch the more commonly discussed demand just described.

The second possible objection is that in quoting Tropman in section 3, I elided a sizeable passage and thus likely misread her argument. The elided passage directly precedes the second paragraph in my earlier quotation. Here it is, prefaced by the sentence it directly follows:

Unless Charles's moral belief about Alice has prior credibility, it is difficult to see how *its* being explained by moral facts would have any hope of giving us moral knowledge. Yet it turns out that by the very assumptions that ground this [Judith Thomson's] explanatory objection, Charles's moral belief is not based upon the right sort of evidence to qualify as minimally credible.

According to the epistemological motivation for the explanatory demand, the only good reason that Charles could have for thinking that Alice's action was just is that supposing it was explains something else that he observes. But as Thomson [1996, 77] describes the case, Charles does not hold the moral belief on the basis of explanatory reasons. His reasons are instead that he thinks that she kept her word at great cost and that such actions are just. How, though, does Charles come to have this general moral belief about justice? We cannot suppose that Charles has direct, noninferential access to this prior moral fact, for the possibility of such access would undercut the very reason that moral facts are being asked to be explanatory. Unfortunately, Charles's belief also cannot be credible insofar as he

inferred this moral fact about justice on the basis of its ability to explain other people's moral beliefs about justice, for this simply pushes the problem back one step. (Tropman, 2013, 43)

I take the main point to be this: First, in making the explanatory demand (and arguing that moral realists cannot meet it) not only does Judith Thomson presuppose, of necessity, the credibility of Charles's belief (for "unless Charles's moral belief ... has prior credibility, it is difficult to see how ..."), but she presupposes it on grounds not countenanced by the assumptions, the conditions for credibility, that attend her demand. For as Thomson describes the case, Charles does not rest his belief that Alice's action was just on the power of that fact about Alice's action to explain the existence of a moral belief (or to explain any other natural fact). Second, it will not do for Thomson to revise her example so that Charles rests his belief on that power. This "simply pushes the problem back one step."

The elided passage is not troubling for the preceding sections. It contains an objection separable from, though sharing some steps with, the objection I critiqued in those sections. Among the shared steps is the one in the first sentence of the above quotation, which, when generalized, is premise 1. So the objection has the same doubtful premise as the objection already treated.

Let me amplify this claim, first by noting that although the objection is indeed separable from the one discussed earlier, we need not sharply separate the two. We can incorporate the new one into my reconstruction of Tropman's argument. However, the revisions that accomplish this do not affect the part of Tropman's argument that I critiqued. Here are those revisions, prefaced by steps 3 and 4, which remain unchanged:

3. Thus, if we make demand (A) our demand makes no sense unless we suppose, as we make our demand, that *S*'s belief in P1 is antecedently credible.
4. To suppose that *S*'s belief in P1 is antecedently credible is tacitly to suppose that our belief in P1, the belief whose credibility is at issue in (A), is antecedently credible.
5. If in making demand (A) we suppose that *S*'s belief in P1 is credible, we do so on grounds not countenanced by (A), meaning grounds other than P1's power to explain the existence of a moral belief (or another part of the natural world). Either that, or we avoid this problem, we rest our supposition on grounds countenanced by (A), at the price of "simply push[ing] the problem back one step."
6. If 3 and 4 are true, demand (A) is inappropriate.
7. If 3 and 5 are true, demand (A) is inappropriate.
8. Therefore (from 3 through 7), demand (A) is (doubly) inappropriate.

Nothing here damages my critique of Tropman's objection. My critique concerns premise 1, not the steps set out above.

## 8.

To conclude, let us call to mind the explanatory demand, which says that putative moral facts must explain the existence of moral beliefs, that if and only if they do so is our belief in them credible. Let us also call to mind a rewritten form of that demand, which replaces "if and only if" with "only if." As I explained in sections 3 through 5, Tropman's objection does not succeed against its target, the explanatory demand. Owing to an insufficiently plausible premise, it does not establish that the demand is inappropriate. And as I explained in section 7, if we suppose that Tropman's target is the rewritten explanatory demand, another of her premises becomes false. Thus, Tropman's objection succeeds against neither of those two demands. This result is important, given that Tropman's objection, were it sound, would show that an influential skeptical challenge (and many cousins of it) can be dismissed as ill-conceived. But as so often in philosophy, there is no quick way with the skeptic here. Those who would oppose his challenge must argue either that a putative moral fact can explain a natural fact or that it can earn acceptance by other means. In short, they have no alternative but to roll up their sleeves.

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