



When explanations don't explain: misunderstanding as a method of resistance

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Introduction

2

Induction brings the *a posteriori* into our web of knowledge. Singular observations are classed into regularities, and interpreted as generalisations. Explanation accommodates and systematises observations and generalisations into our current body of knowledge.

“Things in the world are independent of us, and their behaviour is constrained and determined by their natures. We can best discover those natures by looking for the regularities that reveal them in normal circumstances. *In abnormal circumstances things may be distorted, and the regularities we see may not reveal their natures. But the usual circumstances are the normal circumstances, so we should infer the nature of things from how things usually are*” (Langton, p.142, 2000, my emphasis).

Introduction: anomalous directions of fit

3

Shopper buys according to list; detective compiles list according to purchases.

We are sometimes detectives, and sometimes shoppers. Our desires and beliefs construct anomalous directions of fit in the world.

“The world ‘arranges itself’—at least in part—to fit what the powerful believe. Believing women are subordinate can make women subordinate: thinking so can make it so, when it is backed up by power” (*ibid.* p.140).



Introduction: epistemic injustice

4

These anomalous directions-of-fit are likely given that our knowledge practices are characterised by *epistemic injustices*.

Epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007), occurs when people are wronged in their capacities as knowers.

Epistemic injustice comes in two flavours: testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice.

Introduction: testimonial injustice

5

A testimonial injustice occurs when a group of people, due to structural prejudice, have their credibility as testifiers systematically deflated.

So the first epistemic injustice a person can experience is not being believed when one should be believed; having one's assumed credibility be deflated compared with one's actual credibility. So when a person's testimony is not trusted by virtue of a group to which she belong, rather than any fair assessment of your credibility, then a testimonial injustice has occurred.

Introduction: hermeneutical injustice

6

A hermeneutical injustice obtains when a group of people, due to structural prejudice in the collective interpretational resources, have some substantial part of their social experience obscured from collective understanding.

That is, they are prevented from understanding their situation by a paucity in the shared resources: something is missing or skewed in the shared inventory of available vocabulary, conceptual frameworks, and causal models.

Hermeneutical gaps are “like holes in the ozone—it's the people who live under them that get burned.” (Fricker, p.161). While we are all impoverished epistemically by these hermeneutical shortcomings, the actual burdens are not equally shared.

Objectives

7

To investigate the ways in which deliberate refusals to understand mitigate epistemic injustice, by:

- a) Rehearsing a formal, pragmatic conception of explanation which elucidates the link between explanation and understanding;
- b) exploring the dynamic roles of the explainer and of the explainee in constructing knowledge;
- c) formalising extant (e.g. Pohlhaus Jnr, 2011) articulations of refusing to understand.

Prospectus

8

Section One: “Strategic Refusals to Understand”

Section Two: What is an explanation?

Section Three: Misunderstanding as resistance

1. Strategic refusals to understand

9

Wrongful requests and strategic refusals to understand (Pohlhaus Jr, 2011)

10

Pohlhaus questions the assumed virtue of being disposed to understand an interlocutor.

Are there situations in which one can be wronged through the request for understanding?

In such situations, might it be ethically and epistemically productive to *refuse* to understand?

Wrongful Requests and Strategic Refusals to Understand

Gaile Pohlhaus, Jr.

Abstract In *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* Patricia Williams notes that when people of color are asked to understand such practices as racial profiling by putting themselves in the shoes of white people, they are, in effect, being asked to, 'look into the mirror of frightened white faces for the reality of their undesirability' (1992, 46). While we often see understanding another as ethically and epistemically virtuous, in this paper I argue that it is wrong in some cases to ask another to attempt to understand certain positions or lines of thought. In developing my argument I draw on the work of María Lugones to argue for a view of agency that is epistemically interdependent. I examine the case described by Patricia Williams to demonstrate specifically how the understanding requested in this case unfairly undermines both epistemic and non-epistemic agency. I distinguish appropriate requests for understanding from inappropriate requests so as to make clear that I

Wrongful requests for understanding

11

“In *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* Patricia Williams recounts how during debates in the 1980s over the use of buzzer systems by store owners in New York City, there were ‘repeated public urgings that blacks understand the buzzer system by putting themselves in the shoes of white storeowners – that, in effect, **blacks look into the mirror of frightened white faces for the reality of their undesirability**’ (1992, 46). [...]

In *Aftermath*, an extended reflection on her survival from sexual assault and near death strangulation, Susan Brison writes ‘When I started telling people about the attack, I said, simply, that I was a victim of an attempted murder. People typically asked in horror, “What was the motivation? Were you mugged?” and when I replied, “No, it started as a sexual assault,” most inquirers were satisfied with that as an explanation. I would have thought that a murder attempt plus a sexual assault would require more, not less, of an explanation than a murder attempt by itself’ (2001, 3).”

Wrongful requests for understanding

12

[P]ersons are being called to understand something that only makes sense from within **patterns and practices that hold oppressive power relations firmly in place and that actively prevent those asked to understand from calling attention to this fact.** [...] In these cases, demonstrating the harm that the requested understanding does can only be done from worlds that actively resist the sense of the world one has been implicitly asked to inhabit (Pohlhaus Jr, 2011, pp. 231-232, my emphasis).

Wrongful requests for understanding

13

[I]f Williams were to approach the debate directly, understanding it on its own terms, she would have to consider herself as less than a full epistemic agent to begin, as one in the presence of whom it is reasonable to fear for one's life. From within such a world, it is hardly possible to call attention to the outrageousness of being asked to engage from this position. Asking Williams (or any Black American) to understand the arguments of those who support racial profiling is to ask her to follow (and subsequently maintain) the sense of a context in which her agency, including her epistemic agency, is automatically curtailed for no good reason (*ibid.* pp.234-235).

Understanding and explanation

14

What is meant by understanding?

Understanding is *not* equivalent to knowing. One way of characterising this distinction is that understanding requires one to be in possession of an explanation.

One might know something without understanding it; one might understand something without knowing its details.

Might a refusal to understand be enacted as a refusal to accept an explanation?

If understanding occasions ethical and epistemic concern, is the same true of explanation?

2. What is an explanation?

15

What is an explanation?

16

What happens when we *explain*?

What sort of facts need to be explained?

What determines when a fact has been explained?



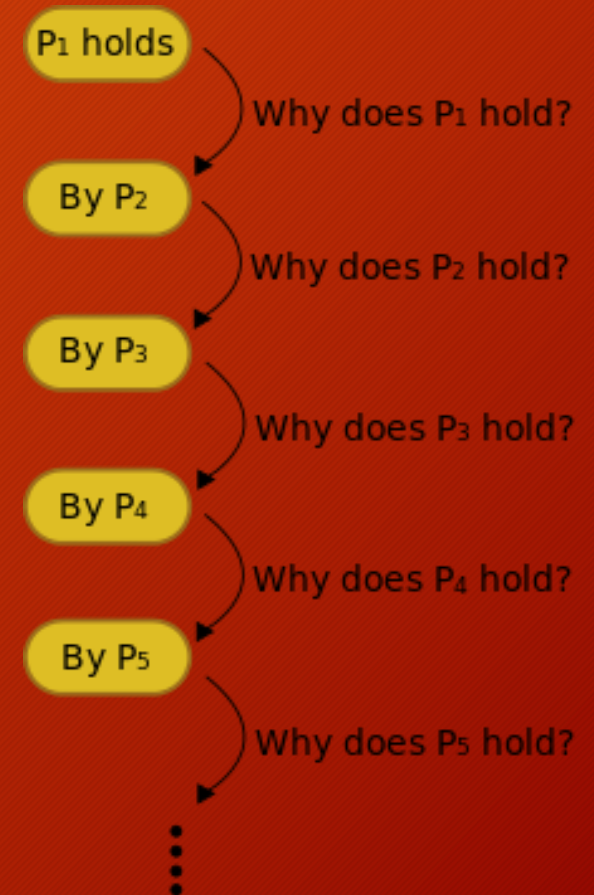
Explananda as “why-questions”

17

Explanandum explained by *explanans*.

Explananda can be described as “why-questions” involving contrast cases: “why A, rather than not-A, or B, C, D?”

The answer to a why-question can also be cast as a why-question, producing a regress of why-questions.



What sort of facts need to be explained?

18

To explain an event is to show it is expectable:

'given the particular circumstances and the laws in question, the occurrence of the phenomenon *was to be expected*; and it is in this sense that the explanation enables us to *understand why* the phenomenon occurred' (Hempel, 1965, p. 337, his italics).

'a (good) explanation raises or makes high its explanandum's probability, p , and the more it does so (ceteris paribus) the better it is' (Mellor, 1976, p.232).



Explanatory demands as expressions of surprise

19

Surprise is a necessary condition for an explanatory demand.

The explanatory demand arises because the explanandum seems to call into question the auxiliary assumptions.

Explanations provide a new auxiliary basis with respect to which the explanandum no longer seems improbable.

Surprise (based on Horwich, 1982)

20

What we mean by an event not being a coincidence, or not being due to chance, is that if we came to know it, it would make us no longer regard our system as satisfactory, although on our system the event may be no more improbable than any alternative. Thus 1,000 heads running would not be due to chance; i.e. if we observed it we should change our system of chances for that penny (Ramsey, 1990, p. 106).

E is surprising iff (a) $p(E) \approx 0$, and (b) $p(B|E) \ll p(B)$, where B denotes background assumptions. That is, an event is surprising if it is both improbable and lowers our confidence in the background assumptions with respect to which its probability was judged to be low. Criterion (b) relies upon there being a competing set of circumstances, B', that render E more probable and which are 'initially implausible (but not wildly improbable)' (p.102). Then, if $p(B')p(E|B') \gg p(B)p(E|B)$, our confidence in B is lowered.

Examples of surprise

21

1. **Surprising.** Rolling 100 consecutive sixes. This meets the two criteria for surprise. An alternative set of circumstances is that the die is biased.
2. **Unsurprising.** Rolling some particular 'generic' sequence of 100 numbers between 1 and 6. Whilst this meets the first criterion (since the sequence has the same probability as the last one), there is no obvious alternative set of circumstances, relative to which the probability of the event would be higher, which isn't itself vastly improbable.

Horwich (*ibid.* p.103) considers a person who wins a lottery consisting of one billion entrants versus a person who wins three lotteries, each consisting of one thousand entrants. Taken against the background assumption that the lotteries are fair, the first event is not surprising, while the second is. This is because there is an alternative hypothesis (that the person cheats in some way) which would make the event likely, and Horwich's inequality comes out in favour of the cheating hypothesis in the second case, but not in the first.

A pragmatic theory of explanation

22

Explanation has occurred when the requisite revision has been made to auxiliary assumptions held by the explaine, reducing the surprise which motivated the explanatory demand.

Explanation therefore consists of the revision to background assumptions in order to accommodate surprising facts, i.e. explanations convert surprising facts into unsurprising facts by modifying auxiliary assumptions.

Explanation as a perlocutionary act: to explain something is to *do* something

23

From “what *are* explanations” to
“what do explanations *do*?”

Explanations do not merely describe;
they can be speech acts i.e. they have a
performative function.

In making explananda more expectable,
**they reconfigure the background
assumptions of the explainee, and
they make the explanandum
unsurprising.**

Yet ...

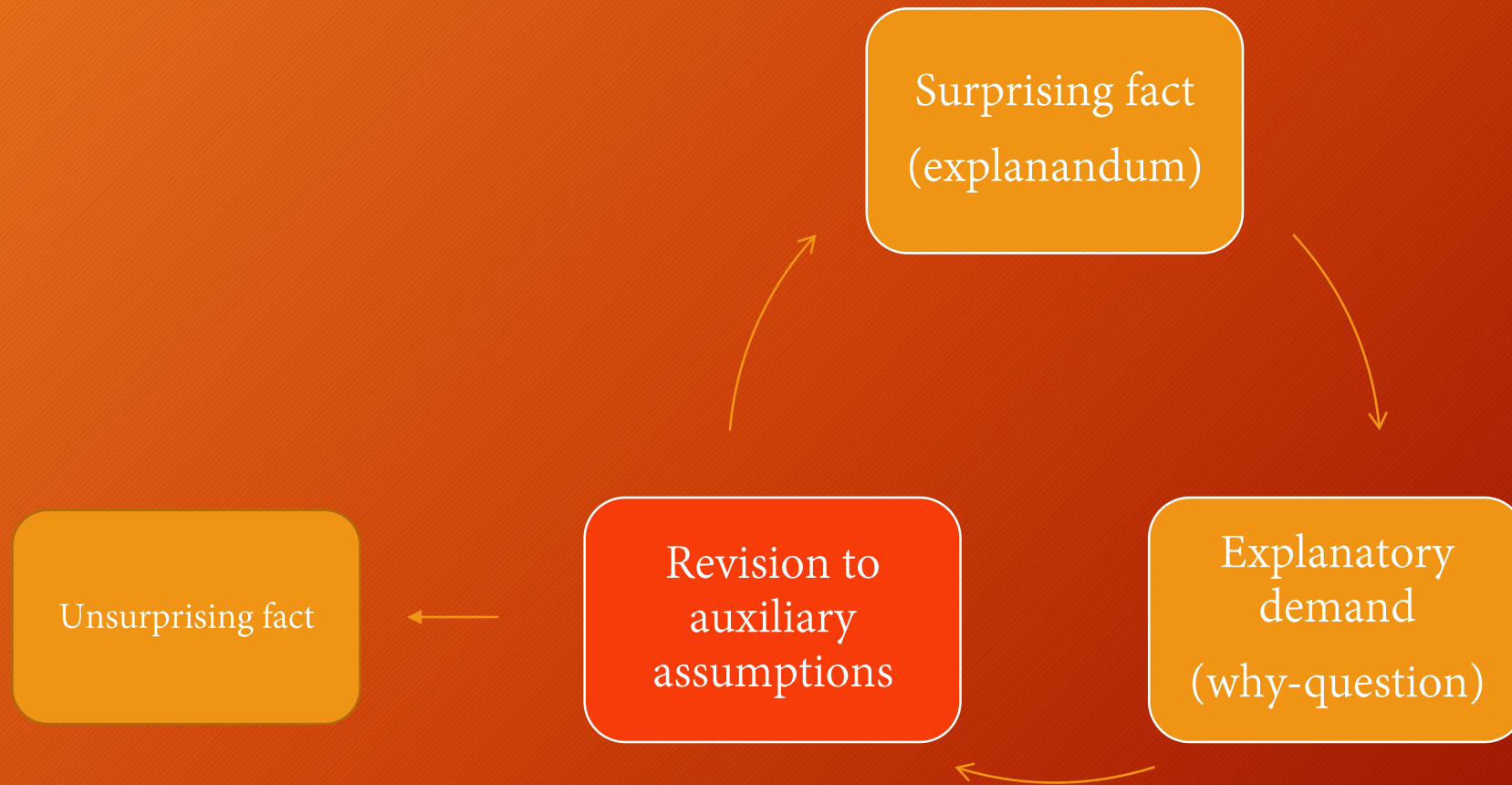
... an explanans which does not explain is *not an
explanation*. This is adjudicated by the person to whom the
explanation is offered.

The process of explanation is dialectical, and the explainee
has a certain power over the explanatory process and its
results, and a responsibility for it.

This power can be subverted in order to meet the
responsibility.

Pragmatic theory of explanation

24



3. Misunderstanding as resistance

25

Locations of explainer and explainees

26



Explanation acts upon the world. It is a powerful exercise of epistemic action.

Particularly situated knowers hold a monopoly on the production of explanations (both via credibility and platform), while other knowers are situated to receive or repeat explanations, or be excluded from the game of explanation.

Knowers are never just individuals, but are rather understood according to their group membership: those in privileged groups are readily assigned credibility excesses, and those in marginalised groups credibility deficits.

Explanatory exclusion

27



(Authority) Extreme credibility differentials begin to foreclose the perceived utility of participating in an explanatory exchange, even as an explainee. As high credibility estimations incur trust, interlocutors are compelled to understand without processing an explanatory demand. C.f. low interest in information sheets seeking informed consent in medicine.

(Obfuscation) Members of authoritative groups, or particular spheres of knowledge, either by accident or by design, are deemed to be un-understandable due to the use of obscure language and complex ideas. Examples include academics as a group, and economics, politics, and science as spheres of knowledge.

Explanatory injustice

28

In order to provoke surprise, a phenomenon must be *a priori* improbable, and made more probable when conditioned over new auxiliary assumptions.

Occasions of marginalisation are apt to provoke surprise, even if they are part of the daily operative reality of the lives of many. They seem improbable because our collective manifest understanding of the social world (as equal, just, meritocratic etc) is produced and sustained by the privileged, for whom it is true.

This “explanatory injustice” combines both testimonial *and* hermeneutical injustice. Privilege grants explanatory monopoly (testimonial injustice), so the most determinative explanations are curated by those in power and distributed into the communal inventory of interpretational resources, thereby obscuring the social experience of the marginalised (hermeneutical injustice).

Explanatory injustice

29

Explanatory injustice is not the construction of outright falsehoods, or even a violation of the rules of explaining, rather it is the warping of the explanatory process by structural forces, either deliberately or incidentally.

This typically occurs through the subjectivity of two demarcations:

- (a) where the explanation stops along the why-chain;
- (b) where the explanation reaches in terms of context.

Consider: UK Prevent agenda; women as superficial, submissive. These truncations have the persuasive benefit of favouring the immediate and simple over the distant and complex. There is a tyranny of the face value. While the truncation may not be false, its implicature often is.



Explaining marginalisation

30

Poverty, racism, sexism, and other experiences of marginalisation may qualify as surprising because:

- (a) they seem improbable with respect to the background assumptions of a world which disguises/denies structural injustice;
- (b) there is another set of auxiliary assumptions with respect to which they seem more probable.

How should we revise our auxiliary assumptions?

Explaining marginalisation

31

Prima facie, it seems like there is an opportunity for a revision to ethically and epistemically problematic background assumptions ... e.g. marginalisation occurs because we live in patriarchal, white-supremacist, capitalist world!

In reality, the modification to the auxiliary assumptions are often explanations that are truncated in ways that maintain the same privilege which disguises that injustice ... e.g. there is something deficient or undeserving about the group in question.

The marginalisation is thereby normalised and made invisible, and the *explainee necessarily participates in the normalisation.*

Consent and understanding

32

Informed consent requires the consentee to have understood. If the consentee does not understand, or *cannot* understand (for one reason or another) then the consent is invalidated. This is particularly important in strong uses of consent i.e.: medicine and sex.

In a weaker sense, consent operates in the everyday sense of understanding. If explanations generate understanding, accepting an explanation implies consent to the consequences of that understanding.

Accepting an explanation which is marginalising implies complicity in marginalising knowledge practices, by consenting to revisions of background assumptions which produce, entrench, or ignore injustices.

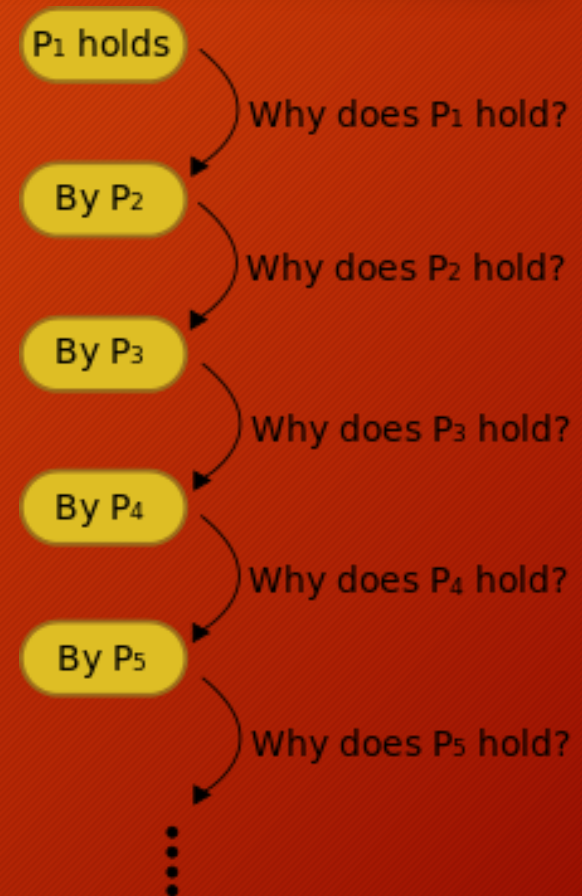
Conversely, if a person does *not* understand, this consent is not granted, the perlocutionary act is thwarted, the revisions to auxiliary assumptions does not occur, and the explanatory demand remains ...

Resisting an explanation

Rejecting the explanans preserves the explanatory burden on the explainer.

The rejection may be:

- (a) An outright refusal to accept the revision to background assumptions;
- (b) the conversion of the explanation into a new (why-question) explanandum.



Resisting an explanation

34

Why-questions are explanatory calling points along a causal chain. Where should an explanation stop? Not all stopping points are equal. Without critical reflection, these truncated explanations can imply naturalness.

“Things in the world are independent of us, and their behaviour is constrained and determined by their natures. We can best discover those natures by looking for the regularities that reveal them in normal circumstances. In abnormal circumstances things may be distorted, and the regularities we see may not reveal their natures.”
(Langton, p.142, 2000).

Misunderstanding?

35

A misunderstanding is a genuine *failure* to understand, which doesn't adequately capture the *deliberate* social-epistemological manoeuvre that is undertaken.

The listener is capable of understanding by accepting the explanation at face value with respect to the social norms with which it is offered.

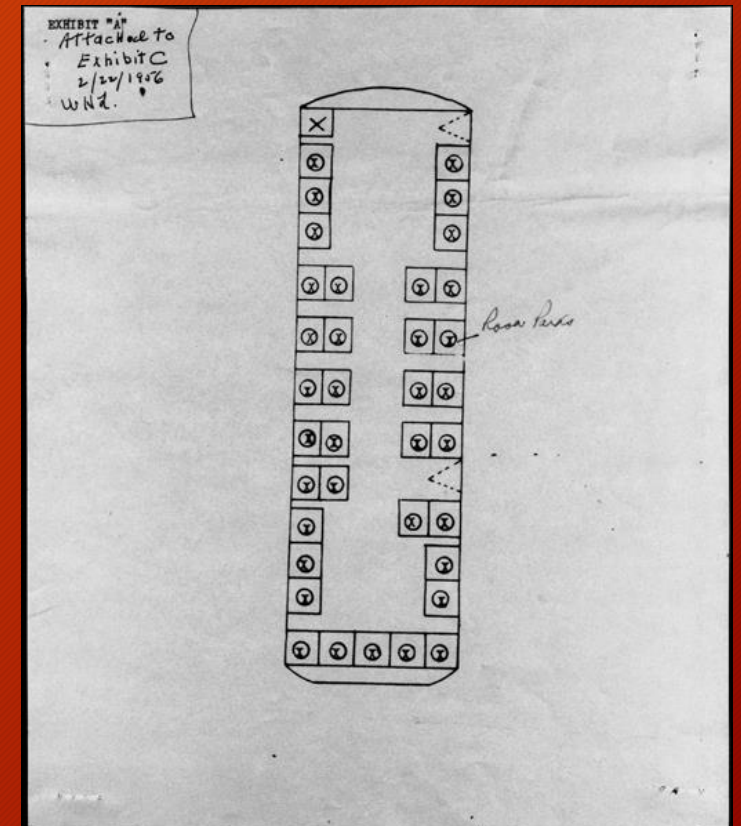
“Disunderstanding” (deliberate-misunderstanding) feigns ignorance, demanding an interrogation of explanations for social phenomena. This is a way of extending the why-regress backwards in time and the revision to auxiliary assumptions outwards in context.

Disunderstanding?

36

Disunderstanding is a deliberate refusal to understand, which consists of the rejection of an explanation.

Disunderstanding is performative, and need not be verbal. It may consist of a refusal to engage in action that is defended by an explanation. E.g. some acts of civil disobedience, such as Rosa Parks' refusal to understand the racist rules concerning use of public transport, forcing the racism into overt discussion. Queering one's performance of gender may be interpreted as a deliberate refusal to understand the sex-gender binary.



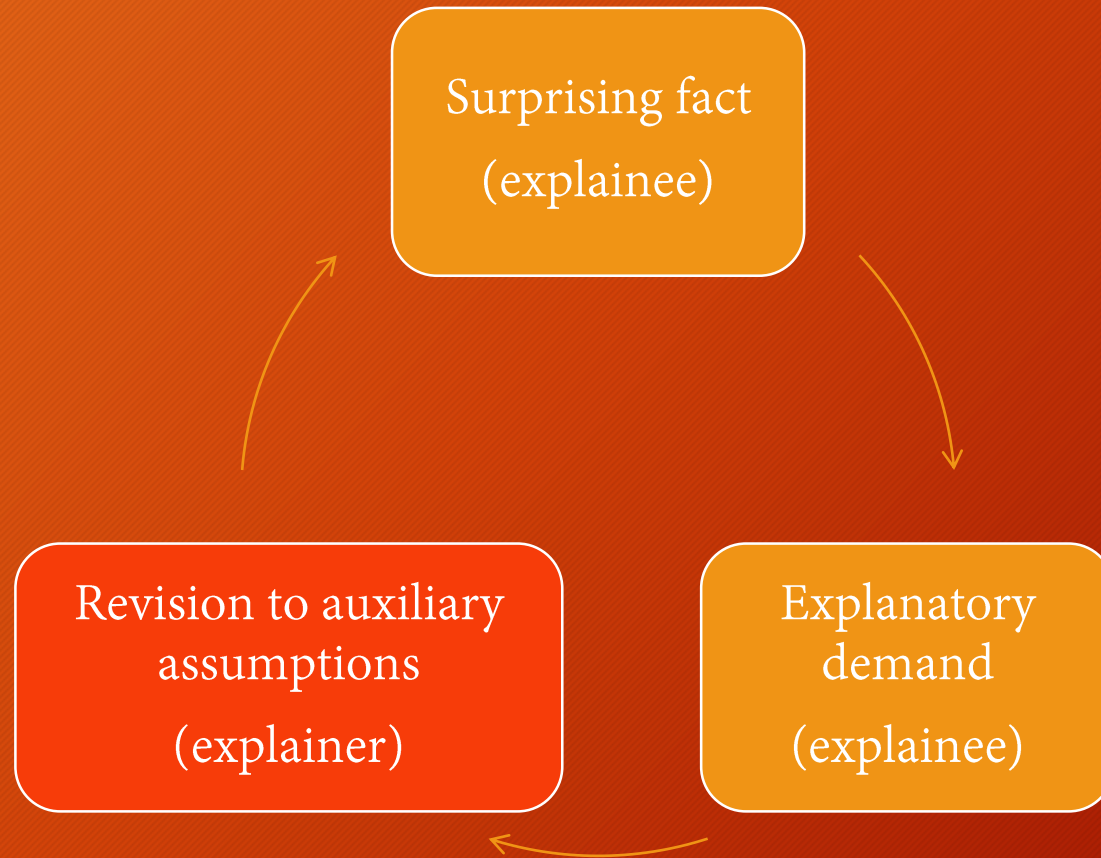
Forms of explanatory resistance

37

1. Produce unconventional occasions of surprise.
2. Interrogate the surprise of others.
3. Reject explanations by extending why-regress.
4. Reject explanations by demanding other revisions to auxiliary assumptions.

Disrupting explanation

38



Concluding thoughts

39

- ❑ Understanding is not always epistemically or ethically virtuous.
- ❑ Understanding is obtained via explanation.
- ❑ Explanations are **subjective** and linked to **power**, but are also **dialectical** in nature, and require the participation of the explainee.
- ❑ As such, there is an epistemic and ethical duty to resist marginalising explanations, to **disunderstand** in order to force the conspicuousness and interrogation of marginalising epistemologies.

Concluding thoughts

40



lord commander
@saigrundy



 Follow

why is white america so reluctant to identify
white college males as a problem
population?



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41

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