

The Epistemic Value of Explanation

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Abstract

In this paper I defend the idea that there is a sense in which it is meaningful and useful to talk about objective understanding, and that to characterize that notion it is necessary to formulate an account of explanation that makes reference to the beliefs and epistemic goals of the participants in a cognitive enterprise. Using the framework for belief revision developed by Isaac Levi, I analyze the conditions that information must fulfill to be both potentially explanatory and epistemically valuable to an inquiring agent and to a scientific community. To be potentially explanatory, the information must state the relations of probabilistic relevance that the explanans bears to the explanandum. But a potential explanation can only be a bona fide explanation if it becomes part of inquiry, that is, if an agent or a group of agents can see any value in it for their cognitive purposes. I provide a way to evaluate the epistemic value of a potential explanation as a function of its credibility and its informational content.

Keywords: explanation, understanding, belief revision, Isaac Levi, pragmatism

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