

SUPERVENIENCE: ONTOLOGICAL AND ASCRIPTIVE

James C. Klagge

I

Supervenience has been heralded as a relationship between two realms that is weaker than reductionism but stronger than dualism. In the philosophy of mind the realms thought to stand in a supervenient relationship are the mental and the physical. In moral philosophy they are the moral and the natural. In the last decade much effort has been devoted to distinguishing, formulating, and scrutinising the various claims of supervenience. But these formulations tend to presuppose that the supervening realm should be construed as a set of properties or events to be understood realistically. In the face of this presupposition, it may be instructive to recall that the supervening realm need not be construed in this way. In this paper I wish to examine the varieties of supervenience and the interrelationships that result from construing the supervening realm in different ways. Along the way I will try to defend moral realism against the charge that it misappropriates supervenience.

II

Consider the following four expressions of supervenience:

G. E. Moore:

If a given thing possesses any kind of intrinsic value in a certain degree, not only must the same thing possess it, under all circumstances, in the same degree, but also anything *exactly like it*, must, under all circumstances, possess it in exactly the same degree. (Moore, 1922, p. 261)

Donald Davidson:

Mental characteristics are in some sense dependent, or supervenient, on physical characteristics. Such supervenience might be taken to mean that there cannot be two events alike in all physical respects but differing in some mental respect, or that an object cannot alter in some mental respect without altering in some physical respect. (Davidson, 1980, p. 214)

Richard Hare:

First, let us take that characteristic of 'good' which has been called its supervenience. Suppose that we say 'St. Francis was a good man'. It is logically impossible to say this and to maintain at the same time that

there might have been another man placed in exactly the same circumstances as St. Francis, and who behaved in exactly the same way, but who differed from St Francis in this respect only, that he was not a good man. (Hare, 1952, p. 145)

And, finally, Colin McGinn:

Mental attributions are *supervenient* upon behavioural facts, in the sense that we cannot justifiably count two creatures as psychologically discernible whose behavioural dispositions, as evidenced in their actual behaviour, perfectly coincide . . . [this] thesis constitutively governs our psychological attributions . . . (McGinn, 1978, p. 214)

The first two quotations expound what I wish to call *ontological supervenience*, the last two expound what I wish to call *ascriptive supervenience*. Ontological supervenience is a connection between classes of properties (e.g. moral and natural properties), whereas ascriptive supervenience is a connection between types of judgments. Furthermore, in ontological supervenience the necessity of the connection involved is interpreted as being in the nature of things, or a metaphysical necessity. In ascriptive supervenience, on the other hand, the necessity is interpreted as a conceptual or logical requirement.¹

Although there are many distinct formulations of supervenience, let us take ontological supervenience to be the view, roughly, that, metaphysically speaking, things cannot differ in respect of the possession of properties in one (supervening) class unless they differ in respect of the possession of properties in the other (base) class. Ascriptive supervenience is the view, roughly, that, logically speaking, a person's judgments of a certain (supervening) kind about things cannot differ unless judgments of the other kind about the things differ. The classes of properties or kinds of judgments related by supervenience are to be filled in according to whatever view is under consideration.

The distinction between these two conceptions of supervenience has not been much noticed. Jaegwon Kim, for example, has written:

Moral theorists like Moore and Hare, I believe, had a very strong sense of 'necessity' here, something like logical or metaphysical necessity; I think they would have said that there is no logically or metaphysically possible world in which two things sharing all factual characteristics could differ in moral or other evaluative properties. (Kim, 1979, p. 41)

There are two problems with what Kim says. Moore explicitly rejects the interpretation of the necessity as *logical*, although I think metaphysical necessity captures what he had in mind.² On the other hand, while Hare

¹ The claim by Hare that judgments that fail to supervene are 'logically impossible' might seem stronger than McGinn's claim that they are unjustifiable. But the fact that McGinn takes the requirement of supervenience 'constitutively' to govern supervening judgments suggests they both see supervenience as a matter of the logic of the supervening terms.

² See Moore, 1922, pp. 271-272.

does characterise the necessity as logical, it is not, for Hare, a necessary connection between *properties* at all (as it is for Moore), but rather between a person's judgments. The characterisation of the necessity in terms of possible worlds is rather ill-suited to Hare's notion.³ Hare's logical necessity is not a constraint on the thing judged, but on the judge. Two things, even in the same possible world, could be judged descriptively indiscernible and yet receive different moral valuations if they were judged by different people employing different moral principles.

Since ontological supervenience is a relationship between classes of properties, it is naturally associated with a realistic view of the supervening class. Indeed, ontological supervenience seems to be a sufficient, but not a necessary, condition for realism about the supervening realm.⁴ It is not a necessary condition because one may hold, as dualists do, that a certain class of properties, such as mental properties, is real but is not constrained by any other set of properties, such as physical properties.

A realist can view one sort of constraint on judgments as derivative from ontological supervenience. If properties of one class supervene upon properties of another, then, since true judgments reflect the world, judgments about properties in one class, if they are true, must supervene upon judgments about properties in the other. Let us call this derivative form of supervenience *descriptive supervenience*. This is a constraint on any true judgments, whether by one person or a number of people. In this respect it differs from ascriptive supervenience, which only constrains the judgments of a given person. Descriptive supervenience will inherit the same modal status that is possessed by ontological supervenience. If, as G. E. Moore held, ontological supervenience is metaphysically necessary, then descriptive supervenience is also metaphysically necessary.⁵ In this respect also it differs from ascriptive supervenience, for the necessity of the latter was interpreted as a conceptual or logical matter.

An anti-realist about a certain class of judgments will not, of course, require that to be acceptable the judgments must reflect the world. But the anti-realist may wish to place some constraints on acceptable judgments so that they are not arbitrary. Ascriptive supervenience, as a relationship between classes of judgments, can serve as such a constraint.

Richard Hare makes this sort of use of ascriptive supervenience for moral judgments.⁶ He holds that by virtue of the supervenience of moral terms,

³ For an elaboration of this charge, as well as some other points in this paper, see Klagge, 1987.

⁴ Moore certainly conforms to this implication, as he is a moral realist *par excellence*. Davidson may fit it less well. Although he sounds, from the passage quoted, to be taking a realistic view of mental events, we know from other passages that his view of mental attributions is influenced by problems of indeterminacy. If he is not a realist about mental events, then he is not advocating ontological supervenience after all.

⁵ Although Moore never uses the term 'supervenience' (contrary to the suggestion of Davidson, 1980, p. 253), he characterises his position in *Principia Ethica* both in the way I have labelled ontological supervenience (Moore, 1903, pp. 35 and 124), and the way I have labelled descriptive supervenience (pp. 27 and 166).

⁶ See, most recently, Hare, 1984, esp. pp. 5-8.

in making a particular moral judgment, one necessarily commits oneself to the existence of a universal premiss and a subsumptive premiss from which the judgment can be inferred. The universal premiss constitutes the standard or principle of judgment, while the subsumptive premiss constitutes a characterisation of the thing judged so that it is subsumed under the universal premiss. If two things are held to be qualitatively indiscernible (at least so far as the subsumptive premiss is concerned), then they will automatically fall under all the same universal premisses, which entail the same moral judgments. Supervenience, then, is a matter of what moral judgments each person is permitted by the logic of moral terms to make.

Hare's conception of ascriptive supervenience derives from views about the meaning of the terms involved. It is part of the meaning of moral terms that judgments involving them must supervene upon judgments of naturalistic properties, else they are arbitrary expressions of preference. The necessity involved in ascriptive supervenience is conceptual necessity, since it derives from the meanings of words. McGinn's account of the supervenience of mental ascriptions also seems to have this character.

Since a coherent notion of ascriptive supervenience can be formulated without appealing to a supervening class of properties, a realist would be wrong to hold that supervenience conditions on judgments are necessarily derivative from ontological supervenience. Descriptive supervenience is so derivative, but ascriptive supervenience is not. From the fact that it is reasonable to place certain constraints on our judgments, it does not follow that the world is constituted in any particular way.

III

This points to a problem for the realist who wishes to advocate ontological supervenience for a given realm: Can the advocate of ontological supervenience offer an accurate account of our intuitions about the modal status of supervenience?

Ascriptive supervenience has been construed as a matter of the logic of certain kinds of terms. So construed, the necessity it involves is conceptual. Ontological supervenience, on the other hand, construed as a matter of the nature of things, involves non-logical, presumably metaphysical, necessity. In the *moral* realm these construals of supervenience appear to be in competition, with moral realists, such as Moore, advocating ontological supervenience, and moral anti-realists, such as Richard Hare and Simon Blackburn, advocating ascriptive supervenience. Blackburn, on behalf of the moral anti-realist, has recently claimed that moral supervenience requires a stricter form of necessity — analytic, or logical, or conceptual necessity (Blackburn uses all three terms) — than the realist and advocate of ontological supervenience can deliver.⁷

The intuition at work here is that it is part of the very *meaning* of moral terms that judgments involving them must supervene upon naturalistic

⁷ Simon Blackburn, 1984, p. 221; and also Blackburn, 1985, p. 56.

judgments. It would be a misuse of moral language to violate this requirement. Since this is a matter of meaning, the modality of the claim is conceptual necessity. But the only kind of constraint on moral language that ontological supervenience has generated is descriptive supervenience, and it shares with ontological supervenience mere (non-logical) metaphysical necessity. Ontological supervenience, and therefore moral realism, would therefore seem to be inadequate to our understanding of moral language.

IV

The advocate of ontological supervenience has two possible responses to this challenge. Unfortunately the responses are mutually inconsistent, so the moral realist will have to choose between them.

It might be argued that the supervenience of moral judgments upon naturalistic judgments is *not* a matter of the meaning of moral terms. If it is not, then Blackburn has given a mistaken account of our modal intuitions regarding moral language.

This line of response apparently would have been taken by G. E. Moore, who wrote:

... I do not see how it can be deduced from any logical law, that if A is beautiful, anything that were exactly like A would be beautiful too, in exactly the same degree. (Moore, 1922, p. 272)

Moore held that the implication was metaphysically but *not* logically necessary.⁸

The prospects for defending Moore's view do not seem bright. One who uses moral (or aesthetic) language in violation of the supervenience requirement would seem, thereby, to be expressing mere preferences or whims instead of making moral (or aesthetic) judgments.

Although I do not take Moore's view to have been definitively refuted, there is another, more promising, line of response to Blackburn's charge: The advocate of ontological supervenience can try to accept and explain ascriptive supervenience (with its conceptual necessity) without forsaking realism about the supervening realm.

Blackburn holds that the only constraint that a realist can place upon judgments or beliefs is that they be *true*.⁹ But that constraint amounts to nothing more than descriptive supervenience, which inherits mere metaphysical necessity. Against this, it might be held that making judgments about a realm on the basis of the proper sort of grounds or evidence is constitutive of competence in making judgments about that realm. This constraint would seem to have the status of a conceptual necessity. Can the realist advocate it?

To begin with, as long as the realist advocates ontological supervenience, there is no danger that the truths will run afoul of this constraint. But the constraint does serve a purpose for the realist beyond that served by

⁸ I took this line, too, in Klagge, 1984, pp. 374-375.

⁹ Blackburn, 1971, p. 115.

ontological supervenience. Ontological supervenience, by itself, carries no implication that facts from the base class have any evidential relationship to facts from the supervening class. The clearest example in which this implication fails is mental supervenience. Advocates of ontological supervenience of the mental generally take mental states to supervene upon physical (particularly, brain) states. But brain states, as yet, play no evidential role in the attribution of mental states.¹⁰ In some cases, however, such as morality, we may wish to hold that facts from the base class (viz. naturalistic facts) do play an evidential role. This evidential role is reflected in the above constraint. Thus, there is some point in the moral realist advocating the ascriptive supervenience of moral judgments on naturalistic judgments, but there is no point in the mental realist advocating the ascriptive supervenience of mental judgments on judgments about the brain.

Finally, the moral realist is not the only kind of realist who accepts a form of ascriptive supervenience. Although the mental realist will not advocate the ascriptive supervenience of mental on brain judgments, he or she may well advocate the ascriptive supervenience of mental on *behavioural* judgments. McGinn is a mental realist of this sort. In the passage quoted at the beginning of this paper he holds that it is constitutive of competence in making psychological attributions that they conform to ascriptive supervenience on the behavioral.¹¹ Another example would seem to be Kim:

If a series of psychological states, along with their mutual inter-connections, are posited as the best explanation of the input-output connections in my case, then, in methodological consistency, the same psychological states must be posited in case of my replica. For he and I share the same input-output connections. (Kim, 1982, p. 67)¹²

And Kim immediately goes on to comment: 'this is something like a "generalisation argument" in moral theory. I think there clearly is a similar consistency requirement in the case of scientific methodology.' By appealing to methodological considerations (and drawing the analogy with morality), Kim, like McGinn, seems to be advocating a conceptual constraint on psychological attributions: They must conform to ascriptive supervenience on judgments about input-output connections.

If Blackburn is right, then McGinn and Kim must give up either their mental realism or their conceptual constraints on mental theorising.¹³ But

¹⁰ Cf. also modal supervenience, where, at least according to McGinn, 1981, pp. 167-168, modal facts supervene upon actual facts, but actual facts do not serve as evidence for modal facts. Another example would be colours and their underlying physical constitutions.

¹¹ See McGinn, 1978, p. 214, for the assertion of mental realism, and p. 218, note 5, for the assertion of the ontological supervenience of mental states on internal physical states.

¹² For simplicity we may limit mental or psychological states to propositional attitudes and avoid the problems of sensation. Kim nowhere explicitly endorses mental realism, but his language readily lends itself to that interpretation.

¹³ In Blackburn, 1985, Blackburn seems to favour giving up the latter. He accepts mental realism with equanimity (p. 58), and then goes on to claim that the Cartesian shows no conceptual confusion (p. 59). But the kind of ascriptive supervenience that Blackburn here rejects is the supervenience of mental judgments on judgments of 'underlying physical state'

it seems more plausible to suppose that Blackburn is wrong, and that a realist may place some conceptual constraints on judgments. So there is no principled objection to a moral realist accepting and advocating ascriptive supervenience. Ascriptive supervenience asserts an evidential relationship between the classes of properties connected by ontological supervenience.¹⁴

A dualist in a given realm (i.e. a realist who rejects ontological supervenience) would be put in an extremely awkward position by accepting ascriptive supervenience for judgments about the realm. Such a dualist could never have evidential justification for judgments that expressed the dualism. Thus, dualists are better off rejecting ascriptive supervenience and holding that judgments about the realm are made directly, without benefit of evidence. For mental dualists, introspection plays this role, though there would also need to be some third-person form of direct judgment. Moral dualists would presumably be intuitionists.¹⁵

One can, of course, be an intuitionist without being a dualist. We are all intuitionists about colours — we can judge them directly, without evidence — yet we believe that colours, and other secondary qualities, ontologically supervene on an underlying physical constitution. We reject ascriptive supervenience for colours, but endorse ontological supervenience.

Thus ascriptive supervenience, construed conceptually, and ontological supervenience are not in competition.

V

So far I have argued that a moral realist who endorses ontological supervenience can, with good reason, advocate ascriptive supervenience. Thus, this kind of moral realist is able to conform to our modal intuitions about moral language. But it might be wondered what right the moral realist has to reject dualism and endorse ontological supervenience to start with.¹⁶ And if the moral realist has no right to ontological supervenience, then he or she has no explanation of ascriptive supervenience after all. The problem is just pushed back a step.

Let us examine this problem first as it arises for mental supervenience, for the problem would seem to be just as pressing there.

(p. 59). No one has ever claimed, however, that *that* is constitutive of competence with mental judgments. The claims of McGinn and Kim concern supervenience upon judgments of behaviour, or behavioural dispositions, or sensory input-behaviour output relations. And this sort of supervenience may well be constitutive of competence, especially if we limit our consideration to propositional attitudes.

¹⁴ This discussion highlights an interesting asymmetry between the moral and the mental. What the mental ontologically supervenes on (*viz.* the brain), is different from what we employ as evidence (*viz.* behaviour). In the case of the moral, the ontological and evidential bases coincide (*viz.* natural facts).

¹⁵ It may have been G. E. Moore's apparent moral intuitionism that led G. J. Warnock mistakenly to attribute a sort of moral dualism to Moore (Warnock, 1967, p. 14). Intuitionism would seem to be a necessary but not a sufficient condition for dualism.

¹⁶ Blackburn presses this point in Blackburn, 1971, p. 111; and 1984, p. 221. For one attempt to explain supervenience on behalf of the moral realist, see McPetridge, 1985. I have argued that this attempt fails in Klagge, 1987.

Kim offers the following argument for mental supervenience.¹⁷ He begins by establishing the methodological consistency requirement (which I quoted in Section IV, *supra*). This is equivalent to what I would call the ascriptive supervenience of psychological judgments on input-output judgments: If one posits certain psychological states as the best explanation of input-output connections in one case, then one must posit them in all cases in which input-output connections are judged to be the same. From this consistency requirement, Kim immediately infers:

If two organisms or structures are physically identical, then their psychology is also identical. If two organisms coincide in the set of physical properties, they cannot diverge in the set of psychological properties. (Kim, 1982, p. 68)

This is what I would call the ontological supervenience of psychological states on physical (or input-output) states. Thus Kim infers ontological supervenience from ascriptive supervenience.

If this were legitimate, then the moral realist could mimic this argument and establish ontological supervenience as well. But the inference is not legitimate. Hare is a well-known advocate of ascriptive supervenience in morality, but no one would suggest that Hare was, thereby, committed to ontological supervenience, and therefore realism, about the moral. Hare's supervenience constrains what a given person may do in making moral judgments. Kim's consistency requirement constrains what a given person may do in positing psychological states.¹⁸

To establish ontological supervenience (with its implicit realism) about the psychological, Kim at least needs to demonstrate that there is some fact of the matter as to what psychological posits constitute the best explanation for each set of input-output relations. This is something he never attempts. Lacking such a demonstration, all we may conclude from the methodological constraint is that whatever psychological state is posited as the best explanation by a given psychological theoriser must be posited *by that same theoriser* in all similar cases.¹⁹ So ontological supervenience does not follow from ascriptive supervenience, and Kim's argument fails. This is just what one would have expected from consideration of Hare's views.

Although this refutation by no means shows that there are no more successful arguments for ontological supervenience, it is not uncommon for

¹⁷ See Kim, 1982, Section VI.

¹⁸ Kim invites the comparison with Hare at this point by explicitly likening his requirement to 'a "generalisation argument" in moral theory' (Kim, 1982, p. 67).

¹⁹ Suppose we have two physically indiscernible subjects A and B, and two psychological theorists S and T. Suppose further that S attributes psychological state P to both A and B, and T attributes an incompatible psychological state R to them. If psychological realism were true and psychological states ontologically supervened on physical states, then it would follow that either S or T or both were wrong in *both* their psychological posits. But this does not follow from Kim's consistency requirement. Neither S nor T can be convicted of methodological inconsistency. (And there is no sense in which two people can be jointly convicted of methodological inconsistency.)

advocates of supervenience to eschew argument. In the course of a discussion of the supervenience of modal facts upon actual facts, in which he notes the similarities with mental and with moral supervenience, McGinn writes the following:

What is difficult, here as elsewhere, is to give an illuminating explication of the supervenience relation Unfortunately, I have no very interesting suggestions to make along these lines: but, . . . one can know that something is true without yet knowing how it can be. (McGinn, 1981, p. 176)

Elsewhere on the same page McGinn supposes that supervenience will have to be taken as a brute metaphysical fact. Davidson, without intending slander, refers to supervenience as a 'dogma' (Davidson, 1974, p. 345).

Indeed, Blackburn himself, who presses the moral realist for an explanation of ontological supervenience, seems quite willing to grant ontological supervenience to the mental realist as a 'metaphysical doctrine' (Blackburn, 1985, p. 58).²⁰ If the ontological supervenience of the mental can be accepted as a brute metaphysical fact, as Blackburn seems to grant, and the ascriptive supervenience of the mental can be defended, then moral and mental supervenience would seem to be in the same boat. So it is not clear how the moral realist is supposed to be in any special difficulty about ontological supervenience.

Once again, the moral realist finds consolation from a companion in guilt who appears less dispensable. If mental realism were dispensable, the consolation would evanesce.²¹

Virginia Polytechnic Institute
and State University

Received February 1987

REFERENCES

- Blackburn, Simon, 'Moral Realism', in John Casey (ed.), *Morality and Moral Reasoning*, Methuen, 1971.
- . *Spreading the Word: Groundings in the Philosophy of Language*, Oxford, 1984.
- . 'Supervenience Revisited', in Ian Hacking (ed.), *Exercises in Analysis: Essays by Students of Casimir Lewy*, Cambridge, 1985.
- Davidson, Donald, 'Replies to David Lewis and W. V. Quine', *Synthese* 27 (1974), pp. 345-349.
- . *Essays on Actions and Events*, Oxford, 1980.
- Hare, Richard, *The Language of Morals*, Oxford, 1952.
- . 'Supervenience', *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 58 (1984), pp. 1-16.
- Kim, Jaegwon, 'Causality, Identity, and Supervenience in the Mind-Body Problem', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy: Metaphysics iv* (1979), pp. 31-49.
- . 'Psychophysical Supervenience', *Philosophical Studies* 41 (1982), pp. 51-70.

²⁰ Blackburn, in his discussion of mental supervenience, contents himself with the claim that there is no ascriptive supervenience of the mental — a claim I disputed in note 13, *supra* — and with an argument against Davidson's joint advocacy of supervenience and anomalous monism — which I should not want to defend.

²¹ In revising this paper I have benefited from criticisms by Simon Blackburn and Richard Hare.

- Klagge, James, 'An Alleged Difficulty Concerning Moral Properties', *Mind* 93 (1984), pp. 370-380.
- . 'Supervenience: Perspectives v. Possible Worlds', *Philosophical Quarterly* 37 (1987), pp. 312-315.
- McFetridge, Ian, 'Supervenience, Realism, Necessity', *Philosophical Quarterly* 35 (1985), pp. 245-258.
- McGinn, Colin, 'Mental States, Natural Kinds and Psychophysical Laws', *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 52 (1978), pp. 195-220.
- . 'Modal Reality', in Richard Healey (ed.), *Reduction, Time and Reality: Studies in the Philosophy of the Natural Sciences*, Cambridge, 1981.
- Moore, G. E., *Principia Ethica*, Cambridge, 1903.
- . 'The Conception of Intrinsic Value', in *Philosophical Studies*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1922.
- Warnock, G. J., *Contemporary Moral Philosophy*, Macmillan, 1967.