Lecture 4: **Responses to the missing explanation argument**

Alexander Miller (1995), 'Objectivity Disfigured: Mark Johnston's Missing-Explanation Argument,' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 55:4, pp. 857-868.

The Missing Explanation Argument (MEA) can be presented as follows:

1. It is a priori that x is red iff x is disposed to look red to normal observers in normal conditions (Response-dependence)
2. For some x, x is disposed to look red to perceptually normal observers in perceptually normal conditions because x is red (Underwater cave)
3. For any x and any F, it is not the case that x is F because x is F (Explanatory solecism)
4. If it is a priori that x is red iff x is disposed to look red to normal observers in normal conditions and if for some x, x is disposed to look red to perceptually normal observers in perceptually normal conditions because x is red, then for some x, x is disposed to look red to normal observers in normal conditions because x is disposed to look red to normal observers in normal conditions (Substitution principle)
5. For some x, x is disposed to look red to normal observers in normal conditions because x is disposed to look red to normal observers in normal conditions (from 1,2,4)
6. It is not the case that for some x, x is disposed to look red to normal observers in normal conditions because x is disposed to look red to normal observers in normal conditions (from 3)
7. Contradiction (from 5,6)

A general argument against response-dependence?

The MEA does not only apply to response-dependent analyses of secondary quality concepts. Take the response-dependent analysis of our concept of piety sketched by Plato:

Euthyphro: Piety, then, is that which is dear to the gods, and impiety is that which is not dear to them.

Socrates: It is loved because it is [pious], not [pious] because it is loved?

Euthyphro: Yes

Response-dependence (A): Something is pious iff it is loved by the gods. Explanation (B): Our ordinary concept of piety implies that whenever one is able to recognise this value in someone, one is able to do so in part because the person possesses the value.

Let's imagine Plato himself is pious, and that he is indeed loved by the gods. Then why do the gods love him? It is natural to say that the gods love Plato because he is pious. But now the response-dependent analysis implies that the gods love Plato because he is loved by the gods. To say that the gods love Plato because he is pious is not an explanation. Again an explanation has gone missing.

The nauseating

Notice, the MEA does not show that there is something wrong with the idea of response-dependence as such. Some concepts might rightly be analysed in response-dependent terms, as long as those concepts do not also imply the kind of explanations the argument exploits.

Take for instance our notion of the nauseating. It seems a priori that x is nauseating iff normal subjects in normal circumstances feel nausea when exposed to x. But we don't want to say that we feel nausea *because* the object is nauseating.

> Suitable subjects are disposed to feel nausea when exposed to rotten meat because rotten meat has perceptible qualities (such as a purplish blush, evident maggot-riddenness, a noisome smell, etc.) which cause the feeling of nausea in the subjects in question.

We have the feeling of nausea because the object is maggot-ridden, smelly, and visibly past its 'best before' date. We do not conceive of 'being nauseating' itself as a sensible attribute, but conceive of 'being nauseating' merely as associated with certain sensible attributes.

Lost or found?

> S: For some x, x is disposed to look red to normal observers in normal conditions because x is disposed to look red to normal observers in normal conditions

> S*: For some x, x is disposed to look red to perceptually normal observers in perceptually normal conditions because x is red

One could object to the MEA that it assumes illegitimately that S is an explanatory solecism. For although it indeed seems to be such a solecism, the fact that it is equivalent to S* could just as well be understood as revealing that S has empirical content. The anti-subjectivist takes the equivalence as showing that a genuine empirical explanation goes missing; but the subjectivist can take the equivalence as showing that a genuine empirical explanation, previously *concealed* by the surface syntax of a particular sentence, has is fact been *found*, rather than lost. And given that both sides accept the equivalences for the sake of the argument, there will be no non-arbitrary way to break the deadlock.

The real objection here is that this arbitrary deadlock arises if we accept the substitution principle required by the MEA. So either we accept the substitution principle and render the MEA compatible with a response-dependent analysis. Or we reject the substitution principle and render the MEA unsound. (See Miller 1995 for a detailed discussion of this objection.)

A (too) strong substitution principle

We should also look more carefully at the substitution principle (P4). Is this premise true?

One could think that it follows from the following strong principle: *in general, substituting a priori equivalents in empirical explanations will preserve their truth as empirical explanations.* So if two terms F and G are a priori equivalent (a priori: x is F iff x is G), a true explanation in terms of F implies a true explanation in terms of G ('x if H because x is F' implies 'x is H because x is G').

However, the strong principle is met by counterexamples. It is a priori that x is triangular iff x is trilateral. Imagine a machine that detects the number of angles of straight-sided pieces of metal. The machine is designed to be fed closed metal shapes with various numbers of angles. Things are working normally and the machine lets through a piece of metal. Why did the machine let through this piece? Because the piece is triangular.

The strong substitution principle now implies that it lets through the piece because the piece is trilateral. But it is false that the machine lets through the piece because it is trilateral, because all the machine does is count angles, not sides.

A weaker substitution principle

To avoid this problem, we need a weaker substitution principle: *in general, substituting a priori equivalents in empirical explanations will preserve their possibility as empirical explanations.* Although it is false that the machine lets through the piece because it is trilateral, this explanation is not necessarily false.

Also this substitution principle seems to have counterexamples (see McFarland 1999). Although it is a priori that x is triangular iff x is trilateral, it is not analytic. This is because 'triangular' and 'trilateral' have different meanings: the former means three-cornered, the latter means three-sided. But then there could be a true empirical explanation of the form:

> S believes that x is triangular because S believes that x is trilateral

If the weaker principle is true, then the following should be a possible empirical explanation:

> S believes that x is triangular because S believes that x is triangular

Yet this clearly is an explanatory solecism. So the weaker principle is false: substituting a priori equivalents in empirical explanations need not preserve their possibility as empirical explanations.