

SUPERVENIENCE and MORAL REALISM*

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There is a well-known argument to the effect that moral supervenience in conjunction with the lack of entailments from naturalistic to moral judgments poses a challenge to moral realism. The argument is spelled out in detail in Blackburn (1973). The standard way to avert the challenge is by appealing to synthetically necessary connections between natural and moral properties—as, for example, in Klagge (1984) and in McFetridge (1985). Blackburn (1985, 1993) rejoins that, even if there are such connections, the challenge still remains. We will remain agnostic on the question whether there are synthetically necessary connections between natural and moral properties or not. However, we will argue, against Blackburn, for the conditional claim that, if there are indeed such connections, then the challenge to moral realism, properly phrased, does not hold up.

Blackburn's original argument is familiar. One would be misusing the moral language in saying that two things differ in some moral property while having exactly the same natural properties. Hence, it is a grammatical constraint that (*Supervenience*) if two things have the same natural properties, then they also have the same moral properties.

What sort of account can we give of the relation between moral and natural properties that can explain this constraint? A candidate account would be that judgments ascribing natural properties entail judgments ascribing moral properties. But this account is blocked by a firmly grounded intuition that (*Non-entailment*) at least some judgments ascribing moral properties are not entailed by judgments ascribing natural properties.

In the absence of this account it is puzzling why there is this constraint that moral properties do not vary independently of natural properties. Blackburn's response to this puzzle is that, in making moral judgments, we project moral attitudes and we are constrained to set our attitudes on grounds of the natural properties of the objects that our

attitudes are directed at. If two objects have the same natural properties, then they will invite the same moral attitude, and in projecting this moral attitude we will pass the same moral judgment on both objects. Hence, in the absence of entailments, we need to resort to an anti-realist view of moral judgments to explain why it would be a violation of the grammar of our moral language to say that two objects differ in some moral property, while having exactly the same natural properties.

The common response to Blackburn's original argument is that an account of the constraint of *supervenience* does not require that there is a relation of entailment — i.e. of logically or semantically necessary implication — from natural to moral properties, but that it is sufficient for there to be a relation of synthetically necessary implication. Let us conditionally accept that there exists such a relation. Blackburn argues, in his later work, that *even if* there is such a relation, the challenge to moral realism still remains, since the modality of *explanans* and *explanandum* differ: *synthetically* necessary connections between natural and moral properties cannot explain the grammatical constraint of *supervenience* or, in other words, the *analytic* necessity of *supervenience*.

A simple and effective argument can be proffered against this rejoinder. The argument has been overlooked due to a certain sloppiness in the phrasing of the *explanandum* in Blackburn's original challenge. *Supervenience* is analytically necessary in that it constitutes a constraint on our moral language. There is a difference between explaining a claim that has the status of being a constraint on our moral language and explaining why this claim is a constraint on our moral language. This distinction can be imported into Blackburn's challenge. We may ask (i) why two objects that have the same natural properties have the same moral properties (i.e. why *supervenience* holds). Or we may ask (ii) why it is a constraint on our moral language that two objects that have the same natural properties have the same moral properties (i.e. why it is analytically necessary that *supervenience* holds).

Do either one of those questions pose a challenge to moral realism in the absence of entailments and the presence of synthetically necessary connections between natural and moral properties? We do not think so. Consider the explanatory demand (i) Explanatory demand (i) is amply met by the existence of synthetically necessary connections between natural and moral properties: two objects with the same natural

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properties have the same moral properties because moral properties are synthetically necessitated by natural properties. But this does not fulfill the explanatory demand (ii) — i.e. the demand to explain the analytic necessity of *supervenience*. And, as Blackburn points out, the thesis that there are analytically necessary connections between natural and moral properties is blocked by *non-entailment*. We concur with Blackburn's original challenge in so far that explanatory demand (i) is not met in the absence of *some* kind of necessary connection between natural and moral properties. We concur with Blackburn's rejoinder in so far that explanatory demand (ii) is not met by the thesis which states that there are synthetically necessary connections between natural and moral properties and that *non-entailment* blocks the option of meeting this demand by postulating analytically necessary connections. But we wish to propose an alternative thesis that both meets demand (ii) and does not contradict *non-entailment*.

Let us ask ourselves: what is the modal status of the thesis that there *are* synthetically necessary connections between natural and moral properties itself? Arguments that address the question whether there are synthetically necessary connections between pairs of properties are strictly philosophical in character. Such arguments appeal to certain intuitions that are embedded in our modal language about the properties at hand. This is certainly the case for Kripke's much discussed argument to the effect that there are synthetically necessary connections between properties of being one or other natural kind and their constitutive micro-properties and that there are *no* synthetically necessary connections between the property of being in pain and the property of having C-fibers firing. As to the relation between natural and moral properties, Klagge and McFetridge rest their argument for the existence of a synthetically necessary connection on the Moorean modal intuition that it is impossible for something that has certain moral properties to be different in some moral respect without being different in some naturalistic respect. Horgan and Timmons (1990-1991; 1992) argue against a particular version of what they call *synthetic ethical naturalism* by pointing to certain dissimilarities between our intuitions about a *moral* twin earth scenario and Putnam's twin earth scenario. We are not interested here in the question whether such arguments can successfully establish whether there are synthetically necessary connections between natural and moral properties or not. But, if the

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thesis that there are synthetically necessary connections between natural and moral properties holds, then it will hold on grounds of an argument that appeals to certain intuitions that are embedded in our modal language about morals. Hence, the thesis that there are synthetically necessary connections between natural and moral properties will itself be analytically necessary.

This provides for a ready answer to the explanatory demand (ii). Certainly, if the thesis that there are synthetically necessary connections can provide for an explanation of *supervenience*, then the analytic necessity of the thesis that there are synthetically necessary connections between natural and moral properties can provide for an explanation of why it is analytically necessary that *supervenience* holds. To conclude, in the absence of synthetically necessary connections between natural and moral properties, Blackburn's challenge to moral realism stands. In the presence of synthetically necessary connections, it disappears once the distinction is made between the demand for an explanation of *supervenience* and the demand for an explanation of why *supervenience* is a constraint on our moral language. Hence, the challenge to moral realism has shifted. It is no longer to provide for an account of *supervenience* or to provide for an account that *supervenience* is a constraint on our moral language, but rather, to provide for an argument to the effect that there are synthetically necessary connections between natural and moral properties while respecting the motivation for *non-entailment*. If there are no such connections, the challenge remains. If there are such connections, the challenge is averted. To advance the debate, it is this stalemate which will need to be broken.

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NOTE

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