

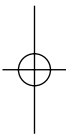


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Moral Dependence


Nick Zangwill

1. BECAUSE AND NECESSITY



What is the relation between moral and natural properties? And how do we conceive of this relation? By ‘*moral*’ properties I will mean properties such as being evil, just, or virtuous or having duties or rights; and by ‘*natural*’ properties I will mean properties such as psychological, sociological, and physical properties.¹

Suppose we judge that Queen Isabella of Spain was evil in 1492, or at least that many of her actions in 1492 were evil. Then we do not think that she had various natural properties in 1492—such as being a torturer, a bigot, and desiring other’s pain—and *by an astounding coincidence* she or her actions also had the moral property of evil. Rather, we think that she or her actions were evil *in virtue of* those natural properties; we think that her moral properties *depend* on her natural properties; we think that she had her moral properties *because* of her natural properties. In general, when we make a moral judgment we judge not just that something has a moral property, but that it has a moral property *because* it has some natural property. This is a fundamental principle of our moral thought.



I am very grateful for many interesting questions raised by audiences at the University of Melbourne, the Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics in Canberra, and at the Third Annual Metaethics Workshop at the University of Wisconsin, where there were many penetrating questions. Two referees for the Press also made helpful comments.

¹ This stipulation has the consequence that God’s psychological properties are natural properties, but I don’t think this matters much. Adding a spatial requirement for natural properties would allow that God’s mental states are not natural. (Moore distinguished, ‘naturalist’, ‘non-naturalist’, and ‘metaphysical’ ethics in Moore 1903.) I do not focus on so-called ‘thick’ concepts for many reasons, which I shall not detail here.

We may think that a natural property is that in virtue of which an act has a moral property whether or not we think that there is a *further* explanation of why it is so. For example, we may think that an act may be wrong in virtue of being a lie whether or not we think that there is a further explanation of why lying is wrong. That is, we may or may not think that some other more basic moral–natural dependence underpins the particular one. But we cannot judge that an act is barely wrong; we must judge that it is wrong because of some natural property of the act, such as being a lie.²

But, as John Mackie famously asked, “What in the world is signified by this ‘because?’” (Mackie 1977: 41). What exactly is this relation of moral–natural dependence?

A plausible thought is that we need a *necessity* to make sense of the “because”: moral and natural properties are necessarily connected. What is called moral–natural “supervenience” is the usual way of articulating precisely what the necessary connection is.

In this paper I shall argue, to start with, that this is incorrect or at least oversimplistic, even though necessary ties are implied by moral–natural dependence. I then consider the epistemic status of moral–natural dependence and moral–natural supervenience, and the relation between them. I end by drawing conclusions about the kind of metaethical theory we should seek.

For the most part, I shall restrict my attention to moral normative properties, but I am inclined to believe that the same applies to other normative properties such as epistemic properties.

2. MORAL CONDITIONALS, RESPONSIBILITY, AND RELEVANCE

Shadowing the dependence relations signified by this “because”, there are conditionals with natural antecedents and moral consequents. For example, a conditional judgment might be that that *if* someone likes torturing *then* he is evil, or if someone lies then he does wrong. I call these ‘moral dependence conditionals’. Should we understand moral dependence conditionals as holding with necessity?

One thing that might tempt us to think that these moral conditionals hold with necessity is that statements of strong moral supervenience

² Elsewhere I probe this requirement, which I call the ‘Because Constraint’ (Zangwill 2005). There are some special cases, such as when we judge on authority, where although we must think that there is some responsible natural property, we need not know exactly which it is. But such cases are secondary.

involve such necessary conditionals in their consequents (Zangwill 1995). Strong moral supervenience is a general framework principle of our moral thought that says that if something has a moral property M, then it has a natural property N, such that if anything at any time is N, then it must also be M. (Or, in only six words: moral instantiations have natural sufficient conditions.) A quite plausible thought is that in moral judgments we assert various specific conditional consequents of the overall strong supervenience conditional. The overall claim is grasped by every moral thinker. But the overall claim embeds an existential quantification over natural properties, and thus in effect it existentially quantifies over necessary natural-to-moral conditionals. *Which* necessary natural-to-moral conditionals obtain, though, is a substantive question and not something every moral thinker knows. We are thus led to the view that although the antecedents of moral dependence conditionals obtain contingently, the moral dependence conditionals themselves hold necessarily. It is contingent that Isabella had certain mental states, performed certain actions, and whatever else, in virtue of which she was evil in 1492; but, necessarily, given that she did, she was evil.³ On this way of thinking, moral cognition is primarily of necessary relations, and only given additional information about which natural properties are actually instantiated can we conclude anything about the morality of actuality. We may have an ‘egocentric’ (!) moral interest in actuality; but our primary moral understanding is of necessary links between moral and natural properties.

This line of thought is attractive, but it must be resisted or at least considerably modified.

Let us call the natural properties of a thing that *make* it good or bad, the “responsible” natural properties. By contrast, let us call “relevant” those natural properties that generate moral–natural counterfactual conditionals. We can distinguish natural properties that are *responsible* for a moral property from those that are merely *relevant* to it. For example, some act might be bad that *is* an act of intentionally causing pain to a child but is *not* an act of intentionally causing him pain in order to medically benefit him. Intuitively, intentionally causing pain *makes* it bad in a way that not being an act of intentionally causing pain in order to medically benefit him does not, even though it is true *both* that if it had not been an act of intentionally causing pain then (other things being equal) it would not have been bad, *and also* that if it had *not not* intended to be medically beneficial then (other things being equal) it would not have been bad.

³ Similarly, a sample of a substance might not have existed; but given that it does, whatever composes it does so necessarily (Kripke 1980; Putnam 1975).

Making a moral judgment about a thing does not mean a commitment to having located all of a thing's natural properties that are counterfactually relevant to its instantiating the moral property—that is, which allow its instantiation. (For one thing, there are an infinite number of negative properties that are counterfactually relevant.) That would be asking too much. What we are committed to is the existence of a subset of a thing's natural properties that *make* it good (or bad or whatever). We may be ignorant of *many* natural features of what we are evaluating. But in so far as we make a moral judgment about it, we assume ourselves to have located natural properties that are *responsible* for its possessing the moral property. To judge that *x* has a moral property is to judge that *x* has some natural property that is responsible for *x* having the moral property. This notion of responsibility is hard to analyze. But it is fundamental. It is a notion we need all over philosophy. And it seems to differ from necessity.

I found two authors who have had similar thoughts. In a very interesting paper published in 1970, Michael Stocker wrote:

I shall say that a *precondition* of a moral duty is a condition such that if it does not obtain one would not have that moral duty. ... There are some moral duties that we have (or might have) but would not have were that condition not met, yet which we do not have even in part *because* that condition is met. (Stocker 1970: 610, his emphasis; see also pp. 606 and 607)

Stocker's thought lay neglected for many decades. However, Jonathan Dancy has recently followed Stocker's lead (Dancy 2004, ch. 3).⁴

3. NEGATIVE RESPONSIBILITY?

We can often illustrate the responsibility/relevance distinction by picking positive and negative natural properties of a thing such that its negative properties are morally relevant while its positive properties are morally responsible. In my example, the positive natural property of intentionally causing pain is responsible for the badness, while the negative natural

⁴ Dancy thinks that there are certain features of things that he calls 'enablers' that do not themselves make something good but which are necessary if something else is to make it good (Dancy 2004: ch. 3; see also Stocker's use of "enable" at Stocker 1970: 607). Dancy makes some interesting points about non-responsible natural properties that nevertheless play a role. He casts the issue in terms of 'reasons', which I think is unfortunate, but his points survive translation into property terms. Frank Sibley uses the words "result" and "responsible" for the relation between aesthetic and non-aesthetic properties (Sibley 1965: 138–40). In explaining aesthetic/nonaesthetic dependence he steers completely clear of both modal and conditional formulations. Sibley's papers on aesthetics might be read with profit by moral philosophers.

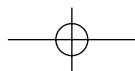
property of not causing pain for medical benefit is merely counterfactually relevant to it. There is a question about whether we should generalize and say that negative natural properties are never responsible for positive moral properties. I find this quite an attractive thesis.

My view is that, quite generally, negative properties do not determine positive properties in the way that positive properties do, even though both generate counterfactuals. Not being plutonium does not *make* something water in the way that being H₂O does, even though both generate counterfactuals. (This is a controversial general metaphysical thesis; see Zangwill 2003.) In morality, there is no denying that negative natural properties are *counterfactually relevant* to moral properties. Nevertheless, I am *inclined* to think that these negative natural properties are not *responsible* for the instantiation of (positive) moral properties in the way that some of its positive natural properties are.

Not every positive natural property of the thing that has the moral property is responsible for that moral property. Many subatomic properties, for instance, are positive natural properties that are not responsible for moral properties. They are not relevant either. Many positive natural properties of a thing are neither responsible nor relevant for its moral properties. Clearly, many negative natural properties of a thing (such as those in my example of causing pain to a child) are counterfactually relevant to its moral properties but not responsible for them. And others are neither responsible nor relevant. The question is whether *any* negative natural properties are responsible for moral properties.

In discussion, Lloyd Humberstone wondered whether my general claim that all moral properties have natural makers could cope with *permissions*. Surely the instantiation of the moral property of being permissible has no natural maker. One way to respond to this worry would be to take permissibility to be a negative moral property and to restrict the doctrine of moral–natural dependence to positive moral properties, like being required or being wrong. But that seems rather arbitrary. Instead, consider the judgment that stamp-collecting is permissible because it does not do any harm. Here it seems that the negative moral property has a *negative* natural maker. So the suggestion might be that positive moral property instantiations require positive natural makers and negative moral property instantiations require negative natural makers. Thus negative natural properties *are* responsible, but only for negative moral properties.⁵

⁵ It might be argued that if the deontic moral operators are interdefinable, then calling some positive and others negative lacks meaning, and the whole issue lapses. One response would be that, although there are necessary biconditional relations between positive and negative deontic properties, still, the positive deontic properties are metaphysically prior.



But what if this were questioned? Perhaps some positive moral properties have negative natural makers and some positive natural properties have negative moral makers. One example is this. Some people might do wrong because they do *not* drive with due care and attention. In this case, the positive moral property seems to have a negative natural maker. Similarly, some people might be permitted to drive on the ‘wrong’ side of the road because they are policemen. This is a negative moral property with a positive natural maker.⁶ One possibility is that we can deal with such cases by saying that the maker is a hybrid conjunction of a positive property and a negative property. Perhaps the wrong-maker is driving *and* failing to take care.

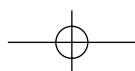
I shall leave this topic here (apart from making a suggestion in a footnote in the next section). The important point for this paper is the distinction between making and allowing—although the issue of positive and negative moral determination, it seems to me, warrants further exploration.

4. THE CONDITIONAL CRITERION, PRAGMATISM, AND CONTEXTUALISM

But how are we to distinguish responsible from relevant natural properties? How can we know which are right-makers and which are right-allowers?

Thus, although it is true that necessarily A ought to do X if and only if A is not permitted not to do X, nevertheless, A is not permitted not to do X *because* A is obligated to do X, and *not* vice versa. The obligation is metaphysical prior. (See further, section 5 on divine commandment theory.) Similarly, although it is true that necessarily A is permitted to do X if and only if A is not obligated not to do X, nevertheless A is not obligated not to do X *because* A is permitted to do X, and *not* vice versa. Here *permission* is metaphysically prior. (On this view, obligations and permissions are both positive moral properties.) A different response would be to deny that there are necessary biconditionals. The number 7 has the misfortune to lack rational agency and moral responsibility. Therefore it lacks obligations and permissions. It is neither obligated to travel on the bus nor obligated not to travel on the bus. But that does not mean that it is *permitted* to travel on the bus. The number 7 is not the bearer of moral properties of *any* sort—obligations or permissions. It is not true that if something is not obligated not to do something then that thing is permitted to do it, and it is not true that if something is not permitted not to do something then that thing is obligated to do it. (The dialectic is like that over the so-called disquotational theory of truth, according to which all there is to say is necessarily [‘p’ is true if and only if p]. One response is to assert the necessary equivalence but nevertheless give the right-hand side metaphysical priority. Another response is to deny that the right-hand side entails the left-hand side, so the necessary biconditional is not true at all.)

⁶ Dancy thinks that some of what he calls ‘enablers’ are positive. In principle I could accept this. His example is of something we should do because we promised to do it. It might be a positive property of the promise that it was done freely. But being done freely doesn’t make the act right. It is merely an enabler or a precondition. The contrary view would be that it is only the conjunction of being a promise and being freely done that is the right-maker.



It is one thing to make a principled distinction and another to have a means of telling when it applies. Furthermore, if we make some abstract philosophical distinction but could not apply it in practice, that would cast doubt on the abstract distinction.

I propose that one important difference between relevance and responsibility is that when the instantiation of a natural property N is responsible for the instantiation of a moral property M , that (typically) generates the *factual* conditional if Nx then Mx , whereas merely relevant natural properties do not. By contrast, a *counterfactual* of the form if not- Nx then not- Mx , is generated *both* by relevant and responsible natural properties. (A 'factual conditional' has a true antecedent whereas a 'counterfactual conditional' has a false antecedent.) Counterfactual conditionals do not allow us to discriminate relevance from responsibility, but factual conditionals do. Moral dependence or responsibility is a stronger notion than that of the moral factual conditional. But dependence or responsibility is a relation that explains the holding of factual conditionals. And every moral judgment involves a commitment to such a factual conditional.⁷

Appealing to factual conditionals enables us to reply to an important objection, which is that the distinction between natural properties that are responsible (makers) and those which are merely relevant (allowers) is arbitrary and depends on our interests. Jamie Dreier put the following case to me. Suppose a doctor knowingly fails to do something that is medically beneficial, out of laziness or callousness. In this case that natural property—failing to medically benefit—is a wrong-maker, unlike the case I had in mind earlier one, where the wrong-maker is being an intentional pain-causing, and failing to medically benefit was merely counterfactually relevant. So, the argument is that the making/allowing distinction is merely a pragmatic one, as it is when we pick out something as a cause as opposed to a 'mere background condition'. Depending on our interests, we might, in some situations, say that the spark caused the fire, but the presence of oxygen was a mere background condition, and in other situations, perhaps in deep space, we might say that the presence of oxygen caused the fire. But in fact both have equal claim to being causes. Similarly, it might be said, for wrong-makers and wrong-enablers. What we pick on as significant or salient depends on our interests, and there is nothing metaphysically privileged about one element rather than another element. Call this view 'pragmatism'.⁸

⁷ Statements of moral dependence factual conditionals will typically deploy names and not universal quantification; for example: If Isabella tortures, then she does wrong.

⁸ This is also Caj Strandberg's suggestion in his contribution to this volume.

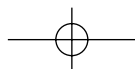
In order to reply to pragmatism, let us separate three cases. The first two cases are what I had in mind in Section 2. And the last is the sort of case that pragmatists use to argue that the maker/allower distinction is not fundamental, and merely reflects our interests.

- Case 1** (a) X intentionally caused pain to a child (=A); (b) X did not intentionally cause pain for the child's medical benefit (=not-B); (c) X is not a doctor (=not-C). That is: $A \& \neg B \& \neg C$
- Case 2** a doctor intentionally causes pain to a child for the child's medical benefit. That is: $A \& B \& C$. (Perhaps the doctor needs to check that the child's nervous system is working.)
- Case 3** a lazy or callous doctor fails to cause pain to a child for the child's medical benefit, which he knows would benefit the child and that is easily within his power to do. That is: $\neg A \& \neg B \& C$.

It is the interpretation of case 3 that is important. The conditional criterion can be deployed. In case 1, which is the actual case, it is true that if A then X did wrong; and it is not true that if $\neg B$ then X did wrong. Hence the criterial factual conditionals say that A is a wrong-maker and $\neg B$ is a wrong-allower. In case 2, a doctor causes pain in order to make sure that something is working properly. In that case, the conditional if X caused pain for medical benefit then X did right (if B then X did right) holds. So B is a right-maker. (I am not sure what to say about the intentional causing of pain in that case; I am not sure whether it is a right- or wrong-maker, but I am not sure whether much hangs on the question.) Case 3 is the important one—that of the callous or lazy doctor. In *that* case, yes, it is a conditional fact that if X did not cause pain for medical benefit then X did wrong (if $\neg B$ then X did wrong). The fact that X did *not* intend to medically benefit *is* a wrong-maker in that case. However, the fact that the conditional fact holds in case 3 does not mean that the same conditional does not fail in case 1. So $\neg B$ is a wrong-maker in one case but not the other.

This is a *contextual* account, which is quite different from a pragmatic account. In case 1, in the actual case, the criterial conditional [if $\neg B$ then X did wrong] holds. It is true, of that case, that *if* X were a lazy or callous doctor, X would be wrong not to benefit the child by causing pain. But that does not mean that in the actual case, in which X is *not* a doctor, failing to medically benefit someone makes an act wrong. The conditional fails *there*. So failing to medically benefit can be an allower in a non-doctor case and a wrong-maker in a doctor case. And this has nothing to do with our interests.

The view here is similar to Alvin Goldman's treatment of his famous barn example, where Henry is surrounded by fake barns but happens to be looking at a rare real barn (Goldman 1976). In this case we are



invited to think that Henry does not know that he is looking at a barn. In this example, whether or not we know depends on whether there are actually many fake barns nearby. Or, in a structurally similar but more everyday example from Fred Dretske, whether we know that the kind of bird we are looking at is a Gadwall duck can depend on whether or not there has been an unusual freak migration of Siberian Grebes into the area (Dretske 1982). Knowledge is dependent on the actual context. That is, the actual context matters—not our interests, which is a question of how it is with the person making the knowledge attribution. That latter is a psychological matter that has nothing to do with the actual situation being evaluated. A context-dependent account is quite different from a pragmatic account, and the contrast allows us to validate the making/allowing distinction.⁹

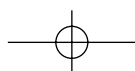
5. CONTINGENT DEPENDENCE

Let us return to the question of the modal status of the dependence-conditionals that we are committed to in making moral judgments. Are these conditionals necessary? The tempting thought—which I am recommending that we should resist—is that the conditionals are necessary and they are instances of the necessary conditionals that figure in the consequent of the strong supervenience principle.

Instead, I propose that when we make a moral judgment, we must have in mind some specific dependency, but we need not have to have in mind some specific sufficiency. While we have in mind deliberately causing pain as that which makes the act bad, we do not have in mind all the possible defeaters without which it would not have been bad. We do not have in mind all the negative natural properties that must be conjoined with the positive natural property of being a deliberate pain-causing in order to yield a conjunctive property that suffices for wrongness.

This means that moral dependence conditionals are *contingent*. This might seem strange. How can dependence be contingent? There is no denying that this seems odd. Dependency relations are intuitively stronger than necessary relations, and in many cases explain them. Surely—we might think—dependence implies necessity but necessity does not imply

⁹ The factual conditional approach may help with the issue over hybrid conjunctive properties that we considered at the end of the last section. It could be argued that the hybrid property generates both factual and counterfactual conditionals whereas the negative conjunct of the hybrid conjunction alone does not generate factual conditionals. That might vindicate the idea of positive moral power and negative moral impotence. The wrong-maker seems to be the conjunctive fact: driving *and* failing to take care.



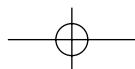
dependence. Consider Kit Fine's example of Socrates and the singleton set {Socrates}—the set with only Socrates as a member: there is a two-way necessity relation between the existence of these two things but only a one-way dependency relation between them (see Fine 1995). That is: necessarily Socrates exists if and only if the set exists; but the set depends on Socrates, not vice versa. Or consider the properties of being good and being what God would approve of. These are necessarily coinstantiated. But many think that even so there is only a one-way dependence relation. Divine commandment theorists run the dependence one way, while their opponents—autonomists about morality—run the dependence in the other direction. The divine commandment theory says that things are good because God approves of them while the autonomist thinks the opposite. But both sides agree on the necessary coinstantiation. (Necessity is really quite a *weak* relation!) By contrast with these two cases, however, in the cases of moral dependence, it seems that dependence relations are *contingent*. There is no doubt that the idea of contingent dependence seems somewhat oxymoronic.

We can be helped to feel more comfortable with contingent moral dependence if we compare moral dependence with causal dependence. We might hold that a spark caused an explosion, even though it was not sufficient for the explosion. Various (positive) background conditions were part of the overall state of affairs that *did* suffice for the explosion.¹⁰ Had there been no oxygen, then the explosion would not have occurred. Nevertheless, to think that the spark caused the explosion is (typically) to hold the conditional that if there were a spark then there would be an explosion. But that conditional holds neither with nomological nor with causal necessity, even though it is generated by a dependency relation.

The contrary view would be that in ordinary moral judgments we isolate a dependency that *is* sufficient. For example, we might think that something is wrong because it is torturing for fun. Maybe there are conceivable saving-the-world scenarios where there are other factors that are counterfactually relevant in that had they obtained, which they did not, it would have been alright to torture for fun. But it might nevertheless be maintained that torturing for fun is still necessarily wrong (that is, it suffices for wrongness). It is just that this wrongness is what is called 'pro tanto' wrongness, which can be outweighed by other values, such as the value of saving-the-world. But the necessity still holds. Where this kind of outweighing scenario obtains—if it does—dependence coincides with sufficiency.

However, it is unlikely that that all cases of moral dependence coincide with sufficiency. Although there may be some cases, like the torturing for

¹⁰ Or in cases of probabilistic causality, that the spark plus background conditions suffice for the probability of the explosion. I assume this qualification in what follows.

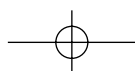
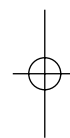
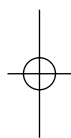


fun case, where the wrong-maker also suffices for wrongness, in many other cases the situation is not like this. In many cases, there are *negative* natural properties without which the wrong-maker would not have sufficed, even *pro tanto*, for wrongness but which are intuitively not wrong-makers. In the earlier example, we judge that an act was wrong because it was an act of intentionally causing pain. Being an act of intentionally causing pain is the wrong-maker. But there are many defeaters that did not obtain, such as the fact that the act was *not* an act of causing pain in order to bring medical benefit, in which case it would not have been wrong. If it had *not not* been an act of causing pain for medical benefit, then it would not have been wrong. And there are countless other possible defeaters. So what sufficed for wrongness in this case is *being* an act of intentionally causing pain, *and not* being an act of intentionally causing pain in order to bring medical benefit *and not* being an intentionally causing pain that is just punishment *and not* being ... and so on.

Hence, dependence and sufficiency come apart in our moral thinking. Oxy-moronic as it may seem, we have to come to terms with contingent dependence in morality.

Two corollaries deserve mention. First, the notion of contingent dependence and of a making/allowing distinction is, or should be, important in epistemology—another normative domain. For example, it allows—what some may find unthinkable—that, for some important notions of ‘is’, the existence of Gettier cases does not show that knowledge is not justified true belief. Knowing might *depend* on justified true belief, and being justified true belief might *make* something knowledge, even though justified true belief is not *sufficient* for knowledge. Gettier cases refute an identity claim; but there are many other robust relations that they may not threaten, such as dependence or constitution. The only epistemological accounts in the Gettier literature that I know of that have the potential to recognize the making/allowing point are ‘defeasibility’ accounts (for example, Lehrer and Paxon 1969). But such accounts typically made the mistake of seeing not-being-defeated as a fourth ‘condition’ for knowledge—that is, as a knowledge-making factor. Making a making/allowing distinction might make a large difference to epistemology.

Secondly, there are consequences for ‘projectivist’ views of moral thought. In this paper I have assumed realism about moral properties. However, a projectivist view, which sees moralizing as a matter of having attitudes as opposed to beliefs about moral properties, might nevertheless allow that we speak and think as if there were moral properties. Such a ‘quasi-realist’ theory might attempt to understand our a priori commitment to moral–natural supervenience as arising from a constraint of consistency among our attitudes (Blackburn 1985). The aim would be to show why

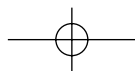


we speak and think as if moral dependence holds as an a priori constraint, and perhaps also why it is right for us to do so (Zangwill 1993). This can only be achieved, I think, if it is insisted that the systemization of a set of attitudes is an essential condition of their being *moral* attitudes. What makes an attitude a moral attitude is not, on this view, an intrinsic property of an attitude any more than being a soldier is an intrinsic property of a certain person. On this view, moral/natural supervenience arises from the practical necessity of operating with a systematic set of attitudes, either as individuals or as a group. Morality could not serve its purposes unless we imposed consistency. The trouble is that this systemization strategy will only deliver the idea of supervenience, not that of dependence. Presumably the projectivist will want to make the making/allowing distinction. But how is that to be done? Of course, our attitudinal reactions are *to* the natural features of things; for example, we find certain natural properties pleasurable. But that will not suffice to explain the more robust idea of dependence. Projectivists need to explain and justify an a priori principle of moral dependence as distinct from moral supervenience.

6. A PRIORI DEPENDENCE AND A PRIORI SUPERVENIENCE?

At first sight, it seems hard to square the contingency of moral dependence with the principle of strong supervenience. What is the relation between these relations? Why should we think that dependence and supervenience go together? And why should we think that an a priori commitment to dependence goes along with an a priori commitment to supervenience? Maybe they have nothing to do with each other. But if so, what then has become of the idea that strong supervenience is an overarching *a priori* framework principle governing our moral thought? Moral dependence seems to be obviously a priori, as we saw earlier. But there is a philosophical tradition of claiming that strong supervenience is a priori. How then are these ideas related?

My view is that although the principles are distinct, they are closely related, and both are a priori. In making moral judgments we are committed to two ideas: when we judge something to have an *M* property *M*, we are committed *both* to there being some *N* property *N*# that *makes* the thing *M*, *and* we are also committed to there being some *N* property *N** that is *sufficient* for *M*. In at least most cases, *N*# and *N** are not identical. If so, the conditional if *N*# then *M* does not hold necessarily. For there are many other *N* features of the thing that is *M*, and only the *N* property *N*# *together* with these other features is sufficient for the instantiation of *M*. It is



possible to have $N\#$ instantiated plus or minus various other N properties, such that M might not be instantiated without them. Nonetheless, as things actually were, $N\#$ made the thing M , even though $N\#$ was *not* sufficient for M in the way that N^* is. But $N\#$ is a conjunct of N^* , which is sufficient for M .¹¹ That is, if we judge that something x has an M property M , then we must judge (that is, it is a priori) that:

- (1) x has some N property $N\#$ such that Mx because $N\#x$, and
- (2) x has some conjunctive N property N^* , such that $N\#$ is a conjunct of N^* , and necessarily anything that is N^* is M .

By the a priori strong supervenience principle, we *do* indeed know that there is *some* N property, N^* , which is strictly *sufficient* for M . But what we need is the claim that if we think that *some* N property $N\#$ is responsible for M then we also think that $N\#$ is a conjunct of a complex N property N^* such that N^* suffices for M .¹² For example, where we think that an act actually is bad because it is a deliberate pain-causing we do also think that *something* sufficed for it—deliberate pain-causing *plus* other conditions. There must be *some* sufficiency nearby. So I think that it would be an over-reaction to conclude that dependence and supervenience had nothing to do with each other.¹³

¹¹ The N^* natural property is the conjunction of all the natural properties that the thing possesses that together *suffice* for the moral property. This conjunction will typically include negative natural properties. However, it is unlikely to include absolutely all of its positive natural properties. The exact position of atoms does not matter much morally. N^* natural properties need not be what are called 'total' natural properties, which are the conjunction of *all* of a thing's natural properties.

¹² Am I endorsing the idea that moral dependence conditionals are *ceteris paribus* or *pro tanto* moral truths of the sort that David Ross liked? I don't think so. The moral judgment says that a certain thing is M in virtue of being N , and there is some condition C such that N and C suffice for M . In this, there is no commitment to an array of *pro tanto* principles that might combine together to yield an overall, or all things considered, judgment.

¹³ To express this commitment, we could harmlessly semantically ascend and talk in terms of truth, which is the preferred genre of many of those who discuss essentialist issues. In these terms, we could say that moral conditional judgments of the form [If something is N then it is M] may not themselves hold true with metaphysical necessity. But, where C is a conjunction of N and all of a thing's other natural properties, then the conditional judgment [If something is N and C then it is M] *does* hold true with metaphysical necessity. It does not follow that *moral* knowledge is a sub-class of *modal* knowledge; for our moral knowledge is of the *truth* of the conditional, not of its *necessary* truth. The knowledge of the moral conditional is added to an a priori framework principle that says that if such a moral conditional judgment is true then it or its cousin (with an enhanced antecedent) is necessary if true. This supervenience framework principle is known a priori; it is constitutive of what it is to make moral judgments. Supervenience principles can in this way be (re)cast in terms of truth of moral and natural judgments (or 'sentences' or 'statements' or 'propositions'). However, I believe

The lurking discomfort with the idea of contingent dependence, in both morality and causality, can be eased somewhat by accepting that a dependency entails that there is some necessary relation nearby. In both the cases of morality and causality, if A depends on B, then B is *part* of a condition C such that necessarily if C then A. If A depends on B—morally or causally—then B has a cousin C, of which B is a part, that is sufficient for A.¹⁴ So dependence and necessity are indirectly connected.

Despite the important similarities between morality and causality, it seems that causation and morality differ in some respects. These are similar in so far as we should allow that something is a cause even though it is not sufficient for the effect, so long as a conditional holds. We can allow for contingent causal dependence, so long as the cause is part of a sufficient condition. On the other hand, in the case of causation, there is a sense in which all of the conditions that are part of the overall sufficient condition have equal status, and this is unlike the moral case, if there is a making/allowing distinction. The distinction between background causal conditions and foreground causes is only pragmatically significant (varying with our interests). But this is unlike the distinction between makers and allowers in morality, which is a metaphysical rather than a pragmatic distinction.

7. A PRIORI MORAL SUPERVENIENCE

In the last section, I assumed the a priori strong supervenience framework principle and I worried about its relation to the principle of a priori moral dependence. But have we now lost the rationale for believing a priori strong supervenience? If we have a priori dependence, why do we also need a priori strong supervenience? Perhaps strong supervenience is true, but why should it be a priori? Maybe it is enough that moral dependence is a priori. Why do we need the idea that we have an a priori commitment to necessities linking moral and natural properties? Maybe we should give up the a priority of strong supervenience. Moreover, it might even be suggested that we should *abandon* the modal doctrine altogether. Perhaps it is not only not a priori but also not true at all! Why must every dependence relation be accompanied by sufficiencies? Although we know a priori that

in the principle of 'semantic gravity': whatever goes up must come down! That is, one can 'semantically ascend' and talk in terms of truth; but only because of non-semantic facts about objects and properties.

¹⁴ This is Mackie's INUS account (Mackie 1965). Even in a probabilistic framework, B&C is sufficient for the probability of A's occurrence.

every instantiation of a moral property is due to some right-making natural property, why must there be some natural property that is sufficient for the instantiation of the moral property? So we have two disturbing questions: why hold that strong moral supervenience is a priori? And: why hold that it is true at all?

It is true that the claim of strong moral supervenience is not *as obviously* a priori as moral dependence. But there are other very closely related modal claims, also labeled 'supervenience' claims, which *are* obviously a priori. For example, it is obviously a priori that if something *changes* morally then it must change naturally, and that *two things* that are morally different must be naturally different. These are what Jaegwon Kim has called 'weak' supervenience claims, since they only make claims about what must hold, as he put it, 'within a world' (Kim 1984). But it is also obviously a priori that something *could* not be morally different from how it actually is unless it were naturally different. This obviously a priori modal claim takes us 'across worlds'. But this obviously a priori cross-world modal claim is only inches away from the not obviously a priori strong moral supervenience principle to the effect that if something has a moral property then it has some natural property that suffices for that moral property.

Let us attempt to traverse these inches. The obviously a priori cross-world claim does not imply that things with moral properties must have natural properties, unlike the strong a priori moral supervenience principle (although it does imply that there could not be many things that differ morally that all had no natural properties). But this *is* implied by the a priori dependence principle, which is obviously a priori. So let us try *conjoining* the obviously a priori dependence principle with the obviously a priori cross-world claim. Perhaps together they will yield the not obviously a priori strong moral supervenience principle. How so?¹⁵

The a priori dependence principle means that something with a moral property must have a natural property. And the modal principle says that moral differences (across worlds) imply natural differences. Contraposing, that implies that that complete natural similarities (across worlds) imply moral similarities. But how does this show that for all moral properties, there are natural properties that suffice for those moral properties? Well, we know from the obviously a priori dependence thesis that something with moral properties must have natural properties. Moreover, if something has natural properties then it is safe to assume that it has some *total* natural property, where a total natural property is the conjunction of all of a thing's

¹⁵ The argument of this section does not depend on discriminating between positive and negative natural properties.

natural properties. It is not too controversial to add that. But that total natural property is sufficient (more than sufficient) for the moral property. So, given the obviously a priori cross-world modal claim, it means that things with moral properties must have natural properties that are sufficient for them. This natural property will not be the same natural property as the one that the moral property depends on. Still, something with a moral property must have some natural property that suffices for it, even though the natural property that it depends on does not. Thus the strong supervenience principle is after all a priori, even if it is not as obviously a priori as some other claims.

8. SUI GENEROSITY

Saul Kripke famously defended principles to the effect that if identity statements between proper names are true then they are necessarily true and that if identity statements between natural kind terms and terms for molecular structures are true then they are necessarily true. He *also* claimed that these conditional principles were known “a priori by philosophical analysis” (Kripke 1980: 109; see also Sidelle 1989). Nathan Salmon, Keith Donnellan, and Hilary Putnam were surely right to object that this epistemological claim is false in the case of natural kinds: although the conditional modal principle is true, it is a posteriori, not a priori (see Salmon 1982, appendix II, citing unpublished work by Donnellan; and Putnam 1992). It seems like something we once did not know and that we have discovered as part of the growth of scientific understanding of what natural kinds, such as water and gold, actually are. In particular, we were only in a position to know the conditional modal principle for natural kinds given the advent of Daltonian chemistry. The ancient Greeks did not know it. Hence the principle is known empirically and is not known a priori.

We must distinguish two claims:

- (A) If something is water *and* has some molecular micro-structure *then* necessarily anything with that molecular structure is water.
- (B) If something is water *then* it has some molecular micro-structure such that necessarily anything with that molecular structure is water.

Perhaps most ancient Greeks would have accepted (A) if someone had gone back in time and put it to them and explained it. But surely most ancient Greeks would have rejected (B), since they thought that water was a basic substance. Thales may not have been an average ancient Greek, but he would certainly have rejected (B), since he thought that water was *the* basic

substance. Given that Thales and many fellow ancient Greeks were perfectly good water-thinkers, but thought of water as a basic substance, or in Thales' case, *the* basic substance, (B) is very unlikely to be an a priori conceptual constraint.¹⁶ If so, then Kripke seems to be either wrong or misleading about the a priori and conceptual status of his claim about natural kinds, although he may still be right about the a priori and conceptual status of the claim about proper names. In the moral case, however, the modal framework principle—moral supervenience—*is* known a priori and conceptually, along the lines that Kripke had in mind for both natural kinds and proper names. Hence, in this epistemic respect, moral supervenience is unlike the supervenience of natural kinds on molecular structure.¹⁷

The same is true of moral dependence: moral dependence is an a priori conceptual constraint on thinking in moral terms. In this respect, moral properties contrast with both natural kinds and sensory properties. It is not knowable a priori that water depends on anything. Thales may have been wrong but he was not confused to think that nothing makes water water. Similarly with colour. It may be that something makes blue things blue. There are presumably physical properties of the surfaces of things, or of light reflectance, or of standard observers, that make blue things blue. But in order to think in terms of blueness, not only need we not know what those blue-making properties are, we need not think, explicitly or tacitly, that there are any such properties. Blueness might, for all we need to know, be a primitive property of things. It was a discovery that it is not. But moral dependence is unlike those two cases, for we know a priori that moral properties are not basic and that they depend on other properties.

I believe that the implications of this are significant. It means that we should distance ourselves from two currently popular realist metaethical schools. A common American approach models moral kinds on natural kinds, and moral/natural dependence on natural kind/molecular structure dependence. And a common British approach models moral kinds on sensory kinds and moral/natural dependence on the dependence of sensory properties on whatever sensory properties are thought to depend on (which varies with different theories). But both analogies are flawed because moral dependence has quite different epistemic characteristics from natural kind

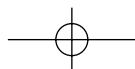
¹⁶ Here I *may* be distancing myself from what has recently been called “two-dimensional semantics”.

¹⁷ Perhaps there are *some* terms for natural kinds that do imply a certain micro-structural composition; “DNA” might be an example. However, while there may be some natural kind terms that are bound by a priori principles of composition, they could not all be like that. Furthermore, whether such natural kind terms have actual instantiations is an empirical question.

and sensory property dependence. This suggests that we need a moral theory that does not model itself on these alleged analogies and that what we need is a more *sui generis* theory. Moral kinds may be a distinctive kind of kinds; and moral dependence may be a distinctive kind of dependence. Or moral kinds and moral dependence may be of a broader normative kind. Either way, moral kinds and moral dependence are very different from non-normative kinds and non-normative dependence.

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