

# ACCOMMODATE MORAL SUPERVENIENCE IN MORAL REALISM

By

Beike Lyu

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Supervisor: Simon Rippon

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## ABSTRACT

Most metaethical philosophers accept Moral Supervenience, which is roughly the idea that no moral changes can happen without natural changes. Moral Supervenience indicates the metaphysical necessary relations between moral facts and natural facts. On the other hand, Moral Realism is generally the idea that moral truths are independent of what people might think. Some philosophers argue that Moral Realists cannot explain Moral Supervenience, which is a significant theoretical cost.

In the thesis I will discuss the supervenience challenge to Moral Realism. After introducing Blackburn's original argument and its modern interpretation, I will discuss several responses from different kinds of Moral Realism. I shall argue that they all fail to explain Moral Supervenience based on current debates over the issue. Then I will offer an analysis of why they fail and argue that a metaphysical picture is not enough for a completed explanation of Moral Supervenience. What is required as well is a substantial explanation of why it is the case.

**Key words: Moral Supervenience; Moral Realism; Metaphysical Explanation**

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# CHAPTER 1: MORAL REALISM AND MORAL SUPERVENIENCE

Moral Supervenience, which can be roughly concluded as the idea that no two different things which have the same natural properties can vary morally, is widely held among metaethical philosophers. It is a very intuitive thesis in our thoughts on morality. Imagine we see someone torturing a baby and claim that it is morally evil. It is hard to resist the idea that the same event could be morally right without changing any specific non-moral feature of it.

On the other hand, the idea that moral truths are independent of what people might think is also intuitive, at least we may well not want quite some of our moral judgments, such as that torturing babies for fun is wrong, to be subjective in the sense that the truths of such judgments are determined by people. To put it another way, many of us have the intuition that some moral truths are necessary and independent of subjective thoughts. Moral Realism provides a clear explanation for this from its commitment to the objectivity of moral truths. Therefore, it would be good to accommodate the two intuitive ideas together by endorsing moral realism while maintaining the supervenience of morality.

Moral Realists, however, especially Robust Moral Realists who think moral properties are *sui generis*, may find them in trouble explaining such supervenience relation, because of their commitment to irreducible (to natural or non-moral properties) moral properties. If moral properties and non-moral properties are of different kinds, then the supervenience of morality indicates necessary relations between distinct entities, which is a problem according to many philosophers. Expressivists and other moral anti-realists claim that it is impossible or very hard

for robust moral realists to explain the supervenience of morality while maintaining their own commitments. Simon Blackburn constructed a famous supervenience argument against robust moral realism, leading to a large debate during the past decades.

In this thesis I will mainly discuss the supervenience challenge to Robust Moral Realism. By using the term “supervenience challenge” I mean the general argument based on Moral Supervenience, which begins from Blackburn who first presents it formally.

## 1.1 Moral Realism and Moral Supervenience defined

To set the background<sup>1</sup>, I will start with Simon Blackburn’s definition.

In his paper *Moral Realism*, Blackburn clearly states his focus:

“I shall call the view that the truth of moral utterances is to consist in their correspondence with some fact or state of affairs 'moral realism'”. (Blackburn, 1993, p.111)

This definition relies on the important distinction between cognitivism and non-cognitivism. Roughly speaking, cognitivism in metaethics is the claim that moral statements express beliefs, while non-cognitivists like Blackburn hold the claim that moral statements express not beliefs but attitudes or emotions. For instance, when Beike says that it is wrong to torture a cat, cognitivists shall understand it as that Beike is expressing his belief that torturing a cat is truly morally wrong, and non-cognitivists will say that the picture is totally confused, because Beike is actually expressing his disapproval/anger (the specific attitude/emotion depends on certain analyses offered by non-cognitivists) to the action. Back to the initial issue,

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<sup>1</sup> The distinction between cognitivism, non-cognitivism, Moral Realism and other theories in metaethics is itself a huge debate, which is not to be addressed in the thesis. I believe the rough distinction between cognitivism and non-cognitivism is enough to understand Blackburn’s stand here and his argument.

Moral Realism endorses cognitivism and rejects non-cognitivism.

But this is not enough, since there is something more than mere expressions of beliefs for us to say that there is “a moral reality” like the actual reality, which is sensed from the term “Moral Realism”. A first step shall be to say that for morality to be real there needs to be moral truths, so that we can get rid of the idea from Error Theory, which is the claim that there are no moral truths, so that all our moral beliefs are wrong.

Even with moral truths in hand, it is still not clear what these truths are based on. We can see the differences in the contrast between Moral Realism and other kinds of cognitivism. Shafer-Landau provides such a comparison in his influential book *Moral Realism A Defence*:

“Constructivists endorse the reality of a domain, but explain this by invoking a constructive function out of which the reality is created. This function has moral reality as its output...Subjectivists claim that individual tastes and opinions are the things out of which moral reality is constructed. Relativists cite various conventions or social agreements. Kantians cite the workings of the rational will.” (Shafer-Landau, 2003, p.14)

The usage of terms here, especially “constructivists” might be controversial<sup>2</sup>, but the point Shafer-Landau wants to make is that compared with these theories, Moral Realism demands a much higher level of objectivity, which he puts it as follows:

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<sup>2</sup> The point here is merely to find a workable definition of moral realism. Constructivists like supporters of Kantian Ethics may say that morality is also stance-independent because moral rules apply to everyone no matter their personal attitudes shall be. Maybe Shafer-Landau needs something more to distinguish between constructivism and moral realism. Some philosophers might use Moral Realism to refer to the claim that moral truths are mind-independent. But this is still puzzling since some kinds of Moral Realism seems to rely on people’s mind to account for morality. Here I will dismiss detailed discussions on these issues and keep Shafer-Landau’s distinction here. Again, the point here is to at least roughly distinguish between Moral Realism and other accounts of morality. One key feature moral truths have according to Moral Realism is that moral facts are just similar to some other facts like  $2+2=4$  in the sense that they are not constructed. For a way of discussion see Enoch 2009. If One can also see Cuneo & Shafer-Landau 2014 for a more detailed discussion, which will be covered in later sections.

“There are moral truths that obtain independently of any preferred perspective,” (Shafer-Landau, p.15)

In conclusion, Moral Realism endorses the claim that, not only are there moral truths indicated by moral beliefs, but also that the truth-ness is independent of what people think or want. Therefore, we can list two basic commitments of Moral Realism:

(A) There are moral truths.

(B) Moral truths are stance-independent.<sup>3</sup>

One thing important to note here is that Moral Realism doesn't offer any specific picture of moral metaphysics (and normative theory as well). Different kinds of Moral Realism might have different commitments to what morality is. For instance, someone might hold that moral truths just are natural truths. “Recreational slaughter is morally wrong” (as a specific moral truth) is similar to “sugar dissolves in water” in the sense that they are both natural truths, and one interpretation of this claim is that they are both natural truth because they are both about natural properties. That is to say, moral properties are natural properties<sup>4</sup>. Such claim can be named Moral Naturalism since moral truths are natural truths (or to put it in terms of property, moral properties are natural properties). There is thus no independent moral domain, but a domain that is converted into the natural realm. In contrast, Robust Moral Realism is the view that has more metaphysical commitments, in the sense that moral properties and facts are different from natural ones<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> I borrow the word from Shafer-Landau, 2003, p15.

<sup>4</sup> This part will be discussed later in 2.2

<sup>5</sup> What natural-ness refers to is a huge issue. Here by using the term “Natural” I mean things that can be studied by natural science like physics and chemistry. It is surely not a perfect definition, but I think it is enough to draw the rough distinction between moral and non-moral (if they do exist). In this thesis one can generally view non-moral and natural as the same thing unless specifically mentioned. It is the main reason I use the term Robust Moral Realism instead of Moral Non-naturalism since it is not the issue to address here what natural-ness means

It is Robust Moral Realism that I will focus on in the later discussion, which will be introduced in the next section. But for now, we can stay with Moral Realism because this is what Blackburn wants to argue against in his paper<sup>6</sup>. Blackburn's argument<sup>7</sup> consists of two claims, which I will reconstruct as follows:

(Moral Supervenience) Moral properties supervene on natural properties.

(Lack of Entailment<sup>8</sup>) Moral truths are not logically entailed by natural truths.

Let us see how Blackburn argues for these two claims to get a better understanding of them. Blackburn defines supervenience as the relation between two kinds of properties that, if A property supervenes on B property or a set of B properties B<sub>1</sub>, B<sub>2</sub>... and so on, then it is logically impossible for two different entities to have the very same B properties without having the same A property<sup>9</sup>. This is a point that could be traced back to R. M. Hare, who introduces the notion of Moral Supervenience in the following case:

“Suppose that we say, ‘St. Francis was a good man’. It is logically impossible to say this and to maintain at the same time that there might have been another man placed in precisely the same circumstances as St. Francis, and who behaved in them in exactly the same way, but who differed from St. Francis in this respect only, that he was not a good man.” (Hare, 1952, p.145)

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exactly.

<sup>6</sup> One clarification that can be made here is that Blackburn does not want to argue for non-cognitivism. His ideal theory, which is named expressivism, is claimed to be compatible with cognitivism, though in a different sense. Roughly speaking, Blackburn tries to borrow Deflationism of truth to keep cognitivism, while rejecting the thesis of Moral Realism. His target will be best captured in terms of “Moral Realism combined with correspondence theory of truth”. I will not go further into this question since this does not matter for our discussion of Moral Supervenience.

<sup>7</sup> He gave the credit to C. Lewy who actually presented the argument in a conversation. See the footnote in Blackburn, 1993, p114.

<sup>8</sup> The name comes from Blackburn, p116. He provides a modest version of Lack of Entailment, saying that all he needs is that there are some moral truths that are not logically entailed by natural truths. This is to be discussed when we meet Shafer-Landau's defense of Moral Realism in the later sections. Also, one thing worth noting is that this line of thought resembles Moore's famous Open Question Argument.

<sup>9</sup> For the exact phrases and discussions from Blackburn see Blackburn, pp114-115.

The meaning of Moral Supervenience and its implication will be carefully addressed in the next section. For now, we can move to the Lack of Entailment claim. In fact, it is also partly inherited from Hare's discussion, as he put it right after the St. Francis case:

“It is not the case that there is any conjunction C of descriptive characteristics such that to say that a man has C entails that he is morally good.” (Hare, p.145)

The point here is that we cannot tell what kind of moral properties A has simply from the concepts of those natural properties A have alone. This resembles Hume's prohibition from “is” to “ought”, namely that we cannot move automatically from natural descriptions to moral descriptions (also labeled as Hume's dictum). In Blackburn's case, the point is that natural concepts don't logically lead us to moral judgments. For instance, all the natural elements in the concept “torturing” and “cat” don't lead us to the moral judgment “torturing a cat is wrong”, simply because there is nothing moral in those concepts. In order to make such moral judgments we need to find something else, like empirical evidence such as actual feelings and emotions one may have for those actions. This claim is also closely related to the famous Open Question Argument from Moore. For those who are unfamiliar with the Open Question Argument from Moore, here is a simplified account. Moore invites us to suppose that utilitarianism is the right moral theory, therefore pleasure is morally good. He then asks whether “Is pleasure good” is a closed question, which means that if you are a competent language user and knows the meanings of the terms you can tell whether this is true or not. His conclusion is that such questions are open questions in the sense that you cannot tell simply from the meanings of the terms concerned. For detailed discussions see Moore 1903. All these similar accounts roughly mean the same thing, that we cannot tell moral truths from non-moral accounts.

Of course, both these claims can be challenged, which has been happening almost all the time since Blackburn's argument was published. The point here is to clarify the meaning of the argument in order to dig further, and now the question is, how do Supervenience Relation and Lack of Entailment jointly entail problems for Moral Realism? Blackburn argues that it is very mysterious for moral realists to accept both. Suppose action A is morally good. If moral properties cannot be derived from natural properties, then it is logically possible that A be identical to all the natural properties it now has, and ceases to be morally good in some time<sup>10</sup>. But this kind of possibility is clearly ruled out by the Supervenience Relation. In later papers, Blackburn uses "ban on mixed worlds" to describe this situation. Moral Supervenience allows for logical possibility of World<sub>1</sub> where all Fs are Gs and World<sub>2</sub> where all Fs are not Gs. However, it doesn't allow for the logical possibility of a mixture of these two worlds, which is to say, somehow World<sub>1</sub> and World<sub>2</sub> cannot "meet with each other". (Blackburn, 1984, pp.184-185; 1993, pp.135-136)

This is mysterious according to Blackburn, and he claims that moral realists have little to say about this mystery. In contrast, Blackburn argues that an anti-realistic theory can easily explain this: For expressivists like him, they can simply say that moral properties supervene on natural properties because we express the same moral attitudes toward things with the same natural properties. If we disapprove of actions like torturing a cat, then it would be a mistake not to disapprove of the very same actions. For moral realists such "moral attitude talking" is

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<sup>10</sup> See Blackburn, pp114-115. For the original phrases. One thing important to note is that Blackburn introduces the dimension of changes here since he uses words like "cease to be" to show how things ought to be the same following Moral Supervenience. It is a tricky question whether being in a certain period of time is a natural property, and we can see this question is avoided in the following discussions of weak and strong supervenience, and the argument of "ban on mixed worlds" as well because talking in terms of possible worlds is applied. However, there is another question concerning the difference between global and strong supervenience. It will be brief discussed later and for detailed discussion see Kim 1987.

not available because of their commitment to cognitivism.

To draw a conclusion here, what Blackburn tries to present is an explanatory demand on Moral Supervenience, which he claims cannot be satisfied by moral realists since the only thing they can rely on is refuted by Lack of Entailment. We will get closer to this argument in section 1.3. Now it's time to see how Moral Realism is influenced by such argument at first sight, which leads us to another focus in this paper: Robust Moral Realism.

## **1.2 Understand Blackburn's argument further**

We've seen how Blackburn tries to gather Moral Supervenience and Lack of Entailment together to argue against Moral Realism. Also, it is Robust Moral Realism that receives the most severe challenge. However, neither of Blackburn's claims is explicitly explained, in this section we will try to clarify the important details in the argument and to see what is going on in the debate over this issue. Generally, there are several things worth discussing: Moral Supervenience and Lack of Entailment as two main claims, and how effective this argument works against Moral Realism. Before we move on there are two things to note here. First, all the discussions in the section are meant to clarify Blackburn's argument and its development, not to defend or challenge it. Second, different philosophers have different interpretations on this argument, which will be covered throughout the discussion when we encounter important issues like variety of necessity.

Let us start with Moral Supervenience. Based on Hare's discussion, Jaegwon Kim develops a general notion of supervenience as a relation of dependence or determination. He distinguishes two different kinds of supervenience relations, one weak and the other strong,

stating as follows:

“A weakly supervenes on B if and only if necessarily for any property F in A, if an object x has F, then there exists a property G in B such that x has G, and if any y has G it has F.” (Kim, 1984, p.163)

“A strongly supervenes on B just in case, necessarily, for each x and each property F in A, if x has F, then there is a property G in B such that x has G, and **necessarily** if any y has G, it has F.” (Kim. p165.)

The first thing to note is that in this kind of construction on supervenience relation, G does not have to be one single property. Kim uses sets of properties in another way of expressing supervenience. The point here is that for any supervenience relation there is supposed to be a basis, in this case natural properties, for the things, in this case moral properties, to supervene on, which is clearly indicated in the expressions above.

As Kim put it, the key difference between weak and strong supervenience is that weak supervenience only requires such relation to hold within the world, while strong supervenience requires such relation to hold across every possible world because of the second extra “necessarily”. We can see this through the following case: Suppose there are World<sub>a</sub> and World<sub>b</sub>. In World<sub>a</sub> all the killings are wrong, and in World<sub>b</sub> some killings are right while other killings are wrong (all the killings concerned here are identical in all natural respects<sup>11</sup>). This scenario

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<sup>11</sup> Of course one could say that this cannot be possible because no two different killings will be in the same space-time location and about the very same person. Dreier provides a way of treating this issue. Generally speaking, the idea is just that we restrict the range of natural properties concerned in given cases. For instance, in this case the victim’s job is morally irrelevant so it should not be in our supervenience base, and Moral Supervenience holds even if the two victims have different jobs. This leads to other questions like what should be contained in the supervenience base, and I believe it is answered by normative theories other than metaethical ones. For details of Dreier’s strategy see Dreier 2019, pp.1397-1399 (Section 2.2).

is accepted by weak supervenience but clearly refuted by strong supervenience.<sup>12</sup> This distinction clearly relates to how one interprets necessity in these two definitions, which is a very crucial point if we want to understand Blackburn's argument. The debate over varieties of necessity is too complicated to fully address here, but several commonsense cases could be helpful. I believe that we could draw a rough distinction between logical necessity, conceptual necessity and nomological necessity by the following case. Before I illustrate the differences among them, I need to stress that it is only a rough distinction that could be used here instead of a reliable set of definitions that could be used in rigid studies of metaphysics of modality. Anyway, the latter topic is not what I am going to discuss in this paper.<sup>13</sup>

We can begin by considering ordinary expressions of necessity like "It must be the case that the sun rises from the east". This makes sense since it does be necessary that the sun rises from the east. What kind of necessity is it? I will label it as nomological necessity since we can imagine that in another possible world, according to a different relative location distribution of the sun and the earth in the cosmos, it is necessary that the sun rises from the west. It would still be meaningful to maintain that there is some kind of necessity in this case. We can understand it from another way that nomological necessity refers to necessity that is discovered by scientific research, which consists of empirical observations and experiments. It is an interesting question that how empirical methods successfully find such necessary relations, but for the sake of discussions here we can set this issue aside. I label it nomological because this

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<sup>12</sup> See also Dreier 1992, p.14.

<sup>13</sup> See McPherson, Tristram, "Supervenience in Ethics", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2022/entries/supervenience-ethics/> for an elaborated discussion on this issue (mostly in section 1.2). Much of the discussion here is also inspired from this entry. Note that I am not arguing in defense of this way of identifying or distinguishing different kinds of necessity, but simply trying to set the background for further discussion on Moral Supervenience.

kind of necessity seems to be nothing more than regularities. Anyway, this is not the issue that I will discuss here.

Now let us consider another case where someone says that it is necessary that 2 is a number.<sup>14</sup> Would it still be possible to imagine a world where 2 is not a number? I would not entirely rule out such possibility, but it turns out to be very hard that we construct a possible world like that. The reason is that the very idea of 2 conceptually contains that 2 is a number. The same reasoning applies when we consider the sentence “Bachelors are unmarried men”, since by the very meaning of things concerned in this proposition bachelors are just unmarried men. I will label this kind of necessity as conceptual necessity. Some philosophers label this kind of necessity as analytical, and others will try to distinguish between conceptual and analytical necessity, claiming that concepts are meanings expressed by our words or sentences while analytical necessity applies only to sentences. We will come back to this point in detail in later parts when we discuss conceptual moral realism.

There is also another kind of necessity that I shall call it logical necessity, in the sense that when we assert claims like apples are apples or moral properties are not non-moral properties. This kind of necessity is even more solid than conceptual necessity that it does not depend on the meanings that concrete concepts hold. We can abstract the logical form of such expressions, which are  $A$  equals  $A$  and  $A$  does not equal to negation of  $A$ . These claims are necessary because they are logical truths, which are certain cases of logical laws. It would be another issue here whether logical laws themselves should be viewed as conceptual truths or the other way round, but I believe the commonsense distinction is clear that conceptual truths are necessary because

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<sup>14</sup> I borrow the case from Fine 2002, p.254

of the meaning of those concepts concerned, while logical truths are independent of the meanings concerned. We can see that conceptual truths like “bachelors are unmarried men” rely on the laws of logic as well.

The notion of metaphysical necessity is often discussed when it comes to necessity. I’ve tried not to use this name because the exact meaning of metaphysics is far from clear and straightforward, and different philosophers use metaphysical necessity in different ways. Here I quote Fine’s idea for a little elaboration. Fine understands metaphysical necessity as the kind that “obtains in virtue of the identity of things” (Fine, 2002, p.254). But what does Fine mean by “in virtue of the identity of things”? Considering the examples Fine uses in his account, we can see that metaphysical necessity often overlaps with conceptual necessity, so it would be reasonable to think that metaphysical necessity is a broader notion which contains conceptual necessity. Another rough description could be that metaphysical necessity concerns what it is to be a certain entity. For instance, “water is H<sub>2</sub>O” is often considered to be a metaphysical necessary truth because it is just what water is supposed to be. However, one might still question the real difference between conceptual necessity and metaphysical necessity. To put it another way, we can ask: Why can’t we say that we are trying to capture the concept of A when we are asking what is it to be A? It is not itself the task to fulfill here. Although we can understand the supervenience challenge to Robust Moral Realism without making such distinction clear, I believe it is still a crucial issue to address because when we turn to various explanations provided by robust moral realists, the distinction between metaphysical and conceptual necessity keeps recurring. For now, I suggest that we set this question aside temporarily and get back to where we start.

With the meanings of different kinds of necessity in mind, we can view weak supervenience as an expression of nomological necessity, while strong supervenience expresses conceptual necessity. The next question is, what does Blackburn mean when he is talking about Moral Supervenience in his argument? With all the “logical possibility” talking in his papers, it seems to be the case that Blackburn is talking about conceptual possibility in his argument. Dreier provides a similar interpretation of Blackburn’s argument but in more detail. His conclusion is that Blackburn tries to show that weak supervenience is true while strong supervenience is false when it is to be understood as a conceptual claim. The “ban on mixed worlds” is a clear illustration of this: By accepting the logical possibility of World<sub>a</sub> and World<sub>b</sub> (if we recall that they stand for two naturally indiscernible worlds but vary morally) existing separately, Blackburn is clearly accepting weak supervenience. By refuting the logical possibility of the mixture of World<sub>a</sub> and World<sub>b</sub> he is refuting strong supervenience, which I believe is what he is trying to express with Lack of Entailment. Recall that Lack of Entailment tells us that we cannot derive moral judgments from natural properties. If this claim is false, then it should be the case that whenever we know the natural properties of a certain action, we should also be able to derive the moral properties of this action (take actions as examples here). This is just to say that conceptually natural properties entail moral properties. If this is the case then strong supervenience should be true since all it needs is the conceptually necessary connections between natural properties and moral properties in every possible world, which will be satisfied if Lack of Entailment is falsified.

We can see from all the discussions above that Blackburn’s argument could be simple, if we are going to understand Moral Supervenience as a pure conceptual claim. But this is not

obvious since one can understand Moral Supervenience as a metaphysical relation, which totally makes sense. McPherson follows this approach and constructs the supervenience challenge in the following way<sup>15</sup>:

(P1) Moral Supervenience states that no metaphysically possible world that is identical to a second world in all base respects can be different from the second world in its ethical respects.

(P2) Robust Moral Realists can only take Moral Supervenience as a brute necessary connection between discontinuous properties.

(P3) According to Hume's dictum, brute necessary connections between discontinuous properties count as a significant theoretical cost.

(C1) Therefore there is a supervenience challenge to Robust Moral Realism.

We can see that this way of presenting the supervenience challenge inherits part of Blackburn's argument in the sense that they both ask for an explanation on Moral Supervenience. McPherson follows Blackburn's thought that Moral Supervenience would be a brute necessary connection between natural properties and moral properties. (McPherson, 2012, p.217) Blackburn would present it as that Moral Supervenience is thus "an opaque, isolated, logical fact, for which no explanation can be proffered" (Blackburn, 1993, p.111) because of Lack of Entailment. What makes his argument different is that McPherson views Moral Supervenience as a purely metaphysical thesis to avoid confusion on analyticity and related issues.

Several things should be noted. The most important thing is that following Blackburn's thought, the supervenience challenge is not a critical argument against Moral Realism in general.

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<sup>15</sup> It is a reconstructed version of McPherson's argument and for his original phrases see McPherson, 2012, p.217.

Even if moral realists have no words for explanation, they could simply bite the bullet and turn to other theoretical merits to show that their theory is still of attractiveness. Also, here we can see that the distinction between metaphysical and conceptual necessity leads to different interpretations and developments of Blackburn's original argument. We will see how this distinction influences various responses from robust moral realists in the following sections.

Now that we have two different interpretations of the supervenience challenge against Robust Moral Realism in general, which is due to different understandings of Moral Supervenience. Though it is still not entirely clear what Blackburn's argument shows, we can move to the next part, which is to clarify the target of Blackburn's argument, where Lack of Entailment will be discussed in detail. In the next chapter I will show that Robust Moral Realism is the real target of Supervenience Argument by specifying different kinds of Moral Realism.

### **1.3 Conclusion**

McPherson's reconstruction of Blackburn's argument naturally leads us to possible defenses of Moral Realism. First, we could simply neglect the supervenience challenge by refuting (P1), claiming that Moral Supervenience does not hold. For my purpose in this paper, I will not elaborate on this point. I believe that we have at least two reasons to accept Moral Supervenience. First, as it is showed in Hare's St. Francis case, the idea that the exact natural duplicate of St. Francis must be a good man as well, is highly intuitive. If we don't hold Moral Supervenience, then we would lose quite a part of objectivity in morality. Second, it is also highly plausible that moral properties are not totally isolated from natural properties, and Moral Supervenience is one certain kind of attempt that tries to capture and describe the relation

between moral properties and natural properties. If we don't want to accept Moral Supervenience, then we might well be in need for another kind of relation between moral properties and natural properties, and the alternative will not necessarily be better (McPherson, 2012, pp.210-211).

Also, we could say that Moral Supervenience needs no explanation, which is to say (P3) is false. I would not say that it is a dead end, since sometimes we do so in our philosophical thinking. For instance, we may think that there is something to explain in the fact "copper is electrical", like what it takes to be electrical in terms of the physical structure of copper and the relevant laws of nature. But if someone wants to ask further questions like: why does something with such nature turn out to be electrical? We will want to say that there is no explanation available for this question, or that no such explanation is needed. In other words, the fact that copper in such nature is electrical is a fundamental fact of the world. It is what turns out to be. For Moral Supervenience it might be possible to do the same. Another alternative to presenting the idea would be to say that Moral Supervenience is a primitive fact of the world, which could be elaborated in more detail. I am not going to discuss this approach to Moral Supervenience here simply because it is not intuitive to me. Moral Supervenience is a far more complicated fact (if it is a fact as is assumed in this paper) than those which are considered to be in some sense fundamental. I will not develop this issue deeper since it concerns the notion of explanation. For my purpose in the paper, I say we stay with the more substantial step which accepts the claim that Moral Supervenience requires an explanation.

On the other hand, my focus in this paper is (P2), which will be carefully speculated in the next chapter, along with a detailed discussion of different kinds of Moral Realism as a closely

related issue.

## CHAPTER 2: STARTING FROM THE CONCEPTUAL LEVEL

We've seen Blackburn's argument based on Moral Supervenience. From the beginning, it is an argument against Moral Realism. What it actually shows is the explanatory demand for Moral Supervenience. Explaining Moral Supervenience shall be a common task for everyone, and Blackburn's claim is that anti-realists like him do better than moral realists, which is indicated by (P2).

How might moral realists respond? To structure the answers provided by moral realists it would be useful to focus on Lack of Entailment since this is the reason Blackburn thinks why Moral Realism cannot accommodate Moral Supervenience. Generally speaking, moral realists have two options here: one is to deny Lack of Entailment, the other is to accept Lack of Entailment and seek other explanations of Moral Supervenience. In this chapter I will introduce paradigm responses following these two approaches and examine them in turn. One thing to note before we dig into details is that those responses are based on specific accounts of Moral Realism, therefore the discussion on Moral Supervenience surely contains much on moral metaphysics. Another point to recall here is that we've seen two ways of interpreting Blackburn's supervenience challenge, one to understand Moral Supervenience as a conceptual truth, the other to see it as a metaphysical truth. I will begin with the first one since it is what Blackburn originally poses, and in later sections we will see how this distinction influences different views of moral metaphysics.

## 2.1 Denying Lack of Entailment: Moral truths as conceptual truths

As we've seen, Blackburn denies entailment between moral and natural properties with Lack of Entailment. The direct move to defend Moral Realism would be to deny the conclusion and argue that such entailment could be made. To do this, we need moral truths as conceptual truths. If moral truths are conceptual truths, Moral Supervenience is easily explained simply by the conceptual entailment between natural and moral properties.

But before we move to claims in defense of conceptual truths, one question is ahead of us: what are concepts? We've already seen the differences between conceptual and metaphysical necessity, but as I've mentioned, the differences could be tricky according to our understanding of concepts. To answer this question is clearly beyond what I am supposed to do in this paper, but a little scratch on the surface in the following passage, which shall be done along with the discussion on responses offered by moral realists, will help clarify the debate on the metaethical issue we've been discussing.

The best formulation following this path comes from Cuneo and Shafer-Landau in their 2014 paper *The Moral Fixed Points*. They claim that several moral fixed points as conceptual truths are necessarily contained in any reasonable sets of moral rules (Cuneo & Shafer-Landau, 2014, p.405). Here are some paradigms of such "moral fixed points":

- It is pro tanto wrong to engage in the recreational slaughter of a fellow person.
- It is pro tanto wrong to torture others just because they have inconvenienced you.

(Cuneo & Shafer-Landau, 2014, p.405)

The reasons for taking some moral truths (and other truths in general) as conceptual truths provided can be listed as follows:

(a) If they (moral truths concerned here) are true, they are necessarily true.

(b) They enjoy “framework status,” i.e., they set the boundaries of what counts as acceptable or genuine moral discourse.

(c) To deny them evokes bewilderment.

(d) They are knowable a priori<sup>16</sup>.

Cuneo and Shafer-Landau admit that these four features are only what they discover to be necessary evidence for any proposition to be a conceptual truth, while a completed list of necessary and sufficient conditions on conceptual truths is left undecided. They don't give a concrete argument on why these features are important concerning conceptual truths but instead hold it as highly intuitive. To refute this argument, one needs to argue either that Cuneo and Shafer-Landau are relying on the wrong definition of conceptual truths, or that those moral fixed points don't suffice to these features. I will mainly focus on the first approach considering space limitation and argue that despite the conceptualized picture of moral truths can easily explain Moral Supervenience on a conceptual level, the project itself meets serious challenges.

First thing to note here is that, Moral Supervenience is widely held to apply to most or quite many moral properties, which means that if we want conceptual moral truths to explain Moral Supervenience, we need quite a long list of moral fixed points. Surely Strong Supervenience doesn't apply to every moral property since we are not likely to accept the claim that all moral rules are metaphysically necessary, but we would be much better off if many of the important ones are so. This is clearly beyond what Cuneo and Shafer-Landau want to commit since Moral Supervenience is not the main issue in their paper, and what they want to argue is the core claim

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<sup>16</sup> I borrow the phrases from Killoren, 2016, p.166, which are the same as the original ones in Cuneo & Shafer-Landau, 2014, p.407-8.

that “there are non-natural moral truths” (p.401). But even if we restrict the discussion within the realm of the so called “moral fixed points”, the problem here is that all these reasons are not convincing, only to make the conceptual picture more troubling. It is not obvious that “recreational slaughter is morally wrong” is a conceptual truth. Suppose we meet a scientific maniac (maybe name him Mask) who turns out to only care about his research. When asked about whether recreational slaughter is morally wrong, he simply replies that it doesn’t matter if that helps his research. Cuneo and Shafer would say that Mask suffers from a conceptual deficiency, but on what ground are they making such a judgment? The reply in the paper is that if Mask doesn’t think recreational slaughter is morally wrong, he fails to realize that **the essence of the concept “recreational slaughter” and “wrongness” entail that if something falls under the former concept it necessarily falls under the latter as well.** But what is the essence of concepts? Is this claim necessarily contained in the four key features of conceptual truths mentioned above?

I understand why Cuneo and Shafer-Landau introduce essence talking in their paper since they want to make a clear distinction between conceptual and analytical necessity. In their view concepts are different from linguistic entities, therefore being much more objective. Taking the stock example “Bachelors are unmarried men” here, the point is that the sentence expresses an analytical truth which is true in virtue of the meanings of the terms “bachelor” and “unmarried men”. Notice that the meanings of words can be changed since they are just outcomes of human construction. On the other hand, “Bachelors are unmarried men” can be seen as a conceptual truth, in the sense that even if the meanings of all the words in this sentence have changed, the proposition this sentence expresses is still true. It is part of their aim that by going conceptual

Cuneo and Shafer-Landau can avoid tricky metaphysical issues like moral properties and facts. They argue that their kind of Moral Realism is a certain kind of non-naturalism because of non-natural moral truths instead of traditional non-natural moral properties or facts. Through the essence talking it is also clear that moral truths are conceptually necessary (if they are conceptual truths as Cuneo and Shafer-Landau claim) and avoids the Open Question Argument since it is about analytical naturalism in this sense. However, it opens a new realm of concept that is independent of other things in the world, which is just another form of the old problem.

We can see this by comparing the proposition “Bachelors are unmarried men” (A1) with the proposition “Recreational slaughter is morally wrong” (A2). Both are conceptual truths, but (A1) is so because the concept “bachelor” is identical to the concept “unmarried men”, which suffices to what Cuneo and Shafer-Landau mean by the essence talking. However, for (A2) it is not the case that the concept “recreational slaughter” is identical to “being wrong”, so Cuneo and Shafer-Landau need some sort of justification, which needs a detailed account of metaphysics of essences of concepts.

I am not arguing that the essences of concepts cannot be employed to explain Moral Supervenience (though it is not clear at all for me). Here I am neutral on this issue. The point is that the essences of concepts should be another crucial feature (we can label it as (e)) of conceptual truths as well as the listed ones<sup>17</sup>; instead of something supplementary to Cuneo and Shafer-Landau’s view, and more importantly, statements of essences of certain concepts are not always self-evident. Before we come to discuss whether Moral Supervenience is explained we

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<sup>17</sup> More things are discussed in Cuneo and Shafer-Landau’s paper, such as the relation between propositions and facts. I think my argument rests independent of these closely related issues and for the sake of space here I don’t include detailed discussion on them here.

need to know what the essences of moral concepts are. As Ingram rightly points out, it is ad hoc to accuse people of conceptual deficiency simply by assuming that moral truths are conceptual truths without a detailed account of the essences of moral concepts (Ingram, 2015, p.3). Such an account is of course possible, but following this line of thought we have another reasonable doubt about the epistemic demand of this approach. How are we going to know anything about the essences of concepts? According to (d), we are supposed to know them independent of any empirical evidence. But then how is the process going to be? If we recall Mackie's error theory, which claims that moral properties are too queer to exist or to be grasped intellectually, we can see that Cuneo and Shafer-Landau's conceptual moral realism faces the very same challenge. This is not to say that this path is a dead end, but only to say that what Cuneo and Shafer-Landau need is more than what they have provided so far. I understand that this is in general a challenge to the Fregean essentialist view of concept, but it is a reasonable doubt to put here since it is crucial to the whole project. According to Killoren and Kyriacou, (a) to (d) should be understood as reasons to believe that moral fixed points are conceptual truths, which bear (e) as an important feature. The problem is just that from (a) to (d) we simply cannot step forward into (e) naturally.

So, from my perspective it is still an open question that whether these "moral fixed points" are conceptual truths. This is not to say that they are not necessary truths, but that they might belong to different kinds of necessity<sup>18</sup>. For instance, some philosophers might take moral truths as normative necessities rather than metaphysical necessities (For instance see Fine 2002;

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<sup>18</sup> There is another way of treating moral truths as conceptual truths, provided by Jackson and Pettit. They offer a conceptual analysis of moral terms and give them a functional meaning in the complete network. For the sake of space consideration, I don't give a detailed discussion here and remain neutral whether this project will work. For more see Jackson 1998, Jackson and Pettit 1996.

Rosen 2010).

Even if we've successfully made the claim that many moral truths are conceptual truths and it could be said that certain natural properties necessarily underlie moral properties, it is still not clear that "Moral properties supervene on natural properties" is a conceptual truth since it seems hard to see that the essences of concept "moral property" and "natural property" (suppose these two concepts are clear despite all the current confusions) necessarily entail this proposition. Surely one could claim that Moral Supervenience as a general conceptual truth needs no explanation (for instance see Enoch, 2011, p.143), because it is what we could gain from the meanings of the terms. But this approach is not that suitable for Cuneo and Shafer-Landau because of their commitment to a much more objective view of concept which is very different from linguistic terms. This adds to the epistemic concern that one has any reliable way of getting to know such conceptual truths.

In conclusion, this is still way to go from Cuneo and Shafer-Landau's project to a promising account of moral truths.

## **2.2 Accepting Lack of Entailment: synthetic moral truths**

I have provided reasons to believe that moral truths are not conceptual truths, which means Lack of Entailment is promising. But it doesn't mean that moral realists can only take the conceptual way to explain Moral Supervenience. In discussion of Blackburn's argument, Klagge quickly realizes that instead of talking in terms of analytical necessity like Blackburn does, metaphysical necessity could work in explaining Moral Supervenience as well (Klagge, 1984, p.375). The point is that while natural properties don't entail moral features from the

meanings of those natural terms concerned (along with the laws of logic of course), it could be argued that natural properties necessitate moral properties in a non-analytical way. Shafer-Landau provides similar arguments in his early response to Blackburn. In his paper *Supervenience and Moral Realism* he states:

“The reason any given B\* cannot give rise both to M and to not-M is that the presence of B\* entails the presence of M.” (Shafer-Landau, 1994, p.148)

Shafer-Landau makes it clear in later parts that he is talking about metaphysical entailment here, so what he really claims is the idea that Moral Supervenience as a conceptual mystery only indicates that we don't fully understand the metaphysical relation between natural properties and moral properties<sup>19</sup>.

We can see that Shafer-Landau is relying on a specific kind of Moral Realism, namely, Metaphysical Naturalism, to answer the supervenience challenge. Take one supervenience instance like St. Francis. Following metaphysical naturalism, St. Francis is a good man **in virtue of** his certain natural characters, say, virtuous personalities and good actions he has done. Anyone who has the same characters would be good as well, which is just what Moral Supervenience means, and this is explained by the metaphysical relation between natural and moral properties concerned in this case. Such metaphysical relation is different from conceptual entailment since it is not ensured by the meanings of goodness and related natural properties but by their metaphysical content, namely, what goodness and those natural properties are. In

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<sup>19</sup> Here it will be important not to mistake Shafer-Landau for a reductive moral naturalist whose view is that moral properties can (and should) be reduced to natural properties, though this kind of view is compatible with his claim. He takes Moral Non-naturalism as his own metaethical stand. More specifically, Shafer-Landau might admit that only natural entities exist and claim that moral properties are irreducible to natural ones. Moral properties are necessarily instantiated by natural properties, which is different from identity relation. For more details see Shafer-Landau 2003.

this sense, we can also call this view Synthetic Moral Realism.

This is a very strong response to Blackburn's argument. If moral properties are metaphysically necessitated by natural properties, then Moral Supervenience would not be mysterious at all since metaphysical necessitation is a stronger relation than supervenience relation. Therefore, if this project itself is promising then we can say that we have something available for Blackburn's supervenience challenge.

The crucial issue here is how such metaphysical necessitation is done. Naturally one might think about reducing moral properties to natural properties. If moral properties are reducible to natural ones, then it is quite trivial that they are metaphysically necessitated by those properties which they are reduced to. The problem is that there have been few satisfactory accounts of how such reduction is done. Can the property of being morally right be reduced to maximizing overall happiness? I believe the answer is just no, and the reality of morality is too complicated to capture in this way<sup>20</sup>.

So if moral properties are irreducible to natural ones, how are they necessitated by the latter? In this section I will briefly discuss Non-reductive Moral Naturalism, and leave Moral Non-Naturalism to the next chapter.

To begin with, if we take moral truths to be synthetic, then we should not follow Blackburn in understanding Moral Supervenience as conceptual truths any longer. A natural move here would be to treat Moral Supervenience as a metaphysical truth, as McPherson does. Second, as is indicated earlier, though it is easy to explain Moral Supervenience within the Moral Naturalism framework, the project itself faces challenges. One of the often-applied strategies

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<sup>20</sup> For perhaps the most promising way of reductive naturalism see Jackson 1986, though in a conceptual way.

for Moral Naturalists to authenticate the existence of moral properties is to claim that they play an important role in our explanation of phenomena in the world (For instance see Boyd 1988; Railton 1986). But it is also widely accepted that moral properties are causally inert, in the sense that they don't serve as causes like natural properties. So Moral Naturalists have two ways out, one is that to argue for the causal power of moral properties (which is not promising), and the other is that to admit that moral properties are causally inert but argue that moral properties still deserve their ontological rights due to their explanatory importance. But even the starting point is not that reliable, for it is also put into question that Inference from Best Explanation is suitable for identifying metaphysical entities<sup>21</sup>. Also it is argued that moral facts, beliefs and motivations can be explained by evolutionarily psychological and social facts (Leiter 2001).

Apart from all this, I shall argue that what Moral Naturalists have in hands to offer as the explanation of Moral Supervenience might not be appealing in the sense that it is too trivial to suffice what we want as a useful explanation, especially for reductive naturalism. The merit of such an explanation, as is indicated, is that there will be no more brute connections between distinct properties, since moral properties are now also natural properties. But the metaphysical necessary connections between natural properties still call for explanations. It is necessary (probably not metaphysically, but it suffices to show the point) that copper is conductive, and we are supposed to have some explanation for it, namely, the inner physical structure and laws of nature presumably. To put it another way, suppose someone just asks why it is the case that copper is what she is expecting is our explanation of why copper is electrical (because of the structure of its atom and electron, based on my very limited physical knowledge). It would be

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<sup>21</sup> For an example of this sort see Arthur Fine 1984

wrong to say that she is asking a meaningless question, since there is a substantial explanation in need (and available as well). Of course, some connections between natural properties are free of such explanations, such as the claim that “everything colored is extended”. This is because it is a conceptual truth which can be derived from the meanings of the terms. Recall that now we’ve turned to synthetic truths rather than conceptual truths, so such cases are beyond our concern. Compare this case with those moral ones, I believe we have no reason to think that moral truths are free of explanations, in the sense that we don’t need to say anything more to show that “recreational slaughter is wrong”. The triviality of Moral Supervenience on the metaphysical level (in the sense that it is much less metaphysically mysterious) does not mean that the explanatory work is done.

## **2.3 Conclusion**

In this chapter we’ve discussed two options to explain Moral Supervenience. My conclusion here is that the conceptual approach offered by Cuneo and Shafer-Landau is not convincing when it comes to explaining Moral Supervenience, while Moral Naturalists may have trouble within their own metaphysical schema.

## CHAPTER 3: MOVING TO THE METAPHYSICAL LEVEL

So far, we've been treating Moral Supervenience as a conceptual truth as Blackburn does. Recall that in earlier parts of the paper I've introduced McPherson's way of constructing the Supervenience Challenge in the metaphysical sense. We've also briefly discussed Moral Naturalism and the challenges it faces. One key advantage of Moral Naturalism is that it easily answers to the Supervenience Challenge in terms of McPherson's construction. Recall that (P2) points out the explanatory burden on metaphysical connections between moral and natural properties. If moral properties are just the same as natural ones, the connection will not be brute but in some sense obvious. One can still ask normative questions like "why is recreational slaughter wrong" but there is no more metaphysical gap concerned here. I will come back to this point in the last chapter, but for now we can see the progress from Moral Naturalists.

On the other hand, those who maintain the sharp distinction between moral properties and natural properties cannot follow this line of argument. This is what Robust Moral Realism<sup>22</sup>, and its supporters are facing. The core thesis of Robust Moral Realism is that moral properties are fully distinct (*sui generis* as those Robust Moral Realists may say). Moral properties cannot be reduced to natural properties. They are just "too different" from natural ones.

Why should anyone live in such a naturalistic world believe this? Besides the intuition that moral properties are different from natural properties, another point is often mentioned, that morality guides and motivates actions in a special way which natural properties cannot imitate. Fire bears the natural property of being too hot to human beings, which motivates you not to lie

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<sup>22</sup> I borrow the name from David Enoch 2011, which means the same as Moral Non-Naturalism.

down on it like it is a soft bed. You are motivated or guided because you don't want to get hurt. Consider now a moral case where you don't want to torture a cat because you know it is wrong, even if somebody tells you that you can get ten Euro for rewards. It is also highly intuitive that in this moral case you have a different motivation not to do something from that in the fire case, especially when it concerns direct personal interest (body damage and money, respectively). Of course, whether moral properties are *sui generis* is open for debate, but we do have some reasons to accept them in our metaphysical theory. Therefore, it would be interesting to see if Moral Non-Naturalism has a good answer to the Supervenience Challenge.

In this chapter I will discuss whether Robust Moral Realists can offer a promising explanation of Moral Supervenience. I will begin with a widely accepted definition of Robust Moral Realism and move to specific explanations of Moral Supervenience afterwards.

### 3.1 Robust Moral Realism defined

There are many different constructions of Robust Moral Realism. As a specific kind of Moral Realism, it shall first share the two claims we've encountered at the beginning of the paper. The crucial point that makes the theory "robust" is that moral properties are different from natural properties, which will be vacuous without substantial accounts of what is natural/non-natural. It is indeed a hard point to issue, as Cuneo and Shafer-Landau admit in their paper that a satisfactory illustration of the moral/natural distinction is very hard to seek. They have provided paradigm examples instead of a well-formulated definition. As David Enoch put it, moral properties are on the ought side of the is-ought distinction (Enoch, 2011, p.2). All of these are meant to offer an initial impression on what morality (non-natural version)

is. We can for now rest with the rough conclusion that natural properties are those studied by modern science, and moral properties are those different from natural ones, which are not subjects for scientific research. To take a mentioned example here, consider the moral claim “recreational slaughter is morally wrong”. Properties of the action recreational slaughter are mostly natural in the sense that they are about what physically concerns in the action, and the property of being wrong is a classical non-natural property.

### **3.2 Explain Moral Supervenience within the frame**

After clarifying (at least partly) the notion of Robust Moral Realism we can dig into their answers to the Supervenience Challenge. In this section I will begin with Enoch’s answer and argue that it is not promising.

Enoch provides one simple explanation: Moral properties supervene on natural properties because of moral norms which are irreducible and brute. Take his case of drink eligibility here. Enoch argues that drinking eligibility supervenes on age (which is a natural property) because of the legal norm that people above 21 can drink. So, if someone asks why Beike can drink, we can answer by saying that Beike is already 24 which reaches the minimum drinking age requirement. Surely this legal norm is not even nomologically necessary, since in different regions the age requirements are different. But Enoch invites us to think beyond this analogy and move to metaphysically necessary moral norms, which will explain Strong Supervenience because metaphysical necessity applies across possible worlds. Suppose (as Enoch suggests here as an example) utilitarianism is true. Therefore, we have the relevant moral norms as “an action is wrong if and only if it decreases people’s overall happiness”. What explains the

supervenience relation between decreases of happiness and wrongness would be the specific moral norm, namely, the rule of utility.

This approach seems promising, but the same question arises with the moral norms here. To explain Moral Supervenience, moral norms need to be metaphysically necessary. We can still ask “why it is metaphysically necessary that an action is morally wrong if and only if it decreases people’s overall happiness”. Enoch insists that such moral norms are basic which need no further explanations, but as Leary rightly points out, what Moral Supervenience requires (as an explanation) is exactly why there are metaphysically necessary connections between moral and natural properties. Enoch’s basic moral norm is just another form of restating the same question (Leary, 2017, p.86).

It would be helpful to introduce McPherson’s notion of “bruteness revenge” here. As McPherson put it, when you try to explain one necessary relation with just another brute necessary relation, you suffer from the “bruteness revenge” (McPherson, 2012, p.223). The point is that the explanatory work is not completed but only removed if we rely on new brute necessities to explain the former one. Suppose we say that Moral Supervenience is explained by metaphysical necessitations between natural and moral properties (if you may recall, this is exactly what Shafer-Landau suggests), it does no help simply stating such metaphysical necessitations without explaining why it is the case.

We can say that Enoch’s approach does not avoid bruteness revenge if basic moral norms need further explanation, which is confirmative for me. In the end of his discussion Enoch simply bites the bullet and admits that such brute necessity cannot be avoided in his account. He then turns on to refute Hume’s dictum, which will be discussed in the last chapter.

### 3.3 Leary's essentialist grounding explanation

Though Enoch's explanations of Moral Supervenience face challenges, it is inspiring in the sense that what Robust Moral Realists need is something filling the metaphysical gap between natural and moral properties. Stephanie Leary provides a response to the Supervenience Challenge with new theoretical resources like essence and grounding. In this section I will focus on this sort of explanation.

Leary first introduces metaphysical grounding and essence into the toolbox. Metaphysical grounding is taken to be a non-causal determination relation. To say that  $x$  is grounded in  $y$  is to say that  $x$  obtains in virtue of  $y$ . Following Leary's case, we can say that the fact that Beike is suffering from thesis writing is grounded in the psychological fact that Beike struggles with new ideas when he is faced with the thesis task. Here what we need to know is that grounding is used to explain metaphysical dependence relations between facts. For instance, the fact that the apple falls down to the ground is grounded in the physical fact, namely, the gravity law. If we are asked about why the apple falls down to the ground, this grounding relation is what we might employ to response<sup>23</sup>. We may come back to other important details of grounding when in need<sup>24</sup>.

On the other hand, essences are taken to be explaining such grounding facts. Leary borrows Fine's notion of essence which takes it to be "the set of propositions that are directly definitive of that object or property", like being an unmarried person is part of the essence of being a

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<sup>23</sup> Other cases may be helpful to understanding here: combined with logic we may say the fact that someone voted for Trump is grounded in the fact that Beike voted for Trump (actually he didn't), or say the fact that the bottle is blue or green is grounded in the fact that the bottle is blue. One thing worth noting is that one certain fact can have multiple grounding resources.

<sup>24</sup> There is an ongoing debate over whether grounding relation is also explanatory, for an introduction of this see Berker 2018. For a detailed introduction and discussion of metaphysical grounding see Rosen 2010.

bachelor<sup>25</sup>. To apply this essentialist framework to Moral Non-naturalism, as Leary put it, will be to say that: 1) at least some moral properties cannot be specified by natural terms alone, and 2) the essences of such properties do not specify natural sufficient conditions for their instantiation (Leary, 2017, p.96). Furthermore, to explain why x is grounded in y we could say that it is because of x and y's essences. Taking a simple example here, to explain why the fact that x is colored is grounded in the fact that x is blue, we could say that it is essential to the property of being blue that if x is blue then x is necessarily colored.

Essence is itself a controversial issue in philosophy. One question is how we come to know the essence of certain properties. What Leary proposes here is that despite confusion, this framework helps explain interesting metaphysical relations like supervenience relations. We can start with Leary's pain example. Being in pain, as Leary put it, can be seen as a hybrid property in the sense that its essence specifies both natural sufficient conditions for its instantiation and sufficient conditions for the instantiation of certain moral properties like being wrong. Essentialists can say (following Leary) it is essential to the property of being in pain that if one's c-fibers are firing then one is in pain, and it is also essential that if x brings about pain, then x is morally bad<sup>26</sup>. The property of being in pain is non-natural because its essence contains more than natural constituents alone, and it explains both why the fact that one is in pain is grounded in the fact that one's c-fibers are firing, and why the fact that punching someone on the face is morally bad is grounded in the fact that it brings about pain.

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<sup>25</sup> This example is from Leary 2017, p.94. For Fine's account see Fine 1994.

<sup>26</sup> As Simon rightly points out (in his comment letter to the draft), it is not essential that pain is morally bad. For instance, receiving a surgery is morally good despite the pain experience since it is important to your health. My point here would be that Leary is relying on a bad example here, and it does no harm to replace it with more convincing cases like recreational slaughter. We could say that being recreational slaughter is a hybrid property in the sense that the essence of the property specifies natural sufficient conditions of its instantiation and non-natural sufficient conditions of the instantiation of the property of being morally wrong.

According to Leary, there are hybrid (in the above sense) moral properties like being a reason and *sui generis* moral properties like being wrong. The essences of the former ones contain both natural sufficient conditions for their own instantiations and sufficient conditions for the instantiations of the latter ones. Therefore, the overall explanatory structure will be this: Moral Supervenience is explained by the grounding relations between natural and moral properties, and the grounding facts are explained by the essences of the natural and moral properties concerned.

We can ask many important questions about this proposal. First, we may wonder whether there could be a list of hybrid properties. Second, we could directly doubt whether properties like being in pain or “thick” moral properties like being courageous or being a promise, as Leary suggests, are good candidates of hybrid properties. Also, we may question how we can know about the essences of moral properties. These are all crucial points to the whole project, and for the purpose here, I will mainly focus on how Leary is to avoid the “Bruteness Revenge”. The trick is that essence requires no metaphysical explanation. When asked about why (part of) the essence of water is having the chemical structure H<sub>2</sub>O, the direct answer will be that it is just what water is. Recall that Enoch suffers from explaining why moral norms should be taken as metaphysically necessary. That is not to say that such an explanation is not possible, but that the explanatory task is still the same as the old one to explain Moral Supervenience. With essence Leary claims that we can stay with bruteness because this is just the basic structure of the world which needs no further explanation.

But why are things different when we take the essentialist framework? We will dig into this question further by considering one objection to Leary’s proposal. Toppinen provides an

interesting objection in his response to Leary's paper. He starts with the idea that being in pain does not seem to be hybrid, since it is reasonable to think that people don't miss something important about pain when they already know everything about its realization. Similar ideas apply to the property of being a reason. Toppinen states that "We can know the essence of lewdness—what it is to be lewd—without thereby accepting the highly questionable view that anything that involves overt display of sexuality is on that account bad" (Toppinen, 2018, p.650). What he has in mind is that it is not obvious that the essences of those so-called hybrid properties contain what Leary might call "hybrid parts". In the case of retributive injustice, Toppinen means that the essence of the property does not contain the part that if something has relevant natural properties then it is retributively unjust.

I think Toppinen senses the right point but constructs it in a somewhat misleading way. He notices that his point could be understood from a conceptual point of view, making it an epistemological argument instead of a metaphysical one. This is because what he poses here is quite similar to Moore's Open Question Argument. The essentialists could reply that we have no trouble knowing the essence of lewdness without realizing that being lewd is in some sense morally wrong due to lack of moral knowledge. For instance, one may know the nature of water quite well but don't know that water is H<sub>2</sub>O. In response to this point of view, Toppinen tries to distinguish between the property of being water and the property of being retributively unjust, but it is not clear, according to his account, that how the differences matter to what we are concerned. He claims that we cannot know the essence of being retributively unjust through a conceptual approach or a priori reflection. This seems to hurt Robust Moral Realism since it seems to imply that moral properties are not like natural ones which can be studied through

scientific methods. But Robust Moral Realism does not necessarily contain such claim that all moral knowledge is a priori ones. Therefore, essentialists (within the Robust Moral Realism camp) like Leary could simply respond that conceptual approach is not the only way of doing moral research and attaining moral knowledge.

The real problem, I believe, is simply that the essentialist grounding explanation does not seem to avoid the “Bruteness Revenge” as well as other kinds of explanations. Leary claims that essence is a basic notion which needs no further explanation, but things might be different when we consider different properties. We can follow Toppinen’s line of thought and consider the difference between water case and the retributive injustice case. Suppose someone asks, “what is the essence of water”, we may answer that “water is H<sub>2</sub>O” and “water is a certain kind of transparent liquid”, or something else that is closely relevant to the issue. If she asks further questions like “why is it part of the essence of water that water is H<sub>2</sub>O”, probably we may just say, as Leary suggests, that it is just what water essentially is. There is no further explanation for this. Now suppose someone asks, “what is the essence of being retributively unjust”, and presses harder by asking “why is it part of the essence that if x has certain natural properties, then x is retributively unjust”, what kind of answer do we have? Following similar thoughts in the water case, we may say that it is just what the essence of being retributively unjust demands. On the metaphysical level this answer is fine in the sense that it is metaphysically possible that the property of being retributively unjust will be instantiated if certain natural properties are instantiated, but from an epistemological point of view, it is very different from the water case. All kind of methods we have to show that “water is H<sub>2</sub>O”, such as microscope or theoretical deduction based on our chemical knowledge (I am not sure about this way though), don’t seem

to apply to moral cases. This is why we feel it is fine to say that “it is what it is” in the water case but not so convincing in the moral case.

I believe this is why Toppinen relies on the idea of concepts when he discusses essence in his paper. Due to lack of detailed answers to how we come to know about morality, it is natural to think that moral knowledge is attained through a conceptual way. But I think the real problem lying behind this is that Leary’s proposal contains no substantial explanation of Moral Supervenience. Someone might say that what is required to explain Moral Supervenience is a metaphysical explanation. As long as the metaphysical structure, where moral properties and natural properties are settled down, is within their hands, the essentialists might claim that we already have the explanation in need. But even if we grant it as one explanation, it is hardly a substantial one. What Leary actually does is to stick the natural and moral parts under the “essence” label without showing why they can be metaphysically combined. Just as moral norms, the essences of moral properties cannot be taken for granted.

It might be argued that essence is just another kind of expression of metaphysical necessity, which means that it is exactly what we need for explaining Moral Supervenience since Moral Supervenience is just the metaphysical relation between moral and natural properties. But this approach does not seem to be plausible. As Fine points out, essence is a broader notion than necessity. It is necessarily true that the single set [Socrate] exists if Socrate exists, but it is clearly not part of the essence of Socrate that he belongs to the set (Fine, 1994, pp.4-5). Therefore, before we get to employ the notion of essence in explaining Moral Supervenience, we need to account for the notion first. It is not to say that we need an account of essence, but a concrete explanation of why certain moral properties (hybrid properties for Leary) have

certain essences, because this is just what Moral Supervenience needs for explaining. If we are going to say that it is just what it is for the fact that “if x has certain natural properties, then x is retributively unjust” to hold, we are just claiming that it is just what it is for certain moral properties to supervene on certain natural properties, which means no substantial explanation is concerned.

We could see this more clearly from Leary’s response to McPherson’s “bruteness revenge”. McPherson considers the essentialist schema. His claim is that essentialists want to explain Moral Supervenience, only to find themselves committed to another kind of brute necessary connections, namely, the ones between the natural and moral constituents of the essences of moral properties (McPherson, 2012, p.223). Leary’s defense from the essentialists’ side, is that McPherson mistakes essence with real definition, in the sense that the essence of properties is not a conjunctive of related propositions, because essence is a broader notion than real definition. The reason provided is that there is no real definition of disjunction, while we can still talk about the essence of disjunctions (Leary, 2017, p.101). In the metaphysical picture from essentialists, the *sui generis* moral fact (x is morally wrong) is grounded in the hybrid moral fact (x is recreational slaughter) which is grounded in the natural facts (what recreational slaughter consists of). This is different from the picture of conjunctive facts, where the conjunction is grounded in its conjunctive parts.

But this is not enough. The distinction between essence and real definition does not help to answer the question “why it is the case that natural and moral constituents of the essence of hybrid properties are combined within the metaphysical core (which is just the essence)”. If essence is not real definition, then what is it? If we trace back to what Leary quotes as the proper

understanding of what essence is, namely, “the set of propositions which are directly definitive of that object or property”, we shall find it that it does not explain how these propositions are combined, or how we come to find out the constituents of those essences. Without further explanations, essences are just another label for the metaphysical necessary connections between natural and moral properties.

My conclusion here, is not that Leary’s proposal is a dead end. Rather, it should be understood that this proposal is at least incomplete for now, because the facts about the essences of hybrid moral properties need further explanation. We will come back and elaborate on this issue in the last chapter.

### **3.4 Moral principle explanations of Moral Supervenience**

Besides the attempt of explaining Moral Supervenience with essences, Fogal and Risberg elaborate on Enoch’s idea that Moral Supervenience is explained by natural facts and moral principles together. The basic structure is that certain moral facts, for instance, x is morally right, are grounded in certain natural facts like “x contributes to Beike’s happiness” and the moral principle that an action is morally right if it contributes to someone’s happiness without creating harm (Fogal & Risberg, 2020, p.175, see also Rosen 2017b). As we’ve discussed on Enoch’s answer to the supervenience challenge, it is not enough to simply pose moral principles as explanans. Fogal and Risberg point out that further metaphysical details are required for the answer to be convincing (Fogal & Risberg, 2020, p.177). One important feature they pose, in contrast with what Berker defends as the view that moral principles (or laws) are universal

generalizations<sup>27</sup>, is that moral principles are metaphysical laws. They indicate metaphysical necessary connections between properties, in this case, just exactly what we need for explaining Moral Supervenience (p.174). It is thus no surprise that Fogal and Risberg say that Moral Supervenience is trivially true with moral principles as metaphysical laws in hand.

The notion of metaphysical law itself is a controversial issue. In the moral case, some philosophers have argued for the notion of normative necessity, which is different from metaphysical necessity in the sense that the latter is about the essences or identity of things (Fine 2002, pp.270-271). According to Rosen's construction of normative necessity<sup>28</sup>, there is no real influence on the explanation of Moral Supervenience. So for our purpose here we can put this issue aside.

In a recent paper Bhogal argues that this project fails as well. His argument can be separated into two parts due to his distinction between two different interpretations of Fogal and Risberg's idea. I will discuss them in turn. First, Bhogal argues that moral principles make no difference to Moral Supervenience, therefore it has no explanatory power. To illustrate this, he claims that the following counterfactual proposition is true (Bhogal, 2024, p.2204):

(c) If act utilitarianism were wrong, then supervenience would still hold.

To make this a counterfactual claim Bhogal presupposes that act utilitarianism is true, that if x maximizes happiness then x is morally required. Following the project of moral principle explanations, act utilitarianism is such a moral principle that explains why action x is morally required. Bhogal claims that the truth of this counterfactual claim shows that moral principles

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<sup>27</sup> One reason why moral laws cannot be universal generalizations is that universal generalizations are partly grounded in their instances, which means they cannot ground particular moral facts which are supposed to ground themselves. See Rosen 2017a and Fogal & Risberg 2020 for details.

<sup>28</sup> See Rosen 2017b

make no difference to Moral Supervenience, thus having no relevant explanatory role.

Now the distinction between general supervenience thesis and particular supervenience facts rises back to the surface. In most cases discussed in the paper, apparently we are focusing on particular supervenience facts and considering specific explanations of them. We will discuss this point further in the last chapter. For now, the point I want to make is that Bhogal misunderstands an important part of Fogal and Risberg's plan, for what they want to explain is particular moral facts (Fogal & Risberg, 2020, p.175), while what Bhogal argues for is actually that the general supervenience thesis is not explained by moral principles. This is not to say that Bhogal is wrong about the need of a proper explanation of general supervenience thesis, but that he is challenging the wrong target when he criticizes Fogal and Risberg's view.

On the other hand, I think Bhogal makes the right move when he claims that moral principles just replace Moral Supervenience with another label without offering a substantial explanation. They are actually the very same thing, while on the one hand Moral Supervenience is often constructed in terms of modality, and on the other hand moral principles are constructed in terms of metaphysical laws (Bhogal, 2024, p.2212) This is similar to what we've seen in Leary's essentialist view, where Moral Supervenience is replaced by essence, which does not change the underlying problem Robust Moral Realists have been facing. In a nutshell, the moral principle explanations of Moral Supervenience do not avoid the "Bruteness Revenge".

### **3.5 Conclusion**

In this chapter we mainly discuss three kinds of explanations of Moral Supervenience under Robust Moral Realism, My conclusion is that all these answers suffer from what McPherson

calls the “Bruteness Revenge”. When we want to explain Moral Supervenience, we are somehow destined to rely on other metaphysical necessities that are in need of explanation as well.

If all the accounts we’ve been discussed are more or less concerned with brute facts that are hard to explain, does it mean that Moral Supervenience is something without proper explanation? To press deeper, are brute facts really intolerable in our metaethical theory? A discussion of these questions will be the aim of the last chapter.

## CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSIVE MARKS

So far we've discussed many kinds of Moral Realism and their response to the supervenience challenge. The rough conclusion we may draw is that almost all kinds of answers are not convincing. They either suffer from their own problems concerning the metaphysical structure or fail to fully explain Moral Supervenience.

In this chapter, I will try to show what lies behind Moral Supervenience, why it is intuitive, what difficulty it contains and what it leads to, based on all the theories and arguments we've discussed.

### 4.1 Moral Supervenience as a metaphysical relation

Before we come to conclude based on those answers to the supervenience challenge, it would be helpful to discuss the difference between the general supervenience thesis and particular supervenience facts.

In section 2.2 I have made the claim that it is not clear that the general Moral Supervenience thesis is a conceptual truth in the sense that following Cuneo and Shafer-Landau's account we cannot tell the truth from the essences of moral and natural concepts. This is not completely right, for one could say that moral properties necessarily rely on natural properties to instantiate, in the sense that there are no rightness, wrongness or other moral properties without the subjects which bear them. There are no wrong actions before actions. In this sense moral properties do supervene on natural properties, and we can say it sounds more like a conceptual truth.

If it is the case, can we say that Moral Supervenience is a trivial claim which needs no

explanation? Maybe we could, but it is clearly not enough to set Moral Supervenience aside with this easy answer. Moral Supervenience is not only a general claim about two different kinds of properties, but also a statement of substantial metaphysical relations between specific moral properties and natural properties. What interests us in using and talking about Moral Supervenience, is the metaphysical puzzle it leads to, namely, how moral properties are metaphysically necessitated by natural ones. We know that Moral Supervenience is true in most of the cases (of course there have been criticisms on this issue), but the point is not to check whether it is true, but why it is true.

Therefore, in order to explain Moral Supervenience we need a metaphysical structure which puts moral and natural properties/ facts/ truth in their proper places. This is what all the accounts we've encountered have been doing. I have argued that they more or less face "the bruteness revenge", and this is time to discuss what this really shows, which is the aim in the next section.

## 4.2 Hume's dictum

To dig further into the core of the "bruteness revenge", we can begin with one certain account discussed earlier. In Section 3.3 we've discussed Leary's essentialist explanation of Moral Supervenience. I've made a conclusion that Leary doesn't avoid "the bruteness revenge" because essences don't explain the metaphysical relations between natural and moral properties. What they do is simply to put them together instead of explaining why they are necessarily together.

Leary would reply that essences are basic metaphysical facts which have no explanations.

This makes sense, since it is the same as when we are asked about “why is Socrate a man”. The answer is simply that Socrate is essentially a man, and it is just what he is. But a further question should be asked, namely, why is the essence of no need of explanation?

I believe we have two possible accounts for this issue. First and probably what Leary has in mind, is that essence is the most basic entity in our metaphysical picture. It would be meaningless to ask for a metaphysical explanation of it. To put it another way, essence is the most fundamental part of our world. The other reason why essence needs no explanation is that certain facts about essence are so obvious that we don’t need anything more to say about them. In the case of Socrate both accounts satisfy, while in other cases things might change.

The point here is not to choose which one is the better understanding, but that both accounts make sense, and should be counted when we consider serious philosophical issues. It is not enough to offer a metaphysical structure where natural and moral properties are placed when this is not an evident truth. Applying this line of thought in Leary’s case, it is not evident that the essences of hybrid properties are exactly the same as what she suggests in her project. It is this kind of explanation that her plan lacks.

When we discuss the “bruteness revenge” in earlier sections, we are roughly following McPherson’s thought and taking the brute metaphysical necessary connections between moral and natural properties as the real obstacle. The real important problem is not the existence of distinct properties, but the bruteness in our theory of measuring them. Hume’s dictum is better understood as a fair demand for further explanations of why we should accept distinct entities and how we account for the relations between them in our theory.

This is what I believe the real problem of explaining Moral Supervenience. Recall that

Moral Supervenience is a modal claim which states the metaphysical necessary connections between moral and natural properties. If we want to know why it is the case, then we necessarily rely on our modal knowledge. The metaphysical challenge now leads us to the epistemic challenge of acquiring modal knowledge of morality. The reason why I claim that all the explanations we've discussed so far face the "bruteness revenge", is just that all these theories lack a detailed account of why it is the case<sup>29</sup>.

In earlier sections we've seen that Enoch bites the bullet of the "bruteness revenge". This sort of response resembles the strategy of "bite the bullet", in the sense that we are not much troubled by the metaphysical necessary connections between distinct properties. What really troubles us is the bruteness which calls for explanation.

### **4.3 Conclusion: the future of Moral Supervenience**

In the thesis I have introduced the supervenience challenge to Moral Realism and discussed some of the responses to the challenge. I have argued that all the accounts fail to fully explain Moral Supervenience, developed the debates and offered an analysis of the reason why they fail. If my arguments are correct then we should care more about explaining the source of modality concerned in Moral Supervenience, rather than satisfied by the metaphysical structure alone.

So what shall we do? My conclusion here is that based on all the metaphysical explanations Moral Realists offer, another issue shall regain our attention: moral epistemology. Concerning

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<sup>29</sup> I will say that Cuneo and Shafer-Landau's approach does the most promising job in showing how the metaphysical necessity is settled since it is closely related to conceptual analysis. But the whole issue is far from settled without further clarifications of the notion of concept they use.

Moral Supervenience as the issue here, the crucial part is how we come to know modal knowledge in the moral area. Maybe the best current move is to follow the conceptual approach, but whatever the method shall be, Moral Supervenience should be explained with a substantial justification of the metaphysical necessity concerned.

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