1. INTRODUCTION

Questions of the form “Why P?” are often implicitly of the form “Why P rather than Q?” The question “Why did Adam eat the apple?” may be asked with the intention of learning why it was Adam, rather than someone else, who ate the apple, or why Adam ate the apple rather than doing something else with it. The nature of what is required to adequately answer a question of this form is the focus of a lively and growing literature on contrastive explanation. This paper, however, is written in the belief that this literature suffers from a poor understanding of the nature of contrast itself, i.e., of the conditions on P and Q that must prevail if we are to sensibly inquire “Why P rather than Q?” Following Lipton’s (1990) and (1991), we call P ‘the fact’ and Q ‘the foil’. Various philosophers have rightly intuited that the essential relationship between fact and foil is an issue importantly connected to the subject of contrastive explanation itself, but, as we will see, no adequate theory of the fact/foil relationship is available today. This paper aims to show defects in the prevailing theories, and suggests an account of its own.

Van Fraassen’s (1980) claims that “Why P?” may be broadly construed as “Why P in contrast to (other members of) X?”, where X, the contrast class, is a class of propositions including P together with ‘alternatives’ to P. We could as well pose the problem of this paper as the characterization of the essential relationship between the various members of a contrast class such that any of its members can be said to be true rather than, or in contrast to, any other, for this is really just the project of describing the fact/foil relationship.

We should distinguish at the outset two projects. We might takes as our aim the description of the conditions on P and Q requisite for a
sensible contrastive statement of the form “P rather than Q” — or alternatively adopt the aim of establishing the conditions on P and Q requisite for a sensible contrastive why question of the form “Why P rather than Q?” Interestingly enough, these two tasks are not identical, for there are sensible contrastive statements which can not serve as the foci of sensible why questions. For example: One ardent Democratic party supporter sadly asks another, just prior to the declaration of Bush’s victory in 1988, whether she thinks that Bush’s election is inevitable. The other replies, sarcastically, that his election is not inevitable, for of course the world might be destroyed by invading Martians at the very moment the election was to be given to Bush. But later both note that Bush won the 88 election at time T rather than the world being destroyed by invading Martians at that time. Now this last proposition is, despite the sarcasm, a sensible contrastive statement, but I suspect it makes no sense to inquire why Bush won the 88 election rather than the world being destroyed by invading Martians at that time. Whatever one’s intuitions on this point, in this paper we shall not attempt to describe the conditions on P and Q requisite for any sensible contrastive statement, but rather the conditions requisite for a sensible contrastive why question, insofar as it is the ultimate aim of this paper to illuminate something important about contrastive explanations, i.e., answers to contrastive why questions.

We begin with just one uncontroversial observation: to sensibly inquire why P rather than Q, one must assume that P is true and Q is false. What else is required?

2. SUBSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION

We will construe the members of contrast classes to be propositions. Consider a typical contrast class:

(1) \{Bush won the 88 US presidential election, Dukakis won the 88 US presidential election, Goldblatt won the 88 US presidential election, Santoni won the 88 US presidential election\}

That (1) is a legitimate contrast class is clear: it could be asked why any of these propositions was true (assuming it was) rather than any other. These propositions are expressed by sentences which may be produced