A critical examination of a non-naturalist's explanation of moral supervenience

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Abstract

In this thesis, I argue that an epistemological characterization of the natural, which classifies the natural as that which demands an *a posteriori* approach, is the most useful in finding out which properties are natural. Shafer-Landau relies on this characterization to argue that moral properties are non-natural. The non-naturalist is challenged to explain the supervenience of the non-natural moral properties on the natural ones, without thereby considering moral properties as – or reducible to – natural properties. Shafer-Landau succeeds in this mainly because he conceives of moral properties as being realized, and exhaustively constituted, by natural properties. He alludes to the similarity of his position and that of non-reductive physicalism in the philosophy of mind, which argues that mental properties are realized by, but not identical to, physical properties. A discussion of Davidson's anomalous monism in comparison with non-naturalism will show that this analogy holds, leaving the non-naturalist vulnerable to the non-reductive physicalist's problems with mental causation. I assess Jaegwon Kim's argument that mental causation leads to causal overdetermination and conclude that on multiple interpretations of the causal powers of moral properties, it does not hold.

Contents

Introduction

There are a number of questions that cause divisions among meta-ethicists. Firstly, are moral properties real? A realist will say they are, an antirealist will say they are not. Secondly, when a moral property is real, what kind of property is it? Naturalists, as the name might suggest, consider moral properties to be natural, or reducible to what is natural. Non-naturalists, however, find that moral properties are of a special kind of property, which does not allow for them to be reduced natural properties. This position has considerable intuitive strength since we do seem to treat moral properties different than natural ones.

How does one go about challenging a metaethical position? As useless as it is to challenge a tennis player to a game of basketball, it is to challenge non-naturalism on the ground that its conception of morality does not fit as well with our scientific world view as naturalism does. Since a non-naturalist tends to give more weight to common-sense moral beliefs, a more useful method would be to challenge its ability to account for a connection between moral and non-moral facts, some form of which most scholars regard to be intuitively, if not necessarily true: a connection consisting of a supervenience relation.[1] Supervenience of the moral on the natural states that when two situations are identical in all natural properties, they should be identical in all moral properties. Furthermore, it claims that a change in the moral realm must be accompanied by some change in the natural realm (though not vice versa). The non-naturalist relies on the relation of supervenience to claim that although moral properties are constituted by natural properties, they cannot be described solely in terms of the descriptive.

The purpose of this thesis is to provide an overview and assessment of non-naturalism as a metaethical position, based on its ability to explain the supervenience of the moral on the natural. Failure to account for the grounding of morality in the descriptive will lead to a morality which is free-floating. Being forced to ground it too much will lead to the reduction the moral to the natural, which the non-naturalist aims to avoid.

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[1] This idea is owed to Michael Ridge, "Moral Non-Naturalism," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2019), ed. Edward N. Zalta, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2019/entries/moral-non-naturalism/, sec. 7.

Although the non-naturalist position will be expressed through its fundamental metaethical claims, within this thesis Russ Shafer-Landau's conception of non-naturalism serves as a model for a non-naturalist defence against the challenge of supervenience. A key part of his defence is the proposed analogy with non-reductionist theories in the philosophy of mind. This analogy will be examined in detail, for its success will allow arguments from this field to be transferred to the moral realm.

Section 1 will provide an overview of moral non-naturalism as a metaethical position. With the help of David Copp, I will give provide a critical assessment of the different ways of classifying natural properties, and conclude that an epistemological characterization of the natural will be most suited to classify which properties are natural. A distinctive feature of natural properties is their demand for an empirical approach. Shafer-Landau uses this premise to conclude that moral properties, our approach of which is a priori rather than a posteriori, are not natural.

Section 2 opens with an overview of the concept of supervenience. After this, I provide a definition of the reductionist claim the non-naturalist aims to avoid, which I understand to be an epistemological claim in the form of a necessary entailment relation from natural to moral properties. This section concludes with an argument as to why the non-naturalist has to provide some explanation of supervenience: he wishes to avoid a free-floating morality which would lead to moral assessment being arbitrary.

Section 3 provides a detailed discussion of the argument from supervenience, expressed in two separate challenges to the non-naturalist. The first challenge is to provide an explanation of supervenience which does not lead to the reduction of moral to natural properties. This challenge is given its force by Blackburn's subliminal argument in his 1984 article "Supervenience Revisited," which shows how the acceptance of the supervenience claim paired with the denial of the claim that a certain concatenation of descriptive facts necessarily must give rise to a certain moral status, amounts to a mysterious relation between moral and natural properties. The second challenge is simply to argue how the necessary coextension between moral and natural properties does not lead to naturalism.

The second half of section 3 is devoted to Shafer-Landau's non-naturalist defence against these two challenges. I will argue in what way I find his defence against Blackburn's challenge lacking. The main reason for this is that although he provides some defence against the challenge, he does not offer any positive explanation of the allegedly mysterious connection between moral and natural properties. However, I propose that this failure is not that severe, for

Blackburn might be begging the question against the non-naturalist by demanding him to be able to explain something which he knows cannot be explained in non-naturalist terms. In Shafer-Landau's response to the second challenge, his denial of the identity of necessary coextensive properties allows him to explain how there can be relations expressed in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions between moral and natural properties, while still allowing for the moral property in question to be multiply realizable.

Section 4 takes us on a journey to antireductionism in the philosophy of mind. Based on a detailed discussion of Davidson's non-reductive physicalism, I offer an assessment of similarities and differences between this position and that of the non-naturalist. I conclude that they are very similar, leaving the non-naturalist susceptible to criticism to non-reductive physicalist theories.

One such criticism is discussed in section 5. I will translate Jaegwon Kim's argument of the non-reductive physicalist's problems with mental causation, which lead to structural causal overdetermination, to the moral realm and pose it as a problem for non-naturalism. It will turn out that non-naturalism can be defended against this challenge, because of the normativity of moral properties.

1.   Moral non-naturalism

Non-naturalism is a realist position. This means it considers moral judgements to be beliefs which can be true or false "by virtue of correctly representing the existence of truth-makers for their respective contents".[2] Furthermore, it makes a metaphysical claim about what kinds of properties there are. It considers moral facts to exist outside of the realm of natural facts. Thus there are, according to the non-naturalist, (at least) two realms of facts: the natural and the non-natural.

Before moving on to the challenges that come with providing a non-naturalist explanation of supervenience, we will take a look at the position itself and the aspects which characterize it. We will start by considering the distinction between what is natural and what is not. Then I will briefly introduce Russ Shafer-Landau's conception of moral properties as non-natural properties.

1.1   The natural/non-natural distinction

Let us first take a look at the distinction between the natural and the non-natural, to see how this distinction shapes the non-naturalist's position. In his 2003 paper "Why Naturalism?" David Copp distinguishes clearly four ways of finding out which properties are natural.[3] For it is the nature of the *natural* properties according to which the negative *non*-natural properties will have to be defined. I will offer an overview of the different classifications and Copp's criticism of them, and add to this some considerations of my own.

The first group contains *reductionist and relational proposals*. A base class of uncontroversially-natural properties is identified, and of any other supposedly natural property it is required that it be "suitably related to properties in the base class."[4] Necessary and sufficient conditions will be given for the predication of a moral property, or some kind of metaphysical relation such as supervenience will be identified according to which moral properties are directly related to natural properties. This conception is problematic, according to Copp. On the

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[2] Russ Shafer-Landau, "Ethics as Philosophy: a Defense of Ethical Nonnaturalism," in *Foundations of Ethics*, eds. Russ Shafer-Landau and Terence Cuneo (Blackwell, 2013), 210.
[3] D. Copp, "Why Naturalism?" *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 6, no. 2 (June 2003): 182-185.
[4] Ibid, 182.

one hand, even a non-naturalist will agree to the supervenience of the moral on the non-moral, so if a conception of what is natural relies on a relation such as this it will not be very useful in identifying natural properties. On the other hand, it tells us nothing about what it is about a property that makes it natural. I think Copp is right in his criticism. Firstly, my discussion of Russ Shafer-Landau will show how a supervenience relation can be effectively used for the classification of moral properties as *non*-natural properties. Secondly, I think a conception of which properties are natural must go beyond the mere identification of natural properties to giving some hint as to *why* these properties are natural.

The second group contains *ostensive definitions*. Frank Jackson, for instance, argues how we can point to chairs, mountains and the like, and then say that natural properties are the properties that are "needed to give a complete account of things like them."[5] "However," argues Copp, "even a non-naturalist can insist that moral properties must be mentioned in or implicated by a "complete account" of ordinary objects." Again, we are here looking for a conception which will successfully identify natural objects or properties. If the same strategy can be used to identify non-natural properties, it undermines the legitimacy of using it to identify natural properties.

The third group contains *metaphysical characterizations* of the natural. These come in four types. Firstly, natural properties are said to be 'descriptive characteristics,' or 'factual properties.' Since both a naturalist and a non-naturalist can agree that calling someone compassionate can be deemed 'in fact' compassionate, this characterization does not capture the naturalist view. Secondly, the natural world can be regarded as "the universe of events and states of affairs that are linked in the causal order."[6] This is problematic in two ways: on the one hand, it cannot be assumed that the natural order is causal – it might as well be causally innate. On the other hand, many people hold supernatural beliefs of the causal order. This does not mean that they deem God, for instance, to be natural. Thirdly, following David Armstrong, "we might take the natural world to be the "spatiotemporal manifold," the conjunction of all states of affairs in space and time."[7] The question might then be raised as to whether (all) properties exist in space and time. Should this be assumed? This excludes the possibility of moral properties being natural from the start. Finally, there is the view "that the natural world

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[5] Ibid, 183, here quoting Frank Jackson, *From metaphysics to Ethics: A Defence of Conceptual Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 7.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid, 184.

is the *material* or *physical* world."[8] This also fails, however, for "naturalism need not be materialist or physicalist."[9] Regardless of Copp's criticism here, I believe that metaphysical characterizations generally run a great risk of being circular: one composes a conditional such as "the natural is whatever is material" and then concludes that moral properties are/are not like this, when in fact the starting point should be the natural properties themselves. Using considerations about them as a foundation, one can formulate a characterization of what it is for a property to be natural. This brings us to the fourth type of characterization.

The fourth and final group contains *epistemological characterizations* of the natural. These characterizations "take the natural world to be the world studied by the sciences and […] take natural properties to be those that are needed to give a complete (scientific) account of this world."[10] Copp himself belongs to this group. He proposes to distinguish natural from non-natural properties "on the basis of our epistemological access to them."[11] For a property to be natural is it being empirical and, consequently, naturalism holds moral properties to be empirical properties.

I agree with Copp that epistemological characterizations are probably best suited to find out what properties are natural. As I said earlier, our starting point should be the properties themselves, not our preconceptions about them. Our epistemological stance toward a certain class of properties (mental, moral, natural) has undergone an evolution over time, whereby less effective strategies have made room for more effective ones, which turned out to be better suited to get to know this type of property. The manner in which properties are being approached is in this way determined by the properties themselves. The natural sciences, for instance, have adapted themselves over time to better suit the type of property it studies: the natural property. They have evolved to be more sensitive to changes in and relations between these properties, and new tools and strategies are constantly being created to better explain the data at hand.

It might seem that for the natural sciences the natural properties themselves are not the starting point, but their methods are. After all, they work based on presuppositions, hypotheses, which are either confirmed or disconfirmed after empirical investigation. Besides, the method by which we study something tends to shape the data being studied, as it might be sensitive to certain aspects rather than others. However, I do not think this permits a charge of circularity.

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[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid, 185.
[11] Ibid.

There is a feedback-mechanism which takes place between the natural sciences and natural properties. An approach which has seemed to be well suited to the properties at hand might get replaced by another which turns out to be more suited to the task at hand. The collective pool of data as a result of ages of scientific study ever continues to grow, and while it grows it guides our epistemological methods of study in becoming more sensitive to it. In this way, the properties at hand shape the way we get to know it; not the other way around.

One might then argue that this feedback-mechanism is also present in metaphysical characterizations. I admit that it might be, but I am convinced that if it is present, its presence will always be less strong than in epistemological characterizations. This is because metaphysical characterizations of the natural are often characterized by a priori reasoning (reasoning which does not involve empirical observation) whereas the consensus is that natural properties are characterized by a posteriori – empirical – reasoning. Metaphysical characterizations might be very well suited to define other kinds of properties than natural ones: mathematical properties, arguably ethical properties (though the latter would mean that the non-natural nature of moral properties is assumed and we do not want to build on these kinds of assumptions). Overall, I believe that metaphysical characterizations are not as effective as epistemological characterizations in picking out *natural* properties.

Which brings me to my next point. A very fundamental epistemological distinction is the distinction between *a priori* and *a posteriori* investigation. Since the natural sciences are characterized by empirical reasoning, I agree with Copp and many others that defining moral properties as either a priori or a posteriori gives us, by the arguments provided above, a good indication of whether these properties are natural or not.

Agreeing on a most suitable method of finding out which properties are natural, does not mean that consensus is reached on whether moral properties are natural. Copp considers moral properties to be empirical, and therefore natural. Interestingly, Shafer-Landau bases his argument on the very same premise as Copp: to be natural is to figure in propositions that emerge from the natural sciences. And, indeed, the natural sciences are characterized by their primarily a posteriori or empirical nature. Because Shafer-Landau considers philosophy and subsequently ethics to be of an a priori nature, he concludes that moral properties must be non-natural. Let us now take a look at how he arrives at this conclusion.

1.2   Russ Shafer-Landau's conception of non-naturalism

Russ Shafer-Landau, whose conception of ethical non-naturalism will here serve as a model of the non-naturalist position, claims to have found a way of solving the debate between naturalism and non-naturalism, using an epistemological, *disciplinary* approach. He claims that "something is natural just in case it figures ineliminably in true propositions that emerge from […] physics, chemistry, molecular biology, astronomy, etc." Crucial in deciding whether some discipline belongs to the natural sciences is asking whether it relies a posteriori investigation, for "the essence of a natural property is that the fundamental truths that describe its nature, and the conditions under which it is instantiated, are discoverable on an exclusively a posteriori way."[12] If a discipline relies on a priori investigation, there is good reason to think it is not a natural science. Shafer-Landau then explains how he arrives at his conclusion that realist ethical non-naturalism is true. Ethics, as a species of inquiry, belongs to the genus of philosophy. As a species of philosophy, it inherits its essential traits. Two essential traits of philosophy are the realistic status of its truths and its status as something other than a natural science (due to the mainly a priori nature of its investigation). Therefore, non-naturalistic ethical realism must be the way to go.[13]

Crucially, an ethical non-naturalist believes in the non-reducibility of moral facts to natural facts: they are *sui generis*. According to Shafer-Landau, identity theories, which equate certain moral facts to specific natural facts – utilitarianism for instance, which identifies the moral property of being good with the natural property of producing happiness – have fallen short in the past due to "their failure to plausibly defend any robust identity claims linking the fundamental moral properties with natural ones."[14] Moore famously argued that one can always plausibly question whether some natural property which is identified with the moral property of being good is, in fact, good.[15] The fact that as of yet ethicists have not yet agreed on some plausible and effective reduction of the moral on the natural, or some laws connecting certain moral facts to certain natural facts, also does not help the naturalists' case.

With the help of Copp, we have characterized the natural as that which is investigated empirically. Based on this Shafer-Landau concludes that moral properties are not natural since they are characterized by a priori investigation. Through this brief discussion of Shafer-Landau's characterization of moral properties, I have provided an introduction to the non-

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[12] Russ Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism: A Defence*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003), 61.
[13] Shafer-Landau, "Ethics as Philosophy," 211.
[14] Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism*, 67.
[15] See Moore, *Principia Ethica,* §13.

naturalist position. Let us now turn to the challenge at hand: providing a non-naturalist explanation of the supervenience of the moral on the natural.

2. Supervenience

## 2.1 Supervenience: the basic claim

This section will introduce the notion of supervenience, take a look at why the non-naturalist might run into trouble explaining supervenience, and consider what I understand to be the reductionist claim the non-naturalist wishes to avoid at all costs.

I will commence by introducing the basic supervenience claim. In the literature, there are multiple denominations for the base properties moral properties are said to supervene on: non-moral, natural, descriptive. In what follows I will almost exclusively use 'natural' to define the properties moral properties are said to supervene upon, since we have defined moral properties as those which are not natural.

Supervenience is a claim which says that a certain set of properties *covaries, in a specific way,* with another set of properties.[16] For instance, the moral is said to supervene on the descriptive by the combination of the following two claims:

- Necessarily, any two situations that are identical in all *natural* respects are identical in all *moral* respects.
- Necessarily, any change in the *moral* status of a situation is occasioned by a change in the *natural* way things are.[17] This means that there can be no moral difference between two situations or possible worlds without some natural difference, *but not vice versa.*[18]

Schematically, the supervenience of A-properties (moral properties) on B-properties (non-moral properties) can be displayed as follows:

A: supervenient family
• *supervenient properties*   Moral properties

B: supervenient base
• *base properties*   Natural properties

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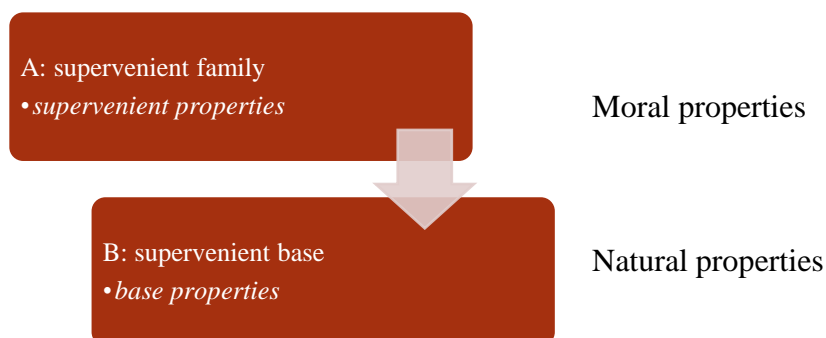
[16] Brian McLaughlin and Karen Bennett, "Supervenience," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2018), ed. Edward N. Zalta. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/supervenience/.

[17] Russ Shafer-Landau, Terence Cuneo, eds., *Foundations of Ethics* (Blackwell, 2013), 433.

[18] Ridge, "Moral Non-Naturalism," sec. 6.

Important to note is that supervenience is not an identity claim. A non-naturalist, for instance, uses the supervenience relation to account for moral properties being realized by, but not completely reducible to, natural properties.

As we will later discover, supervenience theses come in different formulations and strengths. For now, it suffices to illustrate the general claim that is made by any supervenience thesis. I will do this by way of example. Let us say Anne is a good person. She does weekly volunteer work in a retirement home, treats her co-workers with respect, and has recently helped a friend through the death of a parent. We can say that the property of being a good person supervenes on these natural properties about Anne. We do not necessarily, however, (although one could) claim here that the property of being good is nothing over and above these three natural properties, or that knowing that Anne did these things is enough to know something about Anne that is not added to by knowing that she is also good. We merely say that a change in the moral realm – for instance, her being suddenly evil – must necessarily have been accompanied by a change in the natural properties we ascribed to Anne. We do *not* say that a change in, for instance, the degree of the natural properties must necessarily result in a change in her moral property. We *are* saying that were there another person, Bill, who is exactly like Anne in the natural properties he has, it cannot be the case that Anne has the moral property of being good while Ben has the moral property of being evil.

Now that I have given an overview of the basic supervenience claim, we will take a look at why the non-naturalist supposedly has trouble accounting for this relation.

2.2   Non-naturalism and supervenience

The non-naturalist believes in the irreducibility of moral properties to descriptive properties. There is, according to him, something about morality which cannot be fully captured or explained by descriptive properties. Why, considering this division, would a change in the descriptive realm necessitate a change in the moral realm?

The naturalist can offer a much more straightforward explanation of why the moral supervenes on the non-moral than the non-naturalist can. There are two kinds of naturalists: *non-reductive* naturalists, who hold that moral facts are natural facts; and *reductive* naturalists, who hold that moral facts are reducible to natural facts.[19] A non-reductive naturalist can explain

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[19] Andrew Fisher, *Metaethics: an introduction* (New York, Routledge, 2014), 69.

supervenience by suggesting a certain, possibly law-like relation between the two types of natural facts: the moral and the non-moral. A reductive naturalist, it is suggested, does not have to explain supervenience at all: since moral facts can be fully expressed in non-moral terms, a change in supervenient properties necessarily entails a change in the base properties. Since he can still allow for the possibility of moral properties being realized in more than one way – there is more than one concatenation of base properties which entail the moral property of being good, for instance – the converse does not hold.

2.2.1 Reductionism

Before discussing the challenge of supervenience in more detail, I want to elaborate on the reductionist claim. It has come to my attention that in the literature around non-naturalism and supervenience the reductionist claim is usually stated in one or two sentences: it is assumed that the reader knows all about the claim and what it entails. I think the reader is owed a little more than that. After all, the reductionist claim, like the supervenience claim, comes in many forms, and, one could argue, strengths.

In this context, we talk about property reduction. This phenomenon can be understood in multiple ways. The reductionist claim could be understood as an identity claim. On this understanding, reducing A to B means A=B. In many writings on the matter, I see statements which allude to such a strong reductionist claim.[20] This is not, however, how I want to interpret it, for this understanding of reduction fails to grasp the seemingly asymmetric nature of a reductive relation. When we speak of property A being reduced to B, we do not necessarily claim B can be reduced to A, as well. In the case of mental properties, when one claims that the property of pain can be reduced to the firing of C-fibers, one does not necessarily wish to also claim that the firing of C-fibers can be reduced to the property of being in pain. The relation at play is very often hierarchical and thus asymmetrical.

There are alternatives to an identity claim. I will briefly consider the three candidates mentioned by Van Riel and Van Gulick.[21] The relation of *supervenience* I described above is one of these,

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[20] Shafer-Landau, for instance, states how classical naturalists (who are reductionists) "deny the existence of supervenience strictly speaking. Supervenience is introduced to relate *distinct* properties, but these naturalists insist that for any moral property there is just a single descriptive property that 'realizes' it, this property being identical (despite the different designations or concepts used to refer to it) to the moral one." Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism*, 90.

[21] Raphael van Riel and Robert van Gulick, "Scientific Reduction," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2019), ed. Edward N. Zalta, sec. 4.5.

which is used to explain how the reduced properties can be brought down to some base level without being identical to them. However, in its most basic form, it tends to be too weak to capture a relation of reduction. At the very least, a reductionist claims that A-properties can be fully explained in terms of B-properties. The mere supervenience of A on B does not say anything about this possibility. It might allow for it, but as such, it is not specific enough. A second candidate would be the relation of *causation*, where B-properties are regarded to cause the A-properties. This also seems to fail to capture the notion of reduction, however. Although it might be able to account for the asymmetry of the relation, it has a temporal element – first comes B, then follows A – which is a possible, but not a necessary element of reduction. The third candidate is *realization* A properties are reducible to B because the B properties realize the A properties in question. Although this might suffice to account for an ontological reduction of A to B, it fails to account for its metaphysical reduction. As my discussion of Shafer-Landau further along this section will show, an antireductionist might very well claim that moral properties are exhaustively realized by descriptive properties, while simultaneously denying the reducibility of moral properties to descriptive properties. I will postpone my discussion of this. In any case, realization is probably too weak a relation to account for reductionism.

How, if these three candidates are not up for the job, should we interpret the reductionist claim here? I want to follow Kim here and regard the reductive claim to be an *epistemological* claim.[22] On this interpretation, the reductionist argues that A-properties – moral properties, for instance – can be inferred from B-properties – descriptive properties. We can know of the supervenient properties by merely consulting the underlying base properties. In the mental case, merely consulting the physical properties which are said to bring about a certain moral property is enough to infer the mental property in question. In the moral case, Anne's volunteer work, respect for her colleagues and helping a friend in need *necessarily* enable us to infer the moral property of being good. This goodness is in this sense nothing over and above these three properties. Crucially, it cannot be the case that there is another world in which Anne possesses these three properties, but she fails to possess the moral property in question.

Our discussion of Blackburn will tell us more about the reductionist claim and the non-naturalist's interaction with it.

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[22] Jaegwon Kim, "Concepts of Supervenience," in *Supervenience and Mind: Selected Philosophical Essays,* ed. Ernest Sosa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), sec. 5.

2.2.2 Why explain supervenience?

Now that I have shown what kind of relation supervenience is, and made clear what I understand to be the reductionist claim, I will provide an answer to the question of why a non-naturalist should have to go through the ordeal of explaining the supervenience relation.

Besides the fact that the supervenience of the moral on the non-moral has considerable intuitive strength, the non-naturalist would be in trouble if he were to fail to account for supervenience. Shafer-Landau formulates the general worry as such: "If the moral fails to supervene on the non-moral, then the non-moral world does not control the moral world. But if that world does not control the moral world, then the moral world is out of control. Moral assessments would be arbitrary."[23] Shafer-Landau's point here is that to make any substantial moral claims, such as "he did well in helping her through the death of her dog" or "robbing that old lady was a bad thing to do", we want to be able to bind our moral assessment to the descriptive facts about what a person did or did not do. We want to be able to tie a person's being good or bad to these kinds of non-moral facts, or else there would be no point to moralizing.

Shafer-Landau splits up the argument from supervenience into two: Firstly and generally, realists cannot explain why the moral domain supervenes on the descriptive. This worry is shaped by Blackburn's famous argument that the realist cannot explain supervenience. Secondly, even if Blackburn's challenge can be met, a realist cannot explain the content of the list of base properties a certain moral property supervenes on.[24]

I think that there is a better way of splitting up the argument into parts, which is clearer and makes the charge against the non-naturalist stronger. It is provided by fellow non-naturalist David Enoch, and well applicable to Shafer-Landau's discussion of supervenience.[25] Two separate challenges can be identified. The first challenge demands an explanation of supervenience while avoiding reduction. Although Enoch does not take this route, I think this challenge is given its strength by Blackburn's argument. The non-naturalists' persistence to avoid reduction leads to them being forced to deny his formulation of a necessity relation between moral and natural properties. The second challenge states that given supervenience plus the identity of necessarily co-extensive properties, naturalism would follow. The following

[23] Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism*, 78.
[24] Ibid, 90.
[25] David Enoch, *Taking Morality Seriously: A Defense of Rubust Realism,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 234.

section will provide an overview of the argument from supervenience, formulated in terms of a response to these two separate challenges.

3 The argument from supervenience

3.1 The two challenges

3.1.1 First challenge

Blackburn's argument is directed towards the realist in general, but I have made some minor additions to it to pose it as an argument against the non-naturalist specifically. Wishing to evade reduction of the moral on the natural the non-naturalist, while accepting a supervenience relation, is forced to deny the reductionist claim that a certain concatenation of descriptive facts *necessarily* must give rise to a certain moral status. This, however, makes supervenience mysterious.

Blackburn provides the following formulation of the supervenience relation:

(S) $N((\exists x)(Fx \land G^*x \land (G^*xUFx) \rightarrow (y)(G^*y \rightarrow Fy))$

N = necessarily
F = some truth about a thing, event, state
G* = total set of truths (whatever it is that brings it about that the subject is F)
U = underlies

This claims that necessarily, for some x, if x has property F, and G* underlies this, then anything else in the (physical, natural) state G* has property F as well.[26]

In our earlier example, Anne (x) has the property of being good. G* is the total set of natural truths about her, which together bring about her goodness. Let us assume for simplicity's sake that the three facts about her – her volunteer work, the respect for her colleagues and her helping a friend through a tough time – together form G*. Now, let's say Bill (y), is in the same G* state. This must mean that he has the same moral property of being good.

He then proposes another relation, (N), which describes a much stronger necessity relation than (S).

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[26] Simon Blackburn, "Supervenience Revisited," in *Foundations of Ethics*, ed. Russ Shafer-Landau and Terence Cuneo (Blackwell, 2013), 439.

(N) $N(x)(G^* \rightarrow Fx)$[27]

This states that G*, necessarily and without fail, gives one F. This might seem like a similar statement as (S), but its form stated in predicate logic shows an important difference between the two. Strictly translated (S) states the following:

Necessarily, ((<u>for some</u> x) (<u>if</u> x is F <u>and</u> x is in state G* <u>and</u> (the fact that x is in state G* underlies the fact that x is F) <u>then</u> (for y) (<u>if</u> y is in state G* <u>then</u> y is F)).

The conditional relation stated by (S) is much weaker than the claim that state G* necessarily leads to F. The relation formulated considers merely the similarity in moral properties, should two people be in the same G* state. It makes no direct claim about whether there is a direct link between G* and F, whereas this is all (N) does. In Blackburn's words: "(S) necessitates a conditional, and (N) necessitates the consequence of that conditional."[28]

A non-naturalist would be hesitant to accept (N), for they will want to account for the multiple realizability of moral facts. The moral property of rightness might have been realized by an action's maximizing happiness, but this does not mean maximizing happiness is the only way for an action being right. It might even be the case that an action maximizes happiness but fails to be right. Consider the mental property of being in pain. In humans, this mental state is realized by the firing of C-fibers. However, in another species, it might very well not have been realized by this process. Although these beings might have C-fibers, their being in pain might have nothing to do with these. Analogous to this, a non-naturalist would want to account for a world in which someone might be in the same G* state our Anne was in, while nevertheless failing to be good.[29]

The non-naturalist is thus forced to accept the weaker claim (P), which states that it is possible that, for some x, x might be in this exact G* state, but it does not have F.

(P) $P(\exists x)(G^*x \wedge \neg Fx)$[30]

So, a non-naturalist will hold the combination of (S) and (P). He calls this the (S)/(P) combination. This entails that "even if some G* set-up in our world is the very state upon which

[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Shafer-Landau, Cuneo, *Foundations of Ethics*, 435.
[30] Blackburn, "Supervenience Revisited," 439.

some F-state supervenes, nevertheless, it might not have been *that* F state which supervened upon it."[31]

There is a way of modelling (S) and (P) together. There can be G*/F worlds – worlds in which G* = F – and G*/0 worlds – worlds in which things are G* but not F – but mixed worlds (G*/F∨0) are ruled out by the supervenience claim (S) because the possibility of these worlds would undermine its truth.[32] Although it might be possible for G* to not have been F, if G* is once F it must always be F.[33] 'But what explains the ban on mixed worlds?', Blackburn asks the realist. Think about temporal change, for instance. Surely it must be possible for a world to be G*/F before a certain time t, but G*/0 after this time. However, this is not allowed by (S). In other words, the (S)/(P) combination is mysterious.

A non-naturalist could defend himself against the argument so far by saying that he could very well accept the necessity claim on a metaphysical level. There are multiple levels of necessity the supervenience thesis can be projected upon. The strictest of these would be an analytical or conceptual necessity; a slightly less strict one is a metaphysical necessity. Someone who holds the supervenience thesis is very likely to hold it as a metaphysical necessity. "For example, if I hold that the fact that someone enjoys the misery of others underlies the judgement that he is evil, I should also hold that in any possible world, the fact that someone is like this is enough to make him evil." Our discussion of Shafer-Landau's explanation of supervenience will show how even an antireductionist non-naturalist can accept the necessity claim at this level.

Thus, at this level a non-naturalist can hold both:

(S$_m$)   MN $((\exists x)(Fx \wedge G^*x \wedge (G^*UFX)) \rightarrow (y)(G^*y \rightarrow Fx)$

(N$_m$)   MN $(x)(G^*x \rightarrow Fx)$[34]

However, the problem arises once more when Blackburn moves the problem from the metaphysical to the analytic or conceptual level. Denying a claim which is deemed to be analytically true amounts to some kind of conceptual confusion. Denying the phrase "a bachelor is an unmarried man" means one has not fully grasped the meaning of the incorporated terms.

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[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid, 441.

[33] Shafer-Landau, Cuneo, *Foundations of Ethics*, 435.

[34] Blackburn, "Supervenience Revisited," 442.

(S$_a$)   AN $((\exists x)(Fx \wedge G^*x \wedge (G^*xUFx)) \rightarrow (y)(G^*y \rightarrow Fy)$

(N$_a$)   AN $(x)\ (G^*x \rightarrow Fy)$[35]

But one cannot have (N$_a$), "for it is not plausible to maintain that the adoption of some particular standard is 'constitutive of competence' as a moralist. People can moralise in obedience to the conceptual constraints that govern all moralising, although they adopt different standards, and come to different verdicts in the light of a complete set of natural facts."[36]

Why is the non-naturalist so adamant to deny (N$_a$)? I believe there are two interrelated reasons. One is already discussed: the non-naturalist will want to account for the multiple realizability of moral facts. They want to allow for something to be G* but not F. Another reason, closely related to this, is that accepting (N$_a$) would amount to accepting the reduction of the moral to the natural. Suppose (N) is understood as a conceptual truth: AN $(x)\ (G^*x \rightarrow Fy)$. It is a conceptual truth that G* without fail gives one F. According to (S), we can infer a *second* person being F, when we have confirmed the first person's F being brought about by G*. According to (N), is G* *itself* from which F can be inferred. Besides ruling out the possibility of G* *not* bringing about F it entails the reductive claim that some concatenation of natural properties is enough to infer a moral property. This reductive claim might not cause the non-naturalist any problems as the level of metaphysical necessity, as we have seen, but it does when the conceived modality is as strong as it is at the level of analytical necessity. In the way that we know "a bachelor is an unmarried man" to be true when we understand the meaning of the terms "bachelor" and "unmarried man", the concatenation of base properties a certain property supervenes upon is enough for us to know of the supervenient moral property. This relation does not merely ensure the stability of the moral status of certain natural property within this world but it also ensures the necessary entailment of a certain moral status by its realization base.

Since the non-naturalist is thus forced to deny (N$_a$) they have to pair (S$_a$) with (P$_a$): AP $(\exists x)$ $(G^*x \wedge \neg Fx)$. Surprise! The mysterious ban on mixed worlds returns, for which Blackburn demanded an explanation.

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[35] Ibid, 443.
[36] Ibid.

3.1.2 Second challenge

The second challenge the non-naturalist faces argues how given supervenience plus the identity of necessarily co-extensive properties, naturalism would follow. The argument is that "for any normative property, we can define a set of things in purely naturalistic terms, so that, necessarily, something is in that set if and only if it has that normative property."[37] Because (at the very least in this world) some concatenation of descriptive properties necessarily brings about the moral property in question. These two kinds of properties are thus necessarily co-extensive. Under the rule that necessarily co-extensive properties are identical, it follows that the moral properties are natural.

Now that we have made clear the charges against the non-naturalist, let us take a look at one such non-naturalists' response to them.

3.2   A non-naturalist's explanation of supervenience

Shafer-Landau's explanation of supervenience is best expressed through his refutation of the two challenges stated in the previous section. To repeat, the first challenge to the non-naturalist was to explain the supervenience relation between moral and natural properties, without thereby falling into reduction. The second challenge was avoiding naturalism. I will argue that Shafer-Landau's response to the first challenge is not that successful. Blackburn demands an explanation of the (S)/(P) combination at the level of analytic necessity. Shafer-Landau responds that this (S)/(P) combination arises in other domains as well; not just the moral. True as this might be, this evades Blackburn's demand to come up with a positive explanation of the connection between moral and natural properties weakened by the rejection of (N_a). However, I argue that Blackburn's demand here might be too strong, begging the question against the non-naturalist. Shafer-Landau's response to the second challenge rests on the observation of the difference between necessary coextension and identity allows him to avoid the classification of moral properties as natural.

3.2.1 Response to the first challenge

In reaction to Blackburn's argument that the (S)/(P) combination is mysterious, Shafer-Landau proposes that the lack of entailment thesis – expressed by (P) – should be abandoned. A realist

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[37] Enoch, *Taking Morality Seriously,* 137. We can interpret 'normative' here as 'moral'.

can then explain the ban on mixed worlds by "claiming that a duly specified set of non-moral properties *metaphysically* must give rise to a certain moral property."[38]

As we have seen, Blackburn expects and reacts to such an answer by moving the problem from metaphysical to analytical necessity: no propositions specifying entailment relations between moral and descriptive properties are true in virtue of the meaning of incorporated terms.[39] For the adoption of a specific moral standard is not "constitutive of competence as a moralist" – if I deny that murder is wrong, I am not giving any sign of conceptual confusion, or failure to grasp the meaning of the terms 'murder' or 'wrong'.

Shafer-Landau reacts to Blackburn's move by stating that there are two ways of interpreting the supervenience thesis.

(S1)   "if a concatenation of descriptive properties underlies a moral one, then it must (in that world) always do so."

(S2)   "if a concatenation of descriptive properties underlies a moral one, then it must (in that world) always do so, and do so realistically, i.e. independently of any beliefs about these relations."[40]

(S2) is not a conceptual truth because one can very well embrace the notion of supervenience plus antirealism without thereby being confused or incompetent as a moralist; so when this is the interpretation of the supervenience thesis, Blackburn's move would fail.[41]

(S1) can be interpreted as both a metaphysical or analytical truth. In the case of metaphysical truth, then Blackburn's argument causes no problem, for it arises only at the conceptual level. In the case of analytic truth, it would create problems not just for ethics but for various other kinds of properties we deem realistic (mental, chemical, atomic). Shafer-Landau then formulates the general supervenience claim as follows: Necessarily, if any grouping of base properties $G*$ underlies – because it constitutes – property F, then (in that world) anything else that is also $G*$ must be F.[42] This claim, Shafer-Landau claims, is a conceptual truth no matter what sorts of properties are substituted for $G*$ and F. "Since it is also a conceptual truth that, for each of these domains, those groupings that underlie the supervenient phenomena might not have done so, we have, for each domain, a supervenience/lack of entailment combination at the

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[38] Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism*, 85. My emphasis.
[39] Ibid, 86.
[40] Ibid, 87.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid, 88. I have adapted the variables to conform to the ones Blackburn uses.

conceptual level."[43] Unless one is prepared to embrace global antirealism regarding all these domains (for in each of these domains there is an (S)/(P) combination), Blackburn's move fails.

I am not fully convinced of the success of Shafer-Landau's argument here. Blackburn demands an *explanation* of the alleged (S)/(P) combination at the level of analytic necessity. He does not seem to give one. Just like Blackburn suspected, Shafer-Landau claims that the non-naturalist can accept both (S) and (N) at the level of metaphysical necessity: this he can do because he believes that G* underlies of fixes F because it exhaustively constitutes F. On his view of moral properties, moral properties are *realized* by natural properties. This results in a link between the supervenient and base properties, which can take on the strength of a necessity relation. Even an antireductionist non-naturalist may very well hold the belief, at least on a metaphysical level, that murder is wrong, in this world or any other world. Shafer-Landau's main argument seems to be that the (S)/(P) combination understood as an analytic claim arises in other domains as well, such as the chemical and the mental. Surely we would not want to embrace antirealism in all these domains. I think this is a clever way of evading Blackburn's challenge. Sadly, he does not seem to provide us with a positive account of the relation between moral and natural properties in terms of the (S)/(P) combination.

Arguably, Shafer-Landau's defence against the first challenge would have been stronger if he were able to provide a positive explanation of the way moral properties are related to natural properties. The connection between the moral and non-moral properties here is still mysterious, as Blackburn pointed out. If it is possible for G* to not have been F, what explains the relation between G* and F in the cases they are connected?

I do want to reflect for a moment on the severity of this failure. Perhaps implicit in Shafer-Landau's response is that Blackburn demands too much. After all, Blackburn himself is *also* not able to come up with a positive explanation. Because of this, he opts for antirealism about morality. But perhaps the non-naturalist need not go further than he has here. The multiple realizability of moral facts and their irreducibility to natural facts simply prevent the non-naturalist from accepting (N_a). Blackburn might be begging the question against the non-naturalist: he demands them to explain something which he knows cannot be explained on their terms.

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[43] Ibid.

3.2.2 Response to the second challenge

The second challenge states that given supervenience plus the identity of necessarily co-extensive properties, naturalism would follow. The obvious move here – taken up by both Shafer-Landau and Enoch, would be to deny the identity of necessarily co-extensive properties.

An important feature of Shafer-Landau's conception of non-naturalism is how he argues for the exhaustive constitution of moral facts by natural facts. "[Non-naturalism] insists on the non-identity of moral and *descriptive* properties, while allowing the moral to be entirely and exhaustively constituted by the descriptive […]."[44] This means that *metaphysically* his non-naturalism differs from naturalism but *ontologically* they are the same.

The non-naturalist can do this by denying the identity of necessarily co-extensive properties. For example, although being triangular is necessarily coextensive with being trilateral, having three angles and having three sides seem like very different properties.[45] Thunder and lightning are necessarily coextensive, but one is a visual and the other an auditory phenomenon. Because the moral is realized by the natural, there will always be a necessary coextension between moral and natural properties. This does not mean, however, that they are the same thing.

Does the necessary coextension between natural and moral properties cause problems for the multiple realizability of moral properties? I would argue it does not. A moral property can be necessarily coextensive with *multiple* descriptive properties, while still allowing for the criterion of necessary coextension to be formulated for every one of those descriptive-moral pairs. I have illustrated this in the diagram below. Each line represents a relation of necessary coextension, expressed in the form of necessary and sufficient conditions, between some descriptive property and the moral property. It is also clear from this in what way the moral property is multiply realizable.

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[44] Ibid, 76.
[45] Ibid, 91. This first example is owed to Shafer-Landau.
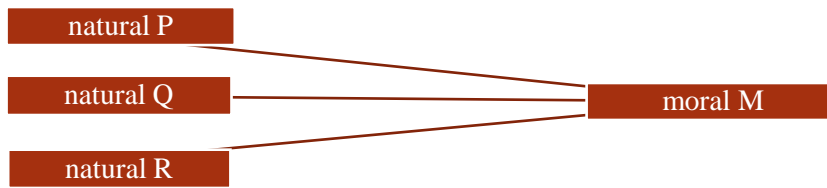
Remember Anne? Anne's moral goodness supervened on her volunteer work, respect for her colleagues and helping a friend through a tough time. Let us assume for now that these natural properties about her were each individually sufficient to bring about her goodness.
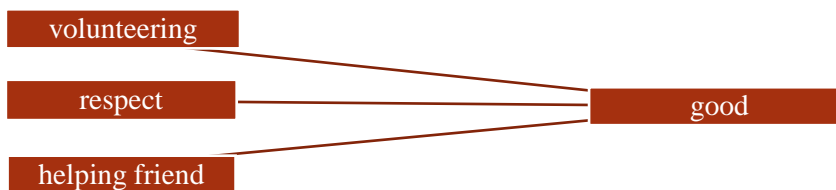
There are three natural→moral relations here: (volunteering→good), (respect→good), and (helping friend→good). The moral property of being good is necessarily coextensive with each natural base property, without being identical to it. It is also clear in what way the moral property is multiply realizable.

In this case, Shafer-Landau can provide a positive explanation of the multiple natural-moral entailment relations. He can defend non-naturalism against the second challenge without much trouble.

4. The analogy with non-reductionism in the philosophy of mind

Now that we have examined a non-naturalist's explanation of supervenience at the hand of Shafer-Landau's response to the two challenges, let us turn to his proposed analogy of non-naturalism with non-reductive physicalist theories in the philosophy of mind. "According to these […], mental properties are not identical to physical ones; mental facts are not physical facts; but mental properties are realized by instantiations of physical properties."[46] Should this analogy hold, the non-naturalist's position will be susceptible to criticisms of nonreductive physicalism.

Shafer-Landau mentions three reasons why these non-reductive physicalist theories are appealing:

- They capture our convictions about the non-identity of mental and physical properties – pain is not the same as c-fibre firing
- They are not ontologically extravagant – ontologically, there is only one realm of facts, for mental properties are realized by physical ones
- They emphasize a supervenience relation that obtains between the mental and the physical[47]

Sadly, Shafer-Landau does not give us any examples of which specific theories he finds appealing. I do, however, want to discuss one to assess the similarity of non-naturalism and non-reductive physicalism. I believe Davidson's *anomalous monism* will be the best candidate for this, as it captures the above-mentioned principles. To show how the proposed analogy holds up, I will give an overview of anomalous monism's central tenets.

4.1 Comparison with Davidson's anomalous monism

I want to introduce Davidson's position with a schematic overview of the four-fold classification he provides of the different positions in the philosophy of mind concerning

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[46] Ibid, 72-73.
[47] Ibid, 73.

reductionism and the endorsement of laws, which clarifies its claims.[48] From this, it should be clear that although he argues that mental events are not ontologically separated from physical facts, he denies the existence of psychophysical laws.

	Asserts psychophysical laws	Denies psychophysical laws
Mental events = physical events	*Nomological monism* Materialism, reductionism	*Davidson's anomalous monism*
Mental events =/= physical events	*Nomological dualism* Parallelism, interactionism, epiphenomenalism	*Anomalous dualism* Cartesianism

In his well-known essay "Mental Events" Davidson explains how there is an apparent contradiction between three principles:[49]

- The principle of *causal interaction*, which states that at least some mental events interact causally with physical events;
- The principle of the *nomological character of causality*, which states that where there is causality, there must be a law;
- The principle of the *anomalism of the mental*, which states that there are no strict physical deterministic laws based on which mental events can be predicted and explained.

Davidson argues that since all three principles seem to him to be true, he will have to explain away the appearance of contradiction. According to anomalous monism, all events are physical, while some of these also have a mental component. This, however, does not mean that mental events can be given purely physical explanations. This is because of a fundamental difference between description and extension. "[W]e can pick out each mental event using the physical vocabulary alone, but no purely physical predicate, no matter how complex, has, as a matter of law, the same extension as a mental predicate."[50] The mental is irreducible: although it *could* be described in physical terms (for physical properties realize mental ones), it is not possible to

formulate a necessary connection in the form of a law, no matter how complex, between any mental and physical properties. In this way, it evades the reduction of the mental to the physical. Instead, mental properties are said to *supervene* on physical properties: a change in the mental realm must have been occurred by a change in the physical realm (a sudden sensation of intense pain must have been accompanied by *some* neurological change, whatever it may be), and two situations identical in all physical properties must be identical in all mental properties.

Davidson reconciles the three principles in the following way. Under the principle of *causal dependence of the mental,* we can assume that at least some mental events are causes or effects of physical events. The principle of the *nomological character of causality* tells us how "each true singular causal statement is backed by a strict law connecting events of kinds to which the events mentioned as cause and effect belong."[51] This, however, does not apply to mental events, for a distinction can be made between *homonomic* laws, which are "laws drawing concepts from the same conceptual domain and upon which there is no improving in point of precision and comprehensiveness"[52] and *heteronomic* laws, which can only do so in a different vocabulary. Because the mental, as we have seen, does not constitute a closed system – for a mental event is always realized by some physical base – there cannot be any strict homonomic laws formulated of mental events. Only heteronomic laws, laws in which the mental is described in physical terms, can be formulated. We have thus arrived at the *principle of the anomalism of the mental*, which states that "there are no strict laws at all on the basis of which we can predict and explain mental phenomena."[53] I believe that by "strict" laws here are meant homonomic laws, which could have the strength of a necessity relation moving from some physical base to some supervenient mental property, resulting in one's ability to infer the mental property directly from the physical properties that realize them.

Davidson then shows how he can prove the identity of the mental and the physical.[54] Davidson's move here is quick and bit confusing. If my understanding of what Davidson means here is correct, the identity of the mental and the physical results out of the fact that every mental event is *realized* by physical properties. We have seen how a law concerning a mental property can only be formulated in heteronomic – physical – terms. Because of the fundamental difference between extension and description, the law formulated in physical terms does not fully 'grasp' the mental property. To do this a homonomic law would be needed, which, as we have seen, is

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[51] Ibid, 63.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid, 64.

not possible in the case of the mental. Therefore, a law describing a mental event causing a physical event, and a law describing a physical event causing a mental event, both have to be stated in physical terms, making them the same law. I am not sure how the identity of laws between properties entails the identity of the properties in question, but since we have already considered another way in which the mental is identical to the physical – it is realized by it – it need not be an issue.

Davidson thus denies the existence of psychophysical laws. What about Shafer-Landau; does he allow for laws linking the moral to the natural? As we have seen, Shafer-Landau claims that a non-naturalist *can* accept the existence of reductive necessary and sufficient conditions for moral properties. This statement was part of his defence against the second supervenience argument. Do these reductive necessary and sufficient conditions for moral properties count as (moral-natural) laws? The language Shafer-Landau uses does seem to classify them as such: he argues that descriptive necessary and sufficient conditions can be formulated, bringing about some moral property. On this reading of his arguments, his conception thus seems to differ in nature from Davidson's antireductionism, who flat out denies the existence of psycho-physical laws.

However, I have good reason to believe this is not the case. As I understand it, the conception of a law that is denied by Davidson is much stronger than the relation endorsed by Shafer-Landau. Davidson perceives a psychophysical law – the possibility of which he rejects – to be a law which not only links mental states and events with physical states and events but *is also used to explain the mental states and events on the basis of the physical states and events.*[55] Shafer-Landau, being an antireductionist like Davidson, goes at great lengths to deny that the moral can be *explained* purely on the basis of descriptive states and events. Both Davidson and Shafer-Landau deny the possibility of Blackburn's (N_a) – that the supervenient property can be inferred from its base properties. Sure, laws can be formulated: Shafer-Landau can allow for necessary and sufficient conditions for moral properties, but these laws are never to be understood to be conceptual. Likewise, Davidson allows for the existence for laws to be formulated linking the physical to the mental, but homonomic laws, which I believe could have about the same strength as a necessity relation, are impossible.

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[55] Vladimir Kalugin, "Donald Herbert Davidson (1917-2003)," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed May 20, 2020, https://www.iep.utm.edu/davidson/.

4.2   The analogy as a basis for criticism

My preceding discussion has hopefully alluded to some fundamental similarities between non-naturalism – in the hands of Shafer-Landau – and nonreductive physicalism – in the hands of Davidson. I will here provide some more schematic considerations, which will show their similarity more clearly still.

The position of nonreductive physicalism in the philosophy of mind consists of the following theses:

- *Physical monism* – all concrete particulars are physical
- *Antireductionism* – mental properties are not reducible to physical properties
- *Physical realization thesis* – all mental properties are physically realized; that is, whenever an organism or system instantiates a mental property M, it has some physical property P such that P realizes M in organisms of its kind
- *Mental realism* – mental properties are real properties of events; they are not merely useful aids in making predictions or fictitious manners of speech [56]

When we translate these theses to the moral domain, we will see a position that is very similar, if not identical, to Shafer-Landau's.

- *Descriptive monism* – all concrete particulars are natural, for moral properties are exhaustively constituted by natural properties
- *Antireductionism* – moral properties are not reducible to natural properties
- *Descriptive realization thesis* – all moral properties are realized by natural properties
- *Moral realism* – moral properties are real and possess truth-aptness

We can also translate the schematic overview of the positions in the philosophy of mind I have provided in my discussion of Davidson's anomalous monism and translate it to the moral realm, to see where Shafer-Landau's moral non-naturalism would end up. Based on my discussion of the non-naturalist view of laws and its difference from the kind of reductive laws Davidson has in mind, we conclude that non-naturalism falls into the same category.

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[56] Jaegwon Kim, "The Nonreductivist's Troubles with Mental Causation," in *Supervenience and Mind: Selected Philosophical Essays,* ed. Ernest Sosa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 344.

	Asserts moral-natural laws	Denies moral-natural laws
Moral events = descriptive events	*(Reductive) naturalism*	*Moral non-naturalism*
Moral events =/= descriptive events	*Non-cognitivism*	

The positions being so similar means that problems which plague nonreductive physicalist theories in the philosophy of mind, could very well be translated into the moral realm, leaving the non-naturalist vulnerable to the problems that plague the non-reductive physicalist. The following section will cover the problem of mental – or moral – causation.

5.   The argument from causation

Russ Shafer-Landau discusses the perceived problems with the causal role of moral facts in chapter four of his book. He there reacts to an argument brought forth by Jaegwon Kim, who argues that the non-reductive physicalist has some serious problems regarding mental causation. Wanting to preserve the *suis generis* status of mental properties forces the non-reductionist to regard them to have causal powers, which, according to Kim, leads to structural causal overdetermination.

Although the position Kim criticizes is nonreductive physicalism in the philosophy of mind, Shafer-Landau considers his challenge to apply to the moral non-naturalism he defends as well.[57] Also, the preceding section has shown the similarity of the positions of nonreductive physicalism and non-naturalism. Based on these considerations we know we are right in considering Kim's criticism as a serious challenge to moral non-naturalism.

5.1   The non-reductionist's problems with causation

Kim explains how the world as portrayed by the nonreductionist is multi-layered. Each level consists of two components: "a set of *entities* constituting the domain of particulars for that level and a set of *properties* defined over this domain. What gives this array structure is the mereological relation of *being part of*, entities belonging to a given layer are mereologically composed of entities belonging to the lower levels, and this relation generates a hierarchical ordering of the levels."[58] In the mental realm, the property of being in pain is mereologically composed of lower-level psychical properties. In the moral realm, some moral property like goodness supervenes on some concatenation of descriptive facts, which realize the moral property in question.

A realist, as the term suggests, holds the supervenient properties in question to be real. But what does it mean for something to be real? When does something classify as such? A common way of finding out is through the application of *Alexander's dictum*, which states that to be real, something must possess causal powers. It must have the ability to bring about other things. A

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[57] "This argument can be taken practically wholesale into the ethical realm, with equally troubling results."
Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism*, 106.
[58] Kim, "The nonreductivist's troubles with mental causation," 337.

mental realist must account for mental causation. "[M]ental properties […] are irreducible net additions to the world. And this must mean, on Alexander's dictum, that mental properties bring with them *new causal powers, powers that no underlying physical-biological properties can deliver.*"[59]

This, however, is precisely what Kim deems problematic. For the ability of mental properties to bring about changes in the physical realm clashes with the principle of the causal closure of the physical domain, which states that any physical event that has a cause at time t has a *physical* cause at t.[60] For as we have seen, a nonreductive physicalist will hold that all mental properties are physically realized. According to Kim, there is a tension which arises out of the combination of "upward determination: " mental properties being realized by the physical, and "downward causation:" mental powers having causal powers of their own, thus having the ability to influence the physical realm.[61] Appointing mental properties a distinct causal role, alongside some physical role, runs the risk of causal overdetermination. Given that some physical property is a *sufficient* cause of some physical event, how could it be that some mental property is also a *sufficient* cause of this same event?[62]

5.2   The causal power of moral properties in Shafer-Landau's non-naturalism

Based on the causal closure of the physical, which states that every physical event has a physical cause, Kim argues that the mental is causally impotent, which constitutes a good reason to deny their existence. A non-reductionist can defend himself against this charge by relying on the causal inheritance principle, whereby the supervenient mental properties inherit (some of) the physical properties' causal powers. Kim reacts to this by identifying three unfortunate consequences of the non-reductionist's adoption of the causal inheritance principle, which I will discuss separately.

Shafer-Landau presents Kim's argument in the following manner:[63]

1) *The causal closure principle* - the physical domain is causally closed: every physical event has a full set of physical antecedents that cause and explain its occurrence

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[59] Ibid, 349-350.

[60] Jaegwon Kim, "The Myth of Nonreductive Materialism," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 63, no. 3 (Nov. 1989): 43.

[61] Kim, "The nonreductivist's troubles with mental causation," 353.

[62] Ibid, 354.

[63] Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism*, 106.

2) *The principle of non-identity* – the mental is not identical to the physical

3) Therefore, if mental facts cause physical occurrences, then there is systematic causal overdetermination

4) *The causal closure of the physical* – there is not systematic causal overdetermination of physical occurrences

5) Therefore, mental facts do not cause physical occurrences

In this picture, supervenient phenomena are causally impotent: instances of the base properties do the causal work. "Since we have, in principle, better explanations available of all that occurs in the world, purely in terms of non-moral causes, then it follows (from the Causal Argument) that we not only lack reason to believe in the existence of moral facts, but have positive reason to reject their existence."[64]

We remember Davidson's observation that mental facts do seem to cause physical events: actions are very often the result of one's inner experience. My slapping a mosquito off my leg – a physical event – is a result of me *feeling* it stinging me; alongside it being the result of the mosquito stinging me. I might not even have noticed it, had the mental property of pain not been present. It thus seems as though it is not the case at all that there is no systematic causal overdetermination in the physical realm. Many physical events also have mental causes alongside physical ones. Shafer-Landau argues that this kind of overdetermination is not as problematic as Kim seems to suggest, for it "is not the sort in which each distinct cause would suffice, independently of any other, to bring about the effect it does. It is false that beliefs and desires, absent any physical realization, would be enough to bring about a change in the physical world."[65] The mental sensation of being stung by the mosquito *needs* its physical realization to cause any physical reaction in me. Along the same lines, moral properties are reliant on the causal powers of the natural properties which constitute them.

Kim sees no other way to avoid causal overdetermination than to take up some kind of identity theory. Shafer-Landau, however, believes the non-naturalist can rely on the *causal inheritance principle*: for any property M that is instantiated at a time by the realization of property P, M's instantiation inherits at that time (possibly a subset of) P's causal powers.[66]

Kim points out that accepting this principle bears three problematic consequences for the non-naturalist. The first is that it breaches, like Cartesianism, the causal closure of the physical

[64] Ibid, 108.
[65] Ibid, 109.
[66] Ibid.

domain. The second is that if the causal powers of M are identical with those of its realization bases, then M in effect contributes nothing new causally, and by Alexander's dictum – to be real is to have causal powers – should be abolished. The third is that "to identify the causal powers of mentality with those of its underlying physical base is, in effect, to deny it a distinct ontological status, and consider it reduced."[67] I agree that all three of these consequences, should they hold, would be disastrous for the non-naturalist's position. Let us consider how a non-naturalist can respond to each of these consequences.

To escape the first consequence, the non-naturalist could either reject the causal closure principle or argue that the endorsement of the causal role of mental properties does not breach the principle. My mosquito example has shown in what way the causal closure principle might be rejected. I argue, however, that it does not constitute a full rejection, for, as Shafer-Landau rightly argued, the mental or moral properties are not *by themselves* sufficient to bring about any change in the physical or natural realm. This will lead the non-naturalist to take the other route and argue that the principle is not breached. He can do this by stating that the moral properties inherit the causal power of the natural properties that constitute them, and thus make use of the same causal powers. The causal closure is not breached, for the causal properties of the moral do not constitute any real addition to the number of causal forces bringing about some effect.

This, however, leads us to the second unfortunate consequence: since the causal powers of the moral are identical to those of its realization base, by Alexander's dictum they should be abolished. In response to this, the non-naturalist can – and Shafer-Landau does – argue that Kim seems to hold a particularly strong version of Alexander's dictum which, according to Shafer-Landau, is inappropriate for the moral realm. Our warrant for thinking that moral facts exist is independent of the effects they might bring about.[68] "[M]oral laws are standards that are not meant to be descriptive, except in an attenuated sense. If moral realism is correct, then true moral judgements describe the implications of such standards. But the laws themselves are normative: they supply a standard that behavior *should* conform to."[69] The non-natural (or a priori) nature of moral properties makes Alexander's dictum ill-suited to be applied to them. A weaker form of Alexander's dictum – something along the lines of "to be real is to be realized by properties which have causal powers" would be better suited. This is exactly how a non-

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[67] Kim, "The nonreductivist's troubles with mental causation," 356.
[68] Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism*, 110-111.
[69] Ibid, 112.

naturalist perceives of moral properties. Moral properties are ontologically tied to the natural world, but they play a special, normative role metaphysically.

The same solution works for the third consequence. Applied to the moral realm, identifying the causal powers of moral properties with those of its underlying base would be to reduce the moral properties to natural properties. I can see how this would be the case if we were to assess a moral property based on its causal function. But as Shafer-Landau pointed out earlier, there is good reason to think we should not assess moral properties in this way, for they are of a normative, rather than a natural, nature.

Overall, it has seemed possible to distinguish between two possible conceptions of the causal role of moral facts according to Shafer-Landau's non-naturalism. On the first conception, Shafer-Landau claims that moral facts do indeed play a causal role. After all, Shafer-Landau mentioned how moral facts can inherit the causal powers of their base properties. We have seen, however, how even on this view causal overdetermination is avoided, for the moral properties do not constitute a novel addition to the number of causal forces bringing about some event: the natural causal forces are all that is at play. On the second conception, however, he denies that moral properties play any causal role; at least not the causal role we would expect natural properties to play. If morality, as he claims is the case with mental beliefs and desires, absent of any non-moral realization, would not by itself enough to bring about an effect in the non-moral world, it would be causally inert. This is not a problem, however, for Alexander's dictum is ill-suited to assess the reality of moral properties. It thus does not seem to matter which interpretation of Shafer-Landau is correct here, for on both the non-naturalist can be defended against causal overdetermination.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have argued that an epistemological characterization of the natural, which classifies the natural as that which demands an *a posteriori* approach, is the most useful in finding out which properties are natural. Shafer-Landau relies on this characterization to argue that moral properties, which seem to demand a primarily *a priori* approach, are non-natural. A non-naturalist has to explain the supervenience of the non-natural moral properties on the natural ones, without thereby considering moral properties as natural properties, or reducible to them. Shafer-Landau succeeds in this mainly because he conceives of moral properties being realized and exhaustively constituted by natural properties. He gives this phenomenon strength by alluding to the similarity of his position and that of non-reductive physicalism in the philosophy of mind, which argues that mental properties are realized by, but not identical to, physical properties. My discussion of Davidson's anomalous monism in comparison with non-naturalism has shown that this analogy holds. It serves as a useful tool for Shafer-Landau to illustrate and clarify his position. However, it leaves non-naturalism vulnerable to the non-reductive physicalist's problems with mental causation, argued for by Jeagwon Kim. I have assessed this criticism, applied to moral properties, and concluded that on multiple interpretations of the causal powers of moral properties, it does not hold.

Based purely on the assessment I have provided here, it can be concluded that the non-naturalist's explanation of the supervenience of the moral on the natural is successful. Of course, the criticisms I have been able to discuss within the scope of this thesis are not the only ones out there, and novel ways of defining the challenge of supervenience, the reductive claim, and what it means for a property to be real are constantly being formulated. The literature on these topics continues to expand. As it stands, however, I am convinced that the possibility of successfully defending moral non-naturalism against the challenge of supervenience greatly increases its credibility. I hope the reader is now, too.

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