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# On Moral Supervenience

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# ON MORAL SUPERVENIENCE

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2014

**To Isaac, Alejandra, and Blanca.**

ON MORAL SUPERVENIENCE

by

RAMÓN ALVARADO, B.A. Philosophy

THESIS

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## Introduction

The moral realist faces a threefold challenge from the moral skeptic: provide an account of moral facts M, identify their underlying non-moral base N, and explain what kind of relation R holds between them (Mackie, 2006). Accounts of M are often challenged by the argument that any account will only be adding a ‘queer’ entity to an otherwise acceptable ontology. This is the argument from queerness. Accounts of N will constraint accounts of R with explanatory commitments to broad physicalism<sup>1</sup>. Because of these two objections, realist accounts of R are deemed unlikely. Different accounts of moral realism will have a different answer for each part of the challenge. Those with reductionist inclinations, for example, will say that moral facts are ultimately analyzable in non-moral terms and therefore reducible to them. For them the relation R between the moral and the non-moral is that of identity. The non-reductive moral realist<sup>2</sup>, on the other hand, believes that moral facts are non-identical to their non-moral counterparts. Under this view, moral facts are in an asymmetric dependence/determinacy relation with non-moral facts that is of the following sort:

- (S) If a state of affairs has non-moral property N and moral property M in virtue of having N then any other state of affairs that has N will also have M.

This is called moral supervenience. The moral realist believes that moral supervenience is an intuitive response to the skeptic’s worry about a possible relation between M’s and N’s. But she also believes that this relation allows her to account for M in such a way as to avoid certain charges implied in the argument from queerness. It does so because S supposedly *explains* the way in which M and N are related. If the N’s determine the M’s then worries about M’s queerness will have less power.

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<sup>1</sup> Either everything is as the natural sciences depict it or depends on it. (Shafer-Landau, 2012)

<sup>2</sup> The non-reductive ethical naturalist I have in mind is better known as the Cornell Realist and her position is best exemplified by the work of Nicholas Sturgeon. However, the arguments in this paper apply to other non-reductive accounts of moral realism such as moral non-naturalism as best exemplified by Shafer-Landau’s position. Throughout the rest of the paper I will be referring to such non-reductive moral realist simply as ‘moral realist’.

Here I argue that conventional accounts of supervenience fail to provide the moral realist with a proper account of the relation that seems to intuitively hold between the moral and the non-moral. This is because the indiscernibility principle on which they are based does not allow them to capture/account for cases in which a determinacy/dependence relation seems to intuitively hold despite discernible base categories. If this is the case then they cannot be used as means to give the kind of account of the M's that the moral realist wants.

In order to show how this is the case I will first begin by expanding on the moral realist position of interest to us. In Chapter 1 I will give an overview of the possible answers to questions about M, N and R. It will first go over those answers that may not need a supervenience thesis at all. This group is constituted by the anti-realist positions of the moral skeptic, the dualist, and the realist position of reductive ethical naturalism. The second group is that of non-reductive moral realists. This group includes those that argue that moral facts, although unanalyzable in non-moral terms, are to be included in our account of natural facts. It also includes the non-reductive ethical non-naturalist who claims that moral facts, even though determined by non-moral facts, ought not to be included in our account of what is natural. I deem them both in equal need of an adequate supervenience account.

Chapter 2 will deal in detail with the skeptic's challenge. In particular, it will focus on the argument from queerness. This is because a response to the argument from queerness is ultimately a response to questions about the nature of M. And it is M that the realist is after. Further, this section will detail the problem of determination and dependence and how this relates to the problem of queerness. Without an acceptable account of R, the realist project of accounting for a non-queer version of M's is directly in peril.

In the third chapter I will go through three accounts of supervenience that I take to be conventional accounts in the literature: weak, strong, and global. By doing so I expect to clarify each version's commitments and how these may affect its usefulness vis-à-vis the argument from queerness.

This section deals with the motivation for the realist to ultimately adopt a strong global supervenience thesis and how she thinks this may be the one that allows her to satisfactorily account for the R's and the M's in the skeptic's challenge.

Chapter four details the two main tensions with conventional accounts of supervenience. The first one has to do with the inability to deal with morally irrelevant N-discernible cases and cases of gradation in M. The second tension is once again about how this affects their adequacy to respond to the argument from queerness. If conventional accounts can't provide with an adequate determinacy relation between the moral and the non-moral, non-moral facts will remain an unexplained independent entity in an otherwise coherent world.

The last Chapter provides, as a conclusion, that a similarity-based account of moral supervenience may provide a way to deal with the irrelevantly discernible cases. If so, it may be the kind of relation that ought to be endorsed by the moral realist. In this chapter I also include objections to such an alternative on the bases that it may not only be unnecessary but also problematic in many of the same ways the conventional accounts are said to be.

## Chapter 1: Moral Realism

This chapter narrows down the moral realist position I am most interested in. Realists, anti-realist and quasi realist will give different accounts of M, N, and R. It is obvious that talk of inter-property relations such as R may only be relevant to those with certain ontological commitments about M.

Let us consider a famous scenario first proposed by Harman but widely used by others in the literature thereafter. A group of young people are seen by a dumpster in an alley senselessly torturing and ultimately burning a cat to death. The act is claimed to be wrong (Harman, 1977).

The skeptical challenge briefly described above asks the following questions:

1. What are the non-moral facts N about the act?
2. What are the moral facts M- if any- of the act?
3. What kind of relation R plays between them?

The one with the quickest response is the moral skeptic. Because the moral skeptic denies the existence of moral facts she has no need for any relation R between the moral and the non-moral. Thus, there are no moral facts concerning the burning of the cat or about any other act for that matter.

A property pluralist in the moral debate- like her counterpart in the mind debate- can also do without a relation R, albeit for completely different reasons from those of the skeptic. For her, whatever moral properties there are may be sui generis and be so without relation to any other kind of property in their ontology. Further, it is implied in their position that physicalism, narrow or broad (Kim, *Physicalism, or Something Near Enough*, 2006), is not the case. Insofar as the problem of queerness is interpreted to be a problem about the relation linking moral facts to natural facts<sup>3</sup>- as I will suggest in chapter 2- there is no motivation for her to take on the task. There is no requirement for an R. There are people that burn cats and there is wrongness. One does not explain the other.

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<sup>3</sup> A suggestion that talk about determination and dependence may be related to arguments about 'grounding' is in Tom Polger's article *Physicalism and Moorean Supervenience*. I agree with this intuition. In it he cites DeRosset and Trogon, 2011.

Other kinds of realism, such as reductive moral realism, say that although there may be a relation between the M's and the N's, this is merely a tautological one. Take the possible reduction of moral terms to their natural counterparts. If M's are reducible to N's then the R that holds between them is merely an identity relation. Thus, when we say that there is something wrong with torturing the cat we aren't saying anything above and beyond what the non-moral description of the act entails. Besides the problem surrounding the strong identification of moral concepts with a strictly non-moral description, there is an open question as to whether reductionist positions can claim to be realists at all (Zangwill, 2005).<sup>4</sup> An identity relation does not explain moral facts after all but rather explains them away.

The quasi realist argues that the reduction that the identity theorist talks about is not attainable and that our moral concepts rely on a semantic dependence relation to natural states of affairs. (Drier, 1992). There is a sense in which the terms we use to talk about a state of affairs supervene on the state of affairs itself. The supervenience thesis in this account however is not between two kinds of things but rather between one kind of thing, i.e. what is out there in the world, and the terms we use to refer to it. So there is nothing about the act of burning the cat that is metaphysically wrong, we just refer to such acts that way for ease of speech.

However, for a non-reductive ethical naturalist- such as a Cornell realist- for example, providing an account of R is a pressing matter. To her, moral facts are an extra kind of thing to be included in the general set of natural facts. Drawing from examples in the biological and economic sciences, according to this account, moral facts are to be dependent on another set of more basic natural facts (Sturgeon, 2006). Whether poverty is a real phenomenon, for example, is assessed by empirical methods that identify it in virtue of facts about a heavily skewed distribution of wealth and resources. According to the non-reductive naturalist, whether or not a moral fact is true or false could in principle be assessed the

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<sup>4</sup> If identity and reduction hold between the moral and the non-moral then there is no reason to continue to think about the moral as something at all above and beyond the non-moral. Therefore the ethical reductionist is hardly a realist.

same way (Brink, 2006)<sup>5</sup>. In particular, by following an explanatory model that identified the explanatory function moral facts were to fulfill (Sturgeon, 2006). Contrary to the reductionist, the Cornell realist thinks of the R of as a determination relation. The moral fact that torturing a cat is wrong is determined by the non-moral description of the act.

For Shafer Landau, on the other hand, the idea that we can redeem moral facts by factoring in their explanatory powers in conventional explanatory models is a problem. It isn't that moral facts have or don't have causal powers, for example; it is that this question may be orthogonal. Simply put, moral facts aren't in the business of causing things (Shafer-Landau, 2003) (Shafer-Landau, 2009). What the moral non-naturalist suggests in its place is a conceptual necessity. Moral facts are redeemable because they are indispensable to complete moral explanations. Without postulating moral facts we could not adequately explain what was happening to the cat. Cruelty is part of the equation.

Besides seriously postulating the existence of moral facts, what these last two positions share in common is a commitment to a sort of broad physicalism (Shafer-Landau, 2009). That is, a commitment to a view of the world that roughly coincides with that depicted by the natural sciences. Thus, I take the following discussion to apply to any non-reductive realist position that also shares a commitment to broad physicalism. Regardless of whether this is a non-reductive ethical naturalism or whether this is a current branding of ethical non-naturalism à la Shafer-Landau, I deem them both in need of an adequate account of supervenience. Having one ensures a necessary link between the moral and the non-moral. This is one of the roles of R. Yet, S is also a structural relation that reflects the idea that one is dependent upon the other.

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<sup>5</sup>In his answer to Mackie, David Brink sates that there is no reason to think that moral properties are sui generis, as Mackie seems to suggest when he accuses the moral realist of Platonism. Instead Brink suggests that "there is every reason to believe that in the actual world moral properties, like other natural properties, are realized materially" And further adds that "this...account of supervenience discharges any explanatory obligation which the argument from metaphysical queerness imposes" (p.89.)

## Chapter 2: The Skeptic's Challenge

### 2.1 THE ARGUMENT FROM QUEERNESS

The argument from queerness is Mackie's response to the cognitivist tradition, which asserts that moral assertions are truth apt and that we can evaluate them as we do other kinds of propositions. The idea behind this challenge is that there is a burden of proof on the realist to account for the referent of moral propositions but also that the only available kind of referent would be a queer one.

There are three elements of importance for us concerning queerness. The first is that the argument has conventionally been interpreted to have two sides: an epistemological one and a metaphysical one. In this section I will focus on these two sides in order to motivate a third side that I deem to be implicit in the metaphysical problem. Particularly, that the argument from queerness also has a requirement that the moral be *properly related* to the non-moral. A proper relation is one that not only links the M's to the N's but that also explains why and how the M's are linked to the N's (Mackie, 2006) (Brink, 2006) (Horgan).

Let us begin with the first element of the argument from queerness. The epistemic problem can be described in the following way. Consider what we know about the world and how we know about it. The things we include in the ontology of our explanations are usually empirically assessed. However, it is unlikely that we can redeem moral facts in the same manner. Whether torturing a cat is morally wrong cannot be settled in conventional ways. In the sciences one example may be that there are no patterns, or laws, of behavior to predict moral outcomes. A more rough analogy is that wrongness can't be pointed to. Related to this analogy is the fact that it is conceptually difficult to imagine what methods, or senses, may be at our disposal as epistemic agents to capture such facts. Particularly, there seems to be an extra normative element to moral facts that does not fall out from our conventional descriptive methods. This

is often deployed as a criticism towards the intuitivist position, which asserts that we have special intuitive abilities by which to recognize the moral facts. The criticism goes something like the following: if you postulate queer kinds of things you will need queer faculties to perceive them.

The metaphysical problem follows that last point. That moral facts are queer is not deduced by the fact that we can't understand them. Rather, we can't understand them because they are queer, inherently queer. The normativity that is ascribed to moral facts makes them inherently different from garden-variety facts. Natural facts are merely descriptive whereas moral facts have something to do with the motivation or the reasoning behind the motivation for an action. Thus, if moral facts do exist they are metaphysically queer. If moral facts are metaphysically queer then we need a similarly queer ability to unveil them in the world. Both are undesirable to the moral realist. Specially if there is a commitment to a broad account of physicalism,

However interesting and strong these two challenges may be, what is important to the aim of this project is the third element of the challenge from queerness. Skeptics such as Mackie and realists from all walks often cite an adequate formulation of R to be of immense importance to the realist project. The mysteriousness- spookiness- of moral facts is also due to the lack of a proper relation that makes sense of them given a widely accepted naturalistic worldview (Mackie, 2006). Thus, the following section will elucidate to what extent supervenience, as a dependence relation, is central to respond to the challenge from queerness

## **2.2 THE PROBLEM OF DEPENDENCE AND DETERMINATION**

According to John Mackie, to counter the queerness argument “something must be postulated which can see at once the natural features that constitute the cruelty, and the wrongness, and the *mysterious consequential link* between the two.” The core of this kind of objection takes the following general form.

- (1) If there is no credible explanation of *how* the moral features of things *depend* on non-moral features, then probably, there are no positive moral truths.
- (2) There is no such credible explanation.
- (3) Therefore, there are no positive moral truths. (Shafer-Landau, 2009)

The skeptic argues that if the realist is going to be taken seriously then she should have an idea of *how* it is that garden-variety natural facts relate to moral facts. That a proper R is an essential part of the realist project is evident in David Brink's reply to Mackie. In it he states the following: "there is every reason to believe that in the actual world moral properties, like other natural properties, are realized materially" And further adds that "this...account of supervenience *discharges* any explanatory obligation which the argument from metaphysical queerness imposes" (Brink, 2006). With S the moral realist not only seeks to answer questions about R but it seeks to do so in a way that is somewhat explanatory of M: an R that tells us how and a why M's are related to N's.

### **2.3 SUPERVENIENCE AS A DETERMINACY/DEPENDENCE RELATION**

A conventional account of physicalism basically says that everything is either physical or dependent on and determined by the physical (Kim, 2005) (Kim, Physicalism, or Something Near Enough, 2006). Moral naturalism can be formulated in a similar way as the view that everything is somewhat as the natural sciences depict it or dependent on and determined by something depicted in them. For now, in order to make the point that the moral realist has a certain commitment to restraints imposed by a naturalist worldview, I will treat both statements as equivalent. Thus, a broad physicalist about the moral may say the following:

If a state of affairs *x* has a moral fact *M*, then *x* is a natural state of affairs and *x* has *M* in virtue of the fact that it has a natural facts *N* that stand in relation *R* to *M*.<sup>6</sup>

The thesis of moral supervenience is the claim that the *R* in the formulation above is something like the following:

R(S): moral facts are determined by/depend on natural facts such that if two states of affairs are said to be identical in *N* then they both must be identical in *M*.<sup>7</sup>

Depending on certain details of how it is formulated, the supervenience thesis allows the realist to make several claims that counter the skeptic's worries about the queerness of moral facts:

- 1) This relation links and *explains* the constancy in coincidental occurrence between certain natural facts and certain moral ones.
- 2) From *S* it follows that moral facts are not a *sui generis* kind with platonic undertones. They are in a sense anchored to garden variety facts. (Think of Brink's statement that moral facts "are realized materially" cited above).
- 3) Thus, *S* makes it so that moral facts are even compatible with a broad account of physicalism. It provides the moral realist with a way to make sense of moral facts as derivative from natural facts in a non-mysterious way.
- 4) If so, moral facts are at least not as metaphysically queer as the skeptic wanted us to believe.

Whether or not *S* successfully counters the epistemic element of the argument from queerness is a question that is left open in this thesis. The limitations of our epistemic methods may be an orthogonal issue to whether or not there is a metaphysical queerness to moral facts that accounts for them. What is important is that by proposing what seems to be a viable dependency account of moral facts the moral realist believes she has also defended moral facts against the argument from queerness.

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<sup>6</sup> Adapted from Tom Polger's 2007 adaptation from Kim's *Physicalism or Something Near Enough*, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Or such that any change in *M* would entail a change in *N*.

## Chapter 3: Supervenience

There are several accounts of S available to the moral realist. However, they are all designed to say roughly the same thing: there is a relation R between N and M. It is one of asymmetrical dependence of M on N (Blackburn, 1971) (Polger, 2007)<sup>8</sup>. In the following section I will run through the main details of each one of the conventional accounts of supervenience as well as the main objections brought forth against them. Specifically I will explain whether or not they can do all that the moral realists wants them to do so as fill-ins for R.

### 3.1 WEAK SUPERVENIENCE

Weak supervenience (WS) is defined as the necessary dependence relation between a set of properties of a state of affairs and another set of properties. If we take A to be a set of properties and B to be another set, A weakly supervenes on B iff necessarily for any state of affairs x and another y, if x and y share all properties specified in B then they would share all properties in A. (Kim, 1987)

Recall Harman's example. Let the set of N properties of torturing the cat (x) contain the burning of a cat (b), the pain inflicted on the animal (p), and ultimately its death (d). The set of M properties contains two main properties: it is either cruel (C) or not cruel ( $\sim$ C)<sup>9</sup>. The cruelty of act x weakly supervenes on x having b, p and d iff two states of affairs with b, p, and d, are also both cruel (or both not cruel). This ensures that- at least in any given world- certain kinds of properties fix other kinds of properties<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> The discussion goes back to G.E Moore who wrote "if a thing is good (in my sense), then that it is so follows from the fact that it possesses certain natural intrinsic properties, which are such that from the fact that it is good it does not follow conversely that it has those properties." ( as cited by Polger)

<sup>9</sup> The complete set of properties contained in this set would include proeprteis such as 'x is cruel but not not cruel' and 'x is cruel and not cruel'. However, only C and  $\sim$ C seem to be relevant given that these other ones are either tautological or logically impossible.

<sup>10</sup> The supervenience relations is identified as both a dependence relation and a determinant one. That is, a given set of properties either depends on or determines (hence the term 'fixes') another.

However, there is a certain desired condition that this relation seems to lack. Recall, the moral realist needs the supervenience relation as a response to the argument from queerness. Specifically, to provide a dependence relation that ensures that moral facts are related in an explanatory way to non-moral facts. WS, however, fails to provide a relation that adequately shows moral facts to be in an explanatory relation to non-moral facts. This is because this relation allows the possibility that in other worlds the same N property be related to another M property  $M^*$  ( $\sim C$ ). We can imagine a world in which act x (torturing the cat) with N properties (b, p, and d) will necessarily be a non-cruel act ( $\sim C$ ) and any other act like it in N will be alike in M. If this is so, then there is a lack of explanation of why the relation holds in worlds like ours but not on others. Further, if this is the case then the claim that N determines the M remains mysterious (Blackburn, 1971). Given that it is conceivable that N and M's may not always be so related, what then allows us to say N determines M? The fact that the torture of a cat may or may not be cruel is not determined by b, p, and d. There is nothing necessarily cruel about torturing a cat in the way described above because under WS there may be world in which b,p, and d are there but do not constitute cruelty.

In the metaethical literature this lack of constancy provides reasons for the antirealist to claim that there is no necessary link between two identical states of affairs even in a given world. The argument goes something like the following.

P1     There is a possible world in which  $N(b,p,d)x$  is necessarily linked to  $M(C)x$  and any other  $N(b,p,d)y$  will have  $M(C)$ .

P2     There is another possible world, indiscernible from ours, in which  $N(b,p,d)x$  is necessarily linked to  $M(\sim C)x$  and any  $N(b, p, d)y$  will have  $M(\sim C)$ .

P3     WS says it is impossible for P1 and P2 to hold in the same world. There is a ban on mixed worlds.

P4     Both P1 and P2 are logical possibilities.

P5 If P4 then their conjunction must also be possible.

P6 if P5 then WS is not the case. (Blackburn, 1971)

Whether or not this is a successful attack in and of itself is not important. The point here is that it is the lack of constancy in WS as a determination relation that puts it such a problematic position vis-à-vis the antirealist. WS fails to properly identify an explanatory relation in which one can say that the moral outcome of a state of affairs is determined by its non-moral properties (or at least that M depends on N).

### 3.2 STRONG AND GLOBAL SUPERVENIENCE

The conventional answer to the objections surrounding weak supervenience is, of course, strong supervenience (SS). SS roughly says that:

A strongly supervenes on B just in case, necessarily, for each x and each property F in A, then there is a property G in B such that x has G, and necessarily if any y has G, it has F.

(Kim, 1984 p.165)

The second modal operator ensures that the relation will hold necessarily in a given world and across worlds. Thus, it seems to offer the moral realist a proper R to redeem her account of M's (Sattlaker, 1996) (Shafer-Landau, 2003).<sup>11</sup> In the case of the cat for example, this relation ensures that torturing a cat is a cruel act anywhere one may be and it is so *in virtue* of its N properties. Upon closer inspection, however, it also reveals SS to have very strong relational commitments between particular properties. Given the SS above and the act x of torturing a cat:

M strongly supervenes on N just in case, necessarily for each act of torturing a cat and each property C in M then there are properties p, b and d in N such that the act of torturing a cat has them, and necessarily any other act of torturing a cat that has p, b and d has C.

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<sup>11</sup> In his book Shafer-Landau argues that too much weight has been given to the thought that no moral facts are ever implied by natural ones and that it may be time to give it up. Some natural facts may indeed imply moral ones. (Shafer-Landau, 2005)

An immediate problem comes once we try to list the N properties that underlie the cruelty of the act in a given world. We will quickly find that b, p and d do not suffice for a meaningful definition of a determinant relation. This is because many more properties seem relevant as a determinant base to M. Let's imagine a case x in which there is indeed pain inflicted to an animal such as a cat, and this pain leads to its death, and there is deliberate burning of the corpse. However, the whole affair rather than being senseless was a matter of survival (s). Such survival allowed no alternatives (a) due to the environment (e) in which the culprits found themselves. In this scenario, s, a, and e seem to be as relevant as p, b and d to inform the moral content of x. There are two main problems with this. The first one is that the list can grow quite long very quickly and could in principle never stop. Therefore the base category N our M's are said to depend on could be impossible to identify. Not knowing what the set N that supposedly determines M includes makes it hard to make the claim that M is determined by N or that M depends in any way on N (Kim, 1987). The second problem is that at any point in which one is to claim a supervenience relation between the moral and the non-moral one has to arbitrarily cut the items included in N. This move may do for a supervenience relation that is merely used for logical consistency.<sup>12</sup> However, it is questionable to what extent such a logical relation may miss to properly represent the very relation it is designed to capture. In the actual world, for example, such a relation may be missing countless cases of moral supervenience merely because of the arbitrary limits on what is included in the N set.

One may group all the variables into (c)ircumstances, (c)ontext and (i)ntentions- for example. However, as I will argue in the following chapter, it is not immediately clear that such groupings are a proper response to the challenge. It may not be obvious, for example, what is meant by the term 'context'. This is because not just any kind of contextual information can be said to determine the moral properties of a state of affairs. Thus N remains underspecified.

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<sup>12</sup> This is because it could not be said to not capture the cases it does capture.

### 3.2.1 Global Supervenience

Whether objections to SS are always successful is another problem. However, it is the case that realists often use a somewhat fortified version of SS thinking they may avoid them. This version of supervenience is called global moral supervenience (GMS). What it does differently is to say that the R we are looking for is between indiscernible worlds and not between indiscernible properties. The relation holds with respect to properties insofar as the worlds are indiscernible: Thus

(GMS) Worlds that are indiscernible in their N properties will be indiscernible in their M properties.<sup>13</sup>

This relation ensures a broad-enough dependence relation between the M's and the N's given an indiscernibility metric between worlds. Harman's example may be a bit tricky to deploy given that whether or not the act will have M property C will depend on whether two worlds are identical in their N's. So, three non-moral properties (b, p, and d) will not suffice anymore to assess indiscernibility. Let the range of non-moral properties be from a to z to cover the complete set of N that is said to be in relation R to M. For moral global supervenience to hold, both worlds must have non-moral properties [a...z]. Suppose now that we encounter a world that instead has natural properties [a\*...z]. Given that a\* is discernible from 'a', the supervenience relation between the moral and the natural may hold but yield a different outcome. This means that a single lack of an atom somewhere in one of the worlds could possibly allow them to differ morally (Kim, 1987).<sup>14</sup> A world with naturally occurring blue apples may be a world in which senselessly torturing a cat is not a cruel act.

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<sup>13</sup> There is a discussion in (Kim, 1987) about whether GS entails SS. It doesn't, thus there can be worlds that satisfy GS without SS. If so, then the same criticism that applied to WS applies to GS. Kim deems this to be a further argument against the supposed strength of GS as a determinacy relation. Here, I grant the realist that GS may be strong enough as is. However, even if so, there will be insurmountable problems for it if it fails to adequately capture what it is supposed to be designed to capture.

<sup>14</sup> J. Kim uses the rings of Saturn to illustrate the same tension proposed here.

## Chapter 4: Morally Trivial Discernibility and Queerness

On one side of the coin the tension is a simple one and it stems from the fact that supervenience relations are often, for the sake of logical and metaphysical prudence fleshed out in terms of indiscernibility. In the following section I will explore how this indiscernibility requirement may not capture the intuition that the supervenience relation often thought to exist between the moral and the non-moral continues to hold beyond strictly identical base categories. This will be discussed via the cases in the first section of this chapter.

On the other side of the coin, once again, we find the argument from queerness. I argue that the indiscernibility principle does not allow conventional accounts of supervenience to adequately characterize the determination relation that seems to intuitively hold between the N's and the M's. Thus it fails to demystify<sup>15</sup> moral facts in face of the challenges from queerness. The three different kinds of examples ahead put in evidence the inadequacy of indiscernibility-based accounts of supervenience to respond to them. The first two cases deal with issues about indiscernibility. The third one is a case of gradation. I argue that both kinds of cases cannot be appropriately accounted for by the conventional accounts of S.

### 4.1 OVERREACH IN GLOBAL SUPERVENIENCE

Let Earth be a planet such as ours. In such a planet, apples are red and torturing cats is wrong. That torturing cats is wrong is a fact that is in virtue of the kind of natural world this is. The first problem with this scenario can be easily described with the following question: what does the color of apples have to do with whether torturing a cat is morally wrong or not? Under GMS, the indiscernibility requirement of N's is a requirement between worlds. If our N's are the properties depicted by our natural sciences then the discernibility will have to be between the complete set of properties as depicted by our

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<sup>15</sup> That is, to redeem moral facts as non-queer.

natural sciences. Being red is a natural property of an apple, in N. Therefore, morally relevant. In this sense, GMS reaches too broadly when it categorizes the morally relevant N base.

At the same time it overreaches, this account is problematically silent in morally irrelevant discernibility gets between worlds. So:

1. Earth has N and M in virtue of N.
2. Included in N is R, the color of apples on Earth.
3. (GMS) Necessarily, any other world with indiscernible N properties from ours will also have M properties.

Imagine now a second world:

4. In Earth<sub>2</sub> the color of apples is  $\neg R$ .
5. Earth<sub>2</sub> is N discernible from Earth.
6. GMS has nothing to say about earth<sub>2</sub>'s N/M relation.

Recall Harman's example. In our world, a few teenagers in the alley are torturing, burning and ultimately killing a cat without any other reason than entertainment. Because of the kind of world that this is, and following GMS all moral properties supervene on all the natural properties herein. If killing a cat is morally wrong (cruel) in our world, it would also be wrong in any other naturally indiscernible world. However, we can't be sure about it being the case in the world with blue apples because it is not indiscernible.

What we can get from this example is not that GMS is completely wrong. What we can see are the limitations. GMS fails to account for a world in which morally irrelevant properties are discernible from ours. When it comes to the supervenience of the moral on the non-moral, this seems specially counterintuitive since only a fragment of the properties contained in whatever interpretation of N seem to be relevant to M's dependence. If there is a way in which moral facts are dependent on natural/non-

moral ones, it is highly unlikely that the color of a fruit bears much weight in the moral considerations of any world.

A more striking example to clarify the tension created by the indiscernibility principle can be to use the spin of an atom somewhere in the vast universe (Kim).<sup>16</sup> The question thus becomes even more pressing: what does S have to do with M? This is an example in which N is being interpreted to be the natural and the natural interpreted to be the physical P. From a narrow physicalist view and following GMS, P-Discernible worlds may be M-discernible worlds. In this paper I have been using the terms natural and non-moral interchangeably as referents to N. But it is evident that the tension delineated by the case above can have an extra dimension when ‘non-moral’ (as opposed to the ‘natural’) is used as the extension of N. While the natural can include whatever is depicted by the natural sciences, the non-moral can include that and more. Mathematical facts, for example, are non-moral facts. Are they to be included as in N when we say that M supervenes on N?

GMS therefore has no explanatory element to it. It relates the M’s and the N’s. However, since it does not ensure either dependence or a determinacy of one over the other it does not manage to capture *the way* in which they are related.

## 4.2 SPECIAL GLOBAL SUPERVENIENCE

One may say that the previous example is something of a caricature since even those who advocate GMS know that nobody means that all moral properties supervene on all natural properties. Rather, what is meant is that all moral properties supervene on all morally relevant natural properties. Recall the move described in the previous chapter in which the moral realist broadly groups sets of properties as belonging to context, circumstances, and intentions. There, I deemed such a move as arbitrary and mentioned the inability to properly define what context meant. The question was, which

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<sup>16</sup> J.Kim uses the number of rings orbiting Saturn as an example of a N property of our world.

elements of the N-context are appropriately relevant to M's? Wedgwood has an idea of what these morally relevant base facts may look like: sociological, biological and mental facts can be an example (Wedgwood, 1999). Some of the Cornell realists also cite some of these specific natural facts as necessary to moral explanations (Sturgeon, 2006). The supervenience claim under this interpretation would look something like this:

i) Necessarily, a world with the relevant N properties- Biological, Mental and Social- will also have M properties.

ii) Necessarily, any other world with indiscernible N properties (BMS) from ours will also have M properties

It seems like an answer: a random atom's spin somewhere in the universe has nothing to do with moral outcomes; biological, sociological and mental facts do. As long as the category base remains constant GMS will hold.

Let us look at an instance in which there is constancy concerning the categorical base. One of Wedgwood's narrowed down relevant N properties will do. We can interpret Wedgwood category of mental properties to include intentions.<sup>17</sup>

Imagine the first scenario to be the same as usual: a kid is burning a cat to death for the fun of it. The second scenario includes a discernible intention of the kid carrying out the act. 'For the fun of it' is now 'because of sheer curiosity for outcomes'. Now, consider the following. Intentions are mental properties. Mental properties are said to be relevant to moral outcomes. Intentions are therefore relevant to moral outcomes of a given state of affairs. In these two scenarios the mental properties, which include intentions, are discernible. Therefore, ii\*\* has nothing to say about whether the moral outcome in the second scenario will be anything like the first

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<sup>17</sup> I take it that whenever we talk about intentions as examples of relevant mental properties to be included in this kind of scenarios we are not talking about the propositional content of such intentions. In other words we can leave out examples that use 'that' or 'this' clauses as bases for discernibility. Although these cases may apply to cases in which the supervening relation being sought is between a natural state of affairs and the semantic terms we use to refer to it, it will not help the realist.

Let us imagine a very similar scenario once more and move on to analyze another possibly relevant aspect of an identical situation: biological properties. In the first case we catch a stray cat, we apply anesthetics and we open its abdomen. Inside we find a gland near its reproductive system that is essential to its proliferation. We remove it in the hopes of reducing the threat to native species represented by the presence of cats. We put the cat back.

In the second case we catch a stray cat. We apply anesthetics and we open its abdomen. Inside we find a gland near its reproductive system that is essential to its proliferation. In this world, however, our biological makeup is such that human DNA has evolved in such a way that we crave for a specific protein found in a cat's reproductive system. We don't need this protein, we just crave it the way one may crave chocolate. We remove the gland mentioned-above since it also happens to be a concentrated source of said protein. We put the cat back.

As in the case above, we are dealing with what Wedgwood deem to be a relevant base property, in this case a biological property. In both cases, there is discernibility and the outcome is the same: GMS is unable to identify a relation that seems intuitively there. Even when we have constancy in the categorical base as defined by Wedgwood, there will be trivial discernibility for which the conventional account of supervenience has no way to account.

### **4.3 GRADATION WITHOUT EXPLANATION**

A different set of problems with the conventional accounts can be further explored via the intuition that the moral outcome of a similar state of affairs clearly admits of degrees within the same M property C.

The following are three N-discernible facts that can be said to have the same M property of C but to a different degree:

1. Deliberate, senseless, and rough poking of a cat is cruel.

2. Deliberate, senseless stabbing of a cat is cruel.
3. Deliberate, senseless burning of a cat is cruel.

There is a sense in which it can be said that number 2 is worse than 1 and 3 is worse still than both. However, the M property to which we are referring is the same. Cruelty C to a different degree. Further, the cruelty of one instance can be explained by appeal to the cruelty in the scenario next to it. One can say that act 2 is wrong because act 1 is wrong and vice versa without much trouble. That is, the relation between the N's and the M's in one case can be invoked to explain the relation between the N's and the M's in the other. And this is despite their N-discernibility. Conventional accounts of supervenience have no way of explaining or even accounting for such an intuitive scenario.

Given these 5 cases we can see how the main characteristic is that the discernibility principle upon which conventional accounts of supervenience are based impedes the relation to capture anything beyond identity. However, in the last case- for example- there is a relation between both cases that seems to hold independently of discernibility. They are similar to each other. Further, this similarity can be said to be sufficiently explanatory. A stronger alternative account, originally proposed by Kim, seems to be able to capture this relation much better:

- i) A state of affairs (x) with certain non-moral (N) properties will necessarily have a certain moral (M) one, and;
- ii) Another state of affairs (y) with *relevantly similar* non-moral (N) properties will also have the same moral property (M) ascribed to the first (x).<sup>18</sup>

If this is so then there is no reason to think that the silence of the conventional accounts is a necessary one or one that makes sense at all. The implications of this alternative will be briefly explained in the last chapter.

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<sup>18</sup> Kim defines it thus: Worlds that are pretty much alike in their B-properties are pretty much alike in their A-properties.

#### 4.4 DETERMINATION, QUEERNESS, AND CONVENTIONAL ACCOUNTS

GMS is supposed to be the adequate formulation of the R that holds between N and M. However, the cases above show that it is not doing a great job. It leaves out cases in which there seems to be an R that holds independently of GMS's constraints. Thus, even if the conventional account of GMS isn't completely wrong, there is at least one alternative formulation that does a better job than it at capturing intuitive cases.

This brings us back to the challenge from queerness. Recall the claims made in section 2.3 about S:

- 1) This determination relation explains the constancy in coincidental occurrence between certain natural facts and certain moral ones.
- 2) From S it follows that moral facts are not a sui generis kind with platonic undertones. They are in a sense anchored to garden variety facts. (Think of Brink's statement that moral facts "are realized materially" cited above).
- 3) Thus, S makes it so that moral facts are even compatible with a broad account of physicalism. It provides the moral realist with a way to make sense of moral facts as derivative from natural facts in a non-mysterious way.
- 4) If so, moral facts are at least not as metaphysically queer as the skeptic wanted us to believe.

GMS is as ill equipped as WS and SS to claim 1. As shown in the cases, it simply does not capture the way in which the N's are related to the M's. If so, the claims 2-4 made in section 2.3 above do not seem to follow from it either.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

The conventional version of global supervenience discussed above can be called indiscernibility-based global supervenience. A world that is indiscernible in its non-moral properties from another will also be indiscernible from it in its moral properties. An alternative account, similarity-based moral supervenience, offers the following:

(SBMS): Worlds that are pretty much alike in B-properties are pretty much alike in A-properties (Kim, 1987)

SBMS ensures that any of the cases above is accounted for. Let us take the case with the blue apples. Blue apples are pretty much alike regular apples. Thus a world in which there are blue apples instead of red apples will be pretty much alike in its moral properties too. Thus, it would also be cruel to torture a cat in such a world. Let us look at the second kind of case, where N is restrained to contain only morally relevant properties such as mental, social and biological ones. In this case the mental or biological properties in consideration (intentions/human DNA) are pretty much alike in both worlds. Thus, torturing a cat will be similarly cruel in both of them.

Lastly, in the third case SBMS allows for the following. The three scenarios are similarly cruel, and yet they may also differ to a degree within their cruelty. Although this gradation may not immediately fall from the formulation above, it does allow for it. If this is the case, it may be that SBMS is the kind of supervenience most suitable to the realist project. By accounting for and including irrelevantly discernible scenarios this account seems to be more intuitively adequate as the R that really holds between M's and N's. If so, it is in better shape to counter the argument from queerness.

One objection to the alternative is that there is no need for it and that the conventional account suffices for the realist's needs<sup>19</sup>. However we have seen in the above discussion how this is not the case. Its limitations are evident in its overreach, silence and its inability to capture R adequately. Although the silence of conventional global supervenience about discernible worlds is logically sound ground to stay in, the possibilities granted by it can be counterintuitive. The intuition that the same relation between the moral and the non-moral holds even in worlds that are slightly discernible from one another is better addressed by SBMS. Specially, if the realist has a genuine commitment with uncovering the way things are, she can do better than being satisfied with safe logical relations just for mere prudence.

It may still be said that seemingly irrelevant details of non-moral descriptions do have discernible moral consequences. Something as irrelevant as the chemical structure of a substance can strongly affect the moral outcome of a state of affairs. These instances show that there is a reason to hold back and keep indiscernibility boundaries on our accounts of supervenience. Here's an example. Consider the two isomers of methamphetamine. One is sold over the counter for allergy alleviation- L-methamphetamine- and the other one is a powerful and illegal narcotic- D-methamphetamine. Imagine someone is attempting to sell L-methamphetamine to someone without previous drug history. Now, imagine another world in which someone in the exact same scenario is dealing not with L-methamphetamine but with D-methamphetamine. The moral outcome of each will be different. Both situations are extremely similar and yet a tiny detail such as the chemical structure of a molecule can indeed cause a change in the supervening level. An indiscernibility account of supervenience would be restrained and allow for this possibility. Slightly different states of affairs may, after all, radically differ in their moral properties. A similarity-based account, on the other hand, could, in principle not be

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<sup>19</sup> Personal correspondence with Shafer-Landau suggests that his position is that conventional accounts of global moral supervenience are not immediately challenged by my account since they remain silent about discernable worlds. Although he acknowledges that the possibility of absurd consequences is there, he deems his position to be a safe enough one.

discerning enough and miss this. It could erroneously, unjustifiably, ascribe M-indiscernibility between both cases.

If minimal but discernible changes can bring about radical changes in moral outcomes, then it may be better that whatever R is remains restrained by an indiscernibility principle. A similarity-based account could be wrong. A discernibility-based account can't. However, there are several problems with the example. The first is the assumption that similarity-based supervenience preempts an indiscernibility-based supervenience from also holding. If similarity-based moral supervenience holds in two worlds that are similar enough then indiscernibility-based supervenience will surely hold in the same worlds were they to be identical.<sup>20</sup>

Secondly, consider the following. Let us say that in our world 'selling D-methamphetamine is wrong *because* exchanging pharmaceuticals for profit is wrong'. We can then move to another world in which L-methamphetamine is being sold and see whether the supervenience relation ascribed first to the world next door also hold in this one. The propositional content changes to reflect the discernibility of chemical structure in the substance. However, SBMS accounts for this kind of discernibility. Selling D-methamphetamine and L-methamphetamine, insofar as both acts constitute 'the exchanging of pharmaceuticals for profit' are similar-enough. They are both wrong. Further, the situations in each world are not only similarly wrong but one is worse than the other. As in the last case of the previous section, there is a sense in which both states of affairs yield the same moral outcome but to a different degree. Accounting for, or allowing for this would be impossible under the conventional account of moral supervenience. It simply wouldn't capture this explanatory supervenience relation between the moral and the non-moral.

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<sup>20</sup> Kim says that indiscernibility-based supervenience may be a special case of maximal similarity-base supervenience. Indiscernibility just means extreme similarity.

A deeper problem for supervenience accounts in general is the following. More recent accounts of supervenience have somewhat given up on the claim that it is in any way a determinacy relation. This is because even though supervenience may be a R that ensures that no change can occur in M without implying a change in N, it does not ensure that this change is a causal/determinant one. If anything, a supervenience thesis merely ensures covariance. Because of this, some have deemed supervenience as insufficient to demystify moral facts (Polger, 2007). The relation links but does not explain why or how M's are related to N's.

However, the kind of covariance relation implied by supervenience is also a sufficiently strong one for the purposes of this thesis. Supervenience as a covariance relation does entail a structural asymmetric element that in a sense reveals an arrow of dependence. It isn't merely an ambiguous covariance in which one can't be sure what, if anything, depends on what. Rather, supervenience is a relation that ensures that only one of the relata is a dependent one. In this sense, insofar as it is able to adequately capture the cases above, it is still in the business of revealing the structure of the world.

Conventional accounts of moral supervenience fail to capture several of the intuitions that we associate with the relation between the moral and the non-moral. A similarity-based account of moral supervenience offers a relation that safeguards said intuitions. It is also in better shape to function as the R that may redeem moral facts as non-queer. It does so simply by virtue of it being a more inclusive and robust kind of relation than the others. It is also a relation that immediately invites questions concerning the nature of similarity and therefore of moral relevance as parts of its project rather than as obstacles to it.

I speculate that further work and/or tests can be conceived to further elucidate this tension by thinking of the supervenience relation in terms of formal instructions to a computer program. One can produce computer simulations of near-to-next scenarios and ask something akin to a moral algorithm to run through them by applying both kinds of supervenience. Once the supervenience relation is given as

rule of constraints we can test whether it is the indiscernibility-based or similarity-based supervenience that offers a more intuitively adequate model. This however, would probably be a long and interdisciplinary endeavor more suitable for a dissertation.

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## Vita

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