

Notes on Skow: *Reasons Why*

October 18, 2016

1 Ch. 2: From Explanations to Why-Questions

Thesis: Philosophers of Science have claimed to seek a theory of explanation, but what they're really after is a theory of answers to why-questions.

Support:

- Explanations and Why-questions come apart.
 - “Explains” can take various wh-complements (what, who, where, how), not just why.
 - A speaker can give an answer to a why-question without *explaining* it.
 - Explanation is primarily a speech act, and as such, belongs to philosophy of language (obviously a bad pissing-contest claim)
 - If scientists couldn't explain, they would still be able to seek answers for why-questions, and would still be good scientists... though they would be bad public intellectuals.
- Hempel's DN model is a theory of answers to why-questions.
- Because he thought he had to give a theory of explanation, Hempel had to try to get the DN model to provide explanations-what, leading him to take seriously objections which, had he focussed simply on answers to why-questions, he could have ignored.
- Contra Hempel, “explains-wh” is not obviously ambiguous. Mirrors the behavior of knows-wh, which is not ambiguous.
- A theory of explanation must have the following form: Fact F is an explanation of Fact G *iff*... (p.14)
- Such a theory deprives us of important distinctions, such as that between “merely” partial answers to a why-questions and partial answers that are also *part* of a complete answer.
- Hempel distinguished between *explanation-seeking* why-questions and *epistemic* why-questions, but this difference seems more to do with the content of what follows the “Why” than with the content of why-questions in general.
- Skow does restrict the range of why-questions he's interested in:
 - He's only interested in why-questions that get “because” answers, not “in order to” answers.
 - Not interested in Anscombean why-questions. (^{JM}Doesn't this rule out many why-questions in the social sciences?)