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## Anti-Reductionism and Supervenience

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In this paper, I argue that anti-reductionist moral realism still has trouble explaining supervenience. My main target here will be Russ Shafer-Landau's attempt to explain the supervenience of the moral on the natural in terms of the constitution of moral property instantiations by natural property instantiations. First, though, I discuss a recent challenge to the very idea of using supervenience as a dialectical weapon posed by Nicholas Sturgeon. With a suitably formulated supervenience thesis in hand, I try to show how Shafer-Landau's proffered strategy to explain supervenience not only fails to explain supervenience, but that it also has a number of implausible consequences. The more general lesson is that strategies which may work well for explaining supervenience in the philosophy of mind and other areas cannot be assumed to carry over successfully to the metaethical context. We should therefore treat so-called 'companions in guilt' arguments in this area of philosophy with considerable skepticism.

**Keywords:** expressivism; moral realism; non-naturalism; reductionism; supervenience; trope

According to anti-reductionist forms of normative realism, normative predicates purport to refer to normative properties, and these properties are not properly understood in any non-normative or purely descriptive vocabulary. On these views, any attempt to reduce the normative to the non-normative is doomed to fail. Normative properties are *sui generis*, and must be understood on their own terms. G.E. Moore famously defended a non-naturalist version of anti-reductionism, according to which normative properties (in Moore's case, specifically moral ones, and more specifically goodness) are not only irreducible, they are non-natural. What being non-natural came to in Moore's sense is slightly obscure, though it is nowadays often understood in terms of whether the property in question would figure in any ideal empirical science or be reducible to properties which would so figure.<sup>1</sup> By contrast,

\* Many thanks to Brad Majors, Sean McKeever, David Robb, Russ Shafer-Landau, Nicholas Sturgeon, the participants of my presentation of this material at Davidson College, and the participants of the Cambridge Metaethics Conference.

1. For a survey of the bewildering senses given to 'natural' and 'non-natural' in this

other anti-reductionist views insist that though the normative is irreducible, it is in some important sense natural all the same. Here I want to discuss a problem for all forms of anti-reductionism about normative properties, regardless of whether the view in question takes those properties to be natural or non-natural.

The problem will be familiar to those who know the existing literature on non-naturalism in metaethics. The argument begins with the following premise. There can be no normative difference without some non-normative or descriptive difference as well. The normative in this sense 'supervenes' on the non-normative and descriptive, or so I shall argue. Indeed, the supervenience of the normative, when properly formulated, is plausibly characterized as analytic. Someone who denied a suitably formulated supervenience thesis would thereby give evidence that he is not a fully competent user of normative terms. Given supervenience, the very idea of an irreducible normative property begins to look somewhat obscure. The challenge put to anti-reductionists is to explain how there could be normative properties which *both* necessarily supervene *and* are irreducible. In this paper I want to consider and rebut two attempts to deal with the challenge.

The first strategy for dealing with this challenge has recently been put forward (in unpublished work in progress) by Nicholas Sturgeon. Sturgeon argues that while most metaethical views can accommodate *some* form of supervenience, there is no single formulation of supervenience which is hospitable to all *prima facie* plausible metaethical views. Just which form of supervenience one endorses will on this account depend on one's background meta-ethical theory. If this argument succeeds then it puts pressure on the anti-realist who argues that non-naturalists cannot explain supervenience. For perhaps the only form of supervenience which non-naturalists can be expected to accept without begging any central questions is indeed a form of that doctrine which they can, after all, explain.

In section one, I respond to Sturgeon's interesting line of argument in a concessive way. I think we do indeed learn something important from Sturgeon's critique, but the lesson is not that there is no form of supervenience which can be used as a dialectical weapon in these debates. Instead, Sturgeon's own argument actually suggests a formulation of supervenience which does not beg any central questions, and which therefore could reasonably be used in a premise against one or another metaethical view. In section one I try to show how a suitably disjunctive characterization of the subvenient base avoids any reasonable controversy of the sort Sturgeon has in mind. In the remainder of this paper I try to show why anti-reductionist views will have problems explaining even this form of supervenience.

The second strategy for dealing with the challenge to explain supervenience takes a more direct approach. Here I focus on Russ Shafer-Landau's recent

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domain, see M. Ridge, 'Moral Non-Naturalism', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2005), <http://www.seop.leeds.ac.uk/entries/moral-non-naturalism/>.

attempt to meet the challenge by explaining supervenience in anti-reductionist terms. In the remainder of the paper, I argue Shafer-Landau's strategy fails, and that the failure is instructive. For Shafer-Landau's strategy seems like one of the most promising ones available to the anti-reductionist. Shafer-Landau tries to show how what he takes to be the most promising strategy for explaining supervenience in the philosophy of mind can be carried over successfully to the normative domain. In particular, he argues that in both cases, we can adequately explain supervenience by appealing to a thesis about how each instantiation of any of the supervening properties is fully constituted by some concatenation of the relevant subvening properties.

I argue here that even if this strategy works in the philosophy of mind, it remains problematic in the normative case. The possibility of such a divide between the normative realm and other cases of supervenience is itself very instructive. For anti-reductionists (Shafer-Landau included) very often rely on 'companions in guilt' style arguments. These arguments rely on the idea that a supposed problem in the normative case is really just a variant on a problem encountered in other areas of philosophy, and that whatever solution works in that other area can be carried over to the normative case. The more general lesson of my argument against Shafer-Landau's proposed explanation is that such 'companions in guilt' arguments should be viewed with considerable suspicion. Strategies which are perfectly plausible in other domains may not carry over plausibly to the normative, or so I shall argue. First, though, we need to clarify just how the supervenience of the normative should itself be understood.

### 1. Supervenience: Formulating the Challenge

Supervenience theses come in all different shapes and sizes, though. Debates in metaphysics and the philosophy of mind have led to the development of a wide array of different supervenience theses.<sup>2</sup> How exactly should we formulate supervenience in the context of challenging the normative anti-reductionist to explain it?

Supervenience theses can be global or local. Global supervenience theses claim that no two possible worlds can differ in the supervening respect without also differing in the subvening respect. By contrast, local supervenience claims hold that two numerically distinct objects in one and the same world cannot differ in supervening respects without also differing in the subvening respects.

One problem for local supervenience claims is that if the subvening base is widened far enough—say, to include spatio-temporal location—then supervenience may be trivially true for the reason that no numerically distinct things can be precisely the same in all of the subvening respects. In which

2. For a useful survey, see K. Bennett and B. McLaughlin, 'Supervenience', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2005), <http://www.seop.leeds.ac.uk/entries/supervenience/#4.3>.

case it becomes trivial that no two things can differ in the supervening respects without also differing in subvening respects as well. This will be trivially true for the simple reason that no two genuinely distinct things can fail to differ in some of the subvening respects. Global supervenience theses skirt this problem by being formulated in terms of whole possible worlds, rather than in terms of individuals within the same world. The issue then becomes which kinds of worlds really are genuinely possible, and which are not. I propose to understand supervenience here as a global thesis, so as to avoid these sorts of triviality worries.

The other issue is how we should understand the subvening base. Here I want to consider a worry recently discussed by Nicholas Sturgeon.<sup>3</sup> The subvening base is sometimes characterized in terms of the natural properties, but the question of just which properties count as natural is itself deeply vexed. Moreover, on many ways of understanding the natural it will not be true that the normative supervenes on the natural. Plausibly, supernatural facts about the next life can give us reasons for action, for example, in which case two worlds could differ normatively without differing naturally—supernatural differences in one's fate in the afterlife, or differences with respect to whether one even has an afterlife, could be enough to explain differences in one's reasons for action.

A seemingly more promising approach, often taken in these debates, is to maintain that the normative supervenes on the non-normative. This is indeed very plausible, but it is not clear that it is analytic. Here the issue seems to be too theory-dependent for analyticity. For some forms of descriptivism are committed to denying this sort of supervenience thesis. Let me explain why this way of defining supervenience may be inhospitable to certain forms of descriptivism.

Consider the descriptivist view that being worthwhile just is being pleasant. This may not be a very plausible view, but it is also not uncontroversially analytic that it is false. Suppose that the descriptivist we have in mind also holds a form of dualism according to which pleasure is itself a basic and irreducible property. In that case, the view seems consistent with denying the supervenience of the normative on the non-normative. For on the descriptivist view on offer, being worthwhile just *is* being pleasant; that is, these are one and the same property. In that case, though, being pleasant *is* a normative property, not a non-normative one. Since being pleasant is, in turn, an irreducible property, it seems to follow that two worlds could differ

3. In what follows, my thinking has been influenced by an as-yet unpublished paper, currently in draft, by Nicholas Sturgeon on supervenience. See Sturgeon (unpublished manuscript), 'Doubts About the Supervenience of the Evaluative'. To be clear, as of the time of my writing this article, Sturgeon's own views are still potentially in flux, as he tells me that his paper is not in his view ready for publication. I therefore do not attribute any of the ideas discussed in the text to him in the sense of representing his considered view, but only in the sense of being his ideas, regardless of whether he still endorses them as true or not.

normatively without differing non-normatively. For two worlds could differ simply in the distribution of pleasantness, given that pleasantness is irreducible. There seems no plausible case, given a thoroughgoing dualism about pleasure, for supposing that two worlds could not differ just with respect to pleasantness. According to the descriptivist view on offer, though, this difference between these two worlds (that is, their difference in terms of the distribution of pleasure) is itself a normative difference, and so not a non-normative one. So two worlds can, on this metanormative view, differ in their normative properties without at the same time differing in their nonnormative properties.

Another approach to defining supervenience is to insist that the normative supervenes on the descriptive, where to be a descriptive property is just to be a property which is, or at least can be, picked out in purely descriptive terms. This account relies on some way of sorting descriptive from non-descriptive terms, of course, but we can perhaps rely on an intuitive sense of how such terms are sorted to draw the distinction. This is roughly how Frank Jackson proceeds in his defense of the supervenience of the ethical on the descriptive.<sup>4</sup>

This approach does not beg any questions against descriptivists, unlike the formulation in terms of the non-normative. For the descriptivist will of course allow that the normative supervenes on the descriptive for the simple reason that the normative just *is* the descriptive, and everything supervenes on itself.

However, those who are inclined to reject descriptivism may reasonably find the supervenience of the normative on the descriptive problematic. For one thing, some philosophers find the very idea of dividing predicates into the category of the normative and the descriptive problematic, in which case the category of descriptive properties (defined here in terms of descriptive predicates) is problematic.

I take an ecumenical approach here. For what seems undeniable is that the normative either supervenes on the non-normative or on the descriptive. Those who deny that the normative supervenes on the non-normative because they are descriptivists will allow that the normative does supervene on the descriptive (trivially). While those who deny that the normative supervenes on the descriptive because they reject the normative/descriptive distinction will nonetheless allow that the normative does supervene on the non-normative. For the only reason to reject that thesis is apparently a certain form of descriptivism, and anyone who denies the coherence of the normative/descriptive distinction is *ipso facto* not a descriptivist, and hence has no grounds for rejecting the supervenience of the normative on the non-normative.

Let us therefore take as plausible, and indeed analytic, the following very modest global supervenience thesis:

4. See F. Jackson, *From Metaphysics to Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 120.

(S) Necessarily: Two entire possible worlds cannot differ in their normative properties without also differing *either* (a) in their non-normative properties or (b) in their descriptive properties.

(S) is extremely plausible, to the point that someone who denied it would thereby betray incompetence with normative concepts. To deny (S) would be to allow, for all that has been said so far, that it could have been the case that the world was exactly like the actual world in all of its non-normative and descriptive features, yet Hitler's actions were not wrong. Since all the non-normative and descriptive facts are the same in this possible world it will still be true that Hitler killed the same people, had the same intentions, etc. Such bare normative differences seem *inconceivable*. Very plausibly, the normative facts are in some way entirely fixed by the non-normative and descriptive facts, and this is something we can know *a priori*. Indeed, it seems to be built into the very meaning of normative discourse, and is in that sense analytic. I therefore conclude that supervenience formulated in this way need not beg any central questions.

## 2. Explaining Supervenience: Companions in Guilt and Constitution

Descriptivist forms of realism have an easy time explaining how there could be genuine normative properties which satisfy (S), since the supervenience of the normative on the descriptive entails (S). By contrast, anti-reductionism seems unable to accommodate any plausible explanation of how there could be genuine normative properties which satisfy (S). For if normative properties, non-normative properties, and descriptive properties really are, in Hume's terms, 'distinct existences', then it is very hard to see why it should be impossible for the former to differ with no difference in the latter. In one version or another, this problem has been put to anti-reductionists many times.<sup>5</sup>

Expressivism has a much easier time on this front. The crucial point is that the expressivist's explanatory task differs from the explanatory task facing the cognitivist. Whereas the cognitivist must explain a metaphysical relationship between two potentially distinct sets of properties, the expressivist instead needs only to explain the sensibility of a practice of normative judgment governed by a supervenience constraint. Moreover, it is not hard to see how such an account would go. Part of the point of expressivism is that we use normative discourse to recommend courses of action *on the basis of* their

5. See, e.g., J.L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), pp. 38-42; S. Blackburn, *Spreading the Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 182-90; and S. Blackburn, *Ruling Passions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 315-17. Even critics of Blackburn's argument often allow that it is effective against anti-reductionist views like Moore's; see, e.g., J. Dreier, 'The Supervenience Argument Against Moral Realism', *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 30.3 (1992), pp. 13-38, here 17-18.



non-normative and descriptive properties. We use normative judgments to decide what to do in any given non-normatively or descriptively characterized circumstance. There could be no sense given to the idea that we were recommending actions, or deciding on actions, on the basis of their non-normative or descriptive features if we did not obey a supervenience constraint in making these judgments.

How might anti-reductionists reply to the charge that they cannot explain how normative properties supervene? One strategy has been to pursue what are sometimes called ‘companions in guilt’, though those who deploy this strategy might prefer to call it one of ‘companions in innocence’. The idea is to argue that we have supervenience in other areas where reductionism does not seem plausible, but in which expressivism also does not seem plausible. For example, the mental plausibly supervenes on the physical even if the mental is not reducible to the physical. Yet almost no one would be tempted to infer from this that we should be expressivists about discourse employing mentalistic idioms. The argument against anti-reductionism seems to generalize too quickly, or so this line of reply insists.

Sometimes, defenders of anti-reductionism supplement the ‘companions in guilt’ move with a positive story about supervenience, which is good. The companions in guilt approach by itself leaves a bad taste. One always wonders whether there might not be some relevant difference between the companions in virtue of which they will at some point part company.

What positive story do anti-reductionists offer about supervenience, then? They typically appeal to a strategy for explaining supervenience which is employed in other contexts (such as the philosophy of mind), and argue that this strategy can be carried over and successfully deployed in the normative case as well. The most promising version of this strategy appeals to the idea that the supervening class of properties (the normative or the mental, for example) are *constituted by* or *realized by* the subvening class of properties (the non-normative/descriptive or the non-mental, for example) This is exactly how Russ Shafer-Landau defends his version of non-naturalism. Here is how Shafer-Landau puts it:

According to the sort of ethical non-naturalism that I favour, a moral fact supervenes on a particular concatenation of descriptive facts just *because these facts realize the moral property in question*. Moral facts necessarily covary with descriptive ones because moral properties are always realized exclusively by descriptive ones. Just as facts about a pencil’s qualities are fixed by facts about its material constitution, or facts about subjective feelings by neurophysiological (and perhaps intentional) ones, moral facts are fixed and constituted by their descriptive constituents.<sup>6</sup>

The strategy combines the companions in guilt approach with an appeal to the idea of constitution.<sup>7</sup> As Shafer-Landau presents it here, the idea is to

6. R. Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism: A Defence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 77; emphasis added.

7. Or, as seems equivalent in Shafer-Landau’s version, realization.



explain the supervenience of the normative on the descriptive by telling a suitable story about the constitution of normative facts (and properties) by concatenations of descriptive facts (and properties). On Shafer-Landau's ontology, facts just are instantiations of properties,<sup>8</sup> and he formulates the strategy in terms of the constitution of properties as well as in terms of constitution of facts.

Shafer-Landau actually aims to explain a slightly different supervenience thesis than the one discussed here, though. He is interested in a supervenience thesis which holds within a single possible world, and maintains that no two things within that world have the same normative status without differing in some descriptive respects. It seems clear, though, that he would extend this strategy to deal with the global supervenience thesis advanced here.

Shafer-Landau's positive explanation of supervenience dovetails very nicely with the companions in guilt strategy. For the appeal to constitution is supposed to be borrowing the best strategy for the companions. Shafer-Landau gives the examples of a pencil and its material constitution and that of a subjective feeling and its neurophysiological (and perhaps intentional) constituents.

Crucial to the success of this strategy is the idea that constitution is distinct from identity. Otherwise, the view on offer would collapse into a form of reductionism, with normative properties being identical with certain constellations of descriptive properties. In itself this is not a problem, since constitution by is indeed distinct from identity with. Constitution is asymmetric; identity is symmetric. A clay statue is constituted by the lump of clay, but the lump of clay is not constituted by the statue; the clay is instead constituted by certain molecules, which themselves are not constituted by the lump of clay, but by various other subatomic particles, and so on. Whereas if  $a = b$  then it follows that  $b = a$ .

However, matters are not so straightforward. One obvious disanalogy between the normative case and the case of companions in guilt is that the supervenience of the normative on the non-normative and descriptive is plausibly *a priori*, and indeed analytic. By contrast the supervenience of the mental on the non-mental is hardly *a priori*, much less analytic. In fact, the majority of human beings at various points in history may well have denied the supervenience of the mental on the non-mental out of an antecedent commitment to a certain sort of dualism about the mental. For many religious traditions would naturally lead one to such a view of the mental. The same point holds about the material constitution of macroscopic objects by subatomic particles. Perhaps even more obviously, this constitution relation is not *a priori*, much less analytic.

Shafer-Landau does not explicitly address this disanalogy in his discussion, but there is at least one interesting move that an anti-reductionist can make here. The anti-reductionist can argue that the preceding objection simply

8. As he reminds us at Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism*, p. 83 n 2.

assumes that the analyticity of the supervenience of the normative on the non-normative/descriptive must be taken as a theorem, rather than an axiom in the following sense. The argument assumes that whatever metaphysically explains the supervenience of the normative on the non-normative/descriptive must itself be analytic. For otherwise the explanation of supervenience will not explain the analyticity of the supervenience thesis.

The anti-reductionist can simply reject this premise, though. The anti-reductionist can insist that the analyticity of supervenience is axiomatic, and not derived as a theorem. It is, the reply continues, simply a brute fact about our normative concepts that something cannot count as rightness, for example, unless it obeys a suitable supervenience constraint. Crucially, on this view the explanation of how any given property could actually satisfy the supervenience constraint need not be analytic, or even *a priori*. Indeed, at some points, this seems to be Shafer-Landau's own view of the issue of analyticity.<sup>9</sup>

Here is an analogy that might help clarify the defence I am proposing on behalf of the anti-reductionist. Suppose that I just stipulate that by 'shmong' I shall refer to that property which obeys such-and-such supervenience constraint, and which is also such that someone who fails to do that which is shmong is therefore blameworthy. There shall now be no mystery about why facts about which actions are shmong will conform to the relevant supervenience constraint—that follows trivially from the stipulated meaning of shmong. How any given property can count as being the property picked out by 'shmong', on the other hand, is another matter, and that will involve explaining how the property in question satisfies the relevant supervenience constraint.

The explanation of how a given property satisfies the relevant supervenience constraint need not itself be *a priori* or analytic, though. For we do not at this stage need an explanation of why it is analytic that the shmong facts supervene in such-and-such way; that follows from a semantic axiom about 'shmong'. All we need is an explanation of how 'shmong' so defined could manage to refer to a given property, and that explanation need not itself be *a priori* or analytic.

The same sort of argument could, it seems, be given in the case of normative concepts. The meanings of these concepts are not given by stipulation, of course, so the analogy is imperfect. Nonetheless, linguistic facts are true in virtue of conventions, and the relevant conventions could just make it axiomatic by convention that normative discourse is governed by a suitable supervenience constraint. The fact that our actual conventions grew up more

9. See Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism*, p. 88. See also Shafer-Landau's reply to a critique by Robert Mabrito in R. Shafer-Landau, 'Replies to Critics', *Philosophical Studies* 126 (2005), pp. 313-29. Mabrito's critique of Shafer-Landau is also itself worth reading for those interested in this debate (see R. Mabrito, 'Does Shafer-Landau Have a Problem with Supervenience?', *Philosophical Studies* 126 [2005], pp. 297-311).

organically, and were not the result of an act of stipulation, does not preclude the relevant conventions having this shape. In which case the fact that it is analytic that the normative supervenes on the non-normative and descriptive is a disanalogy with the other examples of supervenience (e.g. in the philosophy of mind) that makes no difference.

There is a residual explanatory question waiting in the wings here, though. For why do we have predicates for normative properties as defined by the anti-reductionist? The expressivist has an answer to the corresponding question for their view, as we have seen. For without the incorporation of a supervenience constraint, normative discourse could not do the job for which it is needed. Without such a constraint, we could not make sense of the idea that normative discourse is used to recommend actions on the basis of their non-normative or descriptive properties, or that normative judgment allows us to decide what to do in any given circumstance once the relevant non-normative and features are given to us.

The anti-reductionist needs either a different answer, or an account of how reference to the irreducible property he has in mind is essential to the job of recommending actions on the basis of their descriptive properties and forming rational plans for contingencies given in purely descriptive terms. It is not obvious that either of these strategies can be made to work. Indeed, the mere internal consistency of an expressivist discourse shows that reference to such an irreducible property is *not* the only way to get these jobs done. In which case, it would be mysterious why human beings ubiquitously and cross-culturally seem to have normative discourse in the sense the anti-reductionist suggests (with supervenience simply stipulated by linguistic convention, etc.), instead of in the expressivist sense.

Here is another way of posing the challenge to the anti-reductionist who takes supervenience's analyticity as axiomatic. Suppose for the sake of argument that this gets the semantics for 'good' correct. Now consider the invented predicate 'shmood'. The meaning of 'shmood' is given as follows: it refers to a property *just like* the property of being good save for this one difference—shmoodness does not supervene. Why should we have predicates for goodness rather than shmoodness? Perhaps the reply from the anti-reductionist will be that there could be no property as shmoodness, but then the burden of the argument is to explain why this is so. Explaining why there could not be such a property will in effect be much the same as explaining why goodness must supervene. This is not progress.

By contrast, the expressivist explanation of why we would have normative discourse which includes a supervenience constraint has the virtue of relying on the following fairly uncontroversial premise: as rational agents who need to cooperate and coordinate with one another, we need a discourse that can allow us to both settle on the thing to do and recommend actions on the basis of their non-normative or descriptive properties. Moreover, this explanation does not seem to push the question back a stage in the way that the more stipulative anti-reductionist appeal to brute analyticity might.

Most likely, an anti-reductionist explanation of the ubiquity of normative discourse in their favored sense will invoke more controversial premises than these. I shall not speculate here on how an anti-reductionist might try to tell such an etiological story, but leave this as a challenge for their view. For the remainder of this essay, though, I put this particular challenge to one side, as I do not here have the space to explore the anti-reductionist's resources for meeting it in anything like adequate detail.

### 3. Four Challenges

I now want to present four challenges for anyone defending Shafer-Landau's strategy for explaining supervenience. These challenges do not draw their strength from the analyticity of supervenience. The anti-reductionist's proffered explanation is cast in terms of constitution. We are most familiar in ordinary language with the idea of constitution as a sort of mereological notion—a whole is constituted by its parts. An army is (partially) constituted by the soldiers who make it up; a chess board is constituted by its 64 squares; a sentence is constituted by the words that make it up; we the people constitute a nation, and so on.

The anti-reductionist strategy, however, is cast in terms of the constitution of facts, where facts, in turn, are understood as instantiations of properties. A pencil's length at a given time, we are told, is constituted by its molecular composition at that time.<sup>10</sup> An instance of pain, we are told, is constituted by a set of neural (and perhaps intentional) events. In like manner, the argument goes, the admirability of an action is constituted by some set of descriptive features.

At this point, we need to be very clear about just what we mean when we say that an instantiation of a property is constituted by the instantiation of some other property or set of properties. Otherwise we will have simply traded one mystery (supervenience) for another (constitution of property instantiations). This would not be progress.

Fortunately, some of Shafer-Landau's companions (whether in guilt or innocence) have some helpful things to say on this front. First of all, metaphysicians have a name for the instantiations of properties—they call them 'tropes'. Tropes are 'abstract particulars' which are wholly present in the object which instantiate them, but are incapable of being wholly present elsewhere at the same time.<sup>11</sup>

10. Actually, Shafer-Landau lumps length together with weight and claims that both are constituted by molecular composition; see Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism*, p. 77. Weight, though, is relative to gravitational field, and so is partly constituted by more than the object's molecular composition. Mass would be a much better example for his purposes. This in no way undermines the argument, but it is worth getting the examples just right.

11. I take this account from D. Robb, 'The Properties of Mental Causation', *Philosophical Quarterly* 47 (1997), pp. 178-94, though it seems to be fairly standard fare amongst trope theorists.

Tropes are distinguished from properties, which are universals. We must distinguish the property of being tall (a universal) from my tallness (a trope, or abstract particular). Trope theorists sometimes claim that it is an advantage of their view that they do not need to posit a separate realm of universals. Instead, they suggest that we take universals to be nothing more than sets of tropes which resemble one another in relevant respects. Such trope theorists are sometimes called ‘trope nominalists’. Other versions of trope theory posit universals as existing in some sense above and beyond the set of all of their tropes. The arguments developed here should be neutral on this front.

Tropes are also often taken to be fully determinate, whereas the universals they instantiated are determinable. The property of being colored is determinable—there are many ways of being colored. A given instantiation of the property of being colored, though (one of its tropes), must be fully determinate, such as a very specific shade and hue of green.

Within this framework, we can reformulate Shafer-Landau’s hypothesis. He suggests that we can best explain the supervenience of the normative<sup>12</sup> on the descriptive by invoking the claim that every normative property is fully constituted by the instantiation of some cluster of descriptive properties. Within the framework of trope theory, this turns out to be the claim that every normative trope is constituted by a suitable cluster of descriptive tropes. Presumably we can here read ‘constituted by’ literally as meaning something like ‘made up of’, in which case the idea of constitution is still understood mereologically. So far, so good.

How does the thesis that every normative trope is constituted by a suitable cluster of descriptive tropes explain supervenience? By itself, it does not logically entail supervenience. The thesis is *logically* consistent with a given set of descriptive features constituting the instantiation of a normative property in our world, and yet failing to constitute a normative property in another world which is otherwise identical to ours.

In order to explain supervenience, we need some auxiliary premises. The same sort of point in the philosophy of mind emerges nicely in David Robb’s discussion of how trope theory can be deployed to explain the supervenience of the mental on the physical. Robb offers a thesis he calls ‘trope monism’ which is very close to the philosophy of mind analogue of Shafer-Landau’s thesis about the normative. In Robb’s sense, trope monism is the thesis that every mental trope just *is* a physical trope, though mental types are not

12. Here I take some liberties with Shafer-Landau’s text. He focuses exclusively on the moral, and not on the normative more generally. However, I strongly suspect that he would want to generalize his account to include non-moral reasons for action too, and to defend a kind of anti-reductionist realism there too. Rather, he would have wanted to extend the strategy in question when he still believed in this whole approach. Shafer-Landau now rejects the strategy discussed in the text on the strength of some of the arguments in the text—most specifically, the argument that constitution alone does not explain supervenience.

identical with any physical types. This is not precisely the analogue of Shafer-Landau's thesis, which claims only that every normative trope is constituted by a descriptive trope.

The point is that on either way of proceeding, some further assumptions are needed to explain supervenience:

Trope monism, as I have formulated it, entails *Supervenience* (which, I shall assume, concerns types) so long as we are allowed two plausible assumptions: (a) if  $x = y$ , then necessarily  $x = y$ , and (b) if a trope is an F-trope, then it necessarily is an F-trope. Whenever a mental type is present, this will be in virtue of the fact that a mental trope is instantiated; but by trope monism, this will also be a physical trope, which means that a physical type is present. By (a) this mental trope will necessarily be accompanied by the physical one (they are just the same trope), and by (b), this trope will necessarily be a trope of the same physical and mental types. So whenever a mental type is present, a physical type that necessitates it will be as well; and if this is necessarily true, the result is *Supervenience*.<sup>13</sup>

Robb's strategy can be adapted in service of Shafer-Landau's theory as follows. Let us assume that (a\*) if  $x$  necessarily constitutes  $y$  then whenever  $x$  is present,  $y$  is present too, and (b\*) if a trope constitutes an F-trope, then it necessarily constitutes an F-trope. Shafer-Landau's hypothesis entails that whenever a normative type is present this will be in virtue of the fact that a cluster of descriptive tropes (the one which constitutes the normative trope in this case) is instantiated. By (b\*), this cluster of descriptive tropes necessarily constitutes the normative trope in question. By (a\*), it follows that whenever the cluster of descriptive tropes is present the normative one will be too. So whenever a normative property is instantiated, it will be instantiated by a cluster of descriptive properties, and the presence of this cluster of descriptive properties necessitates the presence of the normative property. If this is necessarily true (assuming [a\*] and [b\*] are true), then the supervenience of the normative on the descriptive follows.

Before explaining why I find this strategy problematic, it is important to be clear about the dialectic. Although I have followed Blackburn in posing the challenge as one of 'explaining supervenience', this is potentially misleading. Supervenience is analytic, and so perhaps in a sense does not stand in need of explanation. What *does* stand in need of explanation is how there could be properties which are irreducible yet supervene in this way. Supervenience tells only that *if* there are moral properties then they must be like this: they must supervene in such-and-such ways. That in itself is compatible with an error theory, according to which there are no such properties and indeed with the conclusion that there could not be such properties. Moreover, Mackie famously argued that there could be no such properties precisely on the strength of worries about supervenience, among other worries. This is the real

13. Robb, 'The Properties of Mental Causation', p. 187.

challenge: to explain how normative properties, understood in anti-reductionist terms, are as much as possible, given the modal properties attributed to them by supervenience. The fact that supervenience itself is a trifling and analytic truth does nothing to dispense with this very real explanatory burden.<sup>14</sup>

In fairness to Shafer-Landau, I should note that he has indicated (in correspondence) that he is not sure he wants to adopt the Robb strategy for explaining supervenience. In fairness to myself, I should note that he has not suggested a particular alternative to Robb's approach. Moreover, the general appeal to 'whatever works in the philosophy of mind' seems to make it fair game to argue that Robb's approach is 'what works' in the philosophy of mind, yet will not work in the case of normative properties. In which case, the appeal to companions in guilt should not ease our worries about normative supervenience. Finally, of course, apart from Shafer-Landau's own view, it is interesting in its own right to see whether a variation on Robb's approach could be made to work in the case of normative properties.

I now present four challenges for the defender of this approach. The first challenge stems from the fact that the bulk of the explanatory work here is done by the thesis that (b\*) if a trope constitutes an F-trope, then it necessarily constitutes an F-trope. Why, though, should we take (b\*) to be true? Constitution is, after all, not identity; that is part of Shafer-Landau's point. Why, though, could we not have the same trope elsewhere without its constituting the same F-trope it constitutes here? Some further metaphysical work needs to be done to vindicate this hypothesis, or as yet we have no explanation of how normative properties could supervene. Note that Robb's version of the argument has an advantage on this score. For Robb can explain the analogous thesis that (b) if a trope is an F-trope, then it necessarily is an F-trope. For this only relies on the necessity of numerical identity, which is much more obvious and plausible than the necessity of constitution.

The second challenge is unfortunately not one that I can develop in sufficient detail here. The challenge reflects the fact that trope theory itself is hardly platitudinous. There are serious philosophical worries about the very idea of a trope, and indeed about the reification of property instantiations

14. Many thanks to Brad Majors for drawing me out on this aspect of the dialectic, which is, in my view, all too often submerged as implicit in ways that are confusing in the existing debates. Here I also find it instructive to note the analogy with the philosophy of mind. If dualism in the philosophy of mind were true then it would be plausible to infer that the mental does not necessarily supervene on the physical, as supervenience in this case is not analytic. This shows how we can have irreducible properties without supervenience. This contrast with the normative suggests an explanatory itch which deserves to be scratched. How could there be irreducible properties which nonetheless supervene in the relevant ways? Perhaps the challenge can be met, but it cannot be dismissed as not posing a genuine challenge once we distinguish the issue of supervenience itself qua trifling analytic truth from the metaphysical question of how there could be normative properties with the modal profile entailed by supervenience.



more generally, quite apart from the trope framework. It is true, of course, that properties are instantiated, but we must not directly infer from this that there are property instantiations any more than we should infer from the fact that it is true that people do things for the sake of others that there are sakes.<sup>15</sup> To be clear, the worry here is about the very idea that we should reify property instantiations at all, and not whether we should adopt this or that theory of them, much less whether we should call them ‘tropes’. A traditional theory of universals might well get by with just objects and their properties without bloating its ontology with property instantiations as a third sort of fundamental entity.<sup>16</sup>

This is, of course, not the place for a general discussion of the plausibility of trope theory. Suffice it to say that the Shafer-Landau strategy gives some serious hostages to metaphysical fortune. Indeed, the hostages to fortune are not just the fortunes of trope theory, but of meta-trope theory. For Shafer-Landau’s argument will also rely on the idea that instantiations of properties can themselves have properties in order to make sense of the idea that a fact (which just is a property instantiation on Shafer-Landau’s view) can have the property of being a reason. Understanding meta-properties in the trope framework may lead to more specific problems, and not all trope theorists may be inclined to posit meta-tropes in their ontology. In any event, if expressivism allows us to explain supervenience without such hostages to metaphysical fortune, then that makes expressivism *ex ante* a theoretically safer bet than anti-reductionist cognitivism.

The third challenge stems from the fact that the proffered explanation of supervenience potentially has the odd and somewhat implausible consequence of ruling out certain forms of monism as a first-order view. Historically, anti-reductionist views have been understood as neutral on such first-order questions, though. Indeed, this is in a way one of the main virtues of anti-reductionism. Because it is entirely neutral on the first-order questions of the day, it can much better accommodate the sorts of intuitions that underwrite the force of G.E. Moore’s Open Question Argument.

Why do I say that Shafer-Landau’s explanation potentially rules out certain forms of monism? Because according to trope nominalism, a property just is a set of resembling tropes. Whether a given property is normative or descriptive depends entirely on whether the relevant resemblances are normative or descriptive (the ‘or’ is inclusive). Anti-reductionism just is the thesis that normative properties are not identical with descriptive properties, however. In the context of trope nominalism, this means that the tropes that make up a given normative property cannot resemble one another in ways that would be salient from a purely descriptive perspective.

Somewhat surprisingly, this is enough to rule out certain forms of normative monism. For normative monism will hold that just one kind of fact can

15. This is an old point of Quine’s.

16. Thanks to Brad Majors for useful discussion here.

constitute a reason, and the tropes that make up this sort of fact may well be ones that resemble each other in important ways from a purely descriptive point of view. For example, take a simple form of egoistic hedonism, according to which a fact is a reason for an agent to perform an action just in case it is a fact to the effect that the action would promote the agent's pleasure. The property of promoting one's own pleasure may, though, be highly salient from a purely descriptive point of view; in which case the tropes which make up this property will indeed resemble one another in ways that are salient from a purely descriptive point of view. After all, empirical psychology may well make heavy use of this property in explaining the actions of intentional agents, for a start. This, in turn, would entail that the property of being a reason is, after all, a descriptive property, which is inconsistent with anti-reductionism.

The anti-reductionist has at least two replies. The first is just to 'bite the bullet', and perhaps be so bold as to claim as a virtue for his theory that it allows us to refute egoism! This, though, would be to bite the dialectical hand that feeds you. For ruling out egoism on purely metaethical grounds seems incompatible with the spirit, if not the letter, of G.E. Moore's Open Question Argument, which is itself perhaps the strongest argument for anti-reductionism in the first place.

The second anti-reductionist reply to the objection from monism is to reject the trope nominalist's account of what makes a property count as being of one type rather than another (physical versus mental; normative versus descriptive). Rejecting the trope nominalist's attempt to reduce universals to sets of tropes, the reply will insist that we must posit universals as existing in their own right, above and beyond the set of all of their instantiations. The anti-reductionist is on this horn of the dilemma driven quite literally to something like Plato's Form of the Good, their frequent attempts to distance themselves from that model notwithstanding.

This may seem more plausible than 'biting the bullet', with respect to certain forms of monism. However, this move also may be seen as biting the dialectical hand that feeds you, albeit a different hand this time. For many of those who argue for trope theory do so on the grounds that trope nominalism allows us to avoid some of the metaphysically excesses of a theory of universals. If we are driven to a theory that posits universals anyway, then we may have trouble mounting a good argument for trope theory in the first place. The appeal to 'companions in guilt' may now begin to look more like an appeal for help from some fair weather friends who have no interest in sharing your pain.

The fourth challenge for the defender of this strategy for explaining supervenience is that it seems to force us to reject a doctrine Jonathan Dancy has called 'holism about reasons'.<sup>17</sup> Holism about reasons maintains that a fact

17. See, for example, J. Dancy, *Ethics Without Principles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

which is a reason in one situation may be no reason at all, or a reason with the opposite valence, in another sort of situation. For example, the fact that watching TV would be pleasant may be a reason here, but that very same fact may not be a reason in an other situation, as when the pleasure would be sadistic (in watching news about some tragedy, say).

Holism about reasons is controversial in some quarters, but I think it is very plausible. One way of seeing its plausibility is that we do not typically think of all reasons as being partially constituted by the fact that the agent is able to perform the action in question. My reason to visit my mother is that it will make her happy, not that it will make her happy and I can visit her. Yet, plausibly 'there is a reason' entails 'can' in much the same way that 'ought' implies 'can'. This is already enough to establish a modest form of holism. For this entails that what is a reason here may not be a reason there if I can perform the action here, but not there.

Finally, of course, even if holism is false, it is hardly obviously false. Once again, the anti-reductionist had better not bite the dialectical hand that feeds it and rule out of court an interesting first-order view like this on purely meta-normative grounds. For that would be deeply alien to the intuitions which make the Open Question Argument as an argument for anti-reductionism plausible in the first place.

Why, though, do I suggest that Shafer-Landau's strategy as I have reconstructed it forces us to reject holism about reasons? Recall that in order to explain supervenience, Shafer-Landau's strategy required the following auxiliary thesis: (b\*) if a trope constitutes an F-trope, then it necessarily constitutes an F-trope. Suppose a given fact constitutes a reason. From (b\*), it follows that this fact necessarily constitutes a reason whenever it obtains, regardless of context. This, though, just is the rejection of holism.

Dancy himself is aware that his theory threatens to make supervenience mysterious, and offers the following explanation of supervenience:

My final question about supervenience is how to explain it... What then explains the fact that moral properties supervene on the non-moral? My own view is that this is a consequence of the fact that they result from the non-moral. The properties from which the wrongness of this action results are the reasons why it is wrong, the ground for its wrongness. Now we know already that if we move to another case holding just these properties fixed, we may yet get an action that is not wrong; differences elsewhere may conspire to prevent the original wrong-making properties from doing that job in the new case. *But if we move to another case holding fixed all the non-moral properties of the case whatever, we know in advance that no conspiracy of that sort can happen.* Whatever was a reason in the first case must remain a reason in the second, and nothing that was not a reason in the first can become a reason in the second. So necessarily the reasons must remain the same, and if so, their rational result must remain the same.<sup>18</sup>

18. Dancy, *Ethics Without Principles*, p. 89; emphasis added.

The key move for our purposes comes in the sentence I have italicized. This is enough to entail supervenience, but it hardly looks like an *explanation* of supervenience. For the italicized sentence just asserts a form of supervenience—that there can be no moral difference without some non-moral difference ‘conspiring’ to make the difference. You cannot explain supervenience by stating it.

This last objection—that the explanation on offer is incompatible with holism—is forceful enough by itself, but it is even more forceful when combined with the point about monism. For now we seem inexorably led to a very specific first-order normative theory simply in virtue of accepting anti-reductionism and its apparently best explanation of supervenience. For on the one hand, we must reject monism, and hence must accept a plurality of types of reasons. On the other hand, though, we must also reject the view that reasons can function holistically. In effect, we seem driven to an atomistic version of something like W.D. Ross’s theory of *prima facie* duties.<sup>19</sup>

Such a Rossian view may well be a plausible view, though I doubt that the atomistic part of the view is all that plausible (see above). Even if the view itself is plausible, what is not plausible, given the Open Question Argument from which non-naturalism draws its plausibility, is that our metanormative theory alone could drive us to hold such a specific sort of view about the structure of our reasons.

### Conclusion

In this essay, I have tried to do three main things. First, I have tried to show that so long as we are willing to characterize the subvenient base disjunctively, it is after all possible to formulate supervenience in a way that does not beg any central metaethical questions. Second, I have tried to clarify the structure of the challenge to anti-reductionists to explain supervenience, and in this context have discussed whether the putative analyticity of supervenience poses any additional dialectical burdens on the anti-reductionist. I there conclude that the anti-reductionist can accommodate the analyticity of supervenience but then a new challenge emerges, namely to explain why we have predicates just like our normative predicates but which do not take supervenience as axiomatically analytic. To my knowledge, this particular gloss on the issue of analyticity has not been discussed before. Third, most centrally, I have posed four related challenges for what I take to be the most interesting attempt to date by normative anti-reductionists (namely, Shafer-Landau’s attempt) to explain supervenience in genuinely anti-reductionist terms. By way of summary, those four challenges are:

19. See W.D. Ross, *The Right and the Good* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003 [1930]).

1. A dilemma: Either explain why we should reject trope nominalism (and hence why the Robb strategy for explaining supervenience in the philosophy of mind is not the best strategy here too) or explain why trope nominalism plus the proffered explanation does not implausibly entail the rejection of monism. Either of these options threatens to 'bite the dialectical hand that feeds the anti-reductionist'. On the one hand there is the spirit of the Moorean intuitions behind the Open Question Argument, which would counsel against a direct metaphysical argument against monism. On the other hand, there is the fact that the main force of the original argument was an appeal to companions in guilt; once we are more selective about which companions we invoke, though, we need an argument that we are not hanging out 'with the wrong crowd'. In any event, note how little ice the 'this is just like in the philosophy of mind' explanation is cutting now. We need a lot more argument about just which of the available stories in the philosophy of mind is the right one for the anti-reductionist in metanormative theory—and the anti-reductionist may be forced to say 'not the trope nominalism theory' and 'not a standard universals theory' either, but instead 'a universals plus tropes theory'. Needless to say, it's not obvious that this is the right story in the philosophy of mind, in which case 'companions' arguments really do not advance the anti-reductionist position very far.
2. Provide some explanation of why we should reify tropes. Why not go for a more elegant metaphysics that posits only universals and objects which instantiate them, and doesn't bloat its ontology with property instantiations as well? This challenge may be especially forceful if the reply to point (1) above is to take the horn of the dilemma which rejects trope nominalism. For one of the main arguments for tropes is that given trope nominalism they allow us to avoid the problems associated with a theory of universals.
3. Mount a defence of the assumption that if a property constitutes another property then it necessarily does. This assumption seems to do the lion's share of the explanatory work, but is in Shafer-Landau's discussion a suppressed premise which gets no defence.
4. Explain why this explanatory strategy does not lead all too quickly to the rejection of holism, or why it's so leading is not problematic.

I do not pretend to have demonstrated beyond any reasonable doubt that these four challenges cannot be met. Taken together, though, they strike me as posing a rather deep challenge for an attempt to explain supervenience in terms of a constitution relation between property instantiations. In any event, in my view, the ball is now in the anti-reductionist's court.