Optional Lecture: The Argument from Supervenience for Expressivism

I. Supervenience vs. Grounding

Two relations that are often confused with one another:

- **the supervenience relation:** One set of properties *supervenes on* another set of properties iff (roughly) no two things can differ with respect to the first set of properties without also differing with respect to the second set of properties.

- **the grounding relation:** One property of an object *is grounded in* (or *holds in virtue of*) a second property of that object iff the object’s possessing the second property is what makes it the case that it possesses the first.

The *supervenience relation* holds between *sets of properties*, whereas the *grounding/in-virtue-of relation* holds between *particular instantiations of properties*.

Blackburn claims that moral realists do, and moral expressivists do not, have a difficult time explaining why the set of all moral properties supervenes on the set of all natural properties.

II. The Intuitive Version of the Argument

The following theses both seem plausible:

*supervenience*: It is impossible that two things should each possess the same natural properties without both possessing the same moral properties.

*lack of entailment*: There is no moral proposition whose truth is entailed by any proposition ascribing natural properties to its subject.

Why this combination is supposedly mysterious from the perspective of a moral realist:

Suppose action A has some natural properties and is wrong.

If action B has the same natural properties as A, it follows from *supervenience* that B is also wrong.

But if A’s being wrong is not entailed by its having the natural properties that it does, and if A’s being wrong is an extra state-of-affairs over and above its having various natural properties, then it looks as if it should be possible for that there to exist a B which shares A’s natural properties but not the additional state-of-affairs of being wrong.

III. Digression: Necessity and Possibility

The basic modal operators are *necessity* and *possibility*.

“\(\Box p\) = “\(p\) = “Necessarily, \(p\) = “In all possible worlds, \(p\)”

“\(\Diamond p\) = “\(p\) = “Possibly, \(p\) = “In some possible world, \(p\)”

Necessity and possibility are *duals* of one another, so that:

\(\neg \Box p \iff \Diamond \neg p\)

Blackburn distinguishes the following types of necessity:

*analytic necessity*: \(\Box_a p\) iff accepting that \(p\) is constitutive of competence with the relevant concepts

*metaphysical necessity*: \(\Box_m p\) iff it is true that \(p\) in all metaphysically possible worlds

*physical necessity*: \(\Box_p p\) iff it is true that \(p\) in all physically possible worlds (i.e. in all metaphysically possible worlds sharing the same laws of physics as our own)

Moreover, Blackburn assumes that “\(\Box_a p\)” entails “\(\Box_m p\)” and that “\(\Box_m p\)” entails “\(\Box_p p\)”
IV. The Formal Version of the Argument

Blackburn’s more sophisticated version of the argument allows him to clarify the specific modalities involved in supervenience and lack of entailment.

\[ F = \text{a particular moral property (such as the property being wrong)} \]
\[ G^* = \text{a complex natural property (such as the property being an act of pointless, deliberate cruelty)} \]
\[ U = \text{the grounding (or underlying) relation which obtains between an object and two properties iff the object possesses the first property (entirely) in virtue of its possessing the second property).} \]

Here is how Blackburn formulates supervenience:

\[ (S) \quad \Box [\exists x (Fx \& G^*x \& U(x, F, G^*)) \Rightarrow (\forall x)(G^*x \Rightarrow Fx)] \quad \text{(supervenience)} \]

This is to be contrasted with the following (stronger) entailment claim:

\[ (N) \quad \Box [(\forall x)(G^*x \Rightarrow Fx)] \quad \text{(entailment)} \]

The negation of \((N)\) is the following:

\[ (P) \quad \Diamond [(\exists x)(G^*x \& \neg Fx)] \quad \text{(lack of entailment)} \]

Blackburn claims that the combination of \((S)\) and \((P)\) is problematic for the realist.

\[ G^* / F \text{ world: a possible world in which everything that is } G^* \text{ is } F \]
\[ G^* / \neg F \text{ world: a possible world in which everything that is } G^* \text{ is } \neg F \]
\[ \text{mixed world: a possible world in some things are } G^* \text{ and } F, \text{ and some things are } G^* \text{ and } \neg F \]

If we accept \((S)\) and \((P)\), then we allow that there might be \(G^* / F\) and \(G^* / \neg F\) worlds, but deny that there are any mixed worlds. Blackburn insists that the realist has no explanation for this ban on mixed worlds.

V. Clarifying the Modalities

Blackburn concedes that the following are true:

\[ (S_m) \quad \Box_m [\exists x (Fx \& G^*x \& U(x, F, G^*)) \Rightarrow (\forall x)(G^*x \Rightarrow Fx)] \quad \text{(metaphysical supervenience)} \]
\[ (N_m) \quad \Box_m [(\forall x)(G^*x \Rightarrow Fx)] \quad \text{(metaphysical entailment)} \]

However, he also thinks that the following hold:

\[ (S_a) \quad \Box_a [\exists x (Fx \& G^*x \& U(x, F, G^*)) \Rightarrow (\forall x)(G^*x \Rightarrow Fx)] \quad \text{(analytic supervenience)} \]
\[ (P_a) \quad \Diamond_a [(\exists x)(G^*x \& \neg Fx)] \quad \text{(lack of analytic entailment)} \]

This is enough to generate a problem for the realist.

VI. Is the Expressivist Any Better Off?

An expressivist explanation of the ban on mixed worlds:

“There can be no question that we often choose, admire, commend, or desire, objects because of their naturalistic properties. Now it is not possible to hold an attitude to a thing because of its possessing certain properties and, at the same time, not hold that attitude to another thing that is believed to have the same properties. The nonexistence of the attitude in the second case shows that it is not because of the shared properties that I hold it in the first case” ("Moral Realism," p. 114).

So if the attitudes we express when we make moral judgments are attitudes-held-toward-things-in-virtue-of-their-natural-properties, it follows that supervenience holds.

Why must moral attitudes be of this sort? Because “the role of moralizing [is] to guide desires and choices among the natural features of the world,” and “moralizing is an activity that cannot proceed successfully without recognition of the supervenience constraint” ("Supervenience Revisited," pp. 137, 144).
Appendix A. Companions in Guilt?

objection to Blackburn’s argument: The same argument causes trouble for a realist theory of the supervenience of mental properties on physical properties, of natural kind properties on microphysical properties, and of color properties on surface reflectance properties.

Blackburn’s reply: The analytic version of supervenience is not plausible in any of these cases.

Appendix B. Strong vs. Weak Supervenience

(S) is an example of what is known as weak (or intra-world) supervenience. Strong (or inter-world) supervenience can be formulated as follows:

\( (?): \Box[\exists x](Fx \& G^*x \& U(x, F, G^*)) \supset \Box[\forall x](G^*x \supset Fx) \)  
(strong supervenience)

Can (?) be used to ease the tension between (S) and (P)? Blackburn denies that it can. Suppose we have:

\( (E): \exists x(Fx \& G^*x \& U(x, F, G^*)) \)

From (?) and (E), we can derive the negation of (P):

\( (N): \Box[\forall x](G^*x \supset Fx) \)  
(entailment)

Thus, given our harmless assumption (E), (?) is incompatible with (P). So (?) can hardly be used to ease the tension between (S) and (P).

But this is too quick. Distinguish between two versions of (?):

\( (?_{aa}): \Box_a[\exists x](Fx \& G^*x \& U(x, F, G^*)) \supset \Box_a[\forall x](G^*x \supset Fx) \)  
(technically strong analytic supervenience)

\( (?_{am}): \Box_m[\exists x](Fx \& G^*x \& U(x, F, G^*)) \supset \Box_m[\forall x](G^*x \supset Fx) \)  
(metaphysically strong analytic supervenience)

It is indeed true that (E) and (?) imply (N). However, (E) and (?) only imply (N). And anyway, (?) is much more plausible than (?)

So can (?) save the day? No, it cannot. From (?), all that follows is that, if there is an analytically possible F/G* world, then there are no metaphysically possible mixed worlds and no metaphysically possible G*/¬F worlds. But what we wanted was an explanation of how it could be the case that there are analytically possible F/G* world, analytically possible F/¬G* worlds, but no analytically possible mixed worlds.