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SUPERVENIENCE: PERSPECTIVES V. POSSIBLE WORLDS

BY JAMES C. KLAGGE

I

In a recent paper, Ian McFetridge has proposed an attractive, but, I think, ultimately unsuccessful response to one of the main lines of argument in Simon Blackburn's provocative paper "Moral Realism".¹

Blackburn questions the right of moral realists to impose the condition of supervenience on moral truth in light of the fact that

(L) There are moral truths which are not strictly implied by any truth ascribing naturalistic properties to their subjects.

Given (L), "[s]upervenience becomes, for the realist, an opaque, isolated, logical fact, for which no explanation can be proffered".²

McFetridge holds that we should reject (L) and that, indeed, "the rejection of (L) . . . is implicit in ordinary moral thought".³ Our ordinary moral practices can then be turned to an explanation of supervenience: since supervenience asserts the necessity of a connection between the natural and the moral, this necessity can be explained by appeal to our practices.

This account of necessity is an anti-realist one, but it is one that a moral realist is free to employ. If the moral realist eschews an explanation of this sort, then supervenience appears to be a brute, metaphysical fact. But this is a consequence only of moral realism combined with *modal* realism.⁴ Thus the apparent implausibility of moral realism gets sloughed off onto an unnecessary and unrecognized attachment to modal realism.

II

This response to Blackburn looks attractive, but it goes wrong in its first step, where McFetridge holds that the rejection of (L) is implicit in ordinary moral thought.⁵

¹ See I. G. McFetridge, "Supervenience, Realism, Necessity", *Philosophical Quarterly* 35 (1985), pp. 245–58, responding to Blackburn's paper, "Moral Realism", published in John Casey (ed.), *Morality and Moral Reasoning* (London, 1971).

² Blackburn, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

³ McFetridge, *op. cit.*, p. 245, note 3, and also Section III.

⁴ Colin McGinn seems to be willing to accept that supervenience relationships are brute, metaphysical facts. See his "Modal Reality", in R. Healey (ed.), *Reduction, Time, and Reality: Studies in the Philosophy of the Natural Sciences* (Cambridge, 1981), esp. p. 176. It is noteworthy that McGinn is arguing for modal realism.

⁵ On this matter McFetridge correctly points out that his response to Blackburn differs from my own, described in "An Alleged Difficulty Concerning Moral Properties", *Mind* 93 (1984).

According to McFetridge, (L) can be formally represented as:

$$(L') (\exists x)(\exists M)[Mxa \ \& \ \sim (\exists N)(Nxa \ \& \ (\forall w)(Nxw \rightarrow Mxw))]$$

(where a refers to the actual world, w is a variable ranging over possible worlds, x ranges over objects, N ranges over possibly complex naturalistic properties, and M ranges over moral properties). (L') is formally inconsistent with two other principles:

$$(XXWA) (\forall x)(\forall w)[(\forall N)(Nxw \leftrightarrow Nxa) \rightarrow (\forall w)(Mxw \leftrightarrow Mxa)]$$

and

$$(NMA) (\forall x)(\exists N)[Nxa \ \& \ (\forall w)(Nxw \rightarrow (\forall N')(N'xa \leftrightarrow N'xw))]$$

(where N' now can range over maximally consistent sets of naturalistic properties). And McFetridge claims that ordinary moral thought commits us to (XXWA).⁶ In defense of this claim he quotes the following passage from Hare:

If I said "Smith acted rightly in giving her the money, but he might have given her the money, and in all other respects acted similarly, except that his act was not right", I should invite the comment "But how could the rightness of the act disappear like this? If the act, motives, circumstances, &c., were all the same, then you would be bound, logically, to judge it right in the hypothetical case as you did in the actual case. The actual action couldn't have been right and the hypothetical action not right, unless there had been *some* other difference between the actions, or their circumstances, or their motives, or something else".⁷

And on the basis of this McFetridge holds that "we are committed to saying that every moral truth is strictly implied by at least one naturalistic truth concerning its subject".⁸

The thought that any view of Richard Hare's might have this consequence should immediately make us suspicious of the alleged implication. If every moral truth were strictly implied by at least one naturalistic truth concerning its subject, then there would be necessarily true moral principles, and Hare would surely not brook that.

Hare's view is that once a person accepts a moral principle, that principle applies equally to everything subsumed by it. If the moral principle has the form of a hypothetical claim, then it applies to anything that satisfies the naturalistic description in the antecedent. The principle applies not only to actual cases, but to all hypothetical or possible cases that satisfy the antecedent. Thus, each person, in moralizing and accepting moral principles, is committed to (XXWA) as a condition upon his or her moralizing. Furthermore, even if, in moralizing, a person is unable fully to articulate the moral principles behind his or her moral judgements, the person is, at any rate, committed to there being some moral principle that could be

⁶ (NMA) is a philosophical assumption about naturalistic properties that I will not dispute.

⁷ R. M. Hare, *The Language of Morals* (Oxford, 1952), p. 153.

⁸ McFetridge, *op. cit.*, p. 250.

used to derive the moral judgements made.⁹ And we can, if we wish, go on to say that in our moralizing each of us is committed to the rejection of (L) as applied to our own moralizing.

But none of this shows that in our ordinary moral thought we are committed to (XXWA) *simpliciter*. Suppose that we take several people and consider their moral judgements. So far as Hare is concerned, there is no requirement that this conglomeration of moral judgements must conform to (XXWA). Whether it does conform depends on whether the people accept the same moral principles. If they do not, then the conglomeration of all their moral judgements will fail to satisfy (XXWA). But this would not be surprising, nor would it be in any sense inconsistent with our moral practices.

Of course, the fact that Hare would not be troubled by these violations of (XXWA) in collective cases does not show that ordinary moral thinkers would not be either. But McFetridge does seem to rely on Hare as a paradigm of an ordinary moral thinker. And, anyway, ordinary moral thinkers witness violations of this condition every time they witness moral disagreements.

Thus Hare's example of ordinary moral thought does not, by itself, commit us to the rejection of (L); and the associated moral practices will not suffice to establish (anti-realistically) the necessity of supervenience claims.

III

What has gone wrong? It would seem that McFetridge has committed the fallacy of composition. From the admitted fact that (XXWA) is a condition on the moral judgements made by each person, it does not follow that it is a condition on the moral judgements of all people taken together or on moral truth. Hare's concern is with conditions on people's moral judgements taken distributively. (XXWA), insofar as it is not relativized to a particular person's judgements, or a particular perspective, concerns moral judgements taken collectively. (XXWA) states how things are in all possible worlds, and that is an objective claim from no particular point of view or perspective. (XXWA) entails the existence of necessarily true moral principles that govern the moral judgements of all people taken collectively.

It may be that formulation of this condition in terms of possible worlds tends to facilitate this confusion.¹⁰ Possible-worlds formulations do not preserve the relativization of this condition to perspectives considered distributively. They either treat perspectives collectively or drop reference to perspectives.

⁹ This condition is acknowledged by Hare in "Supervenience", *Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume* 58 (1984), p. 3. See also J. R. Lucas, "The Lesbian Rule", *Philosophy* 30 (1955).

¹⁰ In his paper "Supervenience," *op. cit.*, p. 10, note 14, Hare expresses reservations about possible worlds formulations because they can lead to confusions. This would seem to be one example.

IV

Despite some reservations about possible-world terminology, Hare has tentatively endorsed what Jaegwon Kim calls “weak supervenience” and rejected what Kim calls “strong supervenience”.¹¹ Kim’s weak supervenience is equivalent to what McFetridge, in his Appendix, labels (XYWW), and strong supervenience is equivalent to (XYWW’). Hare is attracted to Kim’s weak supervenience for the following reason: Strong supervenience, by governing the connection between the natural and the moral for objects in any possible worlds, makes moral principles necessary, while weak supervenience, by governing the connection for objects only within a given possible world, allows moral principles to be contingent.

But it seems to me to be a mistake for Hare to endorse any notion of supervenience formulated in terms of possible worlds. Kim’s weak supervenience is at once too weak and too strong for what Hare wants. When one endorses a moral principle, it applies not only to actual cases, in the given possible world, but also to hypothetical cases, sufficiently similar, in any possible world.¹² Kim’s weak supervenience is too weak to capture this intuition, for it only governs cases in the given possible world. On the other hand, as I have argued above, Kim’s weak supervenience is too strong because it constitutes a collective rather than a distributive condition on moral judgement within a single possible world.

The distinction between weak and strong supervenience, focussing on one as opposed to all possible worlds, is not the same as the distinction (that Hare should want) between distributive and collective construals of supervenience. It may be that Hare (and others) thought these distinctions were equivalent, but they are not.

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THE INTELLIGIBILITY OF ABORTIVE OMNISCIENCE

BY STIG ALSTRUP RASMUSSEN

According to a forceful argument repeatedly put forth by Donald Davidson, there can be no communication without a shared world picture,¹ That is,

¹¹ Kim’s formulations are found in his “Concepts of Supervenience”, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 45 (1984), pp. 157–67. The same terminology and roughly the same formulations were independently introduced by me in “An Alleged Difficulty Concerning Moral Properties”, where I labelled them (WSS) and (SSS). The distinction was suggested to me by some ideas of Rogers Albritton. Hare tentatively endorses weak supervenience on p. 4 of “Supervenience”. See also Kim, *op. cit.*, p. 161, note 13.

¹² Recall the passage from Hare’s *Language of Morals* quoted above.

¹ Several of the essays reprinted in D. Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford, 1984) are relevant. Cf. in particular “Radical Interpretation”, “Belief and the Basis of Meaning”, “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme”, and “The Method of Truth in Metaphysics”.