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An Alleged Difficulty Concerning Moral Properties

JAMES C. KLAGGE

I would like to consider a logical difficulty that has been thought to embarrass the moral realist. The difficulty is pressed by Simon Blackburn in his intriguing paper 'Moral Realism'.¹ Blackburn's argument raises substantial issues for the moral realist, and raises them in an intuitive and perspicuous way.

I

There are two conditions for the truth of moral judgements that seem to preclude the view that such truth consists in a correspondence with states of affairs involving moral properties. Loosely, the conditions are these: (1) Moral properties cannot vary over time for a given object or action, nor can they differ between distinct objects or actions, unless the natural properties of the objects or actions in question also vary or differ. But (2) the natural properties of an object or action do not necessarily determine the moral properties of that object or action. Blackburn sharpens these conditions considerably and defends them, but the difficulty they give rise to is this: Since the natural properties of an object do not necessarily determine its moral properties, it is puzzling that their persistence should guarantee the persistence of the moral properties, and that their duplication should guarantee the duplication of the moral properties. There seems to be no explanation of the guaranteed persistence or duplication available to the realist. And, indeed, the second condition seems to suggest that the persistence or duplication would not be guaranteed.

According to Blackburn's own emotivist view of the truth of moral judgements, the conjunction of these conditions seems not to be problematic. People hold moral attitudes towards objects and actions in virtue of the natural properties of the objects and actions. Since different people may have different standards of evaluation,

1 In *Morality and Moral Reasoning*, ed. John Casey (Methuen, 1971).

the natural properties of an object or action do not constrain all people to have the same moral attitude toward that object or action. Thus the natural properties do not necessarily determine the moral attitude. Nevertheless, once a person has taken up a moral attitude toward an object or action in virtue of its natural properties, consistency requires the person to hold the same attitude toward the same object at another time or toward any other object if it has the same natural properties. Failure to do so would show that the attitude was not taken up in virtue of the natural properties in the first case.

This sort of explanation is not available to the realist. According to the realist, moral beliefs are true or false in virtue of their correspondence or non-correspondence with facts involving moral properties. While it might seem natural to impose a requirement of consistency on moral beliefs similar to the one Blackburn imposes on moral attitudes, the primary requirement for moral beliefs must be that they should correspond to moral truth. Thus, moral beliefs can be required to be consistent over naturalistic similarities only if moral truth must be consistent over naturalistic similarities. Yet, this latter condition is precisely what is being called into question. According to Blackburn there is no reason, in the realist's view, to expect that it would hold, and some reason, namely condition (2), to expect that it would not.

Having set out the difficulty in an informal way, I will now turn to Blackburn's formulation and defence of the two conditions. The first condition is that moral properties are supervenient upon naturalistic properties. Blackburn distinguishes two senses of supervenience according to whether the requirement applies to the same object through time or to different objects. He formulates the two senses as follows:

- (S) A property M is supervenient upon properties $N_1 \dots N_n$ if M is not identical with any of $N_1 \dots N_n$ nor with any truth function of them, and it is logically impossible that a thing should become M , or cease to be M , or become more or less M than before, without changing in respect of some member of $N_1 \dots N_n$.
- (S₂) A property M is supervenient₂ upon properties $N_1 \dots N_n$ if M is not identical with any of $N_1 \dots N_n$, nor with any truth function of them, and it is logically impossible that two things should each possess the same properties from the set

$N_1 \dots N_n$ to the same degree, without both failing to possess M , or both possessing M , to the same degree.

Blackburn takes the supervenience of moral properties to be virtually self-evident. The consequence of rejecting supervenience, according to Blackburn, would be that moral properties would be quite unconnected with what we had taken to be their grounds. For example, moral properties might be divorced from human desires and interests. We could have no reason for concern with moral truth that was so remote.

The second condition for the truth of moral judgements might be called the autonomy of moral properties in relation to naturalistic properties. Blackburn first states the condition in the following way:

- (E) There is no moral proposition whose truth is entailed by any proposition ascribing naturalistic properties to its subject.

His defence of this condition consists primarily in distinguishing it from other claims with which he does not wish it to be confused. For instance, he does not mean to be denying that certain natural properties may necessarily be reasons for the ascription of a moral property. He is only denying that they may be conclusive reasons. It seems clear that Blackburn is here relying on the widely discussed view that an 'ought' cannot be derived from an 'is'.

Given the controversy that has raged over the is-ought question, one could hardly expect (E) to be universally accepted. Foot and Searle have offered persuasive counterexamples to (E). What has not been established, however, in Blackburn's view, is that *all* moral propositions are entailed by propositions ascribing only naturalistic properties. Thus, he weakens (E) to the more defensible claim:

- (E') There are some moral propositions which are true, but whose truth is not entailed by any naturalistic facts about their subject.

This claim, he thinks, is both unobjectionable and sufficient to generate the difficulty for realism. The supervenience of the moral properties governed by (E') will continue to be puzzling.

The puzzle can now be restated in more precise terms which help to clarify the modality of the constraints imposed on the truth of moral judgements by the two conditions. There are some moral properties with instantiations that are not entailed by the existence

of the naturalistic properties with which they are co-instantiated. Yet the persistence of those co-instantiated natural properties, or their duplication in another object, entails the persistence or duplication of the moral property. This is puzzling because whatever accounts for the truth of (E') would seem to count against the truth of (S) and (S₂). According to Blackburn, 'supervenience becomes, for the realist, an opaque, isolated, logical fact, for which no explanation can be proffered'.

II

A proper evaluation of Blackburn's claims depends on the interpretation of his terminology. Blackburn tends to use the terminology of 'entailment', 'strict implication' and 'logical impossibility' interchangeably. Although the official formulation of (S₂) is in terms of logical impossibility, Blackburn sometimes paraphrases (S₂) in terms of strict implication (pp. 105–106), and sometimes in terms of entailment (p. 110). Various paraphrases are also given for (E) (p. 110).

There is a subtle difference between entailment and strict implication. A proposition that is necessarily true is strictly implied by any proposition whatever, however unrelated it may otherwise seem. This is one of the so-called paradoxes of strict implication. Entailment is sometimes taken to be a relationship that avoids these paradoxes. It involves the further condition that there be some connection of 'content' or 'meaning' between two propositions if one is to entail the other. This distinction, however, is not crucial for the topic under consideration. Propositions attributing moral properties to a thing are not themselves necessarily true. At best they are necessarily true relative to some naturalistic description of the thing to which the moral property is attributed. Thus, the paradoxes will not arise for moral properties. Presumably, then, strict implication, like entailment, would involve some connection of content or meaning. According to the usual understanding the connection could be derived solely by means of the laws of logic and the meanings of words.

I do not think the terminology of strict implication and logical impossibility is meant to signal any differences. One proposition strictly implies another just in case it is logically impossible for the first to be true and the second to be false.

By the autonomy condition (E'), therefore, Blackburn should be

understood to be making the following claim: There are some moral propositions that are true, but whose truth cannot be derived, by the laws of logic and the meanings of words, from any propositions ascribing naturalistic properties to their subject. This, indeed, is just what is being claimed in the usual rejection of naturalism or neo-naturalism in ethics. Although the supervenience condition has two aspects—diachronic and synchronic—I will mainly be concerned with the second—(S₂). From what has been said so far, Blackburn should be understood to be making the following claim by (S₂): If two things possess the same naturalistic properties to the same degree, then from this fact we can infer, by the laws of logic and the meanings of words, that they possess the same moral properties to the same degree.

Here is where the difficulties for Blackburn begin. In his defence of supervenience, Blackburn seems to be defending something rather different from what he claims. He argues that if we were to give up supervenience, then 'it is possible that the worth, say, of a feature of human life, such as courage, should alter although its intrinsic nature . . . remain[s] the same . . . nothing hangs upon the worth of courage changing if its relation to everything perceptible remains the same, and no reason could possibly be given for being interested in this fact' (pp. 115 and 116). Thus, according to Blackburn, one who rejects (S₂) must allow that naturalistically indiscernible objects might be morally discernible.

However unacceptable this consequence may be, one can avoid it without accepting Blackburn's interpretation of supervenience. One might hold that naturalistically indiscernible objects were necessarily morally indiscernible without also holding that this connection could be derived by the laws of logic and the meanings of words. Of course the connection, then, would not be *logically* necessary. Blackburn's defence of supervenience, in that case, would be satisfied by something weaker than (S₂).

Blackburn makes a point of insisting (pp. 106–107) that no weaker sort of impossibility, such as physical or moral impossibility, makes sense of the principles of supervenience. I agree that physical or moral impossibility will not do. But, as a general point, his insistence on logical impossibility does not fit well with his defence of supervenience. Furthermore, I do not see any reason to suppose that moral indiscernibility can be inferred from naturalistic indiscernibility solely by appeal to the laws of logic and the meaning of moral terms. It does not seem, for example, that a

divine-command theory, according to which moral properties supervene upon God's commands rather than upon natural properties, involves a logical contradiction or a misuse of moral language. What does seem important to hold on to is the condition that naturalistically indiscernible objects cannot be morally discernible. This would satisfy the intuitions on which Blackburn relies just as well as his own formulation of supervenience.

It is tempting to hold that the impossibility employed here is just simple impossibility and not to characterize it in other terms. Perhaps it could be called metaphysical impossibility, but in any event the important point is that the connection involved is synthetic rather than analytic.¹

The moral realist should reject (S) and (S₂) in favour of the following diachronic and synchronic supervenience conditions on the truth of moral judgements:

- (DS) It is impossible that a thing should change in some moral respect without changing in some naturalistic respect.
- (WSS) It is impossible that two things should differ in some moral respect without differing in some naturalistic respect.

Adoption of (DS) and (WSS) in place of (S) and (S₂) removes Blackburn's difficulty for the realist. Since naturalistic indiscernibility does not entail moral indiscernibility, there is no longer any reason to be puzzled by the fact that propositions about a thing's natural properties do not entail propositions about its moral properties.

Nevertheless, it would seem easy to reinstate the difficulty in the following way. Blackburn could adjust the autonomy condition in the same way I have proposed to adjust the supervenience conditions. Instead of (E') we would then have:

- (A') A thing could have had different moral properties from those it actually has even if all its natural properties had been the same.

This would make it puzzling why those moral properties could not change if the natural properties persisted through time or were duplicated by another thing.

1 The best-known advocates of synthetic necessity have, of course, been Kripke and Putnam.

Not only would (A') reinstate the puzzle, but it might appear to create an outright contradiction with (WSS). Yet Blackburn is at pains to point out (pp. 110–111) that the difficulty the realist is in is not an inconsistency, but is only mysterious and not very inviting philosophically. Whether (WSS) and (A') result in contradiction depends on how we understand synchronic supervenience.

To clarify this matter, it will help to use the terminology of possible worlds. If synchronic supervenience only puts constraints on how things are for objects in any given possible world, then no contradiction results, for (A') only rules out such a constraint on how things are for an object in different possible worlds. This form of synchronic supervenience has been called 'weak supervenience' and it seems to be what Blackburn intended. My condition (WSS) is a statement of weak supervenience. (Thus the label (WSS).)

Weak supervenience stands in contrast with strong supervenience. Intuitively, strong supervenience puts constraints on how things are for objects whether they are in different possible worlds or the same possible world:

(SSS) If a thing of a certain naturalistic description has certain moral properties, then it is impossible that anything should differ from it in some moral respect without differing from it in some naturalistic respect.

(SSS) straight-forwardly contradicts (A'). For the moment, however, I wish to put (SSS) aside.

The conjunction of (WSS) and (A') would be puzzling for the realist, but, as far as I can see, there is no compelling reason to suppose that (A') is true. While the evidence against naturalism and neo-naturalism in ethics tends to support (E'), it does not support (A') unless the only sort of necessity is analytic necessity. While the rejection of synthetic necessity is not transparently mistaken, that rejection has been strongly disputed in recent years. If (A') cannot be established, then the puzzle for the moral realist cannot be reinstated. The realist should reject (A') in favour of a 'necessary connection' condition for the truth of moral judgements:

(NC) If a thing of a certain naturalistic description has certain moral properties, then it is impossible that it should have been different in some moral respect without being different in some naturalistic respect.

Having endorsed (NC), the realist is free to accept or reject (E').

III

The conjunction of (WSS) and (NC) as conditions for the truth of moral judgements is neither inconsistent nor puzzling. The naturalistic properties of an object or action necessarily determine its moral properties: In any possible world in which that object or action exists and has the same naturalistic properties as it has in a given possible world, it will have the same moral properties as it has in the given possible world. And the persistence of the naturalistic properties of an object or action, or their duplication by another object or action in the same possible world, necessarily guarantees the persistence or duplication of the moral properties of the object or action.

Not only is the conjunction of these conditions not puzzling, it is quite natural. One reason for the affinity of these conditions is this. It is natural (though in certain respects misleading) to think of possible worlds on the model of times. The actual world is one world among many in something like the way that the present moment is one time among many. Thus (NC) would seem plausible if the condition (DS) were plausible. Also, (NC) and (WSS) naturally go together. If naturalistically indiscernible objects in the same possible world must have the same moral properties, this suggests that naturalistic indiscernibility of the same object in different possible worlds is no different. If the bare identity of the object makes no moral difference in the first case, the bare identity of the possible world should make none in the second. (WSS) establishes the universality of moral judgements: They are (potentially) applicable to all objects (in a given possible world). (NC) establishes the necessity of moral judgements: They are true in all possible worlds. (DS) establishes the eternity or timelessness of moral judgements.

It is natural to wonder whether strong supervenience is just the conjunction of necessary connection and weak synchronic supervenience. In fact it is not, though it does imply both of them.

Consider two possible worlds, W_1 and W_2 . Let each world contain two objects and let all the objects be naturalistically indiscernible from each other. Then weak synchronic supervenience requires that both the objects in W_1 have the same moral properties, and that both the objects in W_2 have the same moral properties. If one of the objects in W_1 were identical with one of the objects in W_2 , then the necessary-connection condition would

require that it have the same moral properties in both worlds. So strong supervenience would not be violated. But if there do not happen to be any trans-world identities, then necessary connection will not be able to operate to block a violation of strong supervenience. (The condition of necessary connection is trivially satisfied in this case.)

I do not see that there is any other condition, weaker than strong supervenience, which together with (WSS) and (NC) would imply strong supervenience. Although (WSS) ensures that the bare identity of an object is not a morally relevant difference in a given possible world, and (NC) ensures that the bare identity of the possible world is not a morally relevant difference for a given object, (WSS) and (NC) together allow that the bare identity of the object *along with* the bare identity of the possible world might together constitute a morally relevant difference. Thus strong supervenience is ultimately what the moral realist should want to defend.

IV

Confronted with the proposal that the conditions for the truth of moral judgements be interpreted as involving synthetic or metaphysical necessities, Blackburn could preserve his objection in either of two ways. He could reject the very idea of synthetic necessity. Or he could concede the plausibility of synthetic necessity in general, but reject its use in the moral context.

On the basis of his other writings,¹ I expect that Blackburn would choose the first option. He seems to be basically Humean in tendency. While synthetic necessity has gained a good deal of popularity, its existence has not been demonstrated. Followers of Quine and Wittgenstein will attest to this. Even if I had the arguments, I could not hope to establish the legitimacy of synthetic necessity in this discussion.

But supposing the legitimacy of synthetic necessity were granted, its use in moral philosophy would still need to be justified. Interpreting the conditions for the truth of moral judgements as synthetic necessities does have the merit of resolving Blackburn's difficulty while doing justice to the intuitions he marshals. Perhaps there are special features of morality that make synthetic necessity

¹ See, especially, 'Truth, Realism, and the Regulation of Theory', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy, Volume 5: Studies in Epistemology*, 1980.

unsuitable there. I regard this as an important open problem in moral philosophy.

Appendix

For connoisseurs of logical detail I offer the following formalizations of what I have taken to be the appropriate conditions for the truth of moral judgements.

Let the necessity operator indicate metaphysical, rather than logical, necessity. Let the variables \underline{x} and \underline{y} range over objects, actions and states of affairs. Let the variables \underline{s} and \underline{t} range over times. Let the variable \underline{M} range over moral properties. Finally, let the variable \underline{N} range over maximally consistent, i.e., complete, sets of natural properties. (I have overscored the 'N' so that it is not confused with a variable that ranges over single properties, as the 'M' does.) Then the diachronic supervenience condition is represented as:

$$(DS) \quad \Box \forall x \forall s \forall t [\forall \underline{N} (\underline{N}_{x_s} \equiv \underline{N}_{x_t}) \rightarrow \forall M (M_{x_s} \equiv M_{x_t})]$$

and weak synchronic supervenience is represented as:

$$(WSS) \quad \Box \forall x \forall y [\forall \underline{N} (\underline{N}_x \equiv \underline{N}_y) \rightarrow \forall M (M_x \equiv M_y)]$$

There is no logically simple way to convert the symbolization of weak synchronic supervenience into a symbolization of strong synchronic supervenience. We cannot simply allow the variables \underline{x} and \underline{y} to range over objects in different possible worlds, for this would result in logical gibberish. Instead, the strong supervenience condition can be represented by a symbolization that contains two occurrences of the necessity operator:

$$(SSS) \quad \Box \forall x \forall M \forall \underline{N} [M_x \ \& \ \underline{N}_x \rightarrow \Box \forall y (\underline{N}_y \rightarrow M_y)]$$

Note that there is no distinction between strong and weak for the diachronic supervenience condition.

Finally, the necessary-connection condition is represented as:

$$(NC) \quad \Box \forall x \forall M \forall \underline{N} [M_x \ \& \ \underline{N}_x \rightarrow \Box (\underline{N}_x \rightarrow M_x)].$$

As I have formalized the strong supervenience condition and the necessary-connection condition, we must first fix on the complete naturalistic description of an object. Thus I have required the variable \underline{N} to range over maximally consistent sets of naturalistic properties. A variable ranging over single naturalistic properties

would have sufficed for representing diachronic and weak synchronic supervenience, but the overscored variable also suffices, so I have used it for the sake of uniformity.

From the formalizations it is easy to show that strong supervenience implies, but is not implied by, the conjunction of weak synchronic supervenience and the necessary-connection condition.¹

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