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MORAL DISCOURSE AND DESCRIPTIVE PROPERTIES

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I discuss a strategy for grounding ethical naturalism propounded by Frank Jackson and more recently by Allan Gibbard: that the undisputed supervenience of the moral upon the natural (or descriptive) entails that moral properties are natural (or descriptive) properties. I show that this strategy falls foul of certain indubitable constraints governing natural kinds; and I then rebut some objections. The upshot is that no viable strategy for supporting ethical naturalism is to be found along these lines. This result has additional consequences, both for Jackson's attempt to accommodate ethical discourse into the natural world, and for Gibbard's purported 'meta-ethical synthesis'.

Recent years have witnessed something of a renaissance of naturalistic approaches towards meta-ethical issues. Changes in the philosophy of mind and philosophy of science, notably the advent of non-reductive physicalism and the related acceptance of the notion of necessary *a posteriori* synthetic property identities, have opened up new possibilities for such treatments. Partially as a result of this, it seemed for a time as if classical analytical naturalism was gone for ever. The sort of naturalism against which Moore fought seemed a little quaint, if not downright antiquated, in the face of some of these recent developments.

   This is no longer the case. A number of prominent contemporary theorists, notably Michael Smith[1] and Frank Jackson, have revived at least the spirit of the old naturalism, by arguing that there is a clear sense in which moral terms have purely descriptive semantic analyses. This claim is buttressed, in some cases, by an independent argument for the identity of moral and descriptive (or natural) properties.

   In this paper I shall examine the latter sort of argument, leaving the claimed semantic analysis for another occasion. There are three main ways for naturalists to argue that moral properties are natural (or descriptive) properties. First, they can claim synonymy between moral and descriptive terms. If the claim holds good, and if, as is (nearly) universally granted,

[1] Smith is not a naturalist as such, but he accepts, with one important exception, Jackson's Lewisian approach towards analysing moral concepts. The exception concerns what he calls the 'permutation problem': see *The Moral Problem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), pp. 54–6.

intension determines extension, then moral properties must be descriptive properties. Secondly, naturalists can opt for a purely theoretical identification, with no direct semantic commitments. Just as water was found to be identical with H_2O, for example, it might be claimed that the best explanation of various phenomena we confront is the identification of moral rightness with (say) maximization of expected utility. Thirdly, naturalists might argue that a proper understanding of what the term 'natural' means, in this context, is one on which moral properties are natural from the first, as it were, and consequently need not be identified with any other sort of property in order to attain the relevant sort of respectability.[2]

Each of these strategies has its adherents, but there is no consensus on whether any of them is ultimately successful. There may initially appear to be a fourth possibility, however: some among the new analytical naturalists have argued that the undisputed supervenience of the moral upon the natural itself entails that moral properties are natural properties. This is a significant result, if correct; for each of the three strategies mentioned above employs certain contentious premises rejected by opponents of naturalism. But to my knowledge no one, naturalist or not, denies that the moral supervenes upon the descriptive. Hence the argument merits close scrutiny.

The plan for this paper is as follows. §I is devoted to setting out the core of the central argument, as given by Jackson. In §II I briefly outline the way in which a similar argument is given, more recently, by Allan Gibbard. Gibbard's framework is very different from Jackson's, but I work to isolate a core of agreed assumptions, which each uses to derive the conclusion that moral properties are descriptive or natural properties.[3] §III is concerned to provide criticism of these assumptions, and, consequently, of the arguments given by Jackson and Gibbard more generally. §IV considers and attempts to rebut certain objections, and §V contains a few concluding remarks.

I

Jackson wants to solve what he calls the 'location problem' for ethics. A location problem concerns how to accommodate the ontology presupposed

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[2] There is also now a *quasi*-naturalistic version of moral realism, defended in P. Bloomfield's *Moral Reality* (Oxford UP, 2001). In '*Quasi*-Naturalism and Moral Reality', *Ratio* (forthcoming), I argue that Bloomfield's project fails.

[3] There are important differences between descriptive and natural properties: descriptive properties are typically thought to include supernatural properties (if any). Jackson is concerned to show that moral properties are descriptive, Gibbard that normative concepts pick out natural properties. For my purposes, however, there is no significant difference between the claim that moral properties are natural and the claim that they are descriptive, and I shall consequently employ the relevant locutions interchangeably.

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by a certain range of discourse into the natural world. His preferred strategy for solving the various location problems he considers is to invoke the 'entry by entailment thesis': if it can be shown that the world's psychological nature, for example, is entailed by the world's physical nature, then we can reconcile the existence of the psychological with the claim that a complete story about the world can be told in purely physical terms.[4] The same basic strategy is employed with respect to moral discourse. In the case of the ethical (p. 119), the key to the entailment is a certain supervenience thesis linking moral and descriptive properties, namely,

S.   For all worlds w and w^*, if w and w^* are exactly alike descriptively, then they are exactly alike ethically.

This is what Jackson calls an 'interworld', as opposed to an 'intraworld' supervenience thesis; more commonly the distinction drawn is between global supervenience theses like (S), and local claims such as Kim's strong supervenience – these latter relate not worlds but individuals within worlds.

Moral supervenience is special, according to Jackson, in that (S) holds true in its unrestricted form, while global psychophysical supervenience claims like the following do not:

ϕ/ψ. For all worlds w and w^*, if w and w^* are exactly alike physically, then w and w^* are exactly alike psychologically.

This claim is false, according to most physicalists, since two worlds might (it seems) be indistinguishable physically, but differ in that one but not the other has added onto it some minded ghostly or spiritual entity. Physicalists deny, of course, that there are any such entities in the actual world; but they are apt to acknowledge the metaphysical possibility, which is all that is required for the present point. The antecedent of (ϕ/ψ) holds for such a case, but its consequent fails, since the world with the add-on has mental states not present in the other world. There are various proposals for restricting the thesis to accommodate this apparent possibility, which need not concern us here (see Jackson, pp. 11–12, and references therein). The important point is that Jackson thinks (S) holds without restriction, and that it is this special feature of moral supervenience which he claims is responsible for the identity between moral and descriptive properties (p. 139). (I shall later question whether moral supervenience in fact has this special status.)

The argument proceeds thus. Let E be a sentence which is about the ethical nature of a world, in the sense that it contains ethical terms (as well as descriptive terms), and asserts about the world some genuine ethical content. Each world at which E is true will have some descriptive nature;

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[4] Jackson, *From Metaphysics to Ethics* (Oxford UP, 1998), p. 8.

and an extremely complex descriptive sentence could, in principle, give that descriptive nature in full. Now suppose that E is true at worlds w_1, w_2, ..., w_n and let D_1, D_2, ..., D_n be the purely descriptive sentences true at each which give their respective descriptive natures in full. 'Then the disjunction of D_1, D_2, etc., will also be a purely descriptive sentence, call it D. But then E entails and is entailed by D.... It follows that ethical properties are descriptive properties' (Jackson, p. 123). E entails D because any world in which E is true is one whose descriptive nature is captured by one of D's disjuncts – if E is true then at least one disjunct of D is true, which makes D itself true; D entails E because D is precisely the disjunction of (names of) all possible descriptive realizers of the state of affairs described by E – if D is true then so is at least one of its disjuncts, and this disjunct describes descriptive sufficient conditions for the obtaining of the ethical state of affairs designated by E. Jackson notes that the argument applied here to sentences can also be given for predicates.

I mentioned above that moral supervenience claims are thought to be special in that they need not be restricted, as psychophysical claims must be. We can now see, according to Jackson, an important consequence of this. It is that ethical language can make no distinctions which cannot be made in descriptive terms. This is a stronger result than that yielded by the relevant restrictions of (ϕ/ψ): even if physicalism is true, certain Cartesian views of the mind will make distinctions which cannot be marked in physical vocabulary. Physical vocabulary will be powerless to describe the difference between two worlds which are physically but not mentally indistinguishable. 'By contrast, ethical ways of partitioning the possibilities make no distinctions that are not mirrored in descriptive ways of partitioning them' (p. 123).

It will be useful to set out the argument in the following schematic form, which I think accurately represents the line of thought behind Jackson's contentions here (for simplicity I focus on predicates rather than closed sentences). I shall call it 'Jackson's argument'.

1. For every ethical predicate P, there is a necessarily co-extensive, purely descriptive predicate D
2. No distinctions can be made with P that cannot be made with D
3. D refers to a property
4. The property it refers to is descriptive (or natural)
5. P refers to the same property, and is thus itself descriptive (or natural)
C. Therefore ethical properties are descriptive (or natural) properties.

Let it be granted that the argument, or a natural extension of it, is valid. It will be argued below that certain of the premises are not true. Before getting to that, however, I turn to Gibbard's recent argument for the claim that

normative properties, including prominently ethical ones, are identical with natural properties.[5] The goal of the next section is to see how Gibbard's case maps onto the argument just sketched, which will then be evaluated.

II

In the previous section, I have extracted from Jackson's discussion an argument sketch which captures the essence of his case for the thesis that moral properties are descriptive properties. Allan Gibbard has outlined in a recent book an approach to the logic of normative concepts which differs in many important respects from that taken by Jackson.[6] However, Gibbard too contends that normative concepts, including moral concepts, pick out descriptive or natural properties; and his argument supporting this contention is similar enough to Jackson's to warrant treating them together. The purpose of this section is to introduce enough of the terminology and apparatus of Gibbard's book to show how his case maps onto the argument sketch provided above. I shall then proceed in §III to criticize the form of argument common to both Jackson and Gibbard.

Certain concepts, according to Gibbard, are 'plan-laden', rather than being purely descriptive. They concern, that is, how to act and decide, rather than (merely) how things happen to be (p. 7). Most of his book is taken up with investigating the logic of such concepts, and a central thesis is that normative concepts are themselves plan-laden. This is taken by Gibbard to provide an (otherwise unavailable) explanation for the somewhat peculiar behaviour of normative concepts. Though there are some shifts of emphasis from his previous work, the book is, of course, squarely within the expressivist tradition.

One central ambition of the project, however, is to effect what Gibbard calls 'a meta-ethical synthesis': to show that the seemingly disparate doctrines of expressivism, intuitionism (or non-naturalism) and naturalism are seen to have much more in common than is often thought, when once we gain a proper understanding of moral discourse. 'This book presents a kind of synthesis of these positions; contrasts between these three families, I argue, are far less acute than is normally supposed' (Gibbard, p. 19).

A key part of this so-called synthesis is Gibbard's claim that plan-laden (normative) concepts pick out natural properties. This claim is central to the

[5] Gibbard would be more comfortable with the claim that ethical *concepts* pick out natural *properties*; but still I think the way things are put in the text is not wholly misleading, given Gibbard's deflationary view of properties.

[6] A. Gibbard, *Thinking How to Live* (Harvard UP, 2003).

following among Gibbard's primary contentions here: (i) that while non-naturalists such as Moore were correct about moral concepts, naturalists are right that there are no non-natural properties (p. 98); (ii) that normative concepts, understood as plan-laden, can still provide legitimate causal explanations (p. 210); (iii) that while a certain sort of knowledge is available concerning plan-laden concepts such as *the thing to do*, knowing that so and so is the thing to do consists in something factual or naturalistic (p. 227); and finally (iv) that the notion of a response-dependent property is something of a confusion, in as much as there are only response-dependent concepts of prosaically natural properties (p. 250). These theses, while not exhausting Gibbard's attempted synthesis, form a central core of it; and it is fair to say, I think, that without the claim which supports them, that plan-laden concepts pick out natural properties, the so-called synthesis would fall to pieces.

What, then, is Gibbard's argument for this claim? One who is 'hyperdecided', in his terminology, has a plan for dealing with every possible contingency. Gibbard thinks that if he can show that a hyperdecided planner is committed to the thesis that moral concepts are ways of conceiving natural properties, then the thesis will be adequately established; in part this is because we are all planners, and the hyperdecided planner is only an idealization of normal planners such as we are (pp. 90–1). I shall not be concerned with this part of Gibbard's argument. Let him be granted that what holds for a hyperdecided planner holds as well for us; and while I am at it, I shall grant him the dubitable claim that if we are all committed to a thesis, then that thesis is true (at least in this sort of context). It will be shown in the next section that his argument still fails to establish the key thesis. The following is one way of setting out the core of 'Gibbard's argument':

1. One who is hyperdecided will take an act with property P_1 to be the thing to do in situation S_1, an act with property P_2 to be the thing to do in situation S_2, and so on
2. We can then construct the complex property $P_1 \vee P_2 \vee P_3 \vee ... \vee P_n$, which I shall call '$P*$'
3. The plan is, in effect, to do in every situation something with property $P*$ – this is to accept that there is a property of being the thing to do, namely, $P*$
C. Therefore $P*$ is a prosaically factual property, being constructed out of recognitionally grounded properties P_1, P_2, etc.

Certain of the terms used here must be explained. To take something to be the thing to do, for Gibbard, is in effect to make an all-things-considered judgement in favour of doing it. It is to rule out all other options. (Viewing something as being OK to do, to take Gibbard's second most prominent

plan-laden notion, entails seeing it as acceptable: it is to rule out ruling it out.) And a recognitionally grounded property he takes to be a property the instantiation of which we are capable, in normal circumstances, of recognizing. For present purposes, there is no significant difference between the notion of recognitionally grounded properties and that of natural or descriptive properties.

Like Jackson, Gibbard takes it that the normative supervenes on the natural; corresponding to every application of a plan-laden concept, then, there will be (an instantiation of) a natural property (or set of them). This will be the property the hyperdecided observer fastens onto in each situation. We then simply disjoin (names of) all possible situations, and take the natural property corresponding to each disjunct, in order to form the disjunctive property P^*. Since each disjunct in P^* is itself natural in the relevant sense, it follows, according to Gibbard, that P^* is a factual or natural property, to the existence of which any hyperdecided planner is committed. This conclusion, taken together with the initial assumptions granted to him above, entails his thesis that normative concepts pick out natural properties.

Gibbard's argument is equivalent to Jackson's in the following sense: there are two essential claims made, (a) that there is a complex disjunctive property corresponding to every coherent normative concept; and (b) that this property is a natural property. The rest of the argument is irrelevant for my purposes. The first premise is in effect true by virtue of the definition of 'hyperdecided', along with moral supervenience. The third step explicates what is claimed in the first two steps of the argument. Premise (2) corresponds with claim (a), and the conclusion with claim (b). These two key claims match up with steps (3) and (4) of Jackson's argument. For the rest of the paper I shall confine attention to Jackson's version of the argument, which employs more familiar terminology. Where it is not obvious in what follows how a particular point made applies to Gibbard, I shall indicate what I take to be the connection.

III

It has been granted that the argument in question (Jackson's argument) is valid. Premise (1), the claim that there is a necessarily co-extensive descriptive predicate corresponding to every ethical predicate, is contentious only in the sense that the complex disjunctive predicate in question may be infinitely long. Some may object to the idea of an infinitely long piece of language, though I shall not do so. The second premise of the argument,

which claims that no distinctions can be made with the ethical predicate in question that cannot be made with the corresponding descriptive predicate, raises issues best discussed later on. I shall suggest below that Jackson is involved in an equivocation concerning the notion of a distinction.

The third step is the assumption that the disjunctive descriptive predicate in question refers to a property. There are conceptions of properties according to which this is trivially true. Model theorists sometimes assume that the set of properties is closed under Boolean operations, which is to say that the result of applying an operation such as disjunction to a pair of properties is itself a member of the set of properties.[7] And then there is Stephen Schiffer's notion of 'pleonastic properties', according to which the existence of a property is guaranteed by the legitimacy of certain logical transformations. So to say that being a cat is a property is to say nothing more than that a certain type of sentence with only one singular term, such as 'Baruch is a cat', can be transformed into an equivalent sentence with two singular terms – 'Baruch has the property of being a cat'.[8]

These conceptions of properties are highly controversial, and in my view wrongheaded. But the issue is beyond the scope of this paper. Here I shall simply note two things: first, that premise (3) of Jackson's argument (and step (2) of Gibbard's) presupposes some such abundant conception of properties (in the absence of such a conception, it is far from obvious that P refers to anything at all); secondly, even granting the truth of (3), Jackson's (and Gibbard's) conclusion does not follow. Even if we grant that there is such a complex property as can be formed by disjoining (names of) the various subvenient bases of any given ethical property, it is not plausible, as I shall show, to think that this is a descriptive or natural property.

I take as an example the ethical predicate 'is morally good'. According to the first premise of Jackson's argument this predicate is necessarily co-extensive with a certain disjunctive descriptive predicate, namely,

D. $P_1x \lor P_2x \lor P_3x \lor ... \lor P_nx$.

Each disjunct of D refers to the descriptive correlate – the subvenient base – of the referent of the ethical predicate as used on a given occasion; each designates the natural state of affairs which realizes particular instances of moral goodness. I have granted, though only for the sake of argument, that D refers to a property. What must now be investigated is whether this property is, as Jackson and Gibbard claim, a natural property.

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[7] Gibbard (pp. 99–100) explicitly endorses this view of properties. While he also occasionally claims that moral supervenience holds *a priori* (e.g., at p. 92), this plays no role in the argument considered, which, like Jackson's, requires merely that supervenience holds of necessity.

[8] See Schiffer's *Remnants of Meaning* (MIT Press, 1987), p. 51; and *The Things We Mean* (Oxford UP, 2003), pp. 61ff.

One way to argue that it is would be to point out that each disjunct in D refers to a natural property – there is a sense in which this is true – and then to claim on this basis that D itself picks out a natural property. (This is essentially what Gibbard does, in the final step of his argument.) But this looks very much like the fallacy of composition. From the fact that members of a certain whole possess a given property, it manifestly does not follow that the whole itself possesses the property in question. Jackson could insist, however, that while the argument form, strictly speaking, may be fallacious, there is nothing in the particular case at hand which indicates that it is problematic to view D as picking out a natural property. Some reason needs to be provided, the thought might be, to defeat the presumption in favour of viewing D as corresponding to a natural property, given that each of its disjuncts designates something unproblematically natural.

Here is such a reason: step (4) in Jackson's argument (which corresponds to the fourth step of Gibbard's argument) violates an independently plausible constraint on properties or kinds:

Kind Constraint – Predicate Formulation: if a property is of a kind K, then it must be possible to pick out that property using only the descriptive and explanatory resources of level K.

Being morally good is not a natural property, because it is not possible to pick out (refer to) the property using only the descriptive resources of the natural level. The natural level, for my purposes, may be viewed as excluding only the ethical or evaluative. So my claim is that one cannot even refer to the property of being morally good without using one's ethical or evaluative knowledge. If this is so, then according to the constraint, the property in question is not a natural property.

The key point is that the disjunctive predicate D cannot even be formed without employing our knowledge of which natural properties realize (or subvene under) the property of being morally good. That is, without using the descriptive and explanatory resources of ethical discourse (which is not part of naturalistic discourse, I am supposing with Jackson and Gibbard), one cannot so much as construct the predicate which is supposed to refer to a natural property. So because one cannot refer to the property of being morally good using only the descriptive and explanatory resources of the natural, being morally good is not a natural property.

Why accept this constraint? There are two broad sorts of reason. First, there are no clear, uncontroversial cases of kinds which fail to meet it. Electrons are physical kinds, and they are picked out by 'electron', by 'negatively charged particle', etc., all terms of physical science. Propositional attitudes are kinds of common sense psychology, and they are picked out by the

proprietary terms of that discipline, 'belief', 'desire', 'pro-attitude', etc. Secondly, it is unclear what it *means* to claim that a property is of a kind K, if this constraint does not hold. To reject it is to be committed to maintaining that *x* is (say) a physical kind, though *it is not possible even to refer to x* using only the descriptive and explanatory resources of physical science (that is, despite the fact that one cannot even talk about *x* in the language of physics). This is surely incoherent.

Suppose it is granted that as things stand, one cannot refer to the property of being morally good using only purely natural descriptive and explanatory resources; one might still think that the problem can be over-come by simply adding D to this stock of resources.[9] Since D does determine necessary and sufficient conditions for the instantiation of the property in question, adding it to the descriptive resources of 'the natural' indeed appears to overcome the difficulty lately emphasized.

The problem is that this manœuvre renders completely trivial the claim that moral goodness is a natural property. For what is being proposed, in effect, is that we simply add a moral concept to naturalistic discourse, supplementing the natural with (a portion of) the moral. Little wonder, then, that we can now refer to this moral property using only naturalistic terms! Given the plausible assumption that the kind constraint provides sufficient as well as necessary conditions for being a property or kind of level K, this *ad hoc* fix would make any property whatsoever natural. Simply add to the nat-uralistic lexicon a term which uniquely and determinately picks out the property in question, and one can refer to that property using only natural descriptive resources. If this allows the initial proposal to meet the kind constraint, it also makes being a natural property a completely trivial and uninteresting affair. If being morally good were really a natural property, then there would be naturalistic explanatory and descriptive resources within *existing* theory which provide means by which the property can be designated; but there are no such means; hence it is not a natural property.

Another way in which the futility of the suggested move displays itself is that no opponent of naturalism has ever meant to deny that moral proper-ties are natural in the sense that if one adds to naturalistic discourse a term referring to a given moral property, one can thereby refer to this property in purely naturalistic terms. The suggestion makes nonsense of the disagree-ment between naturalists and non-naturalists, a reliable sign that something has gone wrong.

Not all additions to theoretical discourse are *ad hoc* in this way. Often a term is introduced in response to theoretical pressure, as was the case with

[9] N. Block makes this suggestion in connection with disjunctive mental predicates; see 'Antireductionism Slaps Back', *Philosophical Perspectives*, 11 (1997), pp. 107–32, at p. 113.

'electron'. Physicists once lacked the means to refer to electrons, but empirical discovery, along with theoretical refinement, remedied the situation. It is not plausible, however, that any empirical discovery, or theoretical pressure, is going to provide a reason for introducing D into naturalistic discourse. Certainly it is no part of the meta-ethical views of Jackson or Gibbard that natural science will one day require the use of moral concepts.

The above formulation of the kind constraint can cause unease from another direction, in as much as it appears to make it possible to derive ontological conclusions from premises about what can and cannot be done with certain sorts of language. Surely, one might reason, the ontological situation is independent of the terms we happen to have hit upon in the course of enquiry. On this sort of view, the admitted fact that natural discourse contains no means by which to refer to the property of being morally good has no tendency to show that the latter is not a natural property; the latter claim concerns how things stand in the mind- and language-independent world, and the former is precisely about language.

The correct reply here is to insist that when things go well, we employ the kind-terms we do *because* of what is in the world; these terms, like the theories which are partially couched in terms of them, are, we hope, accurate reflections of an extra-linguistic reality.[10] One may doubt whether this is so, but in so doubting one is questioning, it seems, scientific realism, rather than the above criterion as such. Nevertheless, it is important that the following is in the relevant sense equivalent to the above formulation of the constraint:

Kind Constraint – Property Formulation: if a property is of a kind K, then the members of its extension must have something in common which is visible from level K.

I shall first explicate and try to defend this version of the constraint, and then remark on the equivalence of the two formulations.

Natural kinds are classically conceived as property types which play a certain crucial role in scientific explanation. Members of a given kind are able to play that role only because they share certain central features. Every member of the set of electrons has something in common with the others: a certain mass, a certain type of charge. Having mass and having charge are physical attributes. A particle's mass, and its charge, can be described within the proprietary vocabulary of physics. This is part of what makes it plausible

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[10] See D. Pereboom and H. Kornblith, 'The Metaphysics of Irreducibility', *Philosophical Studies*, 63 (1991), pp. 125–45, for an argument that what kind terms we employ is no accidental matter, and more generally on the poverty of disjunctive strategies in discussions of property-identity and reduction. The kind constraints appealed to here are also arguably implicit in J. Fodor's 'Special Sciences', repr. in his *Representations* (MIT Press, 1981), pp. 127–45. The argument of each of these papers seems to me to support the constraints.

to say that electrons form a physical kind. Every belief has something psychologically in common with every other belief: each has its content essentially, and each figures in like counterfactual-supporting generalizations which may as well be called laws. All of this is a matter of psychology, which is an essential part of what makes it plausible to say that beliefs are psychological kinds.

Two things must be true of instances of a given property type for that property type to count as a natural kind of level K. First, each instance must have something in common with the others; secondly, this commonality must be visible from level K. Electrons and beliefs satisfy both of these demands. The disjunctive 'property' referred to by D satisfies the first but not the second. Each disjunct of D refers to a realizer of moral goodness. These realizers all have something in common, namely, being sufficient for the instantiation of the property of moral goodness. But this is not a naturalistic matter. As I have been emphasizing, in order even to form the disjunction in the first place one must have knowledge of the extension of a non-natural moral concept. The referents of the disjuncts of D do not have anything naturalistic in common; what they do share is not visible from the naturalistic descriptive level, and hence moral goodness is not a natural property.

An analogy may be helpful here. Mental properties supervene on physical properties, at least in the sense that fixing the world's distribution of physical properties (or instances of them) suffices to fix its distribution of mental properties.[11] Given this, one can formulate, in principle, physicalistic sufficient conditions for the instantiation of any mental property. Let 'Ψ' be a mental predicate designating mental property Ψ, and let 'Φ' be the disjunctive predicate which refers to the disjunction of all possible physical realizers of Ψ. Then 'Ψ' and 'Φ' are necessarily co-extensive. But the members of the extension of 'Φ' have nothing physical in common with one another. As typed by physics, that is, they share nothing in common. Hence they do not form a physical kind. As typed by psychology, on the other hand, they do have something in common, and it is thus plausible to say that they are instances of a psychological kind. The situation here is precisely analogous to that between moral and descriptive properties.[12]

The two formulations of the kind constraint are equivalent in this sense: given an ideal or completed set of natural sciences, there would be a kind

[11] I here set aside the complication noted in §I, concerning the possible need to restrict this sort of claim. This will not affect the argument.

[12] It can be objected that moral supervenience holds necessarily, while mental supervenience is contingent. This is Jackson's view. However, it will be argued in §IV that Jackson fails to identify a real difference between moral and mental supervenience.

term corresponding to every natural kind.[13] And one would be able to refer to a given property using the descriptive and explanatory resources of kind K if and only if instances of the property had in common something visible from level K. For an ideal theory, or set of theories, there is no relevant difference between the two formulations. Our actual theories are of course not ideal; but the arguments of this paper are not affected by the stipulation that we are concerned with ideal theory, since, as mentioned above, neither Jackson nor Gibbard wants to hold the view that as the natural sciences progress, they will come to incorporate moral terms and concepts.

It has been the burden of this section to argue that there is no interesting sense in which the mere supervenience of the moral upon the natural implies that moral properties are natural properties. One final consideration serves to buttress this conclusion. If supervenience did in fact imply the identity of the supervening class of properties with the subvening class, then an extremely popular position in the philosophy of mind, non-reductive physicalism, would be an incoherent line to take. For every proponent of this view will acknowledge some version of psychophysical supervenience; but as non-reductionists, they deny the identity of mental with physical properties. If Jackson and Gibbard are right, then this sort of view is incoherent. But it is surely not *incoherent*, whether or not it is ultimately plausible. This is another reason, which is clearly quite similar to the above reflection concerning the disagreement between naturalists and their opponents, to reject the view that supervenience implies property identity.[14]

IV

In this penultimate section I shall consider a number of objections to the argument thus far. First, some theorists, including Jackson, take it that logical equivalence between properties implies identity. Two properties are logically equivalent if they are instantiated in all and only the same possible circumstances, or alternatively, if the predicates referring to them are necessarily co-extensive. 'Is morally good' and D are necessarily co-extensive, and this might be thought to imply that they refer to the same property.

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[13] This is oversimplified, in as much as it is plausible that not all natural kinds are denizens of the 'natural sciences', properly so-called. (So much was implicit in my treatment of propositional attitudes as natural kinds.) But nothing here turns on the point.

[14] As I have said, Jackson emphasizes what he takes to be an important difference between moral and mental supervenience which is relevant here. I shall deal with this argument in the following section.

This is a large issue, and I shall restrict myself to criticizing briefly Jackson's remarks on the matter. As is well known, being equiangular and being equilateral are logically equivalent properties; but it is not plausible that they are the same property. Jackson contends that the difference is in how we conceive the world, rather than a difference in the world itself. However, it comes perilously close to begging the question to insist, as he does, that the difference between sides and angles is not relevant to the question whether being an equilateral triangle and being an equiangular triangle are the same property. The plausible view of the situation is surely that we have here two different properties, rather than two different ways of conceiving the same property. One is the property (more precisely, the relation) of having *sides* all the same length as x, and the other is the property (relation) of having *angles* all the same size as x. Manifestly, sides and angles are not the same things. Jackson has done nothing, thus far, to defeat the presumption in favour of this natural view. (His view here also has the extremely implausible consequence that there is only one universally necessary property.)

Jackson does go on to advance some positive considerations against holding that ethical properties are distinct from descriptive ones, though the two are necessarily co-extensive. First, he claims that it is difficult to see how one could ever be justified in interpreting a language user's utterance of 'right', for example, as picking out a property distinct from that picked out by the necessarily co-extensive descriptive predicate associated with it. This is because 'we know that the complete story about how and when the language user produces the word "right" can be given descriptively' (Jackson, p. 127). But it is difficult to see how this is supposed to amount to an argument, rather than a mere reiteration of Jackson's position on the matter. If the language user refers to a property which cannot be picked out in purely descriptive terms, then we have a very good reason for doubting whether the property in question is a descriptive one, irrespective of whether there may be artificially produced, logically co-extensive predicates. The fact that a complete story can be given in descriptive terms concerning how and when someone *produces* the term 'right' is wholly irrelevant to the issue. This is a fact about the (relative) explanatory completeness of psychology, or perhaps physiology; and no one is claiming that these disciplines need supplementing with ethical predicates or properties. The relevant question is whether the complete *ethical* story can be told in descriptive terms. It cannot be, if there is no way even to refer to ethical properties in purely descriptive language. As I shall show below, it is a fallacy to move directly from claims about supervenience to claims about 'complete stories' in this manner.

Secondly, Jackson contends that the putative non-descriptive ethical properties in question could be of no ethical significance. They would be

what he calls 'ethical idlers': we would not take seriously someone who acknowledges that a contemplated action would kill many and save no one, but insists that whether the action is morally permissible is not settled by this alone and that we must also know whether the action has the extra non-descriptive property in question. This argument too is weak. It will be logically entailed (given any plausible normative theory) that if the action has the descriptive features indicated, then given supervenience, it also has the ethical property of being morally impermissible. That there is no further question here has no tendency to show that ethical properties are identical with descriptive properties. It shows only something which is not in dispute, that the former supervene on the latter.

Finally, Jackson distinguishes a more and a less extreme version of the sort of distinctness claim in question. The extreme view is that for *every* (possibly complex) descriptive property there is a distinct, necessarily co-extensive non-descriptive property, perhaps an ethical property. He holds that this is absurd, and he is surely correct. The less extreme version of the view is that only *some* descriptive properties have associated with them necessarily co-extensive but distinct properties. The problem he sees (pp. 127–8) is how to find a principled basis for saying when this happens and when it does not. Why is there such a property in certain cases, but not in others?

This too raises a large metaphysical issue, but the outlines of a plausible response can be presented here. On one non-reductionistic though still naturalistic view, some sets of descriptive properties correspond to (subvene under) explanatorily indispensable, autonomous ethical properties; some do not. This is no different from what we find with the various special sciences, themselves part of what Jackson thinks of as the descriptive realm. Certain sets of physical properties correspond to explanatorily indispensable, autonomous geological (chemical, biological, physiological, etc.) properties; some do not. Why is this? It is difficult to see the question as other than a demand for a reductive characterization of special science properties. But the demand may be legitimately rejected. Certain facts are brute; this is not denied by anyone in the present debate. The claim of the anti-reductionist about special science properties is just that the realm of the brute extends further than the reductionist supposes. It is just as much a basic fact about our universe that it contains geological properties, with their respective subvenient physical bases, as that it contains fundamental physical properties, with their intrinsic natures. It is of course a disputed question whether moral properties are profitably modelled on special science properties.[15] But if they are, we are thereby provided with the resources to answer Jackson's challenge.

[15] One central aspect of this issue is addressed in my 'Moral Explanation and the Special Sciences', *Philosophical Studies*, 113 (2003), pp. 121–52.

Indeed, the answer is available even if this view of moral properties is not plausible. For as I have shown, Jackson's challenge amounts to the question why moral properties have the subvenient bases they have. It would be an intolerable mystery, he implies, were it to turn out that there is no reductive explanation of this fact. But a precisely parallel situation exists with special science properties – the question whether moral properties are relevantly analogous to special science properties is not pertinent here. It is plausible that there is no reductive explanation available in the general special science case, but there is also no mystery created thereby. This is best seen, in my view, as a *reductio* of the charge of intolerable mystery which is required to fuel Jackson's objection.

Moving on to a distinct though related set of objections, it was noted above that Jackson holds that the 'special character' of the supervenience of the moral upon the natural ensures that moral properties are identical with natural properties. His point is that a supervenience thesis like (S) does not need the sort of qualification necessary in the case of (ϕ/ψ), its psycho-physical counterpart; as a result, Jackson thinks that no distinctions can be made with moral discourse that cannot be made with natural discourse. This provides a reason for thinking that moral properties must be natural or descriptive properties.

In what sense, though, is moral supervenience really different? Let us allow that there can be two worlds which are physically indiscernible but mentally distinct. So also there can be two worlds which are physically in-discernible but *morally* distinct. (Simply imagine a world just like ours, with a minded and malevolent ghost added onto it.) The mental and the moral are here on a par. What has happened is that Jackson has surreptitiously altered the subvenient base in moving from mental to moral supervenience. The base in the case of (S) is one of descriptive properties, and in the case of (ϕ/ψ) is one of physical properties. It is thus a clear *non sequitur* to argue that because the former holds unrestrictedly, and the latter does not, there must be some important difference between moral and psychophysical super-venience. The difference lies with the *relata*, rather than with the relation.

To confirm that this is the case, if (S) and (ϕ/ψ) are now taken with descriptive, rather than physical, properties as subvenient bases, again there is no difference.[16] I have shown that, so construed, (S) has no need of restric-tion. But neither does the psychophysical thesis; for the minded ghost who,

[16] Some, most prominently Blackburn, have sought to show on different grounds that moral supervenience has a special character. These arguments are important, but they are orthogonal to present concerns, since Jackson does not press for any disanalogy between mental and moral supervenience over and above that already noted. Blackburn's argument requires separate treatment.

it was supposed, inhabits w but not w^* will be counted as part of the descriptive inventory of the former. Hence in the envisaged situation the antecedent of (ϕ/ψ) is false. No difference, therefore, has been shown to obtain between the relations of moral and mental supervenience.

But set that aside; suppose that Jackson is correct that (S) does not require restriction, whereas its psychophysical counterpart does. What follows from this? Jackson thinks that premise (2) of his argument follows, the claim that no distinctions can be made with moral predicates which cannot be made with descriptive predicates. This is either false or trivial. It is false if what one means by (2) is that any given moral predicate is in principle dispensable, since all the explanatory and codificational work in question can be done by the relevant counterpart of D. It was stressed in §III above that predicates like D cannot even be constructed without employing our knowledge of which descriptive properties realize properties like that of being morally good. So far from its being dispensable, we must use our knowledge concerning the moral even to form the disjunctive predicates in question. If moral properties were natural properties this would not be necessary.

The claim is trivial if all one means by (2) is that one can form a necessarily co-extensive predicate for each moral predicate. This is not interesting: it follows directly from supervenience, and has no bearing on the issue whether moral and natural properties are identical, since both sides in the dispute acknowledge the truth of supervenience.

It seems to me that Jackson has fallen prey to a common fallacy, which I call the 'supervenience fallacy', that of thinking that because a certain class of properties supervenes on another class, (members of) the former are nothing over and above (members of) the latter. This fallacy is committed in metaphysics and the philosophy of mind, as well as in meta-ethics, and it is abetted by certain turns of phrase. If the moral supervenes on the descriptive, it is often said to be a consequence that the descriptive 'determines' the moral; that it 'constitutes' the moral; that 'anything that can be done with moral terms can be done with descriptive terms'; and sometimes that the moral is 'nothing over and above' the descriptive.

Each of the quoted phrases has a stronger and a weaker sense, and the corresponding slogans differ dramatically according to which sense they are interpreted as having. For example, the claim that the descriptive determines the moral, in the weak sense, means nothing more than that fixing the descriptive suffices to fix the moral. This follows directly from supervenience. In the stronger sense it means that moral properties are nothing but descriptive properties ('nothing over and above' descriptive properties, again in a strong sense). This is a much more substantial thesis, one that manifestly does not follow from supervenience. Generally speaking, the

fallacy consists in an illicit slide from the weak sense to the strong sense of such slogans. That Jackson is guilty of committing this fallacy is evidenced in the following passage:

> ... ethical language may be needed in practice to capture the similarities among the various descriptive ways that (S) tells us constitute ethical nature, but ethical properties are, nevertheless, possibly infinitely disjunctive descriptive properties – there is nothing more 'there' other than the relevant similarities among those descriptive ways. There is no 'extra' feature that the ethical terms are fastening onto.[17]

Only property identity would establish that there is nothing extra here, nothing over and above the descriptive; only the identity of moral and descriptive properties would warrant the claim that the moral is nothing more than the descriptive. If they, and other pairs of (sets of) properties like them, were indeed identical, then there would be no multiple realizability in each case, and no reason to take a misleading disjunctive detour through supervenience.[18]

Finally, Gibbard offers a pair of considerations in defence of his classification as natural of properties like the one designated by D, which can be turned into objections to the present argument. First, he claims that to restrict the term 'natural' in such a way that it does not apply to predicates like D, and the properties they ostensibly refer to, is problematic. It is problematic because there may be no interesting reasonably well delimited conception of the term which is so restricted.[19] What is to count as natural?

A complete answer to this question does not have to be given here. All that matters is that moral properties do not count as natural from the first, as it were, and Gibbard and Jackson are agreed that this is the case. If it were not, there would be no need to show that plan-laden concepts pick out descriptive properties, or to accommodate the moral into the naturalistic realm. Whatever the natural encompasses, it does not include, at first glance, the moral. And despite the supervenience of the moral upon the natural or descriptive, it is not possible to pick out moral properties such as being morally good in purely naturalistic vocabulary. Given the constraints, this is enough to show that such properties are not natural properties.

Secondly, Gibbard thinks that the more liberal conception of properties he endorses is supported by the possibility that a given plan-laden concept

[17] Jackson, pp. 124–5; see also p. 146, where he claims that as a consequence of moral supervenience, 'there is no ethical nature over and above descriptive nature'. No one innocent of the supervenience fallacy would be tempted by Jackson's line here.

[18] For other instances of the fallacy, see D. Armstrong, *Universals: an Opinionated Introduction* (New York: Westview, 1989), pp. 56, 100; D. Lewis, 'Reduction of Mind', in S. Guttenplan (ed.), *A Companion to the Philosophy of Mind* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), pp. 413–14; D. Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind* (Oxford UP, 1996), p. 41.

[19] Gibbard, pp. 101–2. The quotation to follow is from the same pages.

will correspond to many different natural properties. So *being OK to do*, which is a paradigmatic plan-laden concept for Gibbard, might be realized by 'a complex property that, say, trades off pleasure, integrity, treating people as ends ... and the like. In either case, there is a natural property in my sense that constitutes being OK to do.'

It is difficult to understand why Gibbard thinks this supports his conception of what it takes for a property to be natural. There being no single natural property which realizes a normative property (or concept) is evidence that the latter is *not* itself natural. Gibbard's point makes sense, so far as I can see, only if one assumes that disjunctions of natural properties are themselves natural; and this, of course, is precisely the point at issue. Hence the possibility he cites, so far from bolstering his conception of that in which being natural consists, actually serves to undermine it.[20]

V

It has been argued here that a certain approach towards vindicating naturalism fails. The approach, taken in slightly different ways by Jackson and Gibbard respectively, is to try to show that the identity of moral and descriptive (or natural) properties follows from the undisputed supervenience of the moral upon the descriptive. It fails because it is not possible even to talk about a given moral property without employing moral terms or concepts. Of course Gibbard is no naturalist, properly speaking; but I have shown that part of the larger project of his book is to effect a synthesis of meta-ethical positions, so that his brand of expressivism comes out looking very similar to a certain kind of naturalism. The considerations advanced here cast doubt on this central part of his attempted synthesis. It has been argued that the reductive technique in question, which seeks to derive property identity from implications of supervenience, falls foul of a pair of kind constraints; this in turn implies, I have argued, that the disjunctive property corresponding to any given moral property – if it exists at all, which is highly doubtful – is not a natural property.

What then of Jackson's accommodation strategy for moral discourse? As remarked at the outset of the paper, he claims that the fact that the descriptive story about a given world entails that world's moral story shows that the moral is unproblematic ontologically. My arguments seem to me to

[20] It should be acknowledged that Gibbard has a notion of constitution distinct from and stronger than supervenience (see p. 95), and that he claims that moral properties, such as they are, are constituted by natural properties. But since this plays no role in his argument for the claim that moral concepts pick out natural properties, I shall ignore it here.

show that Jackson's strategy fails, given his strong naturalistic assumptions. For the fact that the descriptive story entails the moral story does nothing to show that moral properties do not exist over and above descriptive ones. Such a conclusion is anathema to one who, like Jackson, thinks that there is a very real sense in which the descriptive nature of a world exhausts its reality. He must presumably either find another way to 'accommodate' the moral, or join Gibbard in opting for expressivism.

It does not of course follow from the conclusions reached here that all versions of naturalism are false or hopeless. What does follow is that if naturalism is to succeed, it must be via one of the three traditional routes mentioned at the outset of the paper. There is no easy road to ethical naturalism.[21]

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